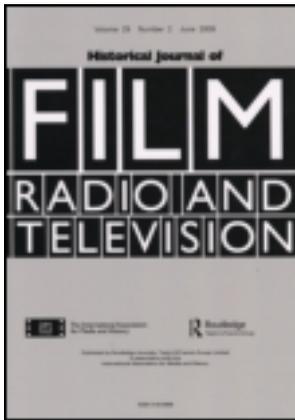


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Celluloid Sermons: the emergence of the Christian film industry, 1930-1986

Dan Chyutin^a

^a University of Pittsburgh

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production (. . .) If someone tells me today that I never made a political film, I have to say this isn't true. My films were even propaganda films, but for Vienna, for Austria!'. There is no proof whatsoever of Forst ever being in 'immediate danger'—and his self-justification and patriotic hubris, very common in post-war Austrian society, has been discussed and rightly criticized by scholars such as Sabine Hake and Karl Sierek. Bono concedes that this criticism is potent because it points to 'the escapist nature and to the consonance with Nazi ideology of *Operette*, *Wiener Blut*, *Wiener Mädeln*' (p. 125). However, he buys into Forst's argument insofar as he sees in the Viennese trilogy an opposition 'of a sentimental, not political nature, which is directed against history and its course in general. In the tradition of the operetta his films formulate a plea against any change, against the trickling of time' (p. 128). Those scholars challenging this view are not ignored by Bono, but still not fully discussed, and relegated to two footnotes (p. 125).

Bono's auteurist method would certainly have been benefitted by putting Forst's films into the context of the work of some of his contemporaries in the genres of 'Viennese film' and musical comedy in the 1930s—Ophüls, Schünzel, Bolvary and Max Neufeld, amongst others, come to mind. Moreover, comparative analyses with some of the many 'Viennese films' produced in the UK and US at the time—think of, for instance, Hitchcock's *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934) and Duvivier's *The Great Waltz* (1938)—could have shed further light on the aesthetic characteristics and ideological implications of Forst's oeuvre.

A massive, 124-page apparatus, taking up more than one third of the entire volume, concludes Bono's book. A thorough filmography, probably the best on Forst so far, also includes his acting jobs (though his stage roles are left out). The extensive bibliography covers what seems to be almost everything written about Forst and his films in German, but does not include non-German-language newspaper and magazine articles and reviews (such as the ones quoted in this review).

In conclusion, Francesco Bono offers a new and fresh look at the work of Willi Forst. His stimulating discussions and analyses of the director's *mise-en-scène* are certainly eminently suitable to revisit and possibly re-evaluate Forst's films. On the other hand, Bono's volume clearly reveals the limitations of an auteurist approach that does not fully take into account wider socio-political and ideological aspects.

CHRISTIAN CARGNELLI

University of Vienna

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Celluloid Sermons: the emergence of the Christian film industry, 1930–1986

TERRY LINDVALL and ANDREW QUICKE

New York, New York University Press, 2011

xvii+270 pp., illus., bibliography, filmography, index, \$35.00 (cloth)

In his 2007 essay 'Hollywood Chronicles' (included in Robert K. Johnston's *Reframing Theology and Film*), Terry Lindvall pointed to a lamentable lacuna within mainstream film historiography. Writing on the history of cinema, he argued, has undergone

'a paradigm shift' (p. 128), which diverted scholarly attention toward films made by, about, and for marginalized communities. In light of the visible presence of religious communities in the socio-cultural landscape of many nations, one would have expected this turn in cinema studies to include engagements with the intersection of religion and film. Yet, as Lindvall reminds us, this has not been the case, due to certain ideological biases inherent to the discipline. Of particular regret for the author is the relative paucity of 'cross-fertilized studies of film and church history' (p. 127). Drawing on previously unexamined records, and employing the particular tools and concerns of film and religious scholars, such studies would reveal, according to Lindvall, the interdependence between modern Christianity and the moving image, and by extension—the degree to which their interaction has shaped contemporary forms of devotion.

