

Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), x + 315 pp., \$24.95 (cloth).

The analysis of media portrayals has been a rich and complex area of study for scholars of Paganism for years, but until now very few monographs on the topic have been published. Those that do exist tend to encompass a range of media, such as Karen Beeler's *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen: An Analysis of Women Visionary Characters in Recent Television and Film* (McFarland, 2008), rather than focus on one form, as with Tanya Krzywinska's intriguing study of classic and cult cinema *A Skin for Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (Praeger Pub, 2005). Others explore representations of a wider range of topics across the continuum of popular culture, including Emily Edwards' excellent *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), or Christopher Partridge's thoughtful and wide-ranging *The Re-enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (T. and T. Clark, 2005).

Still other studies of the occult and media have been less scholarly, such as the idiosyncratic (and often subjective) *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to the Devil in Cinema* by Nikolas Shreck (Creation Books, 2001) or Leslie Ellen Jones' *From Witch to Wicca* (Cold Spring Press, 2004), which contains several chapters on media portrayals. Clearly this field is still a fertile ground for additional academic study, and journals and anthologies across many subject areas continue to include articles on media as it relates to earth-based spiritual traditions, beliefs and practices, communities of practitioners, and related cultural trends.

Given the often-impassioned reactions from both scholar-practitioners and the general Pagan community to popular media portrayals of witches and witchcraft (particularly when such portrayals are seen as insensitive or inaccurate), it is surprising that more Pagan academics have not taken on the task of closely examining the relationship between spirituality and its representation in visual storytelling. Although as many of us have seen, the personal belief systems of scholar-practitioners have occasionally affected the objectivity and scope of their research, and for a field as prone to subjective critical response as the study of media, the problem may be compounded. If more of us practitioner-scholars were perfectly honest, we would admit that more often than not our analyses are more interested in the lack of religious content in narrative media, than in unpacking the complex ways in which religion permeates and informs dramatic fiction.

Douglas E. Cowan's new book *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the*

Silver Screen addresses a much wider range of topics than the portrayal of Paganism or the occult in film. However, since the intersection of religion and horror frequently has to do with antagonism toward, or corruption of, religion in a way that generates fear and anxiety (what Cowan calls “the metataxis of horror, the inversion or reversal of accepted cultural categories”), the author frequently achieves a very in-depth analysis of cinema’s portrayal of Paganism and/or the occult as it appears in a myriad films, even those that take a very general approach to religion and religious iconography. But by grounding his discussion in the horror genre’s clear preoccupation with dominant religious beliefs and conventions, Cowan allows the film texts themselves to suggest the most salient points of interpretation and analysis, rather than imposing them based on a scholarly agenda.

Cowan quickly addresses the notion that horror as a genre is ignored by academics and denigrated by critics, rightly pointing out that the genre’s overwhelming popularity and influence, as well as its often artful manifestations and increasing relevance in the film industry, make it more than worthy of intellectual scrutiny. Approaching the discussion of horror and religion from a variety of defined vantage points, Cowan creates a useful and appropriate rubric for the analysis of horror cinema and its cultural contexts, perhaps most significantly in terms of exploring the origins of the categories of terror experienced by film audiences, or, in his words, “the sociophobics on which sacred terror depends.”

At one point Cowan argues that it is ambivalence towards religion in general, not an increasing trend towards secularization, which is responsible for evoking and embedding fears in the viewer where horror and religion are concerned. In other words, it is because we are religious, whether latently or explicitly, that the intersection of religion with any number of horror tropes makes us anxious. This may in turn suggest that the increasing popularity of horror films is due not to viewers becoming inured to them, but to their experiencing increased fascination with horror film texts as a way to process their subconscious anxieties about religion in a changing world.

Cowan skillfully and thoroughly explores a number of different sources of cultural anxiety as they relate to religious matters in horror cinema, exploring these in chapters with titles like “Angels to Some, Demons to Others: Fear of Change in the Sacred Order,” “No Sanctuary: Ambivalence and the Fear of Sacred Places,” and “Mainstreaming Satan: Fear of Supernatural Evil Internalized and Externalized.” Each chapter also begins with a short section called “Outtakes” which offers close readings of particular aspects of one or more films to introduce the chapter’s main ideas. For example, the chapter on the fear of sacred places

begins with “outtakes” from *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*; the chapter on the fear of supernatural evil begins with *The Exorcist*.

The focus on religion and horror means there is a great deal of analysis devoted to films such as *The Exorcist*, *The Wicker Man*, and *The Omen*, though not as much emphasis on other films of interest to the Paganism scholar such as *The Craft*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Ninth Gate*, or *The Believers*. And Cowan does not play into any preconceived notion of high or low-brow cinema (though he does acknowledge the tendency to categorize films based on their critical status); ergo, *The Dunwich Horror* proves as worthy of discussion as *Rosemary’s Baby*. But any apparent omissions or lacks of emphasis, in addition to being related to matters of taste, are relatively minor weighed against the overall value and comprehensiveness of this text. As a media scholar and analyst of impressive talents, Cowan has given his fellow scholars and intelligent lay readers an accessible, engaging, and provocative study of two of modern Western society’s most pervasive cultural obsessions, both of them conceptually linked to the ways in which we mediate our relationships to life, death, and the mysteries of human existence.

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