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## Facing Forward, Looking Back: Religion and Film Studies in the Last Decade

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## Facing Forward, Looking Back: Religion and Film Studies in the Last Decade

### Abstract

On November 17, 2012, at the American Academy of Religion's National Meeting, the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group sponsored a session entitled, "Facing Forward, Looking Back: Religion and Film Studies in the Last Decade." The session focused on four recent books in the field of Religion and Film: John Lyden's *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals* (NYU, 2003); S. Brent Plate's *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Wallflower Press, 2009); Antonio Sison's *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (Routledge, 2012); and Sheila Nayar's *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the 'Genuinely' Religious Film* (Continuum, 2012). Each author was present to make remarks on his or her book, and then three respondents made remarks on each of the books as well. The respondents were Stefanie Knauss, Rachel Wagner, and Jolyon Thomas. Joe Kickasola introduced the session, and moderated the discussion that followed. This session represented a rare opportunity for scholars of the field of Religion and Film to reflect on the past, present, and future directions of the field, and the *Journal of Religion and Film* is happy to be able to include the remarks of all the presenters here.

### Authors

Joseph Kickasola, John C. Lyden, S. Brent Plate, Antonio Sison, Sheila J. Nayar, Stefanie Knauss, Rachel Wagner, and Jolyon Thomas

**Joe Kickasola: Introduction**

Good morning. My name is Joe Kickasola. I teach at Baylor University and I'm privileged to introduce this panel and share my perspective on it, which may be somewhat different from those that are here in the room. I come at this topic as a filmmaker and film theorist interested in religious faith and experience, not as a theologian interested in film. In my own field, very few people are interested in faith as a point of focus, despite its obvious importance in human life. I'm sure you all could articulate the reasons for this strange omission far better than I, but I puzzled over it most intensely as I was writing a book on the filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski. In that process, it became clear that to ignore the faith questions – and, more importantly, the dynamics of questioning and wrestling with faith – would be to completely miss the heart and soul of that filmmaker's work. The importance of the sacred, and the way it suffuses life and cinema became more and more obvious as I worked on subsequent projects. To make a long story short, after 16 years of thinking on this topic, I am here at my first AAR with several of the authors who have guided me along the way.

This session provides an overview of "religion and film" as a young, but important discipline, offering critical commentary on academic works from the recent past, while projecting new and important topics and methods to consider into the future. The panel surveys four important books from the past decade: John Lyden's *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), S. Brent Plate's *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Wallflower/Columbia UP, 2008), Sheila Nayar's *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religious Film* (Continuum, 2012), and Antonio Sison's *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (Routledge, 2012). All have

played important roles in establishing the discipline as it stands today. But there are particular virtues of each of these books, which I'd like you to briefly consider, as a way of introduction to the panel.

John Lyden's *Film as Religion* helped the discipline out of the small rut it had created for itself. He moved us beyond explicitly religious films and issues of religious representation to religious behavior, broadly defined, and the ways in which cinema *matters* to people in ways that are strikingly similar to the ways religion matters to the religious. In other words, Lyden helped get religious scholars out of the pews and traditional church buildings into the culture, without watering down what religion is. He helps us see how thoroughly religious films really are in their social functions, but also how thoroughly religious people are in their film viewing (however disguised and "unrecognizable" their religions have become).

Brent Plate succeeded in articulating the relevance of religious categories like worldmaking, myth and ritual to the experience of viewing a film. For me, however, the book's chief virtue was to employ phenomenological, material and corporeal theories of reception, beyond the limiting linguistic-based models of traditional film theory. I'd broached these theories of engagement and embodiment before, but Brent did so uniquely, with religion front and center. Believing that religion informs far more of our films and film viewings than we usually account for, he showed us how we make meaning – and search for ultimate meanings – in unlikely places. Additionally, we don't just "make" them with words and concepts, but through our dynamic interactions with the pushes, pulls, rhythms and riffs of the world around us, as well as the ways we negotiate the boundaries of space and time. Instead of the typical discussions of the "religion and film" film canon (*Babette's Feast*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, etc.) he challenged us to see, and feel, the sacred in films as diverse as

*Chocolat*, *Antonia's Line*, and Stan Brakhage's experimental mortuary film *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*.

Sheila Nayar makes a unique and significant contribution to the religion and film discussion by employing paradigms from media ecology (such as orality and alphabetic literacy). We all know that the forms of communication media shape their content, but we rarely consider enough how forms shape *us*, altering the way we conceive, receive, and practice religion as well as film viewing. Her award-winning work offers ground on which to do so, and one of its special rewards is a larger appreciation for different contours of the sacred across cultures.

Antonio ("Ton") Sison's book expands this multicultural trajectory, both in use of sources (the Dutch humanist theologian Edward Schillebeeckx) as well as the scope of films and filmmakers he considers (spanning virtually every habitable continent on the earth). He has pushed us to see religion, cinema, and, most importantly, their *intersection* to be a matter of global significance, helping us to describe, understand and fully realize "the human" and how the Divine dwells in it and through it. I personally appreciate the fact that both Sheila and Ton have come from film-making backgrounds, and so helpfully point us towards an examination of the form of cinema as a modulation of sacred life.

Each panelist will give us a summary of the impetus behind his or her work, some reflection on it, and assess its impact on their subsequent projects.

Our esteemed respondents are well-published scholars in their own right with a variety of specialities, demonstrating the range of impact our esteemed panelists have had. Stefanie Knauss of Humboldt University Berlin has published extensively on the "bodily dimension of religious and filmic experience," sexuality, media and theology. Rachel Wagner, of Ithaca

College, is the author of the increasingly relevant *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. Finally, Jolyon Baraka Thomas has published a unique, focused, topical volume entitled *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan*.

Please welcome our contributors.

**John Lyden: *Filmgoing as a Religious Activity***

I would first like to say how honored I feel to be part of this panel with my fellow authors in the field of Religion and Film; I have followed their work for years, and have greatly appreciated all the contributions that each of them has made to this relatively new field. Each of us has a somewhat different approach to the subject matter, and that is actually one of the things I celebrate the most about this field of Religion and Film; there isn't an orthodoxy that tells us how it has to be done, and we can encourage each other to think outside the box and to go in new directions. I strongly support the work of other scholars of Religion and Film precisely because I want there to be a rich dialogue between the different views, in order that all our understandings of this new area of study can be enriched.

As my book is the oldest of the four, I am in the position to comment on the nature of the study of Religion and Film before any of us wrote our books, and also how the field has changed since then to include the contributions of the other authors represented here. It is hard for me to believe, but *Film as Religion* celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publication this coming spring in 2013, and people are still reading it and talking about it, which cheers me a great deal.

Let me very briefly summarize what led me to write the book. I was trained as a theologian, and wrote my dissertation on Karl Barth and Immanuel Kant, focusing on issues related to epistemology and theological method—nothing directly to do with theology of culture, or popular culture. But when I found myself teaching at a small college in Nebraska in the 1990s, I began to seek ways to connect with students, to convey ideas about religion in a form to which they could relate. This led me to teaching Religion and Science Fiction courses, which included film, and then Religion and Film courses. I had no formal training in film or popular culture studies, but I have been an avid amateur follower and analyzer of film all my life, and I found ways to look at film that connected with religious studies fairly easily. I also have to confess, I did look at films basically as “texts” to analyze, following a literary model to some extent, but I have since repented of the error of my ways as I have learned the limitations of that approach.

Still, at the time, I didn’t find very many books that I liked on the subject of studying film with religion in mind. When I heard talks on the subject at conferences, I found that there were many people writing about this who apparently did not know any more than I did about film, and some seemed to know considerably less. Some were interested in imposing a theological (usually Christian) agenda on popular film. In spite of being a Christian theologian, I had no interest in doing this, as it struck me that one cannot truly understand the film if it is chiefly seen as a means of producing grist for one’s own theological mill. On the other hand, a number of scholars were importing methodologies from secular film studies, dabbling in semiotics or Marxist analysis—again, not always in ways that seemed to enhance understanding of the film in relation to religion. I was therefore led to question, what do these methods have to do with the study of

*Religion and Film?* What can our set of disciplines in Religious Studies bring to the study of film, or of popular culture generally?

I answered that question with another; why not treat Film as if it were a Religion, and develop that as a method for the study of Religion and Film? Why not apply the insights from interreligious dialogue (something I had studied quite a bit) to the study of culture, in particular popular culture, including film? Using Clifford Geertz's functionalist, anthropological definition of religion as starting point, I looked for the structures in films and the reception of film that are like models of or for reality, myths or morals, and rituals that allow the participant to connect to the world of the film. This takes the film seriously, listens to what it "says," but also looks at how it functions for those who view films. What does it do for them? How does it support or help them develop their values, their worldviews? This can and does incorporate ideological analysis of film, which I never rejected, but it puts it in context—after all, ideological analysis is one way to study religion, but not the only way. Films do express the ideologies of their societies, and their filmmakers, and their audiences who may find meanings in them that were not intended by the filmmakers. (As just one example, anti-war films may become pro-war films when seen by those with a pro-war ideology; films that intend to show the useless sacrifice of war may be interpreted as showing the grandeur and value of that same sacrifice.) We then need to look closely at the "text," the film itself, including the film's form and technical aspects, and its production and distribution, as well as how it is received by viewers; what do they do with it, and how do they make meaning out of it? There will not be one meaning, as there are many films, many genres, many audiences, infinite possible interpretations of a particular film—but that doesn't mean we have nothing to talk about, as we can see what was put in the film and what



can be found in the film by different groups. This is just like religion, itself a part of culture, constructed by people to meet their needs and express their worldviews and values.

How well did this work, and what would I change? For one thing, September 11 happened after I wrote the first draft in 2001, and although I did make some revisions as late as summer 2002, at that point I did not see fully enough how deeply ideological American culture was to become after 9/11 and how much a role popular culture was to play in that. Ideologies supporting violent sacrifice and scapegoating were and are alive and well, in movies as well as in other forms of popular culture. I now believe I may have been too optimistic in my book about the prospects for readings of violent films that do not support violence, particularly violence against those who came to be targeted as America's enemies, such as Muslims. As a pacifist who likes action movies, I had always thought there must be many people like myself who would not literally emulate the behavior of the characters in those films, but who find them cathartically useful as a liminal exercise which allows us to question and reflect on values, as well as have some healthy emotional discharge. Unfortunately, I believe I underestimated the ability of Americans to be literalistic about such films in developing their values, and the ability of many to find support for violent ideologies in popular culture.

I also believe that those ideologies are more intentionally developed than I had suspected, whether that intention is conscious or unconscious. I take Girard and other theorists on this subject more seriously than I used to. Again, I would reiterate that I never rejected ideological analysis, but now I have a greater appreciation of it and I am more likely to use it in my own analyses. When I have the chance, I would like to write a book on the depiction of violence and war in film, taking note of how films reflect and shape our views on the justification of war. I would like this text to be one that can be used to teach about just war theory and pacifism, so that

students can better understand the arguments against war, and better understand how popular films skew our understandings of the issues of war by creating ideal, mythological and largely ahistorical narratives in which pacifists are cowards, villains are cardboard stereotypes of evil that require extermination, violent heroes are always motivated by righteous reasons and fight purely, and victory is secured largely without the loss of innocent lives—in fact, there is almost never a recognition that innocent people are killed when we strike our enemies, as only “bad guys” get killed by us in the movies.

I also have developed a greater appreciation and understanding of Audience Reception theory and research. This is something that I called for in my book, even while I recognized I had little data as not enough had been gathered. That is still the case, although there is greater recognition of the need for such data, and there have been some efforts to gather it.

Technological developments have helped, as now one can find audience responses to films all over the internet, so one does not necessarily need to stand outside a movie theater with a clipboard and some questions to get some ideas of how audiences read films; you can read blog posts on websites like imdb.com and get quite a bit of insight into how various viewers saw a film. I have also become more aware of Cultural Studies and the Circuit of Culture, which I would define as including the stages of production of the film; the film itself; its distribution, promotion, and marketing; and the reception of the film by audiences. Cultural Studies also points to how audiences make meanings out of artifacts that may be at odds with what the makers intended, thus creating subversive or contrary readings of films within subcommunities. Cultural Studies also calls attention to how social identities are shaped by cultural products as well as how they contribute to the shaping of cultural products; filmmakers make films that they think will sell because people want to see them, and in this way audiences influence what and

how films are made, but films in turn influence audience tastes and values. Greater awareness of Popular Culture studies has led me to see that my insights about Film apply to many aspects of Culture, and indeed that we do not need to separate out something called “popular” culture from the rest of “culture.” Different groups have different popular culture products through which their identity is shaped, and we don’t need to call one of these “popular” and another one not, just because more people bought one of them than another. What is popular in one context may not be so in another. Consider a set of films as diverse as these—*Star Wars*, *Office Space*, *Harold and Maude*, *Blue like Jazz*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Fight Club*, *Hedwig and the Angry Itch*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Pink Flamingos*, *The Sound of Music*, *Gone with the Wind*—and you will see that they each have their own audiences and fan groups, each finding different meanings in them. It is indeed hard to define what makes a film “popular.”

