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Seeing and Believing

Religion and Values in the Movies

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of representations of religion in film are difficult or impossible to define with precision makes them no less important to study.

The purpose of this book is (1) to examine popular films that treat three of the most numerically prevalent religions in North America—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—roughly in the decade 1983 to 1993, and (2) to propose a method for identifying and analyzing the values imaged in films, especially those related to race, gender, and class. Since popular entertainment films are value-laden, it is important to examine the values that are being circulated in this popular medium. Two primary questions focus my exploration: (1) How is the social phenomenon of religion treated in Hollywood film? What forms of religion are "box office"? and (2) What values are circulated?

1

Moving Shadows: Religion and Film as Cultural Products

An ancient image curiously anticipates modern film; Plato's myth of the cave is a strangely approximate description of cinema. Moving shadows are projected onto a wall by passing a series of images across a light placed behind the spectators, who sit in darkness and in isolation from one another. Plato writes:

> Think of men dwelling in an underground cave which is open to the light along its entire width. They have been in this cave since childhood, with their legs and necks fettered, so that they have to remain motionless, looking straight in front of them and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. There is a light from a fire burning high up and some way behind them; and between the fire and the men in fetters is a raised gangway along the side of which a low screen has been erected, like that behind which a showman conceals himself when he exhibits his puppets. Now imagine men passing along behind this screen carrying all sorts of figures so that they show above the screen, figures of men and animals in wood and stone and all sorts of artificial objects; the carriers as usual sometimes talking and sometimes not.
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> "What a strange image," said Glaucus, "and what strange fettered prisoners."
>
> "They are like us," said Socrates.

The difficulty of examining film images is also anticipated in the myth of the cave: the release of the prisoner and his emergence into the

light of day happens only when the prisoner is "compelled": "When one of them was unbound and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look towards the light, each of these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to be able to see the objects of which previously he had seen only the shadows."[4]

Like all analogies, this myth is an imperfect metaphor for the difference between thinking of film as entertainment and critically examining it. Audiences can only metaphorically be described as chained to their seats and unaware that the film they see on the screen is not reality. And even the most insightful critic does not finally "look directly at the sun," as does the prisoner in Plato's myth. Nevertheless, the myth of the cave uncannily anticipates—by approximately twenty-three centuries—cinema's mechanics and effects.

From its beginnings, film has had a strong relationship with religion. Photographic film was invented by an Episcopal priest, Hannibal Goodwin. The first photographic film shown was *The Passion Play of Oberammergau*, on January 31, 1898.[5] It was directly patterned after medieval Passion plays and featured thirteen tableaux of about a minute each from the trial and death of Jesus. Another early film, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1902), began with a monk reading an ancient manuscript; suddenly he sees a naked woman, but as he moves toward her, she turns into a skeleton! The first motion picture theater opened on Broadway in 1913; by 1916, there were twenty-one thousand of them in the United States.[6] In 1923, Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* was produced at the then-unheard-of cost of one and a half million dollars.

A viewing public was emerging in America for whom religion and vision were intertwined. The concurrence of religion and spectacle was not new, and it is not accidental that film's first topics were religious. Film, like the religious drama of earlier ages, was understood to have a tremendous capacity for generating and focusing the desires not only of individuals, but of societies.

The history of public "entertainment" also points to a larger purpose.[7] Martha Nussbaum describes audiences' expectations of Greek drama:

> To attend a tragic drama was not to go to a distraction or a fantasy, in the course of which one suspended one's anxious practical questions. It was instead to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection, and feeling with respect to important civic and personal ends.[8]

Whether this state of mind was common to all members of Greek audiences cannot be known. But that public entertainment *could* be taken this seriously suggests that film could—and can—be as well. For, like classical drama, film represents the particular class, behavior, and loyalties of its characters. It also often provides nuanced explorations of emotion.[9] Moreover, popular film represents characters in situations and quandaries that often bear a marked resemblance to our own, making visible social issues that could not be presented with comparable immediacy and power in any other format.

In ancient Greece, as Nussbaum persuasively describes, theater was understood to identify and explore a central question, namely, the question of "how human beings should live."

> To respond to [the performance of a tragedy] was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life—a way of life . . . that prominently included reflection and public debate about ethical and civic matters . . . To respond well to a tragic performance involved both feeling and critical reflection; and these were closely linked with one another.[10]

It is not, I think, a far-fetched claim that popular films can also be seen as implicitly, if not explicitly, addressing the question of how human beings should live. Someone will object that the Greek tragedies, because they depict epic heroic struggle, are far more worthy of thoughtful analysis than are popular films. We have that impression, I believe, primarily because Greek tragedies have been treated with seriousness not only by their society of origin but also by a long line of respected intellectuals, reaching to our own time. But if the narrative content of a Greek tragedy were summarized as if it were a film plot, it might be difficult to see its profundity. *Medea*, for example, is the story of a woman who loses her husband to a younger woman and in vengeance kills her children; in the end, a chariot swoops down out of the sky and carries her away. If our attention were solely on the "action" in Greek tragic drama, the play could be reduced to this description.

