



10-1-2019

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Recommended Citation

Yamada, Marc (2019) "Teaching Hierophany through Film and Film through Hierophany," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol23/iss2/6>

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Teaching Hierophany through Film and Film through Hierophany

Abstract

Courses that deal with cinematic representations of the sacred often focus on the experiences of characters in the film, relegating the viewer to the position of a passive witness to the reorienting effects of cinematic hierophanies. These types of courses do not take full advantage of the power of the cinematic medium to transform the way viewers understand the ontological and temporal structures they use to anchor themselves in the “profane” world. Based on my undergraduate course Cinema and the Sacred, this article outlines ways to allow students to experience the full transformative effects of cinema. As is the case with many of the works analyzed below, the religious subject matter dealt with in these films is of secondary importance to their role in creating sacred experience. It is the formal devices through which these visual narratives are relayed, this article argues, that imbues cinema with its sacred function.

Keywords

Hierophany, anime, horror, education

Author Notes

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This essay is based on my course Cinema and the Sacred, which I teach at the university level. The goal of the essay is to help instructors incorporate Mircea Eliade's notion of the sacred into undergraduate film classes.¹ Apart from its connection to religious studies, the idea of the sacred is an important rhetorical device used in cultural discourse on environmentalism, national identity, and other political issues. This essay contends that to truly understand the importance of the sacred, students must go beyond studying the term in a purely academic fashion and experience the reorienting effects of the sacred for themselves—something that film allows them to do. Accordingly, this essay outlines ways for instructors to take full advantage of the power of the cinematic medium to represent the rhetorical capacity of the sacred to transform the way viewers understand the ontological and temporal structures they use to anchor themselves in everyday experience. As is the case with many of the works analyzed in this essay, the religious subject matter dealt with in these films is of secondary importance to their role in creating sacred experience. Rather, the cinematic devices through which visual narratives are relayed, this essay argues, imbues cinema with the transformative effects associated with sacred experience.

TEACHING CINEMA AND THE SACRED

Before analyzing specific films in the course, students learn key terms relating to the sacred and ways in which these terms are reflected in film. The goal of this part of the course is to give students the vocabulary they need to analyze film, while also helping them consider cinema as not just a transparent window on sacred experience but also a medium through which sacred experience is created in the first place. In the first week of the class, we read sections of Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, introducing terms that relate to our discussion of film. After learning vocabulary like *sacred*, *profane*, and in particular *hierophany*—the manifestation of the sacred in the profane world—students of cinema begin to see these concepts at work in many of the films, both religious and secular, that they encounter. We then transition to a discussion of film by reading Michael Bird's "Film as Hierophany," in which Bird emphasizes the importance of a formalistic analysis of filmic works that deal with the sacred: "What is required in a cinematic theology is a consideration of how the style of film can enable an exploration of the sacred—it is the style not the subject matter which is of primary significance."² Accordingly, we examine formal devices that lend themselves to the visual representation of sacred experience. Brent Plate's *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* offers a useful discussion of the way

cinematography, editing, and mise en scène can be used to demarcate sacred experience.³

After developing a working vocabulary of the cinematography of the sacred, we practice analyzing a full-length cinematic work, such as Phil Robinson's *Field of Dreams* (1989), an accessible film for students to begin applying the vocabulary they learn. David Chidester's "The Church of Baseball," which discusses the sacred in terms of American culture, and Mara Donaldson's "Teaching Field of Dreams as Cosmogonic Myth" offer useful resources in creating lesson plans and discussion topics centered on the sacred nature of baseball in the historical imaginary.⁴ In particular, *Field of Dreams* provides a cogent example of the cinematic depiction of the sacred. The scene that we use to discuss the sacred is the moment when the protagonist Ray, an Iowa farmer who is prompted by a strange voice to build a baseball field in his backyard, first meets Shoeless Joe Jackson, a player from the early 1900s, who miraculously appears in Ray's cornfield. Instead of watching the film in its entirety, I have the students watch just this scene; the lack of narrative context requires them to focus on the depiction of the sacred through visual cues.

