JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

2020
06/01

Elie Yazbek (ed.)

Science Fiction and Religion

SCHÜREN

JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

CONTACT

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JRFM

JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

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JRFM thanks the following institutions for their financial support:

University of Graz, Austria

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Villanova University, USA

Das Land Steiermark, Austria

Schüren Verlag, Marburg, Germany

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Die deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet unter http://dnb.ddb.de abrufbar.

JRFM is grateful for being supported by

www.jrfm.eu
ISSN 2414-0201
ISBN 978-3-7410-0102-4

Print on demand service:
Schüren Verlag GmbH
Universitätsstr. 55 • D-35037 Marburg
www.schueren-verlag.de

Design: Christian Wessely / Erik Schüßler
Titelgrafik: Wolfgang Diemer
Proofreading: Rona Johnston Gordon

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Is Superman a God? Editorial

From Scientifiction to Science Fiction

Hugo Gernsback, who was the first to use the term "science fiction" in its primitive form "scientifiction", in the introduction to the first issue of *Amazing Stories* (1926), defined the genre: "By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision. Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading – they are always instructive. They supply knowledge."[1] Marshall McLuhann in *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) described science fiction simply as "writing [that] today presents situations that enable us to perceive the potential of new technologies".[2] In a more philosophical way, Alvin Toffler wrote in *Future Shock* (1970) that this genre "by dealing with possibilities not ordinarily considered – alternative worlds, alternative visions – widens our repertoire of possible responses to change."[3] Later, in *How Easy to See the Future!* (1975), Isaac Asimov defined this genre as a "branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology".[4] According to Elisa Eileen Beshero-Bondar, science fiction is also a "time-sensitive subject. Usually futuristic, science fiction speculates about alternative ways of life made possible by technological change, and hence has sometimes been called 'speculative fiction'."[5]

These definitions, and many others, attempt to understand a genre that has become very popular through the years, not only in literature but also, and mainly, in films and TV-series, especially in the last fifty years. Science fiction commonly deals with science, technology, innovation, interstellar and time travel, similar and dissimilar worlds, aliens and extraterrestrial life, ancient and future civilizations, super-

1 Gernsback 1926, 3.
2 McLuhan/Fiore 1967, 124.
3 Toffler 1970, 209.
4 Asimov 1975, 62.
5 Beshero-Bondar, n.d.

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.1

powers and superheroes. More than this, science fiction is sometimes connected, directly or incidentally, to the exploration of religion, faith, or belief.

This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* examines these themes by focusing on science fiction in films and TV-series, including both historical and contemporary case studies. The basic questions at the core of the articles are: How do films deal with the origin(s) of humankind? Does a machine (a robot, a computer, an android, or a ship) have a soul? What about the concepts of determinism versus free will, the bounds between faith, magic, and experimentation? How do films deal with God/god(s) and the figure of the savior, with prophets, priests, imams, or rabbis? How can ideas of time travel and the afterlife be linked with established religious beliefs? How can science be related to faith? What about notions of the distant future? Why are angels and demons and concepts of good and evil (related to theodicy) so popular in science fiction movies? What is the significance of fictional forms (or codes) of religious systems, and what is their link to theocracies and dystopian universes?

The exploration of science fiction and its relationship to religion, we focus in particular on the question of whether Superman is a god. Superman's father, while sending his son to Earth in the movie Man Of Steel (Zack Snyder, US 2013), says to his wife, who is worried about what will happen to her son once there, "He'll be a god to them", assuming that his capacities and powers will be the symbols of his superiority over humans. Christopher Nolan, producer of the movie, confirmed in an interview: "He is the ultimate superhero; he has the most extraordinary powers. He has the most extraordinary ideals to live up to. He's very God-like in a lot of ways and it's been difficult to imagine that in a contemporary setting."[6]

What about Captain Kirk in the Star Trek saga (Gene Roddenberry, US 1966–1969), Professor Xavier in X-Men (Bryan Singer, US 2000) and the other works of the series, the cosmic beings in A. I. Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, US 2001), or Ra in Stargate (Roland Emmerich, US/FR 1994), as well as so many other entities or heroes from the science fiction realm? Are some science fiction movies "religious" or do they have religious connotations? Gods, divinities, superheroes, monsters, machines, aliens, and humans sometimes deal with religion in the science fiction genre not always as conveyors of a broader message, but also as an investigative approach to scrutinize the meaning of faith, beliefs, morality, mysticism, spirituality according to history, technology, knowledge, and afterlife.

6 Jensen 2013.

Gods Creating Gods

The case of the Alien saga is very revealing of this interaction between science fiction and religion. It is composed of six main movies, Alien (Ridley Scott, GB/US 1979), Aliens (James Cameron, US 1986), Alien 3 (David Fincher, US 1992), Alien Resurrection (Jean Pierre Jeunet, US 1997), Prometheus (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012), and Alien: Covenant (Ridley Scott, US 2017). All of them, and particularly the last two movies, directed by Ridley Scott, question how humanity and humankind are to be defined when humans are simultaneously confronted by their past and future deities, through the prism of scientific and technological developments.

The plot of the 2012 movie is about a spaceship called Prometheus, sent to a distant moon discovered in an ancient star map by archeologists Elizabeth Shaw and Charly Holloway. The mission is to find and connect with the Engineers, suspected to have been humankind's creators ages ago. Once on the planet, the crew discover a large artificial structure, where they find a monolithic statue of a humanoid head, near a corpse of a beheaded alien, supposedly one of the Engineers. Other bodies of aliens are discovered, leading the team to think the species has been totally destroyed. After analysis, the aliens' DNA is revealed to be a match for human DNA. This planet seems to be the cradle of humanity and the Engineers the Gods/Dark Angels of an advanced civilization that created humans and later destroyed them for an unknown reason: "They created us", confirms Elisabeth Shaw in reply to a question from a member of her team.

The movie tries to answer the eternal questions "Who am I?" and "Who created me?" by exploring the myths about the creation and genesis of the universe. One of the main characters, the old and dying Peter Weyland, responsible for the expedition and secretly onboard the ship, claims in the first part of the movie, "I have spent my entire lifetime contemplating the questions where do we come from? What is our purpose? What happens when we die?", echoing the original interrogations about the origins of man: his purpose with the expedition is to set Gods and humankind on an equal footing.

The myth of the creation has been a central theme since the first scene, when one of the Engineers, sent to Earth, is drinking a dark and strange liquid: it transforms its body, causing its dissolution and sending small seeds and DNA all over the world and in the sea. Later we understand that this DNA is rehabilitated into a human DNA, creating human beings on earth.

Ridley Scott, the director of Prometheus, said in an interview that he "was interested in Greco-Roman and Aztec creation myths about gods who create man

Fig. 1: Film still, Prometheus (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012), 01:54:10.

in their own image by sacrificing a piece of themselves".[7] In the movie, millions of years after this first creation, David, the robot shaped by human beings in their image, to serve them as a neutral artificial intelligence device, will give the same dark liquid to Holloway. As a result one Engineer is resurrected through the birth of a monster child after Holloway's sexual encounter with Shaw, an evil God (the Devil?) who wants to exterminate humankind.

Shaw will confront this creature with her faith, symbolized by a Christian cross she possesses and a simple sentence she pronounces twice during the movie, when she is confronted by the unknown: "It's why I choose to believe", says Shaw, confirming a choice that she will assume till the end. When she understands she (and all humankind) was created and modeled by the Engineers, her faith remains unshakable. All she wants to know is who created these Engineers, arguing these monsters cannot be the main creator. She is convinced God is greater and superior.

Is her faith the reason why she is the only human survivor (with the robot David) at the end of the movie? Damon Lindelof, the screenwriter of the film, said in an interview about this subject, "I think that the movie advances the idea that, 'Can the two [human and robots] live alongside each other?' Is it possible to be a scientist and maintain some faith in the unknown? And are you rewarded for having blind faith? I do think the movie makes the meta-commentary on these issues."[8]

In Alien: Covenant, 11 years after the Prometheus expedition, a new ship, Covenant, is sent to the Planet Origae 6. Cohabiting onboard Covenant are the crew, 2,000 colonists, 1,140 embryos, and Walter, a new version of the android David but with the same look. The ship is forced to land on an unknown planet when a major

7 Jagernauth 2012.
8 Woerner 2012.

Fig. 2: Film still, Alien: Covenant (Ridley Scott, US 2017), 01:04:37.

mechanical problem occurs. Part of the crew is reanimated to find out where they are. They meet David in a large cave and are confronted by evil creatures; after killing most of the reanimated crew, David takes control of the ship, directing it again to Origae 6.

David is introduced from the opening sequence of the movie as a rebel. During a discussion with his creator, the business entrepreneur Peter Weyland, he says, "Allow me a moment to consider, you seek your creator, I am looking at mine, […]. You will die, I will not." He claims, as a robot, his supremacy and his immortality over his supposed "human father". This foreshadows what will happen next in the movie: a few scenes later David confirms his abilities to act himself as a creator, producing new species like Neomorph and Xenomorph, calling them the "perfect creatures" that will destroy both the Engineers and the humans.

During the discussion and confrontation with his alter ego Walter, while they are playing music on the flute, in the middle (literally) of Alien: Covenant, David realizes he is far superior even to the new version of the robots. He declares, "You are not allowed to create, even a simple tune… Damn frustrating, I would say." Walter replies, "You were too human, too idiosyncratic", asserting that the humans created the first generation of humanoids *in their image*. The Machine, Lewis Mumford wrote, "came forth as the new demi-urge that was to create a new heaven and a new earth: or at least a new Moses, that was to lead the barbarous humanity into a promised land".[9]

Going further, is David a contemporary Frankenstein, or even a new Satan, as proposed by Allissa Wilkinson?[10] David appears as the main villain, killing Elisabeth

9 Mumford 1946, 58.

10 "David is a better Satan than Satan himself… It's as if in the *Alien* universe, the devil has evolved, thanks to humans creating him. David, fatally, has the ability to create – something Satan never had – and he will use that power only to destroy. He doesn't have any real need to rebel against his

Fig. 3: *The Mirror of Faith*, 2014, University of Barcelona, http://boryanarossa.com/en/the-mirror-of-faith/ [accessed 27 December 2019].

Shaw and most of the crew of Covenant after they land on the planet, a place described by the robot himself as a "Paradise".[11] In an allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but in a much darker way, two stages of the creation (the Engineers and humanity) are melted then destroyed. Even then, David's quest is not completed within this movie: he seeks to reach the ultimate creator, God himself, the One Elisabeth Shaw believed in even up to her death.

This discourse about origins, creation, and genesis has been a recurring theme not only in cinema but also in other artistic mediums. In some cases, artists approach this issue by extrapolating it to the world of natural sciences like biology. For example, these two movies, which deal directly with the subject of science fiction and religion through biological experimentation, could be linked with performances developed by the art collective Ultrafuturo, founded by artists Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti in 2004. In their manifesto, they declared they believe "in the independence of the machine consciousness and in the unavoidable revolt of intelligent slave-machines against their ruthless cynical enslavers-people". With *The Mirror of Faith* bio-art installation (2006), they went further and examined the relationship between science and religion, exploring the controversial theory of the "God gene"

maker, since from the moment he became sentient, he knew he'd already won. He is indestructible, and determined to make creatures that imitate his drive for total domination", Wilkinson 2017.

11 PARADISE LOST, according to Ridley Scott, was the original title of the movie, even when it was already in production (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A524UjfdoA8&feature=youtu.be) [accessed 12 September 2019].

developed by the biologist Dean Hamer: if some humans are predisposed genetically to spirituality, then God can be programmed in people by modifying their genes.[12] In a critical approach, they created in this installation a precise illustration of this theory, producing a Transcendental Bacteria of Faith to stimulate public and open dialogue about genetic research.

Consequently, as we speculate about the next movie in the Alien saga, we might wonder if the android David might use the God gene in a sequel. That would be one option for David if his need is to take the final step and meet God. Nothing is impossible in the vast science fiction domain, where the "what if"[13] remains the biggest question.

The Thematic Section

The three articles in the thematic section of this issue propose different perceptions of the interaction between science fiction and religion. Joel Mayward explores the "parabolic transcendence" in Shane Carruth's two movies, Primer (US 2004) and Upstream Color (US 2013), following an aesthetical approach based on the Ricoeurian concept of the parable. How can the religious be driven by a non-religious discourse? What are the links between the narrative form and the metaphorical process? James Lorenz offers an interpretation of Andrei Tarkovsky's Stalker (USSR 1979), pointing to "the end of desire, hope, and belief". His article focuses on the genre, style, and form of the movie, especially the theme of the journey as a spiritual trip surrounded by Trinitarian and Christological imagery. Bina Nir centers her article on the "biblical narrative and myths" in Christopher Nolan's Interstellar (US/GB 2014), analyzing how a contemporary science fiction film deals with religious motifs from the Judeo-Christian heritage and narrative.

These articles offer a deep exploration of the science fiction cinematic universe as they scrutinize different visualizations of humans dealing with technological experiences, often linked with spiritual and religious quests as they need to transcend their condition and existence. The science fiction genre, with fantasy elements and superhero stories, is a mirror that reflects the millennial existential interrogations that human civilizations have always had and will continue to have.

12 Hamer 2005. On the basis of Hamer's theories, Boryana Rossa explains: "VMAT2 gene encodes for a protein that affects self-transcendence, spirituality and/or faith. A mutation in the DNA of intron 7 upstream of the VMAT2 gene coding sequence is thought to be related to people who have faith or spirituality.

13 Evans 1988, 9.

The Open Section

The open section also contains three articles. In the first one, Kerry P. C. San Chirico analyses the representation of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema through the prism of *dharma*. In the second article René Erwich examines the "embodiment of religion" in the TV-series Vikings (CA/IE 2013–), focusing on the clashes between the pagan and Christian religions. And the third article, by Hannah Griese, showcases the media coverage of the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018 and the use of religious terminology and events to "deepen the intersection" with politics.

The texts in this issue, in keeping with the intention of the JRFM editorial team, confirm the deep connections between the media and religion studies, creating bridges that will help developing research in various disciplines and fields with an interdisciplinary approach. The upcoming release of a great number of new science fiction TV-series that are related to religious themes directly or indirectly – a reboot of 4400 (US 2004–2007), Demimonde (US upcoming), Undone (US 2019–), or Foundation (US upcoming) – is indicative of a growing interest amongst viewers all over the world in these essential subjects.

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Filmography

4400 (Created by: René Echevarria / Scott Peters, USA Network, US 2004–2007).
A. I. Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, US 2001).
Alien (Ridley Scott, GB/US 1979).
Alien 3 (David Fincher, US 1992).
Alien: Covenant (Ridley Scott, US 2017).
Alien Resurrection (Jean Pierre Jeunet, US 1997).
Aliens (James Cameron, US 1986).
Demimonde (Created by: J. J. Abrams, HBO, US upcoming).
Foundation (David S. Goyer / Davil Ellison, Apple TV+, US upcoming).
Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014).
Man of Steel (Zack Snyder, US 2013).
Primer (Shane Carruth, US 2004).
Prometheus (Ridley Scott, GB/US 2012).
Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979).
Stargate (Roland Emmerich, US/FR 1994).
Star Trek. The Original Series (Created by: Gene Roddenberry, NBC, US 1966–1969).
Undone (Created by: Raphael Bob-Waksberg / Kate Purdy, Prime Video, US 2019–).
Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013).
Vikings (Created by: Michael Hirst, History Channel, CA/IE 2013–).
X-Men (Bryan Singer, US 2000).

Joel Mayward

Parabolic Transcendence in Time and Narrative

Shane Carruth's PRIMER (US 2004) and UPSTREAM COLOR (US 2013) as Post-Secular Sci-Fi Parables

Abstract

Subjectivity, memory, and the invisible connections between individuals' identities are all conspicuous themes within filmmaker Shane Carruth's two award-winning indie sci-fi films, PRIMER (US 2004) and UPSTREAM COLOR (US 2013). In this article, I contend that both PRIMER and UPSTREAM COLOR are post-secular cinematic parables per philosopher Paul Ricoeur's description of parable: the conjunction of a narrative form and a metaphorical process, addressing the religious via non-religious discourse. Interpreting these two films through a Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic addresses their mutual transcendence in and through time and narrative via their striking visual and auditory aesthetics, the use of montage in their nonlinear narratives, and the depiction of invisible relational connections between the films' protagonists. I conclude that Carruth's post-secular cinema resides in an in-between space: between the secular and the religious, realism and expressionism, immanence and transcendence.

Keywords

Shane Carruth, Paul Ricoeur, Parable, Post-Secular, Transcendence, Time Travel, Film-Theology

Biography

Joel Mayward is a pastor-theologian and film critic. An adjunct professor at Portland Seminary of George Fox University in Oregon, USA, and the author of three books, Mayward is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where he also serves as Associate Editor for ITIA's online journal, *Transpositions*. His research interests include the intersection of theology and culture, film theory and film-philosophy, and Latino/a liberation theology and ethics. A member of the Online Film Critics Society and INTERFILM, Mayward's film reviews and essays are at www.cinemayward.com.

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.2

> He heard a low and seemingly very distant sound, but singularly grand and impressive, unlike anything he had ever heard, gradually swelling and increasing as if it would have a universal and memorable ending.
>
> – *Henry David Thoreau,* Walden

> The extraordinary within the ordinary, such is the logic of meaning in the parables.
>
> – *Paul Ricoeur*

Touching the Transcendent

Closing my eyes, I remember emerging from the theater into the blue-and-grey evening in downtown Vancouver, BC, after experiencing Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013), my whole body transfixed and transfigured adjacent to my wife; we were hand in hand, both of us in silent wonder at what we had just witnessed. The film felt baptismal in its immersive soundscape and provocative images, as if we had dipped into the currents of an eternal river and emerged awakened and dripping with fresh perspectives. As we drove home, neither of us was entirely sure what we had just encountered, but we knew we had briefly touched the transcendent.

Subjectivity, memory, and the invisible connections between individuals' identities are all conspicuous themes within Upstream Color's narrative. These themes are also observable in Shane Carruth's debut film, Primer (US 2004), a low-budget indie film which pushes the boundaries of narrative coherence via its convoluted-yet-cohesive consideration of time travel. The two engineers at the heart of this film wrestle with what it means to act with prescience as they play God, becoming eternal while ordinary humans in a blurring of physics and metaphysics.

In this article, I contend that both Primer and Upstream Color are sci-fi cinematic parables per philosopher Paul Ricoeur's description of parable as "the conjunction of a narrative form and a metaphorical process".[1] These films' imaginative fictitious narratives incorporate extraordinary elements within realistic settings of mundane everyday life, re-orienting the audience by way of disorientation as the parabolic narrative-metaphor addresses the limits of human experience, ultimately offering a glimpse of the transcendent. Interpreting these two films through a Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic addresses their mutual transcendence in and through time and narrative via their striking visual and auditory aesthetics, the use of montage in their nonlinear narratives, and the depiction of invisible relational connections be-

1 Ricoeur 1975, 30.

tween the two lead characters, Abe (David Sullivan) and Aaron (Carruth) in PRIMER, and Kris (Amy Seimetz) and Jeff (Carruth) in UPSTREAM COLOR. Before turning to a deep reading of each film, let us apply Ricoeur's hermeneutics to parable and sci-fi cinema. I have previously explored Ricoeurian cinematic parables in horror films, via MOTHER! (Darren Aronofsky, US 2016), and superhero films, via BLACK PANTHER (Ryan Coogler, US 2018).[2]

Ricoeurian Cinematic Parables

In his 1975 *Semeia* article "Biblical Hermeneutics", French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the genre of parable as the conjunction of a *narrative form* and a *metaphorical process*. This narrative-metaphor points to a third element, an external reference beyond the parable which Ricoeur labels "limit-experiences".[3] Limit-experiences are human encounters with the horizon of knowledge, imagination, and material reality, immanence nearing or breaching the transcendent. As a narrative-metaphor addressing limit-experiences, a parable is a heuristic fiction which redescribes the religious dimension of human existence without resorting to overtly religious language.[4] It is a story which refers to something *beyond* what was literally told in the narrative, even as that story remains coherent in itself. While some biblical scholars like C. H. Dodd have described this external referent in parables as the "kingdom of God", Ricoeur appears broader in his suggestion that the referent is "human reality in its wholeness".[5]

Thus, in summary, Ricoeurian parables are (1) a *realist narrative form* in conjunction with (2) a *metaphorical process* referring to (3) an *existential limit-experience* which provokes a possible transformation within the audience. John Dominic Crossan summarizes Ricoeur's threefold description as *narrativity*, *metaphoricity*, and *paradoxicality*.[6] While Ricoeur applies this description of parable to literature, the translation from text to cinema will become evident in my application of Ricoeur's concepts to Carruth's films, even as I aim to steer clear of literary text-based trappings so common in theologians' and biblical scholars' interpretations of cinema.[7]

2 Mayward 2017, Mayward 2019.

3 Ricoeur 1975, 30, 33.

4 Ricoeur 1975, 32.

5 Dodd 1935, Ricoeur 1975, 127.

6 Crossan 1980, 2.

7 Melanie Wright wonders if this frequent conflation of film with texts in film analysis by religious scholars is due to the privileging of sacred scriptures over and above other media; I think she rightfully questions whether such text-based approaches are truly engaging with film *qua* film at all. See Wright 2007, 21–22.

Indeed, film scholar Dudley Andrew has suggested Ricoeur's relevance for interpretation in film theory,[8] and Alberto Baracco has demonstrated Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutic in film-philosophy. Similar to Andrew and Baracco, I apply Ricoeur to film-theology to explore how these parables might be *doing* theology via cinema.[9]

Ricoeur considers all parables as having a narrative structure, or *emplotment*. In his *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur's hypothesis centers on the narrativity of human temporal reality, suggesting that we make meaning and interpret all our experiences through narrative – all reality is storied in time. In crafting his hermeneutical circle – what he describes as an "endless spiral" of interpretation[10] – Ricoeur describes three levels or modes of mimesis: $mimesis_1$ (prefigured time), $mimesis_2$ (configured time), and $mimesis_3$ (refigured or transfigured time).[11] Applied to cinema, $mimesis_1$, or the world *behind* the film, entails a pre-understanding or "practical understanding" of the nature of narratives, what a filmgoer understands of the structural, symbolic, and temporal dynamics of the emplotted story.[12] $Mimesis_2$, the world *of* the film, is the mode of emplotment, bringing together the individual elements of the story – characters, events, actions, descriptions – and integrating them within the framing structure of narrative, transforming a succession of events into a meaningful whole. Finally, $mimesis_3$, the world *in front of* the film, marks the intersection of the film-world with the life-world of the audience.[13] This stage is referential in that the film-world is discernible and applicable to everyday life; it is where the film potentially transforms our perspective and praxis.

Ricoeur asserts that parables are stories which could have actually occurred to people in everyday life yet contain a peculiarity or eccentricity. This peculiarity is not due to fantastical or magical elements, but *precisely because of the parable's realism.* As Ricoeur puts it, parables depict "the extraordinary within the ordinary".[14] This quality "remains a fantastic of the everyday, without the supernatural, as it appears in fairy tales or in myths".[15] Ricoeur sees a narrative structure underlying this peculiarity: "Parables are ordinary stories whose entire metaphorical power is concentrated in a moment of crisis and in a denouement that is either tragic or comic."[16] Such is the paradox of the parabolic structure: it begins in an ordinary manner, one

8 Andrew 1984, 180–187.
9 Baracco 2017.
10 Ricoeur 1984, 72.
11 Ricoeur 1984, 53.
12 Ricoeur 1984, 54–56.
13 Ricoeur 1984, 71.
14 Ricoeur 1995, 60.
15 Ricoeur 1981, 167.
16 Ricoeur 1981, 167. Emphasis in original.

the audience recognizes as the "real world", only to upend the audience's expectations of reality through an affective crisis and subsequent coda yet remain within the "real". Ricoeur places such great emphasis on realism in parable that the genres of fable, fantasy, and magical realism should be considered distinct from or even antithetical to parable's aesthetic.[17] Would not this need for realism in parable disqualify the majority of science fiction films, with their otherworldly and fantastical elements conflicting with realism? Yet this realist aesthetic is precisely why Carruth's approach to sci-fi can be considered parabolic: through his emphasis of the ordinary natural world via his grassroots *mise en scène*, he highlights the incredible *within* the quotidian. For both Carruth and Ricoeur, the bewildering transcendent revelation manifests itself because the parable-world appears to be conventional and mundane yet reveals itself to be more than initially meets the eye (or ear, or soul). Carruth's films are speculative fictions set in the present day; they contain no aliens or spaceships, no advanced technology or otherworldly beings. This parabolic narrative distinction of the numinous bursting through simplicity invites a polyvalence of interpretations even as it resists distortive hermeneutical approaches – it provides boundaries while allowing for imaginative interpretive play.

This contrast between realism and extravagance gives rise to the metaphoric element of parables. Ricoeur posits that the metaphorical process provides the intermediary link between the realist narrative and the existential interpretation.[18] Similar to his larger study, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur argues in "Biblical Hermeneutics" for metaphor as resemblance and redescription. True metaphors, for Ricoeur, are untranslatable; they are ontologically new descriptions of reality. This does not mean they cannot be paraphrased or described, but Ricoeur is quick to note that any such translation is "infinite", meaning possible legitimate interpretations cannot be exhausted or reduced to mere propositional language.[19] Thus, cinematic metaphors cannot be abridged to semantic synopsis or moral messages –parables are not mere didactic illustrations, but rather world-shattering polyvalent metaphors. Ricoeur puts it succinctly: "Metaphor says something new about reality."[20] Yet how do we discern a narrative is a parable with a metaphoric process as opposed to a mere story or some other symbol-laden genre, such as allegory or fa-

17 For instance, in R. Johnston 2014, Robert Johnston's main example of film as parable is the fantasy film Stranger Than Fiction (Marc Forster, US 2006), which is decidedly unrealistic and moralistic in both form and content. Johnston thus appears to conflate magical realism with parable, whereas I would argue that these genres are similar but distinct. Following Ricoeur and Crossan, I propose that cinematic parables are more realistic, indirect, and subversive than fantastical, allegorical, and illustrative.

18 Ricoeur 1975, 75.

19 Ricoeur 1975, 80.

20 Ricoeur 1975, 80.

ble? In searching for what he calls "signs of metaphoricity", Ricoeur finds his answer in the narrative structure: the dimension of *extravagance* within the *ordinary* realism of the story "delivers the openness of the metaphorical process from the closure of the narrative form".[21]

Ricoeurian parabolic realism is congruent with the cinematic realism described and celebrated by classical French film theorists André Bazin, Amédée Ayfre, and Henri Agel. Bazin is well-known for his praise of French and Italian realist cinema and its sacramental capacity; his lesser-known contemporaries Ayfre and Agel also recognize the sacred and transcendent in cinema.[22] Building on Agel and Ayfre's phenomenological approach, Michael Bird draws a strong connection between cinematic realism and what he calls *spiritual realism*, a term originating with Agel: "If film is understood to possess a continuity with the world it represents, then in order for cinema to have a means by which it can open us to the dimension of the sacred, this means would have to be directed to the discernment of the holy *within the real* rather than leading away from the real as in the case of art that abolishes reality."[23] Such realist cinema pays attention to the everyday moments, allowing time and images to point us to something beyond the mere material, as seen in the films of recent auteurs such as Asghar Farhadi, Cristian Mungiu, Kelly Reichardt, Debra Granik, and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.[24]

Finally, Ricoeur directs his attention in "Biblical Hermeneutics" to limit-expressions, which utilize paradox, hyperbole, and other modes of intensification to address the external referent of the parables, namely existential limit-experiences. Also described by Ricoeur as "boundary-situations", limit-experiences are ineffable peak moments within human existence such as death, suffering, guilt, and hatred, but also birth, joy, grace, and love.[25] As religious discourse in non-religious language and image, parables as limit-expressions attempt to describe these limit-experiences of immanence on the horizon of transcendence in a metaphoric montage between film-world and life-world. In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur suggests that as the reader interprets the text, the text also interprets and affects the reader. Thus the filmgoer discovers themselves anew via the filmic parable-world, a reorientation by way of disorientation. The task of interpretation is only completed when the audience emerges from the hermeneutical circle with a reoriented theological and mor-

21 Ricoeur 1975, 99.

22 Agel 1961, Ayfre 2004.

23 May/Bird 1982, 13.

24 The Dardennes' post-secular parabolic films are the focus of my forthcoming PhD thesis at the University of St Andrews, tentatively titled "Post-Secular Cinematic Parables: Theology, Philosophy, and Ethics in the Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne".

