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## Spirits and Ceremonies: How to Construct Religious Experience in Documentary Film

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# Spirits and Ceremonies: How to Construct Religious Experience in Documentary Film

## Abstract

For a documentary filmmaker there are several challenges in presenting religious phenomena. It is easy to document the rituals and the sensory level of events, but how can religious experience be represented? How can the invisible be made visible? What are the means to do this visually, aurally and cinematically? There are also special epistemological problems, when we are dealing with documentary film. Previous documentary studies have emphasized the indexical relationship between the object in front of the camera and its representation. But when one is constructing spiritual, abstract, conceptual, religious or theological phenomenon, how can it be done?

These questions are pondered through two cases, two documentary films directed by the writer. *Kusum* (2000) is a documentary film about traditional Indian religious healing. Demons have settled within a 14-year-old girl, Kusum, and the film follows how a healer named Bhagat fights against them. Another film, *The Leap* (2012) tells the story of a Finnish tram diver, who is looking into spiritual paths and joins the Hare Krishna movement. The film charts Keshava's personal 'leap of faith' and the process over two years as he faces the dilemmas of reconciling his personal life with a calling of a demanding religion. The writer reflects his own creative work and advances knowledge about practice. In analyzing these documentaries and solutions implemented during their shooting, the approach can be considered *practice-led artistic research*.

Besides illustrating religion, its cult, rites and rituals, the film-maker has a wide selection of cinematic means to interpret religion. There are at least six different strategies for the filmmaker to reconstruct religious experience: verbalizing, rituals, metaphors, meditative scenes, transcendental film-making and pure fiction. Some of these strategies are used in *Kusum* and *Leap*. Altogether documentary film is an effective tool for interpretation of religious and spiritual experience.

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## Author Notes

Jouko Aaltonen is a documentary film director-producer and researcher, adjunct professor (docent) of Aalto University Helsinki, department of Film, Television and Scenography. His doctoral dissertation (2006) dealt with the process of documentary filmmaking. Additionally, he has published a book on Lasse Naukkarinen, a veteran Finnish documentary filmmaker, three textbooks and many articles. His films, screened and awarded in several festivals around the world, include i.e., *Taiga Nomads* (1991), *Kusum* (2000), *Revolution* (2006), *Punksters and Youngsters* (2008), *Leap* (2012) and *Temples of Dreams* (2015).

## Introduction

There is a lot of research about religion and film concerning fiction films, but not very much dealing with documentary film, and practically none at all from the point of view of practice led or artistic research.

I am a documentary film-maker but also a researcher, specialized in practice led research. This is also my point of view in this article. I have directed several films where spirituality or spiritual beliefs have been one of the topics. This time I am analysing two of my films: *Kusum* (2000) and *Leap* (2012) and reflecting the film-making process of these films.

Although these films are meant for wider audiences and they are not strictly scientific, there is a strong scientific background in both films and they are based on serious research. Via these films and the experience of making them, I ponder the questions of presenting religious or spiritual experience in documentary film. How can the invisible be made visible in a visual medium? This question also has been asked in the literature (e.g. Bird, 1982: 4; Söderberg Widding, 2005: 77—95). The problem is even more interesting in the field of documentary film, because traditionally the definition of documentary film has been based on the photographic, indexical relationship between the visible object and its representation. When one is constructing spiritual, abstract, conceptual, religious or theological phenomena, how can it be done? What are the means to do this visually, aurally and cinematically? Finally I try to define what kind of films *Kusum* and *Leap* are.

## Two cases: *Kusum* and *Leap*

*Kusum* is a documentary film about an Indian family fighting evil spirits and disease. The main character, Kusum, is a 14-year-old Indian girl who falls ill. She stops eating, isolates herself and suffers raving fits. Kusum's family initially tries Western medicine, but then opts for traditional

Indian spiritual healing. Bhagat is a well-known religious healer throughout the region, and people travel hundreds of miles to see him. Bhagat's methods include conversation, rituals and herbal treatments. Joint trance sessions in which spirits talk constitute the core of his methodology. According to Bhagat evil spirits have attacked the family. He orders the family to travel together with him to the holy town of Balaji Mehndipur. It is believed that Balaji has special healing powers and that's why there are sick people everywhere. Kusum's family participates in Bhagat's sessions and various rituals. In the crucial session, the spirits surrender, beg for mercy and swear, on Bhagat's command, to leave the family alone.

