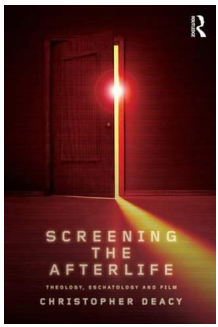
Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film, edited by Christopher Deacy



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Christopher Deacy describes his project as a "two-way dialogical conversation" between theology and film (ix) that is in keeping with Gordon Lynch's correlational model (as outlined in *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 2005). Both writers insist popular culture and theology offer insights and probing questions and that permitting dialogue between them is potentially instructive and transforming. These are not "discrete, monolithic or changeless entities" (x), and differences between them, "here referring to theology and cinematic eschatologies," present an opportunity. Deacy insists it is more profitable to "find a third way that moves beyond the rather static and linear model which supposes that theological traditions or cinematic works are monolithic and homogeneous entities that can only be meaningfully or constructively brought together when the values of one are in tandem with those of the other" (163). Films press us to consider whether "the values that underpin our theological positions" are necessarily more cogent, consistent and defensible just because of their antiquity (164).

In many cases, films addressing afterlife themes are easy to overlook because so many of them suffer from critical weaknesses. Some, like Warren Beatty's 1978 directorial debut *Heaven Can Wait* are overly sentimental while others appear trivial or flippant, reflecting a cultural habit of evading or romanticizing death, something that hinders serious reflection on the subject (7). Deacy warns readers not to dismiss the subject too quickly, however. Even light-hearted films like the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day* combine entertainment with weighty theological subjects (in this case, a version of hell [143–44]). In some cases, the exploration of theological concepts are far more subtle and nuanced, as in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Working Girl* (1988) that invite audiences to reconsider traditional notions about heaven (99–128). Film often encourages a reevaluation of received wisdom on sacred themes (164).

Deacy looks at ways films depict and deviate from "traditional eschatological ideas concerning life and death, heaven and hell, as well as the extent to which cinematic portrayals of the afterlife have often tended to use earthly realities as the point of departure" (ix). He does not limit notions of the afterlife to 'literal' depictions of post-mortem realities or forms of resurrection. His analysis includes films drawing on sacred terminology and imagery to explore more figurative levels of meaning, as in Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*, which bears witness "to the idea of heaven—or, even, on a different though no less untenable level reading, hell—as a physical and geographical location on earth" (119). He approaches his subject from several directions: resurrection and immortality (chapter 2); near-death experiences and mind-dependent worlds (chapter 3); realized eschatology (chapter 4); Heaven and New Jerusalem on earth (chapter 5); and punishment and rehabilitation (chapter 6).

This book fills a gap. Even though death and the afterlife are recurring subjects in film and theological thought, they "have never been comprehensively brought together" (viii) and doing so is not easy for a variety of reasons. Film theorists often minimize or dismiss the religious nature and orientation of films (166 n. 1) and those analyses of the afterlife that do exist (Deacy mentions James Robert Parish's *Ghosts and Angels in Hollywood Films* [1994] among other examples) tend to approach the subject without reference to theology. There is also the eclectic nature of cinematic representations of the afterlife that makes simple models of correlation between film and religion difficult (162). Despite these and other challenges, the exercise remains a useful one. Taking his cue from Clive Marsh's *Theology Goes to the Movies:*

An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking, Deacy recognizes that any theology failing to draw on "the agencies of popular culture simply misses the point about how and where theological reflection is already taking place" (ix), an idea often noted in academic analyses of popular culture art forms (cf., e.g., Robin Sylvan's *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*: "for millions of people … religion and God are not dead, but very much alive and well and dancing to the beat of popular music; the religious impulse has simply migrated to another sector of the culture … a genuine religious impulse went underground and became entangled in the hodgepodge hybrid now called popular music"). The ubiquity of film and its role in shaping audiences' understanding of the Bible and theological concepts warrants close attention. There are many, for instance, whose knowledge of the Book of Revelation and apocalyptic concepts like that of the antichrist derives more from films like *The Omen* (1976, 2006) and *The Seventh Sign* (1988) than the New Testament itself (25–26). Whatever knowledge audiences gain about Christianity is piecemeal and filtered through an artistic lens, of course. Some movies even introduce confusion about the Bible or history deliberately through false or exaggerated claims, such as the familiar device of long-hidden or suppressed sacred writings found in such films as *Stigmata* (1999). Here the study of theological dimensions of film is complicated because their effectiveness depends, to some extent, on audiences' lack of familiarity with the Bible and history (26–27).

When films touch on theological subject matter, it is rarely part of a systematic and comprehensive worldview. For moviegoers coming to the cinema from religious studies departments, it is tempting to impose unfair questions on these artistic "texts": Is it possible to isolate notions of the afterlife and eschatology from an expressed doctrine of creation or soteriology, for instance? Is this not an incomplete story, analogous to a novel with missing chapters? But this is the nature of the beast for those analyzing film (or other art forms) from a theological point of reference, and it is our problem, of course, not a filmmaker's concern. Serious theological evaluation of film and the arts requires we engage these works on their own idiosyncratic terms. Attention to theoretical and methodological strategies for theologically informed film study is therefore a pressing need, and here Deacy makes a valuable contribution to this ongoing enterprise.

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