

Foreword

Robert K. Johnston

Ten years ago, a dozen senior scholars of “theology and film,” together with several leading filmmakers, came together to discuss what should be the emerging foci in theology and film studies over the next decade. The consultation was hosted by the Reel Spirituality Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and was generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, Michael Gilligan, president. Out of this three-year process came six recommendations, which were published as *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Baker, 2007):

1. The need methodologically to move beyond a largely “literary” paradigm, recognizing the importance of image and sound when uncovering the power and meaning of a film story.
2. The need for studies in theology and film to broaden their film selection beyond Hollywood, embracing world cinema as equal and necessary artistic texts.
3. The need to extend the number of conversation partners beyond simply those in film studies and those in theology, reaching out in particular to the arts and social sciences.
4. The need to engage not only a film’s creators (auteur criticism), but also the film’s viewers (reception criticism) in order to have a fuller understanding of a film’s religious meaning and significance.

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5. The need to not shy away from normative criticism. Or to put it in the positive, the need to bring theology into the dialogue with film as a full partner.
6. The need to make better use of a wide variety of theological traditions.

What is remarkable about this book, *Film as Cultural Artifact*, is how creatively it engages most of these needed, new directions in theology and film research. Not only has Mathew John given us a model for engaging with world cinema, he has done so by interlacing insight from visual anthropology. (He is both an ethnographer and a student of film—an anthropologist and a filmmaker.) He not only has provided a model for what auteur criticism can contribute to the critical discussion of theology and film, he also has shown what a film's social reception can add to its theological meaning. (As Margaret Miles says, "Meaning is negotiated between the spectator and the film.") And John is conversant not only with the Christian tradition, but also with the multiple religious traditions that make up India's religious landscape.

John has provided a fascinating, thick description of the Elements Trilogy by Deepa Mehta that opens readers' eyes to both its cultural and theological depth. Although I have often taught the film *Water* in my classes, I learned much from his thoughtful dialogue with these films—much about these movies, but also much about cultural exegesis. John has seen the importance of film to investigations of religion, and of religion to critical discussion of film. Film depictions can help religionists better explore a theology's emotional range and depth, and an understanding of a cultural context's religious commitments and beliefs can aid in understanding a film's power and meaning. A striking feature of Indian cinema is this intermingling of the religious and the cultural. As we move ever more strongly into postmodernity with its awakened sense of culture's spiritual and religious groundedness, John's study will provide a valuable model for us all in the importance of interlacing the artistic, the cultural, and the religious.

In my two decades of teaching theology and film, one of the most significant changes I have observed has been the increasingly warm reception given by my students to cinema from outside Hollywood. As John argues effectively, world cinema reminds us that Hollywood is only one expression of a wider phenomenon, no longer the standard through which to judge all else. My current students, for example, find the Japanese gem *Departures* to be their favorite movie in the class.

Whether Kieslowski's *Dekalogue* or Mehta's *Water*, whether Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* or the dystopic Korean film *Snowpiercer*, world cinema both captures my students' attention and reveals a depth of spirit that at times invites the Spirit.

Like the movies being discussed, this book will both entertain and inform. If you haven't seen Deepa Mehta's trilogy, it will make you want to put these movies on your Netflix list. If you have, it will make you want to see them again, so you might notice all that you missed the first time. Put your feet up and enjoy the read.

Robert K. Johnston

Author of *Reel Spirituality*

Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary