

Theories of Religion Easily Introduced with Bruno Bozzetto's A LIFE IN A TIN (IT 1967)

Abstract

This article discusses the animated short film A LIFE IN A TIN (UNA VITA IN SCATOLA, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6') used in an introductory course in the study of religions to facilitate access to theories of religion. The short film addresses the transformation of religion in plural and complex societies, exploring both the role of religious institutions and other dimensions of life providing existential orientation at the boundary between immanent and transcendent worlds.

Keywords

Bruno Bozzetto, Animated Short Films, Theories of Religion, Societal Transformation, Role of Religious Institutions, Orientation

Biography

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Introducing new generations of scholars to the theories and methods of the study of religion is a fascinating teaching activity. Still, it can be a challenging task. Students are expected to engage with approaches to religion written in cultural contexts they are not familiar with. They are invited to read classics published in specific academic languages and to extract the main theses from texts often available only in convoluted translations. We discuss complex aspects of the comparative study of religion by reading only small fragments of a volume. Usually, the time is too short to explore in detail the biographical, sociological, historical, and political contexts in which the different positions are embedded and to reconstruct the main arguments of the text. And yet it is essential to read and analyse influential, diverse, and controversial theo-

ries of religion from different times and traditions in order to stimulate new thinking. Every generation has to appropriate the different positions and streams within our field, which is truly interdisciplinary and broad. Knowledge of the history of the discipline and its classics is necessary for further developing multiple approaches to such a complex phenomenon like religion.¹

I regularly teach classes that introduce the main theories of the study of religion, often for undergraduate students. The courses are designed not only for students in the study of religion but also for students in fields that are related in varying degrees to that discipline, such as theology, sociology, anthropology, history, and philosophy, and in fields concerned with particular languages, literatures, or cultural areas. Many of the classics of the comparative study of religion that we read as part of an introductory course in the study of religion may be encountered by the students again, either in other programmes within the study of religion or as part of curricula in humanities and social sciences. Therefore, stressing the complexity of religion and the theories about this multi-layered phenomenon is intended to enable the students to recognise religion as a pivotal aspect of culture, whatever their academic discipline.

In such a multi-disciplinary teaching context, I often use short films to address specific questions. This form of audio-visual production seems particularly appropriate since it presents a complete work characterised by all the aspects of film art production in – as the name reveals – just a few minutes. This article does not focus on a single course or a precise teaching strategy to be reproduced in an identical way over the years. Rather, it explores how we might bring together a work of art and crucial theoretical approaches to religion in a flexible and, hopefully, stimulating intellectual environment. In my opinion, academic teaching should always adapt to the specific conditions of a class and the time it is performed. In my own case, I teach in different languages and countries, which requires adjusting the course contents to the disciplinary traditions of the study of religion in these various contexts.

A LIFE IN A TIN (*UNA VITA IN SCATOLA*, IT 1967, 6') by Bruno Bozzetto, the animated film which I explore in this contribution, proves to be particularly appropriate for introducing the context in which a number of influential theories of religion were conceived. To name just a few examples: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966, the same year Clifford Geertz wrote *Religion as a Cultural System* and

1 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021.

Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger*. A year later *The Sacred Canopy*. *Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* by Peter L. Berger and *The Invisible Religion*. *The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* by Thomas Luckmann were published. These works still influence the way we address religion in academia today. My students, who for the most part are post-millennials, subjectively experience the 1960s as part of a distant past. The short film *A LIFE IN A TIN* is very helpful in giving them in just a few minutes an idea of the society of the economic boom in the 1960s and its lifestyle. The film provides a glimpse of the period in which those theories of religion are embedded.

This animated film vividly depicts European urban life in the late 1960s, using a plain but effective narrative and style. In this article, I will analyse Bruno Bozzetto's short film in four steps according to a procedure that may be used in classes. First, we consider the plot, style, and general context in which the film was produced. Second, we will focus on the protagonist and analyse his biography as represented in the film. Third, the depicted urban societal space will be explored. And finally, the different facets of religion represented in the animation are highlighted. These four analytical steps can be translated into questions the students are asked to discuss in groups or as individual preliminary work in preparation for the class after they have seen the film:

Did you like the film? What topic does it address? What story does it tell?
Which society does it depict?

