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Book review

Crystal Downing, *Salvation from Cinema.*

The Medium is the Message

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A common process in many areas of research is that a flood of interest and general exploration is followed by an intense debate around methods and theory. Though the field of religion and film can trace parts of its history back to the early years of the film medium, the field did not seriously start expanding and developing until the late 1990s. Consequently, discussions of theory and method have been particularly called for and have taken place over the last ten years. A general, and not very surprising, agreement seems to be that any study of religion and film must combine knowledge of both religion and film. So far, though, the film element has caused particular problems for many researchers, not least for those who come to the subject from theology or religious studies. This is where Crystal Downing's *Salvation from Cinema* comes in, offering a helping hand to those struggling with film theory and film language and how these can be related to religion.

That Routledge has chosen to publish Downing's *Salvation from Cinema* is not a surprise considering their record of publications related to media and religion. As anyone involved in media and religion research knows, the subject area has strong support at Routledge and this academic publisher has lately brought us many noteworthy volumes, such as *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, *Digital Religion* and *Religion, Media and Social Change*.¹ *Salvation from Cinema* is a significant addition to that list.

Downing's main point in *Salvation from Cinema* can be found in the subtitle of her book: *The Medium is the Message*. Downing launches with Marshall McLuhan, arguing that in order to understand the salvation that film can offer, we need to understand the medium and how it can open up for religious reflection through its forms and language and specifically through what Downing calls "the techniques that constitute the medium" (4). Like many before her (Melanie J. Wright and Bill Nichols among others), Downing is critical of the over-

1 Lyden 2009; Campbell 2012; Granholm/Moberg/Sjö 2014.

abundance of studies that focus on story and forget about the materiality of the medium and its specific visual aspects that affect what we see and how we see. Too many studies, she argues, claim to take the medium into consideration, but still leave it out when they actually come to the religious dimension. Downing's study underlines that if their field is to be able to move forward, religion and film scholars need to take the film medium seriously and truly include it in their reflections on religion and film. Religion and film is about not just religious narratives on screen, but also all the things film tells us that cannot be boiled down to story.

But what exactly is meant with "religion" in this combination of religion and film? For Downing, as well as, I am sure, for many others, religion seems to be tied to questions of transcendence and of immanence, of film pointing to something beyond and sometimes allowing the divine to shine through. It is therefore not that surprising that the first part of the book focuses particular attention on the so-called "breaking the fourth wall", a cinematic technique that, as Downing argues, shows "how creativity in the cinematic medium can generate religious messages that far exceed the significance of story" (11). When the fourth wall is broken, the medium makes us aware of its existence, but also turns the focus on us, the viewers, and our own presence, forcing us to think of the medium and our relationship to it. This is often done by characters on screen speaking directly to the camera and, in a sense, to the audience. The first example Downing discusses is suitably *ANNIE HALL* (Woody Allen, US 1977), a film in which Marshall McLuhan makes an appearance as himself. All the examples discussed by Downing highlight in different ways the ability of the film medium to take us out of our hidden location as viewers and emphasize something more and beyond, something that can be seen as transcendent and as connecting to a more profound message in the story. Examples of breaking the fourth wall are thus aspects of the film experience that can help researchers capture an important element of films that at least sometimes, writes Downing, "gestures toward an interdependence of medium and message that mimics ... the interplay of transcendence and immanence found in multiple religions" (91).

The first part of *Salvation from Cinema* focuses on the film medium and film language and on how film viewers are used to seeing films but can also be made aware of what they see and how the medium shapes viewing experiences. According to Downing many film viewers are often only aware of their *act* of seeing, and not really of *what* they see, but they can learn to see differently and find new insights in what they see. A focus on framing, editing, graphic matches and other techniques of filmmaking allows the complex layers of a film to be grasped and can help lift our analyses of the religious potential of film. Downing's expertise in film theory shines through in this part of the book, but it is brought into even greater focus in the second part of the book. Here Downing

brings the reader into close conversation with a long list of well-known theorists and philosophers, among them Derrida, Peirce and Deleuze, and helps both clarify their ideas and illustrate how they can be used in the exploration of religion and film when attention is paid to the film medium. This part of the book also works as an introduction to film theory in general, highlighting many debates of the past and of the present. In many ways this is the strongest part of the book and a part that is bound to help many religion and film scholars find and develop connections with film theory worth exploring in their field.

