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edited by William L. Blizek .

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*The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*

William L. Blizek, ed.

New York: Continuum, 2009. 426 p.

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The Continuum Companion series purports to be a “series of single volume companions to key research fields in the humanities, aimed at postgraduate students, scholars and academic libraries” (Continuum Books, “The Continuum Companion Series” <http://www.continuumbooks.com>). It can be said without reservation that *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, edited by William L. Blizek, accomplishes this goal. This collection of essays would easily serve as a text for a film course that delves into religion or a religious studies course that strays into film. The strength of the book rests on the ability of its contributing authors to explore the complex topics and theories of religious scholarship in film. The twenty-nine essays, written by experts in film studies, are engaging, detailed, and informative. Blizek, a leading scholar in the field and founding editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film*, argues in his introduction that issues of legitimacy in the study of religion and film are settled, and each subsequent chapter builds on this assertion with specific examples. The authors convincingly demonstrate that religiosity is thoroughly integrated into movies, and that movies are thoroughly integrated into our culture. Blizek treats film as a text, open to the same criticism and analysis across all genres and styles.

A highlight of the book is the effort made to avoid the oversimplification of earlier attempts to include analysis of religious perspectives in film, wherein only Christian narratives were considered. The traditional Christian narratives have their place in film studies, but as this collection reminds us, they are not the only narratives. The book is also exceptional because of the range of religious systems covered; Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are present alongside religious traditions not often considered in film studies such as aboriginal/indigenous, Buddhist, and Hindu. Blizek even laments the absence of Mormon, Sikh, and Daoist cinema analysis yet speculates that it will appear in time (11). Moreover, the breadth of films addressed is neither exclusive to those of the North American (Hollywood) milieu, nor to exclusively English-language productions.

Another refreshing approach found in this work is found in its inclusion of documentaries. Even when the sources are all 'real' and 'unscripted', the process of editing, direction, music, voice-overs, and lighting can change and distort the event being captured, a fact viewers would do well to remember. Documentaries can also be used to alter the trajectory of a given discourse, a point well argued in Rubina Ramji's essay, “Muslim in the Movies” (183). This is particularly significant to film studies because it opens documentaries to religious studies analysis.

Themes and elements from various religions are often explored in modern blended films. Accordingly, the authors deconstruct seemingly secular, western films from eastern religious (Buddhist and Hindu) perspectives. Michele Marie Desmarais notes Hindu concepts, such as moving beyond attachment, in western English-language films like *Truly Madly Deeply* (1991) (Blizek 2009, 163); or *jñāna-marga* (the path of wisdom) in films such as, *The Truman Show* (1998), *Brazil* (1985) and *Fight Club* (1999) (160).

In addition to the problem that all historical films face in balancing the tension between fictionalized accounts and historical events, film depictions of religious figures are even more complex. Adele Reinhartz' chapter, "Jesus Movies", is particularly adept in its analysis of the razor-edge problem of historicity versus fictional narratives that all film depictions of Jesus must negotiate. Reinhartz surveys various contributions to film constructions of Jesus as a figure from the silent era, *The Passion Play at Oberammergau* (1898), to more recent contributions such as Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* (1988) and *The Gospel of John* (2003) (219).

Particularly outstanding is Wendy M. Wright's chapter, "Religion, Spirituality and Film" wherein she discusses the intersection of spirituality and film. The essay also serves as an examination of the meaning in the term "spirituality," which is essential in contemporary religious studies discourse.

*The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* demonstrates that the interdisciplinary study of religion and film is indeed legitimate by presenting an excellent and thorough survey of the emerging field. The authors avoid the usual pitfall of religious studies in film (or film studies in religion) which has been to focus entirely on western films and Jesus-narratives, yet the book does not exclude such analyses where germane. The approach to religion and film is broad and inclusive (across genre, style, and language) without becoming insipid. There are obvious omissions (such as an analysis of the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and film, particularly concerned with recurrent themes of race, gender, and sexuality in modern cinema), but this critique is minor and is not intended to diminish from the book's achievement. Blizek's introduction alone could easily serve as an accompaniment to an opening lecture of a religion and film course. William L. Blizek and the contributing authors succeed in producing an approachable book that addresses the issues of the academic study of religion and film. *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* explores the essential elements at the intersection of both fields.

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