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Review of Daniel S. Cutrara, *Wicked Cinema: Sex and Religion on Screen*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2014, xi + 272 pp., ISBN 978-1-4773-0753-3

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This is an inspiring book which manages to steer a difficult, but ultimately successful, path between the academic and the confessional. Cutrara was formally a Jesuit priest and this monograph bears witness to his own journey away from “the claim to truth” to a perspective where, through teaching in the field of religion and film, the “rigor of analysis” (p. ix) is able to take centre stage. *Wicked Cinema* is partly autobiographical, as Cutrara documents how he has been able to come to terms with his own sexuality while being a member of an institution whose “privileged access to eternal truths” (p. ix) has engendered many a crisis of faith over the years – he writes of his own dilemma of “how to be faithful to my vocation and my relationship with God and, at the same time, deal with my sexual desires” in which, while a Jesuit, he “had begun falling in love with both sexes” (p. 117) – but it is a better scholarly study for it. The concept of transgression lies at the heart of this book, as Cutrara documents “the violation of moral codes and social norms in believers’ sexual behaviors and gender performances” (p. 2) and in so doing he sees this as raising wider questions as to how “societies construct their norms” (p. 2) and what it is that ostensibly constitutes normal or natural behaviour – and thereby that which our society deems to be sacred.

Cutrara’s premise is that film both reflects and informs these standards and he then uses this as an entry point for what turns out to be an engaging study into “cinema’s problematic relationship to religion” (p. 2) where the tendency is to depict “believers as fanatics or mindless drones” (p. 76) who “not only [differ] from the norm, but also [pose] a serious threat to our way of life” (p. 4) – all at the expense of “the positive, life-changing aspects of religious experience” (p. 77–78). This gets to the heart of the book where Cutrara’s skill is in marrying religious and gender discourse. According to the author, “Sexuality is a primal drive that propels people’s lives. Religion is an overarching framework that provides meaning to those lives. The problematic way in which these two interrelate reveals much of what is at stake in the culture wars” (p. 5) between competing, and largely unbridgeable, ideologies and truth claims, from the fundamentalist to the relativist.

The specific examples he uses to illustrate his arguments are very studiously handled, as when in a different slant to *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), a much discussed Woody Allen film within theology and film circles, Cutrara delineates that the more 'moral' Jewish men in this drama are portrayed as being less masculine and as possessing more feminine traits than the film's nonbelievers, to the point that "This feminization of the believers in the film makes them the Other through an association with a particular homosexual stereotype that evokes the pansy" (p. 44). The ramifications of this are serious as, according to Cutrara, "The tragic storyline and the feminized representation of people of faith undermine the authenticity of religious belief" (p. 52). Similar dynamics are at work in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996), set in a small, inflexible religious community off the coast of Scotland, where "the depiction of abject sexuality" (p. 98) equates faith with perversion, even to the point that in submitting to sexual abuse, rape and degradation Bess (Emily Watson) believes that she is demonstrating fidelity and commitment to this "patriarchal God" (p. 96). In *Agnes of God* (1985), too, the protagonist "has been nailed to the cross of patriarchy" (134) as a naïve young nun, who may have been raped, kills the child that she thinks God has impregnated her with and she loses her sanity but clings steadfastly to belief in the God who has made her do something profane.

Not all of the films discussed, however, are completely devoid of hope. Cutrara's case study of *Priest* (1994), which delineates a young Roman Catholic priest in a Liverpool parish indulging in a gay relationship, demonstrates that "homosexual attraction is part of the normal range of human sexual expression", though even here Cutrara attests that "the narrative's conflicted treatment of homosexuality may very well leave the audience questioning whether or not it has been normalized" (p. 142) in view of the film's juxtaposition of a 'normal' homosexual relationship with an abusive and incestuous father-daughter relationship. According to Cutrara, "This juxtaposition between homosexuality and incest creates a rhetorical dynamic where two transgressive acts can be compared" (p. 144).

A real achievement of *Wicked Cinema* is the way in which the author has managed to show how, with films like *Priest*, there have been more positive depictions of gays and lesbians in society just as "there has been a corresponding increase in the negative depiction of religion" (p. 217). This is a paradox which underscores the book, as Cutrara feels that religion is increasingly represented in cinema as extreme, dogmatic and fanatical in a way that does not equate with most believers' perceptions of the good that religion can achieve. When the religious believer is presented as the Other, then "the positive elements of religious faith are lost" (p. 219). By the same token, Cutrara makes the persuasive case for the need to eradicate boundaries between the spirit and the flesh and to show that sexual transgression need not always be portrayed or experienced in a negative manner. Cutrara's call for the demolition of binaries both in terms of religion and sexuality is a sensible one and one which is necessarily required in order that we can "envision the universal humanity that unites us all" (p. 220). The alternative "is to remain in bondage to our fear" (p. 220), and Cutrara's excellent monograph makes a compelling case for reframing the way in which we understand, and have the means to change, the complex challenges that lie at the heart of contemporary debates in religion, gender and film.