Journal of Religion & Film

12-17-2016

Religion and Popular Movies

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Abstract

A few years ago, I was lecturing on John's "Revelation" in a New Testament course when a student approached me after class with a question. He wanted to know if I had seen the movie *The Seventh Sign* and if it was based on the Christian Apocalypse. Unaware that Demi Moore had just appeared in a movie by that title, I assumed the student was referring to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and answered him accordingly. He quickly corrected me and challenged me to see *The Seventh Sign*. I watched the movie soon after that, and although it was not the greatest film I had seen, I used it as a basis for class discussion. The student response was phenomenal. Most had seen the movie and were eager to participate in class discussion. The resulting enthusiasm and "common ground" of material energized our class work on apocalypticism for several class periods.

From the success of that experiment, I reevaluated my teaching and course materials and decided to explore using films in my religion classes. This seemed to be a logical extension of my teaching since my training is in religion and culture and religion and literature. I quickly discovered, however, that skills in literary analysis do not necessarily translate to or correlate with film analysis, and I began to retrain myself in the methods of film studies in order to incorporate films in my classes. My learning resulted in *Screening the Sacred*, a volume of essays on religion and popular American films I co-edited with my colleague, Joel Martin. Meanwhile, I was discovering more and more how films can serve as powerful tools in the classroom.

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Meanwhile, I was discovering more and more how films can serve as powerful tools in the classroom.

First, film is a powerful tool because it motivates students to participate in class. While students in my classes still read texts, they also watch films communally outside class. This shared act begins to break down barriers and build trust between class members before we ever attempt a discussion of the film. As a result, students are more willing to risk themselves before their peers. This increased participation in class spills over to other areas as well, including greater participation in discussions of lectures and assigned readings.

Second, film as a tool empowers students. For whatever reasons, students respond to films enthusiastically. They are stimulated by the auditory and visual experience of movie watching in ways that reading fails to achieve. Often, watching a film will actually inspire students to read criticism, novels, or texts that are related to the film. For all these reasons and more, students are comfortable with the film medium, they are not intimidated by it, and when students interact with material in this manner, they are empowered, confident, and bold. With film as part of their curriculum, students seem more willing to take imaginative risks and to think critically.

Third, popular films can be effective tools for learning because using popular films in a class results in students claiming ownership in course content. Students recognize the films, and they identify them as part of student culture. As a result, the course content has immediate relevance to students, and they feel they have a stake in its examination. This makes students partners in the course, and they feel a greater responsibility for the success of the class and their own learning. When students claim such responsibility and ownership, class interaction is exciting and dynamic, and students become self-directed learners, taking their critical skills beyond the classroom.

Once I discovered film could be a powerful tool, I set out to determine how best to use films in the classroom. I have used movies to supplement texts and materials in traditional courses (for example, *Dances With Wolves* in a course on North American Religion) and as the primary subjects of study in a religion and culture class. Both approaches are productive, and in both cases, there are certain crucial items to consider when using films in religious studies courses.

One must first decide what type of film to use for the exploration of the relationship between religion and film. There are a fair number of contemporary films that treat religion or religious subjects and are more or less obviously religious in nature. Examples of this type of film include *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or even *Little Buddha*. These films provide

opportunities for discussing religious concepts and contemporary responses to religious ideas and themes. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are plenty of films that do not treat religion either explicitly or implicitly or that are simply too trivial and would probably not be very useful for a class on religion and film. A film like *Spy Hard*, for example, would probably not yield sufficient benefits to warrant class time. Nevertheless, between these extremes are a whole host of contemporary, secular films that, while not overtly religious, are very rich in material for the study of religion and film. Popular films such as *Dead Man Walking*, *12 Monkeys*, or *Independence Day* are effective with college students because these are the movies students are already watching, and such movies have the power to affect them profoundly. Put simply, when popular films provide the texts, students are motivated, interested, and moved.

In producing *Screening the Sacred*, Dr. Martin and I decided to focus on popular, secular films and to outline a method for the study of religion and film--a way of exploring the relationship between two cultural forms and a way of organizing a systematic approach to this study. Our book defines religion and culture in broad terms so that the study of religion and film can take place in a variety of ways using numerous categories. Without trying to be exhaustive, we treat three such categories and classify films as primarily either theological, mythological, or ideological. This not only provides an organizational outline for

the three main parts of the book, but also a typology for categorizing films. This typology allows us to recognize different approaches to the study of religion and to examine films from a religion and culture perspective as predominantly theological, mythological, or ideological.

