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Constantine

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Constantine

Abstract

This is a review of *Constantine* (2005).

Since the late 1990s, motion pictures with supernatural themes have been lucrative. While seeking to capitalize on the success of such films, *Constantine* lacks many of the elements that make other supernaturally-oriented movies effective. The makers of *Constantine* try to exploit the ornamentation and trappings of religion, but ultimately fail to create a compelling film, since they lack a strong narrative and rely too heavily on direct representations of supernatural beings. This contrasts with *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), which kept its demons just beneath the surface until the story's climax. For *The Devil's Advocate*, Satan's motto could be applied to the film itself: "Never let 'em see you coming." For *Constantine*, the motto would be reversed: "Demons aplenty are imminent!"

Constantine is an adaptation of the comic book *Hellblazer*. Those familiar with the comic will be disappointed to find a less engaging cinematic fantasy world. The story merges the "law enforcement" careers of rogue exorcist John Constantine (Keanu Reeves) and detective Angela Dodson (Rachel Weisz), who collaborate to uncover mysteries surrounding an apparent suicide. From the moment their joint investigation begins until its furious conclusion, evil spirits terrorize the pair.

Because of his own attempted suicide and near death experience, Constantine lives without hope of heaven. Despite the angel Gabriel's blunt confirmation of his ultimate damnation, he is on a quest to earn paradise through spiritual warfare. Using occult techniques, Constantine frequently visits hell—a land

swarming with "half-breed" demons, many of whom he had "deported." Constantine teaches Dodson to see the supernatural world underlying "normal" human existence. This learning process begins with the assumption that some people lose sight of the spiritual realm through socialization into the modern West.

Audience members with any theological or biblical background will have difficulty willfully suspending disbelief. Much of the plot depends on a caricature of Roman Catholic theology where one is damned on a technicality or redeemed through a loophole. All of this occurs without the satire of *Dogma* (1999). Particularly distracting are moments when John's Apocalypse is called "Revelations," and when an esoteric prophecy is found in a lost chapter of 1 Corinthians. The imagined text would have been more plausible as a Gnostic manuscript or secret copy of "Revelations." This may seem hypercritical; yet such distractions hinder the creation of a plausible fantasy world.

Despite its flaws, *Constantine* has redeeming aspects. In the tradition of Job's anti-wisdom, it provides a provocative theodicy, portraying human suffering as the result of a wager between God and Satan. "God," Constantine says, is "like a kid with an ant farm. He doesn't really have a plan." The film's representation of heaven and hell as parallel dimensions in, with, and under our own reality provides a fascinating angle on an otherwise medieval cosmology. A sacrificial death and

personal redemption become possibilities for Constantine at the story's climax, and a blemished (and somewhat contrived) Christ-figure emerges.

Constantine is enjoyable if one desires a supernatural action diversion akin to *Hellboy* (2004). It may be of pedagogical value to educators and clergy who wish to discuss Christian treatments of theodicy, hell, or soteriology. Likewise, in an age when most religion faculties treat demonology as a quaint fetish of Christian antiquity, it is interesting to examine why fallen spirits still resonate with popular religious imagination. Nonetheless, it is also notable that films which seek the sacred within our "mundane" world, such as *American Beauty* (1999), are often theologically richer than those, such as *Constantine*, which assault audiences with CGI-enhanced cosmic warfare.