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Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film

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Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley, eds. *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

Author Notes

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Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley, eds. *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

Can watching films be a spiritual experience? The intended audience for a book such as *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film*—as well as those reading a review in the *Journal of Religion & Film*—would likely nod in affirmation. Yet further inquiry into this question reveals its complexity: how does watching a film elicit a spiritual experience? What do we mean by “spiritual,” or by “experience”? Is all film-viewing considered spiritual, or are some films and cinematic experiences more in tune with the transcendent than others? While film and religious studies have grown to include a variety of disciplines (e.g. theology, biblical studies, philosophy, sociology of religion), many of these studies still focus on the films themselves as vessels for religious or theological ideas. There has been less quantitative and qualitative research into the study of phenomenology and film, namely understanding the film *as* experience itself, one in which the viewer is spiritually moved or transformed. Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley’s collection of essays seeks to address this lacuna through the exploration of film-viewing as a spiritual experience, looking more closely at the meaning-filled relationship between the viewer and viewed through conversations on phenomenology and film.

The collection is structured around the three titular themes—Dreams, Doubt, and Dread—which serve as the common point of dialogue between the contributors. After three chapters within each section, the final portion is a roundtable discussion between the authors, offering further insights and critiques into each essay. The clear goal behind this dialogical approach is expressed within the editors’ thesis in the introductory chapter:

The aim of the efforts represented within this text is to shift contemporary theological film engagement away from a simple mode of analysis in which theological concepts are simply read into the film itself to begin to let films speak for themselves as profoundly spiritual experiences. Let's agree that a movie is never just a movie; it's an experience—a multi-sensory and often profoundly psychological and spiritual experience. And yet, we have few models for deeply reflecting on them. The conversations within this text wish to do something about that (16).

By engaging a diversity of films and dialogue partners, Settle and Worley expand the boundaries of what readers might initially assume to be “spiritual” films: those which deal explicitly with religion and/or religious persons (Christianity in particular). Instead, the contributors have chosen a variety of auteurs and approaches, ranging from examining a filmmaker's entire oeuvre (the films of David Lynch and Wes Anderson), to comparative studies between similar films (*Gravity* and *Interstellar*; *Doubt* and *Mass Appeal*), to the in-depth analysis of a single film in conversation with a particular philosopher or author (*12 Years a Slave* and James Baldwin; *Take Shelter* and Jacques Lacan). With such a structure, each section/conversation deserves individual attention for its contribution to the whole.

The first section, “Dreams,” explores the concept of world projection, how imagined worlds, both cinematic and cognitive, have a profound influence on the viewer's sense of meaning and ethics. Regarding dream states and logic, one thinks of films in the fantasy or sci-fi genres, as well as horror and psychological thrillers. In David Dark's exploration of the films of David Lynch, he suggests that Lynch evokes a “certain wakefulness” within him, a recognition that “the ineffable is everywhere” (22). Lynch's films unmask and reveal the strangeness in the everyday, suggesting an underlying darkness by bringing it into the light of the flickering screen. Dark suggests that Lynch's

characters and films serve as prophetic witness to the surrounding culture, a wake-up call to unsettling realities.

Similarly, Eric Kuiper uses the language of “unsettling” and “disruption” in his comparative essay on the recent science fiction adventures, Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* and Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*. Where Nolan’s film envisions outer space as an arena of adventure and homecoming beyond the earth’s surface, Cuarón’s gripping thriller suggests that our earthly home is a sanctuary away from the innumerable dangers beyond our atmosphere. Kuiper notes that both films create space for viewers to re-imagine our personal lives and futures through the cinematic experience in outer space: “We leave Earth so we can return to it in a new way. In each film we are invited to dream about a new future” (45).

In an alternative approach to the “dream” theme, Zachary Settle looks at Steve McQueen’s Best Picture winner, *12 Years a Slave*, in conjunction with the writings of James Baldwin and the mythical, ideological qualities of the “black hero” in both history and cinema. This chapter was a revelation for me, as I was unfamiliar with Baldwin’s writings on film, and was only recently introduced to Baldwin’s cultural significance through Raoul Peck’s 2016 documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*, an examination of racial history in America through Baldwin’s unfinished final novel.

While each essay in this section is well-crafted and informative, the most compelling section is the roundtable discussion, where these contributors apply their previous research and analysis and offer more personal, practical approaches to the film-going experience. In defense of film-as-spiritual-experience, Dark proposes, “Films are doing their work on us all the time. Even the bad ones. And they’re spiritual phenomena

whether we learn to think of them that way or not” (61). Films can “rearrange our mental furniture” and disrupt the viewer’s imagination, causing disequilibrium and the need to work out a spiritual recalibration within oneself. Yet this outworking is not done in isolation, as “Friends don’t let friends process cinema all by themselves” (67). Ever the wordsmith, Dark’s contribution to the conversation is most memorable as he describes one’s history with film-viewing as a *catechesis*, the personal history of interaction and engagement with film, and the place film holds in one’s life (69).

The next section, “Doubt,” explores the philosophical notions of skepticism and questions of epistemology as central themes, looking at how films deconstruct both the film’s protagonist(s) and the viewers as “a unique meditation on the experience of uncertainty” (15). The films and filmmakers within the section are unsurprising: from an exploration of Ingmar Bergman’s existential “Silence Trilogy,” to the enigmatic and iconic cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky, to the 2008 parabolic film with the same title, *Doubt*, these are films exploring the very nature of religious uncertainty.

