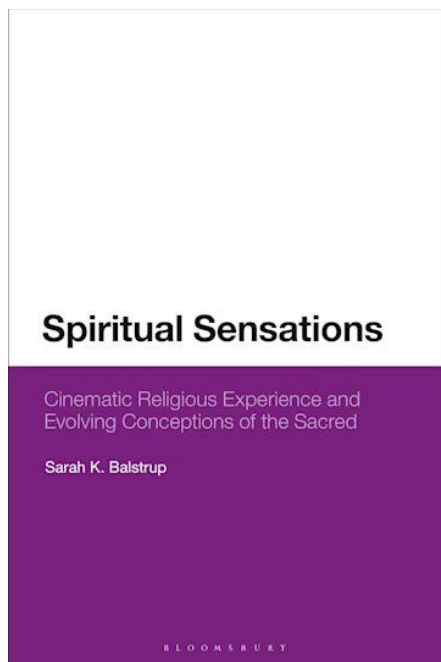




Book Review

Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred by Sarah K. Balstrup



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This painstakingly researched dissertation turned monograph is the latest offering in a scant series of academic endeavours akin to *Devotional Cinema* (Nathaniel Dorsky, 2003), *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Clive Marsh, 2004), and *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film* (Zachary Settle & Taylor Worley, 2016). Balstrup attempted to use the popular cinema for 'an exploration of spiritual experiences and the conditions that are

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necessary to bring them about...[because] film directors are particularly well equipped to engage the senses and to facilitate powerful viewing experiences' (p. 1).

Inspired by the work of Paul Schrader, but rejecting his notion of transcendental style in favour of an alternative spirituality, she focused her research upon three contemporary Western, English-language filmic exemplars, namely: Stanley Kubrick's SF classic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) [hereafter *2001*], the France-based Argentinean Gaspar Noé's erotic fantasy-drama *Enter the Void* (2009), and the Denmark-based Danish Lars von Trier's doomed SF-domestic drama *Melancholia* (2011). Balstrup claimed that these directors generated 'viewer responses that are reminiscent of traditional accounts of mystical experience' (p. 1) via their deployment of cinematic 'devices of richness and intensity that overwhelm the viewer's senses' (p. 3). This overwhelming of one's senses was a psychophysical defining marker that (supposedly) established 'the increased importance of intense and abstract experiences as characteristic of an authentic encounter with truth' (p. 2), whatever 'authentic' and 'truth' operationally meant to her.

Balstrup had aimed to transcend traditional Western historical-critical approaches, narrative analysis, and the seeking of religious or symbolic motifs, in favour of searching for a subjective 'state of mind and affective qualities' (p. 14) that 'effectively guides viewers into a "meditative" state' (p. 17), as her film trilogy supposedly did. In short, viewers emotionally immersed themselves in watching a movie and hopefully, find the Divine therein as indicated by the 'overwhelming experiences of otherness [that] resonate with truth beyond truth' (p. 191) whatever that esoteric phrase meant in practice. However, like all of its investigative ilk, attempting to make the ineffable effable is always fraught with danger and inevitably leaves one often puzzled.

Despite her spiritual aspiration, Balstrup's academic analysis was based upon an admitted 'unruly mixture' (p. x) of impressionistic reviewer testimonies found within the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), but which resulted in a grossly unbalanced interrogation of evidence given the 1968, 2009, and 2011 filmic release dates with an arbitrary 2016 cut-off date for comment access. Overlooking the self-selection bias prompting reviewers to comment, which inherently skewed the data, its quality was also questionable since 'clarification about the deeper meaning of comments cannot be obtained' (p. x) beyond surface appearances and hoped-for meanings.

Be that as it may, most disappointing of all, Balstrup claimed that her carefully selected film trilogy with its internally crafted mystical-like experiences contained 'no overt religious references...[and were] free from explicit religious content' (p. 2). This was no minor or irrelevant claim; especially since a cursory review of the films revealed her confidence to be unwarranted. For example, *2001*'s Frank Poole's mother ended her Earth transmission with 'God bless,' both parents sang Happy Birthday as a Christian celebratory ritual, and especially when Discovery 1 approached Jupiter, vertically aligned planets were horizontally intersected by a large orbiting monolith to form a cosmic cross prior to Bowman's stargate entry. Thus, confirming Kubrick's claim that *2001* was MGM's first 10-million dollar religious film, with the God concept at its heart.