In this scene, sacred experience is primarily represented through cinematography, editing, and diegetic sound. The experience of the sacred is based on the visual contrast established between the farmhouse as a profane space and the baseball field as a sacred one. The farmhouse is depicted as the place where the business of every day occurs. In the close quarters of the dining room, a medium

shot captures Ray and his wife discussing the mortgage at the kitchen table. Their concerned faces and the bills on the table fill the frame, underscoring the characters' preoccupation with profane concerns. The artificial lighting in the dining room and the images of a baseball game that flicker across the television screen in the background underscore how the farmhouse is cut off from the authentic, transformative experiences offered by the sacred.

The sacred space of the baseball field is set apart in the scene through cinematography and lighting. In contrast to the confining medium shots in this early exchange, the wide shots used to capture the darkened field outside of the house emphasize the expansiveness of sacred space. Beckoned to the window by his daughter, Ray sees Shoeless Joe Jackson standing in the middle of the open field in an extreme long shot, the space around him providing a stark visual contrast to the oppression of the cramped living room. When Ray turns on the electricity, the diamond is bathed in light, set apart from the dark fields that surround it. The baseball that will be played here, the scene suggests, is of a purer form than the commercialized version playing on the TV in the house. Along with a fence surrounding the dugout, emphasizing the separation between Ray and the diamond, the distance between the profane and sacred realms is emphasized by shot-reverse-shots between Ray and Shoeless Joe as they first notice each other.

As the scene moves to the baseball field, diegetic sound and choreography distinguish the diamond from the profane space of the farmhouse. As Ray steps

onto the field, it is clear that he has entered a new realm. The lack of dialogue between Ray and Joe for the first few minutes of their encounter suggests the sacred nature of the interaction, far different from the dialogue-heavy confrontation moments earlier between Ray and his wife. The field is a rarefied place in which vulgar interactions are replaced by wordless gestures. The lack of dialogue also requires students to watch the clip closely and rely on visual cues to acquire information, as Ray and Joe intuitively settle into the ritual of playing baseball. Further underscoring the separation between profane and sacred experience is Ray's unpreparedness to participate in this ritual. He mishits a ball to a waiting Joe, suggesting that he is still polluted by the profane world of bills and mortgages and must be initiated into the sacred.

CINEMATIC HIEROPHANIES

This viewing of *Field of Dreams* provides a way to help students rely on visual and cinematic information in analyzing the sacred elements of film. It is the first step in helping students see cinema not only as a medium through which they can witness the sacred vicariously through characters like Ray but also one through which students can experience the sacred's reorienting effects for themselves. Films that seek to create sacred experience should function like a hierophany—they should transform the viewer's perspective of the world. Eliade defines *hierophany* as a

break in the homogeneity of everyday life, revealing a new reality.⁵ Hierophanies reorient our experience to this reality, taking us away from profane manifestations of space and time to remind us of things larger than our mundane concerns. Because they pull us out of the comfort of our accepted notions of reality, hierophanies can often produce a sense of disorientation and even “suffering.”⁶ In a cinematic sense, films that adhere to audience expectations and utilize common genre conventions and storylines are able to present a homogenous worldview that resembles Eliade’s notion of the profane. A cinematic hierophany requires film to go against these expectations—to resignify cinematic language and convention that has grown stale with overuse, as well as to defamiliarize the world for the viewer. Hierophany requires film to adopt a transcendental style, which, according to Paul Schrader, involves the removal of devices that orient human experience within a conventional story, including dialogue, plot, melodrama, and a narrative-based sense of time.⁷