On the other hand, if popular films were understood as responses to the question, How should we live?, we might notice that they propose diverse answers—some highly dubious and others rather profound—to that important question. Is not the behavior glamorized by a film (implicitly) proposed as a partial answer? Greek audiences may have recognized more communally and consistently than do late twentieth-century moviegoers that the serious question of how one should live lies beneath the surface of drama. But popular films—from *Witness* to *Alien 3*—can certainly be seen as addressing that question in myriad ways.

Contemporary popular film and Greek drama, then, cannot easily be distinguished according to their content. But Nussbaum's argument was that Greek spectators came to a public drama *expecting* to identify and discuss its proposal about "how we should live." Similarly, for many filmgoers one of the most prominent pleasures of moviegoing is that of thinking and talking about the film they have seen. If theater was not entertainment for ancient Greeks, neither is film "pure"—meaning mindless—entertainment for many Americans.

Nussbaum's description of Greek audiences has helped us to imagine twentieth-century spectators who want to think deeply and talk intensely about a popular film. But spectators who enjoy serious discussions of films are not the only ones who watch movies for suggestions how to live and what to value. They are, instead, among the few who do so consciously, who do not merely *take in*, but also critically *evaluate* a film's depiction of life. One can choose whether to accept, reject, or adopt in part a film's proposed values only when the question of how to live is consciously brought to watching and thinking about a film. Failing that, image is simply heaped upon image, proposal upon proposal, without clarification of the potential choices of "how we should live."

Of course there were also enormous fundamental differences between fifth-century BCE Greek audiences and twentieth-century Americans, two of which are instructive. First, an important aspect of Greek tragedy was its setting. Ancient theater "took place during a solemn civic/religious festival, whose trappings made spectators conscious that the values of the community were being examined and communicated."[11] Nothing signals to modern spectators that questions concerning how to live their lives are to be engaged in the film they attend.

Second, twentieth-century Americans do not think of filmgoing as an especially social or communal activity. Each person is effectively isolated in the darkened theater. We are next to each other but cannot make eye contact, and we are requested not to talk during the show. By contrast, ancient audiences, "sitting in the common daylight, saw across the staged action the faces of fellow citizens on the other side of the orchestra."[12] They simultaneously saw the dramatic action, felt in themselves the emotions elicited by the action, and observed their fellow citizens' reactions.

Clearly, late twentieth-century moviegoers lack the communal religious setting that signalled the fundamental seriousness of drama to Greek audiences. Can we, who love to be entertained but who also insist on thinking about "how we should live," gather material for considering our lives from the movies? I think we can, and already do. Can we consider the question of how to live to be a question about the common good as well as one about individual flourishing? I think we must.

While considering a film one has seen, one's idiosyncratic, subjective perceptions can be transformed by discussion into social criticism. Just as the ancient philosopher Socrates needed interlocutors—friends—in order to explore the dimensions and implications of an idea, so too do filmgoers need friends with whom to discuss, to disagree and argue, with whom to negotiate the multiple meanings of a film. Even before interpretations can be proposed, friends are needed to reconstruct the film, to point out details one has missed, the tone of voice, the camera angle, the arrangement of actors on the screen, the soundtrack, the framing, the facial expressions. Friends are also needed to help reconstruct what public concerns and issues there were at the time the film was produced and distributed and to discern how the film might relate to them.

Discussions about film are valuable for another reason: to compensate for the inevitable blind spots everyone has. Most Americans have watched films with attention and delight all their lives. Each person has a film repertoire of information and associations that no one else exactly shares. This means that, although each person has intensive prep-

aration and a store of knowledge, none "controls," "commands," or has "mastered" this voluminous body of work.

Moreover, at the same time that we have a great deal of personal knowledge of films, we are also well-trained to respond to filmic conventions in predictable ways. The serious discussion of films should unsettle, challenge, even disassemble these socialized reactions. As one learns to question, to investigate, and to make explicit the strategies by which a film produces—or at least directs—our responses, the pleasure of watching a film changes subtly but profoundly from that of passive spectatorship to that of active critical engagement.

