

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN
BIBLE AND FILM

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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN
BIBLE AND FILM

An Interdisciplinary Engagement

Edited by

Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele

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ABBREVIATIONS

AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CGI	Computer-generated images
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
CTC	<i>Culture, Theory and Critique</i>
EHS	Europäische Hochschulschriften
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FiHi</i>	<i>Fides et Historia</i>
FilTh	Film und Theologie
fps	frames per second
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Language</i>
JRF	<i>Journal of Religion and Film</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>LitTh</i>	<i>Literature and Theology</i>
LSTS	The Library of Second Temple Studies
NA ²⁶	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , Nestle-Aland, 26th ed.
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . 1994–2004. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
P	Priestly writers, one of four hypothetical source-writers of the Pentateuch
<i>PastSc</i>	<i>Pastoral Sciences / Sciences Pastorales</i>
POV	Point-of-View
QG	Philo, <i>Questions and Answers on Genesis</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Studies
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SR	<i>Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
SymS	Symposium Series
T1	Cameron, James, dir. 1985. <i>The Terminator</i> . Orion Pictures.
T2	Cameron, James, dir. 1991. <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> . TriStar Pictures.
T3	Mostow, Jonathan, dir. 2003. <i>Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines</i> . Warner Brothers Pictures.
T4	McG [McGinty, Joseph], dir. 2009. <i>Terminator Salvation</i> . Warner Brothers Pictures.
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
<i>Trans</i>	<i>Trans: Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften</i>
<i>TvT</i>	<i>Tijdschrift voor Theologie</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
World of Man	World of Man: A Library of Theory and Research in the Human Sciences
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZKPR	<i>ZeitSchrift für Kultur, Politik, Religion</i>

INTRODUCTION

Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele

The present collection of essays is a sequel to the groundbreaking *Semeia* 74 issue, published in 1996, entitled *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz*. In that issue, editor Alice Bach signals the changes that have taken place within the field of biblical studies. As she notes,

Living in a borderland between the old and the new, as biblical scholars do, creates a sense of “betweenness,” an uncertain search for transitions and methods that include the contours of the historical ages that have risen and fallen since biblical epochs and the cultural repetitions of the biblical landscapes and figures that are found in our contemporary cultural productions. (Bach 1996, 2)

Twenty years later, the study of film (and television to a lesser extent) has become an accepted topic within biblical and religious studies. As Bach already points out back in 1996, when film and cultural theories are applied to biblical literature, the results can be “ephemeral and surprising” (6). However, it is precisely film as an object of analysis and film theory as a means to engage with that topic within this type of reluctant interdisciplinary scholarship that deserves more attention. In the years after the publication of *Semeia* 74, there have been several notable contributions to the field of Bible and film (see, for instance, Aichele and Walsh 2002, Reinhartz 2003, Runions 2003, Exum 2006, Shepherd 2008, Hallbäck and Hvithamar 2008). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the scholarship of Bible and film has come to full bloom in a methodological sense. Despite the fact that over the last years biblical scholars have become more aware of film history, style and techniques, much is still to be gained from a more sustained engagement with film, an engagement that goes beyond the study of the narrative and themes of a film.

The contributors to the present volume are attentive to both biblical literature as well as film theory and analysis. The emphasis in the selected essays lies on the importance of visual analysis in the encounter between Bible and film. The contributors seek to address this through a diverse range of methodological approaches. What these contributions all have in common, though, is an understanding of film as first and foremost a visual medium, which requires not only attention to that characteristic of film, but also commands its own set of methods.

This volume's contributions to the field of Bible and film lie in their sustained attention to the visual nature of film and its particular technical aspects, as well as in the authors' moving beyond merely paying lip service to an ideal of presumed interdisciplinary analysis. The essays demonstrate the actual work that goes into such an analysis. They also set out to not only apply, but also clarify the method. By doing so, each essay functions as an example and starting point for other scholars, who wish to engage in a similar kind of analysis, but lack the particular analytical and methodological tools or background to do so. This collection provides concrete tools and methods in order to facilitate such an analysis. In this respect, the essays demonstrate the development of the field in the past twenty years. The "uncertain search for methods" Bach noted in 1996 has transitioned into a field where rich and diverse methodological approaches have deepened the reading, analysis, and understanding of the multiple encounters between Bible and film (even popular culture at large; see, e.g., Culbertson and Wainwright 2010), of which the essays in this volume testify.

