

Margaret R. Miles. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996. xvi + 254 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8070-1030-3.

Reviewed by Harold Hatt

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Working from her background in historical theology and using a cultural studies methodology, Margaret Miles (a professor at Harvard Divinity School) turns her scholarly attention to recent popular films (of the 1980s and 1990s) and their social context. She is particularly interested in the way in which these films reflect and influence religious beliefs and values in North American society.

Any reader who thinks of films as mere entertainment will soon be disabused of that notion. Part I deals with religion in nine films, and Part II deals with race, gender, sexuality, and class in six films. The final chapter deals with the issue of the relationship of violence on the screen to violence in North American society. The appendix, which you may want to take a peek at first, outlines the questions that Miles addresses to each film in pursuing her cultural studies method of film analysis. The questions pertain to the film as cultural product, as text, and as cultural voice.

Attention to the cultural context certainly provides a broad and rich context for film interpretation. But Miles also sets an alien standard for a film to achieve in order to be culturally responsible. Miles expects films both to reflect and also to reform the society in which they are produced. However, as art, films work indirectly, not creating in us an obligation to obey, but creating situations that project a spirit for our consideration.

The goal of films is not to occupy a moral position, but to point in its direction.

Miles is at her sharpest when she is looking for the cultural context and significance of the films she analyzes. She is both driven and helpful in her determination to see beyond the entertainment and production values of films to their role as catalysts for reflecting on religious and social values.

Miles is not so perceptive when it comes to seeing beyond the role of film in raising questions and clarifying problems in its role as an indirect communicator, maintaining the principle of aesthetic distance but stimulating audiences to reflect on alternate responses from those portrayed on the screen.

With the exception of *Daughters of the Dust*, which staunchly resisted the temptations of the commercial mainstream, she sees the films as accomplished, but compromised. For Miles, the recurring villains that tempt films to compromise are film conventions, box office aspirations and individualism. She is sharp to point out how these factors influence the films we see, but not so keen at noticing how filmmakers transcend them.

Miles's typical evaluation of a film is that it has something significant to say to us about current social problems and values, but that it ultimately fails. Film is, for Miles, a "cautionary tale." She interprets film as a preparation for the

Gospel, great at seeing, but unable to replace religion when it comes to believing.

We might well assess the value of this book much the way it assesses the value of films. The book is an ultimate failure because it takes seeing and believing as more sequential than mutual operations. But it is not thereby valueless. It serves as a cautionary tale, warning us against oversimplifying the relation of seeing and believing and reminding us of the difficulty of going beyond sight to insight. It also offers us help and encouragement for discerning religious and social values in popular films.

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