Enter the Void featured the deceased Oscar's voyeuristic out-of-body wanderings of his disembodied soul-spirit-consciousness (utilizing impressive first-person camerawork) through the Bardo realms that ended when reborn as a baby. But even more surprising, Balstrup candidly admitted to 'religious content in its reference to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*' (p. 2).

That sacred Buddhist *terma* text was repeatedly deployed therein as a film prop, discussed by Oscar, Linda and Alex, alongside twin neon-signs labelled 'Enter' 'The Void,' and a prolonged discussion of the Buddhist death process.

Balstrup then admitted: 'Buddhist concepts appear to be relevant to viewing experiences of *2001*, *Enter the Void*, and *Melancholia*...as a site of open-minded contemplation that is free from expectation' (p. 18). And yet, Alex's prolonged Buddhist-death-process explication generated a *strong* expectation of its occurrence, which then *occurred*, rather than freeing up the viewer's interpretative possibilities. Whilst *Melancholia* featured a Christian church-based white wedding, a visual reference to Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, and dialogue references to 'bewitched,' 'hell,' 'evil,' 'heaven's sake,' 'My God,' 'Abraham,' and 'Little Father' in various dramatic contexts throughout.

SFX-wise, David Bowman's dazzling psychedelic journey through *2001*'s stargate to become a luminous star-child, and Oscar's terrestrial DMT-drug hallucinations in *Enter the Void* were far more interesting visually than the subsequent meandering of Oscar's amorphous soul-spirit-consciousness through a bland luminous void (done better in the electronically-recorded death in *Brainstorm* [1983]) that highlighted pornographic voyeurism designed to do what exactly? Generate audience sexual arousal that abstractly equated groin itch with spirituality?

Furthermore, Balstrup's equating of Noé replicating 'the experience of the dreaming mind' (p. 125) to generate a 'psychedelic and spiritualized film experience' (p. 125) begs the question rather than reveals the reality since the oneiric apparently now equals the mystical. One argues that equating powerful viewing experiences with profound spiritual experiences is not necessarily ontological equivalents as Balstrup implied. Indeed, what does it mean if one watches but does not achieve that predicted "'meditative" state' (p. 17)?

The beautiful but death-dealing massive blue planet in *Melancholia* generated John's scientific excitement then suicide, Leo's childish excitement then fun, Claire's chronic anxiety then despair, and Justine's anxiety turned into stoic acceptance of the extinction of all life. None of which automatically generated awe-inspiring spiritual experiences that provoked 'a cognitive shift characterized by a noetic feeling of higher unity' (p. 188), supposedly 'cinematic mysticism' (p. 192). At best, it was just a deeper emotional state worthy of intensive meditative self-reflection; even if ultimately spiritually unobtainable and ineffable. Given the release of these three films many decades ago, how many viewers have achieved powerful religious and spiritual experiences induced by watching them, and how would one know?

Production-wise, the monograph has good quality printing, firm covering, acceptable binding, and is reasonably priced, but sorely missed were instructive tables, explanatory graphics, an author index, or any illustrative screenshots highlighting Balstrup's points, which was especially unsettling for a tome championing *the* artform of the 20th and 21st century. Surprisingly, the 'Kubrick, Stanley' (p. 218) index entry made *no* reference to *2001*. Whilst the missing address details of the numerous IMDb reviewers referenced were academically undesirable, but pragmatically understandable given their sometimes maddening, space-demanding complexity; albeit, all making this detailed academic text not very scholar-friendly.

Overall, *Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred* is important and noteworthy for its attempt to shed light by exploring more deeply a grossly under-investigated subset of the emerging religion-and-film field that few

have attempted before. This fact alone makes it worth recommending for any library's genre collection or perusal by knowledgeable postgraduates, undergraduates, or the general reader eager to enter the academic affray.

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