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# Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Ritual and Imagery

**Hansen, Regina. Ed. *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Ritual and Imagery*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011. 294 pp. \$45.00 (USD). ISBN: 978-0-7864-6474-6**

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Regina Hansen's new collection presents twenty-one essays on a range of films, themes and rituals from the *Exorcist* to *Brideshead Revisited*, from saints' miracles to zombie resurrection, from Catholic confession to vampiric Eucharist. The preface claims a loose thesis for the collection: that Catholicism is "one of the central elements of fantastic narrative in North American and European film" (1). Indeed, the book develops how "representations of Roman Catholicism, its symbolism and ritual, are often meant to evoke an experience of the fantastic" (3). As viewers are increasingly removed from the meaning behind its formal elements, Catholicism represents the supernatural.

An introduction explains the rationale behind the division of the book into three sections: marvelous Catholicism, uncanny Catholicism and ridiculous and monstrous Catholicism. Adopting Tzvetan Todorov's definition of "fantastic" as "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (3) allows the authors of the collection to consider traditional fantastic genres such as horror, fantasy and science fiction as well as more "realistic films" where "Catholic symbolism and ritual . . . appear as the sole reference to the fantastic" (4).

Included in "the marvelous" are essays that develop how religion or the sacred is used to critique or reflect capitalism and postmodernity. For example, in John Regan's analysis of *Millions*, the protagonist's discovery of money and visionary relationship with the saints explores money's ambiguous ability to "corrupt and cure" (17). Christopher McKittrick's essay on Catholic themes in Terry Gilliam's films discusses the director's conception of evil as "obsession with technology and money" and "creations of man, not God" (33). Em McAvan's analysis of the translation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to film reveals a movement from implicit Catholic sacramentality into "a New Age respect for life, and a general postmodern turn towards the authenticity of the corporeal" (49). Rick Pioto studies the impact of differing levels of familiarity with and belief in Catholic rituals and practices in relation to the reception of horror films that include Catholic elements. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas studies the *Exorcist* films through the lens of "moral spectacle." Paulo Cunha and Daniel Ribas's essay on Portuguese cinematic depictions of the miracles associated with Our Lady of Fátima documents changing sociopolitical concerns.

Included in "the uncanny" are essays with distinctive approaches to vampire films: Isabella van Elferen's exploration of the function of music in a range of films and Ann Kordas's study of 1930s films which positions them within a historical background of anti-Catholicism and fear of foreign invasion. A more theoretical approach to this topic is offered in Ralph Believeau's interrogation of how the horror genre reinforces social, ethnic and racial hierarchies and

punishes those who transgress these boundaries. Also in this section, Kathleen E. Urda discusses the cinematic transformation of *Brideshead Revisited* into Gothic horror, and Marco Grosoli examines the “crossing point between horror and Catholicism” in attention to “surface rather than depth, and hence style over matter” in *Cat People* (141).

Included in “the ridiculous and monstrous” are Jana Toppe’s exploration of the Eucharist motif in zombie films and Margarita Georgieva’s exposition of religious themes in the Soviet science fiction film *Kin Dza Dza!* Barry C. and Eloise R. Knowlton’s study of Alfred Hitchcock’s *I Confess* examines the “rub of the rational against the sacramental” in the tale of a priest who goes to unbelievable lengths to honour the confessional privacy of a murderer (197). There are several essays on the priest as anti-hero: Shelley F. O’Brien looks at murderous priests; Regina Hansen analyzes the depictions of priests after sex scandals to find that, although anti-heroes, they are not predatory and are often capable of redemption; Christa Jones discusses the self-delusion of *Soul de soleil de Satan*’s priest, who believes his satanically inspired talents to be saintly. Brett Gaul considers the use of Catholic symbols and doctrine in the “realistic” film *Gone Baby Gone* to contrast idealism with grim reality. Victoria Surliuga traces the Catholic “fantastic” in the work of four major Italian directors. David Annandale analyzes Jess Franco’s *Exorcism* using Jacques Lacan’s critique of Immanuel Kant and the Marquis de Sade. Finally, Anabel Altemir Giral and Ismael Ibáñez Rosales track the protagonist’s relationship to Catholic doctrine and her growing self-identity in *The Others*.

The sections established in the introduction strain to contain this range of essays. Genres, themes and films spill over across the sections, which ultimately seem arbitrary and unimportant to many of the authors. The reader questions the justification for all the genres included in the book and wonders whether the collection would not be better entitled “Fantastic Roman Catholicism in Film.” In addition, the text is littered with proofreading errors, which prove distracting to the reader. However, these are worth picking through. Overall, the diversity of the essays makes the book fascinating to both film scholars and historians of religion and culture, as well as general enthusiasts of fantastic film.

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