A spectator's impressions of a film, then, are simultaneously informed by her education and life experiences and trained by film conventions and viewing habits. This does not mean that the strong feeling a film may elicit should be discarded or overlooked. Rather, the emotion a film evokes should be acknowledged and understood as the starting point for an exploration of the filmic strategies that elicited it. The purpose of paying serious attention to film is twofold. On the one hand, the ability to analyze filmic representations develops an individual's critical subjectivity. On the other hand, films reveal how a society represents itself to itself. I will have more to say in subsequent chapters about the self-knowledge a society can gain by analyzing how its reiterated representations relate to its social and institutional arrangements, its public concerns and interests, and its fears and longings.

What is the role of pleasure if we want to think about a film, not primarily as "entertaining," but as communicating social roles and expectations, values, and constructions of desire and the desirable? In her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey made the rather startling statement that in order to challenge the "basic assumptions of mainstream film," one must first "destroy" the pleasure produced by the film.[13] This seems to me a particularly problematic way to understand religion and values in popular film. It reproduces, in secular language, an ancient Christian mistrust of pleasure, calling for a sort of visual asceticism that assumes that one can work and learn only when pleasure is absent.

I would put it differently. Our task is neither to deny nor to destroy visual pleasure in order to do the sober work of analysis, but to trust

our pleasure as a primary tool of interpretation. Certainly a film's implicit claim either to entertain or to mirror reality needs to be examined. Yet to assume that visual pleasure serves *only* to seduce viewers into mindlessly accepting the film's values distorts a spectator's experience and eliminates the primary motivation for analyzing a film. Visual pleasure is the place to begin because by producing visual pleasure, a film communicates values. Roland Barthes once remarked that one "gets" the cultural message at the same moment one gets the pleasure.

Spectatorial pleasure, far from being jettisoned, must be noticed and examined. Pleasure can be examined by (1) identifying the filmic strategies or devices that produce it, and (2) by developing a critical method, an ability to articulate the assumptions and values underlying and informing one's reactions to a film. For the film does not contain and determine its own meaning; meaning is negotiated between the spectator and the film.

This does not mean, however, that a film permits an infinite number of interpretations. Films certainly endeavor to make viewers see what the director wants communicated. The primary tool governing the communication of meaning is film conventions, repeated stylized interactions between the actors that viewers have come to expect from watching countless other films of the same genre. I will say more about film conventions in chapter 2. Here, an example will suffice: in romantic narrative film we expect closure, an ending. Trained by Hollywood conventions, we may even expect a "happy ending," by which is usually meant one in which a heterosexual couple finds each other. If such an ending is denied us, we are likely to feel dissatisfied.

Filmmakers outside the mainstream often subvert film conventions in order to make them evident. For example, in Joan Micklin Silver's *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, the couple separates in the end, which caused several reviewers to complain that the film had no ending. It had an ending; it even had—in the circumstances depicted in the film—a happy ending, but because of the expectation that only if the couple were reunited would there be a happy ending, the film felt unfinished. Similarly, in Claudia Weil's *Girlfriends*, a film convention in which marriage constitutes a happy ending is overturned. A woman's marriage is presented as interrupting her work and confining her character

development, as well as undermining her relationship with an important woman friend. Spectators' displeasure is often the first signal that a film convention has been disrupted.

To sum up, then, I believe that taking a film seriously does not require that the pleasure of entertainment be replaced by boring analysis. Rather, it involves taking pleasure (and displeasure) seriously enough to be willing to inspect them, detecting the filmic strategies by which they were evoked.

Resistance to examining the values films circulate, and to investigating their depictions of religion and religious motivation in particular, is common, however. Marx's maxim, "The critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique" has filtered into a widespread skepticism about religion and its effects,[14] which is apparent in Hollywood's bias against religion. Marx's distrust of religion has also been widely and uncritically adopted by otherwise critical theorists.[15] In academic as well as popular literature, religious belief is frequently characterized as slavish and irrational, based on foolish longings for transcendence or immortality.[16] I will examine in more detail in subsequent chapters the subtle and not-so-subtle forms the secular bias takes in Hollywood films.[17]

Moreover, news and information media often fail to differentiate among different religious commitments, considering all forms of religious loyalty as actually or potentially dangerous to the "impartiality" and freedoms of the public sphere.[18] Media attention tends to be focused on fundamentalist religion, probably because these forms—whether Christian, Jewish, or Moslem—seem to inspire in their members the most dramatic public actions. Liberal religion, or religion that seeks to be self-critical, tends to be ignored by the communication media that give many Americans our sense of what is real. Yet different forms of religion have distinct attitudes toward public life and the common good.

