relies on metaphors. Attempting to objectify the disease, medical practitioners in the 18th century resort to metaphorical language in order to conceptualize a phenomenon that strongly resists definition. That this linguistic practise is contagious and has been caught by the author himself, the attentive reader has noticed all along.

Beate Rudlof (Rostock)


In recent years there has been a revival of religious symbolism and narratives in popular films, arguably culminating around the turn of the millennium – witness the *Harry Potter* cycle, *The Matrix* trilogy or *The Da Vinci Code*, for example. Nadine Böhm takes this phenomenon as the starting point of her ambitious and wide-ranging interdisciplinary study of concepts of holiness as represented in four blockbuster films between 1996 and 2004. She needs to be congratulated for the sheer scope and erudition of her discussion, as well as for the deeply serious and careful way in which she approaches the dialogic (dare I say transdifferential) interrelation between religion and representation/film. Based on a bewildering range of secondary material from various fields (painstakingly referenced in over 600 footnotes), this book is a topical intervention not only in the academic debate on these particular films (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Stigmata, Romeo+Juliet, The Matrix*), but more broadly on the way we read ‘religion’ in culture and the media. Böhm defines her method as ‘phänomenologisch adjudierte Kulturherme-neutik’, which points both to the theoretical premises (predominantly text-centred, and in many ways rather ‘German’) and the style of writing (which sometimes borders on the arcane). It must be said that this is not an easy read, and at times seems closer to a philosophical treatise than a cultural studies analysis.

The study starts off with a long part on the theoretical and methodological premises, divided into three chapters: preliminaries, concepts of holiness (“das Heilige und das Sakrale”), and techniques of sacralization (“die Kulturtechnik der Sakralisierung”). Taken together, this is an extremely wide-ranging and complex investigation into the concepts of holiness from various (mostly German and Protestant) perspectives and theorists (including Rudolf Otto, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich and Hans-Dieter Bahr), as well as their interrelation with and relevance for postmodern society, media and popular culture. The author
approaches the topic from a cultural-theological angle, and is careful to allow the possibility of transcendence, even if experienced only indirectly, as trace or simulation (Derrida and Baudrillard are duly referenced). She makes use of the concept of *Transdifferenz* to grasp the peculiarly oscillating presence/absence of ‘the holy’ through ‘the sacred’ as represented or simulated in popular culture and the media. However, *Transdifferenz* does not function as a master concept here, but is one among a series of viewpoints used by Böhm to ‘circle’ her subject: “entnäherndes Umkreisen” is what she calls her strategy at one point. While this approach suits the theoretical and methodological premises, it can make the reading experience excruciating for the uninitiated. Since neither the concept of the holy/sacred nor the ‘Kulturtechnik’ of sacralization are easily identifiable or analyzable entities, the 120 pages of theoretical introduction leave the reader slightly unsure about the actual focus and the common criteria for the following film analyses. This should not detract from the breadth of knowledge and the high degree of self-reflexivity displayed here.

