

BOOK REVIEWS / BOEKRESENSIES

Johnston, Robert, K, ed. *Reframing Theology and Film. New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. 334 pages. Paperback. US \$28.00, ISBN 9780801032400

The link between theology and film is one made in academic corridors only fairly recently. Therefore it is to be expected that a number of “introductory” issues need to be taken care of. In this volume the authors do exactly that, however in the process they also produced a volume reflecting the scope and depth this discipline has attained in the decade or two since its inception. The lasting impression one is left with after reading through this wide-ranging volume is that the discussion on theology and film opens up new and exciting inter-disciplinary avenues for biblical scholars to explore. In film studies we come face to face with modern cultures in their diversity and inter-connectedness. This volume brings together “scholars, church leaders and film makers to share ideas and to strategize on the discipline of theology and film” (p. 9). In the introduction (pp. 15-26) Johnston gives a good overview of the aim and scope of the volume.

The book is organised into six sections. In the first, “Moving beyond a ‘Literary’ Paradigm” Detweiler (“Seeing and Believing”)¹ discusses how too often film critics become trapped within the boundaries of literary criticism when working with the film “text.” He links this to Protestant Christianity’s exclusive focus on the word, at the expense of the visual image. He goes on to illustrate how the different aspects of film (especially narration and the visual) work together to create meaning and indicates the possibilities this opens for a theological reflection on the text. In the only other contribution to this section Taylor (“The Colors of Sound”) explores the rich contribution of music to meaning in a film. The author, who is a film score writer, explores by means of a historical overview the impact of music on film, and the reasons why this is significant.

In the next section, “Broadening Our Film Selection” Ortiz (“World cinema”) discusses the possibilities for dialogue between theology and film. He indicates how the movie industry has become more representative of world culture by awards in the field that goes beyond the narrow focus on American and European films. Implicitly taking a cue from post colonial theory, he indicates how film can place its audience face to face with the Other and in the process cultivate an understanding and appreciation for the Other. In her contribution to this section, aptly entitled “Letters on better movies,” Vaux, writes letters to her readers in which she guides them through recent and older film

¹ Subtitles of contributions are not always included.

titles that can be used in teaching. She offers brief motivations for her choices by means of outlines for each movie. This contribution is a must read; not only to get useful hints for filling a few Friday evenings at home.

The first contribution to the following section, “Extending Our Conversation Partners” by Lynch (“Film and the Subjective Turn: How the Sociology of Religion Can Contribute to Theological Readings of Film”) gives one of the better theoretical discussions on the theme in the volume. He gives an apt analysis of the current field of religion and specifically its sociological underpinnings. Although this paper lets the reader down somewhat when it comes to putting theory into practice, it still provides a thorough investigation and is worth considering by all theologians, not just those interested in theology and film. Lindvall (“Hollywood Chronicles. Towards an Intersection of Church History and Film History”) discusses the manner in which the role of religion has too often been downplayed in contemporary historiography – film history included. He offers a few pointers towards rectifying this situation.

The fourth section is entitled “Engaging the Experience of the Viewer” and opens with Marsh’s essay “On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People” in which he draws four conclusions based on empirical research. Film is viewed as “a site of meaning making” (p. 153) and in this way connected to theology. He underscores the notion that cinema should not try to educate people while at the same time churches should stick to their primary purpose (worship of God) and not try to entertain people in the process. The next contribution by Ver Straten – McSparran (“Polanyi’s Personal Knowledge and Watching Movies”) is one of the highlights in the collection. Starting out from Polanyi’s view on tacit knowledge, she indicates how the viewer creates meaning through putting together the different pieces of a (good) film, focusing the discussion on the film “Crash.” The conclusion reached is worth citing in full: “Polanyi believes that Christianity should be more like a society of explorers than a community frequently dominated by rule and dogma” (p. 177). In the last contribution to the section, Barsotti (“Películas – ¿A Gaze from Reel to Real?”) considers the response of a limited number of Latina women to six films with Latino settings or “themes.” Criticism as well as praise is levelled at the ability of these films to convey the “Latina experience” through the worlds they create.

Section five is entitled “Reconsidering the Normative” and opens with Lyden (“Theology and Film. Interreligious Dialogue and Theology”), who, on a theoretical level, first deals with the close relation between theology and religious studies – a theme currently topical in North American scholarship (cf. the 2008 SBL presidential address). Once this link is confirmed he considers the nature of interreligious debate to arrive at how Christianity and film can be dialogue partners in this context. Next, Avila (“From Film Emotion to Normative Criticism”) argues for the role cognitive science can play in understanding

films' production of affective responses and contribution to ethically mature agents. After evaluating different cognitive models of emotion it is suggested how these could play a role in normative film criticism, namely, "assessing the adequacy of a film's emotional message" (p. 236). The section closes with an excellent contribution by Deacy ("From Bultmann to Burton, Demythologizing the Big Fish") in which he discusses the contribution of modern Christian theologians to the Theology-Film conversation. In this enterprise film is not used "to illustrate theology but to enable us to (re)examine, critique and challenge the efficacy of the work of a number of prominent twentieth century theologians" (p. 240). Hence the ideas of Cupitt and Bonhoeffer about the interconnectedness between religion and the modern world are seen reflected in films as diverse as *Christmas with the Kranks*, *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *Lethal Weapon*. Bultmann's notion of demythologising is criticised on basis of a film such as *Big Fish*. This suggestion on the way in which theology and film can be studied not as opposing entities, but as partners engaging us about the worlds we are creating, may prove to be very fruitful.

The last section deals with "Making Better Use of Our Theological Traditions" and opens with Pacatte ("Shaping Morals, Shifting Views") asking whether rating systems have influenced the way America sees movies. She traces the development of different rating systems and objects to ratings based on a film's content while ignoring the context which forms the world that the content is submerged in. Loughlin ("Within the Image") provides the reader a slightly more technical, but very readable, analysis of the way in which the Russian filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, created and used symbols and images in his work. The section closes with Johnston's essay entitled "Transformative Viewing" in which he reconsiders medieval interpretation as resource to get beyond the literal meaning of a film. After discussing three modern theorists (Burrows, Frye and Lewis) who applied such approaches in seeking ways "beyond the sterility of the modern critical enterprise" (p. 308), he re-views the films *March of the Penguins* and *Titanic* through these lenses in order to understand the transformative power movies may unlock, when viewed in more than a "literal" manner.

The book closes with a list of all the movies cited, as well as a General Index. All in all it is more than a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the subject. Contributions cover quite a wide range of topics and readings from this volume should form part of any course on religion / theology and film. It may even provide exciting ideas for teaching the Old Testament!

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