

Book Review

Richard Walsh (ed.), *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*

New York/London/Oxford/New Delhi/Sydney:
t&tclark 2018, 416 pages, ISBN 978-0-5676-6620-8

“The strength of the Bible lies in the fact that it is a good screenplay”, wrote Jean-Luc Godard in 1985 in a press presentation of his film *JE VOUS SALUE, MARIE* (FR/CH 1985).¹ The *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, demonstrates that Godard was absolutely right. The book is a treasure trove that can be used as an introduction to research in this field and for teaching at the university level.

The volume is organized in three main sections, which focus on contexts, theories and texts respectively. In the first part, the emphasis is on genres and other constructs used to classify filmic narratives. The multi-layered relationship between the Bible and film is scrutinized through the lenses of film noir, science fiction, horror, comedy and Western or by considering contexts of production such as cultural or national background, for example for the Jesus film in Germany or for adaptations of biblical material through the perspective of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The second part is dedicated to theoretical reflections. The collection of articles offers a wide range of approaches to the interplay of biblical traditions and audio-visual representation: formalism in cinema studies, the role of affects and emotions in dealing with cinematic productions, readings in light of gender and postcolonial theories, issues of translation and the themes of slavery and violence are some of the conceptual frames discussed in this section. The last part is dedicated to specific biblical themes in relation to film. Some chapters focus on biblical characters and related narratives, for example, Noah, Salome or Jesus, while others deal with specific books, such as Exodus or Esther. Reflections on biblical topics such as the question of the canon or belief complete the third section.

1 Pains/Scarpetta 1985.

The 31 chapters are written from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives; they vary widely in style and film selection. For instance, readers will find an analysis of a blockbuster like *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Mel Gibson, US 2004) alongside a study of the experimental arthouse Passion film *SU RE* (Giovanni Columbu, IT 2013), filmed in a Sardinian dialect.

The openness to the multiplicity of approaches to both the Bible and biblical studies as well as to films drawing on biblical symbols, narratives and concepts makes it challenging to summarise the richness of this volume in a few sentences. The broad range of approaches and topics makes it impossible to include them within a consistent theoretical paradigm. The editor, Richard Walsh, resists the idea of a general theory. In his introduction, he interprets the manifold thinking about religion and film as an expression of dynamism and explicitly addresses developments in this broad research field in the last decades. Particularly, he highlights the undeniable and enriching contributions that the study of the Bible and film has made on the one hand to reception history and on the other to awareness of the relevance of semiotics and cultural studies approaches.

Walsh then discusses two main questions. The first relates to how to define a film as “biblical”. He does not try to funnel diversity into a rigid concept of “biblical”, seeing the definition as a matter of negotiation between film production and interpretation. The reference to the Bible might be explicit, located for example in quotations of narratives, characters or topics, or it might be assumed as a working hypothesis in the hermeneutical procedure. This second approach, even if it seems more fragile in term of argumentation, is likely to produce “new insights, previously hidden by theological/biblical/political certainties” (4). According to the editor, the relationship between film and Bible must be understood as reciprocal. Both the biblical tradition and film (not just the “biblical film”) can illuminate relevant dimensions of religious interpretation: the Bible and film are understood as hermeneutical frames rather than defined in any essential way. To cope with the complexity of approaches, categories like Bible on film (when an epic narrative is represented in film), Bible in film (when a film includes allusions to biblical symbolism) and film on Bible (when a film is used to understand biblical aspects, narratives or concepts) are discussed.

The second question is *why* Bible and film? Walsh recapitulates the interconnections of the history of Bible reception and the history of audio-visual media. At the beginning, the Bible provided legitimation for the new technology of moving images in the form of well-known stories audiences could easily recognise. Today many biblical narratives (the Passion is no exception!) still offer possibilities for expansion because they are not consistent or hold curiosities and puzzling constellations that film art can explore. The Bible has a peculiar power, derived from normative read-

ings of the opposition between good and evil, that is widespread in society and also influences political thinking.

The transmission of the Bible in film is not linear. The references to sacred texts, narratives, characters, symbols and reflections that can be found in film production are enacted within a thick and complex intertwining of the history of music, drama, fine arts, architecture and popular cultures.

Although the relationship between Bible and film is so broad, the topic has tended to attract scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology or the study of religion rather than from other disciplines. The research often therefore mirrors a specific interest in religion, rather than other questions related to film as a medium. Nevertheless, research into Bible and film is highly varied today, which explains the range of approaches and concerns gathered in this volume.

The strength of this Companion lies precisely in this profile: it gives voice to renowned scholars who present very diverse analyses of the relationship between biblical tradition and film. Its kaleidoscopic character will surely stimulate further research in this fascinating domain. In spite of its methodological diversity, the volume is somewhat homogenous in its own context of production: most of the authors are based in North America, with a few from the Netherlands or Germany. Perhaps this scholarly base is a limit of the volume, but the resulting collection still opens a truly interdisciplinary conversation.

The *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film* proves that research on the Bible and film has entered a new phase: now established within the canon of scholarly studies, it is flourishing in ways that enhance theology and biblical studies, the study of religion and also film and media studies.

Bibliography

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Filmography

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