TEACHING HIEROPHANY AND FILM

In the class, we focus on the way cinematic hierophanies reorient three aspects of our experience: our worldview, our sense of self, and our sense of human time. Cinema can depict a sense of completeness that is characteristic of sacred experience; it can show us the world before the fracturing forces of language and technology create a dualistic relationship between humans and nature. Japanese

anime is a particularly effective medium for demonstrating the reorienting effects of cinema because it comes from a tradition that emphasizes, even if it has not always practiced, a harmonious relationship with the environment. As an introduction to anime, we discuss the idea of the nonduality that emerges from Shintô perspectives of animism: the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. By attributing a spiritual life to nature through animation, animistic perspectives challenge the dominion often afforded humans vis-à-vis the natural order, demonstrating that civilization is not the center of the world but is one piece of a larger ecosystem. Reflecting the nonanthropocentric worldview of religions like Shintô, the Ghibli anime *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), both directed by Hayao Miyazaki, reorient our dualistic view of civilization and nature through visual effects that show us a vision of a nonanthropocentric world. Both stories depict the disharmony between civilization and the natural world and the effects that deforestation and pollution have on the world outside of civilization. Yet, unlike works of environmental fiction that tend to censure humans, these films avoid simplistic categories, pointing to a polarized worldview as the very reason for the enmity between humans and nature.

These two films use inside-out editing to reconfigure the viewer's understanding of the relationship between civilization and nature. In a scene partway through *Nausicaä*, we are shown a city with people going about their daily

lives. A jump cut moves our perspective outside of this city to an extreme long shot that provides more visual context for the city's surroundings. We see the city's location in a valley surrounded by large cliffs. A tilt up reveals a windmill on top of a tower that resembles the cliffs as the city begins to merge with the background. Another jump cut moves our perspective even farther out to picture the city and its place in the vast green valley that unfolds between the two cliffs. From this perspective, the viewer's eyes are drawn to other aspects of the environment. Finally, the camera zooms out farther to an extreme long shot that completely diminishes the markers of civilization to picture one large ecosystem. By using inside-out editing to dissolve the image of the city before our very eyes, *Nausicaä* visualizes a sense of wholeness that transcends the artificial divisions that civilization can impose on the world.

The apparatus of anime itself, as we discuss in class, provides a way of visualizing this nondualistic world. In its original form, animation was created through the placement of cells on top of one another to form a layered view of the world, consisting of a background, middle ground, and foreground. Movement in this early style of animation was created by sliding cells on top of one another, resulting in a lateral trajectory of motion across the diegetic world.⁸ Although animation has since gained the ability to depict movement into depth, much of anime, as Thomas Lamarre argues, retains the effects of the layered worldview of the original cell animation process.⁹ As an effect of this layering of images,

however, the landscape depicted in the background of the diegetic world does not remain static but rather moves as characters move through it. While the environment remains in place in relation to the movement of characters in conventional film, the untethered landscapes of works of anime depict nature not as a static other to the active world of humans but rather as an interconnected part of it.

The depiction of natural forces in Miyazaki's *The Wind Rises* (2013) creates an anthropomorphized world that is alive with movement. In an early scene in the film, the seismic waves of an earthquake rip through the land, derailing a locomotive carrying passengers. As the train moves laterally across the frame, the ground shakes from the power of the quake. In another scene, a huge gust of wind flows across a pond, creating waves in the same manner as the earthquake did. When the wind comes upon a woman painting a picture under a parasol, the wind shakes the green grass beneath her, sending her umbrella flying into the air. It is important to note that the sounds of the earthquake and the wind in the film are created by human voices, further bridging the divide between the human and natural worlds. A close analysis of scenes of merging animatism and cinematography in this way allows students to directly visualize the reorientation of the world from an anthropocentric understanding of the otherness of nature to a relationship of wholeness.

CINEMATIC HIEROPHANIES AND SELFHOOD

If cinematic hierophanies allow students to imagine a nondualistic relationship between humans and nature, hierophanies also transform a dualistic view of life and death through the depiction of normative and nonnormative bodies. The horror genre provides a selection of films that deal with spiritual themes while compelling audiences to acknowledge the mortality of the corporal form. Interactions with monstrous others force characters, and students, to reconsider the perceived otherness of unbounded and decaying bodies to the bounded ones they associate with the vitality of life.

