

Film as Cultural Artifact: Religious Criticism of World Cinema. By Matthew P. John. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. ix + 148 pages. \$39.00 (paper).
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The accessibility of Matthew P. John's *Film as Cultural Artifact: Religious Criticism of World Cinema* is promoted through his early use of a contemporary, reflexive vernacular. He nurtures the reader at the outset of his voyage to the complicated approach to film criticism his book covers by literally starting at the beginning of his own journey. The book's first chapter, "Seeing the Unseen," reads like a personal blog post, as John takes us back to the summer of 1987, when he was first introduced to world cinema. He speaks of his and his friends' quest to a theater screening foreign films in a way not dissimilar from how Stephen King chronicled his youthful protagonists' journey to discover a corpse in his novella *The Body*, which eventually found its way to the big screen under the moniker *Stand By Me*.

Lured to the box office by a provocative poster featuring a scantily clad woman, John and the boys snuck into a screening of the Japanese classic *The Ballad of Narayama*. While his friends were disappointed that the film did not offer the counterpoint to the conservative boundaries set forth by their native India's films, John called the afternoon spent sutured to the big screen a "transcendent experience" (6). Therein lies the bridge to his robust method to film criticism: one that combines elements of traditional film theory with ethnography and theology.

John maintains his use of the first person throughout this personal narrative but mostly abandons it for the remainder of the text, which takes a modular approach in presenting its theoretical framework. Chapters 2 through 4 present the three pillars on which his approach stands, and they can be engaged in any order. The first is theological, which as he says "does not always have to go to theology, but it does always appeal to the evocative power of film" (29). This way emphasizes the power of the very type of human experience he underwent in 1987. John's text becomes less accessible, however, the further it burrows into his methodology. In the following two chapters, he juxtaposes auteur theory with visual participant observation (VPO) and context criticism. Then, he lays the groundwork for how one should approach the world in world cinema. It is in these chapters that his configuration delves deepest into his specific mash-up of film, theological, and anthropological criticism.

Perhaps John was aware of the potential of losing his audience in the denseness of his schema, for what follows is a helpful treatment of his theoretical approach. Over the course of three chapters, John applies his technique to the Elements Trilogy, a series of films directed by Deepa Mehta.

By watching John put his model into practice, the reader can reengage the previous chapters with a stronger sense of how it can best be utilized (of course, it helps to have seen Mehta's work).

John's overall organization is so clean and concise that the contents page could easily substitute for a course outline in a syllabus (one that would include time to screen or assign a screening of the Elements Trilogy). His effort would serve as a sufficient text for any film-related program that offers or wishes to offer a course related to world cinema, or any theology program that offers or wishes to offer a course related to film. The only stumbling block one might encounter when adopting this text would be the application of VPO, which requires extensive fieldwork that might not be practical at the undergraduate level. Therefore, its most likely home is in a graduate program.

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Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa. By Emmanuel Katongole. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017. 314 pages. \$30.00 (paper).
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Faced with endless regional wars, economic inequalities, political instabilities, ethnic hatreds, religious unrests, and ecological crises, Africa has been termed a hopeless continent. When one looks at most of the Western media, all one sees is a miserable continent. Many Africans continue to be held captive still by a colonial-generated sense of inferiority. Even with these bleak narratives on Africa, Katongole does something unique in *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*: he seeks to tell the untold stories of life in Africa while leading his readers through the narrow springs of life and hope. By doing this, he grounds the journey in the fertile land of God's grace.

This book seeks to center Africa's story in Christian hope. Unlike many theological works that speak of Christian hope using only propositional claims or, at best, a spiritualizing of a hopeful vision, either utopic or eschatological in nature, this book deliberately presents Christian hope as existential and incarnational in the memories, bodies, stories, and environments of African peoples and cultures. To achieve this, the author employs the "portraiture" methodology. The choice of this methodology is aimed at telling the stories of Africans in ways that the theological motif is reclaimed while also reverencing the sacred space and bodies from which these stories