

Book Review

S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*

Second edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, xviii + 207 pages, ISBN: 978-0-231-17675-0

How can we think about religion and film as being structurally analogous, and consequently, what can we learn about religion through the study of film, and about film through the study of religious rituals, myths and sacred spaces? In the much expanded second edition of his volume *Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, S. Brent Plate continues to think about these questions and elaborates on ideas developed in the first edition of this volume (published in 2008 by Wallflower). Plate's basic thesis has not changed since then: in the preface to the first edition, republished here in the second one, he writes, "I argue that religion and film are *like* each other, and that their similarities exist on a formal level" (xiii). Both film and religion frame the world, give meaning to specific elements of existence and experience, and thus create order out of chaos. Drawing on Peter Berger and Nelson Goodman, with Emile Durkheim visible in the background, Plate describes the worldmaking happening in religion and film as a re-creation that uses the materials of the present world to create an alternative (better?) version of it. Religious and filmic re-creation of the world is at the same time recreation, a fantasy, a vision that takes us out of the everyday, that allows us to see the world differently. Given these structural and formal analogies between religion and film, Plate argues that "by paying attention to the ways films are constructed, we can shed light on the ways religions are constructed, and vice versa" (3).

Plate's work is situated in what he considers the third wave in the field, when methodologies move away from literary models to more media-specific approaches (with attention to the specifically filmic ways of worldmaking through, for example, camera movement, framing, sound or editing), and attention shifts from the analysis of a film itself to how it is received by and what it does to its audience. Consequently, this second edition includes a particularly interesting expanded reflection on the

audience's experience during and after the screening, paying special attention to the sensory, embodied nature of reception, and the "afterlife" of a film in real-life rituals, spaces and experiences (chapters 4, 5 and 6). Plate also combines the earlier two waves' respective attention to arthouse cinema and Hollywood, drawing on a wide range of films from Hollywood and US independent cinema, international cinema, contemporary films and material from the very early times of filmmaking. With generous illustrations serving as visual arguments and including stills from less accessible old films, the volume provides a substantial theoretical advancement in the reflection on film and religion through in-depth engagement with cinema across the breadth of time and space.

The volume is divided in three parts, which focus, respectively, on parallels in aesthetic choices in religion and film, on audience experience during the screening and on the traces that films leave after the screening in "real life". The first part's investigation of the "similarities of aesthetic tactics between religion making and film-making" (4) analyzes the filmic forms used to put the afilmic world into the diegetic world of films, looking in particular at myth, ritual and sacred space (chapters 1–3). While the discussion of myth is probably the most developed, all chapters show how the study of film and its techniques can contribute to the understanding of religion, and vice versa, for example by analyzing the way in which myths, like films, are made through the montage of pre-existing, multimedia elements rather than being original creations *ex nihilo*. Especially interesting in this part is Plate's analysis of how myths, rituals and spaces in film and religion are shaped by ideologies and can serve to perpetuate them, such as the myth of white male supremacy or the gendered hierarchies of spatial orientation, with the vertical axis being associated with the masculine and transcendent, and the horizontal axis with femininity and worldliness. But as both films and religions re-create the world, they can also function to resignify spaces or re-edit myths in a way that reconfigures their ideological matrix and thus provides an alternative vision.

The second part focuses on reception, and especially, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological tradition, on an analysis of the viewing subject that takes seriously their embodied presence and participation in the film. This includes a reflection on the body as a medium and the synaesthetic nature of reception in the cinema, when audio-visual stimuli can create a variety of sensory perceptions that combine to make sense of a film (chapter 4). Returning to the notion of ritual, Plate notes how film functions much like religious rituals in forming sensory perceptions and physical and emotional responses. The ethical dimension of such embodied reception is developed through an analysis of the filmic technique of close-ups in dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas's reflection on the face of the other person as issuing an ethical challenge (chapter 5). Drawing on cognitive sciences as well as the Hindu

practice of *darshan* (a devotional practice in which the devotee connects with the deity through an extended exchange of gazes), Plate argues that cinema can enable a form of identification with the other person as the other, with consequent shifts in perceptions and attitudes: “As the viewer becomes conscious of her or his sensing body perceiving words, music, and images, she or he also becomes conscious of the self’s relation to, and dependence on, others” (150).

The third part (chapter 6) focuses on the afterlife of films in real life, and on the way that films can influence religious rituals (such as Star Trek-themed Bar/t Mitzvahs) or become the source of their own ritual performances (such as those surrounding screenings of *THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW* [Jim Sharman, GB/US 1975]). Plate’s underlying thesis about the necessary blurring of neat distinctions between film and reality is most clearly developed in this part in the investigation of how filmic narratives, characters, even whole filmic universes become a part of the everyday-life worlds and communities of their viewers.

Plate’s volume offers important contributions to the development of theory and analytical methods in the field of religion and film. Especially his attention to the embodied reality of viewers and the role of body in meaning making and worldmaking are important contributions to an emerging conversation. His careful analysis of a film itself, its reception and the ways in which it becomes incorporated in the lives, rituals and myths of the world of its viewers vastly expands the scope of scholarly focus in the field and opens up new and exciting avenues for research. Plate shows how studying film contributes to our understanding of religion, while studying religion allows us to better understand film. In particular, his analysis of the lived practice of film watching and ritual making contributes to the further development of the concept of “religion”, shifting the attention from teachings or theologies to lived practices, a shift that is already being theorized in the field of religious studies but is given a new dimension through the focus on film.

Given this broadened understanding of religion and Plate’s attention to the religious function of secular rituals, the Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane which Plate evokes does not seem to provide a very helpful theoretical frame to understand how religion is lived in the continuum of filmic and afilmic reality. A shift in theoretical framing might provide further inspiration and the language and tools to develop some of Plate’s broader ideas – for example about space or the connection between the body of the film and that of the viewer – with a similar degree of detail as in the case of his analysis of myth in film and religion. It would also be interesting to see Plate’s argument developed beyond the classical categories of religious studies of myth, ritual and space, departing perhaps instead from important categories of filmmaking, such as rhythm, light or *mise-en-scène*.

With its wide range of films discussed and its depth of theoretical reflections, in its second edition Plate's study elaborates on previously made points and adds substantial new material in response to the recent developments in the reflection on the relationship between film and religion. His volume is a stimulating contribution to the field of film and religion that will be read with profit by scholars in the field, graduate students and others with an interest in this conversation.

Filmography

THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW (Jim Sharman, GB/US 1975).