*Leap* is a film about the Hare Krishna movement told through two main characters. The film follows the spiritual paths of Keshava Madhava Das, a Finnish disciple and his guru Radhanath Swami, one of the movement's foremost spiritual leaders. Keshava faces the dilemmas of reconciling his personal life with a calling of a demanding religion. The film starts with Keshava's daily life as a seasonal tram driver in Helsinki. In pursuit of enlightenment he travels to Vrindavan in India, and together with thousands of other devotees, takes part in a pilgrimage led by Radhanath Swami. Keshava studies to become an altar priest. He is looking for love and finally gets married to an Indian disciple of Radhanath Swami. Together with his wife, Keshava settles into a family home in Mayapur, the "Vatican" of the movement. Both Keshava and Radhanath Swami must engage in self-sacrifice, asceticism and rigorous ritual discipline to follow in the footsteps of Krishna. The film follows their struggles over two years as they try to achieve their goals.

### **Why these films?**

Spiritual and religious themes have always interested me, although I am not a religious person. It might be, that God does or does not exist, but religion, godhead and spirituality certainly exist. In my *Taiga Nomads* films (1992) shamanism was part of the life of the Evenki people living on the

taiga areas of Siberia. *In the Arms of the Drum and Buddha* (1997) represents the conflict of pressures of shamanism, Buddhism and modern life in Tuva next to Mongolia.

The healer in the film *Kusum*, Bhagat, too, is in a way a shaman — a charismatic man who acts as a middleman between the visible and invisible realities. I was interested, why does Kusum fall ill and how does she get well again? Is the cause a deity, the spirits or the treatment given by Bhagat? The underlying tone of the other reality can be considered religious, but it can also be called the subconscious. The analogy with modern psychotherapy and psychoanalysis does not seem farfetched at all. Bhagat works just as any good therapist. He listens, observes, converses, encourages, guides and takes care.

Trance plays a central role in Bhagat's treatments. Once entranced, people can express their deepest feelings, they feel liberated and say things they could not say otherwise. Bhagat's healing sessions resemble in many ways Western psychodrama. The spirits are named as the cause of the problems; but is not that in fact just inventing a euphemism for the patient's condition? Do the treatment and trance amount to a cathartic experience, liberating and soothing? Is it family therapy or group therapy? Or straightforward faith and sacred powers, a mystery? You can hardly find just one correct answer, as everything depends on the point of view.

To me, it was important to make the invisible visible and portray the exotic as familiar. I wanted to make a film through which we would understand, first and foremost on an emotional level, the strange story Kusum and her family go through.

In *Leap* the general theme of spiritual searching inspired me. In one of the funding applications ("director's vision"), I wrote: "Most human beings are searching for something. It can be a feeling of togetherness, love, happiness, peace, harmony, wisdom or enlightenment. Very often it is called God. *Leap* is a film about the human spirit searching for answers." Although the film is about the Hare Krishna movement, I see the themes of the film much more on the general level. It is a film about religion, any religion.

My aim in *Leap* was to get inside the soul and inside the community and via that let the audience see, feel and finally understand. There were many interesting questions: How do religious human beings see the world? Why do they join such a demanding movement? What are they gaining, what are they losing? What are they searching for? Why is somebody willing to give up all the pleasures of mundane life? By making *Leap* I tried to find some answers to these questions.

I was very impressed by the philosophical and ethical meditation and debate these spiritual people are practising. The essential idea is to forget your own ego. You have to sacrifice yourself for other people and for God. You have to surrender, without any conditions, to God and to your guru, who is representing God. This is totally against the western and modern ideas of individuality. This humbleness is so strange to us, that the media represents members of the Hare Krishna movement very often as silly losers or poor victims. This is not the case.

The Hare Krishna movement is often considered controversial, even after forty years of successful religious life. People outside the movement still remember the scandals of the 1970s and 1980s when ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) was in a confused state after the death of Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the movement. When I was planning the film about the movement I met two kind of expectations: people thought that the film would be either a promotional film for the movement, or it would deal with the abuses and scandals, how people are manipulated and lose their individuality and identity. Learning to know the members of ISKCON better also convinced me that they are not brainwashed victims. Most have made their decision to join the movement seriously and voluntarily. It is a big decision to leave your earlier life and identity.

