

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN RELIGION AND FILM

World Cinema, Theology, and the Human

Humanity in Deep Focus

Antonio D. Sison



Antonio Sison sagaciously sifts through film's profanities to find sacred nuggets buried within: on toilets and motorcycles, among infectious diseases and teenagers in love, in flying kites and dancing ballet. As with Sison's previous writings, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* proffers a brilliant balance between the well-written and the scholarly, while remaining rooted in human experiences. Being fully human has something to do with being more fully aware, and Sison here succeeds in bringing us to our audio-visual senses. In so doing, readers will become more conscious of the holy depths of everyday life.

S. Brent Plate, Hamilton College, USA

Sison highlights the ability of global cinema to illuminate experiences of grace, hope, solidarity and liberation amidst suffering and injustice. His attention to filmic aspects such as cinematography and mise-en-scène also allows film to lead the dialogue with theology, rather than the reverse. Sison has an experience with filmmaking that is rare among theologians, which gives him insights into how the art of film can reveal deep truths about humanity, God, and redemption. A thought-provoking examination of cinema's potential to change us, and so the change the world.

John C. Lyden, Dana College, USA

In this book, Sison skillfully demonstrates the intricate affinity and pulsating synergy between film and theology. He offers readers powerful lenses for appreciating the art of film as a revelatory medium of the reign of God. This impressive work breaks new ground in the hermeneutics of cinema and equips readers to view film with a fresh set of eyes and to discover in it profound theological meaning and spiritual insight.

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

In this masterful work, Sison, "a systematic theologian who is also an independent digital filmmaker and cineaste," (p. 9) unfolds for the reader how to encounter the divine "written on the tablets of human hearts depicted on the screen." He approaches film as film, not as "theology's handmaid," a rarity among those engaged in study of cinema and theology. Sison succeeds in unfolding cinema as a *locus theologicus*, a place for divine revelation, leaving the reader eager to view again, or for the first time, the films he so enticingly analyzes.

Barbara E. Reid, Catholic Theological Union, USA

Cinema has long been a medium to which theologians have turned to find artistic expression of the meaning of transcendence and the shape of humanity. With this book, Antonio Sison moves the dialogue between cinema and theology ahead in two important ways. By widening the scope to world cinema, he frames this dialogue in terms better suited to a globalized world. And by attending so closely to the cinematic crafting of the film, he truly moves the discussion of cinema and theology into 'deep focus' in exciting ways. How we study cinema and theology will never be the same after this.

Robert J. Schreiter, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Professor Sison advances the dialogue between film and religion by adding a welcome international voice to the discussion. Students of theology and film, as well as serious film viewers, will find this an illuminating conversation with several lesser known but important films from around the world.

Richard Blake, Boston College, USA

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Routledge Studies in Religion and Film

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1 World Cinema, Theology, and the Human

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**To my parents, Anthony and Josephine,
for their abiding gift of honest humanity.**

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Introduction

The observant but unobtrusive cinematography reveals a party of twelve taking its place at the elegantly set, candle-lit table, awaiting the special dinner that is about to be served. *Mise-en-scène* is austere and quiescent, echoing the 19th-century Danish puritan milieu the characters live in, not to mention the wintry season that marks the gathering. This and the characters' period costuming—predominantly raven-colored and severe-looking—veil the lack of resolution in the stories they each carry within themselves: the story of a great beauty whose passionate affections for her beloved is denied full expression; the story of a gifted soprano whose artistic talent is sacrificed at the altar of duty and obedience; and the story of a once inspired religious community whose members have turned against each other. At this table of human disenchantment, an exquisite French banquet unfolds to the astonishment of the ascetic guests who have sworn to deny “fleshly appetites” of all sorts. But as serving after serving of ambrosial dishes and fine wines allow them to savor bounteous goodness and sensuous delight, things begin to change at the table. Between scrumptious mouthfuls of *Caille en Sarcophage* (literally, “quail in a sarcophagus”) and sips of perfectly aged *Amontillado*, unexpressed love and repressed creativity find an alternative spiritual path to fulfillment; and reconciliation becomes a promise and a possibility in a community *redivivus*. Surely, this is no ordinary meal. Behind the miraculous feast is the enigmatic figure of Babette, who, unknown to the dinner guests until now, is the greatest French culinary artist of the age. Inspired by a prayer emanating from the hidden regions of her authentic self—“Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist—give me leave to do my utmost”—Babette had cooked her masterpiece.

The film *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel/Denmark, 1986) plays as glowingly in my mind as when I first saw it on screen. As a creative young man in a Third-World context in which one's possibilities are not spelled out very clearly, my engagement with *Babette's Feast* was a kind of sacramental moment, a contemplative experience of God's sublime love and boundless generosity found paradoxically at the heart of imperfect humanity. “It's a wonderful thing to be a human being,” I mused to myself even as I marveled

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at how my film viewing had become a liminal experience; the silver screen, a light at the end of the tunnel. Like an uninvited guest who had dined at Babette's table, I too had found an alternative spiritual path to possibility by way of cinematic language.

