

○ **REVIEW OF DAVID SHEPHERD (ED), *IMAGES OF THE WORD: HOLLYWOOD'S BIBLE AND BEYOND*. SEMEIA STUDIES, 54**

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It is always refreshing to read a book that does what it promises to do, either explicitly or implicitly. *Images of the Word: Hollywood's Bible and Beyond* (hereafter *Images*), a collection of short essays on film by a variety of biblical scholars and theologians, is just such a book. It is truly and honestly interdisciplinary, as opposed to those all-too-familiar acts of blithe and uncritical pillage of the language and concepts of other fields to serve the ends of biblical studies. Perhaps even more importantly, *Images* is, for the most part, a work of biblical scholarship rather than one of systematic theology or apologetics masquerading as biblical studies. Reading the book prompted me repeatedly to seek out new films or instilled in me the need to revisit old favourites, which, at least in this reporter's opinion, is the hallmark of the best writing on film.

The introduction, 'Hollywood's Bible and Beyond', by the volume's editor, David Shepherd, clearly lays out the aims of the project. Shepherd, citing 'the Hollywood cartel' and 'Hollywood's hegemony' as well as scholarship's 'Hollywoodcentrism', calls on biblical scholars to take on films from outside the mainstream of American cinema in the interests of more inclusively 'mapping the movement of the Bible beyond itself' (p. 9). The essays in the volume - which grapple with films dating from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries, films made in places as far afield as Sweden and India - make a real contribution to this difficult task. At the same time, the introduction offers a fine capsule history of the field.

The first essay, also by Shepherd, 'Prolonging *The Life of Moses*: From Spectacle to Story in the Early Cinema', is an illuminating study of early Moses films that offers an intriguing argument about the changing nature of early cinema. Not only does Shepherd do a fine job in illustrating a number of early Mosaic films, including Pathé's long neglected 1905 *La Vie de Moïse*, but he firmly situates them in the broader history of biblical illustration. Most intriguingly, he also discusses the ways in which early film exhibitors re-edited films, a practice that, before the days

of centralised film distribution, was popular and widely accepted. Consequently, he argues, formal redaction criticism can play an important role in film studies.

Eric S. Christianson's 'The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 4-5 and in Classic Film Noir' accomplishes the not inconsiderable task of making good on the promise of its title. Christianson argues that both sets of texts were similarly located in their respective cultures, and both were profoundly challenging: 'In the same way that the film noir world...threatens the stability of the American dream, Judges threatens the stability of Israel's covenantal relationship and expositis the contingency of access to the promised land' (p. 43). Christianson's suggestion that both noir and Judges enact and represent social and cultural ambiguities, particularly those involving gender, is suggestive and deeply intriguing, as is his comparison of Judges' murderess Jael with the noir staple of the *femme fatale*.

The next essay, 'Perversions of Food: Revelation and *eXistenZ*', by Jan Willem van Henten, is more tightly focused on one very specific aspect of a single film and its counterpart in a single biblical book, although he never neglects their respective cultural locations. He focuses on the role of food – both 'normal' and 'alternative' foods – in both texts, using this as an unexpected but ultimately illuminating platform for discussion of two texts that on the surface seem to have little enough in common. Perhaps the most compelling of these similarities is his argument that 'both point out that the world is in flames' (p. 61).

George's Aichele's 'Local Heroes' adds Gilles Deleuze's concept of the simulacrum to his mix of influences as a way to trace resemblances between Bill Forsyth's 1983 film *Local Heroes* and heroes from the biblical text. Though Aichele's use of Joseph Campbell's idea of 'monomyth' is a bit off-putting given Campbell's notorious reductionism, he nonetheless offers up a fiercely creative, compelling, and wide-ranging analysis that manages to join the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen, Walter Benjamin's work on translation, contemporary cinema, Jorge Luis Borges' short story 'Three Versions of Judas', and the biblical figures of Jonah and Qoheleth in ways that allow each of these elements to throw light on the others.