The othering of nonnormative bodies is an issue dealt with extensively in disability theory. Before delving into the analysis of particular horror films, I introduce students to theoretical works that provide the framework for understanding the reorientation of selfhood in horror. Margit Shildrick elucidates the body transformation that transpires in the horror experience as characters, and audience members, encounter monsters. Shildrick distinguishes between what she calls “normative bodies”—the autonomous, masculine bodies of modernity—and “nonnormative” ones—disabled bodies that do not conform to standard views of unity and health. She suggests that contact with nonnormative bodies is fraught

with anxiety because it reminds subjects of the deterioration of their own corporeal bodies. It reminds them of their own mortality.¹⁰

The jarring interaction that Shildrick describes between normative and nonnormative bodies is captured in horror films. Horror is filled with images of deformed and decaying bodies, whose very presence reminds us of the spectre of death. Japanese horror, in particular, offers a useful medium to represent this idea because the very interaction with these horrific others is enough to kill people, transforming their bodies from normative to nonnormative ones. This is the case in one of the most well-known J-horror films, *The Ring* (*Ringu*, 1997). *The Ring* presents aspects of the sacred that we discuss in the class: spirituality, eternal return, and ritual, among other issues. Yet, the most powerful expression of the sacred occurs through the reorienting shock that audiences experience in their interaction with monstrous bodies and the way this interaction challenges their own sense of embodiment. In the story, a vengeful ghost, Sadako, haunts those who come in contact with a mysterious videotape. The shock of seeing her decaying face and hands, often hidden by her long black hair, has a hierophanic effect on characters, reorienting their dualistic view of life and death as well as their very physical appearance, as their healthy bodies take on the same decaying form as Sadako's.

Audiences, too, experience the transformative effects of Sadako's interventions, not only by witnessing the breakdown of the division between normative and nonnormative bodies but also by participating in the curse of

Sadako's forbidden film. The fact that most viewers watched the film on a "borrowed" VHS tape at the time of its release in 1998 put them in the position of participants in the curse. Entering the film through the interested and embodied perspective of characters who are haunted by the curse, the viewers' sense of their own embodiment is challenged through the interaction with Sadako. This reorientation of the embodied form occurs at the end of the mysterious video in a grainy scene in which Sadako emerges from a well in the woods. Shot from the first-person perspective, the video conflates the viewer of *The Ring* with the viewer of the videotape. We witness Sadako emerge from the well and move toward us, violating the space that divides us from her monstrous body. She has long black hair and is dressed in a white robe—the traditional outfit of those who are buried according to Shintô rites. As she stumbles toward us, moreover, glitches in the grainy film make her movements appear unnatural and her body grotesque. Eventually, she emerges on the other side of the television screen, overcoming the boundary that separates the viewer of the videotape, and us, from the diegetic world of the film. The last thing we see as Sadako comes upon us is her angry and decaying face. Through this interaction with Sadako, the viewer of the videotape—our proxy in the film—also experiences a physical transformation; he is later discovered with the same grotesque face as Sadako. In this way, the visceral shock provided by horror films like *The Ring* offers a way for students to experience the

jarring effects that hierophanies can unleash on our experience, much like the terror that Sadako unleashes on the world.

Along with reorienting the viewer's dualistic perspective of life and death, interactions with nonnormalized bodies can reframe our understanding of gendered bodies as depicted in media sources. The brutality of David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) provides a hierophanic experience for characters by pulling them from the uniformity of their consumerist lifestyle and, for the audience, by reimagining an ideal male body. In the film, fighting provides a counterbalance to the protagonist's consumerist lifestyle. An early montage depicts the protagonist's mundane existence, filled with designer clothes, IKEA catalogues, and business meetings—a visual contrast to the fight scenes, which are depicted as sacred experience. These fights are set apart from everyday life through a set of rigid rituals, becoming a way for disaffected men to connect with something larger than themselves and reclaim their agency from the emasculating forces of capitalism. The sacred experience of fighting is effectively set apart in the scene that depicts the inaugural meeting of the club. The scene opens with a tracking shot, following characters into a bar and down a hatch in the floor that leads to a dank basement. This sordid setting belies its sacred function—it is a place apart from the business of daily life, a place where rituals are performed, where fighters get in touch with their primitive selves. On the floor of this dirty temple, rules defining dress and behavior are outlined as the fighting commences. Despite the savagery depicted in the scene, fighting serves as

a bonding moment for the men; their bruises and wounds become a secret sign of brotherhood when they encounter fellow members in the everyday world.