I was interested in religion on the social level and the experiences of religious people on the psychological level. Kusum's experiences are paranormal and mystical. They are most of all spiritual, referring to inward and personal experience and phenomena taking place also outside formal religious traditions. Keshava's experiences in *Leap* can be considered clearly religious,

because they take place in the context of a very precise system of faith and organized institution (Oman, 2013: 26-28).

The experiences of Kusum and Keshava are both strongly personal. It is difficult to verbalize them, especially for Kusum who keeps silent through most of the film. As a film-maker, I had to interpret cinematically their ineffable experience which is already by itself their own interpretation of the spiritual and holy. This was not an easy task.

### **Film-making process**

Both films were based on long and thorough research. In *Kusum* I was working together with Dr. Antti Pakaslahti who specialized in cross-cultural psychiatry. *Leap* was done in close connection with researchers from the University of Winchester, Dr. Graham Dwyer and Dr. Anna King. Both films have been screened in different seminars of visual anthropology and anthropological film festivals.

For *Kusum* we did research in India based on the previous scientific work of Dr. Pakaslahti. He knew several traditional healers and we met some of them. However, Bhagat was the one whose work Pakaslahti had followed for several years, so we concentrated on him. The first idea was to make a portrait documentary about Bhagat, and even include Pakaslahti in the film as a character, so that the film would deal with the encounter of the traditional healer and the Western medical doctor. However, I thought that the real story is happening to the patients, as their life is changing, sometimes even radically. So we changed the point of view.

The problem was the script. To get the film financed we had to make a script. But because I wanted to follow the healing process from the very beginning, we could not choose the main character beforehand. So I wrote a kind of hypothetical script. I knew how the average healing

process proceeds, and I had also an idea about the typical patient. The script was based on a typical person we were looking for, not the real one.

We did not have the main character when we arrived in India for filming. We spent a lot of time looking for the protagonist for our film and went through a great many patients who had already been committed to treatment. The first Tuesday of every month, our healer Bhagat has general consulting and healing hours. Dozens of people travel hundreds of miles to get there. The door is open to anyone who needs help. When Kusum arrived at one of these sessions for the first time, my cinematographer and I immediately noticed this girl who seemed a little lost but was extremely photogenic. It was her eyes, the large and scary eyes, with which Kusum watched the chaos around her and in which the chaos inside her could be seen. Those eyes were crucial. The other members of her family also appeared very natural in front of the camera.

In *Leap* my idea was to have two main characters: the disciple and his guru. We started from the guru. Radhanath Swami is a charismatic and very popular religious leader with several thousands of followers. We met him for the first time in London Bhaktivedanta Manor in 2009, and he agreed to be filmed. Then we started to search for a suitable disciple to follow up. Because the biggest part of the financing came from Finland, we needed a Finnish disciple. Luckily there were at least three among Radhanath Swami's disciples. From them we chose Keshava Madhava das, who was willing to co-operate.

In *Kusum* the filming period in India was quite difficult; the events in the holy town of Balaji Mehndipur were especially chaotic. We embarked on a long journey with Kusum. At times, everything rushed upon us with such fury that the thought of spirits existing didn't seem strange at all. Kusum's case turned out to be much more serious and dramatic than we could imagine beforehand. In the editing phase we did a lot of work to get the material structured so that it was truthful, but at the same time understandable for the audiences which were not familiar with the

Indian and Hindu context. The fight against evil spirits was dramatic and it gave the plot for the film. We tried to emphasize this struggle and its turning points in the editing.

*Leap* was a much longer project. I did quite a lot of research for the project for several years, together with researcher Graham Dwyer from University of Winchester. During 2009-2012 we shot several short periods in Finland, London and India, where we filmed in Vrindavan and in Mayapur. This time events were more controlled, for instance, we knew the schedule for pilgrimage precisely beforehand. We were concentrating mainly on Keshava and his experiences. Radhanath Swami was a more distant figure, and we tried to present him mainly through Keshava. Filming *Leap* was visually rewarding, because Hinduism in general and especially the Hare Krishna movement is so sensual and visual.