Since writing *Film as Religion*, my own views have developed then through this greater appreciation of Cultural Studies and the study of Popular Culture, and that is one reason why I am now co-editing with Eric Mazur the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, which should be out next year. This is about much more than just film, but through developing this proposal and the articles for the volume, I started to appreciate the diversity of aspects of popular culture, artifacts, media, and practices, including television, radio, film, internet, sports, music, food, shopping, fashion, toys, games, comics, monuments, and tchotchkes (to name just a partial list of the topics covered). I have been led to see the topic of Religion and Film in a much wider context as part of a set of cultural practices through which people make meaning and interact with religious values, concepts, and practices.

I have also seen changes in the field of Religion and Film in the directions it has gone in the last ten years, and the books by my colleagues here are excellent examples of this.

Theologians have become less eisegetical, more aware of film technique and less likely to simply impose an ill-informed theological agenda on a film; they are more likely to listen to what the film is saying, even if their primary interest is to engage in a theological dialogue with it. Those who incorporate film theory have expanded a range of approaches as well, mirroring how film studies itself has developed so that it is less likely to simply impose an ideological reading on film without attention to audiences and what they do with films. Again, cultural studies has made us all aware that audiences create their own readings of films, not necessarily imbibing the ideology the filmmakers may have had. Simplistic or absolutist readings are suspect and to be avoided. There has also been considerable progress made in the study of global cinema, so that we are no longer limiting our focus to films made primarily in Hollywood; my fellow panelists here are among the most significant contributors to this study. I applaud the work of all those who have made these advances, and I am happy to have been able to advance the diversity of the field of Religion and Film both through editing the Routledge Companion on the subject, which sought to provide a comprehensive introduction to the nature of the field at this time, as well as in my role as Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, which publishes a wide range of essays demonstrating diversity in both methodology and content. I have greatly enjoyed seeing this field develop and being able to support the work of other scholars in this study, and I look forward to seeing many more new ideas and approaches developing in the years to come.\

**S. Brent Plate: *The Altar and the Screen***

{Adapted from S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, London/New York: Wallflower Press/Columbia UP, 2009}

All invention and creation consist primarily of a new relationship between known parts.

-Maya Deren<sup>1</sup>

The lights dim, the crowd goes quiet, and viewers begin to leave worries of this world behind, anticipating instead a new and mysterious alternative world that will soon envelop their eyes and ears. The screen lights up with previews of coming attractions, each beginning with that same deep, male voice:

"In a world, where passion is forbidden . . ."

"In a world, where you must fight to be free . . ."

"In a world, where your best friend is a dog . . ."

Films create worlds. They do not passively mimic or directly display what is "out there," but actively reshape elements of the lived world and twist them in new ways that are projected on screen and given over to an audience. The attraction and promise of cinema is the way films offer glimpses into other worlds, even if only for 90 minutes at a time. We watch, hoping to escape the world we live in, to find utopian projections for improving our world, or to heed prophetic warnings for what our world might look like if we don't change our ways and get it right. In the theater we live in one world while viewing another, catching a glimpse of "what if?"

Religions and films each create alternate worlds utilizing the raw, abstract material of space and time, bending them each in new ways and forcing them to fit particular standards and desires. Film does this through camera angles and movements, framing devices, lighting, costuming, acting, editing, and other aspects of production. Religions achieve this through setting apart particular objects and periods of time and deeming them "sacred," through attention to specially charged objects (symbols), through the telling of stories (myths), and by gathering people together to focus on some particular event (ritual). The result of both religion and film is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or a world we wish to avoid at all costs. The world presented at the altar and on the screen connects a projected world to the world of the everyday.

In the background of my argument are the world-building and world-maintaining processes of religion brought out in Peter Berger's now-canonic work, *The Sacred Canopy* (and continued by Nelson Goodman, William Paden, and others). We humans, the sociologist of religion suggests, collectively create ordered worlds around us to provide us with a sense of stability and security, "in the never completed enterprise of building a humanly meaningful world."<sup>2</sup> Reality, like religion and like cinema, is socially constructed, allowing its members to engage with it on deeply felt, personal levels.

Ever important is the grounding of human laws and regulations in cosmic structures. The *nomos* (the meaningful societal order) must be in synch with the *cosmos* (the universal, metaphysical order). There is a dialectical, on-going process between the human and divine realms, and it is religion that supplies the link: "Religion implies the farthest reach of man's self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is **projected** into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to

conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, cinema "projects" a particular human order onto a screen, promoting its productions as a link between the "here below" and "up above"--on mountain tops, in the clouds, encircling the earth. At the same time, the screen is literally created to be *larger than life*. Transcendent of this-worldly concerns, rules, or behaviors the cinema enables a god's eye view of things, even if we have long ago given up the "heaven above/earth below" cosmic separation.

Indeed, Berger himself states that while most of history has seen religion as key to creating such a meaningful totality, in modern times "there have been thoroughly secular attempts at cosmization."<sup>4</sup> Science has most importantly made the attempt, but here I am suggesting that we think about cinema as another audacious attempt. Cinema may be part of the symbol-creating apparatus of culture, yet it can also aspire to more, to world-encompassing visions of the nomos and cosmos.

Meanwhile, in the practice of film viewing, the two worlds begin to collide, leaking ideas and images across the semi-permeable boundaries between world-on-screen and world-on-the-streets. Such world-colliding activity is entertainingly exemplified in Woody Allen's 1985 *Purple Rose of Cairo*. Here, the fluidity between the worlds is enacted when the actor named Tom Baxter (played by Jeff Daniels) steps down off the screen and enters the "real world" in which Cecilia (Mia Farrow) sits, seeking relief from her otherwise troubled life. In Allen's film, two worlds cross and both characters are altered because of their shared desires that transcend the boundaries of the screen.

[http://i.cdn.turner.com/v5cache/TCM/cvp/container/mediaroom\\_embed.swf?context=embed&videoId=244843](http://i.cdn.turner.com/v5cache/TCM/cvp/container/mediaroom_embed.swf?context=embed&videoId=244843)

Nonetheless, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* does not let go of the fact that there *is* a screen in place between Tom and Cecilia. The screen is a border that is crossable, yet there are distinctions between the two sides, for example when Tom enters Cecilia's world and takes her out for a night on the town and tries to pay for dinner with the fake prop money he has in his pocket. They eventually come to realize they live in two worlds and a permanent connection is impossible. Of course, all this takes place *on* screen, and not in the real world *per se*.

Woody Allen's film, while delightfully self-referential about the experience of cinema, also tells us much about the experience of religion. Among the myths, rituals, symbols, doctrines, sacred times and places, and ethical components of religions, the faithful are presented with alternate worlds, prescriptions for a better life, and imaginative tools for re-viewing the world as it is, just as the filmed world provides an alternate reality for Mia Farrow's character in *The Purple Rose*. Religions provide promises, warnings, and compelling narratives for behaving in particular (and often peculiar) ways. In each, there is an initial world lived in, and then a secondary, projected, idealized world. In the midst of this, communities of religious adherents work out their lives betwixt and between the two worlds. Powerful stories in the form of myths keep religious imaginations inspired, while aesthetic performances in the form of rituals keep human bodies moving to a rhythm. Even so, when the story is over, when the chanter has finished, when the feast has been eaten, we return to our everyday world. The two worlds seem to remain in a state of separation, yet there are many avenues for connection between them.

To make the connection between filmmaking and worldmaking stronger, in a kind of verbal montage, I here offer two quotes:



A ritual provides a frame. The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft-repeated "Once upon a time" creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales. . . . Framing and boxing limit experience, shut in desired themes or shut out intruding ones. (Mary Douglas)<sup>5</sup>

Whatever its shape, the [camera] *frame* makes the image finite. The film image is bounded, limited. From an implicitly continuous world, the frame *selects* a slice to show us. . . . Characters enter the image from somewhere and go off to another area--offscreen space. (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson)<sup>6</sup>

Note, the anthropologist Douglas is not talking about filmmaking, and film theorists Bordwell and Thompson are by no means discussing religion, yet the formal nature of the two operations shares some uncanny similarity.

To get at some of the specifics of this engagement between worlds, we have to be clear that *while verbal stories are part* of the activities of myths and rituals, myths and rituals have *always* been multimedia, and multisensory. Myths have seldom in human history been primarily understood as written texts to be read alone by single individuals (as they tend to be in the modern age by both practitioners and scholars), but have functioned more like "screenplays" that are recited aloud and acted out in ritual performance. That myths might be *seen* as well as *heard* is not unusual within religions. Navajo sand paintings, Tibetan thangkas, and Japanese gardens are all visual, material modes of mythologizing. We need bodies and sense organs to understand some of these primary elements of religion.

To further this point, I juxtapose two visual examples from the opening shots of two radically different films, George Lucas's *Star Wars* and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Both function mythologically, apart from, and beyond, words.

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/h5psCjg5-cl>

In *Star Wars*, the establishing shot that follows the verbal beginning provides an introduction to the mythic structures of the film, and indicates why the film is not just another film about boy-meets-girl, and/or good guys vs. bad guys. The shot is set in outer space, with nothing but stars dotting an otherwise black sky--no planets or anything to give us an initial grounding. Immediately thereafter, the title "STAR WARS" appears on screen accompanied by a bang of orchestral music (by John Williams). The audience is jolted, excited, by what is to come. As the triumphant, heavy-percussion music continues, a prologue scrolls up the screen, further setting up verbal details of what has happened and what is to come. Viewers are caught up in the narrative, thrust into the middle of action through these words and music.

But the grander mythical cues come just as the words scroll up the screen and disappear into the ether. At that precise instant, the jubilant, percussion-heavy music also all but disappears, leaving only a solo flute playing alongside chimes. For five seconds there is utter calm: the heavens are in their place, the music plays softly, soothingly; there is a cosmic order to the universe. But all we are allowed is five seconds, for then the camera, which has been stationary until now, tilts down to reveal a blue/orange-hued planet below, with other planets visible in the distance. As the camera tilts downward, violin strings frantically rise up and the percussion crashes just as two space ships are caught in battle, firing laser guns at each other. Chaos erupts into the cosmos, wars emerge in the midst of stars.

By setting up the establishing shot in outer space, by suggesting an ordered calm to a universe and then introducing chaotic elements through sound and image, Lucas triggers many elements common in cosmogonies: In the beginning, chaos and cosmos are in battle. In myths as diverse as the Hebrew, Iroquois, Babylonian, and Greek creation stories, the grand struggle in these myth's "establishing shots," is that of cosmos vs. chaos. And through history, such myths indicate, this battle perpetually remains just below the surface of things as humans (or other volitional, sentient creatures) enter into this struggle, creating their own *nomic* order. *Star Wars*, writ large, is about stars and wars, cosmos and chaos, and then about relating the human social order to the cosmic order. In the beginning, visually and mythologically, all the remaining 10+ hours of the six *Star Wars* films are set up within the few seconds of the establishing shot in the first film. The film announces itself as far more than a space-age story, and instead tells us that these wars are the wars of humankind. Which is to say it is no less ambitious than a myth.

Such visual mythologizing is created in other films as well, and here I turn to the surrealistic visions of David Lynch to explore this further. Here is the opening clip from his 1986 film *Blue Velvet*.

[http://www.youtube.com/embed/nM975\\_Ld9S0](http://www.youtube.com/embed/nM975_Ld9S0)

The opening shots introduce an orderly world created through vertical and horizontal spatial dimensions, primary colors, and the 1950s hit song "Blue Velvet." Shot one begins in the sky, blue with scattered clouds, as the camera tilts down to the vertical array of a white picket fence. Eventually red tulips appear against the white fence with blue sky in the background. The larger themes of the film could have fit anywhere, and yet Lynch makes clear that this is the United States in the 1950s, as the red, white, and blue composition of the first shot is extended

by the proverbial white picket fences of U.S. suburbia. The next several shots are edited so as to alternate between horizontal and vertical spatial orientations. Red, white, blue, and yellow colors dominate, while mundane, neighborly images of fire trucks and crosswalks appear. The viewer is eventually brought inside, to a living room where a woman sits sipping coffee while watching daytime television. It is a beautiful day in the neighborhood until we see what the woman is watching: a black-and-white close-up image of a man's hand holding a revolver. This is the first subtle disturbance in the so-far cosmically ordered world--not much, but enough to knock the neat and tidy perspective off kilter. The next images bring us back outside to a man watering his garden (later revealed to be the protagonist's father, Mr. Beaumont), just as strange noises begin to emerge from the water spigot. A kink in the hose halts the water flow and while the man attempts to untangle it, he suffers a stroke. The camera then resumes its downward tilt, this time passing below Mr. Beaumont--who is now lying on the grass with water still spurting out of the now-phallic hose as a dog attempts to drink the water--delving into the earth below. Here the creepy-crawly domain of bugs and insects are revealed to be scampering over each other, all of which is reinforced by an eerie soundtrack, making the viewer feel as if they are truly in that very underworld. The remainder of the film continues with such premonitions.

