Book Review


This edited volume provides a fascinating overview into sacred and religious aspects of fan culture. Fan culture, or fandoms, often encompass communal and personal engagement with fictional works linked to fantasy or science fiction, and the volume highlights how this is manifested in various ways for fans. The book is comprised of ten essays, separated into: ‘Sacred Reading: Analyzing the Text’, which focuses on how fans decode and reinvent texts in sacred, or religious contexts; ‘Sacred Viewing: Watching the Text’, focusing on how encounters and viewed experiences with a text can affect fans; and ‘Sacred Play: Performing the Text’, looking at how fans adapt roles and themes taken from texts into their own lives. The book primarily aims to demonstrate the flexibility and changes in definitions that surround the ideas of ‘religion’ and ‘pop culture’ and the intersection between these two, seemingly separate, categories.

Carole M. Cusack’s chapter is an examination of the Harry Potter books and their role in the popular podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. The podcast uses the text as a basis for the practice of ‘lectio divina’, and presents moral messages through exegetical analysis, aiming to provide a sacred experience for fans through a meditative reading of the text. Cusack proposes a compelling argument in favour of understanding devotional fan reading through a sacred lens, and to understand the devotional reading as a valid method of seeking and fulfilling spiritual, or even religious purposes. Similarly, Rhiannon Grant’s essay shows how fans of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* and BBC’s reimagining of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock* have utilised a cultural-linguistic approach to engage with texts. Grant’s comparison of language structures is a fascinating insight into the relationship and overlap between religion and use of language. The argument posits George Lindbeck’s framework as a parallel to fan language, with regards to how Christians have used highly specific
structures of grammar and vocabulary to thoroughly engage with ideas of Christian theology in a highly specialised context. Grant demonstrates how fans of *Star Wars* and *Sherlock* have proceeded to use similar religious cultural-linguistic frameworks and language when ‘reading’ and decoding these texts. As such, fans who ‘speak the language’ are able to create emotionally and intellectually motivated readings of the text which otherwise do not exist outside of the fan community.

With the emergence of the fandom and its relationship between the source material and the community, Linda Howell explores the extent of religious influences and frameworks of morality in the television series *Supernatural* and how this affected fans. Howell pinpoints the importance of the sacredness of text, and how the show’s religious elements and integration of fan culture led to the fans performing meta-creativity in order to reach enlightened or gnostic understandings of the show that were otherwise not presented in the actual text itself. Howell also presents a situation where fan engagement had become a quasi-sacred act, drawing stark parallels between the show’s engagement with meta commentary as a result of the conversation between the show’s creators and its fans, and she likens fans to the character Metatron, who claims that the act of storytelling has itself become a God-like creation.

Marc Joly-Corcoran explores the different modes of affective experiences that impact fans, highlighting the concept of a ‘cinephany’, in which fans experience a manifestation of the sacred in the profane world and develop an intense emotional response. Joly-Corcoran expands on various methods of fan engagement, such as diegetic cinephany, narrative cinephany and cinephilic cinephany, shown through actions such as cosplaying, or broader metatextual influences and ‘affect’, of the text in their lives. These methods of engagement leads to fans having an authentic and significant experience in their lives, one that is not unlike the affect of religious institutions.

Jyrki Korpua, Maria Ruotsaleinen, Minna Siikila-Latila, Tanja Valsalo and Irma Hirsjarvi also explore how J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* functions as a sacred text, and how immersive viewings of *The Hobbit* films have provided a space for fans to encounter the transcendent. The study was conducted to demonstrate the extent of sacred viewing, and how the engagement of fans with various transmedial worlds functioned in similar ways to religious narratives, especially regarding how both are able to reinforce their community and promote social cohesion. ‘Magical Matrimony’ by Venetia Robertson outlines the extent to which the Harry Potter texts and their thematic and aesthetic motifs have been integrated in the lives of fans, most significantly in a traditionally sacred practice.
of marriage. Robertson proposes that Harry Potter has both enchanted readers, but also provided them a moral understanding of love and commitment through the text itself. The chapter highlights how motifs from the text have not only been chosen for their aesthetic purposes, but to engage in a meaningful and performative ritual of Western weddings. For fans who choose to deliberately integrate aspects of Harry Potter into their personal and public identities, Robertson finds that Harry Potter effectively performed the roles that traditional religion used to in their weddings.

John Morehead also investigates the parallels between fan conventions, to the journey of the pilgrim, demonstrating how cosplay acts as a fan ritual, and how these spaces allow for sacred and meaningful experiences for fans. Other chapters engage with concepts of Lovecraftian influence on Chaos magic (Greg Conley’s “Seizing the Means of Perception”: The Use of Fiction in Chaos Magic and Occultural Fandom’), sacred narrative features in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (James Reynold’s ‘Transformative Souls and Transformed Selves: Buffy, Angel and the Daimonic Tale’), the concept of Messianic heroes and roleplaying in World of Warcraft (Jovi L. Geraci’s ‘Until the End of the World: Fans as Messianic Heroes in World of Warcraft’) and Muslim women and the intersection between religious and fan aesthetics for cosplay purposes (Juli L. Gittinger’s ‘Muslim Women Cosplayers: Intersection Religious, Cultural and Fan Identities’).

The Sacred in Fantastic Fandom is an insightful and masterfully edited book that addresses a range of topics that will appeal to many, from scholars to fans, and is a much-needed volume that provides a critical lens on the intersection between fandom studies and popular culture, and the evolving ideas of religion. Through addressing the encounter of modernity and religion, it provides a compelling argument that fandom and religion could be considered as similar social phenomena. This volume is recommended for students and scholars of new religions and popular culture.

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