### **Religious experience in documentary film**

A religious or spiritual person sees the world differently. His or her experience is different compared to the every-day, mundane experience. How to construct this way to see, hear and feel? I had been thinking about this problem during the film-making process of both these films.

*Kusum* and *Leap* are observational documentary films following a process, which in the former is a complicated healing cycle and in the latter a path including conversion and religious searching. The style is mostly realistic, even naturalistic, *cinema verite* or direct cinema type of observation. There is no outside voice-over explaining what is happening and why. All verbal information is delivered by the main characters of the films.

Both films are dealing with spiritual or religious experience and both are portraying main characters to whom the invisible, transcendental world is real and present. In Kusum's case, her family's and the healer's reality view the spirits as something concrete and the fight against them demands real actions. For Keshava, the world, nature, statues and rituals are full of signs of

Krishna. Even more, as is said in the scene where Keshava is practising to dress up the deity: “This is not the image or statue of Krishna, this is the Lord Krishna.” According to Keshava, the spiritual world is the real one, and this mundane world is only the shadow of the spiritual world. However, we had to make the film in the mundane world. So during the film-making process I had to think about how to construct Keshava’s religious experience.

Human faces are always expressive. Part of the experience can be seen on the faces of the characters. Kusum is mostly unhappy, because spirits are troubling her. Keshava is looking for his path and vocation, and he has to make big choices in his life, and this uncertainty can be seen on his face. But the mental state of happiness, so common to a person who has found his God and conviction, can also be seen on Keshava’s face.

Although religious or spiritual experience is often non-verbal, difficult to express in words, one way to describe it is to let the persons explain the experience themselves. These testimonials are used in the final film. In *Leap*, Keshava is explaining his experience and outlook on the world several times. This voice-over strengthens the story as told from Keshava’s point of view. In *Kusum* this strategy is more problematic, because during her illness (or struggle with spirits) Kusum is not talking, she is totally silent. Instead we used Bhagat, the healer, to explain in the interview what is happening and what the spirits are doing.

In *Kusum* we tried to imitate the way Kusum is making perceptions about her surroundings. During the illness she was isolated, often sitting aside, looking in other directions. She was disoriented, absent, and not interested in what happened around her. In order to describe this I decided to use a special kind of point-of-view shot. After Kusum’s close-up we edited to the scene showing what she was seeing, and then back to Kusum’s face. This is a normal narration and film-editing technique. This time we used tight and very restricted close-up-scenes. Framing was peculiar, and it looked more or less random, and also the content was strange. When Kusum is sitting in the yard and people are discussing around her, she is staring at the washing water pouring

into the drain. We have several scenes like this in the film: in the bus Kusum is staring at the cracks of broken car window glass; when the doctor is examining her, she is not communicating but only looking at the doctor's hands. We also used point of view scenes in *Leap*, but much more conventionally than in *Kusum*.

The soundtrack of *Kusum* is expressive. In the yard scene the busy and noisy Indian street ambience is not heard at all. Instead, we can hear the stylized sound of water. And when Kusum is travelling from the healer's place back home, she is confused and even shocked. All the sounds in the noisy bus are faded away.

Sound effects should feel strong, and yet they must fit into the world of the film. As materials for the sounds, we used very different kind of sounds, which were manipulated, slowed down or speeded up, certain frequencies were cut off, etc. In a way, the making of the soundtrack was like composing music with sound effects.

There are even a few sounds which can be interpreted as paranormal or supernatural. When Kusum is totally disorganized or psychotic, she sees a shadow passing in the wall. At the same time she is hearing a strong noise of fire. This fire-noise is repeated several times in different connections, although there is no fire seen in the picture. So it must be Kusum's inner voice. In the end of the film the evil spirits are burned in the fire, both mentally and ceremonially in the Dushera celebration.

Manipulating the picture was much more discreet. I treated the sound in a way I would normally never dare to treat the picture in a film of this genre. In addition to being an emotional element, sound is also an interpretative and narrating element. In documentaries, the picture is often realistic, but with sound it is easy to construct more meanings and feelings, which gives more possibilities to interpret spiritual and religious experiences.