The roundtable discussion between the three authors—Michael Leary, Joseph Kickasola, and Crystal Downing—is the most erudite, citing a wide range of influences, from theologians to philosophers to sociologists, not to mention the filmmakers themselves. A conversation involving Ricœur and Levinas alongside Brakhage and Bergman is understandably quite cerebral, but the authors’ conversational tone keeps such abstract ideas grounded in concrete experiences. The doubt one experiences in everyday life (e.g., questioning one’s faith or the existence of God) is both reflected in the films discussed as well as challenged. Doubt is never the end of the dialogue, either for the filmmakers or the contributors in the collection. These films raise “a doubting of

their own doubt,” which in turn is a subtle form of faith (128). The roundtable section is also beneficial in that moderator Taylor Worley brings up one of the greatest of cinema’s doubters, Woody Allen. An exploration of doubt and spirituality in cinema without mentioning Allen’s works, such as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* or *Hannah and Her Sisters*, would be remiss.

Allen’s films would also find a home under “Dread,” the section focused on human anxiety and existential uncertainty in a universe filled with evil and suffering. The book’s final section features two of the most compelling chapters due to their unexpected appearance under this theme. The whimsical and childlike films of Wes Anderson might not immediately conjure up notions of existential dread, but Kathryn Reklis’ examination of Anderson’s “aesthetics of the ‘made’” unpacks why Anderson’s highly formalistic approach to filmmaking raises significant questions about authenticity and identity. Reklis posits that Anderson “offers the viewer an experience of authentic self-discovery through artifice and craft” (153). Anderson enthusiasts, like myself, will be delighted and challenged by the chapter’s thematic approach to Anderson’s canon, looking at the common tropes and ideas expressed within the Andersonian cinematic universe. The other compelling chapter, Carl Raschke’s study of Jeff Nichols’ 2011 film *Take Shelter* through the lens of Jacques Lacan, is much more intimate and detailed, partly due to Raschke’s incorporation of his personal narrative in a lengthy footnote, and partly due to the intense focus on a single film from a fresh American filmmaker, one whose films demand further exploration within the conversation of religion and theology.

One significant lacuna within the scope of this collection is the notable lack of female filmmakers. With such a wide range of excellent women directors throughout

cinematic history, it is frustrating to note their absence within this collected work. For example, the entire oeuvre of Sofia Coppola would be appropriate for each of the three given themes: *The Virgin Suicides* or *Marie Antoinette* for “Dreams,” *Lost in Translation* or *Somewhere* for “Doubt,” and nearly every one of her films could be considered within the scope of “Dread.” The films of Agnes Varda, Claire Denis, Lynne Ramsay, or Chantal Akerman (to name only a few) would all be excellent contributions within the conversation about phenomenology and spirituality; a brief search of the *Journal of Religion and Film* for these four filmmakers produced zero results. Every collection has its limitations—one has to make editorial choices about which filmmakers to include and exclude—but this particular examination of phenomenology and the viewers’ experiences with film could have considered a wider scope of filmmakers beyond the usual suspects in film-and-religion studies (e.g., Bergman, Tarkovsky).

One other possible critique of this collection is its emphasis on phenomenology that appears pessimistic or gloomy. “Doubt” and “Dread” are both weighty themes, and the “Dreams” within the first section are more often like nightmares. By limiting spiritual experiences to somber emotions or existential crises, it creates an unnecessary association between “spirituality” and “serious/sad films,” the inclusion of Wes Anderson’s quirky films notwithstanding. An audience’s experience of joy, delight, or euphoria is not necessarily considered here under these themes, and the genre of comedy is notably absent. How might films explore and foster a sense of rich catharsis or even joyful wonder, not simply doubt or dread? Can humor or laughter be a significant aspect of one’s spiritual experiences? Pairing this collection of essays about “serious” films with a book such *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic*

Spirit would offer a more holistic approach to a wider range of both films and emotional experiences.

The very structure and form of this collection serves as paradigmatic for its purpose, namely to foster an experience and dialogue about how films transform us. By framing each section around the “roundtable” discussion—by far the strongest elements within the book—the reader is invited into the conversation as both observer and listener; he or she is drawn into the collaborative dialogue, allowing for the possibility of transformation. The very possibility of human communication and connection through the medium of the written word about another medium (film) is itself a phenomenological venture. The variety of authorial perspectives and each film or filmmakers’ effect(s) reveal the complexity of the study at hand. Framed by a foreword from Robert K. Johnston and an afterward by Gregory Alan Thornbury, the conversational tone of the collection is invitational and personal while remaining academically rigorous in tone. While using the collection as a textbook for undergraduates might prove unwieldy, it certainly is accessible to those in graduate studies, and would be worth placing on the bookshelf of academics interested in phenomenology, theology, and cinema. The collection’s greatest strength is in highlighting fresh scholarly and filmmaking voices; Settle and Worley have assembled a considerable and diverse team of writers exploring recent and yet-to-be-examined films and filmmakers from the novel perspective of phenomenology. I always appreciate making new discoveries, both of films I have yet to see, as well as voices I need to be reading; *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread* offers such discoveries and insights in spades.