Through sound and image, *Blue Velvet* begins with revelations of a world similar to what the *Star Wars* opening shots reveal: Cosmos above, chaos below. In this way, these two films present worlds both radically new and entirely ancient; in this most modern of visual media we find filmmakers relying on primeval cosmologies where peace and harmony exist *above*, and chaos subsists *below*. Yet, rather than leaving us in the mythically distant "long time ago and far, far away," *Blue Velvet* brings the cosmos down to earth, to our neighborhood, connecting up with the mundane tasks of watering the lawn, going to school, and watching television. And then

it unveils the chaos that lies under the very ground on which we walk. The macrocosm is transplanted into the microcosm, the world out there is remade into the here and now.

Films, like the ones discussed here, are a blending of mythologies. Myths are always "mashups" (to borrow some contemporary multi-mediated language), always assembled through bits, pieces, and found objects that have been borrowed, begged, stolen, and improvised. Film has been and continues to be a natural medium for mashups due to its multimedia origins in theater, photography, and focus on everyday life. Meanwhile, attention to the sources of films suggests something about the sources of myths as well. Their existence as a mashup is part and parcel of what all religious myths are about: begging, borrowing and stealing. This is part of what gives them all such great power to affect people's lives. Throughout history myths have been created by borrowing other cultures' myths, setting differing mythologies alongside each other, and then honing the story down into a new package that becomes identified with an emerging community. Rip. Mix. Burn. Christianity takes the mythologies and rituals surrounding the Jewish Passover--Jesus was Jewish, and the "last supper" was a Passover meal--and turns it into the thoroughly Christian activity of Communion. Just as the Jewish Passover is focused on remembrance of liberation in the form of an exodus out of Egyptian slavery, so does the Christian Communion center on remembrance of the body and blood of Christ as the path to liberation.

Religion and film are akin. They both function by recreating the known world and then projecting that alternative version of the world to their viewers/worshippers, making it appear, as Clifford Geertz might say, "uniquely realistic." In this way these audio-visual, experiential stories impact human lives, offering models for living, not just cerebrally, but through the body. The impact, furthermore, is often so great that participants do not see differences in the worlds

but rather a seamless whole. Religious worlds are so encompassing that devotees cannot understand their personal worlds any other way; filmic worlds are so influential that personal relationships can only be seen through what has been seen on screen. My working hypothesis has been that by paying attention to the ways films are constructed, we can shed light on the ways religions are constructed, and vice versa. Film production borrows millennia-old aesthetic tactics from religions, but contemporary religious practices are likewise modified by the pervasive influence film has had on modern society.

1 Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Uses of Reality," in *The Avant-Garde Film*, P. Adams Sitney, ed. (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1987), 69.

2 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 27.

3 Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 27-28.

4 Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 27.

5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 78.

6 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, sixth ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 216.

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**Antonio D. Sison: *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human***

{Adapted from Antonio D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus*. London/New York: Routledge, 2012}

The observant but unobtrusive cinematography reveals a party of twelve taking its place at the elegantly set, candle-lit table, awaiting the special dinner that is about to be served. *Mise-en-scène* is austere and quiescent, echoing the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Danish puritan milieu the characters live in, not to mention the wintry season that marks the gathering. This, and the characters' period costuming—predominantly raven-colored and severe-looking—veil the lack of resolution in the stories they each carry within themselves... At this table of human disenchantment, an exquisite French banquet unfolds to the astonishment of the ascetic guests who have sworn to deny “fleshly appetites” of all sorts. But as serving after serving of ambrosial dishes and fine wines allow them to savor bounteous goodness and sensuous delight, things begin to change at the table. Between scrumptious mouthfuls of *Caille en Sarcophage* (literally, “quail in a sarcophagus”) and sips of perfectly-aged *Amontillado*, unexpressed love and repressed creativity find an alternative spiritual path to fulfillment; and reconciliation becomes a promise and a possibility in a community *redivivus*. Surely, this is no ordinary meal.<sup>1</sup>

My encounter with the Danish film *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1986) more than two decades ago registered in me as a liminal experience; the mysterious conspiracy of image, story, and sound, painted alternative possibilities for me that had not until then been clarified in my field of vision. “Being human is a wonderful thing,” I mused, as I reflected on how human finitude

becomes the paradoxical fertile ground where new ways of relating with each other, with the world we live in, and yes, with absolute mystery, begin to germinate. In more ways than one, the silver screen in the darkened theater hall shone before me like a light at the end of the tunnel. I had dined at Babette's table.

### **World Cinema as *Locus Theologicus***

*Babette's Feast* works as an index of my deepening theological engagement with film, and as an imaginative touchstone for discussing the scholarly servings of *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus*. While my prologue draws from personal experience, my book is decidedly a product of the burgeoning interdisciplinary study of Religion and Film. Estimated to be about thirty years old,<sup>2</sup> the relative youth of this area of inquiry connotes an ongoing process of maturation in the aspect of developing a more systematic interfacing between Religious Studies and Film Studies, specifically, "in terms of a more judicious adoption of a respectful, dialogical approach that examines film on its own terms, and accords due consideration to its proprietary language and grammar."<sup>3</sup> Historically, the scholarly input had often concentrated on thematic and narrative considerations, inadvertently positioning film as a mere adjunct to literature. This continues to cast a shadow on the very credibility of the Religion-Film debate. Melanie Wright incisively argues, "Could it be that— despite the growing bibliography and a plethora of courses —film is not really being studied at all?"<sup>4</sup> Re-casting the question in more specific terms, could a hermeneutical approach that disregards *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and music, most especially in films that evoke powerful sensory/affective fusion such as *Babette's Feast*, even be considered valid?<sup>5</sup> Each year, committee members of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture group of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) make a conscious effort to ensure that paper submissions for the annual meeting are cognizant of this



lacuna; we look forward to reaching a stage when calls for a more critical film hermeneutics would be superfluous.

My engagement with *Babette's Feast* also serves to cue the reader into looking at the selection of films that have made their way into my project. The noted Danish film is one of just a handful of non-English titles from world cinema that register on the radar of the Religion-Film interdiscipline each year; the scales have been lopsidedly tipped on the side of Hollywood blockbusters, many of them, theorized many times before— *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1948), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Dead Poet's Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989), and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), to name a few. In view of this imbalance, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* is an earnest effort to widen the aperture through an assemblage of films from diverse filmmaking cultures. I am not so much interested in legalese on what constitutes world cinema— the U.S. Academy Awards has specific rules of eligibility for Best Foreign Language Film nominations<sup>6</sup> —as drawing scholarly attention to the cultural and anthropological richness offered by world cinema. That said, I approach the categorization “world cinema” in an inclusive sense, a choice based more on the “spirit” than the “letter.” A case in point, the film *Kite Runner* (Mark Forster, 2007), an American film that gives privileged visibility to a story set in Taliban-era Afghanistan, finds a niche in my selection. In like manner, though the Singaporean film *Be With Me* (Erik Khoo, 2002) was disqualified from the Oscar Best Foreign Language Film nominations for having not just one dominant language but four (including English and Braille/sign language), I did not consider the film's interculturality, as codified in its multilingual dialogue, a de-merit. As I pointed out in my book, “films such as these are indexical of a world that is rapidly becoming

intercultural, with national and cultural identities negotiated in the interstices of transnational migration and cultural liquidity.”<sup>7</sup>

In view of the near unanimous critical acclaim reaped by *Babette's Feast*, including the 1987 Best Foreign Language Oscar, the aspect of “critical reception” also figures into my criteria for film selection. The films I’ve chosen to examine have been recognized in critical reviews, international film festivals, and industry award-giving bodies. Evidently, there is not always a straight line that can be drawn between awards and excellence— it is well known that each year yields its share of overlooked cinematic gems —but they do serve the purpose of highlighting works that had earned validation from the film community. The titles I’ve chosen have, in some measure, merited the scholarly attention. Additionally, in an effort to encourage readers to view or re-view the films, I’ve factored into the selection process the titles’ commercial availability on DVD, Blu-Ray, or online streaming. To ensure that my case studies would generate fresh insight, I’ve also limited my choices to fairly recent films produced from 2000 to 2010.

Finally, my referencing of *Babette's Feast* illustrates the power of film to trigger the hermeneutical impulse in such a way that the portrayal of vivid humanity unfolding on screen lays down a bridge for a conversation with theology. This is evinced in two ways. First, it is the cinematic text, not so much the theological text, which initiates the critical dialogue. In this way, film as art is given prior leave to be *locus theologicus*, a rich source of theological insight, rather than the traditional trajectory of theology asserting its primacy as normative text upon which other texts are made to be subservient. In discussing theological approaches to the icon/image, Swedish scholar Sigurd Bergmann proposes, “Theology’s challenge is to contribute to a more reflected attitude to the autonomy and mystery of pictures and of vision.”<sup>8</sup> This would mean that scholars of religious studies and theology must keep in check the tendency to “colonize” and

“baptize” films, an approach that imposes Christian/religious perspectives as an external additive, rather than as an organic dialogue partner to film. Resonantly, Craig Detweiler writes about a re-ordering of the hermeneutical moments of Theology and Film:

While I respect the power and authority of theology, I approach the discipline as “film and theology,” allowing the films to drive the conversation, with theology arising out of the art, rather than imposing it within the text. This is the full implication of reversing the hermeneutic flow.<sup>9</sup>

As a systematic theologian who is also an independent digital filmmaker and cineaste, my own theological engagement dovetails with that of Detweiler:

I intentionally bracket my virtual folder of theological propositions so that I do not summarily enter the theater as a matchmaker scouting for a compatible partner for theology. Rather, I assent to the capacity of the film to be the doorkeeper, allowing it to open portals for a meaningful dialogue with my theological bases.<sup>10</sup>

Second, it is the cinematic imaging of the human story— the portrayal of lives lived fully in the finitude of the meantime —that offers portals to a theological conversation. Theology enters into the dialogue via “the human” rather than the traditional route of propositional, dogmatic statements. I would describe my project as an imaginative quest for eternal treasures in jars of clay. The religious sensibility of filmmaker Robert Bresson echoes this view:

To begin with, I don’t think that speaking of God, pronouncing God’s name, indicates his presence. If I succeed, through the lens of cinematography, in representing a human being, that is, someone who has a soul, who is not a marionette who wiggles, if there is a human presence, there is a divine presence.

It is not because the name of God is pronounced that God is more or less present.<sup>11</sup>

Bresson's hermeneutical lens as well as mine, reflects a certain anthropological confidence, "God, who is ineffable holy mystery, is known through the refracted light of the human who is *imago dei*."<sup>12</sup>

### **Now Showing: The Human**

A deeper focus on the human story invites conversations with theologies that take a distinct anthropological turn; such theologies offer conceptual threads that interweave through the film analysis. A heuristic frame of reference for this interweaving is the human-centered theology of theologian Edward Schillebeeckx. In his later theology, Schillebeeckx configures the ancient Biblical symbol of *imago dei*—human beings as God's image and likeness—in terms of the *humanum*, the eschatological vision of the human family on a pilgrimage towards full reconciliation with self, with each other, and with God, who is revealed in human experience. "Indeed, for Schillebeeckx, it is the human that is the royal road to God."<sup>13</sup> The optimism of this theological understanding, however, is put on trial by evil, injustice, and suffering, that have formed a continuing scarlet thread through human history. Where is the *humanum* in scandalous human tragedies such as the Rwandan genocide? Apartheid in South Africa? The recent Sandy Hook slaughter of the innocents? If anything, humanity is "an ecumene of suffering."<sup>14</sup> In Schillebeeckx's understanding, the *humanum* is a dialectical reality, a noble goal that has to be struggled for within the crucible of human finitude. Where then is the God of goodness and pure positivity in the face of an ecumene of suffering? The divine presence is located in human praxis, in the refusal to acquiesce to cruel contexts that threaten the *humanum*. This would include

concrete efforts to protest against evil and oppression, and the sociopolitical structures that perpetuate them. Said another way, God is the innervating principle in the resistance against what is “not-God.” “Negative contrast experiences” is the terminology Schillebeeckx uses to emphasize the paradoxical character of the *humanum*:

As a contrast experience; it implies indirectly a conscious-ness of an appeal of and to the *humanum*. In this sense, activity which overcomes suffering is only possible on the basis of at least an implicit or inchoate anticipation of a possible, coming universal meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Human suffering becomes the very oil for eschatological hope when it enkindles praxis. “The *humanum* is thus experienced indirectly and fragmentarily in the triple here-and-now realities of promise, protest, and praxis.”<sup>16</sup>

Although not intended to demarcate each of the chapters of this book, Schillebeeckx’s decisively anthropological theology serves as an outer concentric ring, a horizon of meaning that consolidates diverse theological threads drawn from the works of other noted theologians who follow a resonant “God-in-the-human” trajectory— Dorothee Sölle, Jon Sobrino, Søren Kierkegaard, Michael Amaladoss, Pope Benedict XVI, among others.

