Seduction By Visual Image

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Abstract
Increasingly, professors of religion are using movies, both fiction films and documentaries, in their classrooms. Reasons for the attractiveness of the medium as a pedagogical tool abound: ready availability, immediacy of impact, congeniality for young audiences who are more attuned to images than to words, to name just a few. But how many of us who use texts check our critical tools at the movie house door and settle for a credulity vis-a-vis the visual image, a credulity that we otherwise find unacceptable in the classroom? We know that history, no less than fiction (even if differently from fiction) is an imaginative work that involves shaping events into a story. But how many of us knowledgeable ones use documentary films in our classroom as if they showed students "what Buddhism is really like"? Doesn't such an attitude amount to a sort of film fundamentalism?

If films are to remain an important resource for "teaching about religion", perhaps it is time to become somewhat more reflective about what they mean. There are plenty of good reasons why we are not particularly adept at reading films critically, and many of them have to do with the medium itself. Indeed, most movies positively conspire against us in our critical task. What is that conspiracy and what can we do about it? How can we deal with movies on their own terms? First, then, let’s look at some ways in which movies work at seducing us into critical somnolence.
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The Power of the Image
No one involved in the study of religion and religious traditions needs convincing about the power of images. This should be reason enough for us to attend to images, both because we do not want to be in their thrall unawares (as we suspect our students to be) and because their power already signals some sort of "religious" resonance. We know the power of certain images to hold sway over the imagination. We know their power to embody and make present the very being of their object. Profound responses in the presence of images (desire, for example, or shame) transcend the sorts of boundaries art historians establish between the canon of so-called high art and its eschewed other, such as folk and tribal arts and devotional images. Traditionally, the emotional resonance and even the spiritual efficacy of the icon, at least in the West, is not unrelated to its verisimilitude, as if what gives certain paintings and sculptures their power is precisely their capacity for illusion. So, too, with film. It displays a world much more convincingly and immediately than any other symbolic form. As mechanical reproduction, it gives the illusion of pure reference. As moving picture, it seems to offer an ongoing experience of time present and therefore of presence.

We are used to linguistic signs where the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. We scholars thrive on explaining those arbitrary relations. In cinema, relations are short-circuited. The signifier effaces itself for the sake of that which is signified. Too often in film we "understand" without struggling to
improve our understanding. It is this which leads Roland Barthes to call the photographic image pure contingency. It is, he says, always something that is representational. That stands in contrast to a text which, with a single word, can shift from representation to reflection. More so than other arts, cinema offers an immediate presence to the world. Ironically, it is precisely because, as James Monaco notes, films "so very clearly mimic reality that we apprehend them much more easily than we comprehend them." Film semiologist, Christian Metz, comments that, as an easy art, cinema is in constant danger of falling victim to this easiness: "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." This power, inherent in the cinematic image, seduces: we lay ourselves open to the massive doses of meaning and information movies convey without questioning how they tell us what they do tell us. But, the critical turn is essential to the pedagogical usefulness of films.

As constructs which signify, movies need "unpacking" and analysis no less than other "texts". My point here is that the very nature of the cinematic image itself resists reading: its immediacy, its lack of distanation, its illusion of pure reference. What happens when we put this cinema we are talking about in its place, namely, in the movie theatre? I recognize the exigencies of classroom use: few of us have appropriately furnished and equipped screening rooms in which to show films, and the formats available to us are either 16 mm or, alas, ever more frequently,
videotape. Even when we go to the movies these days we are more often than not subjected to the poorly soundproofed, cramped quarters of our local octoplex. Still, if we are moviegoers, we know the contextual pleasures of the cinema: settling into our comfortable seats, munching our popcorn, giving ourselves over to the moment of anticipation as lights dim and we are in the dark.

Together, yet alone, our attention is focused on the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the massive silver screen.