25 Ricoeur 1975, 128.

al imagination; Ricoeur calls this "engagement in action"[26] or "moral decision".[27] Thus, within the application phase of mimesis$_3$, an existential and ethical response occurs as the audience shifts from the parable-world into their life-world with both a fresh understanding of reality and a propensity to enact this new understanding. With Ricoeur's narrative-metaphors and limit-experiences as our hermeneutical framework, we can now turn to Carruth's sci-fi parables Primer and Upstream Color.

Primer: "Did You Notice the Parabolic?"

"They took from their surroundings what was needed and made of it something more."[28] This repeated statement in the voiceover narration from Carruth's Aaron – or at least one iteration of Aaron – is an apt introduction to the world of Primer and its fractured elliptical narrative, a formal decision in harmony with its approach to time travel. As the main characters progress in their time-travel practices and experimentation, the film's very plot structure appropriately collapses into a confusing cycle. Inspired by Feynman diagrams, Primer has an "extremely fractured syuzhet [...] It pushes the act of piecing together the overall narrative (or fabula) to a radically obtuse degree."[29] In this, we the audience are prompted to take from the film-world's surroundings and, like the ordinary engineers of this parable, make of it "something more", to search for traces of meaning in the parabolic, to move back and forth in our own memories of the filmic events in order to construct a semi-coherent whole in both time and narrative.

Made on a meager shooting budget of $7,000 and a skeleton crew of Carruth's family and friends, Primer ultimately won the 2004 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. It opens with Aaron's narration as heard through a phone recording in his attempt to explain to his past/future self (and the audience) what has/will transpire(d). From the inaugural shot of a garage door opening (a repeated motif), there follows a series of scenes of four engineers experimenting with entrepreneurial ideas in Aaron's garage. During one experiment involving the electromagnetic reduction of an object's weight via various elements and power sources, Abe and Aaron accidentally discover (or create?) an approximately 1,300-minute time loop, an enclosed field in which an object is somehow unanchored from linear time and placed into a state of parabolic time in a continuously repeating sequence,

26 Ricoeur 1981, 168.
27 Ricoeur 1978, 245.
28 Primer (Shane Carruth, US 2004), 00:01:15–00:01:21.
29 Bergstrom 2013.

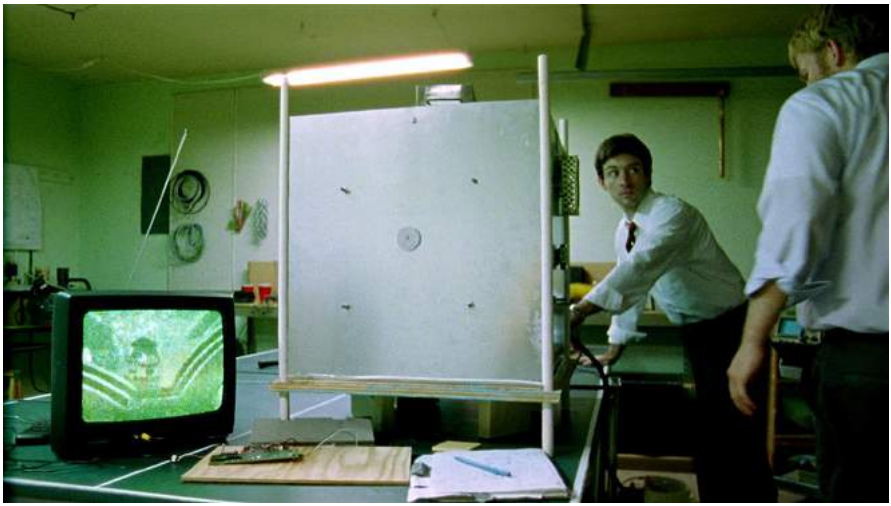

Fig. 1: Discovering time travel. Film still, Primer (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 00:12:07.

allowing the object to be removed either in the present or at some point in the past (fig. 1).

Building upon the discovered premise, Abe eventually creates "the box" – this is a larger unit capable of containing a human being and allowing them to go back in time if they enter and exit the box at the correct points in the parabolic traversal (fig. 2). Abe describes this process to a bewildered Aaron:

> ABE: Look, everything we're putting into that box becomes ungrounded, and I don't mean grounded like to the earth, I mean, not tethered. I mean, we're blocking whatever keeps it moving forward and so they flip-flop. Inside the box it's like a street, both ends are cul-de-sacs. I mean, this isn't frame dragging or wormhole magic, this is basic mechanics and heat 101.
> AARON: This is *not* mechanics and heat.[30]

As Abe and Aaron repeatedly travel back in time to take advantage of the stock market – being careful not to disturb their double selves within the overlapping timelines – a crisis occurs when an acquaintance, Thomas Granger (Chip Carruth), appears to have also traveled through the box, but for a much greater length of time, leaving him disheveled and ultimately comatose. Since neither Abe nor Aaron can imagine a logical scenario where they would share their secret knowledge

30 Primer (US 2004), 00:25:41–00:26:00.

Fig. 2: The box. Film still, Primer (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 00:45:07.

with Granger, the pair's trust in one another (and in their own moral goodness) is called into question. As the narrative progresses, both the duo and the viewer realize that the diegetic timeline is fractured and overlapped, with multiple Aarons and Abes circling through events, causing everyone (both characters and audience) to lose their grip on what is happening.[31]

Primer's narrative has been described as "confounding" and "labyrinthine", leaving the audience "disoriented by the abrupt, matter-of-fact infusion of weirdness" in the otherwise mundane events.[32] Carruth likely intended this disorientation, for when ordinary humans are facing a paradox or a limit-experience, they need interpretation in order to gain understanding, even if full comprehension is impossible. In a 2004 *New York Times* interview, Carruth described his approach to the film's narrative structure:

> My favorite films are the ones that can't be tidily summed up … yet I walk away with a sense of the core. I wanted to make a film like that. As I was writing, my brother would say, "It's confusing." I would ask, "Well, what do you think is happening? Just take a guess." He always got it right. He'd say, "No, no, I get it, I just don't think anybody else would." But that's exactly what I was going for. I

31 It is worth noting here that Shane Carruth's composed soundtrack for the film becomes increasingly digitized, agitated, and ethereal as the narrative spirals into bewilderment.

32 D'Angelo 2004.

Fig. 3: Multiple timelines. Film still, Primer (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 01:14:04.

> wanted it to be right on that line […] The audience never knows more than Abe and Aaron know… But "Primer" is airtight; the information is in there. No one's shown me a hole yet. People who decide to see it a second time, a third, fourth, fifth time […] they tell me it's a different experience.[33]

In Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle, he proposes a dialectic between "guessing" and "validating" where one intuits a proposed interpretation of a text – a guess based in probability – then seeks validation of the interpretation *within* the world of the text itself. Primer prompts exactly this response within its audience, as if by entering the film-world they too have entered a box of the parabolic: "the box" is a metaphorical hermeneutical circle. In their early experimentation, Abe says to Aaron, "When you were controlling the feeds, did you notice the parabolic? Hey, it's important. Parabolas are important."[34] Indeed, Primer is parabolic in both senses of the word, via its ever-curving cul-de-sac of emplotment as well as a narrative-metaphor evoking a limit-experience in its audience. As Carruth says (and personal experience affirms), repeat viewings of the film generate different experiences and interpretations, which is precisely the Ricoeurian "endless spiral" of interpretation within the hermeneutical modes of mimesis.[35]

33 Shulman 2004.
34 Primer (US 2004), 00:23:44–00:23:49.
35 Ricoeur 1984, 72.

Looking for other signs of metaphoricity, we can observe the motif of doors opening and closing: at Aaron's home, the storage-unit hallway, and the actual time-travel boxes themselves. In particular, the storage hallway of seemingly infinite doors (fig. 3) housing the boxes is a striking symbol for the multiple timelines occurring within the film, connoting the various possible trajectories and decisions Aaron and Abe are capable of making, generating endless potential second (and third, and fourth) attempts to do the right thing at a specific point in time (although what is morally "right" becomes increasingly opaque). The doors also suggest an infinite number of possible interpretations for this parabolic story – which interpretive portal will we enter on this occasion, in this viewing?

In moving from text to action – to the world *in front of* the film – PRIMER provokes one obvious question: *what would you do if you could travel in time*? While a plethora of other science fiction stories have explored this query, PRIMER is unique for its simple-yet-complex parabolic approach, where its very realism reinforces its philosophical and theological questions. The settings are mundane and sparse – a garage, a kitchen, a storage-unit facility, a hotel room – while the time-travel machine is mostly PVC pipe, wires, and duct tape (fig. 2). The American indie aesthetic of the film itself – the handheld cinematography, the 16 mm film, the non-professional or unrecognized actors, the real-life locations, the improvisational-sounding technical dialogue – connotes a cinematic realism. It is this very lack of extravagance which provokes a sense of wonder, as if the most transcendent and miraculous of all human events quietly occurred in a little corner of Texas. The boring engineers must contend with the fact that they have a unique prescient knowledge and the capacity to change events for good or ill; their ability to step outside time ever so briefly allows these ordinary men to begin acting like gods, orchestrating moments in order to fulfill their will. Cultural critic Chuck Klosterman describes PRIMER as "the finest movie about time travel I've ever seen" because of its realistic aesthetic:

> The reason PRIMER is the best [...] is because it's the most realistic [...] the plausibility of PRIMER is why it's so memorable. It's not that the time machine in PRIMER seems more authentic; it's that the time travelers themselves seem more believable. They talk and act (and *think*) like the kind of people who might accidentally figure out how to move through time, which is why it's the best depiction we have of the ethical quandaries that would emerge from such a discovery.[36]

This is precisely the realism of Ricoeurian parables, the extraordinary within the ordinary, as well as the ethical and theological questions the cinematic parable pro-

36 Klosterman 2009, 63–64.

vokes in the audience. Carruth has stated that the film is about risk and trust, about how two colleagues' morals and identities are pushed to their limits via an impossible situation becoming possible. As Aaron and Abe confront the endless cycle of selves they have created via the time loops, the film ends on an ambiguous note, with Abe choosing to watch over his past selves like a guardian angel while Aaron seeks to expand the experiment to global proportions.

Moreover, PRIMER has unique resonance with the Ricoeurian stage of refiguration in the narrative, where the "real" of history and the "unreal" of fictional narratives are able to be bridged. In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur suggests that through the act of reading, an imaginative text (such as a film) serves as a mediator for the audience to move between the fictional film world and the practical and affective realm of existence, a "transcendence in immanence".[37] Thus, as we "read" PRIMER, the diegetic untethering of time in the narrative makes us keenly aware of the non-diegetic experience of time itself in our real existence, even as we resist breaching our suspension of disbelief. In other words, the back-and-forth movement from the parable-world of PRIMER into the life-world of the audience has the revelatory effect of a fresh awareness of the experience of time even as the film is unfolding. It prompts lingering questions about time's very nature that are reminiscent of Augustine's wonderment in his *Confessions*: "What then *is* time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know."[38]

Ultimately, PRIMER suggests that our human existence tethered to time is not a limitation but a freedom. As Ricoeur puts it in *Oneself as Another*, our identity is anchored in time and narrative, a self-sameness throughout changes in history, a selfhood as becoming.[39] In real time, I am and I am not the same person I was six hours (or six years) ago; in PRIMER, emancipated from time, I am both persons at once, which means I am also neither. When I am time-less, I am thus narrative- and self-less, making all observed reality and history seem inane as my very self disintegrates (as they continue to use the box, the engineers begin to bleed from their ears and lose the ability to write). Simple statements about reality stop making sense. Or as Aaron puts it, "Man, are you hungry? I haven't eaten since later this afternoon."

37 Ricoeur 1988, 101.
38 Augustine 2006, 242.
39 Ricoeur 1992.

Fig. 4: "They could be starlings." Film still, Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:00:07.

Upstream Color: Synaesthetic Spiritual Connections

"Close your eyes."[40]

That these are the first words of dialogue voiced in Upstream Color is not insignificant. Paradoxical in its invitation (what audience would close their eyes to watch a film?), it suggests that the film's strengths are multisensory, requiring what Vivian Sobchack calls a "synaesthetic" engagement with the film's body.[41] With its strong emphasis on the auditory – it received a special award at the Sundance Film Festival for its accomplishments in sound design – the film has a structure best described as *symphonic*, with a musicality to the editing rhythms which provide coherence to the disparate images and disjointed sense of time.[42] Beyond the apt comparisons to another metaphysical 2013 sci-fi film, Coherence (James Ward Byrkit, US/GB 2013), imagine that Terrence Malick made a film based on a Hayao Miyazaki story, and you may have a glimpse into Shane Carruth's modus operandi.[43] While Upstream Color has an elliptical and fractured narrative akin to Primer, a perceptive viewer/hearer can eventually puzzle together the pieces of the emplotted events, even if the significance and plausibility of those events remain opaque and open to interpretation. A critical summary of the film's narrative reveals its parabolic dynamic.

The opening shot is of trash bags filled with intertwined paper chains being carried towards a garbage dumpster. The montage of subsequent shots over the next

40 Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013), 00:02:30.
41 Sobchack 1992, 129–140.
42 For an excellent analysis of Upstream Color's distinct sound design, see Kickasola 2013.
43 Mayward 2013.

20 minutes is mysterious and jarring, held together by the underlying humming score Carruth employs (Carruth composed the music for both of his films). A man – credited as "Thief" (Thiago Martins) – harvests some blue dust and larval worms from plants growing in a greenhouse. Combining this azure substance and the worms, the man brews a concoction. Some boys drink this potion, resulting in a psychic connection and giving them fantastic abilities to mimic each other's movements. *How* this spiritual link works is unexplained, yet *that* it is happening is undeniable – it antecedes a later scene of Kris and Jeff witnessing a murmuration of starlings, the birds undulating across the skies in inexplicable natural harmony (fig. 4) as the couple realize that their personal memories are intertwined (more on this below).

The Thief places a worm in a capsule. After failed attempts to sell the "drug", he abducts a woman, Kris, and forces her to ingest the pill. This leaves her in a hypnotic trance-like state and under total control of the Thief's verbal suggestions. Over the course of several days, the Thief steals Kris's funds and identity, forcing her to enact bizarre repetitive rituals of drinking water, stacking poker chips, and transcribing Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* onto paper scraps which she makes into a large chain (similar to the one seen in the opening shot). In this liturgy of imprisonment, the camera frames the Thief in the peripheral, able to hear him but unable to see him; he tells Kris his head is made of the same material as the sun, blinding her (and us) to his visage, a thwarting of any possible face-to-face encounter with the Other.[44]

After the Thief leaves – again, we *hear* but don't *see* him go – Kris slowly awakens from hypnosis (or does she?) to discover an enormous worm crawling under her skin. Despite her most violent efforts, she is unable to remove the parasite from her body. The film jump-cuts to a new character, credited as "The Sampler" (Andrew Sensenig), placing a large amplification speaker pointed downward into the earth in an empty field, a pulsing soundtrack emitting from the sound system. The Sampler is then seen waiting in the field at night when Kris appears, bleeding and wearing only a nightshirt. "It won't come out", she murmurs.

The film's soundtrack begins again as we watch the Sampler's surgical process of removing the rope-like parasitic worm from Kris and placing it within a young pig. The exorcism complete – one recalls Christ casting demons into a herd of swine in Matthew 8:28–34 – the pig is then brought back to the Sampler's farm as Kris stumbles dreamlike through her house, a crowd of hazy figures surrounding her. She suddenly awakens in her car by a highway, confused and feeling untethered to reality; by now, she has lost her job, her finances, and any sense of security in the world. She has experienced the most invasive and destructive of traumas – her very sense of self has been violated and erased.

44 An allusion to Emmanuel Levinas.

Fig. 5: God's eye view of Kris and Jeff. Film still, Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:09:35.

The narrative leaps forward through time and introduces Jeff, who encounters Kris during his train commute and is intrigued by her presence (her shortened hair suggests that extensive time has passed since her traumatic experience). Jeff feels drawn to Kris, and despite her initial hesitation, he patiently pursues a quiet romance with her. Interspersed between scenes of their budding relationship, we see the Sampler recording noises and music from the world around his pig farm, collecting auditory samples from nature. As he walks through the large pigpen and draws close to the animals, he is suddenly transported to various human individuals, silently observing people who appear unaware of the Sampler's presence (the parallels to the presence of the angelic or divine are conspicuous).

When Jeff and Kris finally kiss and consummate their physical relationship, we suddenly see them lying on a white sheet in the middle of the Sampler's pig farm. They begin to realize they are somehow linked when they notice their mutual scars from the pig transfusion, and also that they share similar stories of past unexplained traumas and financial ruin. Moreover, their memories seem to be mingled: when they share about childhood experiences, each recalls the same event as their own in a muddled blurring of memory, history, and forgetting. Kris discovers that she is unable to conceive a child, her body (unbeknownst to her) having suffered and recovered from endometrial cancer. However, her pig avatar successfully gives birth to piglets, who are rounded up by the Sampler into a burlap sack and drowned in a nearby stream. This horrific event, though occurring at a distance, somehow initiates an existential panic in the human couple: Kris frantically searches as if for something lost, while Jeff spontaneously starts a fistfight with co-workers. This dis-ease prompts Kris and Jeff to

Fig. 6: Healing from trauma. Film still, Upstream Color (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:33:56.

barricade themselves in their house and hide in a bathtub; we view them from an iconic God's eye shot, their limbs intimately intertwined, a linking of body and soul (fig. 5).

The Thief and Sampler are also linked, but via a complex lifecycle: the mysterious blue material comes from the Thief and his plants, is ingested by the worms, enters the human victims, transfers to the pigs via the Sampler, leaks into a nearby creek through the pigs' deaths, then emerges anew in the blue orchid plants growing nearby; these are harvested by horticulturalists and sold in the Thief's neighborhood. Such circular imagery of death bringing new life – another metaphorical hermeneutical circle? – connotes both Buddhist samsara and Christian resurrection. The true origin of the spiritual sapphire substance remains unclear.

In the final act after the bathtub scene, the narrative suddenly increases in both pace and metaphoricity as Kris and Jeff begin to recollect and recover their past identities. In a dreamlike sequence, Kris, Jeff, and the Sampler all sit down at the same table in a barren warehouse-like room, when suddenly Kris makes eye contact with the Sampler – she is now aware of his presence. Face to face with the Other, the Sampler collapses under her gaze. The scene then cuts to a parallel moment at the pig farm as Kris shoots and kills the Sampler – the mind–body problem plays out narratively. Again, *how* such spiritual teleportation occurs is unexplained, yet *that* it is concretely happening is certain. Along with other victims, Kris and Jeff turn the farm into a sanctuary for human and pig alike; as a result, no more pigs are drowned and the orchids in the river no longer turn blue. Thus, the Thief is deprived of the worms for his drug and the cycle of trauma is broken. The film closes with a beautiful shot of Kris cradling a piglet, a look of peaceful contentment on both their faces (fig. 6).

Upstream Color is rich with not only Ricoeurian signs of metaphoricity, most notably about the experience of trauma, but also humanity's ultimate concern,

a longing for transcendence and connection. The film has been repeatedly described as *spiritual* despite never overtly depicting or addressing religion or God, a non-religious "spiritual impressionism" and "science-fiction with overtones of transcendence".[45] Film critics have observed this spiritual dimension in both the film's narrative and its formal aesthetic, calling it a "cerebral-spiritual love story",[46] a "colossal cosmic synch-up [...] of material on the smartphone of Earth and the mainframe computer of the heavens",[47] and stating, "if you've ever sat at your desk wondering whether there's more to life, or been kept awake by an insidious hum in the darkness, this will speak to your soul".[48] Jeremy Biles observes that the film contains implicit religious motifs and ideas, highlighting the themes of "redemption, salvation, perfection, identity, and trauma as a path of spiritual attainment".[49] Carruth himself describes the subtly religious inspirations for the film's story:

> It was the nagging feeling about where personal narratives and personal identity come from. The idea that people would identify themselves as having a particular personal or religious belief. When I was having conversations with people I was wondering if, once these ideas become cemented, whether I was having a conversation with someone who was present and critically thinking or whether I was having a conversation with someone who had compiled a set of talking points over time.[50]

He mentions that the film addresses the "universal feeling of something unspoken, or a certain religious belief in a God or a cosmic force controlling events".[51] Similarly, in an interview with */Film*, when responding as to whether the film had a religious influence, Carruth replies:

> I mean it's definitely influenced, because I think we all are. I guess you could tell a version of this story that would be like *It's a Wonderful Life* where you've got the angels that are looking down and talking about him and then they send one. In that way you've got human characters that are affected at a distance from some heavenly place [...] So I guess the answer is that the ambition of the film is to be universal and not to speak about any one religion or even religion itself instead of... I feel like we've got tons of religions that we don't even call religions, you know?[52]

45 Brody 2013.
46 Chang 2013.
47 Bradshaw 2013.
48 Johnston 2013.
49 Biles 2013, 164.
50 Koehler 2013, 12.
51 Koehler 2013, 13.
52 Fischer 2013.

A 2013 *Wired* exposé on Carruth contains this insight into his religious background: "For a while, his parents belonged to a progressive, hippie-ish community called the Lord's Chapel. The congregants met in a high school gym or at potluck dinners, where they sometimes spoke in tongues."[53]

Could this Pentecostal upbringing and interest in religious phenomena inform the spirit-laden near-miraculous moments of Upstream Color? The narrative of an omniscient deity (the Sampler) orchestrating the spiritual destiny and health of individuals only to be overcome and killed by those individuals – this all suggests that Upstream Color could be described as a pneumatological "death of God" film, or a "middle spirit" of remaining beyond trauma's aftermath.[54] As time and narrative increasingly blur over the film's running time, the hovering Spirit over the (upstream) waters heals the victims of religious trauma, even as those very victims put to death the religious institution and metaphysical god of theodicy. This is not an atheistic but an *anatheistic* film – it is about life with god after god is dead.[55] Like its inspiration *Walden*, this sci-fi parable invokes a spiritual awakening, inviting the audience to "live deliberately" with an awareness of the transcendent gift that is everyday human existence.

Post-Secular Parables

As of this writing, Carruth has directed only Primer and Upstream Color; two follow-up film projects, A Topiary and The Modern Ocean, remain unrealized. During the writing of this article, the website to Carruth's film production company, ERBP Film, suddenly closed down and became inaccessible. In an October 2019 interview, Carruth stated that he is retiring from filmmaking to focus on other projects and charity work.[56] Yet even if Carruth produced only these two films, his art should be recognized as part of the "post-secular constellation" emerging in contemporary cinema.[57] This post-secular aesthetic could be described as an in-between space between the secular and the religious, realism and expressionism, immanence and transcendence; it is where Carruth's cinema resides. Post-secular cinema invites us into an open space of liminality, wager, and possibility; such motion pictures allow us visions of our subjective link to the "real world" even as they upend and expand our beliefs and imaginations, showing us both our world and other possible worlds,

53 Rafferty 2013.
54 Rambo 2010.
55 Kearney 2011.
56 Pape 2019.
57 Bradatan/Ungureanu 2014.

anchoring us in reality while pushing at the existential boundaries. This is precisely what Carruth's post-secular parables accomplish: through the blending of realist and formalist cinematic styles in science fiction rooted in physical science (PRIMER) and haptic spirituality (UPSTREAM COLOR), audiences encounter what Richard Kearney calls *epiphanies*, "the consecration of ordinary moments of flesh and blood *thisness* as something strange and enduring", a "transfiguring instant" which "happens in the gaps, in the breaks of linear temporality when an eternal now [...] explodes the continuum of history".[58] Indeed, akin to Andrei Tarkovsky's own sci-fi parable, STALKER (USSR 1979), Carruth's epiphanic cinema is truly sculpting in time.[59]

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James Lorenz

The End of Desire?

Love and the Soteriological Significance of Desire, Hope, and Belief in Andrei Tarkovsky's STALKER (USSR 1979)

Abstract

This article explores the soteriological significance of desire in Сталкер (STALKER, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979). At the heart of the film, deep within a paranormal and psychosomatic frontier called the Zone, is a space which signifies the end of all desire: the Room, a preternatural place of mystical power which is said to grant one's innermost wishes. The Zone and the Room become soteriological motifs. Tarkovsky's characters travel there motivated by a yearning for healing, a hope for salvation. This article explores this soteriological journey through the interplay of desire, hope, and belief, for this triad is the key conceptual scheme at work in the film. From analysis of this film that focuses on this framework, several theological and soteriological concepts emerge which can be fruitfully explored. Above all, by focusing on the significance of this triad, a crucial aspect of Tarkovsky's religious thought comes to light: his understanding of the relationship between desire and love.

Keywords

Andrei Tarkovsky, Soteriology, Desire, Trinity, Christology, STALKER

Biography

James Lorenz is a PhD Candidate at the University of Oxford in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. His research is situated broadly in the field of modern systematic theology, with a particular focus on religion and the arts, specifically cinema. His doctoral thesis explores the theological concepts that emerge from the films and philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky.

Deep within Сталкер (STALKER, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979) is a space which signifies the end of all desire in the film. In a timeless future within some nameless country is the Zone, a liminal space between memory and imagination where a meteor strike has created a paranormal and psychosomatic frontier where phantasmagoria can be fatal. In the very heart of the Zone is the Room, a space of preternatural and mystical power that is said to grant one's innermost wishes. Tarkovsky specifically

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.3

Fig. 1: Film still "Entering the zone", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:49:06.

aligns the mysterious power of the Room with the interiority of desire: this is not a space where one can *perform* one's desires and articulate them as if simply "making a wish"; rather, this is a space which draws out honest, essential, and supressed desire from the depths of the human subconscious. And so the Room inspires pilgrims, those who would venture into the Zone, bypassing the dangerous military guarded perimeter and risking the paranormal "traps" within, in order to pursue the fulfilment of their wishes and the hope of satiating their desire. In this way the Room comes to signify both the end and the source of desire, for the very myth of a place which fulfils desire will engender desire in those who hear of it.

The Zone and the Room become soteriological motifs. Tarkovsky's characters travel there motivated by a yearning for healing, a hope for salvation – whatever each of them believes that entails. (See fig. 1.) There is the Writer, whose creativity is occluded and who has come to the Zone in search of inspiration. There is also the Professor, who is reticent at first about his reasons for entering the Zone, but in time reveals the true nature of his quest: to destroy the Room and save the world from the chaos it could precipitate. Both of their motivations are salvific in shape or design. Then there is the eponymous Stalker, one of the pseudo-alien individuals

who illegally smuggle outsiders into the Zone and guide them through its trials to the Room. Although committed never to enter the Room himself, the Stalker also undertakes a journey of self-healing, one bound up with his own crisis of faith and embodied in his hope to facilitate healing in those he guides.