I would describe the interfacing of Theology and Film in this book as “creative crossings,”<sup>17</sup> an intertextual exploration that is both imaginative and critical. For organizational purposes, I group the chapters of this book under four sections, each meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive of the particular facet of humanity that is refracted in the Theology-Film dialogue.

Creative Humanity

*Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, UK, 2000), *Be With Me* (Erik Khoo, Singapore, 2005)

Reconciling Humanity

*The Son* (Jeanne-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Belgium, 2002), *Kite Runner* (Mike Forster, USA, 2007)

Liberating Humanity

*Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (Ashutosh Gowariker, India, 2002), *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, UK, 2008), *Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, Argentina, 2004)

Inclusive Humanity

*Yesterday* (Darrell Roodt, South Africa, 2004), *Whale Rider* (Nikki Caro, New Zealand, 2002)

## **Slumdog Divinity**

Of course, there is no space in this paper for a thorough discussion of each of the films, but allow me to at least offer a “blood sample.” I draw attention to the relatively recent Oscar winner *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film by British director Danny Boyle, who lensed *Trainspotting* (1996) and *127 Hours* (2010). Jamal Malik, a young man raised in Mumbai’s Dharavi slum community, finds that his harrowing experiences as a young boy living in a cruel context will later change the course of his life. He is a participant in the Indian version of the quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, and memories of a string of misfortunes in his childhood provide the answers to the questions asked of him. The unfolding of a paradoxical movement in the film’s dramatic arc already finds iconic representation in an early scene. In flashback, we see Jamal relieving himself in one of the slum’s outhouses, which are nothing more than jerry-built stalls standing on stilts in the middle of a swamp. Designed to allow human waste to torpedo directly into the awaiting swamp, a Dharavi-style toilet bowl is a space between wooden planks. Jamal had taken too long in using the toilet and this infuriates his brother Salim, who earns loose change by

charging customers an entrance fee. When a helicopter bearing India's biggest film star Amitabh Bachchan (in real life, the erstwhile host of India's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*) is about to land in Dharavi, all hell breaks loose as residents rush to catch a glimpse of the actor. The vengeful Salim bolts the door from outside the toilet so that Jamal, a die-hard fan who carries Bachchan's photo in his pocket, is trapped. The panic-stricken Jamal is now caught between the Scylla of missing the once-in-a-lifetime chance of meeting his idol, and the Charybdis of jumping out into the toilet hole. At that frantic moment, he chooses the latter and plummets into the swamp while holding Bachchan's photo up to save it. Coated in foul gunk, Jamal easily parts the crowd like Moses parting the Dead Sea, and comes face to face with Amitabh Bachchan, who obliges him with an autograph. Triumphant, Jamal raises the photo and shouts, "Amitabh Bachchan gave me his autograph!"

The toilet scene is Boyle's comical but incisive use of *mise-en-scène* to portray paradox.<sup>18</sup> It is an iconic representation of how the very crud of a slumdog's life will mysteriously form a conspiracy of grace that will ultimately lead him to triumph over life's obstacles. The paradoxical current can be further clarified through the lens of "serendipity." Drawn from Horace Walpole's adaptation of the ancient Persian tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*, serendipity can be described as "the wisdom of recognizing and then moving with the energetic flow of the unexpected."<sup>19</sup> Serendipity presumes a "divine naïveté,"<sup>20</sup> a faith-like



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openness to mystery, trusting that life's unmapped twists and turns, including misfortunes and experiences of suffering, will ultimately serve the good and authentic. The Dharavi slums, *locus* of the most cruel moments in Jamal's young life, serendipitously offers the keys that will eventually allow him the self-agency to live and to love.

The theological drill down affirms that it is indeed the human that is the royal road to God. In the deep focus of *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, the story of Jamal Malik, *Slumdog Millionaire's* prince of serendipity, becomes a *locus theologicus*. A "slumdog divinity," if you will.



- <sup>1</sup> Antonio D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 1
- <sup>2</sup> Robert K. Johnston, ed. *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 2. In my previous book, I argue, “over and above the overriding preoccupation with thematic and other literary elements, a more serious regard for style offers a distinctly cinematic approach to the Theology-Cinema confluence.” Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Melanie Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. (London: Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2007), p. 22.
- <sup>5</sup> For a theological discussion of *Babette’s Feast* that gives some attention to cinematic language, refer to Peter Fraser, *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 107-116. Moreover, Maria Consuelo Maisto examines the uncritical blurring of “techniques of literary interpretation with approaches to film” in the interpretation of *Babette’s Feast*, “Cinematic Communion?: *Babette’s Feast*, Transcendental Style and Interdisciplinarity,” S. Brent Plate and David Jasper, eds. *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*. (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1999), p. 83.
- <sup>6</sup> “Rule Thirteen: Special Rules for the Foreign Language Film Award” in *The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Online. <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/rules/rule13.html> (Accessed 1 March 2013). For an excellent discussion on the definition of world cinema, refer to Gaye Williams Ortiz, “Opportunities for Dialogue with Religion and Theology,” Johnston, ed. *Reframing Theology and Film*, p. 74-76.
- <sup>7</sup> Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 4
- <sup>8</sup> Sigurd Bergmann, *In the Beginning is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Visual Arts and Culture*, trans. Anja K. Angelsen. (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009), p. 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 43.
- <sup>10</sup> Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 6.
- <sup>11</sup> From an interview featured in *Télé-ciné* no. 173 (March-April 1967):6, as cited in Joseph Cunneen, *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film*. (New York: Continuum International, 2006), p. 108.
- <sup>12</sup> Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, ed. *The Schillebeeckx Reader*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), p.17.
- <sup>14</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1980; rpt. 1993), p. 741.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- <sup>16</sup> Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, p. 149-150.
- <sup>18</sup> “It is not the first time for Danny Boyle to resort to ‘toilet imagery’ to translate a theme in a fashion that is truly cinematic. In a surreal scene in his earlier work *Trainspotting* (1996), Boyle pulls no punches in depicting the codependent nature of drug addiction by having the protagonist Renton dive into a disgusting toilet bowl in a public facility labelled ‘The Worst Toilet in Scotland’ to retrieve opium suppositories he had dropped there.” Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human*, p. 84-85.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul Lederach, who writes about serendipity within the context of peace-building, correctly describes it as “learning more from mistakes than successes.” He takes “mistakes” here to mean the unplanned, unexpected things and occurrences that happen along the road that become signposts to deeper insight. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peace Building*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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**Sheila J. Nayar: *Why We Need to Rethink the “Genuinely” Religious Film***

The following liberally pulls from *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the “Genuinely” Religious Film*, published by Bloomsbury, 2012. I thank the publishers for permitting me to use excerpts from it here.

Picture Sita (or, rather, the movie star playing that Hindu goddess) resplendent in pink and rushing to the window of her artificially ornate palace. As she gazes out from curtains that perfectly match her outfit, we hear Mohammed Rafi on the soundtrack, movingly singing a devotional song about searching for Rama. Cut to a shot of what Sita sees out of the window: it is Rama, her husband, and his brother, Laxman, perched on the shoulders of the monkey-god Hanuman. Nebulously they hover in the night sky, the brothers’ yellow *salwar* pants fluorescently glowing, before awkwardly Hanuman “flies off.” Sita returns to her palatial chambers in order to pay rapturous homage to Rama’s statue. As she offers him daisy heads, we get close-ups of her face: her lips trembling in a smile, her eyes adorned with glitter and ecstatically alight. During her fervid devotional display—indeed, one could say rightly *because* of it—Rama’s face magically appears, superimposed in those dozen daisies’ florets; in the lambent flame of a *deepak*; even in the pupils of Sita’s own eyes. And again: in a spinning golden sun—in a paper moon—and, when Sita opens her hands, her palms ornately hennaed with his name, there again Rama’s face appears.

I vividly remember attending a screening of this mythological film. *Hanuman Vijay* (1974), the movie was called, and I saw it as a child in New Delhi, in the company of my grandmother who had migrated with her children, one of them my father, from the Punjab after Partition in 1947. Ironically, in spite of Sita, and elsewhere a brawny Hanuman, singing or performing *pūjā* (worship) to Rama; in spite of the movie’s bold colors (fuchsias, lavenders,

golds); its kinetic camerawork intended to amplify the tender displays of devotion; and its Méliès-like special effects (spinning chakras, Rama's profile flashing strobe-like in the moon), it's my grandmother I remember most vividly. For, throughout the film's *Ramayana*-based chronicle of how Hanuman saves Rama and Laxman from being sacrificed by a powerful sorcerer who has lodged them both in the netherworld, my grandmother—never educated, never able to read or write—mumbled her devotions and did *namaste* (greetings) whenever that monkey-god appeared onscreen. These were not pro forma utterances or gestures, for there was something truly beatific in her expression—immersion and delight, and a strange inner light (histrionic as that may sound).

How could an old—and, by everyone's accounts, including mine, *wise*—woman like my grandmother have responded in such naïve and childlike fashion to *Hanuman Vijay*? I couldn't help wondering, even decades later, what she had been spiritually seeing—and religiously feeling and responding to—that I had not. Part of the answer seemed simple, of course: she was a devout Hindu, a believer and part of a lived Hindu tradition; I, on the other hand, was none of these things. But something about that answer felt incomplete, perhaps because my own mother was also a devout believer, albeit Roman Catholic, and I had never witnessed such behavior in her. Perhaps it was a difference, then, in the ways the world's faiths are expressed, a product no less of belief than of enculturation. On the other hand, how to explain that other Hindus whom I came to know later on—often educated ones—did *not* engage in my grandmother's fashion with Hindu mythologicals and were in fact quite embarrassed by the indigenous genre (a genre for “the masses” instead of “the classes,” as one woman put it to me years later)? I couldn't help feeling there was something more, something else underpinning my grandmother's response to *Hanuman Vijay* and perhaps, too, to her engagement with storytelling in toto; and, since, in this

case it was *religious* storytelling, to that partly inexplicable, somewhat ineffable thing we call *the sacred*.

No doubt my grandmother would have called my reasons for carrying around this memory “*karam*,” the Punjabi word for fate, given how fundamental that movie-going experience was to be to my eventual discernment that religious depictions in film—and especially spiritual transcendence as experienced *through* film—are significantly contoured by those films’ (and their spectators’ and their critics’) relationship to the *written word*. That is, manifestations of the sacred (or *hierophanies*, as Mircea Eliade refers to them) are, in the context of film narrative, bound up quite significantly—not to mention, transnationally—with particular ways of knowing that maintain roots in orality or that have been historically permitted and/or induced by a culture invested in alphabetic literacy.

What legitimizes a purported hierophany in a movie, I am suggesting, or even a film’s overarching “transcendental style,”<sup>1</sup> may say as much about a viewer’s epistemic location vis-à-vis orality and literacy as it does any particular Hindu (or Christian, or Muslim, or nontheistic) notion of religiosity. Here, then, lies the purpose of *The Sacred and the Cinema*: to demonstrate how orality and literacy both generatively and affectively contour filmic communion with the holy, as well as to explain, in a more particularized fashion, the etiological reasons for such differently charged modes of spiritual expression. In this way, *The Sacred and the Cinema* cannot help but reconfigure our understanding of what constitutes a “genuinely” religious film.