Interactions with nonnormative bodies during fights reconfigure the viewer's perspective of normative male corporality. Close-ups and shot-reverse-shots capture the transformation of characters into grotesque images. The characters who provide the viewer's embodied perspective in the story are often beaten severely; their bruised and battered faces provide a stark contrast to their bodies before the fighting commences. In one fight, the protagonist battles a large man named Bob, who has enlarged breasts that are a side effect of his cancer treatments. Shot-reverse-shots between the protagonist, our focalization point in the story, and Bob's grotesque body reveal the protagonist's, and the viewer's, revulsion. Physically touching Bob, who holds his adversaries in a bear hug against his breasts, forces the viewer, through the perspective of the protagonist, to come into contact with this nonnormative body and to accept it as a masculine one. In this way, *Fight Club* not only depicts the transformation of characters, who get in touch with something real and primitive through the ceremony, but also serves to reorient the audience's perspective on normative bodies.

CINEMATIC HIEROPHANIES AND SACRED TIME

Perhaps more than with depictions of selfhood, students can directly perceive the hierophanic effects of cinema by experiencing the temporality of film. Because the basis of cinema is time, according to critic Giles Deleuze, film provides a way of immersing audiences in both profane and sacred experiences of time.¹¹ “Sacred time,” as Eliade defines it, invites us to break from the linear flow of experience and return to our temporal and physical origins through a process known as “eternal return.”¹² However, the reorienting effects of cinematic time, as we discuss in class, transcend the notion of sacred time as Eliade defines it, manifesting as a break from the linear orientations of narrative structures. Because conventional forms of film, such as classical Hollywood cinema, seek to orient viewers within the story by arranging images into a linear flow, these films provide a way of depicting a sense of profane time. In class, we discuss the way Hollywood cinema organizes temporal moments in a cause-and-effect trajectory, excising scenes that do not advance the story. Even if cinematic plots chronologically rearrange events for rhetorical effect through flashbacks and flashforwards, the emphasis placed on story in Hollywood cinema requires that audiences understand the overall ordering of these events in a linear sense. Because the sacred represents a break from mundane forms of temporal experience, true sacred moments in film should not serve the linear

demands of the story. Just like a hierophany, they should provide a space apart from this narrative logic.

For this reason, nonlinear plotlines in cinematic narratives provide a way of helping students experience the disorienting effects of hierophanies. In the narrative form, the sacred, I suggest, figures through what literary critic Roland Barthes describes as “moments of excess”—moments set apart from the linear march toward the conclusion of the story. Just such a moment occurs in Robert Redford’s *A River Runs through It* (1992), which is based on a novella by Norman Maclean. The film deals with the confluence of religion and fishing through the representation of a sacred river, where two brothers, Norman and Paul, experience a closeness to nature. For this reason, as with the other films described in this essay, *A River Runs through It* provides a model for teaching the visual translation of basic cinematic terms related to the sacred. However, while acknowledging the film’s potential to illustrate sacred themes, I use it as a way to help students *experience* a sacred moment set apart from the profane push of time as directed by the plot. In a film that thematizes the act of storytelling, one moment in Norman’s narration of his experiences at the river sticks out as a sacred space in the narrative, separate from the moments that serve the telling of a story. This scene happens at the end of the film, when Norman, Paul, and their father go fishing together for the last time. In the scene, Paul stands apart from Norman and his father, demonstrating his virtuosity as a fisherman in sacred communion with the river.

