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Dossier: Religion and cinema

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In its first year adopting the continuous publication model, or ahead of print, Horizonte continues its mission of bringing high-quality international academic productions and relevant texts for the studies of religion. The journal will publish three thematic dossiers yearly alongside the open-theme articles and the translations section. Among them, we present here the dossier on Religion and Cinema, the first one of 2022.

When discussing academic works that explore the intersection of religion and cinema, a multitude of connections, methodological approaches, and theoretical contributions can be employed. Even readers who are not experts in the field can readily identify certain links between cinema and religion. The first connection we could mention is *cinema within religion*. It is evident that various media and audiovisual resources, including cinema, are increasingly employed by religious institutions to enrich their traditions and engage new followers by presenting their message in a more contemporary and popular format. In Brazil, for instance, we can currently witness notable initiatives undertaken by the Brazilian Spiritist Federation through their FEB Cinema¹ project and numerous productions catering to the evangelical audience, exemplified by the recent film *Armageddon Code* (2022), directed by Daniel Friesen.

In recent years, a burgeoning genre of explicitly religious and proselytizing films has been gaining ground in the United States. This trend of faith-based films

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¹ More information about the project at: BRAZILIAN SPIRIT FEDERATION. FEB Cinema. Available at: <http://febcinema.febnet.org.br/feb-cinema/>. Accessed on 02 mar. 2022.

has not only found artistic expression but has also achieved remarkable financial success, exemplified by the movie *God's Not Dead* (known as *Deus Não Está Morto* in Brazil), which generated an impressive revenue of \$62 million.² Specialized production companies have emerged in this niche of cinematographic production, including the Kendrick Brothers and Pure Flix. In addition to their roles as film producers, Pure Flix has established its streaming platform, offering content that, as stated by the company, focuses on “media that strengthens your faith and values [...] and suitable for the entire family” (PURE FLIX). Meanwhile, the Kendrick Brothers have declared their “mission to honor Jesus Christ and make His truth and love known among the nations” (KENDRICK BROTHERS).

However, even in the context of *cinema within religion*, it is important to acknowledge the instances where religions have mobilized against the perceived detrimental effects of the seventh art on religious and moral values. One notable example is the internationally acclaimed Iranian cinema, which grapples with ongoing conflicts with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. While Iranian films receive international recognition and accolades, renowned directors such as Jafar Panahi face persecution and imprisonment under charges of propagating against the Islamic Republic. Similarly, within the Christian community, there are constant reactions against what is seen as the film industry's erosion of family values, particularly in countries like the United States. Both conservative evangelical groups and factions within Catholicism have waged a long-standing battle against Hollywood since the early 20th century. The “crusades” of Christian groups against the screening of controversial films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Je Vous Salue, Marie* (1985) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) are well-documented. However, as early as 1936, during the pontificate of Pope Pius XI, the Vatican expressed concerns about the “negative influence” of cinema in contemporary society in the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura*.

It is unfortunate that, in the present state of affairs, this influence is frequently exerted for evil. So much so that when one thinks of the havoc wrought in the souls of youth and of childhood, of the loss of innocence so often suffered in the motion picture theatres, there comes to mind the terrible condemnation pronounced by Our Lord upon the

² The financial success and impact of the first film, released in 2014, led to the creation of a franchise that now consists of a total of four movies. The fifth installment of *God's Not Dead*, titled “Rise Up,” has been announced for release in 2023.

corrupters of little ones: “whosoever shall scandalize one of these little ones who believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone be hanged about his neck and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea” (POPE PIUS XI, 1936).

