

BRADATAN, Costica; UNGUREANU, Camil (eds.) Cinema and Sacrifice.

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When looking up the definition of *sacrifice*, it can be a bit jarring to see, that more often than not, the first definition of the word listed is the more literal, less commonly used or contemplated meaning — the offering of a life, especially to a deity. In our everyday usage, the second, more prevalent meaning instead encompasses the notion of giving something up. However, some middle ground can also be found, such as the loss of life in pursuit of political or personal aim, without religious context.

This tension between a more secular understanding of the word *sacrifice*, and the religiously significant meaning creates a sense of discord throughout *Cinema and Sacrifice*. The notion of sacrifice, even of life, within the secular and the religious sense is a key underlying debate throughout the essays included in the book. As Bradatan points out in his introductory chapter, ‘Sacrifices can please the gods and bring forgiveness to humans; they can pacify enemies and make friends; they can solve crises, heal collective traumas, make or remake communal bonds’ (2014: 2).

These complex and highly varied viewpoints surrounding the concept of sacrifice are interrogated through filmic selections. Each chapter is authored by a different academic, sometimes coming from theoretically distant vantage points. Collectively, the book explores divergent aspects of sacrifice through the medium of cinematography; the diverse group of texts creates a rich and intricate discussion with the films being analyzed as well as between the texts themselves. The most interesting tension between the essays emerges as they shift from more politically focused contributions towards more overtly theologically grounded interpretations of sacrifice. The loom of religion never fully leaves the topic. Every discussion of the concept, even in the secular sense, holds a reference back to the religious, in one way or another.

This reminder of the underlying, more historic sense of sacrifice is brought up a number of times throughout the first half of the book, even though it is made up of texts approaching the topic from the societal sphere, or *this world*. The notion of this looming of religion or myth comes through prominently in Bargu’s essay on *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008). He writes,

‘For Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus’ adventures, and especially his encounter with the Sirens, can be read as a formative moment for the constitution of the modern subject because they point to the entanglement of myth and reason: myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to myth’ (2014: 10).

This circular nature, and reverting back to myth, mirrors the constant tug of religion in the discussion of sacrifice throughout the book.

Each chapter apart from one (the last) considers a film or small group of films, and the concept of sacrifice in relation to that filmic work. They do not aim to come to a consensus on the use or means of understanding the representation of sacrifice within film, but instead each author approaches their filmic selection individually, through the framework set out by the film itself. Then, instead of trying to find common ground, the texts intentionally force the reader into different layers or vantage points regarding the centralizing combination of cinema and sacrifice. The final essay departs from its predecessors by focusing on the individual theoretical viewpoint of Lyotard (drawn from four key texts of his work), offering another angle from which to understand sacrifice and its relation to cinema.

The films themselves range from blockbuster hits, like *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel

Gibson, 2004) or *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011), to films that are much less well known, some employing non-actors. Each example of sacrifice is individual and holds little connection to the other films analyzed throughout the book. But why should they? A main assertion of the collection is that there are many types of sacrifice, and each needs to be approached from the angle most appropriate to the filmic case.

While it might seem that such a varied group of essays would struggle to find continuity as a whole, the strength of the collection is found in the two major theoretical responses presented considering sacrifice in film (the social or political and the theological). The texts work their way from an acknowledged distance in regards to the religious understanding of sacrifice, towards an acceptance of this vantage point, even if at times retaining the theological understanding and rejecting the traditional religious narratives (as is the case in the penultimate chapter authored by Bradatan). As well, the texts hold continuity in their treatment of the films; each uses the film itself as the starting point and impetus for the theory discussed, not the other way around.

One important aspect of the conversation that the collection fails to address however is a historic overview of the many

manifestations of sacrifice within the entirety of film history. While individual essays touch on the issue in relation to the particular film that they are analyzing, or when delving into the theoretical framework from which they are approaching a particular film, none offer a large-scale historical vantage point. Though the introductory text suggests that one of the project's aims is to fill a gap in the comprehensive study of the topic of sacrifice within cinema, it is unfair to expect a series of texts to accomplish what would be difficult to adequately address in an entire book approaching just a historic overview of the topic. Moreover, the aim is not a historical perspective, but to look at the many angles and approaches within this interdisciplinary topic.

First published as a special edition of *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, in 2014, this collection of essays will be of specific interest to readers of film studies as well as theology. Though more broadly, it reaches into media studies in a wider sense and also holds interest for the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics (especially biopolitics), popular culture, and cultural studies. The interdisciplinary nature of this book is one of its strongest characteristics; it does not constrain itself to approach its topic of sacrifice within cinema from a single vantage point.

REFERENCES

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