

into a set of beliefs established long before he began directing films. Much like labeling Hitchcock a Jesuit, it exposes one strand of a complex field of determinations that need to be pursued. It's not the *answer* to the meaning of a body of work that remains uniquely responsive to the complex network of individual and cultural forces that surrounded its creation, but one possible point of departure for a more wide-ranging study. Thankfully, after presenting the thesis in his introduction, Dumont relegates it to the background in his discussion of individual films which he brings to life through his nuanced discussion of specific details related to performances, setting, *mise-en-scène*, and editing. One glorious example comes from Dumont's discussion of what he refers to as a "sublime aside" in *Man's Castle* (1933). Trina (Loretta Young) stares longingly at an oven in a store window. Bill (Spencer Tracy), eating an ice cream cone, joins her. "Bill speaks sharply to her, interrupting (getting an oven . . . is out of the question!), but unperturbed. Trina presses herself against him, then responds to his harsh treatment by smiling, assenting docilely and with inflamed looks. This dialogue between people acting as if they don't hear, this antagonistic byplay rife with implications, where gestures contradict words, where sight relativizes what is heard . . . closes with a most characteristic 'Borzage touch': the second he turns his back to go, Bill leans towards Trina's ear and murmurs something: the young woman's face lights up, but the viewer is excluded from the confidence—and will remain so. This byplay reveals their unique rapport whose significance escapes even initiated viewers" (200–201). Bill later makes her a gift of the stove. Dumont's descriptive analysis has its hand on the pulse of the emotions that flow through the couple, evoking through a series of subtle details a depth of feeling that even Bill, in spite of his feigned gruffness, cannot hide. The interaction speaks to a romantic intimacy that distinguished Borzage from all other filmmakers who explored the lived experiences of the couple.

Dumont's research into Borzage's directorial techniques helps ground an observation that earlier critics have made about the space of his films in the actual space of their production. Borzage's lovers create an idealized, idyllic space for themselves that exists within but apart from a more impersonal, alienating, and even hostile space. The lovers in *Seventh Heaven*, *Street Angel* (1928), *The River* (1929), *Little Man*, *What Now?* (1934), *Man's Castle*, *Moonrise*, and *China Doll* create for themselves what Trina refers to as a "safety zone," a safe place in the middle of traffic where pedestrians can wait until the cars have gone by. On the studio set, Borzage created a similar "safety zone" for his actors. He never shouted or raised his voice but often knelt down next to

actors and gently coaxed them into a mood suitable for eliciting the best possible performances for the scene at hand.

The concept of the "safety zone" suggests that Borzage might productively be explored in terms of what Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920* (Pantheon, 1981) terms "anti-modernity." Borzage's films thus stand as implicit critiques of modernization (urbanization, industrialization, rationalization, mass culture) and of the alienation and cynicism that accompany modernity. In search of a "place of grace," Borzage's characters retreat to a protected spiritual and emotional space within the material conditions of modernity. They attempt to isolate themselves especially from those conditions surrounding war, economic depression, social upheaval, and from the moral depravity brought about by those conditions.

Finally, though Dumont, Scorsese, and others are to be commended for making this book available in English, McFarland has done a rather mediocre job in seeing it through to publication. The text is replete with typographical errors, missing words, and extraneous words. The original, glossy, matte-coated stock of the French edition has been replaced by a dull-finish, alkaline paper. The 440 photographs in the French edition, including sixteen pages in color (which looked glorious) have been reduced to only 116, all in black-and-white, and reproduced on a stock that limits their, sharpness, detail, and contrast ratio. © 2008 John Belton

JOHN BELTON, who teaches at Rutgers University, devoted one-third of his first book, *The Hollywood Professionals, Volume 3* (Tantivy, 1974) to Frank Borzage.

BOOK DATA Herve Dumont, *Frank Borzage: The Life and Films of a Hollywood Romantic*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. \$55.00 cloth; \$45.00 paper. 420 pages.