The Conspiracy

Cinema's power is not simply a function of the conjunction of its verisimilitude with the scale and intensity of its images and its dramatic stream of events. Contributing to that power are the very conventions of screening. We have the illusion of looking in on a private world, the ordinary magnified to the scale of spectacle, from our vantage of security and anonymity. This juxtaposition of intensity and detachment suggests a role not merely as viewers, but as voyeurs. As Laura Mulvey notes in her influential essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", among the possible pleasures the cinema offers is that of looking itself. Who would deny that the magic of Hollywood style at its best has always arisen from "its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure?" Could it be, as Mulvey argues, that movies correspond not only to our needs for ego identification,
but also to our erotic desire to see that which is private or dangerous or forbidden, to gaze at the other as object from our own position of security, thus having it both ways? Movie theatres as venues of projection: both of images and of repressed desires!

A whole body of critical literature has developed out of this argument concerning cinema's manipulation of the gaze and how it reflects the psychical obsessions and ideological commitments of the society that produces it. No wonder it is hard to become critical readers of cinema: the medium itself conspires against us in several ways. One way is the very iconic power of the image, a power heightened and intensified by the conventions of viewing. Another is that film gives the illusion of pure reference. This is as true of most fiction films as it is of nonfiction films such as documentaries, and is due both to film's character as a reproductive art and its exploitation of the conventions of narrative realism. Nonetheless, while most mainstream cinema exploits these conventions in an effort to mimic reality convincingly, it is, of course, not reality. No matter how strong the commitment to verisimilitude, the image is constructed to communicate something more than itself.

**Lens, Links and Metonymy**
I want to single out this aspect of the cinematic image as a way of offering a couple of pointers about how we can begin to become more critically aware viewers by attending to film's own characteristic ways of shaping meaning. Most of the "something more" which shapes our understanding of the work, most of the metaphors and symbols in cinema, derive from the physical properties of the medium. Granted this, I have three simple pointers to propose as a way of beginning to school ourselves in "reading" films. Since the viewer tends to identify with the camera's lens (which is roughly equivalent to the point of view in a novel), we should school ourselves to pay attention to the camera. I suggest attending to two conventions of its use: 1) The camera's angle of vision. The angle from which a subject is photographed has an impact on how the image "reads". As Louis Giannetti demonstrates in "Understanding Movies", an eye-level shot suggest parity between viewer and subject, while high angles reduce the subject's significance, suggesting vulnerability, and low angles do the opposite, creating a sense of dominance over the viewer. 2) The camera's distance from the subject. How much of the human figure is in view, how much of the surroundings? What happens to our perceptions when the character is presented to us in extreme long shot, a mere speck on the screen as opposed to in extreme close-up, where the individual face can become a whole spiritual landscape? An image in painting or a photograph can be rich with symbolic import, but it must achieve its effects within
the frame. A movie is a moving picture, a multiplicity of frames (astoundingly, as many as 180,000 in a two-hour film).

Camera shots tend to acquire meaning when they are seen in relation to other shots. The images and idea clusters within the film, but also with associations we bring to our experience as viewers. This is one of the most characteristic ways in which the cinematic image expresses the "something more." We can call it symbolic and we will not be incorrect. But, as people who are used to the written text, our expectations of the symbolic may mislead us. Here the process is oftentimes a quite humble one which falls into a sort of middle range of meaning between the immediacy of the iconic and the latency of the symbolic. Through editing, the filmmaker elaborates visually on some natural links and fairly straightforward connections, piecing together sets of visual associations, pattering thematic and metaphorical affinities for us through the iterative process of the cinema.

In contrast to paintings and photographs, a film can build its effect gradually, even modestly and quietly, alternating stretches of restraint, when the image is less saturated with meaning, with the occasional epiphany. A surprising amount of the connotative power of film depends on this "cinematic shorthand" of metonymy, this use of associated detail to invoke an idea or represent an object. Our understanding of how a film means and how it directs our attention toward its
meaning can be greatly enhanced and complicated merely by bringing this associative resonance of the cinematic image to the level of our awareness.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude here, then, somewhere to the left of a "film fundamentalism", with its naive literalness and somewhere to the right of a "film gnosticism", with its arty tendency to think understanding films (films, mind you, never movies) is reserved for those initiated into higher semiotic secrets. For my part, I am prepared to go to the movies with my eyes open, ready to work at it, so long as I can continue to sink into my seat and munch my popcorn as the lights dim and the screen comes alive. Tomorrow, in class, we will try to "read" critically what we gave ourselves over to tonight!