Focus on the protagonist. Who is he? What do we learn about his life?
What is he doing? When and where?

What characterises the city depicted in the short film? Which aspects of society are represented? How?

How is religion represented in the film? How would you describe the different facets of religion in Bozzetto's short film?

Urban Life and the Idea of Progress in the 1960s

Bruno Bozzetto, born in 1938 in Bergamo, is an influential designer, animator, and film director. His diverse oeuvre still has a significant impact on the production of animated films, cartoons, and advertising in Italy.² Short

2 A brief presentation of Bozzetto's work can be found in Bendazzi/De Berti 2003; see also <https://www.bozzetto.com/> [accessed 8 April 2021].



Fig. 1: Life in the era of progress and growth is like being shut in a tin (00:00:23). This and all following figures are film stills taken from A LIVE IN A TIN (Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967).

films have always been his favourite mode of expression. His productions are characterised by simplicity and reduction to a few essential elements; moreover, he intertwines humour and irony with social criticism and a poetic approach to existential topics.³

A LIFE IN A TIN, released in 1967, deals with the life of a middle-class man in an urban context marked by technological progress and economic growth.⁴ The short film combines two perspectives on the life of the protagonist. First, it opens with a critical external view on the topic: the urban life of the middle-class man takes place within a small tin, typical of the food industry in the 1960s; the protagonist is imprisoned in this tin by an external force sporting elegant footwear (fig. 1). Who is wearing this shoe? Might this force belong to the “invisible hand” leading the market?

Second, the protagonist, who is unaware that he is being kept in a tin, lives an average life, pursuing his duties, relationships, and desires. The life of the middle-class man in this animated film follows the exhausting rhythm of a script with mandatory steps of which he is not really conscious. There are just a few moments of freedom, of a liberating happiness that anticipates an afterlife – or what a man in a tin can imagine as paradise. In the depiction of his ordinary world, grey-blue shades and black dominate, while dreams, emotions, and imagination are represented as a lavish fantasy landscape in colour. The soundtrack combines music (by Franco Godi) with sound effects and very few words, mostly

3 On the style of Bruno Bozzetto’s animations see Boscarino 2002.

4 For an overview of the Italian context in the 1960s and the role of animated cartoons see Colombo/Stefanelli 2003.

in gibberish. The soundtrack is crucial, for it underlines the feelings of freedom, the oppressive rhythm, and the exhaustion. From the very beginning, the style of the pop music clearly locates the cartoon in the late 1960s.⁵

The Life (and Death) of the Middle-class Man

The life of the ordinary man begins with his mother's pregnancy and his birth in a hospital (fig. 2). The toddler spends a few serene years at home with his mother, who is a housewife, before he starts school. In the society of progress, the middle-class young man attends university. The academic education leads him to a qualified job in industry, and in his leisure time he goes dancing, to the theatre, and to the drive-in-cinema. The protagonist meets the woman he wants to spend his life with. He marries her and soon their child is born. The protagonist makes a living for his traditional family. His life is punctuated by the ringing of the alarm clock in the morning and the factory sirens in the evening. He runs from home to factory and back again at an increasingly frenetic pace. Time flows quickly, and then life is over (figs. 3–6).

The short film describes in detail middle-class life in an (Italian) city in the 1960s: typical activities for the era of the so-called Italian "economic miracle" include attending higher education, buying a car, going to the theatre as a status symbol, dancing and listening to pop music, and going to the cinema.

Yet the family structure remains traditional, with husbands working hard and wives attending to housework and caring for children. The main biographical events are linked to religion: baptism, wedding, and funeral remain unquestioned rituals. Gender roles are organised according to dominant conventions, and the possibility of personal choice is regulated by apparently mandatory participation in progress and success. There is little opportunity for imagination, dreams, and emotions. Joyful moments may happen suddenly in discovering nature, being in love, becoming a father. But moments of happiness are rare and brief in the small tin, in the grey environment of concrete blocks where the protagonist's life takes place. The protagonist, an average man, depicted in an innocent and, at the same time,

5 A LIFE IN A TIN is one of the director's favourite works, as he often explains. See, for example, the interview in Perucca 2008, 183.