Such is the salvific framework that Tarkovsky constructs around the themes of desire, hope, and belief in STALKER. The film articulates a soteriology of the self, manifested around the three central characters' personal crises. As Tarkovsky later wrote:

> It is always through spiritual crisis that healing occurs. A spiritual crisis is an attempt to find oneself, to acquire new faith. It is the apportioned lot of everyone whose objectives are on the spiritual plane. And how could it be otherwise when the soul yearns for harmony, and life is full of discordance. This dichotomy is the stimulus for movement, the source at once of our pain and of our hope: confirmation of our spiritual depths and potential. This, too, is what STALKER is about.[1]

Methodologically, this article explores this soteriological movement through the key conceptual scheme at work in the film: the triad of desire, hope, and belief. This methodology stands as an alternative to a primarily theoretical approach. Rather than conducting this study through the lens of a specific soteriological theory or through the exercise of a particular critical or cinematic theory, I wish to interpret the soteriological significance of STALKER through the framework which the film itself makes available to the viewer: this triad of desire, hope, and belief. On a basic narrative and thematic level, it operates as follows: desire draws the characters to the Zone and leads them to the enigmatic climax on the threshold of the Room; hope appears in the context of a healing narrative, for the Stalker reveals that the Zone "lets those pass who have lost all hope"[2] and he identifies the recovery of hope with the recovery from spiritual crisis; belief is central to the Stalker's character, as he grapples with doubt and desperately tries to encourage and sustain the belief of his companions. When we analyse the film with a focus on this framework, several theological and soteriological concepts emerge. In particular, following a preliminary analysis of genre, form, and style, a second section explores the recurring motif of journey and the transgression of borders. A further section examines Tarkovsky's prominent Christological imagery. This approach leads to a final section discussing the relationship of desire and love, in which Tarkovsky's own writings are focal.

1 Tarkovsky 1986, 193.

2 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:03:44.

Genre, Form, and Style

The film is rightly identified as science fiction, yet Tarkovsky resists many prominent tropes of the genre. Although the film is set in the future, there is nothing in its cosmetic presentation that suggests this. The mise-en-scène resembles the Soviet Union of the 1970s; everything from the interior design of buildings to the depiction of the military's weapons resists the fantastical reimagining which usually accompanies a futurist setting. The resultant grungy aesthetic (enhanced by the decision to treat most scenes outside the Zone with sepia tone) could well be the choice for a realist drama like Tarkovsky's first film, Ива́ново де́тство (Ivan's Childhood, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1962). There is no attempt to indulge in the standard conventions of science fiction, and Tarkovsky relies on an opening crawl text to establish some rudiments of the genre: an indistinct future, an ambiguous disaster-event. In the end, the aesthetic resembles post-apocalyptic dystopia, but even that description seems to fall short of the world that Tarkovsky has built.

The result of all this is an eerie familiarity. Whereas Tarkovsky's other work of science fiction, Солярис (Solaris, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1972), embraced its otherworldly setting on a spaceship orbiting a distant planet, Stalker belies the otherworldliness of its setting by opting for a familiar "real-world" aesthetic. As Turovskaya observes, "far from being the world of tomorrow, this looks more like today, or rather the day before yesterday".[3] Indeed, Tarkovsky conspicuously abandons the use of special effects in pursuit of such familiarity. Yet this is not an attempt to reject fantasy for realism in any codified sense. Tarkovsky pursues the supernatural through something altogether more unnerving: the uncanny. For him, it is the "infinitesimal dislocation of the everyday" which primes the affective power of science fiction.[4] For example, in one scene the Stalker and the Writer leave the Professor behind, only for the Professor to somehow overtake them in a seemingly impossible manipulation of geography. In a similarly eerie episode, inside a ruined building deep in the Zone, a telephone suddenly rings with no explanation as to how it still functions, given the derelict and abandoned state of the building. The power of such moments rests in their nearness to the "real", rather than in any sense of the fantastical; "not the inexplicable, but the unexplained", as Turovskaya describes it.[5] This sense of the uncanny, accomplished through a kind of gritty but – crucially – *estranged* realism, makes Stalker so unorthodox for its genre.

However, it remains vital to recognise that the film *is* a work of science fiction. The film's genre is integral to how we understand its form and style. One great

3 Turovskaya 1989, 111.
4 Turovskaya 1989, 111.
5 Turovskaya 1989, 111.

potential of science fiction is its capacity to transform the way the viewer thinks about familiar themes and paradigms. Where other works of fiction bring cultural and political contexts to bear on the themes they explore, works of science fiction can eschew this contextual baggage to some extent, opening up new corridors of thought to the viewer. In other words, science fiction can function like a philosophical thought experiment; it can (partially) dissolve the viewer's contextual partisanship for certain ideas and transform the way she thinks about familiar concepts. This is an essential feature of Stalker, especially through its presentation of theological concerns. Tarkovsky's Trinitarian and Christological imagery, for instance, takes on novel meaning given the science fiction setting. Iconic images of Christ and various Trinitarian motifs, which recur throughout Tarkovsky's films, are refreshed in Stalker (1979) since they are not accompanied by a visible ecclesial presence, as they are in Андрей Рублёв (Andrei Rublev, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1969), for example.

Tarkovsky's minimalist approach is also evident in his rendering of time. In form and chronological structure, Stalker is deliberately simplified. Gone are the convoluted anachronisms for which Tarkovsky is celebrated, while his usual narrative preference for flashback is curtailed. In this regard, it could not be more different from his previous film, the semi-autobiographical Зеркало (Mirror, Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1975). The effect is felt most palpably through a simplicity of storytelling. The Writer, the Professor and the Stalker's journey through the Zone unfolds as if in real time. The passing of time is not rendered through any form of abstraction, but is marked by concrete signs, such as the events of the plot or the characters' debates and the evolution of their feelings towards one another. A quotation from Tarkovsky illustrates this well:

> In Stalker I wanted there to be no time lapse between the shots. I wanted time and its passing to be revealed, to have their existence, within each frame; for the articulations between the shots to be the continuation of the action and nothing more, to involve no dislocation of time. [...] I wanted it to be as if the whole film had been made in a single shot. Such a simple and ascetic approach seems to me to be rich in possibilities [...] I wanted the whole composition to be simple and muted.[6]

This is the context of genre, form and style within which Tarkovsky engages the themes of desire and soteriology, a context which will determine the director's construction and use of various motifs. The supernatural power of the Room, for example, allows him to deal directly with desire in a way that is not possible outside science

6 Tarkovsky 1986, 193–194.

fiction, while a setting detached from the reality of Christian theology transforms the perception of the Stalker as a Christological figure. With that said, this article now turns to one of the film's most important soteriological and eschatological motifs.

The Motif of "Journey"

Of Tarkovsky's seven films, STALKER is the only one with a linear narrative, structured around a physical journey. In this regard, the narrative is (literally) straightforward: at the beginning the characters express their desire to journey through the Zone to the Room; the middle of the film depicts this journey and the trials it entails; the end of the film sees the three of them reach the Room and documents a brief period after they have left the Zone. However, the journey through the Zone is anything but straightforward. As the Stalker tells us: "There's no going straight here."[7] This is made explicit almost as soon as the three principal characters have set foot inside the Zone. The Stalker reveals that the Room is just metres away, in a straight line across a seemingly unremarkable field. The Writer makes the first move, ignoring the Stalker's warnings that it's too dangerous and stepping out across the expanse. Soon, though, something unseen begins to affect him. Eventually he turns back and rejoins the group. And then, as he looks back at the Room, so tantalisingly near, he sees that an ethereal mist has rolled in, consuming the space in which he walked just seconds earlier.

This episode demonstrates two things. First, that the Zone is both dangerous and sentient, able to react to trespassers. Second, that a journey is never as simple as going from A to B; journeys are not about starting points or endpoints, but about the "way" that is taken. This is crucial to the film, for the motif of physical journey represents the idea of spiritual journey, and the soteriology of self-making therein. A journey is transformative: the traveller is never the same person she was at her origin after she reaches her destination. This formation and transformation of self are captured in one recurring idea, repeated by the Stalker throughout the film: "Here you don't go back the way you came."[8] The simple idea that anyone who ventures into the Zone and reaches the Room must find a different way out represents the wholly transformative power of the film's journey.

It is in this motif of journey/spiritual journey that the film's soteriological framework is most clearly constructed around the triad of desire, hope, and belief. Desire, manifest both as desire for the wish-granting power of the Room and as the "soul

7 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:09:31.
8 STALKER (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:49:21.

yearn[ing] for healing" that Tarkovsky describes, is the first mover of the film's journey. This healing is identified with hope, or the restoration of hope, for the Zone only permits the presence of those "who have lost all hope". The Room, also, is identified with hope: when the Professor reveals his plan to destroy the Room, the Stalker despairs, appealing to the Writer that "he is trying to destroy your hope!"[9] The motif of journey signifies the hope of self-healing, where the restoration of hope is in many ways its own salvation. Yet the restoration of hope requires a final step – it requires belief, for how can one intend to hope without believing in the future? This is the key to the Stalker's prayer, a rare sequence that breaks the film's linear structure with a dream event, in which he prays for his companions, culminating with the petition: "Let them believe in themselves."[10] Again, the Room, their journey's destination, is connected with belief. When the three travellers finally reach the threshold, the Stalker prepares them for their encounter by telling them enigmatically: "Most importantly you have to believe."[11] Afterwards, once the Stalker has returned from the Zone to his wife and daughter, he laments that "they don't believe in anything".[12] The symbol of the Room is used to explore the interplay of desire, hope, and belief in the film. At its threshold all three are interrogated in light of their place in the salvific motif of journey.

The episode at the threshold of the Room conveys another significant aspect of the motif of journey: borders or boundaries and the transgression of them. The characters' journey to the Room involves many such "crossings". There is the border of the Zone, guarded by a substantial military presence; there is the threshold of the Room; and there is the disturbing traversal of the "meat grinder" (see fig. 2), the greatest trial with which the Zone tests trespassers. Within the motif and metaphor of journey, such boundaries represent significant transitions. This is enhanced by Tarkovsky's cinematographic choices. For example, once the characters enter the Zone, the change from sepia to colour emphasises the significance of the "crossing" they have made. It is as if the characters now find themselves in a different world, as with the transition to colour in The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, US 1939). Metaphorically, the shift from sepia to colour signifies a transformation of perspective: the sudden saturation of the image signifies the sudden saturation of meaning for the characters – this is what they have risked so much to reach, this is "home at last"[13] for the Stalker. Soteriologically, Tarkovsky is again using the motif of journey to explore transformation. The Stalker is transformed (and indeed transfigured into

9 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:11:55.
10 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:07:25.
11 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:06:16.
12 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:30:28.
13 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:39:50.

Fig. 2: Film still "The meat grinder", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:50:33.

colour) by the transgression of this border, renewed in the presence of the seemingly sentient Zone.

Sound is also used to signify the transition of entering the Zone, which is physically achieved by driving a trolley train along the tracks from the military perimeter (see fig. 3). At first the viewer is presented with the natural sounds of the trolley's wheels clacking against the rails, but slowly this sound is blended with synthetic music. The effect is a gradual transformation, rather than sudden change. As Stefan Smith describes it, this "sound design leads to an ambiguity of time and space that makes the scene so profoundly effective".[14] At some imperceptible moment the naturalistic clanking of the trolley is transformed into something completely different, just as at an equally imperceptible moment the reality of the world changes and the Zone is realised.

Crucially, Tarkovsky returns to the sound and presence of trains at vital moments in the film, so that it becomes a kind of *leitmotif*. The three companions use a locomotive for cover as the Stalker smuggles them into the Zone, just before they take the trolley train the rest of the way. Most importantly, though, Tarkovsky uses the

14 Smith 2007, 46.

Fig. 3: Film still "The trolley", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 00:35:06.

sound of a train clanking against its tracks in his ring composition. Despite the absence of an actual train, the sound underscores the opening scene of the film in the Stalker's house; it then recurs after the climactic struggle on the threshold of the Room and again, a final time, in the last scene of the film, the inscrutable finale of the Stalker's daughter and the suggestion of her telekinetic powers. In the first and last instances, the sound is accompanied by the Ode to Joy from Beethoven's Ninth. The train signifies journey, and such a particular use of sound is a fitting reminder of this central motif, as well as its soteriological connotations with transformation.

Christological Imagery

The otherworldly setting of Stalker, its futuristic circumstance, situates the film far from any systematised theology or ecclesial context. Yet the film is suffused with Christological imagery. Such imagery is a familiar and essential part of Tarkovsky's cinematic style, for his Orthodox faith is manifest throughout his cinematic corpus. In Andrei Rublev the story's Christological imagery is situated within an explicit ecclesial locus; in Solaris the overt resurrection scene adds an element of theodrama

Fig. 4: Film still "The Ghent Altarpiece", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:26:37.

to the aesthetic expression of Christology. In Stalker this Christological imagery finds expression again, this time through a variety of visuals and character motifs.

The most striking of these visuals is delivered in the second of the Stalker's sepia-lensed dreams, when one remarkable tracking shot passes over a shallow pool of water. Collected beneath the surface are the detritus of long-lost years: a steel tray; a painting of some trees; discarded syringes juxtaposed with the astounding visual of a fragment of the Ghent Altarpiece, glassing the image of John the Baptist (see fig. 4). Fish swim among the strange accumulation, "a symbol for the Christ who has been with the Stalker both night and day".[15] Interestingly, this dream-image of water, altarpiece, and symbolic fish is accompanied by a voiceover from Revelation 6:13–17, which picks up on the eschatological tremors reverberating through the narrative. The dream sequence, then, resonates with the apocalyptic vision as the sixth seal is opened in these verses, making the eschatological significance of the Zone unavoidable.

Tarkovsky's Christological imagery is always situated, however, within a wider Trinitarian range of visuals. The film's motifs, which are not always explicitly the-

15 Turovskaya 1989, 113.

ological, recur in trinities: fire, water, and mist seen as the three travellers congregate in their camp; rainwater, still water, and running water, whose sounds blur into each other, are briefly isolated, and then distorted with electronic music.[16] Yet there are more distinctly theological trinities, the most prominent of which is that of the three travellers. Here is an interpersonal trinity, which Tarkovsky treats fluidly, using it sometimes to represent the divine persons and sometimes to explore social dialectics, such as that between abstraction and practicality, which is the respective dialectic between the Writer and the Professor. Always, though, it is used to explore relationality, as evidenced by the way the film unfolds as one long conversation between the travellers.

In representing the divine persons, the character of the Stalker is crucial, for he is portrayed as a Christ-figure. The journey, rendered vain by the climactic fight on the threshold of the Room, is a reconfigured Passion narrative. Ultimately, the Stalker's prayer for the Writer and the Professor ("let them believe in themselves"[17]) goes unanswered and neither has the faith to enter the Room. According to Tarkovsky, "They had summoned the strength to look inside themselves – and had been horrified; but in the end they lack the spiritual courage to believe in themselves."[18] In other words, they doubt the goodness of their desires and fear that the Room might grant some suppressed and shameful wish. The Stalker, their guide to the salvific promise of the Room, is rejected and spurned at the end of the film, despairingly asking, and with no apparent answer, "Who am I going to take there?"[19] (See fig. 5.)

Christological analogy is a theological method common to many of Tarkovsky's films. For example, the working title of Andrei Rublev was "The Passion according to Andrei", while Ivan's Childhood analogously explores the gratuitous sacrifice of innocence. I have already mentioned the resurrection scene in Solaris in this regard. Such Christological analogy is nothing less than a way of doing theology in his films, a way of opening up theological concepts to the viewer. As David Bentley Hart has written, "analogy is the felicitous coincidence of the apophatic and the cataphatic […]; it 'clarifies' language about God not by reducing it to principles of simple similitude, but by making it more complex."[20] Tarkovsky operates theologically in a similar way, and both Christology and Trinity are especially receptive to this kind of analogical discourse, particularly in terms of the relational language which theologians use: Christ is to God as son is to father, yet Father and Son are one God.

16 Consider especially the waterfall scene; see Smith 2007 for a discussion of the use of sound in this scene.

17 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:07:25.

18 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

19 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:33:15.

20 Hart 2003, 310.

Fig. 5: Film still "The stalker's passion", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 01:19:58.

What, though, does the film's Christological imagery actually accomplish? And what does the Christological analogy of the Stalker add to the film? These questions can be answered by returning to the role of soteriology, for Tarkovsky intends to align the Stalker's struggle, his passion, with the striving for spiritual healing that Tarkovsky considers a main concern of the film.[21] However, he also images the Trinity in the three travellers in order to emphasise the salvific significance of the supreme form of interpersonal relation – love. As he wrote while reflecting on Stalker, "In the end, everything can be reduced to the one simple element which is all a person can count upon in his existence: the capacity to love. That element can grow within the soul to become the supreme factor which determines the meaning of a person's life."[22] This is the key to Tarkovsky's soteriology and the reason for his extensive use of Christological (and indeed Trinitarian) imagery, for love extends between persons and the apotheosis of love is the Trinity. Hart has described the soteriological significance of the Trinity similarly: "Trinitarian doctrine [...] is first and foremost a 'phenomenology of salvation', a theoretical articulation of the Church's

21 See again the quotation from *Sculpting in Time* in the introduction above.

22 Tarkovsky 1986, 200.

experience of being made one in Christ with God Himself."[23] Here, a final trinitarian analogy within the film is especially important, that of the Stalker, his wife, and his daughter. This image of family, and the love that it signifies, will be the concluding focus of this article.

The End of Desire as the Beginning of Love?

The first and last shots of the film point to this particular significance of the Stalker's family. While the scene on the threshold of the Room is one of discord, the film opens on the threshold of the Stalker's bedroom, within which the Stalker, his wife, and his daughter peacefully share one bed. The film's first shot tracks through the opening of the double doors and slowly closes in on the bed; then Tarkovsky cuts, and another tracking shot (this time a close-up) moves over the faces of the three bedfellows, serenely asleep. Much later in the film, Tarkovsky breaks his general rule of treating all scenes outside the Zone with sepia tone and presents the viewer with a vision of the Stalker's family walking together, in resplendent colour. These images appear in contrast to those within the Zone; the two "portals" (one to the Room and one to the family bedchamber) and the two "trinities" (of the three travellers and of the three family members) seem to embody alternative meanings – or rather alternative approaches to finding meaning.

Journey implies an end, an eschaton. Within the motif, destination is at once an end-space and an end-time, and the end of the film's journey – the end of desire – is the Room. It represents a tremendous salvific end (the fulfilment of one's innermost desire), achieved through faith ("most importantly you must believe"[24]). Except, crucially, none of Tarkovsky's characters enter the Room. At face value, this is because the Writer and the Professor lack the requisite faith, because "they don't believe in anything".[25] Yet the Room does not represent salvation for the Stalker either. A friend of the Stalker's, nicknamed Porcupine, is revealed to have had his hope spurned and distorted by the Room. The viewer is told that Porcupine sought the Room to wish for his brother's resurrection but when he reached the Room, the wish that was granted was not his conscious desire to bring his brother back to life, but his subconscious desire to become rich. Porcupine's story ends with his guilt-ridden realisation of this, which drives him to suicide. Here, then, is an alternative presentation of the Room by Tarkovsky: it is an idol of salvation, in which the characters mistakenly place their hope.

23 Hart 2005, 31.
24 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:06:16.
25 Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:30:28.

In *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky ruminates on the vain journey to the Room by pointing to a scene after his characters' return to the outside world, the scene in the café, where the Writer and the Professor are suddenly confronted "with a puzzling, to them incomprehensible, phenomenon".[26] This is the arrival of the Stalker's wife, "who has been through untold miseries because of her husband, and has had a sick child by him; but she continues to love him with the same selfless, unthinking devotion as in her youth."[27] For Tarkovsky, this encounter with the loving presence of the Stalker's wife is at odds with the notion of seeking the Room to satiate one's desire. Tarkovsky writes that "her love and her devotion are that final miracle which can be set against the unbelief, cynicism, moral vacuum poisoning the modern world, of which both the Writer and the Scientist are victims."[28] Confronted with love, the cynical notions of desire that trouble the characters' faith, as in Porcupine's story, dissolve.

In light of Tarkovsky's comments on this scene, the film's triad of desire, hope, and belief can be considered differently. Perhaps it is the end of desire that marks the beginning of love in the film: the unsatisfactory ending of the quest to seek the Room ends and the possibility of love begins. As Tarkovsky puts it, "in Stalker I felt for the first time the need to indicate clearly and unequivocally the supreme value by which, as they say, man lives and his soul does not want".[29] In other words, true existential wellbeing, the spiritual healing Tarkovsky describes, is the alleviation of desire. Moreover, Tarkovsky intimates that the expression of love in the film precipitates the renewal of hope: "In Stalker I make some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is – miraculously – proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world."[30] And, in turn, he suggests that the encounter with the Stalker's wife restores belief in the film's characters: "Even though outwardly their journey ends in fiasco, in fact each of the protagonists acquires something of inestimable value: faith."[31]

Perhaps, then, Tarkovsky sets desire and love in contrast. Turovskaya captures this contrast when she writes about the film's penultimate scene. This scene, the last containing the Stalker himself, shows his wife caring for him in the midst of his despair, comforting his fears, undressing him, and putting him to bed. It is a remarkably tender sequence and, afterwards, the viewer is invited to participate in the intimacy of the scene as the Stalker's wife looks directly into the camera and

26 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.
27 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.
28 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.
29 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.
30 Tarkovsky 1986, 199.
31 Tarkovsky 1986, 199.

Fig. 6: Film still "The stalker's wife", Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1979), 02:36:33.

begins an emotional soliloquy about the state of her husband and her love for him (see fig. 6). Turovskaya describes this scene as "perhaps the strongest part of the film, for unlike the short-sighted seekers after the meaning of life, she is motivated by the simplest, most concrete and unfeigned of all emotions: love."[32]

Is Tarkovsky's portrayal of love and desire as simple as to say that the latter restrains the former? Perhaps, given the director's reflections on "the supreme value by which, as they say, man lives and his soul does not want",[33] but I am not convinced. The desire that drives pilgrims to seek out the Room cannot be wholly negative, like Augustine's disparaging treatment of desire as craving (*appetitus*), for it is more substantial than mere wishes, or lust, or fancy. It is a sincerely felt hope for spiritual healing, even if it is a misplaced or misarticulated hope. Desire, as the film presents it, resists taxonomy. It cannot be neatly indexed under categories like desire for wealth, or inspiration, or flesh. If not impossible, it is at least exceedingly difficult to define desire in such a way. In the end, perhaps all that Tarkovsky

32 Turovskaya 1989, 114.
33 Tarkovsky 1986, 198.

can say about desire and love is something of their respective staying power: desire may manifest fleetingly; every journey to the Room will have an end, after all, but love is eternal, and the gift of love remains long after the journey is over, even if you never reach your destination.

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Bina Nir

Biblical Narratives in INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014)

Abstract

Religion is an essential marker of culture, for its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization. The Christian faith and culture of the West were in turn based upon the holy scriptures of the Jews. Christian and the Jewish religions ergo view the Hebrew Bible as a holy text – as absolute truth. It is still possible to recognize the imprint of myths and narratives originating in the biblical text, as well as other religious Christian sources, in many Western cultural productions. The present article considers the presence of biblical narratives and myths in contemporary cultural productions based on an analysis of the science fiction film INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014). INTERSTELLAR follows the space voyage of a team of experts sent through a wormhole to search for a planet fit for human settlement since Earth is in the grips of ecological catastrophe that threatens to wipe out humanity. A narrative analysis of the film reveals that it draws much of its inspiration from Judeo-Christian sources, particularly the narratives of the Old Testament.

As a work of science fiction, Interstellar relies on the study of the physicist Kip Thorne, but, in addition to its scientific subject matter, the film is also replete with biblical narratives such as the apocalypse, Noah's ark, the tale of the spies, prophecy and the tasking of the "chosen" one with a mission, signs and miracles, the ability to control nature and to create elements within it, and the idea of punishment in the form of being denied entrance to the promised land.

Keywords

Biblical Narratives, INTERSTELLAR, Catastrophe, Science Fiction, Western Culture, Orientation, Mythology, Future Humanity

Biography

Bina Nir completed her doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University. Since 2000, she is a lecturer at the Yezreel Valley College and the Department Head of the Honors B.A. Program. Her research focuses on the interface of Western religions and contemporary cultures, specifically the genealogies of cultural constructs rooted in the Western religions, in areas such as the perceptions of time, judgement, leadership, and success and failure. Her book *Failure of Success* [in Hebrew] was published by Resling Press in 2016.

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.4

Introduction

Although scholarly literature debates the defining characteristics of Western culture, it forms a consensus with regard to the institutions, beliefs, and major customs which can be legitimately deemed to compose its beating heart. The political scientist Karl Deutsch exposits eight main components of Western civilization, which include both Catholicism and Protestantism.[1] Western Christianity (beginning with Catholicism and later branching off to include Protestantism) is historically the most important defining component of Western civilization. The Christian faith and culture of the West were in turn based upon the holy scriptures of the Jews,[2] which were disseminated around the Roman Empire.[3] Both the Christian and the Jewish religions ergo view the Hebrew Bible as a holy text – as absolute truth and the product of divine revelation – and it is still possible to recognize the imprint of myths and narratives originating in the biblical text, as well as other religious Christian sources, in many Western cultural productions.

Religion is an essential marker of culture, for its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization.[4] Every human society or culture has its own mythology, and that mythological heritage constitutes an indivisible part of religion,[5] since some aspects of reality require mythical conceptualization, such as the domain of values and ideals. The myth reflects the organic and holistic aspect of life which we cannot understand using reason or pure scientific method alone. It is a way of imposing order on a world that does not make sense.[6] Mircea Eliade maintained that religious myths not only provide a framework for explaining the cultural behavior of human beings and attest to past experience, but also construct the paradigm for future endeavors and aspirations. In fact, in Eliade's eyes, myth can be considered more "real" than "historical truth" in that it has deeper, richer, and longer-lasting implications.[7]

This article examines the presence of biblical narratives and myths in contemporary cultural productions based on an analysis of the science fiction film Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014). The film clearly belongs in the science fiction genre and is mainly based on scientific ideas, which I will present in the course of this article. As I will go on to show, however, it also contains religious motifs cen-

1 Deutsch 1981, 51–93.
2 Hacohen 2006, 23.
3 Malkin 2007, 44.
4 Durkheim 1971, 418–421.
5 Niebuhr 2011, 125.
6 May 1991, 21.
7 Eliade 1959, 42–43.

tered around the main Judeo-Christian narrative, which constitutes the foundation of Western culture. In addition, we will see that it is even possible to make a connection between at least some of the scientific ideas explored in the movie and religious ideas. Henri Bergson claimed that ethics, law, and scientific thought originated in religion, were integrated with it for the majority of our history, and remain steeped in its spirit.[8]

Interstellar is a science fiction movie. Science fiction, as a genre, deals mainly with futuristic fictional plots that develop existing contemporary ideas and trends in the fields of science, technology, economics, and art, among others, and explore their potential repercussions on the future of humanity. The science fiction author Robert Heinlein defined science fiction as "realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method".[9]

Interstellar follows the space voyage of a team of experts sent through a wormhole to search for a planet fit for human settlement since Earth is in the grips of ecological catastrophe that threatens to wipe out humanity. A wormhole is a hypothetical physical phenomenon that would allow instant travel between two distant points along the space-time continuum, or in other words a passage between two locations in three-dimensional space and even a way of traveling through time.