The representation of religion in the media often reduces it to flawed institutions, discredited myths, and morally flawed practitioners. But this understanding excludes too much; it precludes exploring the way religious loyalties function in human lives and communities. Religion,

as a cultural institution, must perform cultural work; it must organize people's social arrangements and suggest attitudes toward individuals' lives, toward the religious community, and toward others. To examine religion as a cultural product is to ask: How does it work?

Like religion, films describe and define their characters' orientations and attitudes to the world. They invite the question, "How does this character's life *work*?" Are her values, and those of the people with whom she lives, adequate? If one considers the interest in values and relationships common to religion and film, both can be approached as parts of a common cultural matrix. But to make this connection clear, a more adequate understanding of religious orientation and its role in human life will be needed. I will propose a revised understanding of religion later in this chapter.

There is also resistance to investigating serious issues in popular film because of the social and institutional construction of what constitutes serious scholarship. A tradition that has persisted since the West was founded as a cultural and intellectual entity rejects empathic emotion as a method for learning and insight. And the movies both feature and incite emotional engagement. The antitragic tradition in the West, fathered by Plato, has consistently valued rationality, contrasting the use of reason and argument with emotion. This tradition has feared emotion, advocating that emotion be eliminated as much as possible from public and private decision-making. Emotion, especially strong emotion, for adherents of the antitragic tradition, was and is suspect, dangerous, and potentially destructive for both individual and community. The tragic tradition, as exemplified in Greek drama, however, finds it worthwhile and valuable to "nourish the element of pity in us, making it strong."[19]

Since the Enlightenment, the antitragic tradition has sought to establish the ideal of rational impartiality in public discourse, relegating emotion to the private sphere, and empathic emotion to the private arena of entertainment.[20] Furthermore, the public sphere of politics, law, and institutions has been identified with men, while emotion is identified with women. As the ancient tragic tradition knew, the response that drama's powerful images elicited was empathic emotion.

Film, like ancient tragedy, is considered a less than serious focus of

study in that it is thought to evoke pity rather than reason as a formal means of participation. Similarly, film reviewers usually rely on a presumed common perspective in discussing their impressions of a film. Thus, a serious study of popular film must establish its relative impartiality, its claim to a method of analysis that maximizes objectivity, and its rejection of impressionistic and subjective readings. While I do not believe that emotion is unqualified to inform decisions and actions, I acknowledge that evaluative interpretations should not appeal to a presumed common feeling, but should endeavor to provide negotiable grounds on which to discuss the judgment at hand.

Finally, there is resistance to examining the treatment of religion and values in film based on the opinion that popular film is simply unworthy of serious scrutiny. The objection is either that popular films cannot reward scrutiny with an enhanced understanding of anything, or that the pleasure of spectatorship will be destroyed by examination. I hope that this book will demonstrate the inaccuracy of both claims.

Yet the idea that analyzing a popular film "spoils the fun," removing the pleasure of spectatorship, is not to be lightly dismissed. It acknowledges a human need for pleasure, a longing to relax and be entertained. I have already described the use of pleasure in serious film criticism, but it must be acknowledged that the pleasure of entertainment is not identical to the learned pleasure of analysis. Anyone who has endeavored to teach film criticism as a disciplined study will attest to the strength of the settled habit of regarding film as entertainment. It is, then, no small thing to ask that a reader tolerate an examination of contemporary popular film as a transmitter of attitudes and values, and to ask that pleasure be scrutinized. There are, on the other hand, some good reasons—like enhanced self-knowledge and understanding of American society—that someone who certainly enjoys entertainment might want, on occasion, to think seriously about what she sees at the movies.

Fundamental to this book is the contention that religion has centrally to do with the articulation of a sense of relatedness—among individuals, within families, communities, and societies, and with the natural world. Religions also provide a picture of the greater whole in which all living beings are related. Understandings of relatedness underlie religious beliefs, narratives, and institutions. Defining religion in this way means that relationships and practices between people in faith communities, as well as attitudes toward those outside the group require scrutiny. Thus, understandings of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are not accidental or incidental to religious perspectives but, as *a concrete way religious perspectives are articulated*, are central to religious values. Spiritual hunger arises from relationships that lack equality and mutuality and from unjust institutions and social arrangements as surely as it comes from inadequate theology or belief.

If religion is centrally about relationships, about a network of connections, then religion is also centrally and essentially about the values according to which people conduct their relationships. To recognize that religious communities are centrally concerned with the formulation, exploration, and practical application of *values* is also to recover one of religion's public functions, that of critically examining secular values and providing alternatives. Within Christianity, the numerically dominant religion of North America, there are profoundly ambivalent attitudes toward secular society. Conservative Christians often see secular culture as the enemy, while liberal Christians largely assimilate secular society uncritically, even as they temporarily escape its problems in communities of the like-minded. Neither of these stances encourages an engaged, critical, and prognostic relationship with popular public culture.

