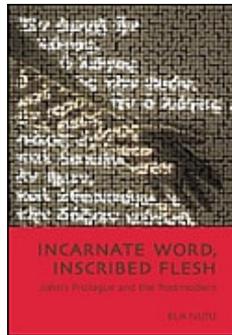


○ REVIEW OF ELA NUTU, *INCARNATE WORD, INSCRIBED FLESH: JOHN'S PROLOGUE AND THE POSTMODERN. THE BIBLE IN THE MODERN WORLD*, 6

(SHEFFIELD: SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS, 2007)

Peter Phillips, St John's College



This is a refreshing and provocative exploration of postmodern readings inspired/incited by John's Prologue. In other words, it is not a commentary on the Prologue but rather some reflections which arise out of a reading of the Prologue, a second-hand Prologue, which itself recedes more and more into the background as the author takes us down other paths and in other directions, especially those signposted to the difficult terrain of postmodern identity and gender.

In a general scene-setting, Prologue-free introduction, Nutu opens with a brief history of (artistic) engagement with the text, highlighting plurality and diversity in interpretations and readings, introducing the role of film within postmodern theological reflection and within the general methodology of this monograph in particular. She adds to the mix discussions of post-structuralism, identity, gender and self. In this way, the stage is set and the introductory excursion ends with a pointer that this work will focus on the interaction between postmodernism's 'de-centred, fragmented' subject with visual, legible texts.

In the second chapter, Nutu conjures up an imaginary dialogue between Jacques Derrida (representing poststructuralism), Raymond Brown (representing traditional readings of the Prologue) and Madonna, with bit parts played by *figments*, which include God, Logos, Life/Death, Light/Darkness and so on. The conversations roll out as a kind of deconstructive commentary on the Prologue, mixing and remixing comments from Brown's reading of the Prologue with cultural anecdotes from Madonna and insights from Derrida. This feast of juxtapositioning represents the ludic interpretation of texts within the postmodern, resisting Brown's authoritative reading, interrupting historical-critical reason with postmodern *jouissance*. The play leads on, somewhat disappointingly, to examinations of Derrida's legacy, the postmodern fragmentation of the text and the self, and the possibility of exploring this multiple fragmentation through film.

In the spirit of *jouissance*, the third chapter interweaves the themes of incarnation and identity through the Prologue and the film *The Pillow Book*. This chapter is a purple patch in the monograph as a whole; a rich exploration of the interplay between words and flesh, at times sumptuous, sensual, enticing, and even horrifying. Nutu explores the inscription of flesh within *The Pillow Book*, in which Greenaway explores the sensuality of writing on flesh and flesh becoming writing, of *logos* becoming *sarx* (Prologue) and of *sarx* ultimately becoming *logos* (*The Pillow Book*). Moving onto the Prologue, Nutu explores the Derridean association of life with the spoken word and death with the written word, and the way in which God comes into existence when his name is uttered in the text. She wanders around the Prologue and postmodernity, asserting that opposites are forced to reflect one another, to prioritise their overlap. So, 'in the beginning was the text'. Nutu's continued exploration of the Prologue becomes increasingly sexual, exploring the so-called ocular-erotic inclination of texts, merging the imagery of *The Pillow Book*, sex, and the Prologue into an orgasmic mix of faith and glory...before slipping into an almost post-coital lull, discussing the nuances of Lacanian psychoanalysis and of film. The second half of this chapter is an amazing contrast with what has gone before; a comparatively dry exploration of psychoanalytic theory which seems so divorced from the preceding pages. And after the climactic rush of faith and glory, the Prologue is nowhere to be seen, or read, or heard.

Chapter four provides an exploration of 'post-Lacanian Continental Feminisms,' focussing particularly on the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray (and *parler-femme*), and Hélène Cixous (and *écriture féminine*), and on their interaction with Lacan and self-identity. Inspired by Cixous' own experience of unveiled sight, Nutu explores the subject of self-becoming or unveiling of identity as seen in the Prologue and *The Pillow Book*, critically engaging with Cixous' and Irigaray's concepts of the feminine and the postmodern provisionality of any concept of identity, so anathema to a modern world of fixed definitions and certainties. This provisionality is itself explored through the end of being, through the horror of *The Pillow Book*, and the re-inscription of Nagiko's madness into her own daughter's reality. In returning to the Prologue, Nutu explores the ways in which God inscribes himself on Jesus, unveils himself, reveals his own identity, taking this even further through a Kristevan idea of abjection.

The next chapter, the fifth, explores themes arising out of this discussion, the gender issues of the Prologue, and the film *The Fifth Element* and (the sometimes problematised) concepts of female saviours. The exploration of the film is not as detailed or intriguing as that of *The Pillow Book* and the reader might wonder how it plays within the structure of the book as a whole. Indeed, there are times when this chapter reads as something added or supplemental (not really part but worth throwing in to make something more complete?) But there is more exploration here of Cixous and Irigaray, of Lacan and Derrida. Identity is here and gender along with the lingering perfume of sexual imagery.

The sixth and penultimate chapter continues to reflect upon identity, this time exploring some of the author's own autobiography and the interaction between social theory and psychoanalysis, and introducing Foucault as an additional conversation partner. This autobiographical reading, picking up on other explorations such as that by Ingrid Kitzberger, explores the influence of the biblical text on the author's own identity and how this then relates to themes of Neo's (fragmented?) identity within the film, *The Matrix*. The exploration of the film, as with *Fifth Element* but not like the discussion about *The Pillow Book*, is differentiated from the rest of the chapter, cut off from it, this time by asterisks, its own identity set apart and, perhaps, questionable.

It is an interesting but tangential discussion of how *The Matrix* should not be read as a Christian parable. Nutu deconstructs the oft-assumed Biblical reading of *The Matrix*, referring to Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* as the true source of its ideas, its identity, rather than the Biblical word. *The Matrix* exploration of identity, however, encourages the author to explore her own origins within Marxist Communism and her liberation from and revolution against this hegemony.

The conclusion is, as it says, not quite a conclusion. Nutu briefly recovers the journey we have travelled, exploring postmodernism, self-identity, feminist critique and film. She points again to the provisionality of it all. All is in flux all the time: all things undergoing change and remodelling; nothing fixed; all things constantly renewed. For those who find this image disturbing, there is no offer of resolution; the fixed identity is an allusion, an aspiration which can never be met. The only reality is the postmodern flow reflected so powerfully in the images flickering across the ever present screens of the postmodern world.

Ela Nutu has assembled an intriguing mix of postmodern reflections on self and identity, shot through with perceptive analysis of feminisms and films, all set against the background of Derrida and late twentieth century (European) psychoanalytical speculation. At times, especially at the end, this reflection is unrelenting in its affirmation of the flow and insecurity of postmodernism. There is no attempt to explore alternative concepts of identity, or criticisms of the postmodern construct which Nutu offers. Instead, all comes under the same destabilising mantra of the poststructuralists. One might almost assume that within the plurality of voices, the multiplicity of ideas, there was no other voice within the whole of creation except the cry of flux.

Within this rich and sometimes overly fluid setting, the Prologue becomes the catalyst for a much larger project and eventually seems to be replaced as the identity of the author becomes more and more focused through the work. The Word is incarnated in the very act of interpretation, incarnated and replaced, put aside, marginalised in the cause of self identity and expression. This book is not only a hesitant, partial, interrupted study of the Prologue but a constant, unremitting, destabilising study of the inscription of the self and a pastiche on postmodern (feminine) identities.