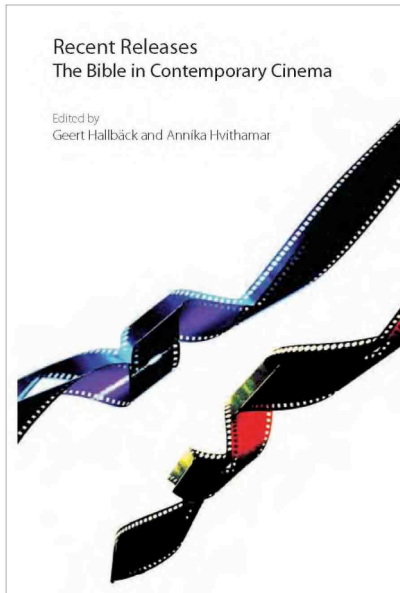


RBL 10/2009



**Hallböck, Geert, and Annika Hvithamar, eds.**

***Recent Releases: The Bible in Contemporary Cinema***

The Bible in the Modern World 15

Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008. Pp. vi + 176.  
Hardcover. \$70.00. ISBN 9781906055363.

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Reading through the diverse collection of essays that constitute *Recent Releases: The Bible in Contemporary Cinema*, I was reminded of the “engagement” between the biblical tradition and the visual—a relationship that has been described by terms such as *problematic*, *symbiotic*, *integrative*, and *antagonistic*. Cultural elements from social mores to gender definitions to the arts have supported the formation of and been formed by what became identified as “a Christian way of doing and being in the world.” This Christian way was predicated upon the Bible as a subject of religious pedagogy, as an object of devotion, and as a mode of interpretation. One “working” presupposition has been that the Bible reformed pagan culture into a new order with an initial reticence, if not dread, of the power of images.

The earliest Christian mistrust of visual images was transferred in the late nineteenth century from those otherwise “traditional,” and predominately secularized, works of art such as painting and sculpture to the then newly invented cinema. Morphing from the positive interdependence in which the visual became an integral form of religious pedagogy to the negative separation wrought through the post-Reformation secularization of the arts from its theological matrix, visual images found new modes of presentation. In particular, the power of images was fundamental to the development of the moving

picture; the term “moving picture” says it all as representational imagery simultaneously evoked audience response of acceptance and projected an aura of authenticity. Similarly, technical developments such as rapid movement, color film, and the integration of sound created the recognition that this was not elitist art form but a populist projection of reality.

Eventually, as the cinema became the motion pictures and the motion picture the movies, the more commonplace (and regular) experience of “going to the movies” became a metaphor for entertainment and escapism rather than the otherwise elitist, read secularized, aura of art appreciation or the inspirational, read theological, ambience of the biblical biography (or documentary). As the “secular century” advanced into the twenty-first century, filmmakers, movie producers, and the public continued their interests in biblical stories and personages. Further, the legacy of the Bible has infiltrated even the most secularized storylines or character portrayals from legendary sagas to contemporary science fiction, so that we have developed a series of descriptive categories as “the Jesus figure,” “the fallen woman,” “the Judas type.” During the 1950s and 1960s, the most acceptable cinematic path for movies to incorporate sex and violence was the biblical epic, for example, *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba*, and *Salome*, in a fashion similar to the secularized arts of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

The so-called canon of Western history has emphasized the high arts, that is, the classic works of trained artists and artistic genius, as fundamental signposts of cultural advancement and to our reflection on that epoch’s cultural, political, and social attitudes. However, since the advent of the study of “the marginalized” in the early 1970s, the significance of the “silent voice” of popular culture that is the locus of the larger populace has been recognized as has the critical place of religion in popular culture and the growing influence of popular culture on religious institutions, teachings, and practice.

The editors of *Recent Releases: The Bible in Contemporary Cinema*, Geert Hallböck and Annika Hvithamar, have orchestrated a collection of essays ranging from interdisciplinary to multidisciplinary approaches to the diverse fields of biblical studies and film studies from the broad methodological surveys of Chris Deacy’s “‘Escaping’ from the World through Film” and Mikkei Fugi Eskjær’s “Religion in New Danish Cinema” to the more focused analyses of Arni Svanur Danielsson’s “Images of Salvation in *Tsotsi*, *In America* and *Levity*” and Thorkell Agust Ottarsson’s “Eden Revisited: Categorizing Eden Themes in Films.” As my own introduction to the Danish perspectives on the Bible and film, I found Eskjær’s essay enormously informative as a statement of scholarly interest in this interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary study and for those Danish films that might otherwise have been unknown to me. Similarly, the brief discussion in the editors’ introduction of the *Deus ex cinema* database project by The Theological Faculty at the University of

Iceland both expands my own research resources and affirms the contemporary reception of biblical narratives and personages.