Celluloid Sermons (2011), co-authored by Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, represents an important step at redressing this scholarly gap. Here the writers interrogate the convergence of the religious and the cinematic through a comprehensive historical account of the American Protestant film industry from 1930 to the late 1980s, when the rise of videotape technology signaled the demise of the church film market. Often considered too simplistic, didactic, and crude to be worthy of serious research, Christian sound cinema has only been sporadically addressed within academic literature, and never in the form of a book-length study of its history. Cognizant of their project's pioneering nature, Lindvall and Quicke thus seek not only to compile historical data but also to proselytize—that is, to 'convert' their readers to the belief that Christian film actually matters.

The book is structured chronologically, with the introduction providing useful background information on the changes in American Protestantism's attitude towards cinema that allowed the Christian film industry to emerge, as well as a general taxonomy of the main genres of Christian film-making (biblical, missionary, historical, biographical, and dramatic). The chapters themselves often center on important film-makers and film companies, in an effort to keep 'the memories of these pioneers alive and fresh so that ensuing generations can appreciate their foundational contributions' (p. xii). Through Lindvall and Quicke's detailed and vivid descriptions, the readers gain intimate familiarity with the stakes involved in preaching via images to a community firmly rooted in the Word. The chapter on 'evangelical film auteurs' James K. Friedrich, Carlos Baptista, and Irwin Moon is particularly effective in describing how this challenge was negotiated. As head of the Hollywood-based Cathedral Films, Rev. Friedrich believed in the power of cinema to evangelize, yet only if 'done right.' Accordingly, he stressed the need to make biblical films that were up to par with the professionalism of studio A-pictures and fully utilized the medium's expressive capabilities. Where professionalism was vital to Friedrich, for Baptista 'quality was of tertiary importance, after the paramount value of evangelism and a secondary concern of financial profit.' Placing message over form, the films made by Baptista's Scriptures Visualized Institute thus 'represented little more than sermons on celluloid' (pp. 45–46). Dr. Moon, on the other hand, managed to advance professionalism and avoid the negative aura of 'entertainment' by producing scientific films for the army and various educational institutions. Under the aegis of The Moody Institute of Science, his work strove 'to find transcending patterns behind things growing in nature' (p. 49), using trust in physical reality to promote faith in God.

While operating in different production contexts, these film-makers ultimately showed that ‘films [. . .] could be used in any church community and might also even unite diverse churches in a shared visual tradition’ (p. 55); more important than this essential contribution to the Christian film industry, however, was their capacity to testify to the potential diversity in approaches to screen evangelism.

As part of their discussion of Christian cinema’s principal players, Lindvall and Quicke also raise awareness to a multitude of films, the majority of which may be unfamiliar to the general reading audience. Unfortunately, due to the breadth of the survey, most of these texts are not explored in depth, and detailed attention is only given to those that have radically altered the character of the industry. Thus for example, in the chapter ‘Mark IV and Apocalyptic Film,’ the writers account for the phenomenal success of Donald Thompson’s *A Thief in the Night* (1972), which at one point became ‘the film for evangelistic rallies and evening services’ (p. 175). While many previous Christian films looked to win over audiences with Jesus’s message of brotherly love, this apocalyptic classic capitalized instead on Christian eschatology, and especially on the fear of being left behind after the ‘Rapture.’ Its popularity not only led to the advent of a whole genre of end-days Christian films (including the more recent box-office triumphs, *The Omega Code* [1999] and *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* [2001]), but also posed an important question in the framework of cinematic sermonizing—namely, what does it mean when conversion originates from the unabashed use of ‘scare tactics’? Another groundbreaking text, *The Jesus Film* (1979), serves as the core of a chapter dealing with the phenomenon of global film evangelism. Often referred to as ‘the most seen film in the world,’ it owes its wide public acceptance to a well-crafted distribution plan that involved circulating a thousand foreign-language versions to the most remote areas of the globe. By making the picture available to indigenous audiences in their own languages, the creators of *The Jesus Film* sought to subvert the dominant trend of promotional missionary films that cater exclusively to American audiences; yet this noble intent still did not prevent the film from being ‘too Western in its conception, music, and editing’ (p. 198), thereby raising suspicion as to its standing as an instrument of cultural imperialism. Hence, like *A Thief in the Night*, this Christ biopic affirmed the power of Christian film to captivate a large audience, but also highlighted the problematic nature of screen evangelism itself.