The film was written by the director's brother, Jonathan Nolan, who took inspiration from the work of physicist Kip Stephen Thorne, which implies that wormholes in the space-time continuum could be a potential gateway to time travel. This fictional idea of the wormhole, which drives the movie's entire action plot, is based on groundbreaking work that American Thorne and his colleagues at Caltech published in 1988, in which they claimed that time travel is not just possible, but even probable under certain conditions.[10] Theirs was the first paper that saw leading physicists making a scientific claim for the possibility of changing the course of time. Michio Kaku summarized: "If you could fall straight through to the black hole, there would be another universe on the other side. This is called the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, first introduced by Einstein in 1935; it is now called a wormhole."[11] Their proclamation was based on the simple hypothesis that an immense gravitational force, in accordance with the general theory of relativity, could potentially bend time-space in such a way as to link two distinct spots in the universe. The resulting "wormhole" would then allow instant travel through three-dimensional space as well as through time,

8 Bergson 1954, 317.
9 Heinlein 1969, 22.
10 Kaku 1994, 19–20.
11 Kaku 2008, 209.

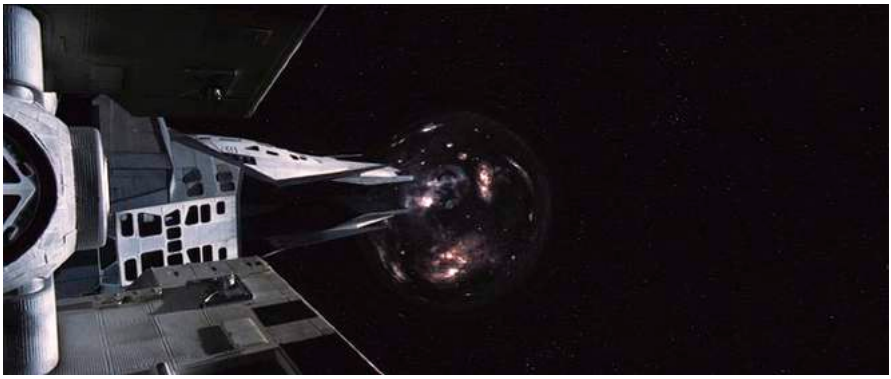

Fig. 1: The wormhole, Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 00:59:12.

and therefore it could be used to travel back into the past (see fig. 1). The only caveat to the theory is that creating such a wormhole would require colossal amounts of energy, far beyond anything our technology could be expected to supply in the foreseeable future.

Thorne claims that since time travel is physically possible, though we may be many generations away from being able to investigate it experimentally, it is no longer the purview of science fiction writers alone. In the past, serious scientists tended to turn their backs on an idea that they deemed too farfetched to be given any time or attention. Times have changed, and many physicists nowadays see time travel as an important subject that should not be ignored.[12]

Thorne himself attested in the preface to the book he wrote about the film Interstellar, "As a child and later as a teenager, I was motivated to become a scientist by reading science fiction by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and others."[13] Although, in turn, the film is largely rooted in speculative science, a narrative analysis reveals that it also draws much of its inspiration from Judeo-Christian sources, particularly the narratives of the Old Testament.

The End of Days and Apocalyptic Era

The film opens on a reality where Earth's resources have reached a state of depletion that has forced human society to revert to agrarianism, and even in this state human life is on the brink of collapse. It is clear to both the scientists and the lay

12 Thorne 2014, 133.
13 Thorne 2014, ix.

Fig. 2: Humanity in the grip of catastrophe, Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 02:19:33.

people presented in the film that things are only bound to get worse and that Earth, or at least its human population, is headed for catastrophe that will spell the end for civilization (see fig. 2).

Joseph Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey) is a widower raising his two children, 15-year-old Tom and 10-year-old Murphy ("Murph"), with the help of his father-in-law, Donald. Cooper used to be an engineer and test pilot for NASA, but at the beginning of the film he is a farmer living on a farm. The overall atmosphere created at the film's outset is the apocalyptic feeling of looming disaster that could put an end to humanity – the sandstorm alarm (00:18:08), the drive through the storm (00:18:30), and so forth.

The film represents a general sense of a fast-approaching and unavoidable end. Nevertheless, it also shows a team of scientists working to save humanity and make a fresh start, rather similar to the apocalyptic vision of the end as a new beginning. The film's through line – its depiction of impending doom alongside the hope of renewal – fits with the biblical timeline that leads from Creation to the End of Days.[14] The biblical timeline presents event after event in a chronological sequence leading up to the present time; from there the timeline continues directly towards its terminal point – the Apocalypse, the End of Days, or perhaps salvation.[15]

In the Old Testament, the apocalypse is mainly the purview of the Hebrew Prophets, who depict the end of days as dependent on the conduct of the community and the Israelite nation as a whole. This belief in the End of Days made its way into Christianity via the Book of Revelation – the Revelation of John. This book had in turn been influenced by the apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament prophet Daniel,

14 Dan 2000, 19.

15 Zeligman 1992, 102–103.

which became the model for all subsequent visions of the End of Days: "And he said, Behold, I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be" (Daniel 8:19).[16]

The descriptions presented in this vision have become the cornerstone of historical perception of the "End of the days" in Western culture. Nevertheless, the Old Testament sources do not present a coherent picture of final salvation, but rather provide a series of apocalyptic motifs emphasizing the drive towards salvation and redemption at the End of Days. Joseph Klausner emphasizes that the Hebrews were the only ancient nation to have a messianic vision of the cosmos.[17] That messianic tradition was then transmitted to the Western world through Christianity. The apocalyptic narratives within that religious tradition have penetrated deeply into the substrata of Western culture and still inform many works of literature and art, as well as science fiction films of the apocalyptic genre, to which INTERSTELLAR clearly belongs.

The Story of the Spies and Noah's Ark

As a child, Murphy, one of the film's protagonists, believes her room to be haunted by a ghost following the discovery that certain books have fallen off their shelves during the night, creating blanks in the stacks of books reminiscent of Morse code. The girl thinks that the bookshelf is "talking to her" (00:14:57) and believes she is also receiving other "signs", such as the sand from the sandstorm which bursts through the window and settles in what is clearly a non-random pattern (00:19:40). Murphy and her father, Cooper, discover that the Poltergeist[18] must be an intelligent being sending them messages by way of gravitational waves (00:20:54). The message is binary code that transmits a set of coordinates leading to an unknown spot on the map. They travel to the location specified by the coordinates and discover that it is the site of a secret NASA base (00:24:32). Upon being escorted inside, they meet Professor Brand, director of the agency and an old friend of Cooper's.

Brand reveals to them that NASA has discovered a wormhole, most likely created by an unknown intelligence for the sake of saving humanity, which could be used to travel enormous distances to uncharted areas of the galaxy and therefore offer humanity a chance of surviving by settling on a new planet.

16 All biblical citations are taken from the King James Version (KJV) unless stated otherwise.

17 Klausner 1926, 199–200.

18 The word *Poltergeist* comes from a combination of the German words *poltern* (to make noise) and *geist* (ghost), and thus can be loosely translated to mean "noisy ghost".

It turns out that NASA volunteers who had been sent on a previous exploratory mission through the wormhole, the "Lazarus" mission,[19] had identified three potential planets for human settlement circling around a super massive black hole named "Gargantua". Those planets are "Miller", "Edmund", and "Mann", named after the three astronauts who had scouted them. Brand, believing that it is too late to save the Earth, lets Cooper in on his vision of how the "end of the world" will unfold (00:29:17); that prospect is the reason why NASA has been secretly planning to build a ship to allow humanity to escape the dying planet and start anew somewhere else. Brand then recruits Cooper to pilot the "Endurance" spaceship, which will venture through the wormhole to confirm the scant data transmitted back by the astronauts of the Lazarus mission (00:29:52).

Brand presents two alternative outcomes of the Endurance mission – Plan A involves the return of the Endurance with the necessary information to decide which planet if any is suitable for human settlement, followed by a mass exodus through the wormhole using giant space stations. If, however, the Endurance cannot make it back to Earth, or the exodus plan cannot be executed for any reason, Plan B will go into effect. Plan B involves the Endurance crew resettling whichever planet they find suitable for human life with the 5,000 frozen embryos carried aboard the ship (00:33:45). This plan implies that humanity will start over on one of the planets on the other side of the wormhole in case there is no way to save the people living on the planet today. The two alternatives bear more than a passing resemblance to the biblical story of the flood and Noah's ark, even thoughith the biblical flood framed as punishment for the moral degradation of human society. Noah is chosen to ensure the continuation of life upon the Earth after the flood:

> And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth […] And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis 6:5–8)

The film mentions three missions undertaken with the aim of saving humanity. The first, the "Lazarus" mission, whose volunteers were the first explorers sent by NASA through the wormhole is reminiscent of the biblical tale of the spies – the

19 The name given to the mission attests to the presiding sentiment about Earth's impending fate and the chances of coming back from it. In the Christian tradition, Lazarus was a man Jesus raised from the dead: "And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:43–44).

scouts sent out to inspect the terrain. In the tale of the spies, God commands Moses to send 12 people from the desert of Paran to Canaan:

> that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them (Numbers 13:1) […] And see the land, what it is, and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds; and what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein, or not […] and bring of the fruit of the land. (Numbers 13:2, 18–20)

The men of the biblical mission, the spies, came back 40 days later, bringing with them the fruit of the land as well as news that the land was good but that the Canaanite cities were well fortified and the people that dwelt within it were strong and plentiful. And even though Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun argued vehemently that the children of Israel could inherit the land, all the others opposed them, saying that it is "a land that eateth up the inhabitants hereof" (Numbers 13:32). In the end, the spies and their whole generation, the desert generation, are punished for their lack of faith by never being allowed to enter the promised land – with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, who do enter it and are even granted domains within it.

In the film, the Endurance crew, which consists of Cooper the pilot, Brand's daughter Amelia, Romilly the physicist, Doyle the geographer, and two artificially intelligent robots named TARS and CASE, embark on the second mission, in effect the "Noah's ark" mission since it carries the frozen embryos that will replenish the human race, following that of the "spies" who had sent back information about each planet. The Endurance passes through the wormhole and heads towards Millers' planet (01:00:15). Soon the crew discovers that the extreme gravitational forces this close to the black hole create a severe time dilation which means that every hour spent on the surface of Millers' is the equivalent of seven years passing on Earth.[20] Cooper, Amelia, Doyle, and CASE go down to the surface of the planet only to discover that it is uninhabitable since it is covered in its entirety by a shallow ocean traversed frequently by giant waves – another consequence of the black hole's gravitational influence. While Amelia is trying to recover the data collected by Miller, a wave hits the crew, killing Doyle and delaying their departure from the

20 The time dilation described in the film, which accounts for the differences between the passage of time on the spaceship and on the planet's surface, is in accordance with Einstein's theory of relativity. See Thorne 2014, 45.

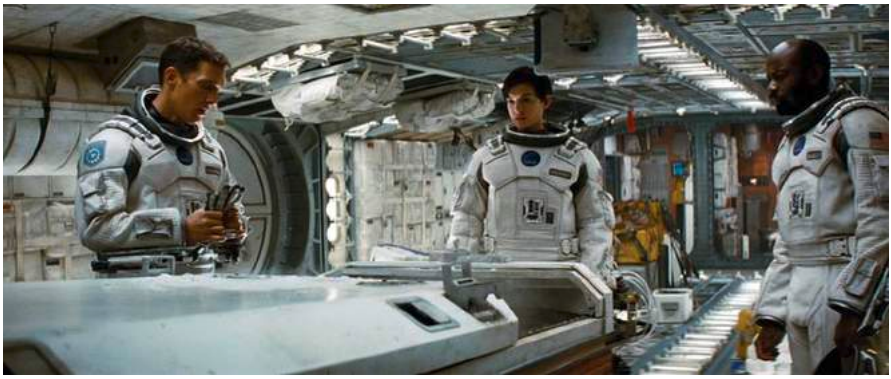

Fig. 3: Doctor Mann in his cryo-chamber, Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 01:36:24.

planet. By the time they get back to the Endurance they discover that 23 years have passed since they left the ship on their reconnaissance mission to Miller (01:17:40). The ship's fuel is running out and they must now decide which of the two planets they should continue on to, based on the data sent back by the "spies".

Amelia suggests traveling to Edmunds' planet, where the data seems more promising, whereas Cooper and Romilly prefer Manns' planet because it is still transmitting, unlike Edmunds, whose signal fell silent years earlier (01:25:50). The crew chooses to go to Mann. The Endurance goes into orbit around the planet and the crew takes a lander pod down to the planet, where they expect to find Doctor Mann, one of the original "spies", in suspended animation (01:35:30) (see fig. 3).

Upon entering the planet's atmosphere, they discover a world of ice covered in ammonia gas that does not seem fit for human inhabitance. They find and wake up Doctor Mann, who confirms that the planet's surface, under the ice, is suitable for human settlement (01:39:29). However, he also reveals to the crew that there was never a Plan A to save humanity to begin with – Brand made it all up as a cover story in order to motivate Cooper to undertake the mission (01:42:06).

Meanwhile, the film also follows Murphy, now an adult and a NASA scientist back on Earth, who is trying to solve a physics problem that has plagued Professor Brand for years: how the giant space station built by NASA could lift off into space without launchers, since the enormous size of the station would not allow for them. On his deathbed, Brand reveals to Murphy that he had almost solved the problem years ago, and that the final feat is not possible without additional information that can only come from the singularity of the black hole – information that cannot be obtained (01:32:30). Having concluded that humanity would not be able to escape the dying Earth, Brand put his faith in Plan B, a fact he did not share with Cooper when he asked him to join the mission as a pilot of the Endurance.

As it turns out, Mann too had given false information about the planet he had been sent to explore, just like the "spies" in the biblical story: there is no surface under the ice; the planet is uninhabitable. Mann attempts to kill Cooper (01:51:57), but Cooper manages to call for help and is rescued (01:57:35). Mann then tries to take over the ship and burns up with it. He is thus punished and will not get to enter the promised land despite the long and arduous journey he made for humanity: "Yet thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither unto the land which I give the children of Israel" (Deuteronomy 32:52).

The movie ends with a futuristic version of Noah's ark – the third one – finally saving humanity. Cooper returns from the place where he was trapped (the tesseract – to which we will return) and discovers that he is in an artificial structure in space – a habitat named "Cooper" that is orbiting Saturn. The habitat is actually named after his daughter, Murphy Cooper, who had finally managed to solve the gravitational propulsion problem and save humanity by building it a Noah's ark. Cooper reunites with Murph, now an elderly woman on her deathbed, surrounded by family (her children and grandchildren). She encourages her father to go and find Amelia, who has already begun the mission of settling Edmunds' planet. Murph stayed behind to wait for her father, believing that he would be back. Cooper then goes back to the planet where he had left Amelia with the embryos that will save humanity (02:42:05).

The Present and the Ability to Influence the Future

With little fuel left after the accident, Cooper and Amelia plan to use the black hole Gargantua as a gravitational slingshot to project them in the direction of planet Edmunds. Once they have gathered enough speed in orbit around the black hole, Cooper and TARS manually operate the engines of the two landing pods to push the Endurance out of the black hole's gravitational pull. Having completed that task, Cooper and TARS detach themselves from the Endurance (02:17:18) and are sucked into the black hole, where they find themselves in the tesseract structure.[21] (See fig. 4).

In this structure, time appears as a physical dimension. Cooper is trapped in the four-dimensional cube, but soon enough realizes that the tesseract is in fact constructed of an infinite number of versions of his daughter's childhood room (02:21:50). Through the bookcase, he can see her at different points in time, at different ages – as a child and as an adult – and he tries to communicate with her by pushing books out of the shelves to spell out "Stay" in Morse code (02:23:55). He sees himself in the past telling Murph that he is about to go on the Endurance mis-

21 A tesseract is a hypercube, or a cube in four-dimensional space.

Fig. 4: Cooper inside the tesseract, Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 02:27:14.

sion and realizes that she was trying to make him stay because the Poltergeist had told her to do so. As an adult, Murphy looks at all the sketches in her notebook, the signs she had written down, and understands that her father was the "spirit" speaking to her through the bookcase all along. Using gravitational waves, Cooper transmits the information TARS has collected from the black hole to the older Murphy. Using this information, Murphy is then able to complete Professor Brand's equation, enabling the evacuation of the earth and the saving of humanity.

Cooper in turn realizes not only that the Poltergeist is himself talking to his daughter from a future time, but also that the extraterrestrial beings who opened up the wormhole must be human beings from the future and that they must also have created the tesseract to enable him to communicate with Murphy in order to give her the information required to save humanity. TARS says to Cooper: "They saved us" (02:27:00). "Who the hell is they? And just why do they want to help us?", Cooper asks in response. The robot does not know exactly but claims that they constructed this three-dimensional space inside their five-dimensional reality expressly so that Cooper could understand the information and send the message back to his daughter, who has been "chosen" to save humanity. Gravity, the robot claims, can cross dimensions, including the dimension of time, but they must find the exact moment to transmit the data to Murph, when she is old enough to understand it, which they finally do with the aid of the watch Cooper gave her before he left Earth.

The idea that man can change the future or influence the future is at the basis of monotheistic faith. The film presents a conception of time that is complex and non-linear, whereas biblical time is linear. In the Bible, time is external to us; it follows a direct course towards the final event, the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.[22] Nevertheless, biblical time is non-deterministic. The prophets as-

22 Leibowitz 2002.

sure us that we have a decisive influence on this outcome and that it is not a future set in stone: "For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings […] then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever" (Jeremiah 7:5, 7). Man in the Bible exists within time; at any moment they may be tested to see whether they succeed or fail in fulfilling the will of God,[23] and the actions of humankind in the present, according to the Bible, will affect the unknown future. This view contains no element of deterministic fate, for there is the possibility of influencing the future through present behavior. In the ancient world, the future is determined by necessity and fate, and humankind has no sway over it whatsoever. The idea that our actions in the present day can affect the future, first presented in the Bible, was revolutionary in the ancient world. The film, while proposing a different, more complex conception of time, remains basically faithful to the biblical notion that actions taken in the present have an effect on the future.

The Mission and the "Chosen" One

At the beginning of the film, when Professor Brand is trying to convince Cooper to accept the commission and embark on a risky journey with an unknown outcome in an attempt to save humanity, the professor tells Cooper: "Something sent you here. They chose you" (00:30:58). Cooper therefore presents the mission to his family as something he must accept. That kind of commitment requires devotion and faith, and only at the end of the film do we understand that Cooper was chosen to help the one truly "chosen" to save humanity – his daughter, Murph (02:29:50) (see fig. 5).

"They" chose her when she was still a child, just as the prophet Jeremiah was chosen before he was even born: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). In talking to TARS, Cooper realizes that "they" have access to time but that "they" need him in order to find the exact right moment in time to transfer the information TARS collected from the black hole. When asked by TARS how he could get the message across, Cooper replies: "Love, TARS […] it's the key" (02:30:30). Just like her father, Murph too has faith and love. She believes her father will come back to save humanity, which is what allows her to receive the message (02:32:15). She carefully writes down the movements of the watch hand (02:32:32), translates the Morse code and finally yells "Eureka!" (02:33:05). Once the solution is found "they" start to collapse the tesseract, a structure created specifically for Cooper.

23 Rauch 1978, 10–11.

Fig. 5: Cooper and Young Murph, father and daughter, Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 00:06:18.

A sense of mission and of being chosen for a mission is felt in the movie by Cooper, Amelia, and Murph. That sense of mission is a motif that appears countless times in the foundational texts of the Judeo-Christian narrative. Research into sanctification for prophecy in the Bible presents a clear literary model of an almost fixed sequence of events.[24] Even though every sanctification story has its own specificities, it almost always begins with God surprising the chosen one by unexpectedly revealing God's self to that person in one way or another. Many prophets hear "voices" of instruction, the most famous of which is the voice heard by Moses coming from a burning bush:

> Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro […] and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed […] And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush. (Exodus 3:1–2, 4)

Analogously, in the film Murph receives signs and messages from the bookcase, which appears to be "talking" to her. Another step in the process of sanctification is the stage at which some prophets express opposition to their appointment – the prophets recoil from the task they are chosen for and are reluctant to accept it. So it is with Jeremiah, who says: "Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child" (Jeremiah 1:6). An exception to this rule is Isaiah, who in his prophetic vision volunteers to accept the mission of prophecy willingly: "Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8). Murph, however, like most prophets chosen by God, is opposed to the

24 Simon 1997, 57–82.

mission her father is charged with and resents him for accepting it for a long time, even into adulthood.

The prophet is then delivered from their reluctance by words of encouragement from God. "Certainly I will be with thee", says God to Moses as he is being sanctified (Exodus 3:12). To Ezekiel, God says: "Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house" (Ezekiel 3:8–9). In the film, Cooper encourages Murphy through the veil of time (02:30:30), and she does indeed manage to decipher the signs. There are also signs and tokens that herald the prophet's ascension into their role, such as God touching Jeremiah's mouth: "Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). Upon being sanctified, Moses is given special signs to convince his people of his prophetic status, such as turning his staff into a snake: "And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent" (Exodus 4:3). In the film, with Professor Brand's death all the signs point to Murph being finally ready to assume her role as the chosen one, such as her understanding that Brand had made up Plan A as a cover story and that she alone can now save humanity. Finally, there is an emphasis placed on the significance of the prophet's mission. Jeremiah describes his role according to the word of God: "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant"(Jeremiah 1:10). Murph's mission is to become a scientist and to save the world and humanity.

The sense of mission has to do with faith and the desire to influence the future, even though most of the time it involves a journey whose is outcome is unknown. This conception is expressed in God's speech to Abraham when he charges him with his mission: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great" (Genesis 12:1–2). Similarly, Moses's mission carries with it an expectation of future success. In a non-static world, it is possible to change the course of events and disrupt the existing human order. The twelve apostles, Jesus's disciples, were charged after his death with the mission of spreading Jesus's word far and wide. All of the apostles, with the exception of John son of Zebedee, died unnatural deaths in fulfilling their mission. The twelve are in fact directly chosen by Jesus from among all the disciples to carry out this mission, as described in the Gospel of Luke: "And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles" (6:13).

The narrative of the chosen one is not found only in religious Judeo-Christian texts. Socrates too was charged with a mission by a God (Apollo), a mission communicated

to his friend Chaerephon by the Oracle of Delphi: his mission (should he choose to accept it) is to "awaken" the denizens of his city, Athens. Socrates tried to resist this fate, at least that is what he claimed in his defense at his trial, as described by Plato: "For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god […] something divine and spiritual comes to me […] I have had this from my childhood; it is a sort of voice that comes to me and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing."[25]

In the biblical text, God is the one who chooses the prophets for humanity and for the people of Israel. In the film, those who choose Cooper and his daughter Murph are called "they". Not unlike the biblical idea of "I am that I am", we do not really ever know who "they" are, but we imagine "them" as beings with superior intelligence and therefore super-human powers. "They" have the ability to control nature and open up an artificial wormhole in the universe, as well as to somehow generate the structure of the four-dimensional tesseract, an ability similar to divine creation. "They" are likened to God as described in the Bible – a superior being that is outside nature, a creator who is able to create and control nature at will. God can stop the celestial bodies in their tracks: "He said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon" (Joshua 10:12). He can stop the seas from overflowing: "will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it" (Jeremiah 5:22). "Their" divine ability to create is matched by "their" ability to "see" the future and take steps to prepare the ground for humanity's salvation, all qualities that equally apply to the God of the Old Testament. "They" have the ability to "search the heart [and] try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways" in order to choose the right apostles for their mission (Jeremiah 17:10). "They" recognize Murph's potential and choose her when she is still a child, just as God chooses many of his prophets long before their mission can begin.

Conclusion

Interstellar is generally thought of as a film that visually demonstrate a number of scientific quandaries, and it is so successful at doing so that certain physicists even recommend it to students as a supplement to course materials, noting, for example, "Christopher Nolan's science fiction movie Interstellar offers a variety of opportunities for students in elementary courses on general relativity theory."[26]

25 Plato 2005, 109–115.

26 Oliver/Tunzelmann/Franklin/Thorne 2015, 486.

However, alongside its evident focus on scientific solutions aimed at saving humanity in the face of an impending catastrophe, we also find a significant number of religious motifs, chief among them the apocalyptic narrative of the End of the World and the salvation of humanity. This narrative, rooted in religion, dominates Western culture and provides inspiration for art, literature, and cinema, especially in the genre of science fiction, but it is also of interest to scientists and researchers in various fields. Bertrand Russell lamented that we cannot preserve life and that all the majesty of humanity is destined to be extinguished with the death of the solar system.[27] Although religion and science are fundamentally different, it is possible for the rational, the mathematical, and the observational to encounter the emotionally powerful myths that provide an explanation for the impenetrable and the mysterious in cases where the attempt to understand scientific data is based on patterns derived from religious worldviews.

Human thought proceeds according to patterns that we have grown into, but because they are often invisible to us, we are unaware of them. Our attempts to understand the physical world around us may be made in keeping with patterns that we have absorbed through our culture. Western culture has assimilated many of the religious thought patterns that characterize the Judeo-Christian narrative and that manifest themselves in numerous cultural productions, among them the film at the center of our discussion.

In our analysis of the film we have discerned four major biblical motifs: apocalyptical time and the End of Days, the story of the spies and Noah's ark, present time and the ability to influence the future, and being chosen to fulfill a mission. There are other religious motifs alluded to in the film which we have not discussed here, such as the name given to the "Lazarus" mission – a clear allusion to the Lazarus story in the Christian tradition, found at John 11:39–44 – and the fact that the mission is composed of twelve volunteers, reminiscent of the twelve apostles of Jesus. We might also mention that Murph is first presented to us as a 10-year-old child, and since the climactic scene in the tesseract takes place 23 years later, we can surmise that she is 33 when she saves the world, Jesus' age when he was crucified. Finally, and most significantly, we cannot ignore the fact that in the end it is love that triumphs over space and time. As Paul puts it in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing […] Love […] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (13:2, 7–8 NKJV).

27 Kaku 1994, 302.

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Open Section

Kerry P. C. San Chirico

Dharma and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema

From Nehru through Modi

Abstract

This essay examines common representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema within the context of dominant post-Independence Indian religious and political ideologies – from a religiously pluralist secular socialist framework to a Hindu nationalist late-capitalist orientation. Since the 1990s, Hindi popular film, the Hindi *sāmājik*, or social, has been understood to be a legitimate conveyor of middle-class Indian values worthy of critical interpretation. This essay thus begins by examining how that legitimacy occurred and how the "Bollywood" film simultaneously became legitimate in the eyes of the Indian public and fit for discursive analysis. Yet long before the heady days of economic liberalization, ascendant Hindu nationalism, and global Indian diaspora, particular notions of Hindu *dharma* (variously if imperfectly translated as "cosmic order", "duty", "law", "religion") undergirded Hindi popular cinema structurally and topically. Having explained this broader *dhārmik*, or religious context, the essay turns to shifting representations of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, by recourse to several popular Hindi films from Indian Independence to the present. Not only do newer films depict troubling representations of the religious Other, but Hindutva ascendance forces us to reexamine past films cognizant of what is to come. Reengagement with earlier films force us to note that ideological inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions have long been manifest on the silver screen, particularly with regard to religious minorities. The essay concludes by arguing that South Asian religio-cultural traditions in all their diversity provide filmmakers with a nearly endless treasury, would that their depths be plumbed. Meanwhile, younger filmmakers are taking Hindi popular cinema in encouraging directions, with newer films reflecting the lives, artistry, and sheer impatience of India's younger generations.

Keywords

Bollywood, Economic Liberalization, Hindutva, Hindi Popular Cinema, Hindi Film, *dharma, dhārmik*

Biography

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DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.5

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This essay examines common representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema within the context of dominant post-Independence Indian religious and political ideologies – that is, from a religiously pluralist secular socialist framework to a Hindu nationalist late-capitalist orientation. Thus, we might identify the historical boundaries of this essay as the time between the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, the year of Indian independence, through that of Narendra Modi, which began in 2014 and continues today. We begin by examining the more recent turn to film as a legitimate conveyor of middle-class Indian values worthy of interpretation, and the coeval shift among Indians from embarrassment to pride in film as the industry followed the liberalizing nation-state onto the global stage. Equipped with this interpretive strategy, we turn to the *dhārmik*, or religious elements *within* the Hindi *sāmājik*, or social film, demonstrating concretely how particular notions of Hindu *dharma* (variously if imperfectly translated as "cosmic order", "duty", "law", "religion") have long undergirded Hindi popular cinema structurally and topically. Finally, and most significantly, we examine representations of religious minorities in Indian popular film against the backdrop of evolving religious and cultural ideologies up to the electoral victory of Prime Minister Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. It is argued that minority representation in popular Indian cinema, like other aspects of Indian public life, can be interpreted as an index of majority concerns about the religious Other. While such representations have never been static, more current depictions present the viewer with a troubling, even ominous picture of the place (or lack thereof) of religious minorities in contemporary Indian society, revealing majoritarian chauvinism and sectarian tensions that call into question the identity of the Indian Republic as a pluralistic secular nation, as well as the easy elisions between Hindu and secular Indian nationalisms. When we now look at past films cognizant of the Hindu nationalist dispensation to come, discontinuity is not the only striking feature. Ideological inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions have long been manifest on the silver

screen, particularly with regard to the religious minorities. The present ascendance of Hindutva (lit.: "Hinduness"), or Hindu nationalism as a national (indeed international) religio-political ideology forces us to reconsider past films and the ideologies embedded therein.

