

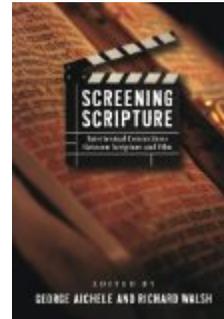
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George Aichele, Richard Walsh. *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002. vii + 300 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56338-354-0.

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I found this book so valuable that I will be attempting to build a class around it. As a scholar of contemporary religion I believe that one of the main places we can observe the evolution of religious thought and symbol is in film and media. Contrary to the opinion espoused by some scholars that religion is being devoured by secular humanism, I believe that religion is alive and well in America. Religion is simply changing form as it always has, and to paraphrase the late Joseph Campbell, film is the form of the new myths. *Screening Scripture* is valuable because it serves to link traditional Western religion with contemporary symbols and concerns.

On the other hand, this focus can be viewed as a weakness of the book. With the influx of non-western religion and the incorporation of non-Abrahamic ideologies into the American consciousness, this text screens only Biblical scripture. Supplemental texts would be useful in a class designed to examine contemporary religion in film.

There are thirteen articles in *Screening Scripture* and I lament the fact that I cannot give an in-depth analysis of each one in the space allowed. Indeed, I could write an entire review of each article. However, I can analyze the three that stood out to me and hope that I will tease enough for each and every person interested in the evolution of popular religion to buy this book.

The first article is "On Finding a Non-American Revelation: *End of Days* and the Book of Revelation." As the turn of the millennium approached, American society was inundated with disaster films, many of which had apocalyptic overtones. I would have personally chosen a different movie to contrast with the Book of Revela-

tion, for example, *The Devil's Advocate*, but *End of Days* is undeniably Apocalyptic, if a bit infantile in its use of stereotypical characters and glorified action. Richard Walsh actually uses this infantile quality to his advantage and draws a comparison with the rather sophomoric language of the Book of Revelation itself: "The comparatively shallow treatment of evil in *End of Days* is a corollary of its [Revelation's] heavy-handed symbolism" (p. 10).

The article, "Of Gods and Demons: Blood Sacrifice and Eternal Life in *Dracula* and the Apocalypse of John" was of particular interest to me since my Masters thesis was on the vampire as a religious archetype. Tina Pippin makes a strong case that Bram Stoker's version of *Dracula* is a representation of the Biblical serpent and, as such, represents passions and desires that Christianity has found unacceptable: greed, violence and sex, or those darker aspects of human nature that can never be fully repressed. The most interesting point of this article was the notion of "the chosen people" and "others." Pippin points out that certain people are marked, not only in the Apocalypse of John, but throughout the Bible. "we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads" (Apocalypse 7:3, quoted p. 25). Vampires also mark their victims with the puncture wounds on the neck, in effect setting them apart as chosen. I think that people have always wanted to be chosen, to live in "a city on a hill," and this continues in modern culture today. This is the reason that some people accept, and others reject, traditional religion. I believe this is also why the vampire is so persuasive as a symbol. Those who choose to reject tradition still have a need to be chosen; they simply prefer something different. Pippin concludes

the article by reiterating her point that vampires stand for our concerns and our fears. “There is a difference between hungering and thirsting for righteousness—or for the righteous. The Draculas desire the latter. But does God desire both” (p. 31)? Has God become vampiric in popular culture?

In the article “Sitcom Mythology” George Aichele explores television as a reflection of reality. Film, both movies and television, represents fantasy worlds where the common person is totally free to explore any facet of reality they desire, especially magical fantastic worlds. Television provides an outlet; sitcoms “represent not the way the primary world actually was, but rather the world as white middle-class Americans wanted it to be” (p. 105). Using the film *Pleasantville* as his model, Aichele draws a connection between this film and the Genesis story. This movie contains elements of the philosophic debate between free will and fatalism, or controlled destiny. In the Biblical story Eve gives Adam the apple and the result is loss of structure as the two encounter an enormously complicated and messy world. The Bible tells us this is a bad thing but, in *Pleasantville*, this assertion of free will is good and brings beauty, wonder, and color into a monochromatic world. Does this reflect the impulse of American religion? Are people finding tradi-

tional religions too simplistic and no longer capable of meeting needs in an increasingly complicated global environment? I think these are certainly questions we need to be asking.

Screening Scripture is the first step in an inquiry of changing religious icons and ideologies. The myths of tomorrow are being created now and I truly believe that the area of media is the vehicle for contemporary religious exploration. Movies such as *Stigmata*, *Frailty* or *Interview with the Vampire* need to be treated as the new myths, and the next step, I believe, is an inquiry into how nonwestern mythology is affecting Americans. As the Catholic Church loses dominance, and fears of terrorism and war enter the mind set, new outlets for religious expression are going to develop. For any scholar interested in exploring contemporary religious movements, *Screening Scripture* is a logical place to begin.

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