Religion is hardly prominent in contemporary popular film, reflecting the public sphere's secular self-image. Yet the claim that American society is thoroughly secular is overdrawn. It is also elitist and regional. Although it might be a fairly accurate description of the East or West coast, it ignores a wide middle portion of the United States where there are still traffic jams on Sunday mornings just before eleven o'clock.

In fact, Americans may be ambivalent about, not uninterested in, religion. The number of articles in the popular press purporting to analyze national trends in religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, indicates that Americans are somewhat preoccupied with their religious profile. Toward the end of the 1980s, *Reader's Digest*, the second-highest circulating magazine in the United States, carried an article ti-

tled, "How Religious Are We?" Forty-eight percent of the respondents reported "a rising tide of interest in religion in the United States."[21] This constituted a 300 percent increase over a 1970 poll. Although it is difficult to specify precisely what constitutes "religiosity," the 1994 public debate over legislation that would permit prayer in public schools, places of employment, and government offices indicated renewed popular interest in religion. Moreover, by 1986 there were 1,100 religious radio stations, 200 religious television stations, and 4,100 religious bookstores in the United States. Church membership and attendance figures also support perceptions of "rising interest." True, increased membership in fundamentalist churches (35 percent) and orthodox Jewish congregations (100 percent) is partially offset by declining membership in mainstream Protestant churches and decreasing attendance at mass by Roman Catholics. Still, 76 percent of the Americans polled had attended a religious service during the previous year, and 95 percent professed belief in God or a universal spirit.[22] A resurgence of religion in the United States appears to be occurring, in spite of the decline of mainstream Protestantism.

Hollywood films of the last decade reflect the hypothesis that Americans are not so zealously secular as is often claimed. Although religion is often not treated very respectfully in popular film, it is at least there. The treatment of religion in a 1979 film, *Hardcore* (a box office failure) is typical of films of the 1980s. The protagonist, a Dutch Reformed Church minister, is searching for his adolescent daughter who has disappeared. He fears that she has been abducted by a group that produces pornographic films, so he enlists the help of a teenage prostitute to find her. To pass the time while they are waiting for a bus, the young woman asks him to explain his religious beliefs. He does so, to her amazement, by reciting the Calvinist beliefs condensed in the acronym "tulip": total depravity, unmerited salvation, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Finding it difficult to comprehend the belief that a person's eternal destiny to salvation or damnation has been established from "before the foundations of the world," the young woman remarks pensively, "And I thought *I* was fucked up!" Religion is sometimes used as a foil to demonstrate the greater seriousness of "real" issues, such as sex, power, and possessions. At other times, film

characters may adhere to religious belief passionately and mindlessly, usually causing personal and social mayhem and damage.

The films I will discuss are mostly Hollywood films produced by large studios and widely distributed. They are mostly narrative films whose box office earnings were relatively high.[23] I have chosen to work with films that contain complex and interesting—though frequently problematic—treatments of religion and values. Most of them deal explicitly, if not centrally, with religion; all of them depict values under negotiation. I have chosen not to treat avant-garde, experimental, or "alternative" cinema for the simple reason that none of these has managed either to gather a diverse popular audience or to affect mainstream film production.[24]

Several other considerations have also directed my choice of films. Although moderately successful in terms of box office profits, most of the films I chose to discuss were not the largest box office successes, even in the week of their highest profit. One could argue that, to know with the greatest clarity and precision how issues of common concern are treated in films, one should choose those films with the largest box office. I did not choose them because I wanted to examine films that were presented to the American public as treating issues of common interest rather than as "cheap thrills," featuring sex and violence. The largest social group that determines box office success is male teenagers.[25] While I do not imagine that this audience saw such films as *Hard Target*, *Lethal Weapon 3*, *Hot Shots*, *Wayne's World*, or *Days of Thunder* simply for escapist reasons, I acknowledge that I am less interested in how contemplating such films might inform the issues with which young men must deal in our society. I hope that someone else will write that book.

The films I discuss also illustrate well the fruitfulness of the cultural studies approach I discuss later in this chapter. In Part I, films that focus on religion—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—are examined. In Part II, I have chosen films that highlight issues of individual and social values, especially as they concern race, gender, sexual orientation, and class.

