

Christopher Deacy, Ulrike Vollmer (Hg./Ed.)

# **Blick über den Tod hinaus**

**Bilder vom Leben nach dem Tod in  
Theologie und Film**

## **Seeing Beyond Death**

**Images of the Afterlife in Theology and Film**

**SCHÜREN**

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## Specific cinematic case studies of eschatology and film

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# Introduction

Whether we are talking about the Christian understanding of 'heaven' or the Buddhist cycle of transmigration and rebirth, imaginations concerning a life after death play an integral role within many, if not indeed all, religious traditions. Outside explicitly religious contexts, also, the question of immortality has arisen as a result of work undertaken over the last forty years in the territory of Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences. Religious, theological and philosophical perspectives relating to an afterlife have thus formed, and continue to form, a substantial part of our Western, cultural consciousness.

It is quite ironic, therefore, that the academic study of eschatology is not quite as established as such other sub-disciplines of religious and theological enquiry as (in the case of the Christian tradition alone) Christology, soteriology, doctrine and ethics. At the same time, however, filmmakers have often encroached on what one might have supposed was quintessentially theological terrain by delineating on celluloid images and narratives relating to 'Heaven', 'Hell', 'Purgatory' and 'Reincarnation'.

With these considerations in mind, it seemed only fitting that, after two decades in which the European research project group 'Film und Theologie' – a collaborative project of departments of theology and religious studies from Freiburg, Münster, Fribourg, Zürich, Innsbruck, Graz, Louvain and Lampeter – have met to examine particular topics relating to theology and film, their attention should have turned to this relatively under-examined field. In previous years, the themes looked at by the research group have included world religions in film, the relation of time, images and theology, religious dimensions of cinematic child-figures, film and social ethics, eros and religion, as well as explorations into the oeuvres of individual directors. The closest that their work has come to exploring the province of eschatology has been the 2009 volume on outer space, which focused on the construction of alternative worlds in science fiction films. It was not until June 2009, at the Katholische Akademie Schwerte, that specific attention was accorded to the extent to which cinematic representations of an afterlife are able to impinge upon theological territory regarding the survival of personhood after death.

The insights of that conference, at which a dozen papers were presented by a combination of established academics and emerging scholars, have been selected

for inclusion in this volume. Questions to be asked in the chapters that follow include whether or not religious traditions have anything to learn from such ‘cinematic eschatologies’ and whether films might even be thought to precipitate better theology than that which is conducted by theologians and religious studies practitioners. What sort of parallels and/or differences can be found by bringing into dialogue questions pertaining to an afterlife that have been generated within the study of religion and films such as *A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1946), *NO TE MUERAS SIN DECIRME ADÓNDE VAS* (Eliseo Subiela, 1995) and *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME* (Vincent Ward, 1998)? In displacing eschatological concepts and images into a fresh context, has cinema changed their original meaning? Why is it the case, for example, that, in cinematic representations, life after death appears as a much more material reality, is far less symbolic and has much more of a this-worldly focus than in traditional eschatological contexts?

Some of the papers focus on specific films, while others are more methodologically-based and address the two-way dialogical question of what eschatology can learn from cinema and what cinema can learn from eschatology. A particular distinction of this volume is the contribution by Professor Paul Badham, one of the world’s leading theological authorities on the question of life after death. Badham initiates this volume with a chapter that examines grounding perspectives in eschatology, death and the afterlife and is a pivot around which the following chapters, with their focus on death and the afterlife in cinema, unfold. His chapter examines how language and doctrine concerning resurrection and immortal life has evolved since the cosmological discoveries of the seventeenth century, to the point that arguably the most influential Protestant and Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, were unable to accommodate in their work any real concept of a life after death. Badham’s discussion of how one of the more profitable ways of imagining heaven is as a mind-dependent world, along the lines of that framed in the mid-twentieth century by philosopher and parapsychologist Henry H. Price, has provided the template for the research focus of Christopher Deacy’s chapter in this volume on the mind-dependent landscape evinced in Vincent Ward’s *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*.

The theological-grounding focus continues in Ch. 2, in which Peter Erdmann introduces concepts of life after death as found in the Old and New Testaments. In keeping with the discussion in Badham’s chapter on whether unbelievers can expect to spend an eternity in Hell or whether a more universalist approach is more congenial to theology today, Erdmann frames his chapter with a brief consideration of a work of art, a wax statue of Hitler asking for forgiveness, in order to introduce the question of whether there is a life in heaven for everyone regardless of their actions in

this life. Throughout his chapter, Erdmann discusses biblical eschatology in terms of this question.

In Ch. 3, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati also helps set the scene for the topic of this book by introducing various characteristic aspects of afterlife representations, though this time from a comparative, religious studies perspective. Viewed from this angle, the term ‘afterlife’ (or German ‘Jenseits’) implies a cosmology of two worlds – the world in which we currently live and the one to which we proceed after death. Every human being is personally connected with this cosmology at the point of death, at which the individual experiences the transition from one world into the next within their own biography. In her paper, Pezzoli-Olgiati searches for this connection of cosmology and biography in visual art. She argues that religions have always played a most prominent role in providing symbols and metaphors for making visible the boundary between one world and the next. Using as examples some medieval paintings in Christian churches as well as the film *NO TE MUERAS SIN DECIRME ADÓNDE VAS*, Pezzoli-Olgiati demonstrates how influential religious imagery has been on works of visual art that try to recreate within this world a connection to a cosmologically other world.