Like Paul, the scene itself stands apart from the story—it is a scene that does not really belong in the logical flow of the narrative. The night before the scene, Norman leaves Paul in a dangerous situation outside of a gambling hall. In most films, this scene would serve as a farewell for Paul and his brother, as we assume that Paul's reckless lifestyle has finally caught up with him. Indeed, the ominous way in which the scene is shot intimates Paul's demise, as does his tardiness the next morning for the scheduled fishing trip with his family. Yet, out of nowhere, Paul suddenly shows up at the family home, and the three head to the river. The ensuing fishing scene feels superfluous on a narrative level.¹³ The three had already gone fishing together, and this excursion adds nothing new to the story. Likewise, the scene forestalls the natural resolution of Paul's narrative arc. Sure enough, immediately following the scene, Norman is called to the police station to identify his brother, who was killed after the fishing trip in much the same way that the story suggested before the final fishing scene. For this reason, removing this scene does not affect the linear unfolding of the story—it's a moment of excess in the narrative. Its main function is to create an experience of the sacred for both Norman and for the viewer. Because it does not figure into the narrative logic of the story, it stands apart as a place of reflection. Through this fishing trip, Norman understands the close connection between religion and fly fishing, while viewers experience a moment in which they lose touch with the linear orientations of a mundane and

homogenous storyline and enter a place apart in the narrative unfolding of experience.

Along with narrative elisions, cinematography and editing create a sense of sacred time by leveling the temporal divisions used to demarcate the narrative flow of conventional films. If profane time is marked through timelines, sacred time, as we discuss in class, is created through what theorist Giles Deleuze describes as “time crystals”—moments in which the artificial divisions of linear, homogenous time collapse. This cinematic term offers an alternative to forms of cinematic temporality that are based on the identification of beginnings and ends and causes and effects.¹⁴ According to Deleuze, cinematic storytelling that flows in linear dimensions abstracts time by dividing it into “immobile sections” that are separate and distinct from other temporal points.¹⁵ Christopher Vitale uses the example of a string of pearls to depict the way time is normally conceived in conventional forms of film. Like individual pearls in a larger strand, distinct temporal moments are connected in a sequential arrangement related to a larger whole. The past, in this linear model, is closed off from the present experience.¹⁶ In contrast, Deleuze views temporality as consisting of “mobile sections,” in which moments dissolve into one another, transcending the bounds of the artificial divisions that keep them separate and discrete.¹⁷ Within this unbounded view of time, each moment serves as the location at which memory and actual experience merge, creating an experience of time that is not limited by the divisions of linear temporality.

Inasmuch as film depicts crystalline moments that merge past, present, and future, film can provide a glimpse of temporal experience unstructured by the limitations of profane time, one that takes on aspects of the sacred. *The Tree of Life* (2011), by Terrence Malick, and *Arrival* (2016), by Denis Villeneuve, create time crystals that merge the virtual past and future with the actual present. *The Tree of Life* is effective not only in representing sacred time but also in helping students experience sacred time's reorienting effects. The film provides a way to teach the trope of eternal return through a plot that assimilates characters in a duration that extends beyond their lifetimes. Often identified as a cinematic theodicy, *The Tree of Life* tracks a Texas family's experiences from the 1950s to the present. The family experiences tragedy when the youngest of the three children in the family is killed in the military. Although the experience of loss is a source of great suffering, particularly for the mother and middle son, this suffering provides an opportunity for the family to be reconciled to a temporal duration that transcends the family members' profane sense of time. In "Filming Reconciliation: Affect and Nostalgia in *The Tree of Life*," M. Gail Hamner argues the characters' worldview is reoriented to a divine perspective as the "hurt of Jack's life is reconciled by the fluid cinematography that interrupts and rethreads it according to divine sensibilities."¹⁸ After we learn of the death of the youngest son, the narrative returns us to the moment of the world's creation. We witness, in grand scale, the formation of land and sea and the advent of life in the form of marine creatures and dinosaurs. This

early depiction of the cosmogony is merged seamlessly with the story of the small Texan family, whose members become part of the larger unfolding of creation.

