

## Review of Matthew S. Rindge, *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream*

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Laura Copier, Utrecht University

In the introduction to her 2003 monograph *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, Adele Reinhartz remarks on the cultural importance of the Bible in relation to popular culture: “Knowledge of the Bible is important not only for understanding the masterpieces of Western civilization; looking at Hollywood films through the lens of the Bible also reveals the importance of scripture for our ability to appreciate popular culture” (2003, 3). Reinhartz’s succinct suggestion for the study of Bible and film in all its interconnections still holds true and continues to be a tenet of the dynamic field of religion/theology and film.

Matthew Rindge’s *Profane Parables* follows Reinhartz’s credo. Already in the introduction, Rindge positions himself within this field by stating that his is “not a book on the Bible *in* Film,” but actually a book on the Bible *and* Film (3), stressing the dialogue and interconnectedness between the two which will take centre stage in this book. The Bible and film comparison that Rindge mentions is historically motivated by an observation made by a pastor in the 1910s, Herbert A. Jump, who compared film to Jesus’ parables. As Rindge argues in a lengthy footnote, from this remark sprang a whole range of scholarly work precisely focusing on equating cinema with parables (116). It must be remarked though, that, within film studies, this comparison is not well known and, as such, is not constitutive of the relationship between the Bible and film the way it might be for biblical scholars. Rindge regards the relationship between the Bible and film in a specific way, namely, films having a particular religious function and, more specifically, films as contemporary materializations of Jesus’s parables. As such, this already is some indication of the book’s main audience: scholars of the Bible and religion (studies) in general who take a professional or personal interest in the (interdisciplinary) encounter between the Bible and film. It is this initially fragile connection between storytelling in cinema and the Bible, or religion at large, that enables Rindge to flesh out the intentions of his monograph which are of interest to three different groups of scholars. Apart from scholars of the Bible and religion, this monograph is of interest to film scholars and to American studies scholars. Since biblical studies is his home discipline, Rindge sets up his argument from there.

In the introduction, he reconsiders a commonly held assumption that parables are “quaint stories that convey a moral lesson or spiritual truth” (2). As he makes clear, “Jesus’ parables are narratives of disorientation, stories of subversion, in which conventional and cherished worldviews are demolished” (2). This argument is taken up again in the final chapter of the book, where Rindge returns to the parables and rephrases what he deems to be their most important quality;

their ability to “dislodge myths from their throne of assumed inerrancy and omnipotence” (105). In terms of the book’s structure, one can ask whether this placement does not result in a diminished impact of the analyses of the films and their parable counterparts. Certainly, some of Rindge’s most astute observations on the shared nature of parables and films would have a greater impact as a starting point for film analyses instead of as an afterthought. Also, by returning to the Bible, or giving it the last word in his argument, Rindge seems to suggest that, ultimately, this source takes precedence in his analyses.

In the interdisciplinary field of film and religion, where the matter of visual analysis and methodology is often at best marginally addressed, it is of particular interest to see how Rindge methodologically handles his tandem readings of biblical texts and film texts. As he states, “This book treats films—like biblical texts—as sacred texts in their own right. Biblical texts are not privileged over films as more significant or authoritative. On the contrary, as the main objects of inquiry, films take primacy and precedence” (4). It is true that the analyses of the films constitute the heart of the book. However, as a film scholar, I find it slightly problematic that the cinematic text in Rindge’s analyses too often is grounded on the notion of the screenplay or shooting script as cinematic text (something of which Reinhartz is also guilty). So, much (too much) authority is placed on the status of the screenplay (an actual text, in the old-fashioned sense of the word). Instead, Rindge’s sharp analyses would have been even better if he had given more attention to the particular cinematic nature of his subject. There are remarks on editing and cinematography in his analyses, yet they are not developed to be a central part of the argument. This is somewhat disappointing, especially when he remarks (with regards to *About Schmidt*), “it is the image—not the word—that facilitates a sacred epiphany” (91).

In the main section of the book, Rindge performs a critical reading of three well-known films (*Fight Club*, *American Beauty*, and *About Schmidt*), by treating them as examples of cinematic parables. Rindge does not precisely explain the reasoning behind his particular selection of films, though it seems to be thematically motivated. What these three films have in common is that they castigate and subvert the myth of the American Dream. In the book’s first chapter on the American Dream, or “the religion of America” (7), Rindge lays out the elements (text, symbol, ritual, hymn, days, origins, and values) that, taken together, result in the sacrosanct nature of the American Dream. He proceeds to convincingly critique this myth and points out its warped advocating of “a gospel of unfettered and unlimited success” (19), while simultaneously negating the reality of death. This twisted combination, the “sacred covenant” of the American Dream, is Rindge’s primary target for deconstruction in his subsequent analyses of the films (23).

Particularly in his reading of David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, Rindge uncovers the “bankruptcy and meaninglessness” (34) of the American Dream. He convincingly argues that the film “faults American culture for demonizing death, exorcising failure, and silencing suffering. It is this American denial of human fragility that the film laments, protesting the American Dream’s obsession with success, and its corresponding erasure of pain, grief, and anguish” (36). Rindge’s

analysis, as the quote shows, rests on the use of the narrative genre of lament to understand the meaning of the film's viewpoints with regard to masculinity, death, and success. However, comparing the film to type of lament, or understanding it as a contemporary, popular, secular manifestation of lament is only a small part of the larger argument Rindge constructs. If *Fight Club* can be seen as a type of lament, Rindge continues, what the film actually tells us is that it "laments America's absence of lament" (36). This statement effectively shows how cinema can take on *and* function as religion. As Rindge concludes, with reference to fans of *Fight Club*, "the film confirms their experience of the American Dream as something that removes them from humanity and articulates their own desperate longing to find spiritual vitality elsewhere. *Fight Club* imagines that people can make radical choices to construct and recreate meaning in an otherwise meaningless culture" (46). *Profane Parables* is a meaningful addition to the field of Bible and film and is highly recommended to those who want to explore the cultural and spiritual interconnections between Hollywood cinema and the Bible.

## Bibliography

Reinhartz, Adele. 2003. *Scripture on the Silver Screen*. Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press.



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