

Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning

Stefanie Knauss

Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2020 (103 pages, ISBN 978-90-04-42675-7, \$84.00)

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In her short but intense work, *Religion and Film*, Stefanie Knauss offers an overview of the budding academic field of religion and film studies. Knauss traces its origin, development, significance, and validity and concludes with her thoughts on prospects for the field. She also presents a wide-ranging literature review of the field that places her work in a broad academic context. Referencing sixty-eight films from different languages and cultures throughout the book helps her support her arguments. Though this e-book is neither an in-depth nor a comprehensive study of the field, it covers all the relevant aspects and general trends in religion and film and comes in handy as an excellent starting point.

The book is divided into 4 chapters. In chapter 1, “Representations of Religion(s) in Film: The Study of Film as Text,” Knauss explores the potential and limitations of approaches that deal with films as texts that represent religion in film. Chapter 2, “Religious Films: It’s in the Eyes of the Beholder,” considers religious films from the perspective of the spectators. It also explores how films function as religion and evoke spiritual responses. The chapter concludes with a critique of an audience-centered approach. The cultural significance of religion and film and the similarities in their cultural role are explored in chapter 3, “The Quest for Meaning: Religion and Film as Agents in Cultural Processes.” Chapter 4, “Why and How Do We Do What We Do?: The Question of Theory and Method,” situates the discipline of religion and film in a methodological context.

Knauss presents textual, audience-centered, and cultural approaches to films. “Text-based approaches locate religious meaning in the film itself” and “audience-oriented approaches argue that films ‘become’ religious or acquire religious significance in an encounter with their viewers” (25). She describes how film functions as religion in a post-secular world. Film viewing becomes a religious act that evokes spiritual response and effects in the spectator. This sacramentality of films becomes an aspect of God’s communication with humans (44). This is possible because both religion and film try to visualize the non-visual and non-comprehensible.

The cultural approach to film describes how both religion and film maintain, as well as subvert, existing social hegemonies. Knauss refers to the idea of circuit of culture developed by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies to reveal power relations, oppressions, and resistance struggles behind the multi-layered meaning formation in films. She argues that “the analysis of film and religion as cultural agents requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes the various factors at play in their interrelationships” (64).

Hence, in the final part of the book, Knauss gives a methodological framework for the field of religion and film by drawing from different approaches such as postcolonial theory, realism, formalism, auteur theory, communication theory, genre analysis, semiotic film theory and analysis, psychoanalytical film theories, phenomenological film theory, cognitive film and media studies, reader response theory, and postmodern theory. Finally, Knauss asserts that the relationship between film and religion is a “dialogue” in which differences are to be appreciated in order to enrich diversity in cultural context and scholarly discourse.