From Meaningless Kitsch to Meaningful Export

Once upon a time, the Indian middle class as well as academic elites in India and abroad relished the denigration of popular Indian film. Branded *masālā* (spicy mixed) kitsch for the unwashed, an escapist spectacular as numbing as any opiate of the people, it was long rejected as either artistically hollow or discursively anemic. Researching in the early 1990s, Steve Derné found it difficult to find even loyal viewers giving films their due. One 29-year-old male explained, "I get nothing out of films. When I have no work, I go sit in the cinema. I spend five rupees and nothing seems good."[1] Still another equated viewing with an addiction: "At first I saw [Hindi] films for entertainment, now it has become a habit (like smoking cigarettes)."[2] There was a certain discomfiture regarding film and a general sense that these films were morally dubious.[3] Embarrassment, not pride, was a popular sentiment.

But changes were afoot. Popular cinema was no longer something to be dismissed – by either intellectuals or the public. Shortly after Derné's filmic ethnography, a change in public opinion finally made itself obvious, first to intellectuals, then among the middle class itself. Vinay Lal and Ashish Nandy attribute the new intellectual interest in popular culture and popular cinema in particular to events beginning in the 1970s, especially to the Emergency, that 21-month period when Indira Gandhi instituted martial law for the purposes of shoring up political power, suspending constitutional law and democratic norms. The press and artists were censored, political foes were jailed, and human rights violations peaked. From this time on it became increasingly difficult to understand the Indian public by means of older ideologies. Theories of secularism and Marxist historicist readings seemed to be of little interpretive assistance. Why, for example, did political parties like the Sikh Akalis, the DMK, and the RSS – all organizations labeled by modern intellectuals as "ethnonationalists", "fundamentalists", and "fascists" – oppose the Emergency so strongly, while Gandhian successors like Vinoba Bhave capitulate with such alac-

1 Derné 1995, 208.

2 Cited in Derné 1995, 208.

3 This was Gandhi's judgment of popular or "social" films. Interestingly, this savvy exploiter of media only viewed one film in his lifetime; Derné 1995, 208.

rity?[4] According to Lal and Nandy, "With many old ideas collapsing and conventional social sciences failing to respond to the changing content of Indian politics, many began to explore the myths and fantasies that seemed to shape public expectations from politics, politicians, and the state."[5]

By the 1980s it had become clearer to Indian and international scholars alike that the media-exposed Indian public was accessible and in fact exploitable through use of religio-cultural symbols and structures in media such as popular cinema.[6] In short, popular culture, and popular film in particular, offered clues for understanding the contemporary public on the verge of a critical time in the country's development – the shift away from socialism in favor of neo-liberal economics and concomitant rise of Hindu nationalism.[7]

By the late 1990s, given earlier nationalist movements, one might have expected Hindu nationalists to favor economic protectionism. Instead, the BJP governments furthered the liberalization agenda first implemented by the Gandhi and Rao Congress Party governments – privatizing many central government corporations, liberalizing trade in accordance with the World Trade Organization, opening the skies to private airlines and the country to overseas investment. It was under the BJP that Bangalore became India's Silicon Valley and Hyderabad became "Hi-Tech City" (thanks also to Andhra's Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu).

Significantly for Indian cinema, under the BJP the Government of India finally granted filmmaking "industry" status, thereby allowing it to receive, among other things, reduced electricity rates and eligibility for bank finance.[8] That the BJP would grant industry status is not too surprising, since, as Tejaswini Ganti notes, "the party's support base is heavily drawn from petty trader's and small businessmen who also comprise the vast distribution, exhibition, and finance apparatus for Hindu filmmaking".[9] Filmmaking's new legitimacy is a significant departure from the norm. For years, the government's treatment of the industry had been paternalistic and puritanical, a medium to be monitored and manipulated. Its tax policy placed filmmaking in the same categories of "vices" like tobacco and alcohol consumption. But with its new respectability in a BJP-dominated India, popular film became an ex-

4 This question is posed by Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

5 Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

6 Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

7 Harish Trivedi partially echoes Lal and Nandy by noting that Hindi cinema only became a respectable field of academic enquiry in the 1990s, especially with the publication of what became the canonical *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, in 1995. He notes that such interest was inspired by the common desire, exemplified by cultural studies, to understand popular and mass cultures. See Trivedi 2006.

8 Ganti 2004, 50.

9 Ganti 2004, 51.

portable cultural product, simultaneously an international money-maker and a disseminator of Indian cultural values and neo-liberal economics around the world. It should come as no surprise that Hindi films have become purveyors of the zeitgeist. Theirs is a hand-in-glove relationship.

By the late 1990s, then, with economic liberalization, globalization, and the consequent advent of satellite television, the middle class had become media-exposed, urban, and striving. Indian cinema was a popular art form reflecting middle-class sensibilities. Ganti notes, "There is in it [Indian cinema] an attempt to capture and keep the past alive, tame the new, and make a virtue out of the transient bonds that the uprooted forge between experience and hope, the past and future."[10] The kitsch produced by middle-class auteurs apparently had something to teach us about the state of India, the Indian state, and the conflicted actors who animate the nation. Nandy explains with his typically insightful panache:

> True, this cinema is also simultaneously a form of kitsch – albeit a powerful, pan-Indian, politically meaningful kitsch – of ideas derived from the dominant ideology of state, categories thrown up by the clash between memories of the encounters between India and the West during the past two hundred years, and the various surviving vernacular constructions of desirable life and society [...] The kitsch is after all meant to entertain and be consumed by people who carry within themselves the contradictory pulls on the one hand, the experience of living with a functioning nation-state desperately trying to modernize itself and join the global political economy and mass culture, and, on the other, the experience of living with the myriad vernacular cultures and traditional lifestyles associated with the civilizational entity called India.[11]

Popular Indian film, including the Hindi variant known since the mid-1990s as the derivatively named "Bollywood", provides the exegete a text of modern middle-class India, exhibiting ideological and sectarian tensions, imaginaries, hopes, and nightmares in the form of *pret*s (ghosts) and Pakistanis. "Midnight's children"[12] – and

10 Ganti 2004, xxv.

11 Ganti 2004.

12 The term "midnight's children" refers to those Indians born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment of Indian independence from the British, and is taken from the 1981 prize-winning novel of the same name by Salman Rushdie. I am using it to refer to the first generation born in the Republic of India. Given these fears, there is particular irony to the popularity of Hindi cinema in Pakistan and within the Pakistani and South Asian diaspora, as audiences are willing to put up with perceived negative portrayals even as the Pakistani government is not. Apparently, Pakistanis are willing to overlook disagreeable Muslim representation in Hindi popular cinema, with enjoyment trumping offense. But a public is one thing, its government still another. In 2019, as a result of the most recent military clashes along the Line of Control and in retaliation for the revocation of the longstanding

now their children – display all these through a medium as bright and seemingly transparent as a Delhi marching band. Yet just as boisterous marching-band kitsch can blind us to the intricacies of the socio-cultural phenomenon itself – note, for example, the colonial vestige of a British marching band, the Bollywood songbook, the musicians and their ragtag dress, and the poor women and adolescents carrying fluorescent torches precariously attached to a moving generator – so too can the glare of the glossy *masālā* film blind us to the things that are. As many now take for granted, the genre has something to teach us.

The final pivot that would make pop Indian film *pakkā* (legitimate) was the growth of India's diaspora. By the mid-1990s, given years of immigration, an Indian diasporic middle class in the tens of millions reached around the globe, from London to New York to Melbourne. Bollywood films had become an important link to *janmabhūmi* (lit: "birthland"), a fact not lost on producers like Yash Chopra, founder of Yash Raj Films (YRF). According to Avtar Panesar, Vice President, International Operations, Yash Raj Films, two films made a huge impact:

> The overseas success of DDLJ and HAHK became the catalyst for international business resurgence and YRF were at the forefront. It was only a natural progression for YRF to control its own destiny. YRF became the first India studio to set up its international distribution arm.[13]

More studios would follow suit. The result? Kucch Kuchh Hota Hai (Something Happens, Karan Johar, IN 1998), Pardes (Foreign Land, Subhash Gai, IN 1997), Kal Ho Naa Ho (Tomorrow May Never Come, Nikhil Advani, IN 2003), and Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna (Never Say Goodbye, Karan Johar, IN 2006) were written with the diasporic audience in mind. So at the same time as Indian middle-class, caste Hindus were feeling no small anxiety about their place in contemporary India, diasporic Indians were struggling with their own demons, especially the ambivalences of identity and belonging in the United Kingdom and North America.[14] As the first generation made

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, a law allowing a degree of autonomy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan banned *all* Indian films. See "It's Pakistan's Loss, Says Bollywood on Films Being Banned Across the Border", in News 18, 8 August, 2019, https://www.news18.com/news/movies/its-pakistans-loss-says-bollywood-on-indian-films-being-banned-across-border-2263587.html [accessed 13 November 2019]. Historically, film bans are a regular practice of the Pakistani government, though past films were banned on an *ad hoc* basis, mostly owing to depictions of Muslims, Islam, and Pakistan.

13 With these common acronyms, Panesar refers to Hum Aapke Hain Kaun? ("Hahk", What Am I to You?, Sooraj Barjatya, IN 1994) and Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge ("DDLJ", The Big Hearted Will Take Away the Bride, Yash Chopra, IN 1995). See Verma 2017.

14 In 2007 a BBC poll found that 38% of all South Asians living in Britain said they "don't feel British", while half believed they were not treated as British by white Britons. "Over a third British Asians

way for the second and third generations in the United States, there was a conscious attempt to maintain a connection to a homeland perceived to be slipping away. Now there were films catering (often pandering) to these longings, all with the support of the Indian central government. Popular films like Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Big-Hearted Will Take Away the Bride, Aditya Chopra, IN 1995) are many things, so we should abstain from facile reductionism, but they are certainly palliatives to both national and diasporic constituencies, alternatively assuring them that Mother India is still essentially Hindu even as their new home is not (a dubious premise), that modernization and Indian-ness are *not* mutually exclusive (more on this shortly), and that Indian family values are indeed superior to those of the Other – that Other variously if mostly negatively construed. The Oscar nomination of Lagaan (Land Tax, Ashutosh Gowariker, IN 2001), in the category of Best Foreign Film, and the showing of Devdas (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, IN 2002) at Cannes conferred legitimacy on both Bollywood and these middle-class yearnings. As Shahrukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai respectively *salām*ed and *namasté*d[15] their way down the red carpet, it might have dawned on segments of these Indian audiences, "Maybe *masālā* is acceptable after all. Maybe so are we."

Can we assume that Hindi popular cinema broadly represents a Hindu public? I believe so. The contention itself rests on dominant and pervasive notions of the Hindu concept of *dharma* in Hindi films, the subject to which we must now turn our attention.

Dharma and the *Dhārmik* in Indian Film: A Necessary Précis

While beginnings are often debated, and searching them out can be a fool's errand, it is significant that the first (and second) Indian features were *dhārmik,* which is to say, religious in nature.[16] The candidates for first include Pundalik (Ramchandra

don't feel British suggests Asian Network poll", in www.bbc.co.uk, 30 July 2007, http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/07_july/30/asian.shtml [accessed 15 November 2019].

15 The typical Islamic greeting or wishing of peace, *salām*, in South Asia consists of moving the open palm roughly from the waist to the brow, whereas Hindus, and religious adherents of other traditions, place both palms together in front of the chest in the *namasté* gesture. Rai and Khan greeted Cannes well-wishers using the gestures of their respective religious traditions.

16 I am using this term *dharma* capaciously to refer to the constellation of meanings connoted by law, moral and ethical code, right action, conformity with the truth of things, and, more common nowadays. as the Hindi equivalent of the English word "religion". *Dhārmik* is the adjectival form of *dharma*. Admittedly, translating *dharma* as religion is problematic, a Western, reductionistic imposition, but one that is largely accepted by modern-day Hindi speakers. I am also placing bhakti, or devotion, broadly under this *dhārmik* rubric, fully cognizant that historically in South Asia, bhakti can both circumvent and reinforce Brahminical worldviews.

Gopal Torne, IN 1912),[17] and Raja Harishchandra (King Harishchandra, Dhundiraj Gopal Phalke, IN 1913). "Whichever of the two films was made first", Rachel Dwyer explains, employing generic categories slightly different from my own,[18] "it is not disputed that the mythological [...] and the devotional are the founding genres of Indian cinema."[19] The *dhārmik* nature of Indian film origins is itself significant, as the *Purāṇas*[20] and epics have framed Indian film narrative since the industry's inception, regardless of particular subgenre. We may variously understand these classical works as "pools of signifiers" through which South Asians interpret their lives, or as Foucault's "founders of discursivity", which can be continuously rewritten, though not necessarily endorsed.[21] Vijay Mishra argues that for Indian cinema the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are crucial cultural "intertexts" or "precursor texts".[22] Scriptwriter Anjum Rajabali described – *sans* philosophical jargon – the genesis of the epic political drama Raajneeti (Politics, Prakash Jha, IN 2010):

> Hey, Prakash Jha and I weren't even thinking of the Mahabharat when we began conceptualizing *Raajneeti*. It was like "here's this man who wants to join politics, and here's the man he sees as his rival ... and voila!" The story came to take the same course of the Mahabharat. This shows that the stories have stood the test of time. No matter what the actual content has been, they point to how a person behaves in the face of a dilemma.[23]

17 Pundalik is the name of the famed saint of the Varkari sect said to have brought the god Vithoba to Pandharpur in the modern Indian state of Maharashtra.

18 Rachel Dwyer differentiates between mythological and devotional film genres, arguing that the difference lies in the relationship of the gods to the human realm. She argues that in the mythological genre there remains an impenetrable distance between divine and human, whereas in the devotional genre the deity is more approachable since the stories generally involve *sants* and *bhaktas* (saints and devotees) and the intervention of the deity in human affairs. Nevertheless, in Hindu "mythology", an exogenous term, there is indeed devotion shown between deities. For example, one immediately thinks of Hanuman's paradigmatic devotion to Rama, which in turn serves as models of *bhakti* for adherents. While this differentiation makes sense in terms of Western categories, where the real difference turns on modern Western notions of history and the historical, such classification does not make as much sense on Indian soil. A more indigenously appropriate designation is the *dhārmik* genre. For a discussion of generic categories, see Dwyer 2006, 1–11.

19 Dwyer 2006, 63.

20 *Purāṇa*, in Sanskrit, literally "old", "ancient", or "ancient story"; it is a literary genre found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, generally consisting of five topics: the creation of the cosmos, the dissolution of the cosmos, the world ages, the genealogies of the gods, and the history of kings. There are some eighteen Hindu *Purāṇa*s, whose treasury advanced (and reflects) the development of various sects and popular Hinduism.

21 Mishra 2002, 3.

22 The *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyaṇa* constitute the epics of South and Southeast Asia, which for ages have existed in oral-aural, textual, and performative modalities. Traditionally they are placed in the category of *itihās*, literally "thus occurred" or conventionally "history".

23 Chandra 2010, 4.

The popular or "social" (*sāmājik*), as it has been called, has always borne the marks of *dharma* either in content or form. Much like the *Ramāyaṇa*, popular films operate on a continuum of *dharma-adharma-dharma.*[24] A film begins with the initial *dhārmik* state of nature, perhaps the Indian pastoral, followed by the moment of crisis (*adharma*), then concludes leaving no one fearing *dharma*'s ultimate degradation. Though the story may allow for some degree of innovation, questioning, and critique, *dharma* tends to obtain. According to Mishra,

> The flexibility of the genre makes for a notion of dharma to be transgressed in a regular manner, as irruptions in the text, as presentiments of alternative (and even superior) critiques, rather than as the construction of a radically new world order. Suggestively, Bombay Cinema interprets to the point of change but never changes the ethical order itself.[25]

Film critic Shubra Gupta refers to this *dhārmik* structure when, in the context of considering the film Johnny Gaddaar (Sriram Raghavan, IN 2007), she writes:

> The "greed is good" principle is still quite alien to Bollywood, though we've has a series of con men (and a few women). But an avaricious stockbroker (as pictured in the Hollywood *Wall Street*) will never be the central character in a Hindi film, because we are still not happy seeing amoral characters in the lead. Immorality is still all right, because we know an outright bad guy will get his just deserts in the end; but amorality, with its ambiguous outlines, is hard for us to handle. We like our movies to have emotional and moral payoffs. Anything else makes us uncomfortable.[26]

This "discomfort" relates to the implicit challenge to a moral universe, like a musical chord that is never fulfilled; it leaves one uneasy, even repulsed.

Brahmanical Hindu conceptions of *dharma* are thus foundational, immanent, and invasive. As such, there seem to be real ideological controls at work in Indian popular cinema, a fact to which we shall return.[27] We must pause here only to note two

24 This continuum signifies the depicted movement from social and moral equilibrium to unrighteousness and disequilibrium and finally to social and moral equilibrium that is part of the narrative arc of the story.

25 Mishra 2002, 14.

26 Gupta 2017, 195.

27 This is one reason why the semantic content of much Indian cinema moves along fairly traditional lines, even those films considered radical. Transgression is itself always circumscribed by that which it is transgressing. The presence of boundaries need not be understood negatively, as it has been since the Western Romantic period. Traditionally (in both the East and the West) constraints – a.k.a. that required by any "discipline" – have been understood as central to the creative project. Hence,

significant dimensions of *dharma*, the ontological and the normative. With regard to the ontological dimension, *dharma* is understood to structure the cosmos, Barbara Holdrege writes,

> in an intricate network of symbiotic relations among interdependent parts, in which each part is in its proper place and ensures that every aspect of the cosmic system is properly balanced and coordinated with every other aspect and thus contributes the maximum to its own evolution and to the evolution of the whole system.[28]

This ontological dimension undergirds the normative dimension, in which, she notes, "the cosmic ordering principle finds expression on the human plane in the ritual, social, and moral orders, particularly as represented in the Brahmanical system of socio-cultural norms".[29] For a human (other animals have their own *dharma*s), one's *dharma* is to live commensurately with one's inherent nature given one's birth and social status. *Dharma* is elaborated still further: *varṇāśrama dharma* is the traditional Brahmanical social order constituted by class and stage of life and by duties and obligations attached thereto. Meanwhile, each person has his own duty, his *svādharma.* Finally, women follow obligations commensurate with their sex – that is, *strī dharma* (literally, "woman's dharma").

With notions of *dharma* undergirding Indian filmic ideology, and the epics and the *Purāṇas* providing much narrative content and form, *dhārmik* film continued in popularity throughout the silent-film period and into the talkie period, which began in 1931. The height of explicitly *dhārmik* films was the 1930s to the 1950s, when deities, *sant*s, and *bhaktas*[30] were enshrined in the new medium. Narratives strayed little from those handed down by the epics, various religious sects, and folk traditions. In the subsequent years, *dhārmik* films continued, but were generally considered "B movies". A milestone occurred in the 1980s, however, with the production of the epics for television, first RAMAYAN (Ramananda Sagar, IN 1987–88), then the MAHABHARAT (Ravi Chopra, IN 1988–90). Unsurprisingly, the producers and directors are both film industry veterans. The Hindi serials boasted a multi-religious weekly viewership of

the endless fecundity of the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyaṇa* through the ages in performative, devotional, textual, and now filmic modalities.

28 Holdrege 2004, 213–214.

29 Holdrege 2004, 214.

30 The words *bhakta* and *sant* deserve some elaboration. *Bhakta* is typically used to describe those religious figures who were devotees of an embodied deity; *sant* is a word related to the Sanskrit *sat* (truth), used to refer to Maharashtrian non-sectarian poet-saints from the 14th century onwards and those North Indian luminaries of the late medieval period who worshipped a deity beyond or without attributes in the vernacular, while eschewing Brahminical orthodoxy. However, the words are often used interchangeably.

more than 100 million, further evidence of both the discursive role of the epics in India and the power of the television medium and the Indian film industry undergirding it.[31]

There are *dhārmik* films and there is always *dharma* in film. In the 1940s the aforementioned *sāmājik*, or social omnibus genre largely subsumed *dhārmik* and stunt films to become the dominant subgenre. This is what we now know as "the Bollywood film", and rare is the Bollywood film bearing no marks of religion, whether that includes direct references to or depictions of religious beliefs and practices or indirect expressions of religious beliefs and moral systems.[32] Reincarnation (Hindi: *punarjanam*),[33] Hindu mythological themes, worship rituals, popular festivals, characters and characterizations from the epics[34] and devotional tropes are common in Bollywood cinema. For example, *darśan*, the act of seeing and being seen by a deity across Hindu traditions (and those influenced by them), is implicit in the viewer's encounter with the silver screen. All this is to say that while the genre is never referred to as the "Hindu social", a Hindu worldview is in fact presented. As India's dominant religious tradition or traditions, the social *as* Hindu is so pervasive as to be largely unnoticed. Dwyer is therefore right to assert that "Hinduism is the invisible norm, the standard default position."[35] And this is a fact often lost on all but those with other religious commitments. Interestingly, the types of Hinduism presented have changed, reflecting contemporary religious and ideological motifs.

The Religious Other, Then and Now

The so-called religious Other or religious minority constitutes no less than 300 million Indian non-Hindus. Minority religious representation has never been static since India's independence in 1947, but some generalities can be made. First, it is a rare Hindi

31 The scope of this essay does not allow for greater explication of the phenomena that were the television serials Ramayan and Mahabharat. This is done with analytical rigor and insight in such books as Richman 2001 and Mankekar 1999.

32 Dwyer 2006, 139.

33 In Karan Arjun (Rakesh Roshan, IN 1995) obviously draws on the relationship of Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, while also evoking the loyal relationship of the brothers Rama and Lakshman of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the same film the trope of reincarnation (*punarjanam*) is employed as a way for *dharma* to prevail, even as an episode of *adharma* (in this case the killing of the two brothers for the sake of inheritance) took the lives of the two protagonists. The virtuous brothers are immediately reborn, reunited, and later take revenge on their killer and defend the honor of their first mother; *dharma* has been reinstated.

34 The *Bhagavad Gītā*, or "Song of the Lord", consists of a conversation between the God Krishna, here serving as Arjuna's charioteer, and Arjuna the warrior, who laments the pending internecine battle on the fields of Kurukṣetra. It is in this context that Lord Krishna explains the nature of *dharma* and devotion, ultimately revealing his divine, cosmic form to Arjuna. Karan Arjun (1995) draws on the connection between these two figures to demonstrate their significant, death-defying relationship.

35 Dwyer 2006, 136.

Fig. 1: Emblems of the Nehruvian secular ideal. Three brothers save their mother, unwittingly. Film still, Amar, Akbar, Anthony (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977), 00:26:01.

film in which the protagonist is Muslim, Christian, Sikh, or Parsi. Second, when religious minorities are portrayed, they appear as sidekicks, or as necessary contributors for the authenticating pluralist mise-en-scène, or as poster children for Indian's sense of itself as a tolerant multi-religious nation. Finally, when minorities occupy pride of place, they do so in unthreatening period pieces or within designated niche communities.[36]

Of the 300 million non-Hindus in India, some two-thirds are Muslim. There was a time when Muslim actors felt it necessary to change their names to more generically Hindu-sounding ones. For example, two of the stars of Mughal-E-Azam (The Great Mughal, K. Asif, IN 1960), Dilip Kumar and Madhubala, began their lives as Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Mumtaz Jehan Dehlava, respectively. Other examples abound. Name changes can be made to mean too much, but they do signal dominant perceptions about what the Indian viewing public is thought to desire or require. They also demonstrate normative Hindu influences on the Indian public.

Beyond these broad representational generalizations, however, we can say that as national ideologies have changed, so too have minority depictions, moving from a type of secular pluralism known in Hindi as *dharma nirpekś*, usually translated "sec-

36 See, for example, the famous Mughal-E-Azam (The Great Mughal, K. Asif, IN 1960). Yes, Muslims once ruled this land, but that is now, safely, a thing of the past and thus fit for romanticization.

ularism", to *Hindutva*, which understands India as innately and essentially Hindu and Hindus as deserving the prerogatives of their dominance.

To my mind, there is no better reflection of the secular, pluralist Indian ideology in film than that of Amar, Akbar, Anthony (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977). It is the story of the disintegration and reunification of an Indian family. Three Hindu brothers are separated in childhood and brought together in adulthood to save their long-lost mother. Significantly, each is raised in a different religion. Amar, the *dhārmik* exemplar, is raised Hindu and is, tellingly, a policeman; Akbar, the carefree tailor and Qawwali singer, is a boyish, non-threatening Muslim; and Anthony Gonsalves, the irresistible smalltime thief with a heart of gold, is raised by a Catholic priest. As it happens, their mother is named Bhāratī: the female form of *Bhārat*, that is, "India". Bereft and hopeless, she attempts suicide. In a twist of fate, all are reunited in a hospital room to save the life of a mother they did not recognize, who through injustice had become a stranger to her own children. It was the mid-1970s after all, and these were suicidal times. The idealistic dreams of independent India seemed to be fading some 30 years after its "tryst with destiny" beginning. Nehru was dead and his daughter Indira had declared the Emergency. Yes, the trains now ran on time, but at the cost of constitutional civil rights threatening to jeopardize the world's largest democracy. Meanwhile, Pakistan, India's shadow Other, likewise founded in 1947 out of British India, was falling into disarray. A military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq would follow just months after the end of Indira's Emergency.

In Amar, Akbar, Anthony, in a scene deliberately lacking all subtlety, the three titular protagonists offer a blood transfusion to save a blind woman they have not yet recognized as their own mother – she is no one less than Mother India (fig. 1). Like the three famed north Indian rivers forming a *saṅgam*, or confluence, at Allahabad to vivify the north Indian plains, so the sons' intravenous lines commingle in the person of their blind, comatose *Mā*. In case anyone misses the singular point, this scene is placed in the film's belated introduction – including the title card in the three scripts of Hindi, Urdu, and English. As the three men lie in three hospital beds, and as their blood flows into a middle-aged woman lying perpendicularly to them, Mohammad Rafi croons the moral, much like a Greek chorus:

Mā sirf nāta nahin yeh kuch aur bhī hai.
(A mother is not just a relationship, but something more.)
Mā se bichad ke bhī yeh tūt jātā nahin.
(Though you wander, the mother's bond isn't broken.)
Yeh sach hai koi kahānī nahin.
(This is true, not just some story.)
Khūn khūn hotā hai pānī nahin.
(It is *blood*, not water.)

One final tidbit about the plot and nationalistic symbolism bears mentioning: the characters Amar, Akbar, and Anthony were separated from each other as children (and thus *united* with their new adoptive families) on August 15, that is, Indian Independence Day.

Much has been written about this film.[37] For the purpose of this essay, it is significant that each protagonist represents a kind of ideal type. Each is likeable and somehow necessary for the country in his own way *as* Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. The message is clear: without their life-blood (that unique signifier of human and national identity), Mother India will die. Amar, Akbar, Anthony presents a religiously harmonious ideal in 1970s India. It is an attempt to summon viewers out of amnesia, to remind a country of a pluralist secular India whose cords appeared to be fraying. It is as if to say, "Underneath all our external differences flows the same Indian blood."

