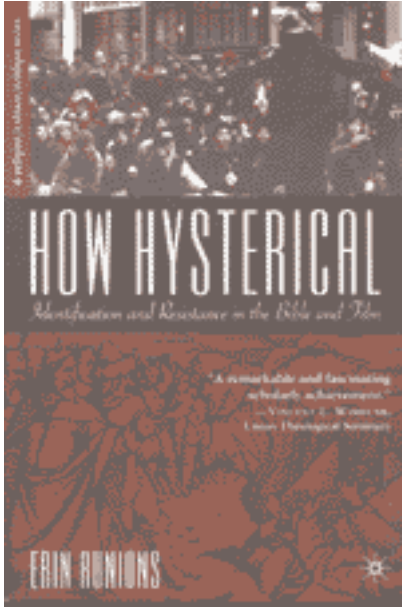


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**Runions, Erin**

***How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film***

Religion/culture/critique 1

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In *How Hysterical* Erin Runions opens alternative ways of reading “two crucial but perhaps overlooked political influences,” the Bible and film, by examining the extent to which these texts question identification and resistance to “hegemonic and oppressive societal norms and ideals” (1). Those wanting to consider more fully the political implications of the images and stories that appear on the silver screen, the way in which film captures the various roles necessary to perpetuate societal structures, or the intersection of film, the Bible, and politics from a broader perspective will certainly want to read Runions’s useful work.

The book includes an effective introduction, valuable footnotes, and six chapters. Each chapter considers a recent film, the scriptural allusions or citations found within these films, a theoretical framework that can foster new strategies and new ways of approaching these films and biblical passages, and the political implications that emerge when the relationship between the two are noted. While familiarity with the films, scriptures, and theories being discussed in *How Hysterical* would be beneficial, Runions’s discussion on all three is such that familiarity with the specific ideas or texts being addressed is not a necessity. Runions finds that delicate balance between providing

information that both the erudite and the novice can use, making her discussion of the film, Bible, and theory accessible and meaningful for most any reader.

The particulars discussed in *How Hysterical* are as follows. Chapter 1 discusses Craig Bolotin's film *Light It Up* (2000), Num 16, and Louis Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation as understood by Slavaj Žižek to show the way in which entities such as Moses, the crown, and school authorities might mask a struggle for land and resources that is always already taking place. Chapter 2 examines Boaz Yakin's film *Remember the Titans* (2000), the references in the film to the Cain and Abel story and Isa 40:30–31, and the master-slave dialectic as fashioned by Hegel and Alexandre Kojève to show the way in which Yakin's film allows audiences to *mis*recognize the current state of race relations in the United States. Chapter 3 considers David O. Russell's spoof on the first attack on Iraq in his film *Three Kings* (1999). Using the theoretical insight of Baudrillard and the simulacrum and Žižek's reading of the commodity fetish, Runions examines Russell's film through the account of Moses' leading the Israelites out of Egypt recorded in Exod 5–15 and the magi visit found in Matt 2 to show the way in which the film ultimately casts the United States in the role of savior and emancipator. In chapter 4 Runions connects Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (1991), the book of Micah, and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity to demonstrate the way in which gender can be and, in Runions's opinion, ought to be explored and challenged, a discussion furthered in chapter 5, which explores the possibilities and consequences of crossing gender lines. In the fifth chapter, Runions views Kimberly Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry*, Ezek 16, and Judith Butler's notion of gender melancholia to explore the interrelationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The final chapter of *How Hysterical* considers Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Magnolia* using a loose concept of biblical apocalypse and Walter Benjamin's conception of the same term to explore the way in which the film announces the ending of a world dominated by patriarchal and capitalistic television.

While the individual arguments found in each of the six chapters of the book are offered almost entirely independent of one another, with the exception of chapters 4 and 5, which maintain a close relationship with each other, Runions offers a book-length discussion that bears a specific interrelationship with itself because of the theorists being considered. Runions is a self-identified "poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, Marxist (including feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ideological critical approaches)," and the discussion found throughout *How Hysterical* demonstrates the usefulness of each of the questions raised by thinkers from these positions, if not also helping prior discussions find new paths of consideration (2). Because the book maintains a well-defined theoretical mode of inquiry, the work enjoys a cohesion that the individual discussions would not otherwise afford.

One obstacle that readers might encounter when reading Runions's book is the overt political agenda it maintains. At times the political observations muffle the comments being made on the relationship that Runions so aptly illustrates between popular film and the Bible. For instance, one must wade through Runions's own highly charged assessment of the actions of the teens or the police throughout the discussion of *Light It Up* in chapter 1. An otherwise useful and intriguing discussion of *Remember the Titans* in chapter 2 is minimized when Runions begins to fault the movie for failing to "adequately relate race relations" in the United States at a time when production in this country is based on a systematically racist idea of prison labor. Chapters 4 and 5 conclude with direct political appeals to play with gender or recognize the gender crisis in which one is always already present, which potentially confuse the valuable insights into the relationship between Bible and film found in these chapters. The book may ostracize an otherwise ready and willing audience by leaving the assessments of the films considered so heavy-handed or by making direct appeals to volatile political positions that most are afraid to consider.

Hopefully, this is not the case; to miss Runions's book is to miss an opportunity to understand more fully the way in which thorough and systematic readings can bring film and the Bible into overt dialogue that can lead to alternative ways of understanding both the Bible and film that are intriguing and useful. Runions's discussion in chapter 3 of *Three Kings* is a terrific example of the value of her book. The discussion of Ezekiel 16 in chapter 5 is also compelling. By taking the textual inconsistencies of Ezekiel at face value and by placing the potentially disturbing events of this chapter in the context of the happenings in *Boys Don't Cry*, Runions exposes habitual identifications and shows how reading these texts can prevent society from recognizing itself. These observations, as others in the book, capture the value of careful examination of biblical allusions and references in film both for viewing films more effectively and for reading scripture more freely and thus secure Runions's work in this field.