

BOOK REVIEWS

Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach, by Chris Klassen. Oxford University Press, 2014. 227 pp., Pb. CDN \$44.95, ISBN-13: 9780195449181

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function, hyper-reality, methodology, popular culture
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This is a thoroughly erudite book. While the subject matter of Religion and Popular Culture (R&PC) is often perceived as superficial, this book demonstrates why it should be viewed as complex, sophisticated and substantial. Religion and Popular Culture, in my view as a biblical scholar who researches and teaches a course on it, is the epitome of what it means to do interdisciplinary scholarship. The book never scrimps on the nuances of technical substance and is both accessible and pragmatic—but in a very lively, engaging and fun way.

The book is designed as a textbook. Theoretical and methodological considerations are of utmost importance for Klassen in the book. She ultimately argues for a cultural studies approach to R&PC in the introduction. She sees the distinct need to provide a textbook for R&PC that combines cultural studies with the blended aspects of religion and popular culture using specific examples to illustrate various points and perspectives. Each chapter articulates a specific theoretical and methodological approach from cultural studies as applied to samples. The great variety of examples keep the reader's attention and interest. Canadian scholars will be appreciative that there are many Canadian examples throughout the book.

The layout of the book is logical, practical and user-friendly. The layout is thus: introduction, nine chapters and a conclusion. The book contains a handy glossary, references (bibliography) and index. Every chapter begins with its objectives and concludes with a summary. These are followed by a set of Review Questions, Useful Resources including print, online, video and audio. It also has several information boxes which usually highlight a key concept or example that the chapter is dealing with, e.g., Spirituality, Postmodernism or Gospel Music.

One deficit of the book is that it lacks any photographs or images which might illustrate some of the concepts it discusses. For example, Klassen provides a detailed written description of a Goth on page 153—but a picture is worth thousand words. Having said that, this deficit may be because securing the rights to such images is notoriously difficult and expensive.

Klassen, in the Introduction highlighting Images, Icons and Identities, begins with James Cameron's movie *Avatar*. She argues that the movie's popularity, based on the resonating type of spirituality with audiences, indicates why scholars must take R&PC seriously. She complements this example with others from video games (RPG Role Playing Games) and then how market branding can be considered icons with religious significance, e.g., Coke as representing the American Dream which "elicits religious responses" (2). From this, she lays out the chapters and content in relation to a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches with specific examples and case studies. In the conclusion to the book, Klassen returns to *Avatar* as a test case to run it through the complete gamut of theoretical and methodological approaches to demonstrate a variety of interpretations of the text.

Chapter one on Religion and Popular Culture deals with definitions and a variety of theoretical approaches. She particularly focuses on cognitive and functional approaches, the latter based largely on Durkheim's work. The functional approach is especially important for R&PC studies because many sub-topoi lack either the supernatural element or formal aspects of religion. The issue then becomes how an image or idea *functions* as religion for the relevant individuals or groups; for example, the Church of Baseball (25).

Chapter two focuses on Marxist Approaches with application to the commodification of "spirituality" best exemplified in the self-help movement or Hollywood Christianity. Klassen uses the Frankfurt School to convey the idea of entertainment being used to distract people from the reality of oppression and economic hegemony, and how commodified spirituality employs it.

Chapter three deals with Culturalism using zombies, vampires and Harry Potter as samples (among others) to illustrate how multiple readings articulate "a specific structure of feeling, by way of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings" (70).

Chapter four focuses on Performativity which stresses *ritual* in such pop icons as Lady Gaga or sports as religion. Performativity is used to affect and transform us "from one state, through the liminal, to another state" (91), and is often related to spiritualized sexuality in the likes of Madonna.

Chapter five employs Feminist Theories in all its multivalency and expressions in the likes of "Girl Power" in *Xena* and Mary Magdalene in movies like *The Da Vinci Code*. It also navigates a variety of forms of feminism from sex positive feminism and or post-feminist images such as pole dancing versus more traditional forms of feminism which deplore "girly culture" as patriarchally constructed sexism. Many feminist issues relate to religion but now are expressed in popular culture.

Chapter six looks at Racism and Anti-Racism, particularly focusing on rap, which involves "hybridity and intercultural interactions" (130). Klassen specifically illustrates the tension between traditional Christian values and secular rap—yet how the genre can and is employed by Christian rappers as a conveyor of truth.

Chapter seven deals at Orientalism, building largely on the work of Said. It is the “lens through which European and American scholars, governments, and producers of entertainment have viewed the ‘East’” (150) in socially constructed, stereotypical and oppressive ways.

Chapter eight examines Subcultures and Post-Subcultures with applications to Goth and the Burning Man Festival. Here Klassen demonstrates, citing Porter, “implicit religion” in relation to how cultural phenomenon *function* as religion for individuals and groups (161).

Chapter nine looks at Digital Media and Hyper-Real Religion with particular emphasis on postmodernism influence. Klassen demonstrates the irony of the majority of gamers who are self-proclaimed atheists yet are obsessed with hyper-religion, the supernatural and meaning in RPGs like Dungeons and Dragons or video games like World of Warcraft. “Virtual reality becomes a new way of thinking about the sacred, otherworldly home of God or the gods” (187–88).

Klassen in her conclusion, as previously mentioned, brilliantly runs the movie *Avatar* through the full gamut of theoretical and methodological approaches in her book which produce multiple readings of the same piece. One of her concluding questions, for both the movie as popular culture and the book, is a penetrating one. Quoting herself in a review of *Avatar* in 2012 she says: “I cannot help but ask what kind of spirituality is born of this construction” (197). This is a question that should haunt the reader as we navigate the complex and influential quagmire of R&PC with all its danger and beauty.

Not that I buy into the concept that critical means negative, I find it difficult to fault this book in any significant way. Do I commend this book to the readership? Indeed, I have just adopted it as the new textbook for my course on Religion and Pop Culture.