Figs. 2–8 (from left to right): Milestones in the ordinary biography of the protagonist. Fig. 2: Birth in a hospital (00:01:12). Fig. 3: Playing as a toddler with his mother in the flat (00:01:34). Fig. 4: Going to school (00:01:48). Fig. 5: Dating his future wife (00:03:22). Fig. 6: Marrying and having a child (00:05:03). Fig. 7: Working in the factory (00:04:42). Fig. 8: The end of the protagonist's life (00:05:37).

critical manner, represents the “normality” of an era in which influential theories about the relationship and entanglement of society and religion were written.

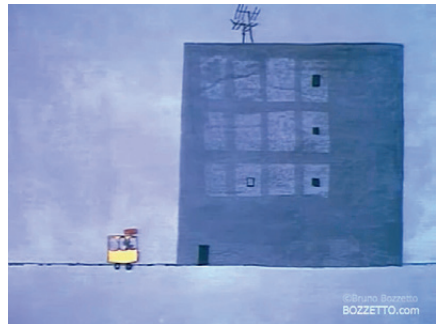
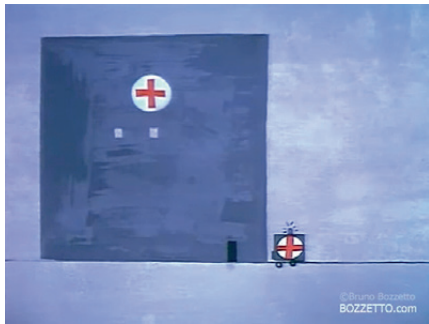
Religion in a Differentiated Society

The representation of urban life in the late 1960s in *A LIFE IN A TIN* obviously does not provide a scholarly socio-historical analysis. However, the short animation can be read as a compendium of topics and feelings that are representative of this era, characterised by both faith in progress and its criticism. Alienation through work and the rise of social movements and youth riots, traditional family roles and feminism, “high culture” and the development of pop music and cinema, conservative Catholicism and the impact of the Second Vatican Council are some of the contested issues that characterise Italian society between the post-war era and the “years of lead”, the era when Italian society was divided by terrorism. The city to which the animation refers is specific to Italy. Nevertheless, the reduction of the narrative to the essentials and the plain style attribute universal significance to this filmic analysis of urban culture in the 1960s. Both the depicted biography and the setting refer to a common conception of citizens and cities in the era of economic growth in Europe. Bruno Bozzetto’s “city in the tin” embodies the idea of social progress that is linked to improvement in material well-being but also to the exploitation of labour and natural resources.

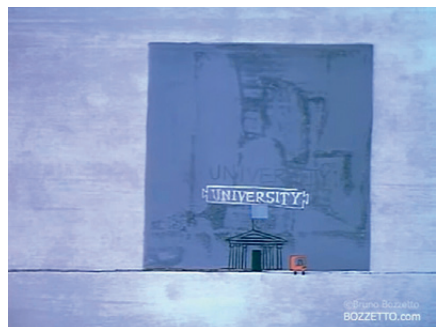
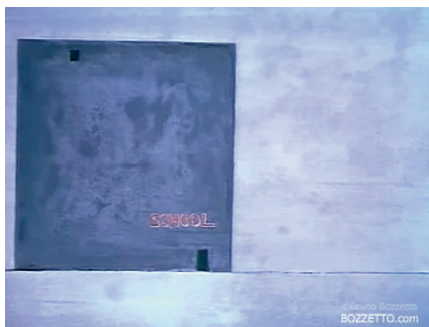
In just a few minutes, Bozzetto’s animated film depicts the principal social spheres where the average middle-class life unfolds: hospital, school, university, disco, theatre, cinema, church, home, factory, public and private transportation are all fundamental urban places that constitute this paradigmatic city.

From an architectural point of view, they all are part of a modern, efficient, and functionally differentiated society and create a homogeneous urban setting in grey. Despite the fact that all the buildings look the same, each represents a particular societal sphere with specific features. By entering the different blocks, the protagonist assumes different roles, performs diverse actions, and assumes various functions, according to the demands and expectations of each social domain (figs. 9–18).