The relationship between the Catholic Church and cinema has undergone significant changes over time, as Catholicism itself has become more receptive to engaging with the realities and values of modern life. A noteworthy example can be found in Brazilian Catholicism, where the emergence of Catholic film clubs in the 1950s provided platforms for the dissemination and discussion of cinematic works. In Belo Horizonte, the influence of these film clubs played a pivotal role in the establishment of the country's first university-level cinema program in 1961. Several key individuals, including Carmen Gomes, Frei Urbano Plentz, and Father Edeimar Massote, were instrumental in organizing and coordinating the program at the Catholic University of Minas Gerais. Father Massote, who served as the program's director in its early years, articulated its goals as follows: “to educate film teachers for secondary education, nurture the aspirations of critics and screenwriters, and provide film club organizers with a deeper understanding of cinematic issues” (quoted in CHAVES, 2018, p. 198). Although the program was discontinued in 1970, its legacy endured through the Faculty of Communication and Arts at PUC Minas, as well as through the ongoing contributions of its former professors and students, such as Paulo Antônio Pereira.

Another significant interaction between cinema and religion can be referred to as religion in cinema. Throughout the history of cinema, numerous movies have explored elements of religious history and sacred texts, either as central themes or as a backdrop for their narratives. Various religious traditions have been directly or indirectly portrayed in films from around the world. For example, religious and cultural aspects of Hinduism are a constant presence in Bollywood and Tamil cinema productions. The Buddhist tradition was explored by South Korean director Kim Ki-Duk in the award-winning film “Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring” (2003), and different perspectives on Islam appear in the plot of the Franco-Mauritanian film “Timbuktu” (2014), directed by Abderrahmane Sissako.

From the biblical epics of 1950s cinema, like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), to more recent productions such as Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the film industry has extensively explored biblical themes. However, as astutely pointed out by Paulo Nogueira (2021, p. 2), the relationship between the “biblical narrative” and the “cinematic narrative” becomes circular as the viewer, after watching the film, associates the images with their reading of the Gospel narratives. The biblical imagination becomes intertwined with the imagination created by the film”. As a result, for those who have experienced watching *The Ten Commandments*, it becomes challenging to read the accounts in the Book of Exodus without envisioning Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea or receiving the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments with the visual effects available at the time. Additionally, individuals who are unfamiliar with the books of the Pentateuch may mistakenly perceive elements depicted in the film, such as Ramses' (played by Yul Brynner) jealousy towards Moses due to Pharaoh Seti's apparent favoritism, or the rivalry between Moses and Ramses for the love of the beautiful Nefretiri (played by Anne Baxter), as part of the biblical text. Similarly, those deeply affected by the images in Mel Gibson's film involuntarily connect them to the concept of Christ's vicarious suffering during His *Via Crucis*.

In the field of Religious Studies, numerous scholars have devoted their efforts to demonstrating and discussing the diverse analytical possibilities and approaches regarding the intersection of religion and cinema. Over time, there has been a steady rise in research dedicated to this topic, accompanied by significant advancements and a wider range of conceptual and methodological approaches in studying the relationship between religion and cinema. Contemporary analyses on this subject draw upon various disciplines such as cultural studies, semiotics, reception studies, ethnography, and others. In his book *Religion and Film: cinema and the re-creation of the World* (2017), S. Brent Plate emphasizes that despite the existence of a longstanding association between cinema and religion since the time of the Lumière brothers, academic investigations into these relationships are relatively recent in their history. An initial wave of studies is said to have taken place between the late 1960s and the 1980s, drawing inspiration from Tillich's perspective of “theology of culture”. The

primary focus was on European art films by renowned directors like Bresson, Bergman, and Pasolini, seeking to explore how the themes addressed in such movies discussed the human condition, its limits, and its expectations. However, starting from the late 1980s, a fresh wave of researchers emerged, shifting the discussion of the relationship between religion and cinema away from *art-house films* and turning towards popular Hollywood movies—such as the ones mentioned earlier—and their interactions with mass culture. Plate identifies a limitation in the first two periods of study, stating, "Both of these earlier movements tended to emphasize the verbal narratives of the films, and thus the studies were often indistinguishable from literary interpretations" (PLATE, 2017, p. XV). Plate positions his work within what he calls the "third wave" of studies in this field. This new research trend is characterized by a departure from what he terms "literary models of interpretation" and a move towards approaches that directly engage with film criticism, technical aspects, and film theory.