In *Kusum*, we stepped out from the tradition of realistic sound representation, which is very typical for ethnographic films. What is interesting here is that although this has been noticed, it has

not disturbed the audience or threatened the general authenticity of the film. The case has even been the opposite. A stronger emotional reaction has led the viewer into a greater sensitivity about the authenticity of the film (Aaltonen, 2010: 157).

These kind of film-maker's decisions would be quite normal in the tradition of fiction film, especially considering religious films, but quite exceptional in the tradition of realistic and anthropological documentary film-making.

Music had a central role in Bhagat's healing sessions, and also in the final film. All music in *Kusum* is source music, diegetic, coming from the world seen in pictures. Music has also a significant role in the Hare Krishna movement and in *Leap*. For instance ceremonies are full of singing and joyful dance. Besides source music, we used also score music by Tapani Rinne. This non-diegetic music is composed and recorded for the film. Score music created atmosphere, rhythm, tried to reflect the psychological state of Keshava, and also commented on some scenes. Music was a way to describe the inner world of Keshava.

Both films have a lot of rituals. They are significant in religion in general, and they are also important in documentary films about religion. Firstly because they are cinematic in the sense that they are action, something which can be filmed. Secondly it is something where the connection to godhead, holy and transcendental can be seen. Mircea Eliade describes the concept of *Hierophany*, which means artifacts, objects and places where the holy manifests. The holy cannot be explained with psychological or historical issues. According to Eliade the holy reality is always the same; unchangeable, a prior, ontological category. (Bird, 1982: 3 ; Anttonen, 2010: 46) *Kusum* and especially *Leap* are full of hierophanies: temples, statues, religious objects, holy places. All these are building up the connection to God and the holy. Both films also have a lot of rituals, reading mantras, chanting and praying. In different ceremonies the main characters are making sacrifices to Gods.

Sensual, visual, aural, and haptic elements are all important in the Hare Krishna movement. All this offers a lot of good material for the film-maker. The aesthetic dimension in ceremonies is important, whether it be music, dance, statues, pictures, clothes or even the way food is served. There are similarities between aesthetic and religious experience, between the holy and the beautiful. For instance, Rudolf Otto wrote that both religious and aesthetic experience give unique means to view the holy and the beautiful (Anttonen, 2010:46). Cinema is a form of multisensory media, which is emotional and enables strong identification. Because of these special features cinema has excellent possibilities to present religious experience and build bridges between religious and aesthetic experience.

Although it is good for the documentary film-maker that there are things to be filmed, there are also obvious risks. One is to use too straightforwardly simple, naive illustrative material of gods and religion to present the holy.

### Exceptional moments

Both films have exceptional, even existential, moments that are big turning points for the main characters. They are crucial also from the dramaturgical point of view. In *Kusum* the most important is the last healing session where the evil spirits are finally leaving the family and swearing not to return. In *Leap* there are several significant moments and steps in Keshava's spiritual path; maybe the most important is his spiritual re-birth, when he takes the initiation (*Hari-Nama*). Keshava, originally Kenneth, makes vows before the deity and the guru to avoid intoxication, illicit sex, meat eating and gambling. He promises also to chant 16 rounds of the *mahamantra* daily and gets tulasi beads from his guru for chanting. (King, 2007: 154) Kenneth gets his spiritual name from the guru. He becomes Keshava Madhava das.

This initiation had already happened several years earlier. I had a problem: how to construct it and how to express the importance of it? Luckily Keshava had a videotape about the occasion. We filmed a situation where Keshava is watching and rewinding the tape at home. Material is manipulated, repeated and slowed down to show how essential it is to Keshava. This came clear also in the interviews we made with him for the film. I wanted to point this out also visually and cinematically.

Before his religious seeking Kenneth was a parachutist. He had a few photos from his parachute jumps and skydiving. This gave me an idea to use this as a metaphor in the film. The idea of parachuting, stepping out of the plane, taking a leap and falling down first freely then with the help of a parachute fits very well to reflect Keshava's path and experience. We edited some old archive film-material together with Keshava's tape about his initiation and made a sequence out of it. This manipulated parachuting material was used several times in the film, for instance, in the beginning as the title scene and in the end. It gave also the name for the film: *Leap*.

