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Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning

Abstract

This is a book review of Stefanie Knauss, *Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* (Brill, 2020).

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Knauss, Stefanie, *Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* (Brill, 2020).

Stefanie Knauss's *Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* is a key methodological and theoretical contribution to the interdisciplinary study of religion and film. It uses *religion* as a broad term that "includes both theological reflections based in specific traditions, and the study of religious practices, experiences, and their meaning" (4). That is, it combines the established fields of theology and religious studies. *Religion and Film* has been published as a short book by Brill and simultaneously as issue 4, no. 1, of the journal *Theology*. This publication reflects Knauss' intersecting research interests in theology, culture, critical theory, and the body and religion. While the author tackles the connections between religion and film using different methods and addressing a range of diverse questions, she adopts most clearly an approach that can be linked with systematic theology of the constructive kind. As the author makes clear, her interest

lies in a critical reflection on how film and religion has been studied so far, how this study contributes to insights in theological, religious and cultural studies, and central questions that concern the field at the moment and perhaps also in the future (5).

Religious figures and institutions have varied in their responses to film, oscillating between recognizing its potential and denouncing its dangers. In film criticism and academia there are not many examples of a sustained engagement with religion and film. Research interest is now on the rise and the words in the book's subtitle condenses the three topics that Knauss pinpoints as critical: representation, experience, and meaning.

The book's first section addresses representation. It discusses approaches that focus on films as texts, the representation of religion in film, and how cinematic works do theology. The kind of approach espoused in this part eschews some of the problems of semiotic-based film analysis, which relies heavily on a correspondence between cinematic forms and verbal language in its most influential versions. Knauss acknowledges from the outset the uniqueness

of film as a medium, despite the fact that films often use narrative structures that come from literature. In fact, the textual analysis proposed in *Religion and Film* is akin to what we can call *aesthetic analysis*, i.e. a critical examination rooted in film aesthetics. Films such as the French *Life and Passion of the Christ* (*Vie et Passion du Christ*, 1903) demonstrate that, from as early as the 1900s, the history of film is filled with religious stories, figures, rituals, and concepts. Films use these direct or indirect religious elements in various ways, but they always articulate expression and meaning which turn them into theological pieces. It makes sense then to speak of a *theology of film* in a similar way that we talk about a *philosophy of film*. Theology can be rendered in, through, or with film. To be more precise, this section argues that film is particularly suited to evoke historic events and personal experiences, which, if properly read, can lead to theological insight about God, human existence, and salvation. The author clearly identifies the problems with this approach. First, films can be reduced to mere illustrations of unreflected ideas about a religion or a theological topic. Second, films can be seen as providing only one reading to be uncovered by an expert, thus neglecting the possibility of multiple readings from different viewers. Both problems point toward the lack of awareness about the possibility that theological and religious meanings arise from the encounter between film and viewer, instead of being decided or limited beforehand.

The second section examines experience, broadening the perspective previously introduced. Here the critical analysis centers on how watching films affects a spectator, especially because of their spiritual dimensions and religious functions. This approach is not audience-centered because this path implies a spectator that tends to be hypothetically constructed. This part identifies two major theoretical shifts. First, a change to an understanding of communication as a complex, non-linear process that involves the viewer's activity in fashioning meanings. Second, a move to a comprehension of film and religion as resembling each other in structure, functions, and substance.

Regarding the first shift, perhaps the argument could be made clearer, if it forgoes the *communication model* that entails a sender, a receptor, and a message to be clearly communicated via a channel. Since the discussion revolves around film as art, then arguably the *expression model* is more suited to deal with the polysemic nature of films in which ambiguity is not a defect or a glitch — a point that is made and developed more thoroughly in the next section. Arguably, this is more in tune with Knauss’s line of thought. The second shift, however, is more fundamental in moving the argument forward. Film analyzed as religion shows how the cinematic medium produces world-making myths, presents ritual practices, explores ethical frameworks, and revels in the multiple dimensions of the seen and the unseen. This discussion is quite detailed and fruitful, since these aspects are examined as expressed through the creative elements of film. That cinema can be seen as a laboratory for moral values because it confronts viewers with characters’ dilemmas and choices may not be evident. That is the reason why “ethics in film” has been mainly a way of thinking about a filmmaker’s decisions regarding a particular subject matter. More broadly, film can be considered as a spiritual medium, an avenue for the experience of God in the cultural sphere. This direction relates to Paul Tillich’s theology of culture, which has been developed as a theology of film by such theologians as Jonathan Brant.¹ Such an experience may be framed within modes that oscillate between realism and formalism: the former particularly linked with André Bazin’s writings on film and theology.²

The third section combines lines of reasoning from textual representation and viewing experience from the previous pages in order to take them further. Knauss considers film and religion as agents in cultural processes that are shaped by and give shape to value systems and ideologies. Notwithstanding its autonomy, religion cannot be isolated as if it exists unchangeably in a vacuum. The cultural dimension of religion is a space where religion arises from as well as engages with social and political aspects of the larger human community,

locally and globally. For her, this dimension, then, can only be critical, in the sense that it involves a meditation about religion and its contexts. In other words, a profound analysis of society is also a profound analysis of religion itself, of its roles, changes, and identities. A critique such as this, which connects issues of class, gender, sexuality, and race, needs to be aware of its own presuppositions and limitations.