This continuing transformation of biblical motifs in visual media, from painting and sculpture to film, television, and video, provides religious signification as it cuts across all borders—geographic, economic, gendered, ethnic, linguistic, and societal. While communicating a religious worldview, contemporary biblically inspired arts have incorporated and been amplified by the globalization of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century world culture. Therefore, the previously raised question in the study of the reception of the Bible in the arts, “how is Bible being ‘read’ and interpreted visually by artists?” has been transformed. Historically, the “artistic” reception of the Bible was an amalgamation of scriptural narrative, apocryphal additions, pious legend, popular devotion, and theological evolution combined with cultural concerns and gender definitions and merged into advances of artistic style and techniques. The final five essays in *Recent Releases* provide intriguing considerations of this past methodology and announce newer routes for discussing the interplay of religion and cinema.

Gerard Loughlin’s “The Madonna’s Tear: Biblical Images in the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky” orchestrates a close reading of significant scenes from his classic *Nostalgia* in coordination with the meaning and symbolism in two classic works of Renaissance painting: Leonardo’s *Adoration of the Magi* and Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna del Parto*. Although his analysis of Tarkovsky’s film might be interpreted as a traditionalist way of looking for the religious in cinema, Loughlin is raising a series of new critical and innovative questions in the realm of “response theory,” that is, not simply whether the religious is present in this film but rather how the religious is represented in this film and, more significantly, how (and why) viewers would respond to this film. By locating central elements of Tarkovsky’s imagery in recognizable and evocative traditional religious art, Loughlin argues that the viewers find immediate points of entry into his interpretation of a contemporary situation.

The interconnected questions, especially in terms of response theory, of whether biblical reception is the purview of the movie-maker or the viewer and what to make of those films that question the validity of religious institutions and their dogmas, are central to the next two essays in this collection. Caroline Vander Stichele’s “Mary Magdalene in Motion” is a cogently argued analysis of the cinematic figure of Mary Magdalene in the works of three diverse and contemporary movie-makers: Mel Gibson in his *The Passion of the Christ*; Ron Howard in his *The Da Vinci Code*; and Abel Ferrara’s *Mary*. Building on the most recent biblical, theological, feminist, and iconological scholarship on this controversial biblical female, Vander Stichele carefully parses the influences and perspectives of each filmmaker. By doing so, she provides a taste of the response and

individual influences that shape the making of a film and how the differing depictions of one singular character can remain somehow “true.” Arnfriður Guðmundsdóttir’s “More Pain, More Gain! On Mel Gibson’s Film, *The Passion of the Christ*” offers a methodological model for reading a movie both as the individual vision of the filmmaker and as visual questioning of religious dogma. Guðmundsdóttir’s observant dissection of the extrabiblical sources influential on Gibson grounds the director’s intricate weaving of the themes and motifs of Anne Catherine Emmerich’s visions with the classical Christian doctrine on the atonement and the passion narratives. Guðmundsdóttir confirms that the filmmaker’s perception of the spiritual significance of violence is overemphasized.

The final two essays in this collection interrelate the role of religion in popular culture and the popularizing of religion in innovative and intriguing arguments. Jesper Tang Nielsen’s “*Jesus and Josephine: The Bible in Danish Popular Culture*” introduced me to this merger of Christmas traditions and television programming in Denmark. His analysis of the singular episode of the annual series *Christmas Calendar* merges biblical narrative with real-life questions through the medium of television and offers an insight into the place of religion in contemporary Danish society. Similarly, Britt Istoft’s entertaining and enlightening “Trekies, Jedi-Knights and Pop Witches: Fantasy and Science Fiction as Religion” offers a cogent discussion of the interplay between religion and popular culture from the analysis of specific episodes of *Star Trek* to the observation that modes of behavior, dress, morality, and ethical views are the foundation of a “religious” group. Reading this essay, I was reminded of how students respond more readily to an interpretation of religious art, whether still or moving, when I relate the *Star Trek* episode in which a Native American warrior in the midst of a fight with Captain Kirk calls attention to the latter’s mortality with the phrase, “Behold a god who bleeds!”

As a closing credit for *Recent Releases: The Bible in Contemporary Cinema*, I advocate it as fundamental as a library resource, on the desk of those teaching/researching religion and cinema, and for graduate students.