Reinhold Zwick's 'The Apocalypse of Andersson: Biblical Echoes in *Songs from the Second Floor*', arguably the best single essay in the collection, provides a fine example of a close reading of a single film in light of the biblical traditions that inform it. Zwick argues that Swedish director Roy Andersson, in his bleak, difficult film *Songs from the Second Floor*, deals with 'the deep crisis shaking many Western societies' (p. 99); offering a glimpse of nothing short of 'the collapse of humanity' (p. 104). His analysis of the formal aspects of the film are insightful and his comparison with the book of Job in turn allows him to further tease out the meaning of the film and its hidden optimism: 'Both offer a radical lament but one that refuses to despair or give up entirely on the future: hope "hibernates" within the rebellion. In Andersson's cinema, this hope begins to dawn when we pass through the deep darkness of a lament placed under the sign of the cross and thereby grow more and more sensitive to the gentle rays of light' (p. 111).

'*Barabbas* Rewrites the Cross: Parody or Parable?' by Richard Walsh, discusses Pär Lagerkvist's novels, on which Richard Fleischer's 1962 film *Barabbas* was based, as well as engaging with films as diverse as *Dead Man Walking* and Mel Gibson's lamentable *The Passion of the Christ*, which, incidentally, makes an appearance in most of these essays.

Adele Reinhartz's 'Caiaphas on Camera', another standout, is an example of ways in which interdisciplinary scholarship can help to illuminate concrete social problems, represented here by the persistence of anti-Semitism in European cultures. Reinhartz examines filmic portrayals

of Caiaphas as a ‘barometer for gauging cinematic approaches’ (p. 132) to the spectre of the biblical vilification of the Jewish population. She highlights how Caiaphas’ portrayal has both challenged and reinforced long-standing prejudices about Jews. She also draws out a compelling comparison that directly addresses the promise of interdisciplinary study: ‘Filmmakers confront the same problem as do historical Jesus researchers: How does one tell a plausible narrative of Jesus’ last hours that stays reasonably close to the Gospel sources and also takes into account contemporary sensibilities and current academic conclusions about the ideological elements of the Gospel narratives?’ (p. 131).

Jo-Ann A. Brant’s ‘Camera as Character in Philip Saville’s *The Gospel of John*’ quietly re-dresses a lack of serious consideration of evangelically produced Gospel films, which have traditionally been ignored by scholars. By focusing on Saville’s camera as a ‘divine witness’, Brant finds *two* at time competing and contradictory narratives running through the film, one told by the incessant voice-over, the other told by the camera itself.

Dwight H. Friesen’s ‘*Karunamayudu*: Seeing Christ Anew in Indian Cinema’ ends the body of the collection on a high note with an articulate and very thorough study of *Karunamayudu*, the 1978 Telugu-language Jesus film that has been seen by an estimated 118 million people. This audience, which owes its astounding size to the fact that the film was licensed by the Christian Broadcasting Network in 1979 for use in ‘Christian witness’ in India, makes the film particularly important in the context of Indian Christianity: ‘For many in India, *Karunamayudu* remains the definitive movie of Christ’s life’ (p. 169). Friesen does a painstaking and very engaging job in situating the film within the broader confines of Indian religion and discusses it quite correctly in light of the history and conventions of Indian cinema.

The volume finishes with two responses, one from film studies (the Jesuit Richard A. Blake’s ‘The beginning of a Beautiful Friendship’); the other from biblical studies (Rosamond C. Rodman’s ‘Decoding, Meta-narrativizing, and Making Analogies’). Though one wishes that the editor had gone outside of the Christian faith for a truly outsider response from film studies, Blake’s essay – and Rodman’s, for that matter – offers some solid insights and some commendable suggestions for further study.

While none of these essays are going to redefine the field, the volume as a whole represents the sort of self-critical, meticulous, forward-thinking, and thought-provoking work that forms the essential foundation for vibrant and challenging scholarship. Perhaps the book’s greatest flaw is that, given its quality and its promise, it is simply too short. It would also have benefited from further engagements with other neglected regions, such as Africa or the South Pacific. The very timely challenge of understanding the global cultural importance of the Judeo-Christian scriptures is one that should be extended to all scholars, not only in biblical and film studies but also to literary scholars, historians, and sociologists of religion.

Offering specific ways to draw connections between disparate realms of culture is the mark of superior interdisciplinary work and this volume provides us with a wealth of examples of how to do this properly. For this reason, if for no other, we should be glad of having *Images of the Word*, and for wishing for more like it.