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Book Review

Sarah K. Balstrup, *Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred*

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In *Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred*, Sarah K. Balstrup explores the religious qualities of cinematic experience, particularly in *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1968), *ENTER THE VOID* (Gaspar Noé, FR/DE/IT/CA/JP 2009), and *MELANCHOLIA* (Lars von Trier, DK/SE/FR/DE 2011). Balstrup demonstrates the coherence of these three films as objects of her study, with *2001*, Stanley Kubrick's psychedelic masterpiece, as a point of departure. She then treats *ENTER THE VOID* and *MELANCHOLIA*, whose directors both cite *2001* as an influence and seek to craft films that elicit a similar spiritual response in the viewer.

Following theorist Paul Schrader, Balstrup focuses on the “transcendental style” of film (p. 23). For Schrader, film can be a “means of accessing the Holy” in a moment of transcendent “stasis” (p. 27). Not all films exhibit this style. Rather, Balstrup (like Schrader) analyzes films that specifically aim to bring the viewer into a transcendent experience or “a ‘meditative’ state” (p. 37), such as in the cases of *2001*, *ENTER THE VOID*, and *MELANCHOLIA*. For Balstrup, the cinematic approach to transcendence in these films takes its cues more from “alternative spirituality” than from Christianity (p. 77). After introducing the “transcendental style” and alternative spirituality, Balstrup spends the remainder of the book closely examining *2001*, *ENTER THE VOID*, and *MELANCHOLIA*, paying special attention to how the films affect viewers viscerally, and how each film exemplifies the transcendental style and an alternative spiritual ethos.

The biggest strength of *Spiritual Sensations* is its contribution to both film studies in general and religion and film in particular. Balstrup intentionally moves away from a focus on narrative and symbolism (p. 16) and toward a focus on “the state of mind and affective qualities” of experience (p. 33). Directors, in this approach, are more than storytellers. They are also creators of sensory experiences that may or may not be tied to a narrative plot. The sensory experience of cinema, then, is capable of affecting viewers in ways that are not strictly dependent on empathizing with characters (p. 33). For Balstrup, Stanley Kubrick represents an important turn toward sensory-centric directing, “away from plot-driven narrative and characterization” and toward “visual and aural excess” designed to “evoke visceral or sensory response” (p. 72).

In the area of religion and film, *Spiritual Sensations* opens promising new directions. By focusing on the experiential qualities of film, Balstrup draws on the importance of “alternative spirituality” (p. 46), a new religious paradigm that prizes personal experience and religious autonomy. It is also a broad religious sensibility that inspired Kubrick’s 2001. Commenting on Kubrick’s declaration that 2001 is a religious film, Balstrup writes, “This overt declaration of religious meaning is not, however, drawn from Christianity but from a type of alternative spirituality that embraces the potentialities of science” (p. 77). Balstrup also explains the often ambiguous style of arthouse cinema in terms of alternative spirituality: “As the value of self-determinism is so strong in alternative spirituality, it is crucial that art film directors present moments of ambiguity and paradox, as this provides the opportunity for pluralistic responses, even if audience reactions end up looking rather uniform” (p. 180). With a move toward a sensory-centric cinema, Balstrup is able to bring more experience-centric religious movements (like alternative spirituality) into conversation with film. While symbolism and narrative have an important place in the films that she discusses, it is primarily non-representational sensory experience that communicates religious transcendence. For example, Balstrup includes an analysis of the “meditative qualities of sound, composition, and pace” in 2001 (p. 98), focusing first on how Kubrick uses an extended black screen to isolate the sense of hearing in the viewer, resulting in “contemplative perception” (p. 101).

A few ambiguities pervade *Spiritual Sensations*, but they are generative ambiguities that accompany complicated and textured topics like film and religion. The first concerns method and subject. Is Balstrup’s mode of reading film dependent on the content of the film itself? Asked differently, could

a transcendental interpretation work on just any film, or must the director have transcendental intentions, and if so, to what degree? Second, are narrative and sensation opposed? Balstrup tends to pit one against the other, at least casually. For example, Balstrup writes that the type of film viewing in *Spiritual Sensations* “is distinct from classical modes of viewing that are plot driven and rely on the development of empathy with the characters on screen” (p. 33). It makes sense that Balstrup would focus on the distinctive qualities of the transcendental style, but it also seems that viewers often experience (and directors often construct) Schrader’s “stasis” in predominantly narrative films. A film like *THE THIN RED LINE* (Terence Malick, US 1998) comes to mind as a possible example of a primarily narrative film that exhibits the transcendental style. Balstrup’s method is likely also applicable to a wide variety of films outside arthouse cinema.

Overall, *Spiritual Sensations* is important reading for any scholar of religion, film, or religion and film. It contains thoughtful readings of films (as well as qualitative analysis of audience reactions) in a fresh theoretical paradigm. I hope that the future of the study of film and religion contains more of this kind of engagement with cinema, where visceral and affective experiences do not need to be mapped symbolically onto narrative mythologies in order to make religious sense. The religious sphere is not confined to symbol and narrative. It occurs also in the body and in consciousness; in excess, in ecstasy, and in equanimity. Neither is the cinematic sphere exhausted by narrative and plot. The cinema, too, affects the body and consciousness of the viewer, harboring excesses, ecstasies, and equanimities of its own. The cinema holds the potential to be a spiritually significant experience *in itself*, and *Spiritual Sensations* helps us make sense of that fact.

Filmography

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1968).
ENTER THE VOID (Gaspar Noé, FR/DE/IT/CA/JP 2009).
MELANCHOLIA (Lars von Trier, DK/SE/FR/DE 2011).
THE THIN RED LINE (Terence Malick, US 1998).