The focus in the next set of chapters then moves from introductory, grounding perspectives in eschatology to a discussion of the way in which films specifically make use of, and/or deviate from, eschatological teachings. Christopher Deacy’s chapter (Ch. 4) focuses on the eschatological provenance of films which, at face value at least, would seem to militate against an eschatological frame of reference. Deacy has in mind here the way in which films that have an earthly, this-worldly orientation have a crucial role to play in eschatology-film work as they concur with debates in Christian theology over so-called ‘realized eschatology’, where the *eschaton* is believed to have been inaugurated already. Even in films that do bear witness to a traditional afterlife schema, Deacy indicates that it is nevertheless the case that earthly realities are being used as the point of departure, to the point that it is this life, rather than the afterlife, which is being affirmed, and that death comprises nothing more than an opportunity for providing ethical lessons about how to behave in the here and now.

Following on from the theological focus of Badham’s, Erdmann’s and Deacy’s chapters, in Ch. 5 Freek Bakker investigates the role that representations of reincarnation have played in film. Bakker starts with the consideration that, despite being an important theme in the last two decades, religion/theology and film publications have accorded little interest in this topic. Bakker’s chapter explores the reasons for this, with reference to two specific filmic examples, and also explores how reincarnation is differently conceived in India and the West. In particular, Bakker makes the pertinent point that, instead of, as in Indian reincarnation, karma playing an integral

role, in Western films it tends to be one person's love for another that facilitates a return to life. Bakker interrogates the reasons for this dichotomy and, crucially, asks whether Western films about reincarnation have any authentic religious foundation.

In Ch. 6, Christian Wessely begins by pointing out a paradox. On the one hand, beliefs in a life after death seem to be essential to human nature as they go back a very long way within the history of humanity. On the other hand, many people within our contemporary, western culture appear to be estranged from beliefs in a life after death because they are detached from religions which have usually been responsible for expressing those beliefs. Wessely suspects, however, that our western, popular culture has retained a number of Christian inspired beliefs regarding a life after death, even though these beliefs are not specifically identified as Christian within that culture. In popular films, beliefs in a life after death are often expressed in the motif of the funeral rite, integrated into the narrative of the film. Wessely therefore examines various filmic representations of funeral rites, concluding that, while these provide an opportunity for a viewer's emotional engagement with questions regarding the afterlife, they are not able to fully visualize the mystery of religious beliefs.

In the final chapter in this section (Ch. 7), Jolyon Mitchell examines the role that staircases have played both in cinema and the Bible. With particular reference to the different interpretations of the story of Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28, Mitchell looks, for example, at how in *A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH* the cinematic staircase can become a bridging point between heaven and earth. Mitchell indicates, however, that this is not the only role that staircases perform in films, and that it is more customary for the staircase to be a site of violence and danger, as epitomized in the Odessa steps sequence in Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925). Mitchell concludes by suggesting that beyond the violent struggle and the metaphorical fall into violence the ladder or staircase also provides a powerful metaphor and symbol of the ascent towards peace and heavenly bliss.

Whereas the four chapters in this second section all proceed from particular, theological concepts or motifs to the way in which these are represented in film, in the third and final section of this volume the focus is on either a specific film or the oeuvre of one director. Using these specific films or filmmakers as the starting point, there is then an attempt to apply the religious or theological ideas found in these films to wider religious and/or theological debates. In the first of these chapters (Ch. 8), Reinhold Zwick looks at the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini from the point of view of the director's mysterious death. Zwick introduces the thesis, put forward by a close friend of Pasolini, that Pasolini might have staged his own death as some kind of sacrifice, complementing his life as a 'work of art'. The paper then considers a number of Pasolini's films, interpreting images of an afterlife represented in them and looking

for any clues as to whether the films might express the belief that a sacrificial death might bring about an afterlife in heaven.

Then, in Ch. 9, Ulrike Vollmer analyses and interprets Marleen Gorris's *ANTONIA'S LINE* (1995) in terms of the possibility of gender specific thinking about life after death. The film shows farmer Antonia's life as she returns to her mother's farm after the Second World War, beginning a line of independent minded, female offspring, thereby creating a matriarchal atmosphere on her farm. Throughout the film, Antonia's beliefs regarding life after death are featured in voice-overs as well as images, which appear to emphasize the continuation of this-worldly life in cyclical repetitions. After an examination of Antonia's beliefs regarding an afterlife, the paper proposes reasons why these beliefs could be considered typical for the kind of matriarchal setting Antonia has created on her farm.

Finally, in Ch. 10, Tommi Mendel discusses the imagery of the afterlife used in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *AFTER LIFE* (1998). In the film, people proceed, after their death, into an intermediary zone where they make a film of their best memory, before moving on to an afterlife. Mendel demonstrates how Kore-eda's images of this intermediary world in between life in this world and an afterlife are influenced (although not always intentionally so on the part of Kore-eda) by Japanese beliefs regarding life after death. However, rather than wanting to promote certain beliefs regarding an afterlife, Mendel's argument is that, through using various techniques to help viewers identify with the characters in the film, Kore-eda enables his audience to reflect on their present lives by using images of an afterlife.

The 2009 annual conference of the research project group 'Film und Theologie' has been the group's first co-operation with academics based in the UK and working within the area of film and theology. In this volume, we have decided to keep the bilingual nature of the conference by publishing papers in English as well as German, as they were delivered at the meeting. The conference has been sponsored by SIGNIS (the *World Catholic Association for Communication*) and by the Forschungskolleg 'Theologie/Religion – Kultur – Medien' (Kath.-Theol. Fakultät, Universität Graz, Austria). The Katholische Akademie Schwerte has kindly agreed to pay for the printing of this volume. We would like to say thank you to all our contributors for their co-operation, as well as to all who have sponsored the conference and this book.

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