

Sexing Religion in the Narratives: creating spaces of sexual dissent in the media

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Introduction

Media's greatest power is its ability to create and re-create reality, exclude or include bits and pieces that compose the truth for humanity. Even in a globalizing network of communication, the information that comes from one point of the world and is delivered in another could not exactly show the entire context of its origin. The process by which it is selected, encoded and transmitted is still very dependent on the messenger.

Carruthers (2000) has pointed out the 'CNN effect' wherein the selection of news, the angling of the stories, and the various editorial policies can affect the decisions of the policy-makers as the information they receive shape their perception of what is happening.

Instead of discussing on what the media have failed to show, however, this paper focuses on some of what I would be referring to as 'marginalized realities' that the media have in fact picked up and is slowly taking a space in the picture of reality. It specifically centers on the conflict between human sexuality and the constructs of religion as the theme is treated in a powerful artistic medium of communication – the movie.

Marginalized realities, to give a definition, are issues that exist but are refused their existence by censorship and information filtering. Religious norms highly influence social exclusions and conflicts. But instead of maintaining the status quo on gender biases and sexual repressions, I believe that the cinema can be used to challenge it and bring about a new norm more cognizant of the modern situation.

Some of the movies I have selected are adaptations from books and from time to time I would refer to the books which could give further situational or character backgrounds, its

narrative being more extensive in character than a movie. The paper will not deal with the aesthetics of the movies; rather, it deals with the content especially related to gender and sexuality.

Needless to say, the motion pictures could be the most important medium in communicating subliminal messages to its audience. People go to the movies or watch television for entertainment, to forget their conscious realities. To the non-discriminating audience, he or she might see the film as passing. In truth, the ideas and concepts we see on screen actually affect our perceptions and behaviors in our personal realities.

The significance of film was more noted during World War II when realistic war dramas were used as propaganda to move people to patriotism. The war which was happening somewhere else in the world was dramatized so that the home fronts can see them, and justify the country's decisions. Fearing, in 1947 wrote in his article *Influence of the Movies on Attitude and Behavior*:

Like the folk tale, classic drama, primitive story-telling, or the medieval morality play, the film may be regarded as a means through which the individual understands himself, his social role, and the values of his group. It is also a means by which the individual orients himself in a universe of events which appear to occur haphazardly and chaotically.

Even post-war, the film has been used largely for propaganda, in maintaining the perceptions of the dominating power of the war victors. In pretty much the same way, the structures – mainly patriarchal – that maintain these powers are maintained with the aid of media and the film.

Questions are eliminated by showing that these structures are what are viable. The films I will be discussing later, instead of being interpreted as affirmative support to these powers, could actually be interpreted as revealing that these structures could be eroded and could not even exist in an ideal state.

The sexless Christ, celibacy, and the way to the kingdom of God

I start with the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) to provide some basic teachings of the Roman Catholic Church shown – and questioned – in the narrative.

In the various attempts to depict Jesus Christ as a human being who walked and lived with mortals, it was only in the movie that I saw this humanity. Jesus had a wife, committed the grave error of wanting to be normal, to live like man and stepped down from the cross. Although in the end Jesus decided to fulfill his mission as The Son of God, the apparent hint of the possibility that God can be tempted, can be human, was so distressful for the church that the movie – and the book by Nikos Kazantzakis published in 1953 on which the movie was based – was banned in several parts of the world. Jesus Christ cannot even in the remotest possibility succumb to temptations of man. He would lose the perfection, the ideal which makes Him God and which man could never achieve because of man's passions.

The movie, as was the book, was purely fiction. And yet it held a power over their audience – the power of planting a seed of thought, something that could not be entertained by Christian fundamentalists else their entire worldview would erode. An entire set of rules – the Canon Law – is based on the inculpable Christ, free of the corruption of the flesh.

God carries the concept of a male, often referred to as 'He', and by the various designation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, contrary to the masculine standards of virility and sexual prowess, His being God entails His difference from man in such that He is not prone to human cravings. This is specifically underlined by His celibacy. Unlike

the Gods of the Greek and Roman Gods who had female consorts, the God of Roman Catholicism, a monotheistic religion, is in His perfection alone.

