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Religion and Redemption in *Black Snake Moan*

-- Kristen Tobey

While many reviews describe Craig Brewer's *Black Snake Moan* as a movie about religion, the immediate impression one gets from the trailers and posters is more accurate: The film is primarily about a barely-clad woman named Rae chained to a radiator. Some have argued that the religious elements serve only to disguise the film's pornographic nature, but there are deeper implications to the relationship between sex and religion, not only as plot elements but as tools of filmmaking.

We in the audience know we're supposed to feel bad about watching a portrayal of utterly degraded femininity, but we feel better because the film deals with religion -- which presumably will lead to redemption, as the character of Lazarus sets out to "cure" Rae's nymphomania with a Bible in hand. At the same time, we know we're supposed to feel just as bad about being titillated by portrayals of crazed religiosity, because being titillated by someone else's religion (fire-and-brimstone preachers are among those to whom this film is decidedly *not* marketed) implies objectification, much as pornography does.

We're not supposed to gawk at religion, or at a naked woman beaten and in chains. But Brewer gives us license to gawk at them in tandem by making us think that we're gawking at the other one, each in turn. And in the battle for thematic supremacy, we end up taking neither wild sexuality nor wild religiosity seriously. The film sets itself up to present sex and religion as pervasive and powerful forces, responsible for who people are and who they become -- but ultimately *Black Snake Moan* deals with an ambiguous, tenuous kind of redemption that has little to do with either.

The movie's religious aspects initially seem intended to appeal on the same prurient level as its sexual content. This is nothing new; a recent spate of religious films has portrayed religion provocatively. However, the early hints of crazed religiosity don't bear on the plot. More significantly, they don't bear out atmospherically. Religion *starts out* intense and threatening, with Lazarus hissing to his estranged wife, "You best pray, girl." Her response, "Don't you lay a curse on me," suggests a deep and dark power to religion.

But from there the religion portrayed is humdrum. Perhaps the director felt he had to live up to his tagline, "Everything is hotter down south": sexuality is more desperate, the music is more trance-inducing, and the religion is more dodgy. But after a few scenes, Brewer presents religion as the stuff of everyday life -- not unimportant but tame, a social institution that compels one to ask after churchgoers who are missing from the pew on Sunday. And this might make for a disappointingly boring film, if not for the woman chained to the radiator -- which would be appalling, if not for the soothing religion in the background.

In the one overtly theological scene, a local reverend instructs Rae in a kinder, gentler version of Christianity, more quiet and prayerful than the fire-and-brimstone variety with which she has been raised. But in the film, redemption comes not from prayer but from action: for Lazarus, in

making blues music, a form of spiritual fulfillment; for Rae, in putting on a dress and making scrambled eggs, marks of her integration into conventionally moral domestic life.

The "message" preached by the film, then, is platitudinous: pull yourself together, live your life, bond with someone. It would be rather dismal to identify this as particularly "religious." Indeed, this mild portrayal of redemption mirrors a conspicuously tepid portrayal of religion.

While audiences know how to be outraged or annoyed at some depictions, or even *suggestions*, of religion in film -- consider reactions to *The Passion of the Christ*, *The DaVinci Code*, or *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* -- in *Black Snake Moan* religion is, despite early suggestions to the contrary, neither particularly scandalous nor potent. In a film that is ultimately about redemption, religion neither brings about that redemption nor stands in its way.

But when the picture of redemption is such a tentative one, the disconnect between redemption and religion, though it counters the film's set-up, may actually be comforting -- for Brewer's unwillingness to show the viewer the potential power of religion is also an unwillingness to show its potential ineffectuality. And while this may be less titillating, it is also rather less depressing.

References:

A review of *Black Snake Moan* by A. O. Scott (*New York Times*, March 2, 2007) can be read at: <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/movies/02blac.html>.

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