What follows is a highly intelligent, complex and theoretically aware discussion of the four films (*Romeo+Juliet* and *The Matrix* in particular), which pays attention to the techniques of representation as well as layers of meaning that have largely been neglected in previous analyses. A common emphasis on representations of ‘the sacred’ emerges implicitly and is helpfully summarized in the conclusion. On the other hand, the chapters on the four films are fairly disparate both in length and depth of analysis, are not held together by a clearly identifiable analytical focus, and new theories and approaches are introduced in each of them. For example, the *Matrix* chapter (by far the longest) is strongly concerned with mediatised corporeality and the concept of simulation, aspects that are marginal in the theoretical chapters and do not always sit comfortably with the focus on sacralization. From a cultural studies viewpoint, the institutional, economic and political-ideological underpinnings of the films are largely underexplored. We learn very little about the production and reception, the filmmakers, the marketing and the cultural/national background of the films. The chapter on *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (A. Cuarón, 2004) is the shortest and least substantial. The ‘sacred’ is found mainly in the representation of Harry as a suffering saviour figure, the religious symbolism, the presence/absence of Harry’s parents, and the cinematic strategies of emotionally involving – or ‘overwhelming’ – the audience (especially in the lake scenes). Böhm introduces Lacan’s concepts of ‘screen’ and ‘gaze’ and pays detailed attention to cinematic techniques such as mirror images, camera angles and slow motion/stills. The chapter is certainly worthwhile reading for these insightful passages alone; the final evaluation of the film’s strategies of sacralization as liberating and empowering for the audience is arguably less convincing. Since the
analysis stays predominantly on the (film-) textual level (neglecting aspects such as the Potter cycle as a cultural phenomenon, literary adaptation, marketing, fandom etc.), it seems to discuss 'the holy/sacred' on a different conceptual level than most of the theoretical chapters. The following chapter discusses Stigmata (R. Wainwright, 1999) in a similar way, focusing on the representation of Christian iconography in a horror/mystery thriller that is heavily influenced by an 'MTV-style aesthetic' and tries to sell its message of a more personal and liberated (even partly sexualized) faith through references to the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. This chapter is more critical than the previous one in unmasking the film's own individualized, gendered/sexualized and commercialized agenda. Both in this and the next chapter, there should have been a discussion of the specifically Catholic elements, I think. The valuable discussion of William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet (B. Luhrmann, 1996) on the one hand emphasizes the 'sacred' character of the cultural icon Shakespeare and its ironical (or 'fetishistic') exhibition in the film, and the sacralization of Romeo and Juliet's love through various representational techniques on the other. This metaphorical interpretation of love as a 'sacred' element is a welcome and convincing addition to the points made in the theoretical chapters. Finally, the interpretation of the Matrix trilogy (A. + L. Wachowski, 1999/2003) offers the most sustained analysis in the book, taking into account both a wealth of secondary literature on the film (which is not always true of the other chapters) and the wider economic agenda behind it. It posits various hypothetical ways of immersion into the film and its franchise, as well as different ways of reading from different religious perspectives: gnostic, Christian, and Buddhist – this is acutely done and deepens the already complex level of discussion. However, given that differences between religions did not play a part in the theoretical discussion, and that Catholicism was not emphasized in the previous chapters, it highlights the need for clearer common criteria for analysis. In any case, the main thrust of this chapter is directed towards questions of mediatization and simulation in the digital age, and how they influence representations of the 'sacred'. Strategies of sacralization (especially focused around the protagonist Neo) help to establish an illusion of individual agency, even omnipotence, on the diegetic level as well as for an immersive consumer (to be continued in the computer game etc.) but are simultaneously undermined by being themselves 'mere' simulations. In the end, for Böhlm, there is no God in the Matrix, but to some extent in the other films, particularly Harry Potter and Romeo + Juliet (even though such a bland summary of the complex argument seems almost nonsensical).

After finishing the book, I found myself in two minds: next to the exceptionally high level of discussion overall, I particularly admire the
complex way in which the author uses her theological expertise for a cultural-hermeneutic reading of the films, never allowing one perspective to dominate the other but carefully investigating the interfaces between them and thereby illuminating layers of meaning rarely discussed in the more strictly ‘disciplinary’ literature. In this sense, it is a sincerely and courageously interdisciplinary study. On the other hand, it is overburdened with too many different theories and approaches which do not cohere into a clear analytical focus and at times rather obscure the valuable insights. As a whole, the book is a difficult read (which does not help interdisciplinary communication), and would have profited from some editorial influence – or from having been written in English, perhaps. In the end, however, the excellent qualities of the book completely outweigh these misgivings; Nadine Böhm’s study is clearly an impressive achievement and can be recommended to anyone interested in either the films discussed here or the broader interdisciplinary field of religion and (popular) culture.

Dietmar Böhnke (Leipzig)


Postcolonial Studies are focussed on former colonies – the clue is in the name. Any attempt to apply their categories to situations which are not in the usual sense colonial is bound to raise questions. Yet the analysis of identity, hybridity, empowerment and minority culture can run along parallel tracks in the most diverse historical constellations around the world, and the terminology is easily transferable. I have for example used the vocabulary of postcolonialism elsewhere to discuss literature of German Turks, without any aspirations to understand their situation in terms of empire; it is enough that some phenomena fit. So it is hardly surprising that Gaelic Scotland, with its history of disempowerment should invite a discussion in similar terms.

To go beyond this, however, and understand Gaeldom in the fullest sense as a postcolonial situation, is controversial because of the degree that Scotland – especially but by no means only Lowland Scotland – was a full partner in the processes of the British Empire. Still today at the FP’s club reunions of one Clackmannanshire secondary, the olim cives sing the old school song, celebrating their bold founder who went forth in search of fame and fortune: he was a slave trader. On the other hand, it has long been known that the imperial characterisation of “natives” in overseas colonies was in part informed by the much older construction of the