Leap also refers to Søren Kierkegaard's concept of *leap of faith* (Hannay 1991, 98-99). Keshava makes his own leap, and actually that is what the film is about.

### **Outside and inside**

Common to both film-maker and anthropologist or researcher of religious studies is the tendency to identify with the subjects and maintain a distance at the same time. Empathy, the ability to see from the inside is a key feature of both (Anttila, 2006: 344). In anthropology, the internal point of view of community is called the emic-level and the external, distanced point of view, the etic-level (Eriksen, 2004: 58-59). The idea of emic-etic distinction, without using necessarily these words, has proven to be a very useful model also for documentary filmmaking.

To get inside a community takes time, as both researcher and film-maker have to build up the relationships and trust. Very often the film-maker becomes friends with his subjects. He or she identifies him- or herself with the subjects. But for film-making this is not enough. Also the audience have to identify with characters. In this kind of observational documentary film the meanings and content are usually constructed via the main characters. That is why one of the most important decisions is the selection of the main characters. The film-maker spends a lot of time seeking out the right persons. The main character has to be in an interesting life situation, somehow cinematic and also willing to cooperate (Aaltonen, 2010: 96-98).

Both Kusum and Keshava were interesting persons in interesting situations. Keshava was able to explain his choices and it was quite easy to identify with him. But Kusum was confused, in the middle of crises, and not communicative. This was for me and the editor a big problem. How can one get audiences to identify themselves with a 14-year old silent girl? Finally we edited in the beginning of the film section where Kusum is afterwards smilingly telling what happened to her. We see that she is happy, normal and clever, a person for the audience to identify with. Only after this section do we see what happens to her during the illness and healing process. We tested audiences for their identification with the characters. In test screenings, the audience identified themselves with different characters: mostly with the protagonist Kusum, but some also with the worried father Kaushal and a couple of doctors, even with the healer.

Because the topic was strange and complicated, I wanted to maintain a simplistic form emphasising the story. I hope Kusum's story moves something inside of us and helps us to understand how similar we all are as human beings, even if our cultures appear to be worlds apart. The family has their share of problems, but are not those problems actually very much the same that any family, anywhere, would have?

In research and in documentary film there should also be some distance. René Gothóni writes, that the anthropologist doing the field work is in the dynamic triangle, whose extreme points are empathy, alienation and commitment. Empathy is a basic prerequisite for all the field research, but alienation and taking a distance is the basic requirement for all critical study. "It means seeing things and doing analysis from the intersubjective, rational perspective." (Gothóni, 1997: 142) During field work, the researcher must commit himself and identify himself with the situation as comprehensively as possible. In the second phase, when writing, the researcher withdraws from his commitments to reach the intersubjective perspective. (Gothóni, 1997: 143) This is very similar to the analytical editing phase of documentary film-making. Film-material is screened and analyzed in order to find out what there really is, and what kind of synthesis, e.g. final film, can be made out of that. The etic-level can be seen in the way the film is edited, in how filmmakers have constructed meanings by combining images, sound and scenes.

In *Leap* some distance is created for instance in the scene where the guru is giving a speech in an ecstatic meeting. The intensity and feeling of power is done by using several close-ups of the guru when he is looking at thousands of his devotees yelling the Hare Krishna -mantra. We made the scene longer than in real life. By editing the film-maker is interpreting and commenting. This kind of commenting has to be very discrete in this observational documentary style. One should not make too much distance to characters and narration.

### **Transcendental style**

Religious films often include elements which can be called meditative or the style of the film can be called meditative. Film-makers mentioned in this connection are for instance Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Terence Malick (Anker, 2011: 342—344; Söderberg Widding, 2005: 85). The philosopher Stanley Cavell uses the term “meditative” to describe the style of Terence Malick,

especially his way of looking at aspects of the natural world (Anker, 2011: 342). Meditative cinema may answer questions that language cannot: the film's verbal questions are responded to visually. Although *Kusum* or *Leap* are not meditative, they certainly include scenes which could be described as meditative. For instance there are scenes of silence. Keshava is also meditating in a few scenes. For me they are important, also because of the rhythm of the film.