Yet, the film does not just depict sacred time through eternal return; it also allows students to experience it through editing that seeks to merge past, present, and future. Instead of abstracting time into discrete scenes that add up to a larger linear narrative, *Tree of Life* creates a mobile sense of temporality. The most useful scene in the film to demonstrate this view of time is a particularly long montage, which begins after the cosmogony, of the children growing up. The sequence is not divided into units that demarcate time and give shape to the growth of the children. Unstructured by these artificial divisions, images in this montage flow seamlessly from one moment to the next. Without temporal divisions that reinforce the immobility of past, present, and future, the open-endedness of the images allows the past to flow into the present rather than remaining distinct from it.

At first, the montage orients the viewer within a linear sense of time. A series of match cuts about 11 minutes into the film establishes the protagonist, Jack, the oldest son of the family, in the present. Having just heard the news of his brother's death, Jack begins to reflect on his childhood. The cut between adult Jack and images of Jack playing with his brothers as a child reflects the workings of memory. These periods in time are linked through images of water. Water flowing under a faucet in the present time is connected to an image of the boys playing in the rain in the past.

However, the montage begins to interpose images of water in a way that defies a linear logic, creating a flowing experience between past, present, and future. As Jack goes about his day in the present, the scene cuts to a brief shot of people walking on a beach in shallow water and then cuts back to Jack's life. Whereas the temporal context of the images is centered on Jack's perspective, the displacement of Jack from the scene creates ambiguity concerning where the scene fits within the linear timeline established at the start. Cuts on water continue throughout the long montage without returning to Jack's present. A moment capturing children in a bathtub cuts to an image of older children playing in a pool, before cutting back to the bathtub scene. Defying the logic established by the initial flashback, images of water are often matched without the temporal cues that are used to locate them in a timeline that can orient the viewer. Matching between these decontextualized images, then, figures the experience of water in ways other than through profane story time, allowing Jack's experience to take on new meaning.

The resistance to linear temporality in the editing style of *Tree of Life* has a disorienting effect on students, who are used to editing styles that arrange images in a way that conforms to the linear trajectory of an unfolding story centered on the perspective of an individual character. Close analysis of these scenes allows students to recognize how invested they are in relying on a linear sense of time and in the structure of stories to help them understand a film. Through this conflation

of images in an atemporal fashion, students experience a sense of time that is free from the linear divisions of a profane view of the world.

Like *The Tree of Life*, the science fiction film *Arrival* (2016) disrupts the linear orientation of cinematic narratives to present a sacred sense of time. Apart from the movie's experimentation with time, *Arrival* also provides a good example of many of the elements of the sacred that Eliade discusses. The film tells of a scientist, Louise, who mourns the death of her daughter against the backdrop of the sudden visitation of extraterrestrial beings. The interaction between humans and aliens serves as a perfect example of the experience of the sacred. To approach the aliens' ship, humans must go through a process of sanctification. They move from room to room in a makeshift tent set up to investigate the arrival and change into hazmat suits. As they get into jeeps that will take them from the tent complex to the ship, long shots accentuate the sense of separation between the profane and sacred worlds. Finally, as the scientists enter the ship, they are physically reoriented as the lack of gravity affects their sense of direction: up becomes down, and down up. This reorientation process prepares them to commune with the aliens, who appear on the other side of a large window and communicate through a language that is nonlinear. This scene alone is sufficient to make *Arrival* a good source for teaching the basics of cinematic representations of the sacred.