In short, I address adult readers who want to see and think about what they look at in movie theaters and on video. The large number of

movie reviews in newspapers and magazines indicates that many people enjoy thinking and talking about films they have seen. I endeavor to provide such readers with a conceptual framework and methodology for analyzing popular films in the social context of American public life within which they were created and circulated. The book addresses the same diverse audience that made the films I discuss at least moderately "popular."

I consider films that have been produced (roughly) within the last decade so that a more or less accessible historical experience (national and global) can be assumed. Films, like paintings and plays, are not timeless objects; they arise in, and respond to, concrete historical circumstances. Thus, they cannot be adequately analyzed without reference to the social anxieties and aspirations that prompted their production and that had a great deal to do with whether or not they became successful at the box office. While it would be interesting to compare films across several decades, it could not be done responsibly without reconstructing the social interests and concerns within which the film took voice, a task too demanding for this book. The primary context for a film, I believe, is not other films but the public world of events, institutions, and multiple vexed negotiations of values and behavior.

It is notoriously difficult to predict the box office success of any film.[26] Dramatic mistakes have been made—frequently, and on both sides. Small-budget independent films have sometimes been successful beyond all expectations, and films that apparently have everything—big budgets, stars, and all the mandatory titillation—have bombed. My hypothesis is that films that succeed at the box office are those that identify currently pressing social anxieties and examine a possible resolution. My discussion of particular films will seek to demonstrate that the film played a role—provided a voice—in the clamor of public conversation. A director can imagine, and a film can visualize, the resolution of a situation so that cinema audiences can picture more concretely how the issue might be dealt with, what it would look like and feel like if a particular resolution were to be adopted.[27]

If indeed a film's success at the box office is largely determined by its accurate identification of an issue or problem about which people are

presently puzzled and concerned, films that were made even a few years ago must rely on viewers' interest in the skill and technical expertise of actors, director, and crew. Even slightly dated films can begin to bore precisely because the issues they explore are no longer the same as those that we are encountering.

Having stated what I hope to accomplish, I must decline several agenda that might at first appear consonant with the method and aims of the book. I do not seek to interpret particular films persuasively, if by "interpret" is meant to argue that a certain underlying theme or problem contains the real meaning of the film. I will not seek to show that contemporary popular films are, in general, invidious, though I will argue that caricatures of religion and the unproblematized representation of certain social and institutional practices are detrimental.

I will not focus on secular reinterpretations of traditional religious themes, like the near-death experience depicted in *Resurrection*, or the moving secular resurrection scene at the end of *Longtime Companion*. Neither am I interested in identifying religious themes—such as forgiveness, grace, or redemption—in Hollywood films. Films may help people to recognize the operation of such realities in contemporary dress and everyday life, but often religious motifs are in the eye of the beholder, requiring a theological perspective and theological language in order to recognize them. They will not announce themselves to most spectators.

A brief overview of popular films of the 1980s and early 1990s reveals some patterns in the treatment of religion in film:

1. No "old-fashioned reverential films" (like the earlier *Greatest Story Ever Told*) were box office successes.[28] There were, however, some films about religion and religious leaders, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which, film critic Tom O'Brien says, "revived the idea that one could make a serious film about religion—a taboo in Hollywood . . . since the 60s."[29] Unlike earlier films, recent films about Christianity are largely iconoclastic: Jesus is pictured as a "real man," troubled by sexual fantasies; or as a media figure (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, originally a successful Broadway play); or as a

contemporary inner-city African American (*Brother from Another Planet*); or as a critic of capitalist consumerism (*Jesus of Montreal*). Moderately successful box office films on religious leaders included *The Chosen*, which presented two forms of Judaism, and *Gandhi*.