Chapters 2 and 3 of the book are intended for readers unfamiliar with the sacred as a serious area of study. In order to invite those readers into the conversation, Chapter 2 offers a history of the sacred as a field of study, primarily in the discipline of religion, while Chapter 3 follows with a history of the sacred and the *cinema*, as these have been conjointly studied in the

last century. Moreover, I begin with these chapters because I consider the chapters that follow, in which I delineate my own position in detail, to be an *extension* of the important work already done in the field. Thus, it is in Chapter 4 that the materially grounded but mysticism-accommodating journey vis-à-vis orality and alphabetic literacy begins. (In this sense, I align myself with S. Brent Plate who urges that one can indeed “work from the untenable position that religious aesthetics can be materially grounded, and yet leave open some space for what can only be called the mystical.”<sup>2</sup>) Via a reassessment of religious spectacles from both Hollywood and Bollywood (the Hollywood of Mumbai, formerly Bombay), I argue in Chapter 4 that films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Hanuman Vijay* are contoured by decidedly oral norms of storytelling. These norms not only suggest associations between films from far-flung continents and religious traditions, but between films and their source material (e.g., the Old Testament, the *Mahabharata*) whose roots once lay in oral transmission. For the sake of illustration, it draws upon films as disparate as *The Ten Commandments*, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970), generic Bollywood *masala* (spice-mix) films whose endings traditionally display a manifestation of divine forces, and Hindu mythological and devotional films like *Hanuman Vijay* and *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975). In brief, the chapter covers various interpenetrated norms that are orally inflected, such as—and here I am naming only a few—epical and exoteric abundance; the importance of spectacle, of a “cinema of attractions” (because no deed or personage can afford to merge with its environs and disappear); aural augmentation and kinetic camerawork (as promoting spiritual attachment); and the importance of material witness, of an “in-your-face” incarnation (because, in the oral realm, if incarnation is not material, it does not exist). My hope in excavating such epistemically oral norms as they pertain to the sacred is to dispel the common critical assumption that religious spectacles *can only* be operating as escapist metaphors.

Our need for a more pluralistic approach to the “genuineness” of transcendence onscreen—for a concession to varieties of transcendent experiences and to transcendent styles (including *within* any single religious tradition)—becomes even more pronounced, one hopes, through a consideration of the largely consensual arguments forwarded by scholars over the past half-century concerning what sorts of films and, more crucially, what sorts of stylistic norms capture, impel and/or stoke “authentic” transcendence. Pulling from well-intentioned and often admirably subtle works such as Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre’s *Le cinéma et le sacré* (1961), André Bazin’s (1996) essays on religion and film, Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972), as well as more recent works by Joseph Cunneen (2003), Peter Fraser (1998), and Andrew Quicke (2006), I suggest that a major stimulus for the norms these critics privilege is *alphabetic literacy*. By this I mean not only that the critics themselves have been shaped by their life-long interaction with writing and print (i.e., ontogenetically), but that academic culture itself has evolved over time (i.e., phylogenetically), progressively accommodating and oftentimes privileging—even if unwittingly—a more literately inflected worldview.

In no way is this to undermine the contributions of those scholars upon whom I draw. Literately inflected modes of engaging with the sacred are surely no less valuable or no less real than those contoured by, and for the sake of, oral accessibility or enjoyment. Nevertheless, such a bold and potentially delicate proposition demands a material defense, and so I carefully articulate in Chapter 5 how and why these norms are the express byproduct of high literacy (a term common to the education field and one which implies a way of knowing that calls for the exercise of higher-order skills of literacy, such as the ability to manage abstraction and to impose meaning when necessary<sup>3</sup>). Consider, after all, that the norms these analysts generally, and oftentimes quite poetically, extol—stasis, austerity, the mundane—are *never* part and parcel of

films highly inflected by orality. In fact, the transcendently styled cinema's partiality for a "hidden God" may well owe its existence to writing and print. Some of the literately inflected norms that I consider here include the ordinary—indeed, the banal—as purportedly being more reflective of the "real" and, hence, of the sacred; stillness, sparseness, and silence as engendering "authentic" transcendence (but which, as I show, together constitute a wholly literate metaphysics); divine intervention as occurring via isolation, not only for characters onscreen but as well for viewers via a necessary *private* extraction of meaning (e.g., intellectually processing symbols, or irony, or Deleuzian time-images and camera-consciousness). The sacred in this realm is ostensibly a byproduct of something occurring "beneath" the surface—but probing beneath a text is anathema to oral storytelling with its intentions of homeostatically *preserving* meaning through time.

If these chapters appear to champion a binaristic reading of films, that is the unfortunate, but also rectifiable byproduct of my needing to isolate radically different ways in which two "genres" manifest such things as sacred space and sacred time. If anything, I have taken this methodological approach in order foremost to *undo* long-held academic assumptions that the former, in relying on visual and aural chicanery, is necessarily less spiritually real or authentic than the films of, say, Yasujiro Ozu or Robert Bresson. On the other hand, to project filmic hierophany as being *either* highly oral *or* highly literate would be just as flawed, not to mention hazardous. Hence, Chapter 6, which assays degrees—or, shall we say, in deference to William James, *varieties*—of hierophanic experience. Briefly I consider films that inhabit a space somewhere between, or that complicate overly simplified notions of, the religious spectacular and, in a modification of Schrader's phrasing, the transcendently styled film. In fact, movies that lie somewhere within the orality-literacy matrix (at least insofar as I have been able to map



that matrix) may appeal spiritually to populations that reject some of the norms that contour more orally inflected hierophany and also the literately derived noetic demands that a transcendently styled film can impose on spectators. My purpose in reflecting here on such films as *Dogma* (1999), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), *The Message* (1976), *Adi Shankaracharya* (1983), *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989), *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), as well as on genres like science fiction and horror, is, yet again, to stress the *multiplicity* of ways in which the sacred might be genuinely resonant on film. As Gayatri Chatterjee urges, “Just as societies and civilizations exist at very different levels and stages of formation, codification, and hierarchy, so too do religion and art.”<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, as film-viewers, we are epistemically situated no less than we are historically situated, and so, too, to some extent are our personal tastes, inflected as they are by literacy-related competencies (amongst many other variables, of course). Some scholars may take this as evidence of a theory that dangerously retreats into relativism. I remain entirely apolitical—a-ethical even—and in that sense, rightly accusable of foregoing what Plate identifies apropos today’s film-and-religion students, who must “walk that careful line between praising the great imaginative stories of old and paying attention to the subtle ways these stories might maintain oppressive systems of power.”<sup>5</sup> But that I leave to the next set of scholars, who are more able than I, and I hope willing to tackle that important line of questioning.

Perhaps my emphasis, then—in order not to end on a defeatist note—should accent less what this new epistemic approach offers the religion and film disciplines than what the approach takes inadvertent pains to prohibit: the tendency to overplay the mystery that *is* faith such that tangible influences on one’s engagement with the transcendent are ignored. Eliade contends that “Sacredness is, above all, *real*.”<sup>6</sup> But the real is not natural—at least not in the sense Kenneth

Burke implies when stating that language “adds a ‘new dimension’ to the things of nature.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, sacredness—like language—like technology—evolves, such that one day some new, unforeseeable dimension shall be cast upon the divine, opening yet another door to hierophanic power.

- 1 Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972)
- 2 S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005), iii.
- 3 Laura Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Online. 17 August 2002. <http://www.nap.edu/>, 3.
- 4 Gayatri Chatterjee, “Designing a Course on Religion and Cinema in India,” *Teaching and Religion in Film*. Ed. Gregory J. Watkins. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.
- 5 S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 35.
- 6 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. R. Sheed. (New York: New American Library, 1958), 459.
- 7 Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 8.

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## **Stefanie Knauss**

Give or take a year or two, John Lyden's publication of *Film as Religion*<sup>1</sup> in 2003 coincided with the awakening of my interest in the area of film and religion, and his call for a serious engagement with culture (in particular film) not as something different from religion/theology, but as something that has religious aspects, that *is* religious, has shaped my work in fundamental ways: I am not so much interested in looking for religious symbols (although this, too, can be fascinating, in particular when focusing on the question why they are still present and understood in post-secular society), as in seeing how film experiences can have religious dimensions for people, how they "speak" to viewers on different levels and address existential questions in their very own ways.<sup>2</sup>

Lyden's book signals an important step in the development of the field in attributing an independent voice to film in the film-religion dialogue, and most importantly by tracing some of the ways in which film functions *as* a religion. Certainly there is still space for debate of what it is exactly that makes film function as a religion, but this fundamental insight contributed to shift the scholarly attention from an interest in how films reproduced religious content towards attributing more autonomy to films, and from an interest in content and narrative towards a focus on reception in the discussion of the relationship between film and religion. Film-religion studies are, also because of Lyden's contribution, no longer (only) about religion *in* film (important as this is), but about the possibility of something "religious" happening *between* film and viewer.

The influence of Lyden's basic ideas reflects also in Brent Plate's discussion<sup>3</sup> of the analogies between film and religion as a re-creation of this and other worlds, in Sheila J. Nayar's focus on what happens between film and viewers of different cultures,<sup>4</sup> and in the explicit methodological decision of Antonio D. Sison to emancipate film "from being a mere handmaid of a given theological proposition and agenda, and, as an art form, offered prior leave to speak on its own terms as a condition for a respectful and honest dialogue with theology."<sup>5</sup>

In general, these recent publications testify to a certain "maturity" of the field (without wanting to imply that now all the work is done): the authors work with films on their own terms, with methods that do justice to the specificities of the medium, and take into account no longer only narrative or plot, but also cinematography, montage, *mise-en-scène*, soundtrack, etc. Films are no longer used as illustrations to preconceived theological thought or ideas about religion, but rather theological insight and insights in the phenomenon of religion are allowed to grow out of the engagement with film (which happens not only on the intellectual level of thinking, but also on the aesthetic, affective level of feeling) so that it really is a relationship of mutual borrowing and enrichment, as Plate underlines.<sup>6</sup> And increasingly, material from a variety of cultures, contexts and genres is included so that the horizon of film and religion studies finally expands beyond the Christian and European/American context in which it first originated, and also beyond the narrative fiction films on which it has mostly concentrated.

Nayar's and Sison's publications are good examples for how this work can further develop and also provide methodological signposts that will help future students, such as Sison's reflections on the correlation between third cinema and liberation theology on the basis of filmic aesthetics and not (only) on the level of content or a common option for the poor and marginalized. Nayar's work's importance for future studies lies, in my view, in particular in her

focus on underlying epistemic frameworks that shape our experience of films and the meaning we attribute to them (as cinema goers and as critics): we tend to assume as given (“natural”) how we “know”, and forget that different ways of knowing and perceiving are indeed possible. Nayar shows how orality and literacy do not only shape filmic representations of the sacred, but also viewers’ experiences of cinematic sacredness in decisive ways. Further studies could depart from these insights and on the one hand, overcome the stark contrasts set up between these two epistemic frameworks for reasons of method, and on the other, look for other formative epistemological structures, for example dualistic or binary thinking in general (and in particular body-mind dualism), hierarchies among cognitive processes (senses vs. intellect), etc. Gender studies and queer critique of ways of knowing and the categorizations underlying them might be helpful to further develop these aspects. This becomes also clear in Plate’s gender-conscious analysis of space in *Antonia’s Line* (Marleen Gorris, 1995): while he is very attentive to the traditional gendered associations of horizontal (feminine) and vertical (masculine) space and the reversal of their respective evaluation that occurs in the film, he does not question (as queer critique would) the underlying presumption that there be two genders (and two only) and that each have its respective space (other associations of behavior, ways of knowing or being could be added).

With my personal interest in the development of film and religion studies that take seriously the embodied dimension of film reception, I notice that this aspect plays an increasingly important role in the more recent publications: in Brent’s analysis of the role of the senses as media in filmmaking and filmviewing that “mediate” and “make” a film in the process of seeing and hearing and through human synaesthetic capacities,<sup>7</sup> in Ton’s focus on the sacramentality of the immanent in the films he works with,<sup>8</sup> and in Sheila’s evaluation of

elements that address the affective dimensions of viewers.<sup>9</sup> A glance at Lyden's work shows just how much has happened in the last ten years with regard to this particular aspect in film and religion studies: in his study, body plays a fairly small role yet, but I would argue that its inclusion, for example in the analysis of the analogy between film and ritual (i.e., with regard to the embodied experience of rituals, the role of the body in ritual, etc.) could help to further develop his arguments and show other analogies between film and religion.

Looking at the four books discussed here (and thinking of many more in the field, including my own), I would like to raise two questions regarding two concepts used frequently, but maybe not altogether helpfully, namely the concepts of analogy and dialogue.