For anyone seriously contemplating questions of theory and method in the study of religion and film, *Salvation from Cinema* is sure to inspire reflection. However, this is not to say that this is an unproblematic study that does not raise any questions. Downing clearly illustrates her knowledge of how film works and of film theory, and also introduces this knowledge to readers in a way that should help clarify issues for those unfamiliar with film theory and highlight new perspectives for those with a keener knowledge, but her understanding of religion seems somewhat more wanting. The book is full of theological reflections and references to the Bible, and some aspects that can be related to different religious traditions are brought up, but her religious perspective feels very specific and very much focused on the aspect of the existence of and relationship with something “beyond” expressed in religion or, more specifically, on what Downing refers to as transcendence. Downing touches on certain non-Christian theological traditions and questions, such as the Buddhist tradition with Bodhisattvas, but often only briefly, bringing the focus back to the film medium in the next sentence. Since her aim is to teach viewers more about how to understand what one sees in film, her choice is comprehensible, but it sometimes leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Looking at Downing’s earlier publications, there is no doubt that she has more knowledge of religion than is expressed in the book, but here her interest in highlighting film language sometimes takes over, at the expense of a thorough theological reflection.

An example of a subject of which I would personally have liked a deeper analysis is nudity on screen, to which Downing dedicates an entire chapter, but a chapter without any serious grounding in religious/theological traditions. The chapter starts by highlighting the problems devout people have had with sexualized bodies on screen and then discusses the artistic potential of nudity in film. However, it neglects to reflect on the complex role of the body and sexuality in religion and possible connections between material religion and the film experience. In Downing’s defense, one might argue that she touches on these issues later in the book, specifically in her discussion of a couple of Jesus films, among them *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Mel Gibson, US 2004), but the chapter,

nevertheless, leaves the reader, or at least this reader, looking for a deeper argument that does not seem to be there.

Religion and film scholars have sometimes been accused of telling audiences what they will see in films, particularly which religious readings they will make of a film. Lately, more and more scholars have realized that films can be viewed and understood in many different ways and what viewers see will depend on what they bring to the viewing experience. Downing is not interested in reception and it would be a misrepresentation to say that she claims that viewers will always see what she herself notes in a film. Yet, like many theologians before her, she also sometimes takes on the role of preacher, not of the theological message, but of the filmic and material message of films. This does not undermine her main points, but it does open her up for some of the same critique many religion and film scholars have been confronted with before her. The fact that Downing highlights the need to understand the medium in order to be able to understand what we see and how we can see differently should make it clear that there are many ways of seeing a film. Statements about what a viewer will necessarily see are therefore problematic.

Despite these partial flaws in tone and focus, Downing's study *Salvation from Cinema* is still very much called for and urgently needed in today's religion and film research. I believe it can work as inspiration for scholars who are teaching religion and film and are writing in that field, showing possible ways of becoming more aware of how film functions. Together with an introductory book on film language and theory, it can help young scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies begin with a religion and film analysis that gives room for more than just story. Focusing on narrative, as Downing and many before her have argued, only brings us so far when studying film, an audio-visual medium. By paying attention to the complexity of the film medium and how this medium works, new doors can be opened for research in this field. This is not to say that we have to accept McLuhan's, in many ways reductionist, argument that the medium is the message, but it does mean that we cannot ignore his point either. The medium is never the entire message, but if we do not understand the medium, we are likely to misunderstand or miss some of the message.

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