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Sister Aimee

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Sister Aimee

Abstract

This is a film review of *Sister Aimee* (2019), directed by Samantha Buck and Marie Schlingmann.

Keywords

Pentecostalism, Aimee Semple McPherson

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Sister Aimee (2019), dir. Samantha Buck and Marie Schlingmann

Aimee Semple McPherson is a fascinating and complicated figure in the history of American religion. A conservative Christian evangelist and healer, she founded the Foursquare Gospel Church, created the form of much of modern Pentecostalism, and became the first celebrity media religious figure. She was among the first to utilize radio, movies, and theatrical stage performances to spread her message. She held interracial services, embraced FDR's social programs, rejected evolution science and communism, and gave support to Mexican immigrants. She was accused of various things, including extramarital affairs. She also disappeared for a month in 1926, resurfacing with a story of having been kidnapped, although it was alleged that she had run off to Mexico with a married man, Kenneth Ormiston. In the end, McPherson is a cipher who can be interpreted in any number of ways, a forerunner of the religious media figures that have become staples of our society.

Sister Aimee is a hilarious riff on her life that spins a story of her 1926 disappearance and speculates from there on what really happened in those weeks. It makes no pretensions for historicity, claiming at the outset to be “5 ½ percent true.” It begins with her escape with Ormiston, a naïve radio engineer for her show who is depicted as a wannabe Ernest Hemingway longing to go to Mexico to write stories about the revolution. But this film quickly pivots to become a tale of McPherson’s friendship with the fictional Rey, their Mexican female guide who proves to be a gunrunner and freedom fighter against the anti-Catholic communist government in Mexico. The film’s tone never varies from parody, which allows it to transcend genre in ways that evoke everything from *It Happened One Night* to *Thelma and Louise*. It’s a tale of women who want to control their own stories, and this is accomplished through means as diverse as throat-slitting and tap dancing.

The film suggests that McPherson’s disappearance was the result of a moment of doubt about her calling, or perhaps just being tired of it. But it never suggests that she was a complete hypocrite or that she did not believe in her ministry, and this dual identity as an imperfect figure who nonetheless returns to her religious vocation seems about as accurate as any construction of her life. It sketches her as a chameleon who was always reinventing herself with tremendous theatricality, expressed in the film climax by a surreal and ebullient performance of a musical number in a Mexican jail. In order to prove to them that she is an “entertainer” rather than a propagator of religion—which would make her guilty of a capital crime—she tap dances, sings, and heals her way into her jailors’ hearts. This is not presented realistically, and yet knowing something of McPherson’s life and work, it does not seem too far-fetched! The film is worth seeing for this scene alone.

There is nothing reverent about this film, and in proclaiming its fictional nature so strongly it liberates itself from the need to observe norms of historical faithfulness to any church or tradition. But in some ways its non-historical nature allows it to tell a truer story about McPherson and religion than many a pious construction, creating a portrait of a strong-willed woman who chose not to follow the rules about what women are supposed to do. I could not help but enjoy this film from the moment it started, and its wild ride is an unapologetic celebration of all the media figures we have come to love as much for their faults as their hutzpah—which continues to work its healing magic on us.