When trying to describe the relationship between film and religion, we (myself included) often define it – a bit cautiously – as analogy, i.e. film and religion are two spheres with similar, or the same, structures, but they are essentially different. However, I wonder whether this goes far enough to describe the mutual, and I would say participatory relationship between film and religion. It is certainly helpful to discover analogies in order to understand better how film and religion both work. But is it enough to understand how films have religious dimensions or religions cinematic ones, if they are “similar but different”? How can there be a transformative effect of one on the other in their mutual relationship? I think analogy, which implies comparison, but not participation or interaction, is not quite enough to describe what happens between these separate spheres, when this “in between” (not covered by the term “analogy”) is maybe the space that is decisive and where something new can develop. This also leads me to wonder how much our concepts of religion (and of film, although the latter seems easier to define than the former) and related concepts have to change when we apply them to this particular experience or phenomenon of religion and film, religion in film, film as religion: is it

the same “religion” as that experienced in a church liturgy, or in a sacrificial ritual, or in individual prayer or meditation? What is the common ground, and where are differences? Thus Lyden’s use of Catherine Bell’s typology of ritual<sup>10</sup> as a grid through which to analyze the ritual dimension of film might only be partially helpful, because – maybe – this typology simply may not capture all aspects of the ritual in films and film experience.

And regarding the second, frequently used, concept, dialogue: in Lyden’s work, dialogue is structurally employed as a method for film-religion studies, and a similar use can be discovered in Sison’s volume. It is a model that is often used, but also often criticized: all too often, it happens that the intended dialogue and exchange turns into a monologue that does not leave space to be surprised or challenged by the partner in dialogue. It also continues to focus on the discursive, linguistic and by implication intellectual dimension of film reception as the one that is religiously relevant, neglecting the dimensions of affective, empathic feeling, sensory perception, embodied being through which film and religion also (inter)relate in terms of world-building, meaning-making, experience of the sacred or transcendence. Although a dialogue is potentially open to new influences and changes of direction, it implies linearity, a one-after-the-other, maybe even causal sequence of events, experiences and their interpretation, which, I think, does not fit well with the sometimes blurred, only half-conscious, multi-dimensional, and “mixed” (intellectual, sensorial, cognitive, affective, etc.) ways in which films are experienced and their religious dimensions unfold (again, on many different levels). Maybe it would be better to speak of a relationship that does not only include film and religion, but fundamentally also the viewer: a relationship that does not only include and address all dimensions of being of the film, of religions and of viewers (intellectual, affective, material), but in which a new reality can

emerge that is more than the sum of its parts, because the religious of films, I think, is something new that occurs in the space between film, religion and viewer as they engage in a relationship.

In my own work, I try to understand better this relationship, in particular the embodied dimension of film reception and how in this embodied engagement with the body of the film, as Vivian Sobchack would say,<sup>11</sup> something new can develop, something that has religious dimensions, something “other”, maybe even the encounter with the totally Other, as something that happens precisely in this way because the medium of film is what it is, because the effects of montage, light, sound, movement on one’s body make us feel ourselves, and they take us beyond ourselves when we are most intimately within ourselves.<sup>12</sup> More fundamentally, I try to think about somatic or embodied, sensory knowing as a complement to intellectual knowing, and thus to “queer” ways of knowing,<sup>13</sup> and also to open up new sources of knowledge for theology in the appreciation, as Antonio Sison also says, of the immanent, the material and the everyday as a road, maybe even the “royal road”<sup>14</sup> to knowing God. I think that attention to the epistemic potential of the body is something that we could profitably focus more on in religion-film studies, although not exclusively of course, because it is something particularly central in the experience of films, i.e., media that address several senses, directly and synaesthetically, in a uniquely intense way, and because it establishes a connection between the realms of film and religion as an element of both, establishing thus an experiential, participatory relationship between the two.

Where should film-and-religion studies then go from here? Many different topics are open for exploration, and many different roads are being taken by scholars in the field. I will focus on just one aspect that I think is important to consider in future studies. I think that reception studies are and remain an important task, but that they are not advanced enough with



regard to the methodological, material and theoretical aspects involved in their application in the particular field of film and religion studies: reception studies in film is different from literature or other media, and reception studies in film and religion are different again from those in film. There is some important work being done by Lynn Schofield Clark and Stuart Hoover and the group at the Center for Religion, Media and Culture (University of Colorado at Boulder), by Clive Marsh in the UK, by Tomas Axelson in Sweden, but what is missing is a discussion of the scope and limitations of empirical work in this particular field: what it can do, but also what it cannot do. Thus I would wish for more critical work on methods and theory of reception studies in film and religion studies, which importantly also develops ways to study the different dimensions of reception: body, emotions, intellect, practice, etc.

As I said before, I think that the discipline of film and religion studies has come of age, not in the sense that its work is done, but in the sense that it has developed a certain sophistication, a grasp of its methods and underlying theories – without denying the fact that still more work is to be done in this respect, as some of the points I mention above have shown. It has also come of age in another sense: namely in the ways that film and religion studies now do not only draw on the insights and results of many other disciplines (such as film studies, religious studies and theology first of all, but also sociology, epistemology, psychology, queer and gender studies, etc.), but are also able to contribute constructively to other fields of inquiry: sociology of religion comes readily to mind, but also epistemology, sociology of the body, media theory and so on. It remains another task for the future to establish even stronger relationships and collaborations with these disciplines in which the efforts and results of each can be brought together fruitfully.

- <sup>1</sup> John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> See in particular my *Transcendental Bodies: Überlegungen zur Bedeutung des Körpers für filmische und religiöse Erfahrung* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2008); cf. for an English summary of my main ideas: Stefanie Knauss, "The Sensuality of Sense: Reflections on the Bodily Dimension of Filmic and Religious Experience," in *Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society*, eds. Stefanie Knauss and Alexander D. Ornella (Vienna: LIT, 2007), 197-216.
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- <sup>5</sup> Anthony D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Plate, p. viii.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Plate, ch. 3; on synaesthetic film perception see also Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> In particular in his discussion of the film *Be with Me* (Eric Khoo, 2005) in Sison, ch. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> In Nayar, ch. 6, but also throughout her discussion of an orality-inflected style of filmmaking and film reception.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Lyden, ch. 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Vivian Sobchack, "Embodying Transcendence. On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime", *Material Religion* Vol. 4. No. 2 (2008), p. 197.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Stefanie Knauss, "The Language of the Senses: An Aesthetic Theology," in *Feminist Theology and Visual Arts*, eds. Annette Esser, Christine Gasser-Schuchter, Sylvia Grevel, Alison Jasper and Ursula Rapp (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 53-65.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Sison, p. 6-9.

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## Rachel Wagner

Marshall McLuhan has famously said, "We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror." I think this sentiment is particularly apt today, as we use these four books to take stock of where the study of religion and film has been in recent decades, and consider where we would like it to go. I begin by looking at some of the shared concerns of all four authors, in an attempt to consider why we love film – another way of asking why we study it. Scholars have their own modes of veneration.

All four books argue that *film invites us back into the real world* by urging us to imagine the *filmic world* in relationship to and/or contrast to it. Plate proposes that film "actively reshape[s] elements of the lived world" to offer us new modes of seeing the familiar (1). Sison proposes that film is a "sacramental" form of art, and as such has the power to invite us into our fullest form of humanity (7). Describing the notion of the *humanum*, Sison argues for "the eschatological vision of a full, authentic humanity based on the ancient theological symbol of *imago dei*" (7). Lyden, too, argues that as ritual, film invites us to work toward our ideal selves. In film, he says, "an attempt is made to actualize the ideal world of myth, to bring its power to bear on ordinary life," to "make ideal (what ought to be) into the real – and in this way, to

connect morality to life” (79). Nayar points us toward the surprise of transcendence that film can offer. She proposes that we cannot foreclose on what the “sacred” is for any viewer, but we can be sure that all viewers, whether trained in scholarly critique or not, have the ability to experience it in film and it will shape their lives.

In a related sense, all four scholars speak about a kind of *self-recognition* that can happen with film. Nayar invites us to think richly about how stories work in context for specific people. She is interested especially in “oral or nonliterate viewers.” Some viewers, she proposes, are driven not by academic analysis but rather by an “eschatological need” that is emotional, personal, and sometimes even nonverbal (58). Films that are not especially grand or critically acclaimed, then, can still generate an experience of the sublime, what Nayar calls the “sacred” (158).

*To some degree, all four authors are interested in the way that film can work as ritual.* Whereas Lyden argues that films can work as rituals in their own right, Plate suggests more lightly that “film’s formal structures are *akin* to the formal structures of ritual” (39). Both point out film’s ability to offer, as ritual typically does, patterned, and as Plate puts it, “often rhythmic, performances” that “act out myths” in time, and that help humans to “remember” the “great myths of old” (41-42). For Lyden, films can invite experiences of liminality, encourage *communitas*, nurture catharsis, and symbolically expiate guilt. Plate points out that the camera can perform a ritual function by punctuating, via editing and visual devices, “cosmological structures” of ordering space and time (42). Indeed, Plate points out, the very practice of placing objects onscreen is a performance of “setting apart,” reminding us that even the ordinary can be made sacred through new perspective.

Nayar and Sison identify film's ability to nurture a sublime vision of ideal humanity in ways that gesture toward ritual, functioning with a sort of "sacramental" quality, as Sison puts it, that marks film as having special abilities to move us (53). Plate suggests more modestly than others that although film has the *ability* to work as ritual, only *some* films (especially those produced by masters) effectively utilize the tools of filmmaking in such a way as to draw us into new mythic worlds and in so doing, startle us into greater awareness. Sison echoes this sentiment in his own way, though it's hard to say if they would agree on what the principles of selection should be. Nayar disagrees, arguing that even presumably banal films can strike an emotional chord with viewers and invite transcendence. Lyden exhibits elements of both perspectives. The desire to identify a set of films that best exhibit the "sacred" or the numinous, or the ideal, or the beautiful, is fraught with difficulty, of course, and betrays one of the most nagging problems in film studies: if there really are only some films that exhibit the "sacred" or the "religious," whatever these are, then who gets to pick the set, and why?

Sison seems comfortable making some selections based on the emerging values of "world cinema," a term that also begs clarification. Plate has made similar gestures here and elsewhere. The call to experience "film qua film" is a familiar refrain in religion and film circles, but I'm still not quite sure what it means, except that we wish to sanitize film from the muck of contemporary analysis – unless it helps us. Or perhaps it means we want to grant ourselves the freedom to encounter films from our own perspectives, a worthy goal until we admit this also means we have the right to privilege our perspectives for readers who are meant to learn something from us as we transcribe our impressions.

Indeed, this is a place where Nayar's argument comes through loud and clear: if we truly privilege individual encounter, this may (must?) come at the cost of prescribed canon, and at the

very least with the humility of any claim to own the right to determine normative interpretation. Furthermore, the “film qua film” approach sometimes comes at the cost of understanding a film’s after-life in fan culture, and renders the experience of film-viewing a context-less encounter divorced from its creator, its context, with no sense of how a film might be “performed” on devotional YouTube videos, or via social media links, shared clips, in alterations that pair filmic visuals with a user’s choice of music, and so on. We are no longer afforded this luxury. Or if we are, we must also make room for the rest.

Such problems are not news to literary theorists who struggle between the poles of authorial intent and unmoored reader reception all the time – but it is a tension that we too should keep at the forefront, and query additionally what difference it makes if we also add the nuances and ambiguities of visual symbolic or imagistic argumentation to the mix, not to mention the many ways in which any film’s footprint is transformed in the new digital contexts into which it will doubtless be put by viewers.

The predominance of case studies and lists of films used as evidence is a common trope in film analysis, and obviously a necessary one, even if problematic. The scholars here represent a variety of justifications for *which* films (or which kinds of films) to include in collections of case studies that point toward larger principles. They offer different answers to the question of which films matters the most: The most current? The most popular? The most beautiful? The most obviously religious? The most controversial? Each of these four books has the whiff of adoration to it. The authors all obviously love film. This is more than intellectual fascination with an argument well made, or flexing of intellectual muscles in the cause of reputation. These are poetic books, books with teeth, books that hold you and whisper.

And so I want to step back and ask, in a more meta sense, *why* are we so in love with film itself, with the “we” here including us scholars but also, as Nayar and Plate especially prompt us, ordinary people? Are we perhaps bored with received religion, a claim made by the current trend of scholarship focused on the “nones?” Does film offer a compelling alternative route to religious experience at a time when we desperately seem to need it, with film functioning either as a proxy for religion (Lyden, Plate) or a means of enhancing or perhaps even *revealing* existing faith (Sison, Nayar)? If so, how does film dilute, challenge, or re-frame religious experience? Can we even *speak* of film as a “whole,” – that is, as a concept itself - or are we forever limited to case studies as the ordinary mode of critique? We have many case studies – we need more meta-analysis. And, pointing now toward my own research interests, we need to accept (even if it means film might take other lovers) that film exists in our own deeply wired world, where it is promiscuous and fragmented, where it performs its own deconstructive demise again and again on YouTube, on Facebook, and on fan websites.

