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Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film

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Abstract

This is a book review of Sabine, Maureen. *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film*. New York: Fordham UP, 2013.

Keywords

Nuns, Roman Catholicism

Author Notes

Matthew Aughtry is a filmmaker and pastor who has studied at The University of South Carolina (BA--Film Studies/Media Arts) and Fuller Theological Seminary (MDIV--Theology and Art). He also holds a Certificate in Screenwriting from UCLA. He is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church of North America and resides with his wife and son in Texas.

Sabine, Maureen. *Veiled Desires: Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film*. New York: Fordham UP, 2013.

The thrust of Prof. Maureen Sabine's book *Veiled Desires* is perfectly encapsulated by its title. In this book she explores the portrayal of women religious in film and how their desires (or lack thereof) are shown through their actions, words, and the language of cinema. Many a screenwriting guru has proclaimed *ad nauseum* that a story is ultimately about a character who wants something and overcomes a myriad of obstacles to obtain the object of desire. While this definition can be helpful for standard movie fare, it gives the viewer pause when a film or story presents a protagonist with competing desires or perhaps desires that remain obscured. Sabine's book focuses on the screen stories of women who, because of their religious vocations, must come to grips with deep desires that remain veiled to many in the outside world and, often, even to themselves.

Dr. Sabine's work here is not focused on any and every portrayal of women religious throughout the history of cinema but, rather, on films from a certain time and place. Namely, she focuses on films from the West (primarily mainstream American/Hollywood productions) produced after the end of the Second World War. The source of these films is of interest because women in such films are most often portrayed as objects of desire rather than the subjects of a narrative. Moreover, sexual desire and/or a desire for family are the two most common aspects ascribed to these characters. What makes Sabine's choice of films so intriguing is the fact that the actresses in these movies have often been constricted to playing such characters but are now cast into a role that is in direct conflict with the traditional portrayal of sexual/familial desires. In some films the conflict results in a capitulation to more conventional desires, while in others the characters subvert the assumptions about what women want. Of course, such subversion does not only occur within convents or beneath habits.

Although Sabine's timeline begins after the Second World War, there is another set of dates that dominates much of the book and provides a significant context for the films themselves—namely the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church's sweeping colloquium which took place from 1962-1965. The council had radical implications on the life of nuns and their portrayal in media, stories, and, of course, films. Moreover, conversations regarding women's roles in society at large were also taking place and much of western culture was undergoing a shift in perspective regarding what a woman could do and where she could do it. As Sabine makes clear, films that focused on the life of women religious could not ignore the changing attitudes and perceptions around women in general.

Overall, Sabine does an impressive job handling the many layers present when discussing women in film, 20th Century history, and religious doctrine. She deftly weaves all of these different aspects into her interest with the portrayal of desire within these films. In doing so she engages with Audre Lorde's ideas presented in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and Anders Nygren's work *Agape and Eros*. In Lorde and Nygren the author finds conversation partners whose ideas often clash but which are fruitful for the discussion of these films featuring women religious. In particular, the concepts of agape and eros dominate Sabine's book. Throughout the book these two different forms of love (or desire) are placed into dialogue with the portraits of nuns in post-WWII film. Some characters seem to repress eros and choose agape, others seem to vacillate between the two, and Sabine argues that a few may not see them as quite dichotomous. Regardless, the desires represented by these two forces give the book a consistent through line.

Sabine breaks up her book by chapters that focus on the types of desire presented through these films. In each chapter an aspect of desire is given as the title and focus of the section. After

the specific type of desire is described, Sabine then spends time discussing films that she believes explicitly embody this designated desire. The book moves from “Selfless Desire,” which focuses on the self-giving nature of three protagonists portrayed by Ingrid Bergman, on to “Sexual Desire,” which focuses on the expression and repression of such desires in *Black Narcissus* as well as two nun films that directly deal with the relationship between men and nuns in the Second World War (*Sea Wife* and *Heaven Knows Mr. Allison*). The third chapter (“Subjective Desires”) focuses entirely on the Audrey Hepburn vehicle, *The Nun’s Story* as it relates to the desire for family.

The chapter “Sonorous Desires” focuses on the presence of music in the life of these cinematic nuns, particularly the ones found in the most famous film covered in the book (*The Sound of Music*) and also one of the most obscure (*Change of Habit*). The chapter “Sacred Desires” focuses on *In this House of Brede* (a British mini-series about life in a convent) and the mystery film *Agnes of God*. Dr. Sabine’s final chapter is one of the most engaging, titled “Spiritual Desires.” It focuses on the film *Dead Man Walking* and brings many of her earlier themes into full bloom. The book also contains a quasi-epilogue which basically serves as another chapter focused on the film version of *Doubt* which contrasts quite nicely with the first film in Sabine’s repertoire, *The Bells of St. Mary’s*.