ARTHUR KNIGHT

Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949
by Judith Weisenfeld

Years ago, before much African American cinema—whether by that we mean, say, Oscar Micheaux films or Hollywood films with black characters—was available on video, I was doing research at the Library of Congress Motion Picture Division. A colleague approached me and asked, in effect, "what's the deal with all these scenes from early African American sound films that show a crowd of characters with arms upraised and casting outsized shadows to signify religious ecstasy?" Whatever I answered was lame. I wish that I'd

been able to refer my friend to Judith Weisenfeld's *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949*. Weisenfeld is a professor of religion, but *Hollywood Be Thy Name* proves amply that she is also a first-rate cinema scholar, at home both when working as a cultural historian and when working as a textual interpreter. Her book joins recent works like Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Terry Lindvall's *Sanctuary Cinema: The Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (NYU Press, 2007) in expanding our understanding of how significantly religion and cinema have interacted, and it adds to these works by taking full account of the complex ways in which race, religion, and cinema have been interlaced in American movies.

Weisenfeld begins her work with the advent of sound cinema because, she argues, “filmmakers were particularly drawn to the possibilities that black religious music offered for the new sound technology, and [they] . . . recognized the aesthetic power of African American religious expression, so often grounded in using the body’s sound and motion as conduits to the divine” (5). This aesthetic power—for instance, those upraised hands—and the prominence of black church denominations, freshly visible in the 1920s and 30s in the urban north, made African American religion a “natural subject matter for the movies” (3). But Weisenfeld doesn’t mean “natural” as an unreflective category. Rather, she means it as a category that must be probed for the “varied motivations” (3) that undergird it and the ideological functions it serves. *Hollywood Be Thy Name* performs this probing in impressive detail and across a wide array of materials and socio-cultural terrains.

In fact, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, a phrase drawn from a Langston Hughes letter quoting a (in his words) “backwoods church entertainment given by a magician” in Georgia, is at once a perfect and a flawed title for Weisenfeld’s ambitious volume. It’s perfect because it captures the sense of the emphatic overlapping and interlacing between religion and film that so rightly interests Weisenfeld. It’s flawed because it hides a great virtue of this book—namely that it is not exclusively about Hollywood films.

Weisenfeld begins in Hollywood with chapters on King Vidor’s first sound film *Hallelujah* (1929) and the film adaptation of the huge theatrical hit *The Green Pastures* (1936). However, from there she moves to two chapters that consider race films and, specifically, the religious films *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) and *Go Down Death* (1944) by black filmmaker Spencer Williams. And she concludes with chapters that focus on films made off-Hollywood, as it were, but by

Hollywood-connected filmmakers: *The Negro Soldier* (1944), made by Frank Capra’s army film unit, and *Lost Boundaries* (1949), a story about passing made during the late 1940s cycle of “social problem films” and produced by Louis de Rochemont. All of these films have been seriously neglected in critical scholarly literature. The exception is perhaps *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). Weisenfeld treats *Cabin in the Sky* in comparison with *The Negro Soldier* as a way of examining how World War II-era films worked to revise representations of black religion in an effort to engage African Americans’ support for a war being fought for values they too infrequently benefited from.

The reason these films have been neglected, although Weisenfeld doesn’t say so in as many words, is arguably because they so strongly manifest the theme of black Christian religion. Scholars have been much more inclined to draw analytic and interpretive boundaries around these works based on categories such as genre and auteur (consequently *Cabin in the Sky*’s relative familiarity) or modes of production and their interaction with race (e.g., Hollywood vs. race film). Weisenfeld doesn’t neglect these categories—she recognizes their presence and effect and, as I suggested, different modes of production provide a broad and useful organization for the book—but she also makes plain that such categories are hardly determining, especially when the experiences of African American audiences are taken into account. And she is abidingly interested in what black audiences—she emphasizes the plurality, that African Americans were not a monolithic group—made of these films, and is impressively inventive in finding evidence of these audiences and their responses in press reports, letters, and autobiographies, and the files of churches, studios, and government organizations.

Weisenfeld’s research and interpretive prowess is probably most spectacularly on display in her chapter that focuses on Spencer Williams’s films (though I should add that she also touches on several other “black-audience religious films” on her way to Williams). I suspect that any film scholar who has encountered these films has been impressed by their uniqueness. They are astounding—and, in my experience, many students find them galvanizing if also hard to get a handle on. While there have been a couple of useful essays on these films, Weisenfeld gives us an account that provides broader contexts in black religious practices (including useful reflections on Williams’s likely knowledge of both Protestant and Catholic theology and worship styles), in other even less well-known black-audience films, and in the production and distribution histories of the films. It seems there is not an archive she has not been to and combed carefully. This chapter will certainly ensure that I teach *The Blood of*

Jesus and Go Down Death even more thoroughly and mindfully from now on.