With such careful consideration being given to a variety of Christian media texts and their creators, *Celluloid Sermons* may occasionally seem overburdened by historical detail. Yet this is no fault of the study but a direct result of its attempt to provide ‘a reference guide to the particular set of institutions, individuals, studios, denominations and films that make up a Christian film industry’ (p. xi). In fact, it is a testament to the writers’ scholarly prowess that they were able to marshal so much material while still providing a clear and compelling image of a particular cultural history. With this being said, however, what seems largely absent from this image are meaningful theoretical discussions of film aesthetics in the context of Christian tradition. Though such discussions are found in the authors’ previous work (see, for example, Lindvall’s co-written essay ‘Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity’ [1996] and Quicke’s ‘Phenomenology and Film: An Examination of a Religious Approach to Film Theory by Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre’ [2005]), here they are reduced

primarily to the dialectics of amateurish vs. polished and sermonic vs. parabolic. As a result, Lindvall and Quicke miss the opportunity to construct a theory on how Christian sensibilities affect and are affected by the form of Christian cinema (for an exemplary study that attempts to do just that, albeit in the context of popular religious images, see David Morgan's *Visual Piety* [1999]). Such an endeavor may have been beyond the scope of this ambitious project, and its absence does not detract from the book's significant achievements. Quite to the contrary—if anything, this lack only validates the writers' point that we still have much to learn about Christian film-making, and about the meeting of religion and cinema in general.

DAN CHYUTIN

University of Pittsburgh

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Cinematic Rotterdam. The Times and Tides of a Modern City

FLORIS PAALMAN

Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2011.

687 pp., illus., €39.50 (cloth)

Cinematic Rotterdam is an impressive and rather dazzling study on how the Dutch city of Rotterdam developed into a symbol of modernity during the 20th century. Dazzling because of the looks of the book itself, its functional colour codes, the quality of its illustrations, stills and photographs and the easy access to notes. Also dazzling because of the complexity of its structure and the high density of information and its extensive filmography. Even so, the reader hardly ever gets lost because Paalman never loses sight of his main question: What was the social role of cinema in the process of Rotterdam's urban development? In his perception film, in connection with other media and the developments of which they were part, was an important factor in the modernisation of this city.

Paalman fits into the young 'cinematic city studies' movement with this approach. Cinematic city studies originated in the late 20th century as part of the spatial turn in the humanities, which caused a revival of interest in the relationship between cinema and the city. Landmark in this revival was David Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (1997), which focused on utopian and dystopian cinematic framing of the city. Thomas Elsaesser with his ground breaking 2005 study on construction and housing films in Frankfurt in the late 1920s was one of the key figures in this new direction and one of Paalman's inspirers. Elsaesser developed the concept of *Medienverbund*: how different media, including film, photography, printed matter, design and architecture are strategically applied to reinforce each other, following a similar agenda. This method revealed various connections between the arts, industry and politics. Paalman combined this approach with the theory of cultural ecology as developed by anthropologist Julian Steward in the 1950s: a method for recognising the ways in which culture change is created by adaptation to environment. Networks and how they interact, are crucial elements in this method. In *Cinematic Rotterdam*, Floris Paalman unravels the networks of film productions, which created the image of Rotterdam as a modern city. He treats the city as a layered system of structures: its