The decision to divide each chapter based on a kind of desire is not ultimately a very helpful one in my view and, at times, it can be rather confusing. Certainly there are sexual desires present in *Change of Habit* among others and spiritual desires pervade most, if not all, of the films mentioned in the book. That is not to say that Sabine’s arguments for the inclusion of each film in a given chapter are not compelling. She makes a strong case for her choices in every chapter introduction. Rather, it seems somewhat difficult for even her to maintain these boundaries. After all, how does one discuss the cinematic nun’s desire for family without spilling more ink on *The*

Sound of Music? Sabine's delineations certainly do not seem arbitrary but the case for their necessity would be a difficult one to make.

With that in mind the book's arguments do seem to build quite well and, as I mentioned, her writing on *Dead Man Walking* seems like the natural evolution of her discussion of the complex desires which make up the life of the cinematic nun. Perhaps this is because Susan Sarandon's Sister Helen Prejean seems like the natural evolution of both the historical nun as well as the ideal modern-day cinematic portrayal of women religious. As Sabine illuminates throughout her book, the life of nuns in the United States underwent radical change in the twentieth century. Sister Prejean not only reflects this change, she underwent it. The film's opening shows a young Sister Prejean in a traditional nun's habit as she makes her vows in a church. By way of contrast, Susan Sarandon spends most of the film in "street clothes"—a personal decision that is a seemingly direct result of Vatican II and the changing attitude regarding monastic vocations.

Sarandon's portrayal is also an interesting one to put in conversation with these other films because, unlike some of her cinematic counterparts, Sister Prejean does not seem to have any dark shadows of repression or painful denial lurking within her. She is both confident and secure as she navigates and even faces down a world that is primarily run by men and remains undeterred when they challenge her. Unlike Bing Crosby's Father O'Malley, the priest at the penitentiary is unable to patronizingly order Prejean to do what is best for her (as much as he may wish it otherwise). As important as her relationship with Sean Penn's Matthew Poncelet is, one never gets the feeling that she needs a man to validate her identity. In fact, Sister Prejean's ultimate desire seems completely and totally focused outward, taking on the pain and desires of others.

Sabine's discussion of history and theology throughout make the final chapter, focused on this fascinating true story turned acclaimed film, a satisfying ending to the book. By the end of the

book the reader has enough of a grasp on the radical shifts in the life of nuns in recent history and on the theology of women (especially in the Roman Catholic Church) to see the significance of this particular cinematic nun and the myriad of iterations that preceded her. This is truly the book's greatest strength—serving as a witness to the changing tides of religious life for these women by focusing on their portrayal in the world of Anglo-American film. It is interesting that almost all of the films on which Sabine focuses take place in the twentieth century and a few of them are significantly removed from their historical context (*Doubt* being perhaps the largest leap in time and, also, the least fluid with the book's overarching structure).

Dr. Sabine's book would be an excellent companion to a class focused on the portrayal of women religious in film or even across various mediums and would also be quite useful as a resource if one were discussing any of the films that she covers in the book. The individual chapters on *Dead Man Walking* and *The Nun's Story* are particularly strong and the amount of focus given to *The Sound of Music* and *Black Narcissus* are also extensive enough to add a great deal to any discussion regarding these particular films.

Scholars interested in the portrayal of religious vocations or in the representation of monasticism on screen would certainly find this book indispensable. Additionally, this book would be useful for anyone in engaging in the portrayal of women on film since the films covered either exemplify or subvert the expectations of such portrayals—a few of the movies even do both. As the title suggests, this book primarily focuses on Anglo-American nuns and so scholars interested in the overlap of religious vocation with non-Western contexts or peoples of color will need to supplement with other resources (though both *Change of Habit* and *Black Narcissus* and Sabine's chapters dealing with them would be helpful dialogue partners).

Overall, Sabine has crafted an engaging work about an oft-ignored subgenre of films. Her knowledge of historical developments, theological language, and a thorough understanding of American film in the twentieth century make this book both captivating and exceptionally informative. Sabine follows through with her thesis and ultimately shows how the desires of agape and eros (and the many manifestations they take) need not be at odds in the cinematic nun's life (even if they often are). From *The Bells of St. Mary's* to *Dead Man Walking* and even *Doubt*, Sabine shows us that the desires of these women religious are not dualistic, nor are they reducible to a simple formula. The life of a nun is beset with complications and, as the Mother Abbess makes clear to young Maria in *The Sound of Music*, the convent walls do not protect its inhabitants from the troubles of the outside world. The desires and decisions that face cinematic nuns, it seems, are not so different from the ones that wrestle inside each of us. Perhaps engaging with these films, with Professor Sabine as our guide, will be helpful to any whose own desires seem overwhelming, at odds, or, even, veiled from view.