The arc of Weisenfeld's argument is qualifiedly—strongly qualifiedly—progressive. At least in terms of Hollywood and Hollywood-independent films, she notes a shift from representations that invest heavily in sexualizing African American religious practice to representations that aspire to be universal and humanist. There is change here and Weisenfeld seems inclined (as did critics like, say, Ralph Ellison) to see this change as good—or at least OK. But with her nuanced reading of *Lost Boundaries* she also notes that even while this film, and others like it, used “religious arguments” to “broaden the category of American citizenship,” it also has religion “function . . . as a powerful means of reaffirming racial categories and boundaries” (213). In the final paragraph of the book's conclusion, Weisenfeld asserts that the intersection of race and religion remains charged and powerful in American film, but she hints that more substantial changes in representation have occurred with the “rise of independent film . . . and the participation of black filmmakers in this movement” (238). She leaves this assertion tantalizingly broad and undetailed, saying “that is a story for another book.” Anyone who has seen a Tyler Perry movie (to name just one instance) in the last few years should root for Weisenfeld to write that other book. © 2008 Arthur Knight

ARTHUR KNIGHT directs the Literary and Cultural Studies and Film Studies Programs and teaches American Studies and English at the College of William & Mary.

BOOK DATA Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. \$60.00 cloth; \$25.95 paper. 341 pages.

STEPHEN PRINCE

***The Frodo Franchise:
“The Lord of the Rings” and Modern Hollywood
by Kristin Thompson***

In *The Frodo Franchise*, Kristin Thompson gives us a comprehensive and very detailed portrait of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* in its many incarnations—as a series of movies, games, video supplements, Internet properties, and other manifestations of a franchise that seems unending. In light of the film's enormous fan base, its influential use of digital filmmaking tools, its global revenues, and its appeal across different media, Thompson writes that “quite apart from what fans or detractors may think of the movie, it can fairly claim to be one of the most historically significant films ever made” (8).

Thompson clearly finds this to be a persuasive claim, and her own work as an academic film historian lends her assessment of the film and its claims to significance considerable weight. She aims to place the film (understood as a single entity, but actually a trilogy of three films) into its multifaceted context as a movie blockbuster and as the hugely successful product of a globalized media economy. “Not just as a film trilogy but as a larger phenomenon, *Rings* reveals a great deal about the changes going on in Hollywood in this transitional era of globalization and new media” (10).

She also writes as a fan of Tolkien and of the Jackson films, and this personal connection to the material makes for a very warm and lively book rather than a musty academic treatise. Her chapter on fandom, for example, is entitled “Fans on the Margins, Pervy Hobbit Fanciers and Partygoers.” She confesses that initially she was skeptical of Jackson's project and feared that it might turn out to be just the kind of film she dislikes—a prestigious, overly respectful literary adaptation made with an eye on the Oscars. Instead, it turned out to be a fun movie, and Thompson embraces this quality in the work, finding, for example, that Jackson has blended numerous popular genres with Tolkien's narrative. These include horror, martial arts, swashbucklers, war films, and Westerns. She quotes approvingly Jackson's remark that he is still the same guy who made a zombie movie (*Dead Alive*, 1992) and would like to make one again some day. Frame enlargements in the book compare Bruce Lee's martial-arts moves with those of Legolas (Orlando Bloom).

Thompson is fair to critics of Jackson's approach, and she quotes several, including disparaging remarks by Peter Bogdanovich about the child-oriented design of popular movies today compared with earlier decades. And she acknowledges that Jackson's is not a traditional take on Tolkien, that he aims for a more adolescent taste than did Tolkien, that the action elements are more pumped-up and extended in the movies, and that the monsters get more attention on the screen than on the page: “A book about imaginatively conceived characters on a lengthy journey interspersed with skirmishes has been turned into what some might see as a gallery of battles and monsters” (54). As a Tolkien fan, Thompson nevertheless approves of these emphases because they enabled the film to reach a larger audience composed of non-Tolkien readers. “For them, the narrative was altered and simplified. It took advantage of the novel's many major settings, fantastical creatures, and huge battles, all of which lent themselves to special effects and epic scenes of a sort familiar from blockbusters in various genres” (56).

Crafted in this way, the film became the global phenomenon that Thompson covers in detail. She examines the