

**S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, 2nd ed.
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Academic writing and scholarly conferences (and college and university departments) are often described as vehicles for the sharing and creating of "new knowledge" - at minimum new insights or syntheses of existing relationships, systems, or structures. In many ways, however, the genre of scholarly writing also functions to reiterate and re-describe "old knowledge": what are established ideas and methods, as well as who are acknowledged, credentialed experts with a long bibliography of work on a given topic (indeed, a perennial risk is the creation of Authorities who calcify ideology into "fact"). For good or ill, the recognition of value in the use of established methods, and the hard-earned acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills are integral to the field of biblical studies. Yet, more than a few biblical scholars, who would shudder at reading or hearing complete, amateur biblical interpretation, regularly, themselves engage in the study of Bible in/and film, without ever having read even an introductory volume on film theory and film interpretation. With no skills at all in film making, film history, film theory, film scholarship - with the complete inability to describe or define basic terms like "auteur," "genre criticism," "formalism," "racking focus," "mise-en-scene," "New Hollywood," "shot-reverse-shot," and more - biblical scholars wade into film critique with the unearned boldness and confidence of the uninformed.

Plate's little book should be required reading for any biblical scholar turning to the question of Bible in/and film. In it, one finds brief (but highly sophisticated) reviews of film theory directly (eruditely) connected with leading theories of Religion (following Geertz and Eliade), permeated with acute attention to structures and functions of religion (particularly sacred text, myth, and ritual studies), and attuned to the ways all these function within the humanities more broadly. Plate also introduces critical terms and methods for interpretation of film.

In his introduction, Plate lays out the basic equation of the book: film and religion overlap because both are collaborative, mytho-poetic, ritualized forms of world-and-meaning creation. Movies are re-creation of order and "world view", the product themselves of multiple creators and artists, where stories or visions unfold in ways that create (communal) meaning. Plate equates this to leading scholarly definitions of religion, particularly the conversation that pools in the work of Clifford Geertz. Religion is a system, created and consumed by community, that creates "worlds" (ie maps out what is real, what is valued, what can be conceived) that are meaningful (indeed, the very basis of meaning). For the rest of the book, Plate will draw corollaries from this fundamental theorem, using structural elements of Religion

(ritual, symbol, sacredness, mythology, space) as vehicles to examine tandem elements in Film.

The book is divided into three sections: "Before the Show: Pulling the Curtain on the Wizard" (chapters one through three); "During the Show: Attractions and Distractions" (chapters four and five); and "After the Show: Re-Created Realities" (chapter six). This organization roughly follows film theory and creation, viewer response and affect, and reception and tradition.

In chapter one, Plate nuances the canard of film as modern mythology (while also covering a definition of "mythology" as an active element of religion and outlining the basics of a Formalist approach to film theory). Movies "mean" by the combination of significant semiotic elements. Movies are not merely script or narrative. They are infused with light, sets, props, camera work, special effects, camera angles and lenses, editing, sound, music, acting and more which all combine to create "meaning." Similarly, mythology was not merely story or plot, but was an oral event, narrated (and performed) in context. "films can show how myths operate beyond their existence as verbal stories" (24). Further, like movies "myths are always 'mash-ups', always assembled through bits, pieces and found objects" (24). Plate also introduces basic film compositional concepts and terms (such as *mise-en-scene*). He illustrates these themes via *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*.

Chapter two takes Bobby Alexander's definition of ritual ("a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which everyday life is transformed...Traditional religious rituals open up ordinary life to ultimate reality or some transcendent being or force"; 45) and compares it to film editing. Film edits and cinematography move viewers throughout the film's world, preparing some scenes, focusing attention, altering location, changing space. "The altar and the screen create transitions to an alternate world. . . . They function as "portals," semi-permeable boundaries between two worlds that allow movement back and forth" (45). Plate demonstrates these themes via the movies *Chocolat*, *Antonia's Line*, and *Man with a Movie Camera*.

Chapter three examines space, set, *mise-en-scene* and structure in film via parallel to concepts of the *axis mundi* and sacred space. He notes "Urban planning and cinematic production design both entail practical decisions based on the social relationships among the people within those environments" (69). Film, he notes (quoting Wim Wenders) "is a city art. . . . the Soviet film maker Sergei Eisenstein saw architecture as film's 'undoubted ancestor': 'Victor Huger called medieval cathedrals 'books in stone' . . . The Acropolis of Athens has an equal right to be called the perfect example of one of the most ancient films" (70). Plate explores the role of space, spatiality, building and construction in both religion and film using Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

Part two moves from movie production to movie consumption, drawing upon new insights from Affect-critical approaches to both Religion and religious practice and viewer response to film. Chapter four, "Body, Screen and Death" focuses on the embodied experience of film viewing, particularly intersecting with the work of Affect and Religion (and "humanness") as found in the work of Donovan Schaefer and others. Plate is particularly interested in the affective way we view bodies on film,

particularly partial bodies. He examines *The Exorcist* and the haunting *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (which is a documentary of medical students dissecting human cadavers). Having treated filmic (and affective) experiences of partial bodies, Plate turns to "The face, the close-up, and Ethics" for chapter five. Weaving discussions of affect, cinematography, and human psychology, Plate contrasts the cinematic close up with religious iconography. He finds "ritualistic practice" and "cinematic use of close-ups as larger-than-life faces of actors on the screen capture our attention and transpose our moving bodies into a relationship with the characters in the diegetic world of the film" (124). He turns from this to a conversation on ethics, integrating the work of Emmanuel Levinas (on the recognition of the Face of the Other and its implications for moral theory).

Chapter six, "Footprints of Film: Cinematic After-Images in Sacred Time and Space" explores the role of reception and community construction in both film viewing and religious activity. He notes the similarity between pilgrimage (as traditionally, religiously understood) and fans seeking out the location or artifacts from films. He notes the ritual, participatory following of some films (*Rocky Horror Picture Show*) and the use of movie promotional items to affect culture, often religiously. DeMille's 1956 *The Ten Commandments* was promoted by packets sent to schools and secular community centers celebrating the Ten Commandments as foundational for the American Constitution; stone monuments to the Commandments were placed in civic spaces.

Readers familiar with Plate's first addition will see much in the above survey that is familiar, but, indeed, also much that is not; *Religion and Film* is significantly modified and expanded in this second edition. The most engaging additions address the relationship of ritual and film (particularly via both editing and audience participation) and an examination of affect and cinema (via viewer response), including an expanded section on the affect of "the close up" and of horror. Plate engages emerging scholars of embodiment, (new) materiality, religion and affect (Donovan Schaefer, for example). His arguments would be enhanced throughout by more attention to work on affect and cinematic form, particularly for embodiment and horror (as per Eugenie Brinkema).



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