2. A few films that critiqued society from a religious perspective had moderate success at the box office (*Romero*, *Chariots of Fire*, and *The Long Walk Home*).
3. Several films (such as *The Day After*, a film made for television, and *Testament*) depicted religion as helpless and ineffectual in the face of human suffering and social chaos. In *Testament*, the priest stutters, "We just don't have all the answers; . . . we are trying to find out." Religious resources for ethical or moral decision-making are equally suspect in Hollywood films. According to popular films, there seems to be little possibility that moral choices involving and affecting a broader public sphere could be religiously motivated. Ethical decisions affecting institutions, national and global politics, and business are seen to require a more complex frame of reference than traditional religious principles offer. In *Coma*, the surgeon says, "Hospitals are the cathedrals . . . [to] a whole nation of sick people turning to us for help." Many films made in the last decade imply that traditional religious authority has been replaced by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, politicians, lawyers, and business leaders.
4. Religion was frequently represented as a social problem in 1980s Hollywood films (*Jesus of Montreal*, *Everybody Wins*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Day After*, *Jungle Fever*, *The Rapture*). Religious feeling, when it was represented as motivating behavior, was typically fanatical and rash (*Black Robe*, *The Mission*, *The Rapture*).
5. A few movies included religiously motivated characters, but, with one dramatic exception (*Witness*),[30] they were not successful at the box office (*The Trip to Bountiful*, *Babette's Feast*, *Tender Mercies*).[31] Films tended to picture religious motivation as personal and individual, rather than as communal (*Romero*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Black Robe*, *The Mission*). If communal religion was pictured, it was not mainstream religion (*The Long Walk Home*, *The Chosen*). Perhaps largely because American public discourse is filled with the rhetoric of individuality, those of us who are religious usually think of ourselves as religious *individuals*, not as members of religious communities. Yet, as Fred Inglis said, "The big structures of society play through our being all the time, and our only chance of freeing ourselves from them is to catch them at work."[32]
6. Religious "otherness" was represented from the perspective of a dominantly Christian culture. *Not Without My Daughter*, a film I discuss in greater detail in chapter 4, is a striking example of a popular film's irresponsible treatment of Muslims.
7. Films that urged an explicit message bombed at the box office. "Too-serious" movies—with the notable exceptions of *Schindler's List* and *Philadelphia*—failed to recover their costs, even when well reviewed (*The Last Days of Chez Nous*, *Lorenzo's Oil*, *A Dangerous Woman*, *A Dry White Season*, *Cry Freedom*).

Despite popular films' largely dismissive treatment of *religion*, films are profoundly interested in *values*, that is, in "the material, relational, social, and political 'goods' that a person or people identify as centrally constitutive of the 'good' life."[33] Values include attitudes, opinions, institutional loyalties, and particular behaviors—sexual and social—that people find indispensable, or at least worth working or struggling for. Values are what people want to be able to take for granted in their society. While others' values can be—often are—questioned, rejected, or resisted, one's own often seem to have an "obvious" or "natural" rightness. Yet experience, and examination of experience—one's own and others' representations of their experience—continually brings received values into question. Values are constantly negotiated, both by individuals and by societies; some values are contested and those deemed no longer adequate are resisted, and different "goods" are proposed.

In short, if we want to understand the values circulating in the public sphere at any time, media culture is a good place to start. Directors have frequently denied that films communicate values. Sam Goldwyn, in an often-quoted aphorism, once said that "anyone looking for messages should go, not to the movies, but to Western Union." Clearly, if they are to be successful, films must entertain. But this study owes a great deal to Roland Barthes's important suggestion, already quoted, that one "gets" the cultural message at the same instant that one gets the

pleasure; the cultural message is coated or masked by pleasure, so that the greater the pleasure, the less one notices and examines the cultural message.

A moment's reflection is convincing proof that the problems of American social life are a staple of popular film. Whether or not a film explicitly questions the behavior it shows, if it displays behavior widely practiced but considered problematic, many people will want to see it. To suggest only a few of the many popular films that frontally treat common dilemmas and issues of contemporary life: *Jungle Fever*, which takes on drug use, inner-city poverty, and racism; *Something Wild*, which examines drug use, unsafe sex, and lawlessness; *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, whose plot revolves around an ecological crisis; *White Palace* and *Thelma and Louise*, which depict drunk driving and unsafe sex with a stranger as fun. Racism is central to *The Long Walk Home*, *Jungle Fever*, *Do the Right Thing*, and *Boyz N the Hood*. Sexism is depicted as unproblematic—irritating, but "just the way things are"—in most popular films, including *Thelma and Louise* and *The Piano*.

In this book, however, I will endeavor to avoid a kind of cultural pessimism too often engaged in by critics of contemporary culture and society. Films that depict problematic behavior do not always serve to promote that behavior. Considering particular films in the social context in which they were produced, careful discriminations can be made as to whether the film depicts a damaging or destructive social behavior uncritically, or depicts it in a way that reveals its personal and social costs, in order to critique, or even to present an alternative.[34] And so much depends, as I have argued, on the viewer's use of a film, whether for "entertainment," or for considering how we should live.

It is easy enough to criticize films; so few are perfect. Most treat some issues well, others not so well. People of minority racial, ethnic, religious, and/or sexual orientation groups within American society, whose interests have been consistently misrepresented for decades, often appreciate and support any effort to more accurately and sympathetically represent them.[35] Films that attempt to deal honestly and fairly with issues and images of marginalization and oppression should be acknowledged for their courage as well as criticized for their shortcomings.

"I strain after images," Plato said. We all do. We cannot begin to live a life we cannot first imagine, and images stock the imagination's repertoire. I believe that popular films should help people to imagine richly diverse relationships and a generous society. To the extent that Hollywood film conventions reiterate a narrow range of desires and repetitiously designate what is desirable, they constrain the collective imagination and impoverish the public symbolic repertoire.

