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Jochen Mündlein

Book Review

Inge Kirsner, *Komm und sieh* *Religion im Film. Analysen und Modelle*

Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020, 164 pages,
ISBN: 978-3-658-30130-9

In her new book, Inge Kirsner, professor of practical theology at the University of Tübingen, considers how religious film might be interpreted at the beginning of the 21st century. After a short introduction, the volume is divided into two parts. The first part offers a broad overview of leading motifs and themes from the Christian-Jewish tradition – such as sacrifice and redemption – that can be found in films. Kirsner sees these elements as contributing to the existential character of filmic interpretation which emerges from films' adaptation of these themes and motifs to human life. This view is illustrated in the second part of the book by practical suggestions for liturgical events. In Kirsner's opinion, going to the cinema is similar to attending a church service, for both interrupt everyday life: "Idealerweise kommen wir aus dem Kino anders heraus, als wir hineingegangen sind" (Ideally we emerge from the cinema as different from when we entered it, 4). She describes film watching as an experience which addresses basic existential questions about being human. In the analyses that follow, films are then interpreted theologically, using images, motifs, and figures from the Christian Bible, and in relation to the viewer's life. The volume can thus be positioned between film analysis and theological hermeneutics. The title of the book conveys this threefold message from the beginning. "Komm und sieh" refers to the title of a film, *COME AND SEE* (IDI I SMOTRI, Elem Klimow, SU 1985). It also, however, reiterates the condensed revelatory knowledge of Jesus as the messianic savior found in a statement made by the apostle Philip (John 1:46). And it can also be understood as an urgent invitation to read this book, and as an offer to relate motifs and themes from Christian tra-

ditions found in films to the reader's personal experience. The second part of the title, "Religion im Film" is, however, misleading: the films are consistently considered only in light of the Christian tradition and a Christian perspective and never from the point of view of other religious traditions. This specifically Christian consideration of film highlights the many possibilities of Christian motifs in current cinema and illustrates the contemporary relevance of the medium of film for theology and the study of Christianity.

The first part of the book is subdivided into ten chapters and considers Christian themes and motifs in selected films. The first two chapters concentrate on the complex representation of social life organized by binding rules. Using specific films as examples, Kirsner illustrates the challenges of portraying the role of the divine in the genesis of these rules. In this way, Kirsner circumscribes two basic challenges of portraying religious motifs in film in a dense description: first, the challenge of representing transcendence, since images of the divine in films are dependent on and embedded in a cultural context and therefore can only ever claim to be a provisional and incomplete experience of transcendence, and second, the thematization of normative instructions for action as found in the Decalogue and naturalized as a primary human experience. Kirsner understands the representations of the divine as an expression of interpersonal relationships in society and at the same time as an expression of a relationship between humans and God. The dialectical character of theological film interpretation becomes clear in her hermeneutic reflection. From an emic perspective, the individual films can be understood as a foundational experience of Christian faith, while an etic perspective emphasizes the provisional nature of these experiences and their fundamentally anthropological character.

In the following three chapters, the book uses selected films, such as *ARRIVAL* (Denis Villeneuve, US 2016) and *THE DARK KNIGHT* (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), to discuss central themes of Christian theology: selfless sacrifice, misunderstood suffering, and resurrection. The existential longing for redemption is presented here as a basic anthropological motif. The films are interpreted as a recapitulation of biblical narratives within a framework of Christian hope and expectation of salvation. At the same time, the audience can identify with the characters in the films and be reminded of their own hopes from a Christian perspective. The book summarizes the prerequisites for this need for salvation in Christian motifs. Kirsner argues that based on the typology of representations of evil and the analysis of apocalyptic and dystopian representations, films create imaginative places for negotiation of

salvation expectations and redemption motifs. Within cinematic dramaturgy, she shows, motifs of doom and destruction are complementary to the represented redemption.

At the end of the analytical film reviews, Kirsner establishes a link to the beginning of the book. She emphasizes the position of digital media and film in shaping social life. The filmic representation of technical and scientific progress again raises the question of how human life can be organized in society. Drawing on science fiction films, she contrasts being human with artificial intelligence and, at the same time, thematizes the ethical responsibility of humans towards their environment. The question of the role digital media, and in particular cinema, will play in the fundamental experience and interpretation of reality in the future remains necessarily unanswered. The orienting achievements of movies and the changing and growing presence of digital media in the everyday experience of the audience suggest that we needed a fundamental reconsideration of the implications of digital media for everyday life.

The second part of the book focuses on the practical use of films in worship services. In concrete examples, films are examined for their Christian statements and their individual interpretations of life. Examining devotional practices and services in detail, Kirsner shows how films can be interpreted theologically and applied in practice. The films serve as spaces of identification for the audience and are reflected theologically in sermons and in connection with biblical stories. These interpretations are then presented as a finished template with songs, prayers, and liturgical elements. The liturgical embedding of the films is creative, even if the interpretations are sometimes one-sided and do not always do justice to the complexity of cinematic productions.

The book offers a very good and broad selection of Christian references in current cinema. However, these references are interpreted very statically. Individual motifs are covered in the discussion of the films, yet the ambivalence and diversity of Christian references within an individual film are not addressed. For the film *ARRIVAL* (2016), for example, Kirsner notes the main character's willingness to make sacrifices and the experience of suffering as a form of Christian life. But she ignores the messianic transformations of this figure and the resulting questions about free will and predestination. Thus, the film not only creates a space for the audience to engage their personal suffering, but also addresses philosophical questions about people's ability to make decisions. Cross-references within the book itself would help

avoid the impression of eclecticism with regard to individual religious motifs in the movies.

Overall, the theological film analyses and liturgical applications offer a very good introduction to the field of film and theology for students of theology and in studies of Christianity. The overview of the various topics of the Christian tradition, their everyday relevance and the discussion of the medium of film from an ethical perspective illustrate the central importance of this field for contemporary religious questions. The two complementary sections of the book, film analysis and application, will be particularly inspiring for students and those interested in theological film work, as they draw attention to the religious horizon of the reception of films and at the same time encourage the productive use of films themselves in church services.

Filmography

ARRIVAL (Denis Villeneuve, US 2016).

THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008).

COME AND SEE (IDI I SMOTRI, Elem Klimow, SU 1985).