WORLD CINEMA AS LOCUS THEOLOGICUS

My viewing experience of *Babette's Feast* serves both as an index of my deepening theological engagement with film, and as an imaginative point of departure for mapping the ingredients and flavor profile that make up *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus*. Far from being a collection of personal reflections, this work developed within the study of theology/religion and film, a burgeoning interdisciplinary area whose current ferment is less than thirty years old.¹ The relative youth of theology and film is Janus-faced. On one hand, the field of inquiry is at an exciting stage of development, in which there is still ample room for scholars to be creative, explore new territory, and make a contribution to the maturing process. On the other hand, there is room for improvement in the aspect of developing a more systematic interfacing between theology and film, most especially in terms of a more judicious adoption of a respectful, dialogical approach that examines film on its own terms, and accords due consideration to its proprietary language and grammar. The "missing link" had been well ventilated in my previous book, in which I argue that "over and above the overriding preoccupation with thematic and other literary elements, a more serious regard for style offers a distinctly cinematic approach to the Theology-Cinema confluence."² So pivotal is the issue that it puts to question the credibility of a number of existing works in the area, many of which treat film as a mere adjunct to literature. Surely, a hermeneutic that under-conceives the language of mise-en-scène and cinematography, and for that matter, music, in a film of such powerful sensory/affective fusion as *Babette's Feast* would be impoverished indeed.³ As Melanie Wright's clear-sighted query predicates, "Could it be that—despite the growing bibliography and a plethora of courses—film is not really being studied at all?"⁴ While a thorough examination of the scholarly landscape is beyond the delimitations of this book, not to mention the fact that this trajectory had been taken up in other works,⁵ it is instructive for us to acknowledge some fairly current publications that, to my valuation, represent inroads toward addressing this lacuna. Robert K. Johnston's *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Baker Academic, 2002; 2nd ed., 2006), arguably the most popular theology and film textbook in the interdiscipline, was remiss in considering the centrality of audiovisual language in its first edition. However, following the deliberations of a 2004 consultative body⁶ that was organized to look into the status of the theology/religion-film debate, Johnston introduced a number of revisions to the second edition, among them a

new chapter on “Image and Music,”⁷ an afterthought by any other name but most certainly a welcome one. In *Seeing Film and Reading Feminist Theology: A Dialogue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Ulrike Vollmer explores the ways in which “seeing” and “being seen” are represented in selected films that feature women artists as central characters. Through a detailed examination of cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and music, Vollmer succeeds in bringing her case study films into critical dialogue with feminist theology and film theory. S. Brent Plate is another scholar who has been consistently advocating a more critical approach to religion and film by way of an examination of film form. In his 2008 *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (Wallflower Press, 2008), Plate describes the scholarly development of religion and film in three stages—the first wave extends from the late 1960s to the 1980s, during which a humanistic approach to auteur cinema was based largely on the discursive framework of Paul Tillich’s theology of culture; the second wave covers the late 1980s, during which more attention was given to the literary aspects of popular Hollywood films; the third wave, which encompasses the last decade, has been characterized by a stronger engagement with film theory and reception studies.⁸ Plate’s third-wave moorings are apparent in his examination of myths and rituals through an incisive analysis of cinematography, editing, and *mise-en-scène*, as well as in his consideration of the aspect of audience reception. To her credit, Melanie Wright earnestly configures a holistic methodological framework that aims to further systematize the religion and film confluence. In *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (I. B. Tauris, 2007), she employs a cultural studies approach, in which she provides a sociopolitical/religious context upon which she analyzes both the narrative and stylistic aspects of the film. She then offers a discussion of the film’s reception history, considering both its critical and popular impact. Works such as these represent a positive response to the ongoing scholarly imperative to examine film *qua* film, a trajectory that this book takes with unqualified seriousness. The vital ingredient contained in the chapters of this book is a commitment, not merely to the examination of storytelling, but to a respectful engagement with *audiovisual* storytelling; it is not just the story itself that is constitutive to the hermeneutics of film but the particular, cinematic mode by which the story is told. That said, the stylistic options of a film—*mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and music—are given due consideration. Consistent with my previous work and akin to the efforts of Plate and Wright, I also establish the circumstantial and cultural background of each of my case studies, over and above available accounts on the kind of reception they generated from both audiences and critics at the time of their theater run.

My viewing experience of *Babette’s Feast* also cues us to look into another crucial ingredient—the list of titles from world cinema that I choose to examine. The theological attention generated by this acclaimed Danish film represents a mere drop in the ocean of Hollywood movies