In the essay designed to provide theoretical orientation to the volume, George Aichele discusses five topics that relate to any scholarly analysis of both biblical and cinematic texts. First of all, he argues that the best approach is a semiotic one, which offers a common critical arena in which the various texts may be brought together, because a semiotic analysis approaches both texts as systems of signs that have meaning. The popular compare-and-contrast approach alone is almost always insufficient from a critical standpoint, and allegorical or symbolic approaches often are theologically biased. These approaches look for the hidden, symbolic, and often theological meaning in both biblical and cinematic texts. Second, in his view the radical semiotic difference between the written texts of the Bible and the moving images of the motion picture, which are often supplemented by sound and color, cannot be overstated. No movie can ever be the same as any written text. Bringing these two types of texts together

requires an extreme act of translation. Third, the biblical text should not be privileged over against the cinematic text. Any notion of holy Scripture should be suspended. Each of the two (or more) texts deserves to be considered in its own right and not as explaining the other. This opens the way for a genuinely intertextual dialogue or mutual interrogation between the texts. Fourth, with the advent of digital electronic media, movies are no longer (simply) “films.” Digitization leads to a merging of formerly separate media (print, sound, video, photography, etc.) to the extent that the concept of medium itself may need rethinking. This technology may also have considerable consequences for the future of the Bible and of biblical studies. Finally, most movies are inherently mass-produced works of art: many identical copies that are consumed by many people. As for the Bible, its transformation from unique manuscripts to printed and now electronic texts has transformed its semiotic potential as well. The influence of the consumer market (for both movies and Bibles), Aichele states, has become an important factor in the production of each of them.

The essays by Larry J. Kreitzer, Richard Walsh, and Reinhold Zwick in the first part of this volume, focus on film technique and how that shapes the interpretation of both film and biblical texts. They also reverse the hermeneutical flow in interpreting biblical texts, one way or another, through film.

In his contribution, Kreitzer notes that Mark 14:51–52 has long been a text that has puzzled New Testament specialists. Who is the unnamed naked young man mentioned in these verses, and how is it that he comes to be following Jesus and his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane? The fact that these verses have no parallel in the other gospels has led many commentators to suggest that the secret of these verses has something to do with the authorship of the Gospel of Mark itself. Could it be that the naked young man was, in fact, the author of the Gospel of Mark and that he was deliberately injecting himself into the account of the arrest of Jesus? If so, to what purpose does he do so? Similar questions about intentionality have been raised about the film-maker Alfred Hitchcock who famously included brief cameos of himself in thirty-nine of his films. The glimpses of himself that Hitchcock offered to his audiences remain one of the defining features of his films and are arguably one means whereby his creative vision was conveyed. Kreitzer explores how the Gospel of Mark and the films of Hitchcock may be usefully compared as examples of art in which their creator influences the meaning and interpretation of the work by inserting themselves suggestively into it.

Walsh in turn looks at the composition of Mark's Gospel as a whole from the perspective of D. W. Griffith's film *Intolerance*. He notes that biblical film scholars have mostly been interested in Griffith's depiction of the fall of Babylon and his Jesus fragments in *Intolerance*. However, the film is, in fact, most famous for its crosscutting (parallel montage) of four stories. Moreover, Griffith's use of crosscutting within individual stories is meant to build suspense. Mark's paratactic style and its intercalations are similar crosscuts. While Griffith's more famous crosscutting between his four stories functions similarly to his crosscutting within stories, it also serves to create an idea or motif that rises above material diversity. According to Walsh, harmony readings of the gospels similarly create (the idea of) the one gospel. In both Griffith and Mark, harmony, the creation of the one, the idea(l), has important byproducts, including notions of "providence, revelation, empire, and spirituality" (45). Walsh concludes that this unifying vision "is profoundly asocial" (62).

Taking literary studies as his starting point, Zwick notes that leading scholars of literary studies have developed a media-transcending view on narratives that (among others) covers both fiction and film. Particularly on the level of plot or discourse both media share many common features in structuring their narratives. This transmedial character of narrative structure encourages a reading of suitable literary texts with cinematic eyes—that is, "a look that is informed by the pluriform possibilities of filmic narration" (80)—in order to explore their narrative texture, especially concerning point of view and the organization of time and space. Zwick suggests that "viewing biblical narratives with cinematic eyes reveals anew their artistry in shaping a narration that is as dense as it is dynamic in its fabric of time, space and point of view" (100). Zwick applies this approach to the Matthean version of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1–13), followed by a comparison with Pier Paolo Pasolini's draft of this scene in his film script for *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964).

The essays in the second section, by Michelle Fletcher, David Shepherd, Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele, and Tarja Laine, focus more squarely on specific films and biblical texts. They work from the assumption that shared concepts and methods, crucially, a willingness to be attentive to both, provide the starting point for a flow between the biblical and the cinematic.

