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The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination

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Abstract

This is a book review of Douglas E. Cowan, *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

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Cowan, Douglas E. *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

For all the supposed renaissances that horror has had over the years, it remains a largely underdeveloped area of data for scholars of religion. Anyone who has even briefly considered teaching a class on horror and religion has undoubtedly run across this problem. Whether the lack of scholarship is a matter of indifference or perceived insignificance is a topic for a different space. Yet, for some time now, Douglas E. Cowan has sought to change this, asking us to consider that analyses of horror, and popular culture more generally, are worthwhile endeavors. In his recent book, *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination*, Cowan's motivations are the same, covering themes familiar to him (and to those who have read him). Presented more in a style associated with Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, Cowan's chapters read like essays, all of which strive to answer a single question: "[W]hy are sex and horror so often intimately bound together on religion's altar?" (7).

While Cowan attempts to make sense of the entanglement of sex, horror, and religion in different ways throughout the book, he asserts that, at bottom, it is the "body out of place" that sheds the most light on this intersection. But what does it mean for a body to be "out of place"? In the terms of horror, an "out of place" body is manifested in any numbers of ways, such as through transformation (as a ghost or a zombie), violation (from a sexual assault), or abnormality. Transformed,

violated, abnormal bodies all signal a convergence of something Cowan terms "the sexual body's (un)holy trinity" — sexuality, gender, and sex (41). To bring this to life, Cowan turns to William Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist*, where the demon-possessed body of Regan MacNeil presents "the quintessential body out of place," particularly in the scene where she thrusts the crucifix into her vagina (29). The taboo of a sexual act with a religious item, an act that is committed by a child on her own body, makes the scene a controversial one, but its inclusion as an example is for more than simply the spectacle of her out-of-place body. Sketching out a point that he returns to in a later chapter, what *The Exorcist* depicts clearly is the religious imagination. The difference between religion and the religious imagination is certainly a tenuous one at best; Cowan distinguishes them by considering religion as more of a "social process and a cultural phenomenon" (48). In terms of the religious imagination, though, he looks to William James's proposition that religion, "'in the broadest and most general terms possible,'" concerns "the belief in an unseen order," as well as the idea "'that our supreme good lies in harmonious adjustment thereto'" (48). The religious imagination, then, is not bound by how our communities define religion, only by the limits of what our minds can dream up.

Each chapter focuses on data from various media (films, short stories, graphic novellas, television shows, and other such works). For Cowan, films (A through Z-grade, importantly) make up only one facet of popular culture that shapes and is shaped by our religious imaginings. For the most part, Cowan does not linger

too long on any one film, choosing instead to demonstrate that the horror mode, as David Hartwell argues, cannot be contained to one genre or one form of media; indeed, it is pervasive. It is the recognition of that pervasiveness that grounds the chapters, as Cowan makes use of myriad examples to demonstrate not only how prevalent "bodies out of place" are, but also how intertwined our religious imaginations are with the horror mode.

Cowan pays the most attention to filmic depictions of "bodies out of place" in Chapters 2 and 5. In "Crab Monsters and Giant Leeches: Exploitation and the Socially Approved Body," he considers popular exploitation films like Roger Corman's *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) and Bernard L. Kowalski's *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (1959) in order to drive home why it is important for us (as viewers and as scholars) to "learn to look at 'bad films'" (57). Borrowing an idea from the Greek film critic Ado Kyrou, Cowan encourages us to push aside any feeling that so-called lowbrow films are unworthy of scholarly analysis, particularly because so often those very films function as indicators (and even arbiters) of conventional morality. No discussion about American film and morality would be complete without mentioning the Hays Code, and Cowan's acknowledgment of its impact is most notable in his discussion of the 1931 English and Spanish versions of *Dracula*. Following in the steps of Jonathan Z. Smith's work on comparison, Cowan's analysis of scenes from the two versions (which were shot on the same set) provides a useful reminder that the significance of

comparison is not in the similarity between data but, rather, in their difference. Later, when Cowan turns to Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015) and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) in "Skyclad: Sexualizing the Dangerous Other," he provides an equally sharp comparative analysis of depictions of witchcraft and modern-day Pagans. Though each film makes use of "bodies out of place" in their sexualization of the religious Other, he convincingly argues for exploring the multivalence of the religious imagination of *The Wicker Man*. In pushing back against the way most others read the story (that Summerisle's Pagan community represents danger and abnormality in contrast to the normative Christianity of Sergeant Neil Howie), Cowan fosters a move away from more conventional classifications between "religion" and "magic" toward more expansive interpretations of the religious imagination.

Cowan relies on various religious studies approaches throughout the book, including ideas found in the work of Rudolf Otto and Peter Berger, among others. Yet J. Z. Smith plays an outsized role, which should come as no surprise, given the book's subtitle and one of its key terms: religious imagination. Essays from Smith's *Imagining Religion* make a frequent appearance. Cowan even finds Smith especially helpful when discussing the reason he has chosen to focus on specific media. Quoting Smith, Cowan argues that his selection of material (short stories, films, novellas, etc.) is of value "'only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion'" (90). But what I find to be

of more significance is what Smith says further down the page: we as scholars "must be able to articulate clearly why 'this' rather than 'that' is chosen as an exemplum."[1] That is, it is our job as scholars to be "relentlessly self-conscious" in our choice of data.[2]

Given Smith's proposition, then, let me turn to the book's inclusion of descriptions of brutal sexual assaults as found in various horror media. Given the book's topics, one can certainly understand why these descriptions are included. Yet the amount of space given to the descriptions of scenes leaves them feeling undertheorized, with little explanation of their detailed purpose within the particular chapter's analytical framework. Such descriptions would better serve the reader if it were made more explicit just how *this* or *that* extended scene provides an example of Cowan's argument that "the horror mode renders bodies out of place" (31). To be clear, I do not advocate for shying away from analyzing sexual violence in our scholarship; in fact, in more recent years, scholars of religion have written much about religion and sexual violence. For example, Rhiannon Graybill, Meredith Minister, and Beatrice Lawrence's edited volume *Rape Culture and Religious Studies: Critical and Pedagogical Engagements*, published in 2019, encourages engagement with such material, both in scholarship and in the classroom. Moreover, Graybill has provided new theoretical models for discussions of sexual violence in *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, and the Hebrew Bible*. As Cowan rightly notes throughout the book, sexual violence is often part

of the religious imagination. To engage with those particular imaginings, though, requires a more thoughtful approach, which could be provided by being in conversation with recent scholarship concerning these very issues.

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[1] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), xi.
[2] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

References

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