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Bible and Cinema: An Introduction

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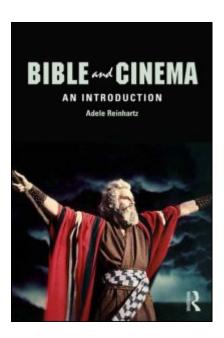*Fuller Theological Seminary*, stevenvredenburgh@fuller.edu

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Abstract

This is a book review of *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* by Adele Reinhartz.

Author Notes

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In the more than one-hundred-year history of cinema, the Bible has been adapted, referenced, alluded to, and mocked countless times to countless ends. In *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction,* Adele Reinhartz provides a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, overview of the many ways that the Bible has been used by and in Hollywood films. This task is not an easy one, as Reinhartz herself acknowledges (3). The ever expanding body of film history makes such attempts to summarize the topic of "Bible and Cinema" akin to hitting a moving target.

Nevertheless *Bible and Cinema* fills the niche quite well.

There are, no doubt, many ways that one might approach the task of providing an introduction to Bible and Cinema. In this book Reinhartz has chosen a primarily historical approach that looks at the cultural and artistic factors that have shaped cinema history as it relates to the Bible. She also looks at the ways biblically influenced films have shaped culture, and formed the American identity, since America is the primary source and consumer of these films.

Bible and Cinema is divided into two parts. The first section contains a discussion of "The Bible on Film," i.e., direct adaptations of Bible stories in Hollywood films. This section contains chapters on Old Testament Epics, Jesus Stories, Sword and Sandal films, and finally allegories of Biblical stories. Part two of *Bible and Cinema* deals with the "Bible in Film." This section covers Old Testament stories that inform the plot of films, Christ-figure films, morality in film, Apocalyptic films, and a discussion of transcendence in film.

Chapter one, The Old Testament Epics, primarily focuses on epic films like Cecil B DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) which were produced during the 1950's and 1960's, otherwise known as the golden age for this subgenre of film. These films proved fertile subject matter due in no small part to the Motion Picture Production Code and the limitations it placed on violence and sexuality. Producers such as DeMille recognized the power of sex and violence as major draws to the box-office and were able to circumvent the MPPC's restriction by placing these taboos in the context of a Bible story. (21).

In addition to the text of the Bible itself, these films drew inspiration for their look from a number of sources including the illustrations and font of the King James Bibles that most Americans had in their homes at the time. These visual cues lent credibility to the films, imbuing their stories with a "biblical" tone even though, in reality, they were embellishments of the biblical text itself.

In Chapter two Reinhartz discusses Jesus on the Silver Screen. Despite "the importance of the Jesus story for western history, society, and culture" (57), Reinhartz argues that very few

film adaptations have succeeded in creating a compelling depiction of that story. Part of this is due to the tension between the inherent fictionalization that is needed to create a compelling biopic, and the religious constraints demanding a biblically accurate portrayal of Jesus.

Reinhartz spends a significant portion of this chapter discussing the racial identity of Jesus as portrayed in Jesus films. With few exceptions, the Jesus of Hollywood bears a greater resemblance to the Caucasian character depicted by Warner Sallman (62) than the first century Palestinian written about in the gospels. This both undermines the historicity of the films and reinforces racial power structures.

Films like *Ben Hur* (1959) that follow the followers of Christ are the subject of chapter three. These films have much in common with the Old Testament Epics that were produced around the same time, drawing crowds through romance, action, and spectacle. Like *Ben Hur*, many of these films intersect with the story of Jesus, but since they are not adapted from biblical narratives, these films often feature more compelling characters than either Old Testament Epics or Jesus films.

Since the golden age of biblical epics occurred in the decades following World War II and the first decades of the Cold War, many of these films can be understood in terms of the growing tension between Democratic and Communist states. Much like their American counterparts, the early Christians stand against the oppressive Roman Empire, which represents the "godless commies" (98). In addition, these films reinforced Christian morality with themes of good business practices and loving your neighbor (102).

The last chapter of the Bible on Film section, titled "Epic and allegory," deals with films that straddle the line between Bible in vs. on Film. These films depict Biblical stories in conversation with modern society. The first example is DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) in which the Israelite's Exodus from Egypt is paralleled with a story set in 1920's America. This chapter also deals with Passion play films that depict a group of actors attempting to put on a production of the last days of Christ.

These passion play films allow filmmakers more freedom in their characterizations. The character playing Christ is allowed to make mistakes since he is not Christ himself, but can still take on many of his characteristics. Both the passion plays and the films depicting them are more often European, and so most of the films in this section are from Italy and France, though a notable exception is mentioned in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973).

Section two of Bible and Cinema is titled "The Bible in Film" and provides a discussion of films that draw from the Bible both subtly and explicitly, but do not attempt to tell biblical stories in their original context.