Nayar proposes, drawing on Bresson’s fascination with images, that an “inner economy presumptively demands that a spectator actively negotiate filmic images in order to extract their meaning” (115). People negotiate film. They play with it. They interpret it. They carry it within their hearts. They use it as a means of identity formation, and they share it as gifts. People come to film with different expectations, different histories, and different needs, a point that is on the surface of Nayar’s approach. Nayar warns that the “earnest drive for inclusivity” that includes the desire to diversity film studies to include more voices, even world cinema, “can sometimes result in a methodology that feels a bit ‘grab bag’” (56).

How, then, is meta-analysis of “film” even possible? We have been watching for decades the dismantling of normative scholarship on the phenomenon of “religion,” and more recently

“religious studies” in favor of focused contextualized historical and cultural analysis. Can we speak, as Plate and Lyden do especially of film as “religion” without finding ourselves subject to the same critiques that the term “religion” is now vulnerable to? I have no easy answer to the question.

Even as they seem at times to strain against it, we find in these scholars’ work whispers of the new hyper-individualized, fragmented context of film consumption with which we are familiar today. Nayar, Plate and Lyden are all particularly interested in the introduction of *the viewer* in what Plate calls the “third wave” of film criticism. Nayar spends a lot of time assessing the different ways that scholars deal with this new interpretive interloper, the “spectator,” who confounds assumptions about the sacred by stubbornly and idiosyncratically personalizing it in countless ways (54-55).

None of the authors writes explicitly about digital culture, but all four acknowledge the ways that film fits in lived contexts, perhaps Nayar and Plate especially. Since so much of the lives of people in the developed world is spent in digital environments, film lives here too, and much of the religious work that is done with film is subject to the algorithmic processes of wired culture, fan culture, “me” culture. The intense commodified focus on the self is the dark side of listening to every voice. Once people think they might be heard, *everyone* starts talking and we can’t hear anything over the hubbub.

Film today lives in *Facebook*, in *Twitter*, in streaming environments of all kinds. It is viewed through mobile devices, accessed via video game consoles, consumed on laptops and iPads, blared over big screens in public places, watched at the gym, in the kitchen, in the car. Film is implicated in the isolationist tendencies of ear-bud culture, where everyone consumes



what *they* want, when *they* want. Film is an escape, but perhaps in more ways than we have considered before now.

The notion of *interactivity* with film is of course closely related to the argument that film can work as ritual, something that Plate and Lyden argue explicitly, and which Nayar and Sison both imply in their interest in the “transcendent.” Yet film offers a peculiar form of interactivity when compared to other forms of emergent media. When we “interact” with films, no matter how deeply they affect us, *we don’t change the film itself* – it changes us, and perhaps our community. In this way, we can think of film as akin to liturgy, with a fixed form that invites our engagement with it but remains in some ways unyielding. Films also work like texts, of course, with fixed strings of words that again invite our reaction but don’t allow us to change the author’s original order and arrangement. Video games, on the other hand, offer us stories that we can change, at least to some degree, and endings that are optional.

Other forms of emergent media – social media, online interactive areas like discussion forums, and online worlds like *Second Life* – are even more “open” than video games, creating an environment with somewhat fixed rules, but often not determining the arc of any given story, instead inviting free interaction via role-play or digital performance of fandom. Film, on the other hand, stubbornly insists that it is “other.” Even if we crave entry into its scripted spaces, they were first carved by another hand. And even if we *make* its story our own, it always *begins* as someone else’s.

And yet, we know that many different forms of media can relate to the same “story world.” This phenomenon is increasingly the mode by which we consume filmic stories. Not all films are keyed into larger franchises, of course, but popular fascination with those films that *do* generate a large fan base, that build larger worlds, is one of the most distinctive features of

popular film in the past 15 years and it is a thriving business: *Twilight*; *Halo*; *Avatar*; *The Hunger Games*.

The “world” of the film, were we able to pinpoint its location, has shifted from being represented simply by a single film to being situated in an inaccessible space “behind” and “beyond” the film, and tapped into by the many comic books, films, novels, costumes, ritual objects, and online supplements that the story-creators can imagine, and further enhanced by devoted fan communities who will re-make films, or parts of them, into creations of their own for digital display. This is “transmedia,” and I argue in *Godwired* that it is the fullest expression of “media religion” today. Perhaps, then, I suggest, we might see film *as the ritual* to transmedia *as the religion*. This formula resolves the tension created by scholars who talk about the “world of film” or “religion as film” in a totalizing way. Every film can be viewed as a sort of ritual experience, or to draw from Sison, the possibility of a “sacrament.” But we don’t see full-blown religion in today’s media culture, I propose, until we look at transmedia, where we see all of the components of what religion and film scholars point to as religious elements affiliated with film: ritual, myth and storytelling, the transcendent, fan culture, desire, and devotion. Furthermore, transmedia puts film squarely in conversation with other elements of popular culture, inviting film studies to have a fuller conversation with cultural studies than it already has going on. Film, then, is dissolving at the edges a bit as it encounters kin media through the vehicle of transmedia. Film is now more closely related than ever to games, toys, ritual events, clothing lines, and a whole host of interactive digital media.

Even as we must recognize the fraying of the boundaries of film as a fixed vessel for storytelling through its affiliation with transmedia, we must *also* recognize how film differs from many of the new modes of emerging media, how it offers perhaps the firmest foundation in a

rapidly shifting media world. Despite the many different modes of video delivery at our disposal, the many screens if you will, the *idea* of what a “film” is remains steady. In today’s emergent media context, film is perhaps the most stable mode of storytelling, the most fixed experience of ritual. It is, if you like, the most “Catholic” mode of moving images. It is the most fixed form of flow.

Film is a ritual of time, the memory of story, the very notion of fixedness, the performance of meaningful emergence of time, in time. Film viewing is an experience that survives as a distinctive ritual experience with fixed beginning and end, even in the midst of countless other open-ended, emergent, streaming, shared, corporately constructed forms of visual art and representation. Perhaps we love “film” because we experience it as the very idea of fixedness within flow, the performance of deliberate limitation in storytelling, the giving over of authority to an author or at least the *idea* of one, in order to experience one stream at a time. To think in theological terms, film invites us to think in terms of predestination, or at least fatedness. Film gestures performatively, through its very nature, toward the idea of providence, or fate, or if you like, God. When we watch a film, even if it is experimental, even if it is unresolved, even if it is utterly inexplicable, we give ourselves over to the vision of the creators, and we can be assured that there was one. We are committed to experiencing the film in a linear timeframe, with no ability to change what appears on the screen until later.

Video games are likely to play more directly with the concept of free will, and certainly seem to offer us greater agency in the visual and experiential flow. Social media, too, encourages us to see life as always flowing, always forward, and with no predictability but for the flow itself. Film, by contrast, tells us that some things were meant to be. In its relentless visual march forward, in its refusal to let us alter its course once we have entered its world, film promises fate.

It may not tie up all the elements of its storylines, and it may bleed over the frame visually and metaphorically – but film can keep us from seeing what the creator didn't want to let us see, and shows us only what the creator wanted us to experience.

Film blinds us partially, deliberately, keeps us in the flow of unknown experience. We relinquish control to film, and because we willingly do so, film is able to show us that the invisible is still possible. Film holds something back, and although we can imaginatively fill in the blanks, the sense of purpose that comes with what we *do* see makes us more likely to imagine that all we don't see has purpose too. Film can work as a kind of performance in negative theology, as Sison and Nayar both suggest. Film has purpose, always, even if the purpose is to deny its own purpose.

We never get to see the images that could have been filmed but were not, off-screen. We may be able to imagine new scenes ourselves in mash-ups or fan culture, but we cannot be the director of the film. We cannot go and make the choices that he or she did not. The “other” remains intact in the person of the director, and his or her vision. We see through the eyes of another – the director and perhaps also the characters – but especially the director, and this reminds us who we are not. It suggests that there are some stories that we don't tell ourselves. In a world where everything seems hyper-individualized, such relinquishment of responsibility can be comforting.

Games and films both exhibit elements of fatalism, and games may even ramp up the notion of fate by offering us choices, even if our ultimate end is fated. And yet, the very notion of increased interactivity in video game storytelling thrusts us back into recognizing film's lesser interactivity. Film refuses our control, at least at first. We can only own it by destroying it – by taking over the author's story, and even if we do this via mash-up editing or revisionary digital

alteration, the film itself remains in a Platonic sense intact, distributed *as* “film” to others in a normative performance of storied stability.

Could it be that our love affair with film is a nostalgic desire for wholeness without the burden of traditional religion, or at least for a story that we can count on to stay the same? Robert K. Logan, drawing on Marshall McLuhan, points out that new modes of media always render previous ones obsolete and engage in a complex dance of retaining certain elements of the old form while introducing new ones as well:

“[D]igital media is now obsolescing television in the sense that young people look more to digital media to meet their information and entertainment needs instead of television. Television cannot compete with the interactivity of digital media and their two-way flow of information. Television has become a one-way dead end medium – without interactivity and hence boring.” (*McLuhan Studies* 2011, 44).

What if the same thing is happening to religion today, that religion as we have known it is now “obsolescing” as interactive media promises much more obvious and intense two-way interaction, offers us the role of creator? Film, then, may be comforting because it reminds us, relentlessly, that we don’t control every story. We can’t.

Even as more and more new story-worlds emerge and filmmaking seems increasingly absorbed into massive corporate ventures in story-selling, in its very structure, film performs its survival and its religious articulation of time as ultimately stable. Film lets us sit quietly and listen, in a world that is full of demands for our voices. Film suggests that meaning is ultimately achievable, and that the “other,” the different, that which we do not control, can paradoxically

comfort us. Film, then, represents the timeless ability of storytelling to calm us, to promise us meaning, to give us something to hold onto when everything else seems out of control. This, I suspect, is why we love it so.

### **Jolyon Baraka Thomas<sup>1</sup>**

To situate myself a bit the outset, I should clarify that I am not a film buff, nor have I had much formal training in film studies. I got into the study of religion and film because I was trying to figure out a way to understand the confounding discrepancies between low Japanese levels of professions of religious belief and affiliation and high levels of participation in religious activities, which are more frequently described as custom or habit. It occurred to me as I began my investigations that the operative definitions of religion favored by scholars almost certainly did not match those favored by laypeople, so I decided to try assessing aspects of Japanese religiosity through aspects of quotidian life. I happened to choose illustrated serial novels (manga) and animated films (anime) because—as someone with a prior interest in religion—my own reading and viewing of these popular media revealed seemingly religious registers to the stories and characters, but also because conversations with some Japanese acquaintances confirmed my suspicion that at least some people constructed their religious viewpoints in response to ideas and images featured in their favorite comics and cartoons.<sup>2</sup> It was in the process of first trying to wrap my head around this connection that I encountered John Lyden's monograph and the 2003 volume about world cinema edited by Brent Plate.<sup>3</sup>

One of the primary things that I took from John Lyden's stimulating 2003 book was the importance of trying to get at audience reception in a responsible manner. John was fairly

meticulous in setting out his rationale for treating film as religion and for laying out a case that plebeian entertainment could serve the lofty role of religion just as easily as high art could. In my opinion, one of the better methods that John advocated but could not fully implement in his book is to borrow from the ethnographic toolkit and use surveys, interviews, and similar sorts of observations to get at how audiences respond to films. Although the usual caveats about ethnographic methods apply—interviewees often tell interviewers what they think they want to hear, interviewers ask leading questions, what people report is often different from their actual behavior—these methods form an instant way of verifying a scholar’s hunches about audience reception. They can therefore provide significant defense against the charge that a project on religion and film solely represents the idiosyncratic interpretations of a single scholar. This is particularly important because scholars of religion are primed by our training to see traces of religion in all aspects of social life and cultural production.

To give an example from my own work, in Japan only about two or three people out of ten admits to being “religious,” and most people vigorously avoid describing even activities at temples or shrines as “religion.” When I interviewed people about their reactions to manga and anime, few of them were willing to describe their approach to these media as “religious,” but they would readily talk about how specific stories or characters provided guidance for ethical behavior, or how they or someone they knew had engaged in ritual activity in response to manga or anime content. This allowed me to do more or less what John was aiming for in his book: namely, to treat the medium and the cultural practices surrounding it *as* religion instead of merely treating the medium as a *vehicle* for static religious content. That said, I merely scratched the surface and my number of interviews was minimal, so I am hoping that some anthropologist out there picks up on the work and runs with it.

