

Religion and/on American Television

“Television and the Numinous”

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How should media scholars think about religion? Cultural Studies, as an inheritor of Marx’s and Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion, has historically had trouble thinking about religion as something other than an ideological symptom and institution of power. But critical theory has also included an undercurrent of mysticism, from Walter Benjamin’s allegory of the puppet and the dwarf to Michel de Certeau’s studies of everyday life rooted in his Jesuit training.

Pulling out Stuart Hall’s and Paul DuGay’s trusty Circuit of Culture, we could think of religion as a category of identity, like race, gender and sexuality, and comfortably slot it in with those other influences on the construction of subjectivity. But to compartmentalize religion as just another aspect of identity is to miss the challenge it brings to our conventional models of culture.

Max Weber famously identified modernity as “the disenchantment of the world,” as supernatural forms of thinking were replaced with technocratic rationality. But religious studies scholars such as Christopher Partridge argue that today, we are seeing the “re-enchantment of the world,” as people seek new forms of spiritual meaning and models to explain their connection to the universe. Some turn to traditional religion, while others increasingly define themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” syncretically drawing on a range of practices and traditions. And a third group, I would argue, find themselves drawn to mythic stories and mystical fantasy worlds without even recognizing that they are filling a spiritual need. My own journey has moved along all three of these paths.

In this context, the explicit representation of religion onscreen is just the tip of the iceberg. Why is it, in this era of ComicCon and cosplay, that the fictional worlds which most inspire fandom are realms of magic and the supernatural? The answer, I would suggest, is that they speak to a yearning to supplement our everyday model of reality with participation in something beyond the rational.

The theologian Rudolf Otto introduced the nondenominational term “the numinous” to describe a sense of transcendent meaning. The Circuit of Culture is the product of the era of postmodern theory, and its flatness reflects postmodernity’s model of depthlessness. But I would suggest a revision that acknowledges the human need for depth: a *sphere* of culture, with the numinous as the third axis, informing and enriching the entire circuit. The images of the numinous in a specific culture are socially determined and subject to struggle and negotiation, just as all aspects of the circuit of culture are, but the numinous is not optional. As the religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal points out, to repress the spiritual dimension of life is to watch it return again and again in our dreams, fantasies and nightmares.

The contemporary television show which best exemplifies the forms of spirituality I'm describing is *Game of Thrones*. The worlds of Westeros and Essos include numerous religions, from the Stark's old gods to the Faith of the Seven. But even more than these invented creeds, what makes *Game of Thrones* so compelling to so many contemporary viewers, I would argue, is the return of magic to the world. Historically, most fantasy, from *The Lord of the Rings* to *The Last Unicorn*, dramatizes the disenchantment of the world, as magical beings retreat from the rising tide of modernity. What makes *Game of Thrones* so different is that it's a world where magic is returning - in the form of zombie white walkers, but also spectacular dragons. *Game of Thrones* speaks to the re-enchantment of the world - and to the rising demand that our culture offer glimpses of the numinous.