

Review of Erin Runions, *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film*, New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. 208pp. ISBN: 0-312-29573-1.

Erin Runions has certainly produced in *How Hysterical* a provocative and challenging work. A charge that is sometimes labelled against theologians, especially those in the West, is that they are too abstract, distant and detached from the lives of the people and subjects they are examining, a claim that has particular salience in the context of liberation theology. Theology may once have been an unapologetically elite discipline, where scholars, within the ivory towers of academia, engaged with dogmas and philosophies that were outside the reach of the masses and had little or no bearing on the domain of everyday life, but the boundaries are beginning to change. Work undertaken on the interface between religion and film is a pertinent example of how any distinction that continues to exist between the theologian and popular culture is a largely ambiguous and indeterminate one. Yet, Runions' book is probably the most extreme and thorough-going attempt I have ever encountered to fuse the boundaries between the academic and the socio-political. She goes much further than other scholars working in the field of religion and film in that her interest is not in how religion is represented in film *per se* but in how, through the lens of film, religion intersects with social and political concerns. In brief, her argument is that the Bible is a dominant influence in the West and can help people mould their political views and actions. There is thus a link between religion and (political) identity formation, especially in the fight against oppression, political change and social transformation. Specific themes Runions explores are colonization, patriarchy, wealth, whiteness and gender. The films studied do not necessarily contain explicit Biblical citations, since

she sees the Bible as a culturally defining text which “still often acts as a kind of ‘primal scene’, which gets repeated in various ways through popular culture, creating similarities where they may be least expected.” (p. 2) The six films discussed at length – which include *Remember the Titans*, *Three Kings*, *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Magnolia* – are chosen because of their relevance to real-life situations of violence and political struggle. As she argues on page 3, “Contemporary stories of oppression, struggle and resistance are often strangely similar to biblical stories and themes, or they are interpreted directly through biblical themes and images.”

In response, however, I would question just how paramount the Bible is in giving us points of identification. Hindu epics such as the Ramayana can also be crucial in helping us understand such socio-political ideas as duty (*dharma*). Runions’ approach is thus merely one possibility for understanding contemporary struggles. There is also a very idiosyncratic slant to Runions’ study. She identifies herself as a white, anti-neo colonialist activist and an academic. She has been involved in anarchist organizing against the military, prison industry and police brutality, and, from first hand experience, has come to the conclusion that social change can only come about when people’s ideological commitments shift and they can begin to identify differently. This particularly comes to the fore in chapter 2 on *Remember the Titans* which is a film that celebrates harmonious race relations in the context of a mixed black and white American football team in 1970s Virginia and which can be seen as a variant on the Cain and Abel story of Genesis 4. Runions’ concern is that the film has the propensity to cause a white viewer to misrecognize the actual state of race relations between the privileged white population and the increasingly imprisoned and enslaved black population in America today. The film may suggest that there is a mutual recognition between ‘master’ (white) and ‘enslaved’ (black), but

in reality the system that holds racism in place does not allow for such a utopian rendering.

Her idiosyncratic slant also, though, works in her favour. Coming as she does from a background in “antiracist, antiprison organizing” (p. 46), there is an earnestness, depth of experience and an overarching passion about Runions’ book which makes her readings compelling. The films upon which she focuses are scrutinized with much deftness and rigour and she substantiates her arguments effectively. Methodologically, also, Runions sets out her stall with precision. Her hypothesis is that the way to respond to oppression is by resistance which is in turn viewed by those who wish to maintain the status quo as hysteria – that is, as failed identification with what the dominant patriarchal order deems ‘normative’. Admittedly, her thesis is not always easy to follow, and is laden with a considerable amount of ideological baggage which may not be to everybody’s taste. But, while not warranting a place at the top of a general course bibliography on Religion & Film, for the more discerning reader *How Hysterical* is a very rewarding and worthwhile polemical study.

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