Judaism, being the origin of the Catholic Church, is important in knowing how the present concept of sexuality possibly evolved. Eilberg-Schwartz (1996) discusses the incorporeal God and the dilemma of a bodied God. He writes:

Marriage and sexuality are frequent biblical metaphors for describing God's relationship with Israel. God is imagined as the husband to Israel the wife; espousal and intercourse are metaphors for the covenant... But the heterosexual metaphors in the ancient texts belie the nature of the relationship in question: it is human males, not females, who are imagined to have the primary intimate relations with the deity.

He quotes Ezekiel 16:8 in proving the sexual relationship God has with Israel. However, ancient Jews could not have this heterosexual set-up lest their masculinity is effeminized in this relationship. Thus, God's genitals, so to speak, remained hidden. He further states:

The apparent absence of a divine phallus exalts God above male sexuality and renders it problematic in critical ways. That is, it is around matters of sexuality and the need to procreate that men experience their otherness from God. To be like God the creator they must procreate. But to be like God they should have no sex and no desire.

Thus could be an argument for celibacy as the only way how priests, in the evolution of the church, had to take a vow of celibacy. The celibacy of God, however, is not to be confused with virility which is a necessary patriarchal tradition. God being divine and exempted from the usual processes of nature, His ability to procreate does not necessarily involve breaking the rule of celibacy. And indeed, through an Immaculate Conception, Jesus Christ was born. I would like to argue contrary to the dilemma of the masculinity challenged by the elimination of the human father in the birth of Jesus Christ pointed out by Eilberg-Schwartz. Although the situation somehow derogates the human male, it could only be seen as establishing the masculine power of God in the Judaic patriarchal imposition that males should have sons.

This rule of celibacy is institutionalized in the laws of the church, the Code of Canon Law. Canon 277 states that:

1. Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity.
2. Clerics are to behave with due prudence towards persons whose company can endanger their obligation to observe continence or give rise to scandal among the faithful.

The 'second sex' and the taboos of homoeroticism

Consequently, the institutionalization of celibacy for men put the women to a secondary position in society. Already marginalized from her economic conditions, she is further degraded by her possible threat to man's aspiration for perfection. From Eve to the wife of Lot, the woman has always been the temptress, the one prone to disobey God.

This leads me to another book made into film which delved further into the norms of the Roman Catholic Church set based on these standards – the first novel of the Italian writer, Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*. Although a murder mystery novel, it shows the intricacies of relationships within a secluded monastery set in Renaissance Italy. From the underground dealings of procuring village maidens for monks of shady backgrounds to homosexual attractions among the monks themselves, the story deals with taboos that the church wants to keep hidden but keeps leaking out of its fortified walls.

The story was a bit altered in the movie which had centered more on the attraction Adso of Melk, the monk who was the narrator of the story, to a peasant girl. Although his feelings for the girl was also discussed extensively in the book, it was not on the relationship itself but more of a discourse on the feeling of attraction, an emotion which is to be denied to a monk if he ever

wants to achieve the perfect relationship with God. The original story also tells of how the lust of one monk for another had spiraled into the intricate murder mystery.

The movie simplifies the complexity of the novel which was heavy with church history, at the time when inquisitions were rampant and the sects such as the Minorites calling for simplicity were being persecuted as heretics, into a mere detective story. Nonetheless, it had somehow conveyed some of the church's abstractions on sexuality and gender.

I wonder though if the movie consciously guarded itself from the topic of homoeroticism which was very heavy in the book. Also, in the novel, reflecting on his past – since he was writing the story in his final years – admitted that there had been a time in his life when he had gazed at another monk with the same lust as what he felt for the peasant girl he had his only sexual intercourse with. Removing these heavy undertones in the movie might be self-censorship on the part of the movie makers, homoeroticism being the biggest taboo in the Roman Catholic religion. The Bible even blatantly states this in Leviticus 20:13 with a specific punishment: 'If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.'

Various Biblical anecdotes and verses prove further testament and support to Vatican's eventual banning of gays from priesthood. Eilberg-Schwartz (1996) discusses the story of Noah how, found naked by one of his sons, his dignity had to be preserved by the other sons turning their eyes away from him. His phallus was not to be seen as it could be a 'potential disruption' to the heterosexual norm.

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