The imaginary society of the animated film is helpful for introducing the concept of social differentiation and the role of religion in modern society. It is interesting to observe the developments in mass media at this time:



Figs. 9–11 (from left to right): The short film presents the main social spheres of modern differentiated society. Fig. 9: The hospital represents the healthcare system (00:01:00). Fig. 10: The house where the protagonist lives refers to the family and private space (00:01:17). Fig. 11: The church as a building materialises religion as an institution (00:01:22).



Figs. 12–13: The school (00:02:47) and the university (00:03:06) belong to the education system.

cinema is established as a popular medium; housing blocks have antennas, evidence of the success of radio and particularly TV.

The church represents the religious system that provides the rituals in society, at least according to *A LIFE IN A TIN*. The typical steps of an average biography go hand-in-hand with attending church services. There is no hint



Figs. 14–16: The disco, theatre, and drive-in cinema are different facets of leisure. The first (00:03:12) was crucial in the Italian youth culture of the Sixties, which was very much influenced by songwriters rejecting formal high culture, represented here by the theatre (00:03:27). Drive-in cinema refers to global entertainment and its Italian response (the banging on the soundtrack may refer to a spaghetti western or mafia film).



Fig. 17: The factory forms the core of the economic sphere (00:04:26).

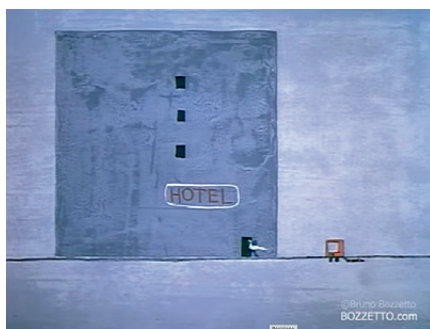


Fig. 18: The hotel (00:04:09) serves as a reference to holidays and travel: tourism as a habit of the ordinary man is typical for this age of economic expansion.

of religious pluralism or the dismissal of traditional rituals. In the church block, rites of passage are performed according to tradition, marking important transformations in life.

The protagonist's birth and wedding are briefly sketched, while his funeral is depicted in detail, with an ironic note. The frenetic life of the middle-class

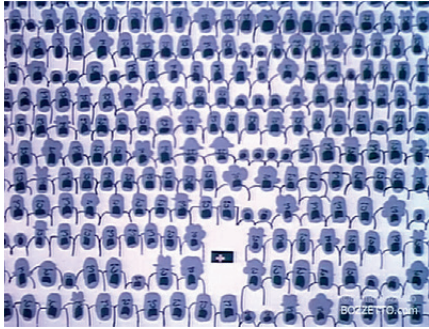


Fig. 19: Funeral service as a social duty (00:05:41).

man has come to an end: after hurrying increasingly ant-like from home to factory and back again, the protagonist falls down dead. Everyone attends the memorial service and mechanically recites the usual prayers. There is neither compassion nor personal content. The recitation of prayer is reduced to a mechanical sound performed in unison; the ritual, performed exactly as expected, seems to have lost its meaning. The film sounds a critical note regarding religious practice which has entirely adapted to this dystopic place of technological and economic progress. The animated film suggests that attending church is a mere obligatory step prescribed by the social script of convention (fig. 19).

Meaning-making Processes and Individual Imagination

Even in such a standardised life, there are experiences of personal meaning-making where the individual transcends his poor life trapped in a small box. The imagining of a different world is represented in full colour, in radical contrast to the grey of concrete buildings.

As a child on his way to school, the protagonist already has a personal experience of happiness that opens up an exciting horizon beyond his grey daily life (fig. 20). He discovers nature: a butterfly and then lavish trees. The first encounter with the beauty of nature brings a feeling of profound joy. This wonderful experience ends suddenly, when the screaming mother orders her son to hurry up and get to school on time. The middle-class schoolboy growing up in a small flat has only occasional and perhaps imaginary opportunities to experience the beauty and freedom of nature. A second immersion in this fantastic, dream-like dimension of existence happens when the ordinary young man falls in love: in the night, the crescent moon illuminates the landscape in

Fig. 20: On his way to school, the protagonist discovers an unexpected dimension of life that makes him very happy: nature (00:02:02).



different shades of an intense blue. But as an adult, there is no time or place for reveries and transcendent experiences: urban life and the chains of production are demanding and all-consuming. Only short breaks into the fantastic world of happiness out there are possible, for instance when his baby girl is born.