Along with visualizing sacred experience, *Arrival* allows the viewer to experience its reorienting effects through its bewildering style of editing. The

reorientation that Louise experiences in the ship transforms her sense of time in the profane world. The film disrupts the linear unfolding of time by upsetting the causality of the narrative, creating a time crystal in which the past, present, and future merge. The ordering of the images in the film creates this resistance to linear structures. A montage of Louise and her child opens the film. We see her daughter growing older as Louise describes their life together in the past tense. From the start, we learn that Louise is struggling to overcome the death of her daughter. We also learn that this tragedy led to the breakup of her relationship with the child's father. Though these events seemingly happen before the arrival of the aliens, in a chronological sense the end of the film suggests that they happen *after* the event, as Ian, a man whom Louise befriends during her work with the ship, is later revealed to be the father of her child. The disruption of chronological order in the film is confusing for viewers, who do not understand how the young girl could die before her mother meets her father.

However, interpreting the film as a time crystal in light of the themes of hierophany and sacred reorientation that occur in the story allows viewers to experience the flow of time outside of the linearity of plot they have become conditioned to. Experiencing this flow of time is accomplished by setting the film in what Deleuze describes as “any-spaces-whatever”—spaces that are not bound to a particular point in historical time.¹⁹ These types of spaces do not allow the viewer to isolate the temporal moment of the film in the trajectory of linear history. The

crystalline moment for Louise happens toward the end of the film as she communes with the aliens; past, present, and future converge into one experience through editing. Images of Louise's daughter, which the viewer identifies with the past, are intercut in the story as if they are flashbacks. However, we are told that they are actually flashforwards, as Louise's child has yet to be born. In this way, the film refuses to conform to linear ordering as it presents images of Louise's child as both past and present.

As I discuss with my students, it is important to think of the film not as a collection of "closed" moments that are ordered in a timeline with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, I challenge students to think about moments in the story as open-ended, as they flow into other moments in the film. Louise's changed vision of time, from a linear experience to a circular one, allows multiple causes and effects to condense and disperse in ways that do not necessarily fit with the causality of linear time. If the death of Louise's daughter is not a closed moment—if its effects continue to unfold in the life of the protagonist—then it does not serve as a stable reference point to demarcate a past against which the viewer can follow a developing story. Likewise, if past moments continue to develop and take on new meaning, the principles of causality and teleology that depend on stable temporal markers collapse, allowing an event that occurs first in a linear timeline to also occur last. Though challenging for students to grasp, the film's refusal to arrange cinematic images in a way that aligns with the conventional ordering of time

provides a way for the students to directly experience the reorienting effects of time crystals in cinema.

While there is great value found in films such as *Field of Dreams* that depict sacred experience through conventional forms of visual storytelling, courses that deal with cinema and the sacred would benefit from cinematic works that do not just depict sacred experience but also allow students to experience the reorienting effects of hierophanies on their worldview, sense of self, and sense of temporality. Transforming the audience's view of the world and sense of self requires more attention to cinematography and editing that defy the traditional forms of visual storytelling. The films analyzed in this article can transform students' perspectives by removing them from the comfort zone provided by the conventional forms of media that they encounter every day.

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 11-12

² Michael Bird, "Film as Hierophany," in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 3-22.

³ S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2009).

⁴ David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (Winter 1996): 743-765; Mara Donaldson, "Teaching *Field of Dreams* as Cosmogonic Myth." *Journal of Religion & Film* 2:3. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss3/3>.

⁵ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11–12.

⁶ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20–21.

⁷ Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.

⁸ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine, The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2009), 74.

⁹ Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, 74.

¹⁰ Margrit Shildrick, “Prosthetic Performativities,” “Prosthetic Performativities: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities,” in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 119.

¹¹ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.

¹² Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 74–75.

¹³ Samuel Bringham, a student in this course, deserves credit for this insight.

¹⁴ Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, 117.

¹⁵ Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁶ Christopher Vitale, “Guide to Reading Deleuze’s Cinema II,” *Networkologies* (blog). April 29, 2011. <https://networkologies.wordpress.com/2011/04/29/tips-for-reading-deleuzes-cinema-ii-the-time-image-towards-a-direct-imaging-of-time/>.

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 2.

¹⁸ M. Gail Hamner, “Filming Reconciliation: Affect and Nostalgia,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 18:1 (2014), 15. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/43>.

¹⁹ Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 9.

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