

## Book Review

# Mathew P. John, *Film as Cultural Artifact* Religious Criticism of World Cinema

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An interdisciplinary endeavor, Mathew P. John's study *Film as Cultural Artifact* attempts to draw on methods and theories of cultural anthropology and theology in order to analyze film's role in intercultural dialogue and deepen the theological understanding of religion in film. The use of an integrated methodological framework including theological critique, ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological analysis, he argues, will allow for "a more holistic reading of religion from world cinema" (1). The author applies his theoretical and methodological insights to analysis of the Elements trilogy by Deepa Mehta, in particular the last film of the trilogy, *WATER* (CA/IN 2005).

The author begins with a discussion of the parallels between film and religion as "narrative[s] of culture" (9) that are world- and meaning-making. Religious criticism of film will pay attention to the role of religion in the meaning-making processes in which the film engages, with a specifically theological approach being explicit about the normative elements of such critical analysis and about the transcendental horizon in which the analysis takes place. Film thus becomes a potential space of God's revelation in and to culture, whose movements the analyst follows in an open, dialogical attitude which begins with analysis of the film qua film, presupposing a mutual critique and enrichment throughout the dialogical encounter.

While these first two chapters are firmly grounded in previous research in the field of film and theology, in chapter three John offers an innovative contribution in the combination of this theological approach with anthropological and ethnographic methodologies that push further the understanding of how film and religion interact as cultural meaning-making narratives. John describes films as cultural documents available to ethnographic studies: "a *fictional story* is being *performed* to create *visual representations* of culture" (35). Cultural exegesis, the methodology developed by John, then looks at film in order to understand and interpret culture. Specifically, the author works with a combination

of methods that allow analysis of the work itself, its context of production and its reception, focusing on how culture, and especially the religious dimension of a culture, are represented and understood. This includes virtual participant observation, in which the viewer enters the world of the film to participate in its culture, combined with auteur criticism, which helps uncover the meaning of the film intended by the filmmaker and understand choices and biases in the filmic representations, and context criticism, the author's term for analysis of the reception of the film studied through focus groups and expert interviews.

The particular field of application of this methodology is world cinema as a space for intercultural and interreligious encounter when viewers enter into another culture through the story told and performed in a film. Chapter four offers a brief introduction to world cinema as the cinema(s) of all cultural contexts, which, while valuable and necessary, is too brief and lacks analytical and theoretical depth. The description of Bollywood as a production context and a genre offers some interesting insights in view of the case study of the Elements trilogy, but a problematization of the term as well as a critical analysis of its potential are necessary.

The second half of the volume, chapters five to eight, is dedicated to analysis of the Elements trilogy, and specifically the film *WATER*. The author applies the methodology developed in the first part, starting with detailed analysis of the conditions of production and authorial intentions as derived from an interview with Mehta. Here, a discussion of the "diasporic gaze" of Mehta as an Indian woman living in Canada is especially interesting as this situation combines both emic and etic perspectives in a complex relationship which often leads to a controversial reception in the country whose culture is represented. In fact, Mehta's work has been criticized in India for exoticizing and denigrating Indian culture and, especially, victimizing Indian women. Feminist and decolonial criticisms of Mehta's films discussed by the author provide a glimpse of the multiple layers that the country's colonial past and continued relationships with former colonial powers as well as neo-colonial dynamics have created. A more detailed theoretical reflection, taking into account post- or decolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (whose thoughts on *suttee*, the sacrificial burning of a widow alongside her husband's body, would have been especially important for the analysis of *WATER*), would have provided more depth to the author's account.

In chapter six, the author combines an analysis of the film's representation of the stigmatization and deprivation of widows in 1930s colonial India based on ethnographic studies with the outcomes of focus groups and interviews about the reception of the film in 21st century India. The combination of two different methodological steps is not helpful because it leads to the underlying implication that while Mehta represents the cultural situation adequately (or maybe even authentically), given the ethnographic studies the author consults, view-

ers today are critical, maybe unjustly so, of the implications of the film regarding the situation of women and the role of religion in India then and now. While the author acknowledges a multifaceted reception that distinguishes between the film and what it says about “India then” and “India now” and affirms the possibility of different readings, there seems to be an implied “correct” reading that acknowledges that the representation is “authentic” (an expectation that the author had problematized in earlier chapters about ethnographic research) and has a critical relevance for the social context of India today. The author points out, rightly so, that both the filmmaker’s intent and audiences’ responses are tinted by ideological presuppositions; perhaps it would also have been fair to add that the scholar’s analysis, too, is not perfectly objective.

In the concluding chapter, the author focuses on a religious analysis of the film, its treatment of the multireligious context of India (and Pakistan) with all its tensions, its references to different schools of Hinduism and its universal message about the relationship of “faith” (or institutionalized religion with specific traditions, practices and regulations) and conscience, with the individual conscience as the place where the value of traditions will be decided.

The volume concludes with three appendices (ethnographic films; Christ figures; film analysis of narrative, image and sound) whose relevance for the previous study is not entirely clear.

The author’s combined ethnographic and theological approach does justice to film and religion as narratives of meaning- and world-making, and thus as cultural processes. The understanding of entering a film’s world as an activity of virtual participant observation (and the anthropological analysis of the data derived from this observation) and ethnographic methods in the analysis of reception provide particularly interesting contributions to the field of film and theology. Overall, however, the study only scratches the surface and would benefit from more in-depth reflections on issues like, in no particular order, the scholar’s own presuppositions and potential biases in the work of analysis; the presence of divergent views in the reception of the film; the post- and decolonial theoretical underpinnings of the project; the comparative theological project of the encounter of Hinduism and Christianity in the theological analysis; and the broader potential of world cinema for theological analysis from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, the volume provides interesting reading both for those interested in the methodological and theoretical development of research in film and theology and for those interested more specifically in Mehta’s Elements trilogy.

## FILMOGRAPHY

WATER (Deepa Mehta, CA/IN 2005).