My first reaction to Brent Plate's 2008 book was one of despair followed immediately by elation. I got a copy of the book just after I had submitted the earliest draft of my own book manuscript to University of Hawaii Press for consideration, and I found that we had independently come to similar conclusions regarding the co-constitutive relationship between religion and recreation, in the dual sense of recreation as entertainment and re-creation in the sense of creating and refashioning world views. The elation came when I realized that Brent's book proved that at least one scholar who I very much respect was working toward a similar understanding of religion and visual culture that could show where and how fictional worlds got mapped onto empirical reality; his understanding of the embodied aspect of film viewing was also very stimulating. That non-filmic reality appears on film is obvious, but this fact is not applicable to anime for the obvious reason that anime is illustrated. The reverse, in which filmic worlds and characters appear in empirical reality through audience members' ritual activities is, by contrast, both counterintuitive and exciting. In my work, I was able to document examples such as humans dressing up as their favorite animated characters (cosplay) or offering votive tablets to fictional deities at Shintō shrines.

Ultimately, I somewhat quixotically tried to explain how this is even possible through a discussion of the cognitive process whereby creators and viewers of illustrated images stitch them together in processes called closure and compositing. I tried to show that in the same way that a viewer of a manga imaginatively fills in the spaces between panels as she reads (closure), she also can fill in spaces between a comic and her own life, reading it as having a direct impact on her outlook and actions. Similarly, in the same way in which a single frame of anime might feature several layers of cels superimposed on one another to provide the illusion of depth—and the way in which a single panel of a manga might include multiple layers of signification



including third-person omniscient commentary, dialogue, soliloquy, and onomatopoeia—people composite illustrated worlds with the empirical world. One thing I see future studies doing—something that has been hinted at in all the books but especially in Brent’s and Ton’s—is to similarly figure out how the technology and grammar of film itself might be used to better understand religion. In other words, perhaps it would clarify the field moving forward if we could talk about *religion as film* just as readily as we talk about film as religion. I have to admit that at this stage I am not exactly sure what this would look like.

On that specific note, when John called in his book for a sort of “interreligious dialogue” between religion and film, quite frankly at first I was not sure what he was getting at. However, after reading Antonio Sison’s (2012) book I think I understand John’s argument better and I see how a sort of “interreligious dialogue” between religion and film might work, even if I remain unclear about how *film* can “talk.” Ton’s (Antonio’s) book was challenging for me personally because I do not read a great deal of Christian theological or confessional literature in my study of Japanese religions. Perhaps because a significant part of my training in Asian religions is to resist attempts to understand Asian traditions as crypto-Christianity, the basic premise of the book that film can reveal the human as an image of god made me feel a bit “itchy.” It was hard for me to accept as a generalizable principle that can be extended equally to all films—especially films made in obviously non-Christian cultures.

This is not a criticism of Ton’s work. Ton was careful to clarify that his intent was not to “baptize” the obviously non-Christian films with Christian meanings. While my initial (and unfair) impression was that he had done exactly that, upon some reflection I realized that what he is doing in his book is actually very familiar to my own project. Some of the films he addresses may not be explicitly Christian, but he argues persuasively that the films can nevertheless offer

Christian messages in line with the particular theology he lays out in the opening of the book. Similarly, in my own book most of the manga and anime I addressed are not explicitly religious, and in most cases both directors and audiences would probably deny that the films serve any religious function or have any religious meaning even if they feature characters or ideals that *seem* religious. I nevertheless argued that there was sufficient evidence for me to identify certain films as having apparently religious meaning for certain audience members according to the definition I laid out in my introduction, making my approach an almost perfect parallel to Ton's. I think Ton and I diverge when it comes to whether and how to assess audience reception. I would be particularly interested in reading a follow-up project that mobilizes ethnographic methods to see if there are ways that viewers of these films take them to be providing the sort of image of god he describes.

Sheila Nayar's (2012) book provided significant food for thought for me. I have to admit that I am still digesting the recuperation of Eliade for discussions of religion and film. While his importance for the field of religious studies is indisputable, reading the first couple of chapters I wondered if his universalizing tendencies might actually hinder Sheila's project of distinguishing between "oral" and "textual" ways of knowing. It became clear in the later chapters that Sheila's "recuperation" of Eliade was actually a project of bending the Eliadean conception of the sacred to account for this distinction, but I wonder if Sheila's use of the definite article in her title—"the sacred"—masks what may actually be a discussion of two (or perhaps more) "sacreds." Since Eliade's problematic premise was that so-called primitive humans had more direct access to the (unitary, universal) sacred than modern humans, I wonder how Sheila might incorporate into her work some of the recent scholarship about secularity and the ostensible disenchantment of the world, particularly because some readers might misunderstand Sheila's project as romantically

suggesting that orality is better than literacy. More broadly, I think one of the challenges moving forward is to incorporate a sophisticated understanding of secularity into the religion and film literature, since it would be facile to assume that religion represents a secularization of originally pure religious ritual or doctrine and equally facile to assume that the medium of film does not alter religious messages, particularly in the case of feature films like religious spectaculars and propaganda films designed to elicit religious responses in audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Anyway, when I first read Sheila's description of the distinction between orality and alphabetic literacy my mind immediately went to the very *visual* quality of writing in East Asia and how ideographic literacy, like alphabetic literacy, inspires interiority; it also creates a unique visual conceptual vocabulary. In conversation, literate people in East Asia regularly visualize specific characters in order to assign the right semantic value to homophones, and people will sketch characters on each other's palms or in the air when breakdowns in communication occur. Further systematic focus on the cognitive processes behind ideographic literacy may contribute significantly to the existing literature on semiotics in manga (particularly) and anime, which has shown how the marriage of symbols, text, and imagery creates a unique cognitive shorthand for transmitting otherwise intangible, invisible, or verbally inexpressible data: a nosebleed indicates the internal emotional state of erotic arousal, for example, while onomatopoeia can be both drawn and transcribed. So, in addition to Sheila's stimulating suggestion that we consider how textual ways of knowing may unduly influence our analyses of film—and the concomitant suggestion that audience reception studies might be enriched by more fully addressing the oral/aural proclivities of some audience members, I tentatively suggest that we also consider that there are multiple modes of literacy that may indeed foster multifarious modes of *seeing*. While the literacy angle is new to me, my research to date has found that it is precisely because of such

alternate modes of seeing (and of representation) that Japanese anime feels different from other animation. This derives very much from anime's close relationship to manga, the indebtedness of both to film technology, and their development out of earlier illustrated media in Japan such as picture card plays and visually augmented Buddhist homilies.

I'd like to suggest that such historical continuities between religious film and earlier media (illustration, sculpture, drama, and associated ritual practices) deserve attention in the future. For example, what historical examples are there of fictional deities (and the actors who play them) becoming objects of veneration? What rituals have been performed in conjunction with dramatic performance? When have inert images been treated as alive and in need of sustenance, entertainment, and the like? How do these examples serve as evidence of the imaginative process of people suturing fictional worlds to empirical reality?

On the subject of other things to aim for in the future, one thing that I think scholars of religion do far too infrequently is to define the term religion itself. When Brent argued at the start of his book that religion and film are like each other, I wonder if that allowed him to sidestep a definition of what each of them is. Similarly, when Sheila uses the term "sacred" to indicate things "set apart" in time or space, how do we account for the fact that we are talking about film, the viewing of which might be quotidian rather than exceptional?

Some might say that we know religion or the sacred when we see it, but this opens us up to the reasonable critique that we are being excessively confessional, are reading our own interpretations too much into the work of a director, or that we are imputing to audiences our own reactions. I'm not calling here for some impossible mode of pure objectivity, but minus ethnographic work (sorry to keep hammering this point) it seems difficult to prove that the scholar of religion and film is talking about anybody but herself. In my own work, I have to

account for the fact that most of my informants—both directors and audiences—will recognize characters, images, and tropes as religious in origin but will deny the possibility that they have any religious effect or meaning. A sensitive, multivalent definition can address this by clarifying how the category of “religion” operates for different interest groups, including scholars, filmmakers, clerics, and audiences.

However, I also think that we can and should interrogate the tendency to adopt strictly functionalist definitions of religion when describing its relationship to film. When it comes to measuring religious effects or outcomes of viewing film, my own approach distinguishes between garden-variety “diversion” (ninety minutes of fun with little change in worldview) and re-creation (active engagement with a film that leads to a change in worldview). The religious effects of mere diversion are too slippery to offer much academic purchase, and I think that when we use functionalist language to talk about the sacred and cinema or religion and film, we are generally talking about the *re-creation* that happens for some viewers as they watch (or for some directors as they create) filmic worlds and incorporate those images and ideas into the ways that they imagine the world.

Obviously I am very much in line with Brent on this given our very similar uses of the concept of “re-creation.” In the future, I think we need to isolate those moments when re-creation happens by, first, putting ourselves in prime locations for interviews and participant observation where we can see filmic worlds getting imaginatively and ritually projected onto empirical reality. I also think we can and should use very specific language when describing the changes in worldview that occur through film. It is too easy to say in academic shorthand that somebody experiences “redemption” or “renewal” through film. What precisely do we mean when we use such words, and based on what evidence?

So, in addition to asking what religion *does* for different interest groups, I think it is equally important to think about the content of religion and how those different groups perceive that content at a pre-discursive level and interpret it thereafter. My own working definition, which is admittedly somewhat scientific, suggests that religion necessarily posits the existence of empirically unverifiable realities.<sup>5</sup> I think that if we can highlight the places where films identify characters (such as deities), forces (such as karma), and goals (such as salvation) that cannot be described in strictly empirical terms—that is, if we can highlight the places where the inherently imaginative aspects of storytelling, visual representation, and religion intersect—then we can do a much better job of not merely describing religion *in* film or why film and religion are functionally similar, but can indeed get at why film *is* religion, as John claims, or can get at what specifically is *sacred* about film, as Sheila suggests.<sup>6</sup>

1 Thanks to Brent Plate for organizing the panel, to all of the authors for their very stimulating books, to fellow respondents for their thought-provoking comments, and to our audience for coming to a panel right at the end of the conference and asking some challenging questions of all of us. I would also like to especially thank Ton Sison and Sheila Nayar for making sure that I got copies of their recently published books at my home in Japan well before the panel session. This somewhat colloquial paper represents my best effort at reconstructing the rather disjointed notes that informed my original panel response. I have edited for clarity and added some supplemental information in the notes below.

2 The results of my investigations are summarized in Thomas 2012. Without going into detail about the book itself, I would like to offer a brief note on the state of religion and film studies in Japan for the sake of comparison. Japanese scholars of religion were fairly slow to pick up on the religion and film literature, meaning that until recently books on the subject have been fairly superficial. The rather pessimistic assumption in the small number of existing works on religion and film in Japan seems to be that although Japan is religiously deficient (professions of belief and affiliation are exceptionally low), film directors contribute to the survival of religious ideas by smuggling them into audience consciousness. This line of argumentation assumes that religions are static repositories of data from which directors draw rather than perennially changing, living institutions; it also assumes that religious content is not transformed in the process of mediation. Nevertheless, several Japanese scholars of religion have seized upon this conservationist approach and have promoted the idea of using films in religious studies classrooms as a sort of last-ditch effort against student apathy towards (or estrangement from) religion. The assumption that religion is a cultural artifact that needs preservation and that professors of religious studies are the ones who should curate it is potentially problematic because it treads a fine line between the laudable goal of improving religious literacy and proselytizing.

3 I am referring here not to Plate's 2008 monograph, but rather to Plate 2003.

4 Incidentally, I find it curious that very few of the movies discussed in any of the books are created by religious organizations for missionary purposes. In Japan, one religion known internationally as Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku, formerly known as the Institute for Research in Human Happiness, or IRH) has been very active in making anime feature films that blend Happy Science cosmology with hortatory adventure stories featuring pious protagonists who survive crises of faith. Happy Science pours considerable resources into these films, although the films' success in boosting numbers is difficult to measure.

5 See Thomas 2012, 8–19 (but esp. 11–12) for a fuller treatment.

6 To clarify, I am not arguing for what Brent describes as the “spot-the-Christ-figure method,” but rather for a commitment to highlighting what precisely makes a heroic figure Christ-like rather than simply heroic or exemplary (here I think I am very much in line with Ton's argument in the last chapter of his book). Presumably, we interpret a figure as Christ-like because of her portrayal as an agent of redemption, which is in turn predicated on the fundamental assumption (belief, if you will) that redemption is something that needs to occur in the first place. The Christ-figure *per se* isn't what makes a movie religious or sacred at all. Rather, it is the *a priori* assumption that viewers are in need of salvation that turns any given heroic figure into a Christlike one. It is striking how frequently literature on religion and film creates and reproduces such empirically unverifiable *a priori* assumptions, with authors saying without qualification that audiences crave or experience redemption, revitalization, or the like. Personally, I think we should avoid this sort of psychologizing language because it so clearly resists verification. We do not know that audiences crave “redemption” until we see audience members act or speak in a way that suggests that such desire exists.

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