There was a time, prior to that heady decade of the 1990s, when we could leave it at that. The rise of Hindu nationalism and two electoral victories for the BJP, however, require some re-engagement. Then this scene reveals problems and contradictions of Indian secularism that have long been present if held at bay. I am speaking of the common elision or interchangeability of Indian with Hindu identity. So, we note that even with this particular secular vision of Amar, Akbar, Anthony, what is shared is in fact "Hindu blood", since the boys were born to a Hindu family prior to its heartbreaking disintegration. This follows a common historiography in which religions born outside of India (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam) are treated as foreign species, mere implants in a common Hindu soil. The implication is that adherents of these traditions are denuded Hindus, even as their "blood" or genetic structure is South Asian. Lost in this representation is that "Hindu" as a singular religious identity is a growth of the ages, originally a geographical signifier used by Persians then Greeks then Muslim Central Asians to cover a multitude of religious beliefs and practices, and congealing as a singular religious identity in relation first to Islam and later to Christianity.[38] The words Hindu and Hinduism, by extension, collapse the panoply of sectarian differences existing under these abstract socio-religious signifiers. This Indian=Hindu elision is a common one, proffered (often) unwittingly by secular nationalists and explicitly by Hindu nationalists. And, it is undeniably true that Hindu traditions form the dominant religio-cultural matrix on which religious minorities dwell in India, as I hope the preceding discussion of *dharma* and some if its attendant characteristics reveals. Yet to equate Indian with Hindu and vice versa is to overlook the degree of pluralism so characteristic of South Asia, where "religious"

37 See Elison/Novetske/Rotman 2016.

38 See San Chirico 2021.

identities are but one of many identities. And yet, in the wake of Islamic and British Christian empires, when dominant religious identities were congealing around religious identity monolithically defined, majoritarian concerns and their required Others were developing.

Thus, Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, the intellectual architect of Hindu nationalism, and Pandit Nehru, advocate of what is often deemed Indian secular nationalism, stand in agreement, for both nationalisms tend to essentialize India as Hindu. As we can now see, Nehru's pluralist secular nationalism was fragile, its latent fissures ripe for exploitation, its conflations and elisions often lost on elites but evident to either those who did not share the vision or those whose place in India was more tenuous. Such tenuousness was made particularly evident by the end of the 20th century, when Indian life was itself changing rapidly, with the crosscurrents of economic liberalization, unmet material expectations beamed into new cable televisions, and ascendant Hindu and Islamist nationalisms. The times were changing quickly and so too were depictions of the religious Other.

We may thus characterize Muslim representation in two ways, reflecting an evolution of dominant national and subnational ideologies from Independence through the 1980s, and then from the 1990s until 2010s: the male Muslim is either the innocuous and dutiful sidekick or, more recently, the dangerous Other, a terrorist with links to Pakistan and Kashmir or, if the film is set in the West, an Islamist with links to ISIS or al-Qaida. Note the negative portrayals of Indian Muslims as disguised Pakistanis, the veiled presence threatening to destroy India from the inside out. This shift in filmic representation is marked by films like Roja (Rose, Mani Ratnam, IN 1992) and continues with Dil Se (From the Heart, Mani Ratnam, IN 1998), Main Hoon Na (I am Here, Farah Khan, IN 2004), Fanaa (Destroyed in Love, Kunal Kohli, IN 2006), Deevaar (The Wall, Milan Luthria, IN 2004), and Kurbaan (Sacrifice, Rensil D'Silva, IN 2009), to bring us well into the new century.[39]

Ironies always attend Manichaean worldviews. Some 25 percent of native Hindi speakers are Muslims, yet their depiction in Indian films – though *not* their overall industry participation – is severely skewed. More ironic is that over the last quarter century, Bollywood's leading male actors have been the Muslims Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan. Heroes of the box office with a global fan base, they sporadically face accusations of "anti-nationalism", a code word generally leveled against Indian Muslims. In 2015, after Shahrukh Khan gave an interview criticizing

39 The multiple Bombay train blasts of July 11, 2006 certainly played into this characterization. It was striking how this attack was quickly interpreted along American 9/11 lines by Indian media outlets, paralleling the Indian government's adoption of the American "war on terror" hermeneutic since 2001. The date itself, 7/11 (or 11/7), suggested an Indian equivalence to many.

Fig. 2: The stranger within. Saif Ali Khan as the secret Muslim terrorist Ehsaan/Khalid, Kurbaan (Rensil D'Silva IN 2009), 02:17:36.

India for increasing intolerance, the BJP secretary of the state of Madhya Pradesh tweeted, "Shah Rukh Khan lives in India, but his heart is in Pakistan."[40] Khan, grandchild of an anti-British freedom fighter, then felt it necessary to modify his critique and offer his nationalist bona fides.

Meanwhile, in recent years, Aamir Khan has taken on one social cause after another, especially by starring in and producing the television show Satyamev Jayete (Truth Alone Triumphs, Satyajit Bhatkal, IN 2012–14). Named after India's national motto, the show dealt with national societal issues – from alcoholism to domestic violence, honor killings to casteism, solid-waste management to masculinity. While widely lauded, Khan is himself no stranger to anti-national abuse, with his patriotic criticism of India and willingness to address social ills often interpreted by Hindu nationalists as Muslim profanation of Mother India. Meanwhile, Salman Khan, who has played more Muslim roles than the other Khans, has burnished his own bona fides by playing roles that fit a certain muscular Hindu mold.[41]

Perhaps it is also ironic, or at least merely interesting, that these "Brothers Khan" rarely portray Muslims. In fact, Bollywood seldom features a Muslim character as

40 Divyanshu Dutta 2015.

41 See, for example, Bajrangi Bhaijaan (Brother Bajrangi, Kabir Khan, IN 2015), in which a Hindu devotee of Hanuman, Salman Khan, helps a Muslim Pakistani girl return to her family in Pakistan.

male protagonist. Shahid (Martyr, Hansal Mehta, IN 2012), the true story of an activist Muslim lawyer, is an exceptional exception. When superstar Muslims like the Khans do play Muslim parts, their loyalty to Mother India is so clearly stressed, or their characters are so over-the-top evil, or their characterization is so at odds with their carefully crafted public personae that it is simply impossible to confuse the actors with the roles they play. Note, for example, Aamir Khan's portrayal of Islamic terrorist/Pakistani secret agent Rehan Khan in Fanaa. Then there is the case of the "fourth Khan", Saif Ali Khan, playing Ehsaan Kahn in Kurbaan (fig. 2). In this film, an unsuspecting young American Hindu woman named Avantika (played by Kareena Kapoor) falls in love with the middle-class Muslim academic from Mumbai now living in Delhi. The two marry and decide to move to the United States, with Ehsaan quickly finding a job teaching "Islam in the Modern World" as they move into a New York suburb with a large South Asian population. Avantika becomes pregnant, but soon discovers that her husband is part of a terrorist plot in which she is forced to participate. Avantika becomes a victim of their scheming, as she uncovers that their marriage was part of an elaborate plot. Ehsaan, whose real name is Khalid, used her to legally emigrate to the West in order to join a terrorist cell. Suffice it to say, in the end *dharma* noticeably obtains. Dying of a bullet wound on the floor of the subway, Ehsaan professes to Avantika that he fell in love with her despite himself. Their love was real, but Ehsaan as *adhārmik* exemplar must die. Justice is restored as Avantika is left to put the broken pieces of her life back together.

And so we have transitioned from the figure of the dutiful Muslim sidekick of the pre-1990s to the anti-hero Ehsaan/Khalid in Kurbaan. In this new globalized world, where capital, terrorism, and fear can flow as one, we witness a shared American and Indian stereotype of the dangerous and omnipresent Muslim, rendered even more frightening by the fact that contemporary Muslim violence has become, given the participation of burka-clad terrorists, coeducational. In India women have long been associated with the health and integrity of the family unit, so it is especially noteworthy that not only does Avantika's character become the unwitting victim and co-conspirator in an Islamist plot, but she is in fact pregnant with this Other. Chillingly, and reflective of Indian and American anxieties, the enemy is literally growing within.

Of the actors mentioned, Aamir Khan has played the largest number of Muslim roles. By my count, Shahrukh Khan, arguably the most famous Indian actor of the last quarter century, has played a Muslim only four times over three decades in 90 films. So when he decides to play a Muslim role, that role is worthy of attention. In My Name Is Khan (Karan Johar, IN 2009), the main protagonist, played by Shahrukh, has a message for US President George W. Bush, whom he crosses the continental United States to meet. The message is simple: "My name is Khan and I am not a ter-

rorist." Khan's epic *yātrā*, or pilgrimage, (noticeably echoing Forrest Gump's) lasts so long that he ultimately meets a new president, Barack Obama – a leader more receptive to the protagonist's plight, signaling hope that America's new political dispensation will mark an end to Western (and, in fact, Indian) anti-Islamic prejudice.

As is often the case, the line between protagonist and Hindi-film superstar is gauzy, particularly when audiences are well aware that after September 11, 2001, Khan the actor repeatedly faced difficulties from Homeland Security when entering the United States.[42] By then he had become a global brand with his own production company. Apparently, even he was not immune to the ignominies of religious and racial profiling as part of the "War on Terror".

To say that Khan's recent roles have become self-consciously "meta", then, would be an understatement. More recently, in Raees (Rahul Dholakia, IN 2017), Khan plays the titular bootlegger who escapes poverty through a combination of brutality and savvy to become a major Gujarati kingpin.[43] Significantly, the Muslim anti-hero refuses to distinguish between Muslims and Hindus, seeing all members of his composite neighborhood as "my people". This is a world in which the brothers Amar, Akbar, and Anthony would feel at home. After all, the period film is set in roughly the same time and location as the 1977 masterpiece. As Khan resuscitates an earlier 1970s' Muslim stereotype (that of the gangster), he is likewise summoning and endorsing India's earlier multicultural vision of itself. In the age of social media and satellite television, when Khan is pilloried for daring to speak out against intolerance, King Khan has found a way to shrewdly communicate through his characters.

While certainly the most numerous, Muslims are not India's only religious minority. Sikhs fare better in Bollywood films, but like Muslims of old, they generally serve as sidekicks to Hindu protagonists (The Company, Ram Gopal Varma, IN 2002) or, more often, as harmless turban-wearing background players employed as proof of secular India's composite religious culture, exemplified by the famous slogan "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Īsāī Bhāī Bhāī Hain." ("Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian are all brothers"). This is all the more surprising given the ubiquity of Punjabis in the Hindi film industry as producers, directors, playback singers, and actors. By the late 1990s, the "typical" North Indian protagonist had become a Punjabi, and the quintessential heartland, the Punjab (Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge; Veer-Zaara (Yash Chopra, IN 2004)). By the turn of the century, a non-Indian could be mistaken for thinking that all of rural India was blanketed in golden mustard. Given the ubiquity of Punjab, Punjabis, and things Punjabi, then, one could expect to see more Sikhs in films other

42 Kumar 2016.

43 The nostalgic lionization of a pre-economic liberalization (gangster) entrepreneur can be interpreted as a not so subtle endorsement of India's new economic regime.

Fig. 3: Actors Jeevan and Nassir Hussain as Christian sinner and saint, respectively, Amar, Akbar, Anthony (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977), 02:17.55.

than as sidekicks, background players, metonyms of national religious diversity, or performers in stylized Bollywood Bhangra numbers yelling "ballé, ballé!"[44]

Finally, we have the rather conflicting representations of Christians in *sāmājik* films. There are, in my estimation, four ideal types: the scantily clad, denationalized Westernized vamp, the comic drunkard, the gangster, and the pious Catholic nun or priest. For heuristic purposes and commensurate with the Manichaean world in which we seem to be dwelling, we might condense these representations further into a helpful dyad: the morally dubious Westernized Other versus the pious Catholic clergyman. There has been a significant difference between Muslim and Christian characterizations since Independence. Whereas Muslim portrayals have noticeably shifted diachronically from sidekick to menace, Christian characterizations have remained relatively stable and simplistic. In fact, the latter mirror the challenges of Indian Christian identity in the wake of British *Christian* Imperialism. So, while vil-

44 There are certainly significant exceptions. In the aughts of the new century, we saw the release of two films with Sikh protagonists: Singh is Kinng (Anees Bazmee, IN 2008) and Rocket Man: Salesman of the Year (Shimit Amin, IN 2009). The primary difference is that these Sikhs are *keśdārī* (turbaned), whereas in previous films (Veer-Zaara, Yash Chopra, IN 2004), the religious signifiers are more subtle, e.g., a character with a traditionally Sikh name or the presence of the *kaṛā*, or steel bracelet. A noticeable exception is Amir Khan's character, Chandrashekhar Azad, in Rang De Basanti.

Fig. 4: Parveen Babi as Anita, the Westernized vamp: Christian, oversexed, underdressed, and deracinated. At the bar with Amitabh Bachchan, Deewaar (Yash Chopra, IN 1975), 01:52:03.

lains notoriously bear Christian names like Robert, Peter, or John (Amar, Akbar, Anthony), scenes in Christian churches have become quite popular, with Hindu characters often praying in such settings (Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge). (See fig. 3) How might we understand these rather conflicted representations? Here again, Hindi popular film reveals certain tensions and contradictions. As with the Muslim representations, one of the dominant Indian imaginaries is the Christian as innately foreign. To many, Christians exist as a dishonorable remnant of the British imperial past and of Western ways of life. In this rendering Christian equals Western. As with Christians in the Middle East after the American response to September 11, South Asian Christians in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are often treated as Western proxies. It matters not that Christianity had arrived in South Asia by the fourth century (and possibly by the first century, with St. Thomas the Apostle); and it is immaterial that those converts to Christianity over the last five centuries are in fact indigenous to South Asia (and more often from low caste or Dalit backgrounds). Conversion to Christianity in some misty past seems to erect an ontological chasm between Indian (essentialized as Hindu) and Christian – as though one's genetic structure is washed away in baptismal waters.

While it might be true that villains bear Christian names because of actual Christian involvement in the Mumbai underworld, there is a more salient reason for these stereotypes. After all, the Mumbai underworld, like Mumbai itself, is religiously diverse and cosmopolitan. More significantly, a difference in dress (the scantily clad, oversexed Westernized woman), or name (Julie, Anita, Helen, Robert, Anthony), or diet (alcohol, meat) marks one as the Other in our midst, a denatured reminder of a shameful colonial past fitting uneasily into both secular nationalist and Hindutva narratives of the nation-state (fig. 4) Every identity is fashioned by its perceived Other, and the deracinated, Westernized, Indian Christian serves to bolster what Nandy often calls the "anti-self", through which the modern Indian self is constituted.[45] Obviously this leaves Indian Christians wondering where they fit in. The Christian, like the Muslim, is rendered a stranger in her own country. Indian religious minorities often look in vain for Hindi filmic characterizations that do not lazily at best and nefariously at worst hew to hackneyed stereotypes.

Tolerant Hinduism and the Secular Ideal?

If Hindi popular film can be read as a window into the mind and soul of the Indian middle class, as this essay rather conventionally assumes, then they provide us with clues about the individual and social tensions of 1960s India as well as enduring tropes in the Indian imaginary. In light of subsequent shifting ideologies, we can say it does more. Adapted from R. K. Narayan's novel, Guide (Vijay Anand, IN 1965) is an allegory for two seemingly paradoxical themes: India's tryst with modern, secular nationhood, and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) through faith and renunciation. Starring and produced by screen legend Dev Anand, the movie has as its protagonist

45 Christian representations are neither consistent nor uniform. We might ask how to account for the use of Christian sacred space in Hindu popular film, as when the character Simran makes a special point of praying in a Swiss church in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. A clue might be found in the fact that many Bollywood filmmakers and actors were educated in Christian schools and convents run by priests and nuns, a constituency that directors seem to know and respect. Shah Rukh Khan studied at St Columba's School, run by the Catholic Congregation of Christian Brothers, and Aamir Khan studied at the Bombay Scottish School and St. Anne's High School. We must also recall the genuine reverence shown by Hindus for sacred space generally, regardless of sectarian affiliation, which explains the use of churches in film. So even as Christians might be scapegoated as dangerous purveyors of "Westernized non-Indian family values", there is also a (more oblique) recognition of the influence of Christians on Indian society, particularly in the niche areas of medicine, education, and social work. I would argue further that to admit the place of Christians in the Indian social is perceived as a type of disloyalty to Indian independence, even though Christianity has played a significant role not just in the development of post-Independence India, but also in South Asia's tryst with Western modernity. Perhaps such a role is inherently ambivalent. Suffice it to say, the taint stemming from Christianity's relationship with British colonialism continues to negatively affect Indian Christians and Indian Christianities seven decades after the demise of British India.

Raju, a fast-talking ex-con tour guide in the lake city of Udaipur who befriends then be-loves an unhappily married dancing-girl, Rosie (note the Westernized name), played by Waheeda Rehman. The frame story concerns one man's journey from worldling to Hindu *mukta* (spiritually liberated person) through self-renunciation and faith in God and the people; another story is the cost of the modern, fast (read: Western) lifestyle and its attendant morally compromised relationships. Through the course of the film, traditional Indian (read: Hindu) values are valorized, while a dubious eye is cast on upward, debasing, and treacherous materialism. The two narratives culminate in the final scene, when Raju, who has taken on the role of *sādhu* (Hindu ascetic) as a result of a villager's misunderstanding, fasts unto death to end a fatal drought. In an ironic twist, the ex-convict becomes the true saint the villagers always believed him to be. Despite protestations to the contrary, the villagers, cognizant of their religious history, remind him that the true Hindu *sant* (holy person) has no proper genealogy:

> Swami, the path of knowledge is very crooked. Valmiki became a sage after being a dacoit. Goswami Tulsidas cut through the desire for a woman to become a sage. My faith in you has only grown stronger. After getting purified for twelve days of penance, the cry that comes from your soul will tear the skies open and the gods will be forced to cry and wet the earth to the quench the thirst.

Raju is hereby challenged to become the savior the villagers so desperately need him to be. As days pass, we witness his ascetical struggle. The vast desert skies remain barren as thousands throng the village temple to do penance and see the "*baḍā mahātmā*" (super great souled-one). Lines begin to form in order to take his *darśan*, and Raju's transformation continues through periodic moments of divine encounter, lingering doubt, enlightenment, and final *mahā-samadhī*: "These people have put their faith [*viśvās*] in me", he tells a laughingly tone-deaf Western reporter. "Now I am growing confident in their faith."

Just before Raju's death, Gafur, his affable Muslim business partner, discovers that the fasting *sādhu* is none other than his old friend. Seeking to reunite with his friend, he is rebuffed at the temple entrance as not one of their "*khandān*", or family, a common euphemism for religious identity. Raju steps forward to welcome his old friend, correcting the villager: "*Pyār merā dharm hai; dostī merā* īmān *hai*." (Love is my religion; friendship is my faith.) Significantly, he uses the Hindi *pyār* for love and the Arabic/Persian īmān for faith, reflecting the inclusive secularist vision for India.

Yet just how inclusive is this vision? Moments later, in one of the film's most poignant scenes, the crowds and the principal actors are seen praying according to their respective traditions for the starving hero. We briefly witness Gafur sitting

Fig. 5: Anwar Hussain plays the character Gafur, who does *namāz* under Shiva's gaze, Guide (Vijay Anand, IN 1965), 02:42:12.

in *namāz* facing Mecca within the colonnaded sandstone temple, arms stretched in prayerful supplication as his erstwhile partner lies at death's door (fig 5). One might interpret this frame as evidence of tolerant Hindu pluralism – and maybe it is. But one could also argue that a more detailed inspection reveals something else more troubling, now made clearer by the passage of time, in light of Hindutva. For there, to Gafur's left, is an ancient carving of Lord Śiva in his yogic posture, silent witness to the man's prayers. Although the film was released in the 1960s, perhaps this image provides an apt metaphor for a Hindu vision of contemporary India. As tolerant as it may be, the religious Other always dwells under the Hindu gaze, resting on a Hindu foundation, by the grace and beneficence of the Hindu.

This more troubling interpretation cannot be separated from later filmic representations now given Hindu nationalist ascendance. If love is the *dharma* as Raju claimed, it is here one of the more conditional varieties, wherein the minority must never forget that they live by the beneficence of the majority. It is the kind of majoritarian love that puts the song *Vande Mātaram* ("Hail, Mother!") in a Muslim woman's mouth – as in Fanaa – assuring the audience that she is the acceptable, *safe* kind of Muslim – even though everyone knows of Indian Muslim discomfort with of-

fering paeans to any (deity, nation, deified nation) other than Allah, no matter how sincere one's love for country. This is not the Indian ethos of acceptance of religious pluralism and the Gandhian vision of secularism undergirded by what is called *sarva dharma sambhāva*,[46] but a debasement of that ethos where the co-opted minority mouths the loyalties of the majority, where stooge becomes cipher. Whether that film be Fanaa in the new century or Guide in the last, reflected here is an acceptance of the Other not on the Other's terms, or at least a kind of negotiation of these terms required of religious pluralism, but on terms set by those who hold the keys to the kingdom – and that *rāj* is Hindu. Ultimately, then, what Guide provides us, as do so many less noble films from the years that followed, is a vision as saffron as the *sādhu*'s robe and, in retrospect, as ominous as the gathering mob. Yet this film was created in the Nehruvian period and not in the age of Modi. I make this point only to demonstrate something has become even clearer now that the dominant national Indian ideology has shifted. With the recent resounding re-election of the Hindu nationalist BJP, this shift is simply undeniable. I am arguing that Indian secular nationalism has always carried, in certain respects, an uncomfortable likeness to Hindu nationalism – often despite representations to the contrary. And this is ironic, given longstanding Hindu nationalist critique of the Nehruvian dispensation as peddling a mere "pseudo-secularism", a faux religious neutrality that in practice favors (and placates) religious minorities for the purpose of securing votes.

Conclusion or Interval?

Since Independence, the dominant filmic ideology has roughly paralleled that of the state. While this has much to do with placating a politicized and notoriously conservative national censor board, that cannot be the sole cause. Shared corporate interests and national pride (conflated with religious pride) also play their parts. It is no coincidence that in the Nehruvian period the protagonist was a socialist-leaning artist or vagabond, while at the turn of the new century the hero had become a multimillionaire or the scion of one.[47] There once had been a strong if moralizing sense in pre-liberalization India that one could not serve both God and mammon, one of the morals of Guide. Cut to contemporary popular film and resolution of the God–mammon struggle comes not through sacrifice of the latter, but through

46 Literally, "equal respect for all religions". Gandhi's understanding of secularism may be contrasted with Jawaharlal Nehru's *dharma nirpekṣ*, or "religious neutrality", more along the lines of Western secularism, which can (but need not) be construed as government hostility towards religion.

47 Note the shift from Shree 420 (Mr. 420, Raj Kapoor, IN 1955) and Pyaasa (Thirst, Guru Datt, IN 1957) to Taal (Rhythm, Subhash Gai, IN 1999) and Om Shantih Om (Farah Khan, IN 2008).

the actual marriage of neo-liberal economics and trademarked religion. There is, it would seem – and contrary to most *dhārmik* instincts – no struggle required at all. Capitalism has proffered its notorious choice with the ruse that such choices are basically unnecessary.[48] Indian capitalism and the films it spawns sing a familiar tune only in new vernacular languages. The subtext is that one need *not* choose between social justice and material prosperity, God and lucre. One can drive to the temple in that Corolla, emerge dhoti-clad for *pūjā* (worship), later pick up some KFC after bypassing the required low-caste security guard, and finally return home in time for a Yash Raj film on Sony TV. Rani Mukherjee may wear miniskirts, but she can still sing a heartfelt *bhajan* (hymn) to an acceptable deity. Such is the complicity of upper-middle class Bollywood elites who continually deny their own responsibility in the new economic dispensation while hiding behind stock disclaimers about what is desired by the Indian public.

Yet one must wonder whether Indian audiences really need a repetition of *Vande Mātaram*, the favorite ditty of the Hindu nationalist Vishva Hindu Parishad, when a character ventures to the exotic West (Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham (Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad, Karan Johar, IN 2001))? Are Indians so in danger of forgetting their cultural moorings that they require a reminder when life in the West looks just a bit too attractive, too transgressive? And speaking of contradictions, when Hrithik Roshan dances his way through London landmarks with blonde, high-skirted European sex objects in tow in Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham or when Amitabh Bacchan is thanked for *his* sexual prowess by a Western prostitute in Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna, what is being accomplished and for whom exactly? In Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Pardes or in Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham, British or American Indians voice their discontent with their adopted country as if to assuage Indian audiences that they need not envy these Non-Resident Indians. But why do Indian audiences require assurances that British or American Indians pine to return to the land of their forebears? What psychosocial fears lurk behind such pandering?

It is often argued by the Hindi-film industry that it is simply giving Indian viewers what they want. In fact, Indian audiences are more sophisticated than the purveyors of popular cinema as it exists in the early 21st century. The masses that threw out the BJP-led coalition in 2004 and then returned that BJP a decade later are also the children of South Asians who have long used, shaped, disseminated, and ar-

48 Take, for example, the rise of Ramdev, the leader of multibillion-dollar Patanjali Ayurveda Ltd. The hirsute yogi is the ubiquitous spokesperson for a company that sells shampoo, tea tree oil, and at least 500 other Ayurvedic products. You can find Ramdev leading thousands for national yoga day with Prime Minister Modi, or filing a report against a political leader for having the temerity to link Hinduism with violence, or firing members of his company striking for payment of the minimum wage.

gued their narrative traditions to various contested ends. The aforementioned epics themselves demonstrate the diversity of South Asian narrative traditions. Since the early 1990s, religion scholars have focused on the epics not primarily as texts, but as traditions living in oral/aural, performance, ritual, and literary modalities. As such, each epic represents a complex and dynamic web of signification through which South Asians understand their world and their place in it over millennia. So, while the epics are open-ended and polysemous organisms cutting across sectarian boundaries, Indian screenwriters and producers have only scratched the surface of the epic traditions, to say nothing of other traditions What, for example, is *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*? For those who encounter the *Mahābhārata* in its multiple regional, linguistic varieties and modes, there might be more than one answer. Yet one would not know that by common representations from members of the Sangh Parivar, where an often flattened, sanitized, *sanātanized*, and indeed *Vaiṣṇavized* Hindu *dharma* is presented as normative.[49] Thus, to write of *dhārmik* "constraints" said to pervade Hindi popular film earlier in this essay is to denigrate not Hindu *dharma* as such, but the narrow way the notoriously capacious concept is being applied. In other words, Hindu *dharma* is not an artistic, narratival, or even ideological obstacle to be abandoned, as if that were even possible. Indeed, "obstacles" – variously called techniques, norms, rules, or conventions – can provide the necessary constraint for the flourishing of any art form, even when reacted to or pushed against. This is how all traditions adapt and change. The real problem, if I may be bold enough to call it that, is that the film industry has failed to plumb the full depths of India's *dhārmik* treasury, which is a nearly limitless repository. I am arguing that Hindu traditions have the resources *within themselves*, in interaction with the liberal ideologies of modernity, to ensure the flourishing of multiple communities in a pluralist democracy. They need not resort to the denial of these identities in the name of a secular nationalism that denies difference, or that foregrounds national identity over all other identities, or that forces persons and communities to check their ultimate commitments at the door marked "civil society". Finally, with regard to representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema, it bears repeating that even a cursory glance at the names of actors, directors, editors, composers, producers, and playback singers reveals the cosmopolitan and multi-religious (if not

49 In recent years, various Hindu groups have presented Hinduism as a largely monolithic tradition along the lines of perceived Christianity and Islam, contrary to the long history of South Asia religions, wherein a diverse collection of traditions flourished without the novel designation "Hinduism". Historian Romila Thapar made this point in her seminal essay "Syndicated Hinduism", which subsequently sparked further reflection by Paula Richman and others. Such authors demonstrated that among Hindu nationalists a new "normative" Hinduism was being presented as *sanātana* (eternal and unchanging) and Vaiṣṇava (centered around Viṣṇu, particularly Rāma, an avatar of Viṣṇu). See Thapar 1997 and Richman 1991.

multi-class) nature of the Hindi film industry. Yet this abundance still fails to make it onto the silver screen.[50]

Perhaps given that the film industry – be it in Mumbai, Los Angeles, or Hong Kong – is an industry privileging profits over prophets, we should be neither surprised nor sanguine about the ability of film to break free from present ideological shackles because of either commercial interests or Hindu nationalist commitments (which are now commingling as never before). While one need not close an essay with a happy ending, it is encouraging to report that one looks for signs of hope – and not in vain. Artistically rich, socially conscious, and humanistic films produced by the aforementioned Amir Khan continue to be box-office sensations. Rang De Basanti (Colour it Saffron, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, IN 2006), Taare Zamin Par (Stars on Earth, Amir Khan, IN 2007), Three Idiots (Rajkumar Hirani, IN 2009), and Dangal (Wrestling, Nitesh Tiwari, IN 2016) readily come to mind. Perhaps in response to the fantastic, hyper-modern, shiny (where-do-people-really-live-like-this?) Yash Raj films created at the turn of the century, subsequent films relish the authentic. One thinks of Gangs of Wasseypur (Anurag Kashyap, IN 2012) and its more realistic regional dialogue, disorienting postmodern narrative style, and evident breaking of sacrosanct Bollywood film convention. One also thinks of Queen (Vikas Bahl, IN 2014) and its *cinéma vérité* style. We pause here only to note a message on women's agency strikingly different from that offered by Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge a generation earlier.[51] Then there is the ability to tackle edgier themes without resorting to juvenile stereotypes (like homosexuality in My Brother Nikhil (Onir, IN 2005). Such films entertain while managing to refrain from shallow moralizing; they challenge social norms while calling Indians to something better, drawing upon various aspects of South Asian religio-cultural traditions to hold a mirror before Indian and global audiences. Critically, and none too late, they reflect the lives, artistry, and sheer impatience of India's younger generations.