In her essay Fletcher moves back and forth between the *Terminator* films and the book of Revelation. As she notes, through thirty years of change, *Terminator's* apocalyptic visions of the future end of the world,

good versus evil, and ultimate battles for survival have continued to draw in audiences. Also, a range of scholarship is available examining how *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* use biblical material, but focus on the two later installments is lacking. Her own work builds on this previous *Terminator* scholarship in two ways. First, it focuses on the repeated use of themes and images from the book of Revelation within all four *Terminator* films in order to examine how they have developed since *The Terminator's* 1984 inception. This discussion highlights how the blurring of categories, dialogue with the past, and confusion of good versus evil have heightened as the franchise has progressed. Secondly, it uses this exploration of apocalyptic themes in the *Terminator* films in order to reread the text of Revelation itself. This rereading suggests fresh interpretations for the text of Revelation, demonstrating how its use of images and motifs is more akin to *Terminator* sequels than *The Terminator* itself. Ultimately, she argues, the enduring appeal of *Terminator* films and the book of Revelation may not be their presentations of the future after all, but rather their dialogue with the past.

Shepherd starts his essay with the observation that in the wake of a rising tide of interest in the literary qualities of biblical texts, the horizons of biblical studies have been expanded by scholarship that has explored the extent to which biblical traditions intersect with classical dramatic categories such as comedy and tragedy. What has not yet been explored in any (even preliminary) way is how our understanding of biblical traditions might be enhanced by considering them through the lens of melodrama, a genre not unconnected to the theatrical tradition, but primarily associated with and theorized by critical discourse in film studies. Following a brief survey of critical approaches to melodrama within film studies, Shepherd explores the ways in which filmic conceptions of melodrama may offer new insights into the narrative traditions we find in the biblical text. He does so by focusing on Henri Andréani's exploration of the David-Saul cycle in his films *David et Goliath* (1911), *David et Saül* (1911), *La Mort de Saül* (1912), and *Absalon* (1912).

Also dealing with genre issues is the essay by Copier and Vander Stichele. They make a comparative analysis of Roland Emmerich's film *2012* and Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* using Rick Altman's work on genre in film as a theoretical lens. The use of genre in both film theory and biblical studies is explored, more specifically the genre of the disaster film and that of apocalyptic literature. They are put in tandem in an analysis of *2012*. The same approach is also applied to *Noah*, thus allowing a reading that

moves away from the interpretation of *Noah* as Bible epic. To substantiate this point, Copier and Vander Stichele offer a comparative reading of *2012* and *Noah*, focusing on the way the issues of death and disaster feature in both films.

In her essay, Laine takes a different approach to *Noah*. She argues that Aronofsky's film displays an understanding of God that is only "accessible through affectively toned perception" (173), here understood as an intentional state whose function is to "attribute salience to the world" (174). A responsiveness to God that is affectively toned relates not only to matters of importance but also of what must be (ethically) true about such matters if they are to bear (religious) importance. Laine's essay shows how *Noah* induces affectively toned experiences through which the spectator has access to a "truthful" image of God that encompasses not only God's creative but also God's destructive powers. This evokes the Christian notions of death and resurrection as well as those of death and renewal more generally.

The essays in the third part of this volume are more theoretically oriented and bring the Bible in conversation with film in a number of ways. Daria Pezolli-Olgiati shifts the focus to the reception of film, while Robert Paul Seesengood uses insights from affect theory to analyze the works of Lars von Trier. Jeffrey L. Staley and Matthew S. Rindge discuss gender issues in their analysis of *Aviator* and *American Beauty* respectively and Abigail Pelham and Jeremy Punt focus on the subject positioning of characters in *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Hunger Games*.

In her contribution, Pezolli-Olgiati offers a triangulation between film analysis, the study of religion, and film theory on the basis of a case study. In *Je vous salue, Marie!* (1985), Jean-Luc Godard revisits the gospel narrative of annunciation and nativity, including the issue of virginity, in a contemporary, secular, everyday French context. When the film was released in several European countries, the film was received in different and extreme ways. Cinemas were put on fire in some cities, and the film was condemned officially by Roman Catholic institutions as a public offence to central contents of the faith and for being blasphemous. Others within and outside the Christian churches, however, outlined the high theological and artistic value of the film. Beyond these conflicts caused by a provocative approach to the figure of Mary lie different interpretations and ideas about the function and place of art and religion in a modern secular state. On the one hand, the film as work of art stimulates audiences to consider provocative perspectives on biblical narratives and symbol-

ism and to actively engage in open interpretation processes. On the other hand, Pezolli-Olgiati argues, the recurrent term of blasphemy outlines the complexity of reception as a social phenomenon.