The animated short film addresses the topic of the relationship between human and nature, and with it, the absence of the natural world in a metropolis of cement blocks. The exploitation of natural resources on the one hand and the idealisation of nature on the other are topics that may be discussed at this stage of the film analysis. A LIFE IN A TIN points towards the experience of nature, happiness, and personal imagination even though the depicted lavish landscape is perhaps only the visualisation of an individual moment of fulfilment, a projection of intimate feelings.

And what about the link between the natural world and religion? Only after death does the beautiful coloured landscape reappear in full measure, with the tomb of the ordinary middle-class worker at its centre (fig. 21).

At this stage, the filmic perspective has changed. Are we still in the small tin? Or has the imagination of a colourful forest as a last resting place

Fig. 21: Afterlife in colours (00:05:52).



overcome the anguish of life in a tin and freed the city dweller from the oppression of production? The film is open to interpretation: at this point, the long shot no longer represents a detached, critical gaze upon the reality of the protagonist, but instead appears like a subjective camera, the last expression of the desires, expectations, and fulfilments of the ant-man. The landscape of trees and flowers could refer to an imagination of paradise, of an otherworldly place of well-being and happiness. Nature and paradise both transcend the experience of living in a city of concrete blocks.

The role of this natural landscape as a place of rest, happiness, and transcendence recurs frequently in works by Bruno Bozzetto. In *MISTER TAO* (IT 1988, 2'35"), which won an award at the Berlinale in 1990, nature is represented as a first step into a spiritual quest that never ends. A comparison between the two short films could be useful for developing this approach to religion and the analysis of the animated film.

From Playful Animation to Theoretical Horizons

A LIFE IN A TIN opens up a space where different approaches to religion can be discussed. It is a polysemic work that establishes in a few minutes different, even contradictory, perspectives on religion in the post-war society of economic growth, consumerism, and societal differentiation. In this concluding section, the main thematic lines highlighted in the analysis are recapitulated and associated with theories of religion that may be discussed in an introductory class.

First, the short depicts an urban setting built and organised according to an idea of progress and infinite development. It presupposes and criticises a society in which the relationship between industrial production and the sustainability of the planet's resources does not play any role. Thus, by setting the grey city against the colourful nature where the protagonist experiences a glimpse of happiness, the film anticipates the debate that would crystallise a few years later in the report *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome, an informal group founded by scholars and business leaders.⁶

Second, in the representation of urban society and the modern individual provided in Bozzetto's short, religion appears at first in the form of a clearly

6 Meadows/Meadows/Randers/Behrens, 1972. The book can be downloaded at <https://is.gd/K7wd4h> [accessed 5 June 2022].

recognisable institution. Given the cultural context in which the film was produced – in Italy in the 1960s – it makes sense to identify the references to Christianity with the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, in accord with the overall style of the film, the references are kept vague and may stand for different Christian denominations or even for religious institutions in general. Keep in mind that the film's title is in Italian, English, French, and German and that the diegesis does not use an identifiable language, which means that the short has always been accessible to an international audience. In a differentiated society, religious institutions form one of many societal spheres. In this sense, religion has specific functions as, for instance, it provides rites of passages for individuals, marking important steps in biographies from the cradle to the grave. For this reason, some theorists argue that religion, on a collective level, provides societal cohesion. Furthermore, rituals and religious services are characterised by a specific language which comprises not only prayers and liturgical elements but also visual, auditory, and material forms of communication (like water or specific clothing, both addressed in the short). These different facets of religious communication are transmitted from generation to generation and interiorised through socialisation processes so that – from the perspective of the members of a congregation – they seem obvious and self-evident. On this level of the interaction between individual and religious institution, religion is not (only) a matter of belief in the sense of adhering to a precise worldview or specific teaching. Rather, it conveys practices, feelings, and emotions, ascribing a particular significance to crucial events in one's life.

All those aspects of religion as an institution can be used to introduce classic theories of religion in a differentiated society as well as ritual theories: the range of possibilities is very broad. For discussing a sociological approach to religion in the European context, the course syllabus may include crucial passages from Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. A Study in Religious Sociology*,⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*,⁸ and/or Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.⁹ The role and limits of rituals may be addressed by analysing Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*,¹⁰ Mary

7 This work was originally published in French in 1912 as *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*. For a translation into English see Durkheim 1915.