Kusum and Keshava experience the world of spirits and the world of Krishna beyond this mundane world. This can be called transcendental; it is beyond physical laws, independent of the material world. The transcendental is ineffable, beyond words and beyond normal reception. The transcendental can be reached for instance in rituals (Anttonen, 2011: 15).

Film director and scriptwriter Paul Schrader writes about transcendental style, concentrating on cinemas of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer. For Schrader transcendental style expresses the Holy (Schrader, 1972: 8—9). Religious experience is presented either by abundance or by sparsity. In Schrader's view, Hollywood religious spectacles overuse abundant means. (Schrader, 1972:162) Schrader writes: "The transcendently-minded film-maker finds himself in a unique position: he must properly dispose of a surfeit of abundant means (cinema's inherent "realism"). He cannot ignore or neglect these means, but must turn them to his advantage." In transcendental style the film-maker proceeds from abundant means to sparse means. (Schrader, 1972: 160) Schrader thinks that the film-maker who tries to express the transcendent must gradually eliminate the abundant means and the earthly rationale behind them (Schrader, 1972: 164).

In *Leap* there are both kind of scenes: sparse and abundant. There are colorful rituals, celebrations which are spectacular. They are full of colors, sounds, music, movement, smells, tastes.... On the other hand there are moments of silence and meditation, moments when time almost stops. I wanted to have changes in the rhythm of the film, and I wanted also the feelings of external and internal to vary. In *Kusum*, restricting the main character's perception is a clear example about sparse means.

### Some conclusions

The question, how to present religious experience in documentary film was asked in the beginning of this article. Answering this question, there are at least six different means to accomplish this goal:

1. Verbalizing the experience; characters speaking, interviews, testimony
2. Rituals, where the connection to the holy is represented
3. Metaphors
4. Meditative scenes
5. Transcendental film-making
6. Fiction

Strategies 1, 2 and 3 are used in these two films. The voice of the character is strongly heard in these films without conventional narration (often called ironically ‘voice-of-God’). Both films are using some metaphors, although the style follows the tradition of observational cinema. There are also some meditative scenes and elements of transcendental style in both *Kusum* and *Leap*. Fiction is not used in these films, but it would be one possibility to illustrate the holy or transcendental. Traditional religious films, for instance biblical spectacles, are doing this, but also the Hare Krishna movement is favouring romantic, fantasy-type new-age illustrations in the movement’s own videos. This kind of approach does not work in the context of documentary film.

*Kusum* and *Leap* are dealing with religious experience, but are they religious films? Film is considered religious when “it evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery” (Bird, 1982: 14) or has devotion and dedication to the holy as a basic aspect (Paloheimo 1979: 11—12). That is not the case in these films. Could the style of the films be described as transcendental in the

meaning that Schrader puts it? Maybe not. The topic of the films is the experience of the characters, not the transcendental by itself. The documentary style is more observational, approaching the traditions of anthropological film. *Kusum* and *Leap* are neither Eliadean hierophanies, as they do not offer audiences connection to the holy or transcendental. Neither *Kusum* nor *Leap* have a deeper religious or theological level. In other words, both films can be understood even when the viewer is a non-believer. *Kusum* and *Leap* are not religious films, but they are films about religion. Their approach is rather anthropological or sociological to focus on religion as a social and psychological phenomenon.

However, both films can be interpreted either so that there exists something transcendental or not. *Kusum* and *Leap* are open for different kinds of interpretations, both religious and mundane. There are also special ethical aspects to be taken into consideration. According to my ethics, the documentary film-maker has to respect the real people as well as their religion, beliefs and worldview, even when it is not identical with his own. I often favor film-making where the interpretation is left open. For instance in *Kusum*, it is possible to understand the story totally from the point of view of Bhagat's spiritual Hindu perspective. At the same time, the film also opens up to an explanation which is in harmony with a Western medical and psychological explanation. Thinking this way, it is not so important whether the film-maker is a believer, Christian or Hindu, an agnostic or even an atheist. Different voices, and explanations should be possible to find from the final film.

Altogether, documentary film is an effective tool for interpretation of religious or spiritual experience. Besides illustrating religion, its cult, rites and rituals, the film-maker has a wide selection of cinematic means and strategies to interpret it.

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