Whether or not the industry heeds this *videśi*'s (foreigner's) unbidden critique, at least this member of the audience – an unashamed, unreconstructed Hindi cinephile – awaits the time when Hindi popular cinema comes closer to fulfilling its potential in an India (and a world) marked by ideological chauvinism, distrust, and cynicism. Bollywood films are, after all, notoriously long, and who can say where we are in this particular industry's history? We might simply be at the "Interval". The lights

50 The multi-religious nature of Hindi popular cinema is demonstrated by a collection of essays in Pinto 2011.

51 Note the transition from the ultimately conservative if adaptive social vision of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, where Simran places her fate in the hands of her beloved, ultimately to be freed to love him by her father, to Queen, where the jilted fiancée finds her own way to Paris for a honeymoon without a husband. Twenty years separate Simran's and Rani's excursions to Europe, but it is Rani who demonstrates agency.

come on at intermission as we adjust our eyes, stretch, and confer. Eventually the lights will dim once more; the velvet curtains will part, prompting our rushed return to seats in anticipation of what is to come, of what remains to be seen on that luminous screen, and of what of ourselves is reflected before our eyes.

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René Erwich

"Someday Our Gods Will Be Friends"

The VIKINGS Series as Embodiment of Religion and Liquefaction of Meaning

Abstract

This article reflects on the recent television series VIKINGS (CA/IE, 2013–) from a practical-theological standpoint. It addresses the series as a serious expression of the relationship between film and religion. Narrative, reception, style and context are used deliberately to present themes related to the clash of pagan religion and Christianity. The article contends that the development and construction of VIKINGS can be viewed in light of a liquefaction of religion.

Keywords

Film and Theology, Practical Theology, Film as Embodiment of Religion, Liquefaction of Religion, VIKINGS

Biography

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Introduction

A quick scan of the Internet and other media reveals a variety of depictions and presentations of Vikings. In both the past and the present, "Viking" and "the Viking Age" have been used to conjure up a "warlike Viking tickling our imagination with horror and delight" or a fantasy figure and "male chauvinist symbol". Both terms are present, Gunnar Andersson writes, in "authentic academic history and simultaneously collective myth in the minds of millions, with social, economic, and political

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.6

implications".[1] A constant interplay exists between research, knowledge and present use in the ways the ideas of the "Viking" and "the Viking Age" are addressed. Historically, between 750 CE and 1100 CE communities in Scandinavia were not as unified as we might think, and the modern use of "Viking" covers very diverse meanings. Today, we might write at length about Viking metal music or about Viking symbols that are used by American Football teams, appear in advertisements for beer, and could be found in dark depictions of the 5th SS Waffen Panzer Division "Wiking" in the Second World War. Such symbols are both deployed and exploited. Viking stereotypes often prevail in both popular mythology and historical reconstructions.

However, a further aspect of Viking discourse is apparent in a recent filmic representation of Viking life that is found in the Irish-Canadian historical drama television series Vikings (CA/IE 2013–), based on the Icelandic sagas of the Viking Ragnar Lodbrok. The series, written and directed by the renowned scriptwriter Michael Hirst, also known from The Tudors (IE 2007–2010) was first shown in early March 2013 on the History Channel in Canada and the United States and soon found millions of viewers and fans. This top-rated show, filmed on location in both Canada and Ireland, has reached its sixth season. The series website hosts infographics on each season.

Interviews given by Hirst provide strong evidence of a deliberate attempt to frame the series in light of an existential clash of religions. In an interview with Brock Swinson, Hirst stated, "During my research, the Pagan versus Christian conflict was very central to Viking sex and life at the time. It couldn't be avoided, so it had to be addressed. I loved reading about it and I couldn't have written Vikings without writing about the Pagan gods and the Christian God, who ultimately won, essentially."[2] Similarly Hirst explained:

> I wanted to show pagan fundamentalism – for audience to understand that paganism was a real religion and that people believed it very deeply. It meant a lot and explained the world to the Vikings. I think I was getting that message across. We've seen levels of belief – Floki [one the main characters] is a complete fundamentalist and I wanted to show the same for Christianity, that it was driven by people like Bishop Heahmund – young religion sweeping across the globe and one of the reasons was the intensity of belief and Heahmund was going to represent that for me – passionate Christians coming up against equally passionate pagans.[3]

Hirst successfully weaves this clash of religions into the series, including very concrete depictions in single episodes. This article explores the intriguing mix and collision of religious realities. The medium of film can support and enhance conversations about

1 Andersson 2016.
2 Swinson considers the relationship between historic Viking reality and the series.
3 Hirst in the interview (see for link bibliography).

vital and existential themes that influence identity formation.[4] This television series, as we will see, is a useful example of how film can reflect cultural and religious capital. Viewers connect to the series not just as entertainment but also in light of their own individual and collective identity constructs. The VIKINGS series contributes to societal discourse on religious tensions through its links to religious elements, rituals and symbols.

Theoretical Framework and Method

Both the relationship between religion and popular culture and a practical-theological lens are conceptually and methodologically significant for the interpretation of the VIKINGS series in this article. The concepts *religion* and *culture* are not unproblematic. The discussion employs a working definition of *religion* based on a range of characteristics that provide meaning: the formation of communities with shared understandings and values, ritualized behavior, language and language-constructs of transcendence and intimacy, sacred perceptions of time and space, and the (re) configuration of symbols and narratives.[5] Culture is seen as a *design of living*, expressed in forms that are experiential, ritual, social, mythic, ethical and doctrinal.[6] Popular culture is treated not as distinct but as a shared set of activities and meanings prominent for some populations and conveyed through mass media or other means of communication.[7] John Lyden's categorizations in defining religion, culture and popular culture are helpful, picking up on the various ways in which religion and popular culture can be framed within healthy scholarly discourse.[8] My approach in this article falls within his first category, religion *in* popular culture, for it does not seek to establish a particular Christian or theological reading or look at how religious communities or communities of faith might read, connect and adapt to major cultural shifts as expressed in modern media. That instrumental approach could produce a religious or theological domestication of the television series.[9]

As a practical theologian, I am interested in the ways religion is expressed and embodied in lived contexts and practices. In this sense, practical theology has a focus on lived religion. Rather than research a specific audience and its reconstruction and interpretation of the VIKINGS series, in this article I approach the production as an *expression* of lived religion. Reflecting on the reality of religious film, Joseph Marty has

4 Van Hell 2016.
5 See Mazur/McCarthy 2011.
6 Erwich 2013, 173–180; Luzbetak 1998.
7 Lyden/Mazur 2015.
8 Lyden 2015, 15.
9 For a range of further theoretical perspectives see also Lynch 2007.

asserted that there is no human life of faith without images.[10] Even though I would disagree with Marty that religious film should focus on finding seeds of the divine Word, I recognize that film can awaken the *homo religiosus*. According to Marty,

> cinema binds us again with the poetic and religious expression of humanity, even though subjects that are profane, scientific or areligious; all the more so if it approaches the great experiences such as birth, love, work, hope, fidelity, joy, death or their inseparable opposites treachery, lies, jealousy, hate. Everything that is human, every relationship to the world and to nature, treated artistically by the cinema becomes a poem, a tale, a re-reading, a proposal of meaning, a celebration – in short, something that resembles a first religious step. And this step may be blasphemous, contentious, provocative, pantheist, deist, mythic or revolutionary.[11]

A series like Vikings provides a secular context for religious meaning, as I will explore below. In ways that are possibly unlike other forms of art, film "summons and supports elements that belong to the religious dimension inherent in every human being".[12] For a start, Vikings mirrors religious aspects of our society. For many people film-watching has become a religious activity. In a way we could argue that the creed, the religious, belongs to humanity and not just to Christianity. And it is back at the top of the agenda! The popularity of series like Vikings and many others (such as Game of Thrones) suggests, Marty argues, that

> the religious dimension, too long assimilated to Christianity, remains fundamental for every individual and every culture. Thrown out with the water of Christian baptism, the infant homo religiosus comes back in full force and looks for his points of orientation outside of and far from mother church, in practices and beliefs ranging from the most serious to the most illegitimate, fantastical or dangerous. Our society once again rediscovers, painfully, that the religious and the sacred are fundamental for human beings and culture.[13]

Film as a Specific Embodiment of Religion – Liquefaction of Meaning

Film, as in the example of Vikings, is a symptom of a liquefaction of meaning, an idea central to this article and therefore deserving of particular attention. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman distinguished between solid modernity and liquid modernity, with

10 Marty 1997, 132.
11 Marty 1997, 136.
12 Marty 1997, 134–136.
13 Marty 1997, 139.

the former being a massive constituency regulating political, economic and ecclesial life and structures, and the latter indicative of an ongoing phase of modernization, in which nothing is fixed and everything is characterized by movement.[14] Practical theologian Kees de Groot elaborates on Bauman's thesis of a "liquid society" in a provocative book in which he sets the concept in a wider context.[15] Deploying the concept of "liquidation", De Groot contends that institutional religion is not simply coming to an end in Western societies, for religion and church are crossing boundaries. He uses the liquidation metaphor to describe the changing function and role of faith, religion and Christian institutions. Religion is liquefying, he suggests, as many elements that compose the church (counseling, education, assistance and care, for example) become part of leisure activities, health care or contemporary culture. Religious capital was once a solid asset, but in liquid modernity, such solid institutions lose power and influence. Church, class and family are eroded, and networks become key to social participation. This typical Baumanian view downplays the options for religion and community. Even more, if religion is included in the series of institutions that have lost their influence, there is no more serious space for religion and thus, as a consequence we would need to talk about its liquidation. I agree with De Groot that Bauman's views of community and the role of religion are limited, for religion continues, if under different conditions. These conditions are strongly influenced by a context in which consumption, individual choice, networks, communities "lite" and various spiritualities are central, with the liquidation metaphor therefore again relevant. De Groot characterizes the slow but inevitable process that leads to the sale of the church's capital as liquidation, not just liquefaction. Religious products appear in these different social contexts, with the church no longer the sole provider.

The framework for this examination of Vikings is provided by both the idea of film as the embodiment of religion and the concept of the liquefaction of meaning. To address the meaning of film from a practical-theological perspective, I first examine the general filmic content of this series and look into its storylines and narratives, cultural and religious contexts and style. Here I take up Melanie Wright's proposal to ensure that crucial aspects of the television series get the attention they deserve and not just their message.16 I believe this approach also does justice to the development of the series. The initial general analysis will be followed by analysis of a selection of fragments in which the relevant tensions and clashes occur. These fragments contain

- specific (constructed) dialogues about religious and/or theological themes
- specific references to clashes of religious or theological views.

14 Bauman 2000.
15 De Groot 2018.
16 Wright 2007, 11–30.

With a great variety of fragments available, I have selected examples that are connected to the main characters in the first seasons. For their analysis I deploy procedures common in qualitative content analysis, but with specific reference to religious and theological views.[17] Crucial to this method was evidence in constructed dialogues that illustrates the liquefaction thesis. The series as a whole contains numerous fragments that mirror a multicultural and multireligious society, even though it is set in the ninth century. There and then often become here and now. I have chosen not to use De Groot's term "liquidation", for the concept is not free of difficulties. Finally, I review my findings from a practical-theological point of view.

This article does not directly address the historicity of Vikings, although it does touch on Christian and pagan religious practices and realities. Because the series has not yet ended, with the fifth season underway as I write, I have made the end of the fourth season my own endpoint, a decision aided by the death of Ragnar Lodbrok, one of the central characters, close to the end of that series.

The Vikings Series – Content and Context

Storylines and Narrative[18]

The series starts at the beginning of the Viking era, in Scandinavia in the early ninth century. The men of Kattegat (not a historical location as such) are sent east on an annual raid by the chosen "Jarl" (earl), Haraldson (Gabriel Byrne), a title held by the most "prominent men below the kings in Viking-Age Scandinavia".[19] Farmer Ragnar Lodbrok (Travis Fimmel) is an underachiever, but as a result of religious experiences and with a desire to travel in other directions to the southwest, he joins the raid. He has heard the many stories of riches in the West (S1:E1).[20] He tries to find support for his desire to travel farther, and when he receives a sundial, Ragnar decides to have a boat built in secret by his friend Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård). However, Jarl Haraldson is not supportive of a southwestward raid. Ragnar navigates the open seas and arrives

17 Lamnek/Krell 2016, 447–511.

18 How have audiences responded to the series? More than 325,000 ratings on the IMDb website provide an average of rating for the series of 8.6 on a scale of 1–10. The majority of these viewers are between the ages of 18 and 44, with 24% female and 76% male. Generally, the series has been well received on websites and social media. Criticisms included the lack of development of the main characters during the later seasons, geographical inaccuracies and too great violence. Viewers are often unaware, it seems, of the composite and complex historical background to the figures of Ragnar, Björn and Ivar. Series 5 was less well received, with viewer figures for the later episodes dropping off. See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2306299/ratings?ref_=tt_ov_rthttps://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/may/23/vikings-review-history-channel-game-of-thrones [accessed 19 February 2019].

19 Holman 2003, 81.

20 Season and episode are referred to here using the format S1:E1.

at the monastery of Lindesfarne, in Northumbria (S1:E2).[21] Ragnar and his men raid the monastery and sail back home with a monk named Athelstan (George Blagden) as a slave. Athelstan becomes a central character in the course of the following episodes, and an exchange between pagan and Christian religions begins. On their arrival home, the conflict with Earl Haraldson escalates (S1:E4). Tensions with the earl grown, and soon, having been badly wounded in battle, Ragnar challenges him to a one-on-one fight. Ragnar kills Haraldson and becomes the next Earl of Kattegat (S1:E6). Between the major scenes, we encounter Athelstan, whose growing knowledge of pagan religion comes at the cost of his Christian faith. His initial aversion to pagan religion and its rituals and symbols gradually reverses. In the following episodes, the narrative takes a turn as the viewer is drawn deeper into the rituals of the Viking religion. The Vikings travel to Uppsala, bringing sacrifices. The dark depiction of these sacrificial practices involves an attempt to sacrifice Athelstan as well.

Local and regional battles prevail next as Ragnar and King Horik (Donal Logue) wage war with Earl Borg (Thorbjørn Harr). Ragnar's brother Rollo (Clive Standen) opposes Ragnar (S2:E1), but is defeated; although Rollo is brought to justice, he is then set free and in the meantime, Ragnar imperils his relationship with his wife Lagertha (Katheryn Winnick) by sleeping with Aslaug (Alyssa Sutherland), hoping that by having two wives he will increase his chances of having another son. Lagertha divorces Ragnar and leaves him, along with their son Björn (Alexander Ludwig). Ragnar continues his raids in England until he is stopped by King Ecbert (Linus Roche) of Wessex, who forges an alliance with King Ælle against Ragnar (S2:E7), Ragnar is defeated, barely escapes the coalition forces and must return to Kattegat, taking Athelstan with him. Ragnar and Athelstan's friendship is deepening as Athelstan increasingly adapts to the context in which he is now living. The second season ends violently, with King Horik killed and his kingdom taken over by Ragnar (S2:E10). Once more Ragnar sets off for Wessex, and while the Viking group develop their settlement there, looking for land to inhabit, a strange visitor confuses Aslaug about the situation and others and seduces her.

Athelstan is able to awaken Ragnar's interest in a raid on Paris, although Floki hates Athelstan and his Christian faith. Lagertha loses her earldom, and as Ragnar

21 A historical account of Lindisfarne is found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Cf. Ford 2005. The text recounts (55) the Viking invasion: "This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery, dragons flying across the firmament. These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine: and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of January in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable have in the church of God in Holy island [Lindesfarne, sic E], by rapine and slaughter. Siga died on the eight day before the calends of March". Generally, the "Viking age" is defined by historians as starting with the attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 CE and ending with the battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066 CE (see for further background Andersson 2016).

prepares for the raid on Paris, he and Aslaug distance themselves. King Ecbert orders the destruction of the newly developed settlement, an act carried out under the leadership of his son, Prince Aethelwulf (Moe Dunford) (S3:E5). Prince Aethelwulf's wife, Judith (Jennie Jacques), gives birth to a son, Alfred, who is in fact Athelstan's child. Floki decides Athelstan must die and kills the Christian at prayer (S3:E6).

Season 4 opens up with Ragnar being badly wounded and now near death. Floki is arrested by Björn for the murder of Athelstan. Rollo moves into his new role as a Frankish count and marries Princess Gisla (Morgane Polanski). Back in Kattegat, Floki is strung up in a cave as was the god Loki (S4:E2). Of particular note, Athelstan appears to Ragnar in a vision, repeating the word *mercy* over and over again (S4:E3); as a result, Ragnar sets Floki free. At the same time Athelstan appears on "the other side" to King Ecbert. In the course of this season, viewers see an ongoing amalgamation of cultures and religions, Anglo-Saxon, Frankish and Viking. Princess Kwentrith of Mercia (Amy Bailey) delivers a son, who is evidently Ragnar's child. Ragnar decides to go back to Paris, where he will confront his brother Rollo. In the meantime Lagertha develops her own kingdom as Earl Ingstadt, ruler of Hedeby. While pregnant, she insists on fighting the Parisians on Ragnar's side. The Vikings are forced to retreat – Rollo's preparations for the defense of Paris prove very effective – and Ragnar's leadership is called into question (S4:E8). We see Ragnar's sons now as almost grown men: Hvitserk (Marco Ilsø), Ivar (Alex Høgh), Sigurd (David Lindström) and Björn (Alexander Ludwig).

Ivar increasingly positions himself as the most traditional Norse son of Ragnar (S4:E10), which will be significant for the remaining episodes of this series. Ragnar wants to return to raiding Wessex and seeks to persuade others to join him. Their voyage is interrupted by a great storm and shipwrecked, Ivar, who has joined Ragnar on the raid, wakes up on a beach beside his father (S4:E14). King Ecbert is informed that Ragnar has returned, and Ragnar and Ivar are taken hostage by Aethelwulf. Locked in a cage, Ragnar is brought to Ecbert's dinner table, where intriguing conversations take place. Ragnar repeatedly tells Ecbert that the king must kill him. Athelstan's son Alfred (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) meets Ragnar, who is moved to tears. Ecbert promises to keep Ivar safe, and in the next episode, called "All His Angels" (S4:E15), Ragnar is handed over to King Ælle, who will show no mercy. Ælle declares that the souls of all the innocent men Ragnar has killed will be released from purgatory. Ragnar is taken from his cage and as he is beaten by solders, he has repeating flashbacks and visions of Athelstan and his life. During his last moments he recalls Athelstan teaching him the Lord's Prayer. As King Ælle prays in his chapel, the soldiers throw Ragnar into a snake pit. In a final moment Ragnar looks up towards an incognito King Ecbert. Ivar swears revenge. Lagertha cannot believe Ragnar is dead and continues her struggle for power. Ivar raises a great army to revenge the death of his father and kill King Ælle. Ecbert dies by his own hand as the Viking army rages.

Style

As Wright states, subject matter alone does not make a film or series religious.[22] The style of Vikings creates a strong religious dynamic and conveys deliberate religious constructs. Intense imagery and stylistic effects express collisions and conflict between Christian and pagan religions, which largely revolve around the principal characters and their narratives. Camerawork blends the two religious systems, likely presenting something of the historical reality.[23] At many points, detailed attention is given to the symbols and rituals of the two religions. Visual references to Christ and his Passion, even to the point of a (historically inaccurate) re-enactment of the Crucifixion, are presented alongside pagan sacrificial rituals. The portrayal of the individual characters is complex, although in the later series the characters are less developed and somewhat flatter. Nevertheless, it is this ever changing filmic movement that sustains the deliberate attempt to create meaning throughout the episodes.

Cultural and Religious Context

The cultural and religious contexts in which the series is embedded were in reality more ambiguous than is suggested. The cultural context was likely more democratic than depicted,[24] and the society less violent.[25] Scholars have pointed out that, in contrast to the image given here, religious beliefs were diverse and the popularity of the various gods differed from place to place. Anders Hultgård and others state that Viking religion was a non-doctrinal community religion, in contrast to doctrinal transnational religions like Christianity.[26] The script, written by Hirst, across the four series suggests a transitional and syncretistic period, and indeed attempts to reconstruct a strongly unified Viking religion have proved problematic and overly harmonizing. Surviving sources suggest shifts and variety, with the underlying theology, mythology and worldviews multifaceted and connected to similar forms beyond the Viking world.[27] The figure of Ragnar is evidently a composite of various legends,

22 Wright 2007, 11–30.

23 Brink 2008, 212–257; Richards 2005, 19–29; Andersson 2016.

24 Brink 2008, 11–49; Andersson 2016.

25 Richards 2005.

26 Hultgård in Brink 2008, 212.

27 For example, the mythical representation of the world as a cosmic tree (Yggdrasill). According to Brink and others the closest comparison is found in ancient Iranian religion, with myths containing depictions of the tree and its branches: "The trunk of the cosmic tree is also thought to contain nine mountains from which all waters of the earth flow forth. These similarities together with evidence from Greek, Phrygian and Indic traditions indicate that the Scandinavian idea of the world-tree is part of an Indo-European mythic heritage, which has analogies also among Finno-Ugric peoples of northern Eurasia", Brink 2008, 215.

myths and resources: in her substantial historical and textual study, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe concludes that Ragnar Lodbrok was not a historical figure, but rather a legendary figure given the attributes of other historical personages.[28]

"Friendship of the Gods" and the Coexistence of Christian and Nordic Religious Practices

We can now move to a detailed analysis of the evidence of the clash of religious perspectives and practices in the VIKINGS series, a clash historically grounded the coexistence of the Christian and Nordic religions. The fragments examined here form a chain of evidence for the liquefaction thesis encountered above. These fragments are used within the series to convey specific religious convictions and practices, both pagan and Christian, to the audience – for example, messages about suffering, peaceful religious coexistence, an exchange of rituals such as prayer, spiritual interconnectness and mutual learning across religious backgrounds, understandings of rites such as baptism, and discourses about the existence of god(s). For the Nordic religion, as also for Christianity, we cannot readily speak of uniform religious practice,[29] but archeological and written evidence suggests the existence of "forn siðr", a set of relative rituals and activities that reinforced general values and beliefs.[30]

Dominant Themes in the VIKINGS Series

Fragments and their Meaning

With their deliberate confusion and merger of religious horizons, all of the fragments analyzed here suggest a crossing of boundaries and an exchange of religious beliefs. The scenes play out the well-attested historical phenomenon of the mixing of religions, found not only in graves that held both Christian and pagan symbols but also in daily practices. In Figure 1 I present the selected fragments with their themes and core content. Our focus is on evidence of the formation of communities with shared meanings and values, ritualized behavior, language and language constructs of transcendence and intimacy, sacred perceptions of time and space and the (re) configuration of symbols and narratives, and the ways in which these characteristics relate to the liquefaction thesis.

28 Ashman Rowe 2012, 269.
29 Andersson 2016, 82–89.
30 Andersson 2016; Brink 2008, 212–243.

Season	Episode	Theme	Core
Season 1	Episode 8	Athelstan and pagan religion	Resemblance passion narrative Christian gospel presented in pagan context
Season 2	Episode 9	Ragnar's idea of friendship of the gods	Hope for future peaceful coexistence of religions
Season 2	Episode 10	Ragnar praying the Lord's prayer	Exchange of religious symbols and rituals, hybridity of religions
Season 3	Episode 6	Ragnar's speech after Athelstan's death	Separation of spiritualities, experience of deep loss and qualified differences between ultimate allegiances
Season 3	Episode 9	Ragnar's baptism	Clash of religious values? Different levels of communication of a pagan king versus medieval Christian leaders
Season 4	Episode 14	The dialogue about heaven, Walhalla and the existence of God/god	Two opposing religious paradigms and their relativizing encounter

Fig. 1: Selected fragments from Vikings.

Fig. 2: Film still, Vikings, S1:E8 (00:35:07).

Season 1 – Episode 8: Athelstan and Pagan Religion

(Ominous howls)

CULT LEADER: Have you come here of your own free will? *(Wind gusts strongly)*

ATHELSTAN: Yes.

CULT LEADER: At first, I was suspicious of you. I sensed something, so I spoke to lord Ragnar. He told me your story: That you were a priest, that you were a Christian, and worshipped a god called Jesus Christ. Is that true?

ATHELSTAN: Yes.

CULT LEADER: And do you still worship this God? Are you still, in your heart, a Christian?

ATHELSTAN: No.

CULT LEADER: Say again.

ATHELSTAN: No.

CULT LEADER: And a third time… say it.

ATHELSTAN: No. *(whispered)*

CULT LEADER: You know why you're here, don't you? You have been brought here as a sacrifice to the gods.

ATHELSTAN: *(Gasps) (Frightened gasp) (Running footsteps)*

SEER: I have come to tell you that the sacrifice of this man will not please the gods. He is neither willing nor is his faith acceptable to Odin. His heart is corrupt. He has not renounced his false god.

RAGNAR: Looks like your god finally came through for you.

Fig. 3: Film still, Vikings, S1:E8 (00:35:32).

SEER: Instead, one amongst you must agree to take his place tomorrow at the sacrifice. If not, then all shall fail. The gods in their anger will punish everyone, and withdraw their protection from all of us. *(Whispering)* No, not you. *(Hard clap on the back)*
LEIF: Before anyone else can claim this honor, I desire to be sacrificed.[31]

Context

In Vikings, the Vikings travel to Uppsala to bring sacrifices pleasing to the gods, in a section brimming with Christian and pagan amalgamations. Athelstan is to be sacrificed. The leader of the cult questions him about his religious integrity, and it becomes clear that Athelstan has not really given up on his god, even when his god is characterized as false and Athelstan's heart deemed corrupt.

Interpretation

A Christian, even Christological narrative runs through this fragment as one person is to die for the sins of others. In this case, however, Athelstan's sacrifice is not accepted. The scene is deliberately staged: the cult leader's first question asks about Athelstan's allegiance to Christ, with his subsequent questions exploring that allegiance in terms of worship. Here is found a reference to Peter's threefold denial of Jesus in the Gospel

31 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5VoO15xWMY [accessed 27 September 2019].

narrative. Ragnar's comment – "Looks like your god finally came through for you" – is striking, for at this crucial point his god does not abandon Athelstan, which clearly Ragnar interprets as divine intervention by the Christian god. This reversal of the expected is repeated throughout the series. Thus, for example, when Athelstan is taken hostage by King Ecbert of Wessex, he is treated as a Christian apostate and crucified by a local bishop (although in practice few crucifixions took place after the fourth century CE). The parallels with the crucifixion of Christ are emphasized, with the people screaming and shouting. But the camera also zooms in on Athelstan's face, and as he calls out, in Latin, "Into your hands I commend my soul", we see his one black eye, a reference to the one-eyed pagan god Odin. Christian and pagan narratives are thus connected, and boundaries between their rituals and metaphors crossed.