The last section concentrates on issues around meaning. This is a reflection on the making of meaning that critically investigates complex facets of theory and method. This book's part is consciously postponed until the end because, as Knauss makes clear, in this work, methodologies and theoretical frameworks are implied in and emerge from the concrete case studies explored before. Be that as it may, it may seem surprising to some readers that these questions appear more strongly only in the final section. Reflecting on methodology and theory in the beginning would have been simply a way of providing a basic framework for the discussion instead of making it *a topic itself*. The point is that this discussion is the crucial scholarly contribution of this short study and can be arrived at only after the previous reflections.

This book makes explicit underlying assumptions and confronts recurrent difficulties in order for research to advance in the interdisciplinary field of religion and film. It successfully provides "heuristic tools" (6) for the clarification of this field. For instance, there is a need to clarify what is meant by film, religion, and theology within a particular research project. For this reason, Knauss argues that the study of religion and film should be "understood in terms of dialogue, a notion that implies positionality as well as openness" (82). John C. Lyden's proposal of looking at the relationship between religion and film as interreligious dialogue or comparative theology, derived from the idea of film as religion, has been influential.³ As Knauss points out (45), most studies share Rachel Dwyer's cautious understanding of film as including several religious dimensions rather than being itself a religion.⁴ That said, the variety

of perspectives and expressions that film provides make it a vital site for interreligious dialogue. Film puts us in contact with specific religious traditions, allowing for exchanges, encounters, and mutual knowledge and understanding. Film also enables us to study how tensions, conflicts, memories, reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding between different religions and cultures have been cinematically expressed. In this proposal, when thinking through the connections between religion and film, we go beyond interreligious dialogue as a conceptual analogy. Since interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a concrete process that is already occurring within and between religious traditions and communities, the task is to grasp and suggest how film can participate in and contribute to such a process.

The shortness of *Religion and Film* fits its project of being a concise overview of the field, taking stock of where we are right now. This is very useful for teachers and researchers who have an interest in religion and film and are playing their part in the interdisciplinary convergence of both fields. However, and this seems to be a calculated risk, the book's dimension does not allow for the development in depth of some of its suggestions. These suggestions are presented as prospects for new research. As I have argued above, dialogue between areas of knowledge — religious studies or theology and film studies — opens the possibility for interreligious and intercultural exchanges of a different kind than we have witnessed until now. Even when art has been considered a possible nexus between religions and cultures, in most cases, film remains disparaged or ignored. The ontological properties of film as a mass art that offer us projections of existing and created worlds contribute to the much-needed human dialogue between faith communities by putting religious diversity on display to large numbers of people. Even if this study is marked by the confessed limitations of Knauss's own interests and knowledge (7), hence the predominance of Western cinema and Christianity in the discussion, it expands the interdisciplinary field of religion and film by the questions it raises and the way it draws from a variety of resources. Therefore, at this stage in

the development of the field, its importance lies not only in the answers it gives, but in the possibilities it opens up. It points toward the incomplete road ahead, but it invites us, film and religion scholars, to walk it and build it with new research focuses and contributions on other cinemas and religions. In the conclusion, the author mentions the three turns that Jolyon Mitchell describes as occurring today in the study of religion and film, all of them commented throughout the book: the global turn, the cultural turn, and the medium specificity turn.⁵ Knauss aptly adds “the turn to theory and methodology, as the field considers its foundations and the possibilities of moving into new directions” (85). Her intuition is that this process of self-reflection in this young interdisciplinary field can facilitate a deeper dialogue between religious/theological and cinematic ideas and concepts.

¹ See Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² See e.g. André Bazin, “Cinema and Theology” and “A Saint Becomes a Saint Only after the Fact (*Head Over the Marshes*),” in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, ed. Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 61-72 and 205-209.

³ See John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, 2nd edn. (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁴ See Rachel Dwyer, “Filming the Gods,” in *The Religion and Film Reader*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate (New York: Routledge, 2007), 139.

⁵ Jolyon Mitchell, “New Directions in the Study of Film and Religion,” *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 107-112.