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## Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God

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## Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God

### Abstract

This is a book review of Shayne Lee, *Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

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### Author Notes

Terry Lindvall (PhD, University of Southern California) occupies the C. S. Lewis Chair of Communication and Christian Thought at Virginia Wesleyan University. He is the author of 15 books including *God Mocks* (NYU Press) and *God on the Big Screen* (NYU Press), out of which he produced the feature documentary film, *Hollywood, Teach Us to Pray*.

**Lee, Shayne, *Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2022).**

In his *Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2022), Shayne Lee articulates the question of evil and suffering when many cry out for salvation or try to make sense of calamity. If, as C. S. Lewis addressed in his *Problem of Pain*, God is all-powerful and all loving, why do His people suffer? How can we understand the problem of theodicy? Shayne Lee probes the depths of the problem of pain and the stigma of suffering that accosts everyone.

Lee undertakes the task of representing the challenge of theodicy through cinematic Black suffering and conversations about God. Lee contends that contemporary films serve as a site within the constraints of secular society for theological claims about Black suffering to take place, as seen through films as diverse as Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), Tyler Perry's *Meet the Browns* (2008), and Ousmane Sembène's *Ceddo* (1977). In his keenly observant and strategically nuanced study, Lee discerns a synergy between modern cinema and this pressing, haunting, and intractable question of evil. How can one reasonably deal with the conundrum of a beneficent God, one's fallible faith, and the ubiquitous tragedies that befall certain groups: histories of slavery, persecution, and genocide? The book fortunately eschews modern theoretical language, speaking in poetic and prophetic modes. As such, while it does focus on global Black suffering, it transcends race, digging down into common humanity, its vices, and its eternal conundrum of theodicy.

Lee's unflinching look into the question of "Why does God let bad things happen to good people" begins with the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, who championed the idea that this is the best of all possible worlds. Within the same century, the cynical satirist Voltaire skewered the naïve optimism of Leibniz and argued for religion's weaponizing of evil that also subverted the idea of Divine intervention. At best, God was sidelined, apathetic or impotent to

involve Himself in excruciating human affairs. (Or does one reverse the original query with “Why do good things happen to bad people?”)

The book’s structure plots out the social and religious contexts in which Lee sees these films being created and consumed. Chapter 1 outlines the position of film in modernity betwixt the desire for theological reflection around suffering and the cold rationality of secularity. Chapter 2 lays out spiritual resources from liberation, womanist, and Black theologies and their relationship to cinema. The next section of chapters explores groupings of case studies around particular thematic threads. Chapter 3 examines films that depict Black enslavement and oppression, primarily in the context of the Atlantic slave trade. Chapter 4 tackles the oeuvre of Ousmane Sembène, the father of African cinema, and the role of religion in his films. Chapter 5 focuses on theodical themes in films about contemporary African American life and suffering. Lee’s Epilogue considers the depiction of violence, suffering, and religion as they come together in depictions of modern Rwanda, South Africa, and Nigeria.

More than Swedish director Ingmar Bergman’s existential despair (and probable guilt over his country’s own acedia in dealing with Nazi crimes), the Senegalese film auteur Sembène stirred and troubled the waters of Africa’s oppressive cruelty in his films. He records the unmitigated suffering and economic despair of his people, with no apparent indication of beneficent divine mediation. Prayers and worship seem to offer no respite from slavery, rape, female genital excision, or slaughter in films coming out of Africa. Lee’s tragic exhibition of the new cinematic holocaust of the Rwandan Genocide and the apartheid system of Johannesburg and South Africa finds no hope in God. Human agency and action, rooted in liberation theology, seem more effective with a sequestered God, as when the Reverend Kumalo in Darrell Roodt’s *Cry the Beloved Country*

(1995) seeks to integrate his faith with the pervasive suffering and racial equality and can only cry out that “Sometimes it is hard even for me to keep faith!”

Human agency is necessary in these films to relieve or mitigate human suffering. Lee triangulates Roodt’s theme of theodicy and Divine inefficacy, summarizing the crisis as:

God as powerless to balance the scales of justice; God as unable to alleviate black poverty and pain in Johannesburg; and God as incapable of offering resolution and peace to the faithful cleric Stephen Kumalo (184).

Documentary and feature films out of Nollywood and other parts of Africa teach that social activism trumps supplication for resolving cruel, corrupt, and calamitous human affairs. His shocking descriptions of the Hutu people attacking their Tutsi neighbors with machetes or of how “Christian schools and churches, places where vulnerable Tutsis sought refuge and divine protection, were converted into slaughterhouses” (203) caused this reader to stop in devastating awareness of the traumatic impact of man’s inhumanity to man.

Lee’s book chronicles how cinema effectively paints disturbing portraits of individual, corporate, and national acts of evil. Much like Alex Haley’s *Roots* and Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*, Lee’s work weaves the suffering, grief, and experiences of evil onto a global Black canvas. A question arises: can the rest of us share these particularized memories and traumas, to crawl toward shared human struggles and sympathy?

One cannot leave *Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy* without being shocked awake. Its messages and its overwhelming cinematic evidence plague one’s moral imagination and religious conscience. Reason and rational proofs cannot answer these questions. It will take a Word from God to bring understanding, not only of what it seems He is not doing, but why are we doing what we are doing.