

EXAMPLE 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 seeks to go beyond such approaches and to the extent to which he succeeds, this book can be welcomed as a significant contribution to the study of religion and film.

Steve Nolan's work appears to be 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 origin. The thesis is that worshippers who celebrate the Eucharistic sacrament undergo a similar inclusion into the drama of the mass as that experienced by the cinematic spectator 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 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, Dr Nolan's grasp of theology or religious studies is not always 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 analogy is beyond doubt, for rather than discern narrative similarity Dr Nolan argues that it is in participation and representation that the analogy can be made between this particular religious rite and the practice of watching a film. But, apart from the reference to the worshipper's experience during the performance of the mass, there seems to be very little specifically *theological* engagement here. What, ultimately, is the significance of being 'sutured' into the mass, and does it in any way differ from being 'sutured' into a film? Are both little more than the means of strengthening of a particular ideology? And if they are,

Comment [r1]: Note the way in which the review is headed by a full reference to the book: its title, author, place of publication, publisher, date, number of pages, price, ISBN.

Comment [r2]: The first paragraph introduces the book by making brief reference to the field and by declaring immediately what the reviewer thought about it. You do not need to do this, but you need to think about how to introduce the review.

Comment [r3]: The second paragraph refers to the basic arguments of the book.

Comment [r4]: The third paragraph makes more detailed reference to how the argument is constructed. This concentrates on analytical description rather than evaluation.

Comment [r5]: The next three paragraphs raise evaluative and critical issues with the book's content and argument.

does it matter? Furthermore, this might be a particularly *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 admitted that many commentators who bring together theology or religious studies and film 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 major weakness in the book. There can be little doubt that this is a skilful and scholarly treatment. 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

Comment [r6]: The final paragraph makes some general evaluative comments. These are positive, but they need not be so. It is important to support whatever evaluative conclusion you reach.

Comment [r7]: You must include a word count. You should not exceed 1000 words and write no less than 950.