In the first chapter of this section, Reinhartz looks at "The Old Testament in modern guise." Though there are many options to choose from, Reinhartz gives as examples *Babel* (2006) and *In the Valley of Elah (2007)*. While neither of these films tells the biblical story as such, our understanding of the stories they tell are enhanced by an understanding of the stories they reference. In particular, *In The Valley of Elah* tells the story of Hank's search for the truth regarding how his son, a soldier, died. The title of the film comes from the location of the story of David and Goliath, which sets up the conflict between Hank's David to the Army's Goliath (145).

Chapter seven takes a close look at Christ-figure films where "the plot is parallel to the story of the life, death, and sometimes, the Resurrection of Jesus (148)." Due to the ubiquity of Christ-figures in film, one of the most helpful aspects of this chapter comes when Reinhartz provides a method for both identifying and interpreting Christ-figures in film. One of the stated purposes for studying these films is the way that various depictions of Christ reveal the diverse and changing views of Christ in contemporary culture. Reinhartz cites *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) and shows how that movie's protagonist, Harold, both fits and subverts the Christ-figure.

The eighth chapter focuses on morality in film and its relationship to the Bible. This relationship has proved to be ambiguous over the years, sometimes enhancing moral authority, and at times revealing a profound lack of morality. For example, Reinhartz cites *Dead Man Walking* (1995) as an example of how knowledge of the Bible denotes moral authority. In this case, a nun's knowledge of the Bible is used to give her arguments against the death penalty weight (177). Conversely the movie *Carrie* (1976) features an abusive mother who quotes scripture to justify her behavior. Her misuse of the Bible, and its moral weight, reveals and deepens her own depravity (195).

Chapter nine of *Bible and Cinema* focuses on apocalyptic films, which deal with doom on a cosmic scale (206). In this chapter Reinhartz looks at impending apocalypse, current apocalypse, and post-apocalyptic films. Though these films rarely follow the narrative arc of the apocalyptic literature found in the Bible (Daniel and Revelation in the protestant canon), they do resonate with the themes of these books. Like the biblical literature, these films often reflect the fears of the cultures in which they are produced. Interestingly, their key feature is disaster, whether that exists in the past, present, or future, and the promise of redemption. Reinhartz uses *Wall-E* (2008) as an example of this disaster and hope. In the movie, the earth's resources have been depleted and the world blighted by waste. However, hope is found in a small plant that indicates the Earth is ready to once again sustain life (221).

The final chapter of *Bible and Cinema* concludes with a discussion of transcendence in film. Just as the Bible tells the story of how a group of people interacted with a transcendent other, so too can film point to something transcendent. Reinhartz points to Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) as an example of how a film can invite a connection to something beyond our understanding. The film's opening shot is a passage from the Bible which, along

with the movie's theme of grace against nature, orients the viewer toward God. This orientation toward the transcendent other is moved forward through the use of imagery (often beautiful shots of nature) and lush music (246-251).

Reinhartz acknowledges the fact that what works for some viewers will not work for others, and cites *The Mill and the Cross* (2011) as an example of a film that was both panned and lauded by critics and audiences (233). Nevertheless this discussion of the ways film can be used to invite a connection with the God of the Bible is a fitting conclusion to *Bible and Cinema* which has spent the nine previous chapters showing us the God of Hollywood.

With *Bible and Cinema*, Adele Reinhartz provides a much needed primer on the convergence between a religious text and material culture. Both the Bible and cinema have had an incredible impact on western civilization and America in particular. This book skillfully considers the ways that these two cultural touchstones have shaped each other over the last one hundred years. Each chapter provides a methodological touchstone regarding how each topic should be investigated and why it is important that we should do so. Reinhartz then provides the reader with several examples of this methodology in action.

The text as a whole serves to underscore Reinhartz's cinematic literacy. Early chapters in particular include movies from the silent era through the modern day. Reinhartz also shows her knowledge of the Bible and Theology throughout the book, but never more clearly than in her discussion of *Inglorious Basterds* (2009). Though her reading of this film depends more upon Augustinian theology than the Bible itself, it nevertheless reveals Reinhartz's knowledge of both the cinema and the Bible, as well as the extent to which the Bible can be used to reveal the potential meaning of film.

One of the most valuable of Reinhartz's insights concerns the various pieces of art and literature that have contributed to modern ideas about biblical people and customs. As discussed above, many of the earliest Bible films borrowed imagery from pictures in the King James Bibles that were common in many American homes. As later movies referenced these early films with borrowed shots and feel, a visual shorthand was created that allowed filmmakers to quickly evoke a Hollywood-biblical style, if not always substance.

It is important to keep the subtitle of *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* in mind while reading this book. At more than one occasion Reinhartz could go deeper into the topic at hand. However, this would be inappropriate for a book that is meant as an introduction to a topic that covers more than a hundred years of history. At more than two hundred and fifty pages, *Bible and Cinema* provides an introduction to the field, just as it intends, but it also urges the reader to explore such a deep well more thoroughly. It will thus serve as a welcome text for introductory Bible and Film or Religion and Film courses at the undergraduate level.