8 Berger/Luckmann 1966.

9 Berger 1967.

10 This work was originally published as *Les rites de passage* in France in 1909. For an English translation see van Gennep 1960.

Douglas's *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols. Exploration in Cosmology*,¹¹ and Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*.¹² The film creates an opportunity to discuss functional approaches to religion by addressing the social and individual effects of institutions in a differentiated society. Enumeration of the possible roles of religious institutions and the ways they interact with other social spheres (such as those of hospital, school, or cinema) could allow system theories to be addressed and linked to debates about secularisation and privatisation. A possible starting point for presenting the main lines of such theories could be reading a passage from a classical approach like Niklas Luhmann's *Funktion der Religion*.¹³

Third, as the film analysis has shown, the short film not only depicts a grey urban society but also encourages a critical view of the society of the 1960s, emphasising its effects on individuals who are reduced to mere cogs in the wheels of industrial production. According to this perspective, the short film is critical of religious institutions. The religious rituals (particularly the funeral) are in some way mechanical and seem to be an expression of social expectation and duty rather than of compassion in the face of grief and human finitude. This recognition could stimulate a discussion in class about controversial values attributed to religion as well as influential positions within religious criticism: is religion a resource for societies or is it an instrument of oppression and illusion? How does religion provide orientation for an individual who does not participate in religious organisations? According to my teaching experience, this aspect could be developed with Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*.¹⁴

Fourth, a playful but critical exploration of Bozzetto's short film builds a bridge to thinking about religion as a meaning-making process that is not always mediated by a religious organisation. In line with the protagonist's experience of happiness in the colourful landscape, accompanied by playful music, the approach to religion may be extended further by addressing the agency of individuals in shaping worldviews that are not regulated by institutions. At this point, religion could be related to individual experience and considered a complex symbol system articulating the tension between *Lebenswelt* and transcendent world(s). Here another link to *The Invisible Religion* by Thomas Luckmann could be

11 Douglas 1966 and 1970.

12 Turner 1969.

13 Luhmann 1977.

14 Luckmann 1967.

made, combined with cultural studies approaches to religion as a meaning-making system through reference to Clifford Geert's *Religion as a Cultural System*.¹⁵

Finally, it could be interesting to focus on the framing of the narrative. Through consideration of the tin and the foot that closes its lid – cutting off the fingers of the protagonist (fig. 1) – the animated film could be used to illustrate theories of the equivalence of religion and other societal spheres, particularly the economic. Both systems provide existential orientation for individuals and society by constructing transcendent powers that lead the world and the market, respectively. What concepts of religion highlight the influence of external powers on the world and history? What concepts of economics operate with the idea of a transcendent regulating force? Are there parallels? Or differences? And, more generally, what questions could be addressed by considering religion as functionally equivalent to other societal systems too, like politics or media? Here the range of contemporary approaches one could use is really broad. For students familiar with German, a helpful conversation partner might be the transdisciplinary approaches to religion in *Religion – Wirtschaft – Politik*.¹⁶

It is not a good idea to use a short film as merely an illustration of theories. Instead, a production like *A LIFE IN A TIN* should be analysed as an independent work of art, as a multi-modal audio-visual medium capable of elaborating complex dimensions of human life in a few minutes. In other words, engaging in detailed film analysis is indispensable for working with audio-visual sources in teaching. Only the in-depth exploration of the short film will throw light on problems and questions we can address by engaging with theories and classic positions. Therefore, presenting a short film like *A LIFE IN A TIN* in a course in an academic setting is not just a helpful way of introducing and contextualising dry and complex theoretical thinking about religion but also an excellent example for the inspiring role the arts can assume when it comes to conceptualising intriguing questions in academia. This short film re-enacts the feelings, fears, desires, and limitations of a decade in which many intellectual discourses were formulated. The 1960s has gifted us sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies approaches to religion that have contributed significantly to the consolidation of the study of religion as we teach it today. The mixture of criticism, simplicity, and irony in Bozzetto's animated film articulates a view of society, culture, and religion that is still inspiring today.

15 Luckmann 1967; Geertz 1966.

16 Liedhegener/Tunger-Zanetti/Wirz 2011.

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Filmography

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