

Religion and Film: An Introduction

MELANIE J. WRIGHT, 2007

London: I.B. Tauris

244 pp., UK £14.99 (pb)

ISBN: 1-85043-886-2

In many respects, Melanie J. Wright's new book is a very brave and distinctive contribution to the abundance of Religion & Film texts that have been published in recent years. Citing at the outset that "In the mid-twentieth century, going to 'the pictures' was *the* social pastime in the West" (p.1), Wright argues that it would be wrong to see cinema as an agent of secularization. Contrary to claims made to that effect, her position is that "Religion has not been displaced by a new medium: it has colonised it, and has found itself challenged and altered in the course of the encounter" (p.2). This sets the scene for what amounts to a critical reappraisal of the existing literature – which Wright sees as in many cases deficient – where the tendency is to focus upon only narrow areas of the religion-film nexus, such as biblical epics or films which ostensibly deal with explicitly 'religious' content, at the expense of more interdisciplinary approaches that draw upon the practices both of religious studies and film/cinema studies. She takes the line that, in the field to date, writers rarely engage one another sufficiently and that there is inadequate critical discussion of the principles used to select particular films for study. She laments the fact that the common assumption is to write that as both religion and film are in broad outline about life and its meaning, then, by definition, all films are thus religious (or open to a religious meaning). This criteria, she avows, is so broad that it can be neither proved nor disproved and is thus meaningless. In its place, Wright prefers to query the religion-film

distinction, and to see 'religion' not as a discrete entity that can simply be brought into relationship with 'film,' but as "a mode of being" (p.173). Accordingly, that which comprises a 'religious film' is not simply to do with the narrative or textual aspects of a film, but "is better understood as a process, a function of a dynamic exchange between screen images and sound, and viewer activity and perception" (p.173). Rather than simply see religion as being *in* film, or as a vehicle *for* religious experience, Wright concludes her discussion with the tantalising thought that "film" may even be "religion itself" (p.173).

Despite such a powerful thesis, however, it is a little disappointing that more is not made of the specific ramifications for religious studies of this claim. Although the 'evidence' is accumulated throughout the book, it is sometimes lost in the – albeit extremely erudite and informed – reflections that constitute the bulk of this manuscript, in which Wright addresses six specific films (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Wicker Man*, *My Son the Fanatic*, *Keeping the Faith* and *Lagaan*) that deal with some or all of the following: religious characters, conflicts or texts; a plot or narrative which is dependent on religious narratives or traditions; character definition that makes use of religion in some way; and where the film concerned is set in a religious community or communities. It is never explicitly clear why she has chosen these particular six films other than the consideration that, in keeping with Ninian Smart's attempt in religious studies to approach more than one religious tradition, she wishes to look at a range of works that constitute cinema worldwide. This is all laudable – in order to do justice to the range of world cinema it is vitally important that any study encompasses big Hollywood films as well as art house and independent films – but it is hard not to shake the feeling that a student who picks up this book will skip those chapters which

deal with films with which he or she is not acquainted. A more theme-based, rather than film-based, structure would have reaped greater dividends.

There is much to recommend this book, though. Wright queries the motivations of those who teach Religion & Film courses in universities, suggesting that pragmatic reasons are afoot. For example, courses “need to be attractive and intelligible to students with increasingly diverse educational and cultural backgrounds” (p.13). Within this marketplace, such modules are, she argues, attempts “to appear legitimate in the eyes of university administrators and external agencies” (p.13). Since film is perceived as being both popular and relevant, and more sellable than a module on, say, Sanskrit, then religion-film courses make good strategic sense. I would not go quite as far as Wright in this, however: in some institutions, academics from outside religious studies tend to be scornful of work undertaken in film by theologians and religious studies scholars, so that a Religion & Film module may be a harder, rather than easier, sell, in the university at large. But, Wright is on firmer footing in her reservations about the tendency to emphasize the narrative dimension of film at the expense of its *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing or sound (p.21). According to Wright, when film is not seen *qua* film but only for its affinity with literature, “limited analysis results,” to the extent that “despite the growing bibliography and plethora of courses” it may be the case that “*film* is not really being studied at all” (p.22). Her call for a “decent course on film within a theology and/or religious studies programme” to consist of “familiarising students with key areas of film-studies practice as one of its aims” (p.23) is a serious one, and it is good to see, for example, William Telford’s chapter in the recent volume *Cinéma Divinité* going some way towards meeting this sort of concern.

However, too much can be made of the 'literature' vs. 'film' dichotomy. Not only has much film criticism over the years also gone down the path of "reading" films as "texts," but Alister McGrath's 2001 anthology of *Christian Literature* presents clear grounds for interchange with the study of film.

To her credit, though, Wright does an excellent job of querying the efficacy of much of the work carried out to date in Religion & Film and she offers a new slant to the area by adopting a more cultural studies approach to the work. She notes that much of film studies has been shifting to this area, and also looks at the efforts of those, such as Malory Nye, for whom religious studies is really only a form of cultural studies and that there is no culture-free mode of religious experience or expression. Her reading of *The Ten Commandments* as a product of Cold War patriotism (in which even the Red Sea is unmistakably blue) and her understanding of how the film supports a Christianizing agenda and also lies against the grain of the historical-critical method of biblical study which had been firmly established by the 1950s, are successfully brought out. There is also much to recommend her discussion in chapter 5, in relation to *The Wicker Man*, that both paganism and Christianity are, in part, "social constructs" (p.84) and that Robin Hardy's cult horror film has as a subtext the insufficiency of market economics, the fracturing of the English post-war consensus and a commentary on 1960s social upheavals and the backlash of the Heath government's law and order agenda. This is an instructive, even pioneering, book, which will hopefully pave the way for increasingly informed scholarship in this area in the years to come.

CHRIS DEACY

Applied Theology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK