

○ ERIN RUNIONS'S *HOW HYSTERICAL: IDENTIFICATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE BIBLE AND FILM*

Richard Walsh

Richard Walsh reviews *How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film* by Erin Runions (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003. ISBN: 0312295731).

Dominant ideology 'pins' us in our socioeconomic place. It causes us to mis-recognize ourselves and to overlook the structural violence within our culture. Film – and its use of biblical texts, as well as the traditional interpretations of those texts – is part of the cultural apparatus transmitting and enforcing the structures of domination in the norms of race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality.

For Runions, this 'order' is 'chaos'. Against it, she unveils a glimmer of hope, 'hysteria'. She rescues this term from its misogynist history by combining it with a host of popular postmodern terms – 'excess', 'trauma', 'sublime', and 'apocalypse' – to signify resistance to the identity foisted upon us by dominant ideology. As dominant ideology has many means to co-opt resistance, one must add political action to resistance in order to become truly subversive.

Her discussion of *Light it Up* and *Remember the Titans* (in association with Numbers 16, Genesis 4 and Isaiah 40:30-31) sketches this titanic clash. Using Althusser, Lacan, and Žižek, Runions illustrates how rebels – like those in Numbers 16 and *Light it Up* – have a language and identity formed by dominant ideology even as they appeal to 'higher order' notions like holiness, equality, or justice. More tragically, defenders of the dominant order (law, name of the father, phallus) use 'just' violence against rebels to defend orders. Runions revalues this process by portraying the violence as excessive and denouncing it as 'hysterical'. In short, Runions employs the excluded – the misogynist 'hysteria' – against the dominant order. The first step to resistance, then, is a far-reaching transvaluation of values.

Turning to *Remember the Titans*, the lone 'mainstream' film in her corpus, Runions explores the difficulty of this revaluation. On its surface, *Remember the Titans* resolves, at a personal level, the race conflicts that bedevil our society. Using Hegel's master-slave narrative, however, Runions shows that the film actually veils as it reinforces the systemic racism of our society. Characters work – as Hegel's slaves – in order to allow the audience (typically Hollywood envisions a white, male middle-class audience) to reach self-consciousness – as Hegel's master. In fact, the trope of work – blacks and whites work together to form a team – in the film has rather demonic connections to a prison industry whose only true product is a conservative discourse on the value of work.

To find liberation, Runions turns to *Three Kings*, a parody of U.S. involvement in the first Gulf War. Like the Gulf War itself in Baudrillard's analysis, *Three Kings* creates a simulacrum that constructs and reveals a reality (the Gulf War) otherwise unknown. According to postmodern theory, such a repetition – not to mention the parody – should create the 'difference' that would allow a subversion of the dominant. Ultimately, however, the film fails to challenge U.S. supremacy or imperialism, because it 'frames' (Derrida) any subversive elements within a discourse of messianism, humanism, commodity culture, and colonialism. It positions its viewers to identify with

the three kings seeking gold, who are a capitalist rewriting of Matthew's rewriting of Exodus. When the three kings sacrifice the stolen gold in order to lead the Iraqi people, with the aid of the U.S. military, to freedom, the viewers identify with the U.S. military's image as liberator.

For the first time, however, Runions explores a more hopeful alternative. Viewers may deliberately identify differently. They may choose, for example, to identify with the murdered Iraqi woman who motivates the film's plot, instead of with the U.S. military personnel. That view askew may, then, lead them to recognize the colonial violence veiled by the messianic ideology of U.S. imperialism.

Runions continues her exploration of alternative, resistant identifications with a discussion of *Paris is Burning* and *Boys Don't Cry*. Runions pairs the first film, a documentary about drag queen balls in Harlem, with the syntactical mixing of gender in Micah. Both film and text may enforce dominant ideology, as the film's drag queens express desires to be white, wealthy women and Micah ultimately reverts to the notions of the active, male Yahweh and the passive, female Israel. Nonetheless, the film, at least, positions its viewers to identify with excluded, non-dominant persons, the black drag queens, rather than dominant factions in society. Further, the film's heroic drag queens and Micah's gender mix – like Bhabha's notion of the 'hybrid' – create an ambivalence, an unstable coexistence of norm and deviance, that displays the norm's (in this case, heterosexuality) own constructed quality.

Her discussion of *Boys Don't Cry* reinforces the notion that gender and sex are constructs by exploring the formation of male, heterosexual identity. Using Butler, Runions traces said identity to a gender melancholia arising from the repression of the loss of a same-sex love that is more basic than Freud's famous incest taboo. The individual incorporates that lost love into its own ego as a reproachful super-ego, the agent of the death wish. In the film and Ezekiel 16 (with which Runions pairs the film), however, males horribly violate women, who transgress heterosexual norms. Runions explains this deviation by adding Butler's idea that the repudiation of female identity forms male heterosexual identity. Again, the norm, not deviation, is responsible for violence.

As with Runions's discussion of *Paris is Burning*, resistance is possible because the film invites the audience to identify with difference, to identify as both male and female (with Brandon), and to see that their identities are complicit with that which it (violently) excludes (with Butler). As one comes to this alternative identity, one identifies less easily with the typical, violent American hero, the 'self-made man'.

Runions's analysis of *Magnolia*, her final film, underscores the importance of unveiling traditions of dominance and violence. The film, and Runions, connects patriarchal family traumas and the TV medium. Runions hopes to give film a more messianic, if not apocalyptic, role. The apocalypse that she hopes for is not, however, a biblical one, for such apocalypses have a history of complicity with misogyny and colonialism. She hopes for a Benjaminian apocalypse, the shock of the present that does not simply repeat the traumatic tradition (as opposed to art's aura of tradition). She finds this shock in the film's falling frogs (Exodus 8:2), for that interruption disrupts several characters' patriarchal family legacies. Thereafter, these characters acknowledge their abused pasts and make good.

The film ends, however, with a smiling, white woman looking at the camera as background music asks for a superhero savior. That ending may undo the apocalypse and reinsert the viewer into dominant ideology (the white, male middle-class audience of Hollywood film). Runions's

last sentence captures that uncertainty: 'What will remain ambiguous is whether *Magnolia* positions viewers to wait for a transcendental savior, or rather to make the task of resisting capitalist patriarchy their own.' In short, will *Magnolia*'s viewers and Runions's readers allow themselves to be 'pinned' or will they willfully deviate from oppressive norms?

The obvious strength of Runions's work is her sophisticated, theoretical critique of film and the culture it supports ideologically. Along the way, she also provides insight into the biblical texts, particularly with her detailed, textual analyses of the prophetic texts that are her area of expertise. Her real 'biblical' contribution, however, is her exposé of the biblical texts' translations into and complicity with dominant ideology.

To escape such complicity, she focuses on theorists of difference, rather than on text or on film, to inspire a radical politics resisting norms of race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality. Accordingly, her book rewrites, rather than repeats, biblical texts in order to subvert and to resist the cultures of dominance the texts have been made to support. The result is a Bible that moves from 'hysteria' to Benjaminian apocalypse, both of which, unlike Genesis and Revelation, resist traumatic patriarchal traditions of misogyny and colonialism. As Revelation rewrites Genesis, her Benjaminian apocalypse rewrites 'hysteria'. Her gospel is also resistance, the possibility of rewriting the origin myth of 'hysteria' at a personal, conscious level, made possible by a baptism in her theorists of difference. Her ethic is willful deviation from oppressive norms.

Like the apocalyptic that she rejects, Runions runs the risk of accepting mere exchange – the change of the name of the dominant class – instead of genuine change. She struggles to avoid that peril by eschewing domination in all its forms. Thus, repeatedly rejecting violence and heroism, her political resistance lies in the recognition of the constructed nature of norms, in identification with the marginal, and in the acting out of identities deliberately transgressing the norms. Such acts lead to no certain end, because they forsake the strategies of domination. Appropriately, then, she ends her book with an ambivalent ambiguity that can be resolved only by her readers.