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Nothing Compares

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Nothing Compares

Abstract

This is a film review of *Nothing Compares* (2022), directed by Kathryn Ferguson.

Keywords

Sinead O'Connor, Child Abuse, Roman Catholic Church, Popular Music

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. 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 also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Nothing Compares (2022), dir. Kathryn Ferguson

This documentary on the tumultuous early years of pop singer Sinead O'Connor's career details the personal source of her controversial acts, and gives context that the young may not know and the old may not remember. But most of all, it makes one cringe at the general reaction to her protests in the 1990s, as she was so far ahead of her time that almost no one understood what she had experienced or why she reacted as she did.

O'Connor had an abusive childhood created by a mother who engaged in verbal, emotional, and physical abuse of her, expressed most of all in O'Connor's song "Troy" about the nights when her mother locked her out of the house at the age of eight and forced her to sleep outside even while the child begged to be let in. Few people may have known that the song tells that story, as O'Connor did not share details of her abusive childhood until years later. At that time, she could

only express her anger musically. Today, she is also able to recognize her mother as a victim, as she believes that the religious, social, and economic oppression in her native Ireland created generations of women as its victims. The Roman Catholic Church had tremendous control over Ireland at that time, making divorce, abortion, and contraception illegal, and causing people to believe they would be damned for dancing after midnight or eating meat on Friday. O'Connor was sent to a Catholic "care home" at age 14 which was associated with one of the Magdalen laundries, later notoriously exposed as places of abuse for young women who were basically imprisoned there for becoming pregnant after being raped by a priest or other "upstanding" man. The women were blamed for their own victimization and punished accordingly, in line with a perverse justice that O'Connor would later rage against.

Once her musical talent was recognized, O'Connor moved to London and began her life as a musician, discovering the protest music of Reggae and Rap. She shaved her head at this time to create her iconic image, and rejected patriarchal control of her life when a record company demanded she have an abortion. She encountered the Gay sub-culture of London, and starred in *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1990), about a pregnant 15-year-old in Ireland. Her first album, "The Lion and the Cobra," made her a hit in 1987, and her single "Nothing Compares 2 U" hit number one in 1990. But in that same year, she refused to perform in a concert in the United States if they played the National Anthem, as part of her protest against the buildup to the first Gulf War, which caused radio stations to boycott her and led Frank Sinatra to threaten to "kick her ass." She refused Grammy Award nominations due to their refusal to recognize Black Hip-Hop artists like Public Enemy. But her most public moment of protest occurred in 1992 on *Saturday Night Live*, when she sang Bob Marley's "War" a cappella, and then tore up a picture of Pope John Paul II on live television.

O'Connor decided to make this protest as she had learned of the Roman Catholic Church's cover-ups of sexual abuse, which years later gained increasing credibility and publicity. At that time, however, she became an object of hate and ridicule. When actor Joe Pesci hosted *Saturday Night Live* the following week, he was cheered for threatening to hit her. She received death threats, and comics and late-night talk show hosts lampooned her, suggesting her criticism was not serious. Later that month, she appeared at a Bob Dylan tribute concert and was roundly booed. Shaken by this, she decided not to sing "I Believe in You" but instead to repeat her a cappella performance of "War" from *Saturday Night Live*. Kris Kristofferson had introduced her as a courageous singer, and hugged her afterwards, but this sort of support for her was rare at the time.

O'Connor's protests did not come from a rejection of religion, but rather a love for a Church that she felt had lost its way. When she was considering whether to walk offstage at the Dylan concert, she believed that God was asking her if she would stand by Him—meaning, continue her courageous critique of the Church. To stand by God is *not* to stand by the Church, in many cases, and O'Connor understood this better than most.

While the media dropped her for many years, she kept recording and insisting that she deserved to be heard. As a battered child herself, she felt the need to speak out. Now that the Church has admitted many of its cover-ups and errors, she has been proven a prophetic forerunner, underappreciated in her time. As O'Connor puts it, "They tried to bury me. They didn't realize I was a seed." We need more such seeds to yield fruits that speak truth to power, even when this leads to threats and rejection—for only then, when you make people uncomfortable, do you know you're having an impact. O'Connor remained true to herself in her ability to do just that.