This typology quite naturally led us to a methodology for studying these various types of films, a methodology that employs different critical approaches appropriate to various types of films. For example, films that are categorized as relying predominantly on theological concepts require a method, a critical stance, that draws from theological studies and a theological approach to religious studies. Similar claims can be made for mythological films and ideological films. We do not assume this method is complete, and we are refining and searching for another type of criticism that is even broader and more inclusive in scope. Some examples will illustrate how this typology and methodology work.

Many popular films are replete with themes that could be identified as primarily theological. For example, films like *Places in the Heart*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, or *The Fisher King* rely heavily on concepts such as grace, justice, redemption, hope, and forgiveness. Since these ideas are predominantly theological, it is expedient to rely on methods that are equipped to deal with such categories. So, someone using a film that is predominantly theological in nature would find it helpful to employ theological criticism to elucidate the relationship

between religion and film. This type of criticism tends to define religion traditionally and will locate traditional religious symbols and categories in films, often drawing from the Jewish or Christian religions in the case of popular American films. While theological criticism is an excellent approach to dealing with films that contain theological content, it is also very narrow in its focus, sometimes relying almost exclusively on Western symbols and concepts to define or understand religion. So, along with a theological approach, one needs to employ other methods to deal with films that might not be predominantly theological in nature.

A second method, mythological criticism, allows a more universal approach to the study of religion and film. Myth critics, unlike theologians, define religion broadly, refusing to reduce religion to any single tradition or truth claim. Myth critics assert that religion transcends cultural boundaries and the narrow foci of individual traditions. Instead they deal with universal archetypes, symbols, and rituals. This broadens the study of religion and film by opening up the definition of religion. For example, where a theological critic might talk about Christ figures in a film, myth critics are interested in hero figures. Rather than the theological categories listed above, the myth critic is more concerned with psychological and human archetypes, the struggle between good and evil, or the hero's journey. Films like *The Natural* or *Field of Dreams* fit nicely into this type, but perhaps *Star Wars*

is the prime example of films that benefit from examination using mythological criticism. As Joseph Campbell suggested in interviews with Bill Moyers, *Star Wars* contains all the mythic elements: Luke Skywalker is a universal hero figure who stands for an entire culture; the Force is a supernatural, spiritual power; the primary struggle is one of good and evil; psychological archetypes come into play as Luke struggles against Darth Vader (death father).

Myth criticism helps to alleviate some of the problems inherent in the theological approach, but the mythic perspective has limitations as well. In particular, myth criticism tends to be ahistorical and psychological and ignores the political and social dimensions of religion. Therefore, *Screening the Sacred* includes a third approach to the study of religion and film: ideological criticism. Ideological criticism tends to understand religion in relation to that which is not ordinarily considered religious: the social structure; gender relationships; race and class distinctions. Thus, with ideological criticism, one sees how religious concepts and categories are translated into everyday power struggles and societal relationships. Ideological critics interpret religion in its historical and social context and explore the relationship between society's values and the religious force such values might have in a particular culture. Such values might either shape religious traditions or be shaped by them. In any event, social values and religious traditions rarely exist in a vacuum, and an ideological approach to film helps the student to

see and learn how these values and religious ideas interact in culture. *Screening the Sacred* identifies the films *Rocky* and *Blue Velvet* as ideological films, but one might also look to more recent films such as *Natural Born Killers* or *Pulp Fiction*.

By defining three approaches to the study of film and three different types of films that interact with religious studies, we are attempting to broaden the way our students think about religion. And we need to seek even more typologies, more methods, for categorizing and studying film and religion. In the process, we can recognize that films are an excellent medium and tool to initiate an exploration into how religious attitudes can affect and be affected by a wide range of human, social, and political attitudes and issues. Our ultimate goal is to encourage students to become critical interpreters of culture by initiating a dialogue about how religion and ideologies are communicated in society. We choose to use films in religious studies courses because we believe movies can be powerful vehicles for communicating religious stories, meanings, and values to mass audiences and to the public sphere. As such, Hollywood and religion, as cultural forms, have the power to reinforce, alter, or challenge our most deep-seated beliefs, values, and hopes. For this reason, a study of religion and film is a natural one for religious studies curricula and for programs that rely upon and promote critical thinking. For whatever else they might be, for good or bad, popular movies do carry substantial weight in the public presentation of values and beliefs, and for that reason alone,

films exist as natural texts for our students interested in religion in contemporary

society.

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[1] Portions of this essay summarize the method and organization of "*Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*", edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).