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The Cell

John Pater
paterjc@edmspc.com

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UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

The Cell

Abstract

This is a review of *The Cell* (2000).

The Cell is a disturbing, intense, at times gory, bizarre and scary movie. It stars another of America's sensationally beautiful women. Its director has made some award winning commercials and music videos. And, it contains some deep theological themes. It is about a chosen saviour, about the defeat of evil and the cleansing of guilt, about dying in order to live. Believe it or not, this is where popular culture, superficial in so many ways, turns out a serious religious product.

We have to say first of all that this is not casual, light, entertaining summer fare. It is a psychological thriller in which a child social worker uses some newly developed technology to travel through the minds of first a child patient and then a psychopathic multiple murderer. It is within the psyches of these others that much of the movie is played out.

And that is an intense experience. What is most striking is the incredible imagery that exists in that psychic world. The director of this film, Tarsem Singh, is new to feature film, but he has gained a reputation for directing some vivid, image-filled music videos like that of R.E.M.'s *Losing My Religion*. Singh paints huge scenes, drawing on epic and mythic images from our western culture. It is the stuff of our dream worlds; no words, but lots of disjointed images and symbols, movement and colour, with the scenes often seeming unconnected. The film draws us into these highly imaginative worlds, overwhelming us by the depth and layers of meaning that these scenes represent.

The central character in the story is Catherine Deane (Jennifer Lopez), a social worker who is the star of a new technology which allows the linking of people's brains and psyches. Catherine "has a gift" to truly enter into and encounter the patients at their deepest levels. This is evident in the kinds of encounters we witness when she is inside, first a child, then a psychopathic killer. "She's had quite a journey," a technician explains, "she's gone a long way into his world." Catherine herself is dedicated to using this gift. "I was chosen to do a job," she says.

Catherine's task is to free her patients from psychological bindings which prevent them from being fully functional, healthy human beings. By entering their psyches she has to find a way to unlock their troubled, tortured, disturbed souls. Catherine is a saviour. She alone has the gift and the calling to save them from themselves. Especially in her travels into the killer's psyche, she is called upon to purge him of the sickness, violence, wrong-doing and cruelty that has enslaved him. She is a redeemer who frees people of the guilt that lives within. In the end, the only way she can enact her redemption is to allow her own psyche to be invaded by those she attempts to cure. The film shows this by having her turn a switch which reverses the direction of the psychic flow. Now the killer's psyche is inside hers. This is an act of self-sacrifice. To use language familiar in Christianity, she takes on humanity in order to save humanity. It is a form of incarnation where she risks losing herself in order to save others. The technique works and she is able to kill

the monster (devil) that lives within the killer, in a sense saving him from the evil he had become.

This is recognizable as a part of the Christian story, but it is also a contemporary revisualizing of an even older mythology. Ancient Mesopotamian mythology told stories of the Goddess descending to the underworld in order to defeat the evil one and rescue those enslaved there. The spectacular, sensual incarnations that Catherine undergoes inside her patients' psyches matches this Goddess imagery. The temple-like scenes and the monsters encountered there also fit this ancient mythology.

So it is a religious story that is told here. Is it one we believe in? What is the place of saviours in our mythology? Where is evil? What does evil look like? How can evil be overcome? This movie has its answers to these questions. Are they our answers?

This movie is also a lesson in the underestimation of Hollywood. Here we have a movie which is highly marketed, using a million dollar star, and a sensational story-line and yet it turns out a product which allows quite serious religious reflection. Somehow, in spite of the low Hollywood stereotype, movie stars and directors can do impressive theology.