The premise of a cultural studies approach is, as J. Hillis Miller put it, that the cultural products of a given time are "deeply embedded in history, in a particular language and class structure, in specific modes of production, distribution, and consumption."[36] Unlike a film critic, a cultural critic is not solely, or even primarily, interested in studying the film as an independent "text"; rather, as a historian of contemporary society, she also studies the particular cultural moment in which the film originated.[37] In contrast to methods of film criticism that think of films solely as texts—psychoanalytic, semiotic, Marxist, feminist, *auteur*, or genre criticism—a cultural studies approach scrutinizes them as products of the culture's social, sexual, religious, political, and institutional configurations.

In his 1987 field-defining article, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?," Richard Johnson specified a careful and thorough historical method for studying contemporary societies.[38] Cultural studies, he said, examines the "life cycle" of a film, the circuit from production, to distribution, to reception, as well as the film itself. The "cultural context must be studied not in order to melt the work back into it, but as an indispensable analysis undertaken to identify the differentiae that make the work different" from other works.[39]

Culture theorists also think of the spectator differently than do film critics (as I discuss more thoroughly in chapter 2). For now it is enough to say that cultural critics understand film audiences as active interpreters of a film rather than as passive, helpless recipients of the information and values communicated through media. Cultural critics work from the premise that people see differently according to a complex preparation they bring to spectatorship: social location, race, class, sexual orientation, gender, education, age, to name only some of the potential variables. Moreover, spectators are understood primarily as

social, rather than as autonomous individuals. That is why the social and historical context of a film's production, circulation, and reception is important. Finally, cultural studies is more concerned with popular culture than with the so-called fine arts, which are seen by comparatively few people.[40]

Cultural studies' approach to media calls for an exploration that goes beyond "impressions" to documented description of the broader social "conversation" within which the film is one voice. Culture theorists do not reject other approaches to film criticism, such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, *auteur*, or feminist; rather, they think of them as insightful but partial pictures of how film works in society. In concrete terms, then, a cultural studies approach requires information about a film's funding and production; its distribution to theaters; the director's intent, as described in interviews; the box office earnings; and the diverse critical perspectives given in reviews. It also analyzes the screenplay, camerawork, narrative, and soundtrack.

Moreover, the "cultural space" taken by any film must include what Barbara Klinger has called "digressions," that is, advertising, interviews, trailers. These designate the film's topic and "consumable identity"; they attempt to make the film appeal to the broadest popular interests, explaining why diverse audiences should want to see the film. Intermedia coverage of films leaves few Americans ignorant of the topics of the best-marketed films. In fact, a film's box office success depends on its supporting digressions.[41] I do not discuss them in this book only because to do so would extend dramatically the book's length.

All cultural messages are timely; they refer to a historical moment and depend on the visual associations and particular perspectives of the viewers whose interest in the film creates its success at the box office. Thus, any identification of a film's cultural messages can only be suggestive, never final or complete. It is, indeed, likely that my positioning of a film within a historical set of public interests and anxieties will not be fully convincing to a thoughtful reader who has noticed different news items or engaged in different conversations than I have. Since a cultural studies approach depends, for its accuracy and insight, on determining which features of society are crucial to a reconstruction of a film's communications, it is always vulnerable to suggestions that a central aspect of common experience has been overlooked. And

sometimes information one would like to have is not available. When the necessary context is accurately identified, however, a cultural studies approach to film criticism promises to reveal the functions of popular film in American public life. In the appendix I list the questions I asked in analyzing each film and its treatment of religion and values.

The development of popular film coincided historically and geographically with the emancipation of public life from church control and patronage. "Congregations" became "audiences" as film created a new public sphere in which, under the guise of "entertainment," values are formulated, circulated, resisted, and negotiated. The public sphere is an arena in which various overlapping minorities can converse, contest, and negotiate, forming temporary coalitions.

The point of my study, then, is not to identify films that treat Christianity and/or other religions "positively." Nor is it to praise or deplore the values represented in films. It is, rather, to acknowledge that the representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of "congregations" in movie theaters. North Americans—even those with religious affiliations—now gather about cinema and television screens rather than in churches to ponder the moral quandaries of American life. Religion and film *share* an interest in, and attention to, values. I will endeavor to show that looking at religion and values in "the movies" through the lens of a cultural studies approach can demonstrate the importance of bringing critical religious perspectives to popular public discourse. Finally, the movies help Americans consider the ancient and perennial question of human life: How should we live?