Furthermore, in this new phase of studies mentioned by Plate, there has been a shift in focus from analyzing the narratives of specific films to examining the reception of the works and the parallels between cinema and participation in religious ceremonies. This introduces a third relationship where cinema, to some extent, fulfills a religious function, leading us to consider *cinema as religion*. While Quentin Tarantino has expressed that cinema is his religion on occasion, researchers exploring the connections between cinema and religion are striving for greater refinement and theoretical discussion on this matter. In *Film as Religion: myths, morals, and Rituals* (2003), John C. Lyden, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Nebraska, highlights the significance of researchers in the field of religious studies who examine cinema to be aware that they should "try to understand how it functions for its audiences — the beliefs and values it conveys, and its ritual power to provide catharsis of the emotions associated with a range of life problems and situations" (LYDEN, 2006, p. 246). Plate reminds us of the capacity for creation and re-creation of worlds that both cinema and religion possess: "As an alternative world is presented at the altar and on the screen, that projected world is connected to the world of the everyday, as boundaries, to a degree, become crossable" (PLATE, 2017, p. 3).

Through this dossier, readers of Horizonte will be able to perceive the richness and diversity of studies on the relationship between cinema and religion. Following Professor Frederico Pieper's (Federal University of Juiz de Fora) excellent editorial, we have the following articles: **Hildegard von Bingen, the Exemplarity of the Feminine in Margareth von Trotta's Film** by Luiz Vadico; **The Spiritual Dimension of the Commensality in the film Babette's Feast: towards an ecumenical understanding of the hospitality and Eucharistic** by Ceci Baptista Mariani, Breno Martins Campos, and José Lima Júnior; **Memories, cinema and the End of the World: analysis of the film Melancholia by Lars von Trier's** by Rodrigo Follis Santos and Ana Paula Pirani; **Incursions into the World of Continuity: reading of Midsommar's archaic fiction based in Bataille** by Paulo Augusto de Souza Nogueira and Giovanni Felipe Catenaci; **Bible and Cinema: structures of biblical stories of calling and commission in John Landis' *The Blues Brothers*** by Carlos Ribeiro Caldas Filho and Jacqueline Zirolto Dolgie; and finally, **Monolitheism: A Concept of God in *2001, A Space Odyssey*** by Vitor Chaves de Souza and Márcio Cappelli.

In addition to the dossier, this edition of Horizonte presents a translation by Brasil Fernandes de Barros of the text **A Suggestion about Mysticism** de William James, along with four articles in the open thematic section: The origins of the Monastery of Saint Michael of Refojos: an open debate by Norberto Ferraz; **The nuncio Alessandro Bavona and the ecclesiastic circumscriptions expansion in Brazil between 1907 and 1911** by Jerri Roberto Marin; **Indigenous evangelization as an expansion project from National Mission Board of Brazilian Baptist Convention (1926-1939)** by Paulo Julião da Silva e Júlia Rany Campos Uzun; e **Religious and critical views of "tradition"** by Stephen Joseph Engler. Finally, in this edition, we have published reviews of the following works: **Religiosas em America Latina: memorias y contextos** by Juliana Neri Munhoz; **Evil and Creation: historical and constructive essays on Christian Dogmatics**, by Glauber Souza Araújo; **Handing Down the Faith: how parents pass their religion on to the next generation**, by José Pereira Coutinho; **Deus, a filosofia e as universidades: uma história seletiva da tradição filosófica católica**, by

Elton Vitoriano Ribeiro; e **Religious transhumanism and its critics**, by Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz.

We wish everyone a great and fruitful reading of this edition of Horizonte. For authors interested in submitting their work, the calls for articles for upcoming dossiers are already available on our website.

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