Seesengood combines affect theory and an auteur approach to the work of Lars von Trier read against the canonical Apocalypse of John. According to Seesengood, “while von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009), *Dogville* (2003), and *Melancholia* (2011) explore themes that intersect with biblical apocalyptic in obvious, theological and cosmological ways, other films—such as *The Idiots* (1998), *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which all explore social organization, and *The Kingdom* (1994), which probes the limits of technology—engage themes also central to biblical apocalyptic” (209). Both the visions of Revelation and the films of von Trier trigger positive and negative emotions in the reader. As Seesengood argues, the sense of shock, terror, passion, lust, et cetera awakened in the viewer/reader is, in itself, the core meaning. The universe and human society are affective agents. Any cognitive engagement of them without the sensual and the affective is partial, is occluded. Seesengood concludes that the apocalyptic scenarios offered by von Trier and John “work to reveal this affective quality to the world” (210).

According to Staley, Martin Scorsese’s award-winning 2004 film, *The Aviator*, could not seem further removed from the central themes of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Scorsese’s representation of Jesus is a troubling image for many viewers. His Jesus is “a man haunted by internal voices that call him to a destiny seemingly beyond his capacity to fulfill” (233)—to bear and die for the sins of the world. In the end, the Jesus of Scorsese dies as the obedient son of an invisible (divine) Father. *Aviator*’s main character, Howard Hughes, is a twentieth century American, a multimillionaire engineer, who designs airplanes. He is only interested in smooth machines or perfectly shaped female bodies. However, there are images in *The Aviator* that recall *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and there are motifs in the film that hint at a provocative connection to the latter. Starting with these intertwined images, Staley explores the latter film as an exploration of the invisible Mother, in conversation with the invisible Father of *The Last Temptation*.

Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s seminal work, Rindge examines the depiction of Angela Hayes in Sam Mendes’s 1999 film *American Beauty*. He argues that the film both conforms to and departs from Mulvey’s critique of the cinematic depiction of women as objects of sexual pleasure. Whereas Lester Burnham’s four fantasies illustrate Mulvey’s critique, the

film itself (through a variety of technological devices) subverts and finds fault with the portrayal of Angela as an object of sexual desire. The essay concludes by offering some reflections on the ways in which biblical texts similarly “conform to and resist prevailing patriarchal norms” (264).

In her essay, Pelham notes that director Wes Anderson, in all his films, “creates characters through the deliberate deployment of specific objects, each of which serves as a kind of totem for the character to which it is attached” (271). No character, though, seems as defined by the objects that accompany her as Suzy Bishop, the young protagonist of his most recent film, 2012’s *Moonrise Kingdom*. In the field of consumer behavior psychology, the term *extended self* refers to the self, created at the intersection of a person and the objects that he or she views as possessions. In this essay, Pelham brings the film’s use of objects to create extended selves for its characters into conversation with the Bible’s account of the giving of instructions for the building of the tabernacle by YHWH in Exod 25–31 and of the construction of the golden calf by the Israelites in Exod 32. In these texts, as in the film, objects are used to give physical reality to what, otherwise, would be invisible. In addition, the fact that the term *extended self* comes from the field of consumer behavior research raises questions about YHWH’s role as consumer. If YHWH has an extended self, a self both reflected and created by objects, what does this say about YHWH as consumer? What kind of a consumer is YHWH and how can YHWH’s actions be understood as the actions of a consumer intent on the creation of self through the acquisition of objects?

In his contribution, Punt argues that the problem of subject positioning (or the debate on the ideology of realism) in films is an extension of discussions about the provenance of the cinematographic image and still attracts much attention among film theorists. Punt combines the consideration of subject positioning in *The Hunger Games* films—films devoid of ostensible biblical or even religious references if not motifs—with postcolonial concerns about mimical identities. The emphasis is on how these films project individual and group identities as well as interrelational networks that are constitutive of life in empire, whether in Panem or in first-century Roman Empire as reflected in the New Testament.

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the uncertain landscapes of biblical studies signaled in Bach’s introduction twenty years ago have been remapped into a burgeoning field where scholars of biblical literature and film theory can converse with each other through a number of different approaches and methodologies. The interdisciplinary engagement

that the contributors to this volume advocate shows that the boundaries between biblical studies and film studies are not as clearly drawn as is often presumed (by practitioners on both sides). Rather, the close encounter between Bible and film opens up new routes into territories where there is still much more to explore.

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