

AN EXAMPLE OF A BOOK REVIEW

***Film, Lacan and the Subject of Religion: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Religious Film Analysis.* By Steve Nolan. London and New York: Continuum, 2009. Pp. xii + 219. £65.00. ISBN 978-0-8264-2760-1.**

Academic studies of film and religion, or film and theology, have abounded in recent years, most of which seem to pursue a similar line of enquiry looking either to analogies between cinematic stories and those of the religious tradition or to the treatment of film as narrative. Steve Nolan's book seeks to go beyond this, and for that reason it can be welcomed as a significant contribution to the study of religion and film.

Steve Nolan's book is inspired by two things. First of all, he recounts, fairly briefly, his experience as a child and young man where the local cinema and Roman Catholic church both played a formative influence in his upbringing. It is from the juxtaposition of these two contrasting buildings with apparently different aims and practices that the main thesis in this book finds its genesis. The thesis is that worshippers who celebrate the Eucharistic sacrament undergo a similar inclusion into the drama of the mass as the cinematic spectator experiences in watching (or experiencing) a film. The second thing which inspired the author was the recognition that the vast majority of commentators who link religion and film tend not to take film theory seriously and thus are not disposed to treat film as film, choosing instead to treat it as another form of narrative.

From this Dr Nolan constructs an erudite and convincing argument in which he categorises previous discussions as 'phenomenological' (or 'sacramental'), where film becomes a means of experiencing the transcendent; 'literary', where film is treated as no more than story or narrative; and 'anthropological', where film is treated as in itself as a religious practice. To counter this he utilises the work of the 1970s film-theory journal, *Screen*, which brought together Marxist ideology, semiotics and the psychoanalytical insights of Jacques Lacan in order to try to understand what an audience might experience when watching a film. In so doing, he emphasises the 'suturing' or stitching of the viewer into the narrative of a film in which the viewer is drawn into an ideological reality and where each one experiences the existence which properly belongs to another. In this he recognises a process similar to that experienced by the worshipper in attendance at the mass. Through witnessing the priest's performance of a particular liturgy, so the believer is drawn into a particular ideological reality in which the salvific event is made real in the present.

I would wish to highlight three issues which arise from the book.

First, it is not clear whether Dr Nolan's grasp of theology or religious studies is quite as profound as his coherent assimilation of cinematic theory and his precise and detailed treatment of the work of Lacan. I say this because it appears, at one level at least, that the argument about 'suturing' the cinematic audience or the eucharistic congregation into the ideological reality being represented before them is no more than an *analogy*. That this goes beyond the usual appeal to the analogue is beyond doubt, for it is in participation and representation that this analogue is to be found rather than in the details of a particular story. This might be a particularly

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Comment [1]: Note how the review is presented. You need a full reference to the book: title, author, place of publication, publisher, number of pages, price, ISBN.

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Comment [2]: The first paragraph presents the book in the context of the field of study to which it belongs and through saying briefly what the reviewer thought about it. You do not have to do this, but you will need to consider how best to present the review in such a way as to grab the reader's attention.

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Comment [3]: The second paragraph refers the reader to the main arguments in the book.

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Comment [4]: The third paragraph refers to the structure of the argument in a fairly detailed way. This is a descriptive rather than evaluative analysis.

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Comment [5]: The next three paragraphs evaluate and critique the main arguments.

Catholic reading, and one wonders whether similar points could be made about Protestant practices.

Second, the author claims to be analysing the viewer's experience in watching a film. It has to be said that many commentators claim this as an inherent part of their argument. Dr Nolan's thesis is rather more subtle than most, locating the experience in the subconscious which explains the dependence on psychoanalytic theory. However, like others, this remains a theoretical standpoint. That in itself does not disqualify it, but it begs the question whether or not some empirical research and evidence is required in order to support or validate his claims. Until such work is done, can we really claim that audiences (rather than particular commentators) interpret their cinematic experiences in religious or theological terms?

Third, the emphasis in the book is firmly on theory rather than application. When Dr Nolan turns to interpret specific films in light of his analysis, his treatment is exquisite. This reviewer would have welcomed further examples of application in order to see just how widely relevant and deeply insightful his approach might be.

None of this is intended to suggest weakness in the book. There can be little doubt that this is a skilful and scholarly treatment in which the whole subject area is advanced because it recognises the need to take film theory seriously. As befits a work which started life as a doctoral thesis, the discussion is highly technical – especially those parts which discuss the work of Lacan – but the analysis is in no way diminished as a result. The argument is well made and logically set out, and Dr Nolan certainly takes the subject to a new level of critical appreciation. The work deserves the attention of those who are interested in the dialogue between film and theology or religious studies as well as those who are interested in film theory per se. If it is widely employed, then the arguments advanced here may be developed in order to contribute further to our understanding of a most significant aspect of contemporary study of religion and popular culture.

985 words

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Comment [6]: The final paragraph draws general conclusions by making evaluative comments. In this instance, these closing comments are positive, but they do not need to be. It is important that the conclusions are supported by the arguments which feature in the review.

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Comment [7]: You will need to note the word count.