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## From the Editor

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## From the Editor

### Abstract

The Editor introduces the April 1999 issue of the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

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The most striking feature of the Sundance Film Festival which I recently attended was, for me, the importance of making a film in one's own language. This was especially true for the movie, *Heart of Light*, which is the first feature length film produced in Icelandic, the language of Greenland. The pride of the director and others associated with this film, pride in making a film in one's own language, was both obvious and endearing.

It also was clear that other directors were proud of making films in their own language. Since many of the films related to religion came out of the world cinema portion of the festival, I saw movies in Spanish, Japanese, French, and Icelandic. In every case there was a sense that using the native language was a crucial element in the movie's artistic success, even if the use of a native language would hinder the movie's financial success. These movies stand in contrast to the most common experience abroad, which is that a movie is made in English and then dubbed into the native language.

One explanation for the prominent use of the English language in film is that the film industry in the United States is so dominant throughout the world that it imposes its own will on much of the world's film production. The sad result is that other cultures remain second class citizens in the world of film.

I think that there are really two important issues here. First, I think that those of us who teach religion and film have a moral obligation to show foreign language films as a way of showing respect for other cultures. This is part of what people call diversity, and it is an aspect of showing films that cannot be ignored. Second, while most of our students are greatly influenced by movies, they are most often influenced by English language movies. By showing foreign language movies in our religion and film classes we can teach our students how to enjoy and appreciate a much wider range of movies. As our students grow in their experience of film, there will be more demand for films that are not limited to the Hollywood blockbuster. The result will be that our students will see many more great movies than they otherwise would.

IN THIS ISSUE, Linda Ehrlich identifies the ways in which *Sleeping Man*<sup>1</sup> (1996) shows us various spiritual qualities of Buddhism. The movie is at its best when it shows spiritual qualities, rather than when it teaches about them. A great advantage of film over text in relation to Buddhism is that it can show spiritual qualities. (For a similar account of film in relation to Buddhism, see Michael Gillespie's "Picturing the Way in *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*,"<sup>2</sup> in vol. 1, no.1, 1997.

For several years Adele Reinhartz has been informally keeping track of the appearance of the Bible in movies. "Scripture on the Silver Screen"<sup>3</sup> is a brief

survey of what she has discovered. She divides the filmic appearances of the Bible into three categories: 1) the appearance of the physical text; 2) references in films to Biblical passages; and 3) re-creation of biblical stories with varying degrees of transformation. Most popular in the final category are stories about Jesus-like characters that are not directly about the life of Jesus. (For film portrayals of Jesus, see her "Jesus in Film: Hollywood Perspectives on the Jewishness of Jesus", in vol. 2, no. 2, 1998. For more about category three, see Matthew McEver's "The Messianic Figure in Film," also in vol. 2., no. 2, 1998.)

This issue also includes the report on the 1999 Sundance Film Festival,<sup>4</sup> mentioned above. The films discussed connect with religion in various ways. Many of these independent films are not like to play at your local theater. The hope is that when readers find one of these movies interesting they will seek out copies at the local video store or in one of the many video catalogs.

Bryan Stone has surveyed 180 contemporary films, looking for a connection between religion and violence.<sup>5</sup> He concludes that religion is frequently used in film to justify violence or to enhance its entertainment value. In either case, religion in film supports the view that violence is "natural" or "right". Since these uses of religion in film are so prevalent, at least the cumulative effect of watching very many popular movies may be that viewers come to accept violence as natural or right.

Finally, our colleague at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Dale Stover, had a special opportunity to interview director, Anh Crutcher, about the making of her movie, *Yakoana*.<sup>6</sup> The interview presents a "spheric" introduction to what we might learn from a film regarding indigenous populations.

- WLB

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<sup>1</sup> *Stillness in Motion: The Sleeping Man of Oguri Kohei* (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Ehrlich.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> Picturing the Way in Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gillespi.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> "Scripture on the Silver Screen" (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/scripture.htm>)

<sup>4</sup> 1999 Sundance Film Festival (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/sundance.htm>)

<sup>5</sup> Religion and Violence in Popular Film (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Violence.htm>)

<sup>6</sup> The Story Behind *YAKOANA*: an Interview with Anh Crutcher (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Yakoana.htm>)