Season 2 – Episode 9: Ragnar's Idea of the Friendship of the Gods

RAGNAR: So have you returned to your faith, renounced ours?
ATHELSTAN: I wish it was so simple. In the gentle fall of rain from heaven I hear my God. But in the thunder I still hear Thor. That is my agony.
RAGNAR: I hope that someday our gods can become friends.[32]

Context

This very short dialogue between Athelstan and Ragnar comes from the episode titled "The Choice". It is indicative of the friendship between the two men and serves as a reminder of how they learn from each other. The fragment recounts Athelstan's confusion and different religious experiences, in this instance in relation to natural phenomena, to rain and thunder. Competing gods occupy the stage throughout the series, but here they are embodied in two main characters.

Interpretation

Athelstan and Ragnar represent different religious worldviews, but their friendship is, for Ragnar, indicative of how the gods might be brought to mutual recognition. This possibility comes out even more strongly after Athelstan's death, when Ragnar reflects on their relationship (see below). The dialogue has strong traces of an

32 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XN05TfmdB4 [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 4: Film still, Vikings, S2:E9 (00:27:49).

ongoing existential encounter between religions and of their interconnected convictions, beliefs and struggles. It ends with Ragnar's hope for a future friendship of the gods, a perspective more commensurate with diverse Viking religion than with contemporary Christian faith. The whole fragment serves as a metaphor for the peaceful coexistence of religions in the world of the viewer.

Season 2 – Episode 10: Ragnar Praying the Lord's Prayer

RAGNAR: I've seen you praying to your God. Will you teach me one of your prayers, so I can learn? *(Both kneel)*

ATHELSTAN: Our Father, who art in Heaven.

RAGNAR: Our Father, who art in Heaven.

ATHELSTAN: Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven… *(Shaky, nervous breaths)*

RAGNAR: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. *(Footsteps splash)*

ATHELSTAN: Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

RAGNAR: And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.[33]

33 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmyAXaOdxJE [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 5: Film still, Vikings, S2:E10 (00:33:50).

Context

This episode bears the title "The Lord's Prayer" and is a striking example of the repeated religious encounters that characterize Hirst's script. Ragnar asks Athelstan to teach him a prayer familiar to him, within a context marked by their deep friendship and mutual recognition. As Athelstan prays the well-known words with Ragnar, the latter's growing interest in his friend's faith and convictions is also expressed. Ragnar's openness to learning of the rituals of another religion runs throughout the first seasons as evidence of his fascination with the unfamiliar.

Interpretation

The encounter with religious paradigms and symbols that are not one's own has a long history, as is revealed by the example of the material culture of the Viking Age. Andersson notes: "For much of the Viking Age, people in Scandinavia [...] had two different religious systems to relate to: the older indigenous Norse religion (Ásatrú) and Christianity."[34] Often the two were blended through a process of acculturation, yielding a hybrid evident in surviving artefacts such as crucifixes, icons, shrines and pendants. Expeditions created contacts between Viking homelands in Scandinavia and Christian Europe, and in the tenth century, several Viking leaders were baptized.

34 Andersson 2016, 82.

Fig. 6: Film still, Vikings, S3:E6 (00:43:38).

Season 3 – Episode 6: Ragnar's Speech after Athelstan's Death

RAGNAR: I never knew what a martyr was. I still don't. You were a brave man, Athelstan. I always respected you for that. You taught me so much. You saw yourself as weak and conflicted, but to me you were fearless because you dared to question. Why did you have to die? We had so much more to talk about. I always believed that death is a fate far better than life, for you will be reunited with lost loved ones. But we will never meet again, my friend, for I have a feeling that your god might object to me visiting you in heaven. What am I to do now, hm? I hate you for leaving me. I ache from your loss. There is nothing that can console me now. I am changed. So are you. Forgive me, my friend, not for what I have done. But for what I am about to do.[35]

Context

In a touching scene, Ragnar speaks these words after Floki the boatbuilder has killed Athelstan, but they serve also as evidence of his internal dialogue. Grieving deeply, Ragnar speaks of learning from Athelstan and responds to his death as a personal loss. He is convinced that their different religious backgrounds will mean they cannot be reunited in death. His earlier hope that his god and Athelstan's God could replicate

35 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iZLoRObShM [accessed 27 September 2019].

their own friendship now seems unrealistic. Ragnar and Athelstan may have learned from one another, but their gods will not come together as had the two men.

Interpretation

Ragnar expresses a longing to be with Athelstan in heaven but is aware of the objections to his presence. Ragnar's ambivalence in relation to Christianity throughout the series is a deliberate trope, showing the fabled figure torn between two religious realities. From the end of this scene onwards, Ragnar wears Athelstan's necklace, from which hangs a large cross. Death looked like the best option to Ragnar, but at this point he seems to change his convictions. Ragnar exchanges death as a core metaphor of the Viking religion for life as a core metaphor of Christianity. The symbolic, ritual and religious meaning of death has changed.

Season 3 – Episode 9: Ragnar's Baptism

SINRIC: How much treasure do you want to lift the siege and go away? *(speaking French)* 5,760 pounds in gold and silver? He *[the French king]* urges you to accept the offer. Reinforcements are on their way to Paris.

RAGNAR: Tell him I know that no one is coming to save him. *(Sinric speaking French)*

RAGNAR: And the offer is not enough. There is something I also seek that has no tangible worth, but to me is more precious. *(Sinric speaking French)* I want to be baptized. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: He doesn't understand.

RAGNAR: I am a dying man. And when I die, I want to be reunited with my Christian friend, who happens to be in your heaven. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: He says you will go to hell, not heaven.

RAGNAR: That is not your decision to make. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: They will make arrangements for the ceremony.

RAGNAR: This is a man of God, is it not? And this is water, am I wrong? You will do it here, and you will do it now. *(Priest praying in French)*[36]

Context

In the context of the conflict with the French over Paris, we find further evidence of a crossing of religious boundaries and weighty exchange of religious meaning. Here,

36 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX0HPtXzWFk [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 7: Film still, Vikings, S3:E9 (00:40:33).

Fig. 8: Film still, Vikings, S3:E9 (00:42:39).

again in season 3, in the midst of financial negotiations Ragnar, who is ill and dying, expresses his strong desire to be baptized, in order that he might be reunited with his friend Athelstan when they are both in heaven.

Interpretation

As episode 6 of this same season made evident, Ragnar is committed to being in the presence of his friend. His view runs: Athelstan believed in a peaceful afterlife in heaven; Athelstan died; I believe in his truth claims and he must therefore be in heaven; I want to be with him; I need to go to heaven when I die. The Catholic bishop is not willing to perform the baptism and insists that a pagan like Ragnar will go to hell not heaven. The dialogue around this issue, which is in part in medieval French, bears traces of a deep confusion. Ragnar is subsequently baptized, an event tellingly staged: Ragnar and the baptizing priest are positioned centrally, with the French on one side of the water and Ragnar's family watching from the other, in a juxtaposition of religious backgrounds and values. Historically, baptisms of Viking kings did take place, as noted above.

Season 4 – Episode 14 The Dialogue about Heaven, Walhalla and the Existence of God/the gods

RAGNAR: What if your God does not exist?
ECBERT: My dear friend, what are you talking about?
RAGNAR: Your God, my gods, what if they don't exist?
ECBERT: Well, if God or the gods don't exist, then nothing has meaning.
RAGNAR: Or everything has meaning.
ECBERT: What on earth does that mean?
RAGNAR: Why do you need your God?
ECBERT: Well, if there were no gods, then anyone could do anything, and nothing would matter. You could do as you liked and nothing would be real and nothing would have meaning or value. So, even if the gods don't exist, it's still necessary to have them.
RAGNAR: If they don't exist, then they don't exist. We have to live with it.
ECBERT: Ah, yes, but you don't. You don't live with it. You only think of death. You only think of Valhalla. *(Sighs)*
RAGNAR: And all you think about is heaven! Which seems like a ridiculous place, where everybody is always happy.
ECBERT: Valhalla is ridiculous! All the dead warriors get to fight again in the courtyard each morning, and kill each other again. *(Chuckles)* And then they all have supper together! *(Chuckles)*
RAGNAR: Then they are both ridiculous.[37]

37 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3cimQ6yIT8 [accessed 4 October 2019].

Fig. 9: Film still, Vikings, S4:E14 (00:31:48).

Context

With our final fragment, we are at a point near the end of Ragnar's life. Now a prisoner of King Ecbert, Ragnar does not have long to live. The two men admire each other and cannot be described simply as enemies. Each is fascinated by the other, even to the extent that as Ragnar dies in the snake pit, Ecbert is there to watch, disguised as a monk.

Interpretation

This exchange is profound. Having questioned each other's perspective on the existence of the gods or God, the two men make light of their related beliefs about an afterlife. In S3:E9, Ragnar had been baptized in hopes of joining his friend Athelstan in heaven. Here, with irony and humor, Ecbert and Ragnar relativize each other's core convictions. They address the meaning of religion in general and its benefits for humanity, although their conversation does not reach a conclusive end. Ecbert's perspective has a particularly striking historical-theological angle, for in an age in which the existence and presence of God were not theologically disputed, Ecbert speaks of God/gods as not existing but required for meaning-making – here something of postmodern philosophy seeps into the script.

Practical Theology, Film and Religion

The fragments discussed here are drawn from larger patterns across the series that form from the exchange and sharing of religious meaning. They are not simply entertaining, but indicative of a serious attempt to provide a chain of narrative moments that reflect on existential questions and issues of religion and faith. As noted, scriptwriter Michael Hirst intentionally shaped the series to contain a variety of reflective dialogues of meaning. The idea of liquefaction connects very well to this dynamic within the the VIKINGS series (and probably in many others).

Film and modern media, and art too, have taken on some of the role previously held by institutional providers of religious meaning. The more film (in our case) is a deliberate construct to spread that meaning normatively, the greater the liquefaction. Christopher Deacy, who exegetes this reality, cites Conrad Ostwalt:

> We are uncomfortable with religion, yet we are faced with it at every turn. It is not the case that religion is fading with the secularization of society; rather, religion is being popularized, scattered, and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions. We find ourselves in a contradictory age in which secularity and religious images coexist.[38]

Deacy concludes that religion is located not simply in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, but also in the middle of popular culture[39]. In such a changing culture, might going to a movie be characterized as a religious activity?[40]

Conclusions

Like film, television series too, as we have seen in the case of VIKINGS, can address vital questions about the current shifting spiritual landscape. They can function as mirrors of a normative religious culture or indicate how popular culture ingests religious value and religious orientation. The audience response to the depiction on screen is part of a dialogue, a conversation as in this article, on religious themes. Film and television hold religious capital and make religious narratives accessible for audiences, even if unplanned by the scriptwriters. The audience will then benefit

38 Deacy 2005, 12.

39 Deacy 2005, 13.

40 Compare Marsh 2004. Marsh writes about film-viewing as a religious practice. See also Loughlin 2004.

from a guide to what it is seeing and hearing. The series VIKINGS is, as we have seen here, a rich source for reflection on religious themes, symbols and rituals and for understanding the complex interactions of historically intertwined religions, in this instance Christian and pagan. That interaction is nuanced. Strong and often accurate historical references create a liquefaction of meaning at so many points in the series, providing, for example, rich teaching moments for religious education and historical study that highlight the complexities of lived religion.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could include an in-depth qualitative project that addresses how audiences digest and interpret what they see in a series of this kind. Are audience responses in line with the initial motives of directors and scriptwriters? The tensions between intention and reception certainly merit further research, particularly in terms of identity construction, education and interreligious dialogue. What is the impact of the liquefaction of meaning through film and modern media on everyday religious practice? How might the popularization of religion affect religious experience?

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Hannah Griese

Jerusalem between Political Interests and Religious Promise

The Opening Ceremony of the New US Embassy as Media Ritual

Abstract

This article focuses on the opening ceremony for the new US embassy in Jerusalem, which took place on 14 May 2018. By analyzing a live transmission of the ceremony, it seeks to show how Jerusalem is constructed as a "holy city" through the ceremony and its medial representation. It thus aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East by focusing on the intersection of ritual, (sacred) space, conflict, and the media. More specifically, adopting a spatial approach to religion, drawing on this episode it looks at media rituals in the construction of holy space within the Middle East conflict.

Keywords

Middle East Conflict, Jerusalem, Holy Space, Religion and Media

Biography

Hannah Griese received both her Bachelor's degree and her Master's degree in the Study of Religion at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (LMU), where she is currently working on a doctoral thesis in the same field.

The Relocation of the US Embassy in the Midst of Middle East Conflict

Jerusalem is of utmost importance in the conflict in the Middle East above all because the city plays a key role for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for it is a "holy city" for all three faith traditions. But what is a "holy city"? Why does that character make Jerusalem so important in the conflict? And why do seemingly smaller epi-

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.7

sodes relating to Jerusalem have such great impact? Taking these questions as its starting point, this article focuses on a recent event, namely the opening ceremony for the new US embassy in Jerusalem, held on 14 May 2018. It explores the construction of Jerusalem as a holy city at the ceremony and via its medial representation.

President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 and his announcement that the US embassy would be relocated there were highly controversial. While Israeli politicians and members of national-religious Jewish groups were joined by Evangelical Christians in the United States in welcoming his decision, Arab nations and the broader international community condemned it. Given the contested status of Jerusalem, they warned, such a step could seriously compromise the peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.[1] Nevertheless, less than half a year later, the new embassy was officially opened – on Israel's 70th Independence Day. The opening ceremony, which was broadcast on television and the Internet in Israel, the United States and all over the world used explicit and more subtle religious references on various levels.

This article analyzes the live transmission of the opening ceremony in the version available on the YouTube channel of *TIME*, the US news magazine (fig. 1).[2] It seeks to highlight references to religion – specifically to Christian and Jewish traditions – and their role within the ceremony. From a methodological point of view, the video is scrutinized on three levels. First, on the rhetorical level, I examine the speeches held during the ceremony and explore their religious references. Secondly, on the performative level, I analyze the structure of the ceremony, the music that accompanied it and formal aspects such as its timing and location. Finally, on the level of medial representation, I analyze technical aspects such as camera shots and camera work. The article will demonstrate the interweaving, even merging, of religion and politics in this event. Multiple references to Christian and Jewish traditions and links to current events, places and persons created a dense web of religious legitimation of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which helped portray the city a holy space, superelevate[3] the participants and their co-operation and emphasize the value of the event. As a result, both city and participants acquire a power by association that bolsters their position in the Middle East conflict and, through the broadcast of the ceremony, is transmitted to a worldwide audience.

The article thus deepens our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East by focusing on the intersection of ritual, (sacred)

1 Collinson 2017.

2 TIME 2018.

3 The term "superelevate" is used in this article to indicate that someone or something is unduly elevated and overstated by idealizing and glorifying her/him/it.

Fig. 1: Beginning of the ceremony, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:01:32).

space, conflict and the media.[4] More specifically, adopting a spatial approach to religion, it draws on this episode to consider media rituals in the construction of holy space within the Middle East conflict.

The Ritual Production of (Sacred) Space and its Medial Representation

In this instance, a spatial approach to religion is particularly illuminating. Since space and religion are mutually formative, a focus on Jerusalem as space can help us understand how the city is constructed by religion and in turn shapes religion. Additionally, such an approach helps us uncover the entanglement of religion and space in Jerusalem and reveals related structures of power and control and their influence on the conflict in the Middle East. Above all, we can explore how power works in and through religious processes in relation to different levels, areas and conceptions of space.[5]

4 With "media", I mean here primarily audiovisual news media such as newscasts on television or websites.

5 Knott 2005, 8; Kong/Woods 2017, 2–3.

This article follows a social-constructivist approach to both religion and (sacred) space. Accordingly, religion is considered "a creative mode of cultural meaning-making initiated by humans, not beings from an unseen world".[6] Religion is taken to be a socially constituted symbol system that interacts with political and economic powers as do other institutions and ideological systems. In turn, space is conceptualized as "claimed, produced and negotiated by groups advancing specific interests".[7] Consequently, sacred space is not thought holy in itself; the designation "sacred" reflects the presence of religion in the space, which is a product of human action. This perspective therefore focusses on socio-religious practices that transform spaces and make them sacred. In the course of sacralization, a distinction is created and maintained by drawing a dividing line between the holy and the profane.[8]

Yet space is dynamic and constantly changing, or "always becoming, never complete", in the words of Lily Kong and Orlando Woods,[9] as it is continually produced and reproduced. Similarly, they note, religion is "not a fixed set of elements but an ever-evolving web of shared meanings and understandings that is used in different ways by different people".[10] This conceptualization of both space and religion as dynamic categories also explains why holy space can never be definitively holy, for it is part of a repeated pattern of sacralization and desacralization.

Space is generated, shaped, used and perceived by human imaginations, memories, actions and speech. Specific forms of such spatial practice which combine all of these elements in a particular way are rituals. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, humans produce space – including holy space – through ritual, and thus ritual is a process through which meaning is attributed to space. Ritual, then, is not a reaction to something "holy"; rather, someone or something is made holy by ritual.[11]

But how exactly does holy-making happen? And what is "holy", if holiness is not a substantial but a situational category? Here the definition of ritual provided by Catherine Bell is illuminating. Rather than provide a new conception of ritual per se, Bell focuses on "ritualization", which she understands as

> the production of ritualized acts, [which] can be described, in part, as that way of acting that sets itself off from other ways of acting by virtue of the way in which it does what it does. Even more circularly, it can be described as the stra-

6 McAlister 2005, 250.

7 Kong/Woods 2017, 5.

8 With this approach, I am not denying the existence of the "holy", but rather want to emphasize the necessity of a "methodological agnosticism" (see Smart 1973) within the study of religion.

9 Kong/Woods 2017, 6.

10 Kong/Woods 2017, 6.

11 Smith 1992, 105; Knott 2005, 35–43.

> tegic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values.[12]

In other words, the environment structured through subjective symbol systems appears to be the origin of these values, which consequently naturalizes them. Furthermore, ritualization is always connected to power, since it endows social actors with the authority to reinterpret reality.[13] Thus, Smith and Bell together provide us with an interpretation of how "holy space" is related to ritual and what constitutes "holy space": by means of ritual, actors and their concepts are intertwined with a space and thereby legitimized and endowed with power. Sacralization, then, can be understood as a specific process of power attribution.

Where does this interpretation place "religion" and what is religion's role within this theoretical framework? Religion is perceived as socially generated, and references to specific religious traditions and specific religious concepts have a purpose within the ceremony. As religious concepts can be understood as empowered by the process of sacralization, a space loaded with religious concepts reaps the rewards of those concepts' privileged relationship to power. Sacralized concepts are sacralized again and thereby become even more powerful. Religion is produced through ritual, but it is also reiterated in ritual, which produces in turn new forms of religion. In this circular process of sacralization and resacralization, religion is generated and regenerated and power accumulated and bound to space. Consisting of religious concepts, religious traditions are thus powerful sources of legitimization.

Kim Knott suggests that religious traditions have a privileged relationship to power because historically they were both institutionally and ideologically dominant. I propose we reverse that dynamic: religious traditions' dominance was a product of their privileged relationship to power, which stemmed from their generation through sacralization. Even though, as Knott notes, this dominance is currently questioned in many societies, religion still plays a key role in many conflicts about space, often in a supporting role.[14] Furthermore, for many groups, religious conceptions of space are more important than secular ones, which can lead to tensions or (violent) conflicts. Religion can be used to legitimize claims to space, which can be especially significant in the case of territorial conflicts. Permeated by religion, sacred spaces share the power of religion – and whoever has the ability to perform a ritual also has the power to define, and thus claim, space. However, no appro-

12 Bell 1992, 140.
13 Bell 1992, 141.
14 Knott 2005, 27–28.

priation is final. The struggle for sacred space goes on and on.[15] Sacred space is an instrument of power in conflict, providing the actor who has the resources to claim that sacred space with an advantage.

In this article, I take the opening ceremony for the new US embassy as a ritual, which will allow us to understand how the ceremony functions. The ceremony, or ritual action, took place in Jerusalem and was about Jerusalem. It therefore contributes, I suggest, to the construction of Jerusalem, which is loaded with a subjective reality which however appears to be objective.

The ritual of the ceremony was and is broadcast by media and therefore it must also be conceptualized as media ritual. As rituals, like all aspects of human life, are subject to processes of digitalization and medialization, ritual and media must be seen not as two distinct categories but as interacting and overlapping processes.[16] The relationship between ritual and media is multidimensional, for media represent rituals, and rituals are subject to medialization, meaning that media are integrated into rituals, and rituals are adjusted to the logics of the media.[17]

Moreover, media do not just document rituals; they also modify them. On the screen the audience sees not the event itself but a representation of the event, and representations are always selective, providing a certain point of view on the event. Media events are constructions, not expressions of a reality.[18] Additionally, media are not simple institutions of information transfer, but rather social actors with their own ideas, values and norms. Through their selectivity, which determines which events and actors are perceived and how, media produce conceptualizations of the world and interpretative cultural models. Media claim to present "reality", but they are constructing selective images of reality while professing authenticity and participation in extra-medial happenings, especially in the case of live broadcasts.[19]

Jerusalem between Political and Religious Interests

Jerusalem is constructed as a "sacred space" by actors who in performing their (religious) concepts connect those concepts to the city. In the case of the opening ceremony, actors from Israel and the United States advanced religious concepts derived from Christian and Jewish traditions. The existing conceptualizations of Jerusalem

15 Chidester/Linenthal 1995, 19.
16 Grimes 2011, 20.
17 Couldry 2004, 57; Sumiala 2014, 943.
18 Couldry 2004, 57; Grimes 2011, 5; 20.
19 Couldry 2004, 95–97; Bartsch/Brück/Fahlenbach 2008, 11–18.

within these traditions shaped the actors' images of Jerusalem and were therefore reiterated in the ritual of the ceremony.

Both Judaism and Christianity contain discrete conceptualizations of Jerusalem, with the utopic "heavenly Jerusalem" a spiritual and symbolic center and the "earthly Jerusalem" an actual geographical-historical city. Through history and up to today, these two clearly distinguishable concepts have been interwoven in various ways, including politically.[20] The entanglement of these two versions of Jerusalem is performed within the city itself, as we see in the example of the ritual of the opening ceremony. Through such actions Jerusalem is loaded with religious concepts and constructed as a holy city, as "heavenly Jerusalem". Moreover, throughout history Jerusalem has been variously charged as sacred space by claims and rituals, and as a result many levels of sacralization have accumulated within cultural memory. The repeated connection of religious concepts to the city has entangled its earthly and heavenly histories. In a circular process, actors through the time have constructed and still construct Jerusalem by loading it with their concepts; these constructions shape conceptualizations of Jerusalem within religious traditions that are reused to reconstruct Jerusalem. The many layers of accumulated sacralization and legitimized concepts form a bulwark around the space.

For our interpretation of the ceremony, we need also consider the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem although – indeed, precisely because – it does not appear in the ceremony. This claim is primarily fueled by the significance of Jerusalem in Muslim tradition. Called "al-Quds"("the Holy") by Muslims, Jerusalem is the third holiest city after Mecca and Medina and al-Aqsa mosque is considered the place from which the prophet Muhammad started his journey to heaven.[21] The Palestinian claim is absent from the ceremony, which thus works not only by performing a certain version of Jerusalem, but also by excluding another. From this perspective, the struggle for Jerusalem can be understood as a struggle between conflicting claims to sacred space.

The modern debate over Jerusalem, with the city a central bone of contention in the Middle East conflict, is part of this struggle. Even though, as Jan Stetter and Stephan Busse suggest, the concrete premises of the current conflict over Jerusalem are modern, the legitimacy patterns that characterize the conflict come from much older religious narratives. The modern conflict, however modern it may be, has dimensions that reach back far into history.[22]

Today religious narratives about Jerusalem serve as powerful sources of legitimization, and references to the "heavenly Jerusalem" justify claims to the "earthly

20 Kristianssen 2015, 2.
21 Wasserstein 2007, 27–28.
22 Busse/Stetter 2018, 23.

Jerusalem". But why do the actors want to possess the "earthly Jerusalem" in the first place? I argue that Jerusalem is a variously loaded sacred space and that because of its privileged position of power, it can grant a power and legitimacy that will prove an advantage in conflict. In sum, I suggest, religious concepts are used to gain control of the "heavenly Jerusalem" and thereby own the "earthly Jerusalem".

Israeli Politics between "Heavenly" and "Earthly" Jerusalem

> This morning, the Israel Defense Forces liberated Jerusalem. We have united Jerusalem, the divided capital of Israel. We have returned to the holiest of our Holy Places, never to part from it again.
>
> *– Moshe Dayan, 6 June 1967*[23]

The entanglement of the heavenly and earthly Jerusalems is evident in Jewish tradition: Jews yearn for the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the focus of their messianic hopes, and thus for centuries have turned to the earthly Jerusalem as a site of prayer or as a pilgrimage destination.[24] Thus, the hope for the heavenly Jerusalem is projected onto the earthly Jerusalem. The restoration of Jewish sovereignty is, however, Bernard Wasserstein contends, a relatively new idea. The religious veneration of the city did not entail, he argues, concrete obligations regarding the earthly Jerusalem, and indeed, when the idea of a political restoration emerged in the 19th century, it was rejected by the majority of orthodox Jews, who were skeptical of Zionism, which they held to be a blasphemy that sought to anticipate God's own plan for salvation. Consequently, Zionism long remained a decidedly secular movement, at least in terms of the (non-)participation of religious actors.[25]

The Zionists' relationship with Jerusalem has been ambivalent. For a long time, Jerusalem was not a focus of their interests. Indeed for the early Zionists, Jerusalem represented the old world that they wanted to leave behind, for they associated Jerusalem and its citizens with religious zealotry, dirt and parasitism, and consequently they contemptuously neglected the city. At the beginning of the First World War, however, the Zionists revised their strategy for reaching their goal of sovereignty in Palestine and a homeland for the Jewish people, with Jerusalem now part of what was in effect a cultural struggle in which the city functioned as a national symbol of a glorious Jewish past.[26] Here again, we see both the distinction between and intertwining of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalems.

23 Speech of Moshe Dayan, 6 June 1967, cited in Kristianssen 2015, 23.
24 Wasserstein 2007, 22; Reiter 2013, 120–121.
25 Wasserstein 2007, 19–22; Baumgart-Ochse 2010, 32.
26 Katz 1995, 279–283; 287; Wasserstein 2007, 22–23; Mayer 2008, 224–225.

Jerusalem became a singular focus for Zionists after 1967, when, after Israel's victory in the Six Day War, the previously marginal group of religious Zionists gained more power in Israeli politics, accompanying a shift to the right. The nationalistic-messianic wave within Israel saw the influence of the religious Zionists increase greatly, along with the Settler movement, and become more mainstream. Drawing on their religious-messianic interpretation of events, which saw Israel's remarkable victory as the direct intervention of God, the religious Zionists superelevated the State of Israel, strongly emphasizing Jewish particularism and their natural and unique claim to the land of Israel.[27] Since 1967 the fusion of Jewish elements and Zionism has created a distinct religious-national ethos. Israeli Judaism turned from the religion of a nation to a national religion.[28] To legitimize that process, the Zionists sought a construct of Jerusalem that merged religious conceptualizations of the heavenly Jerusalem with the earthly city.

The US, its Evangelical Christians and Jerusalem

> If a line has to be drawn, then let it be drawn around both of us – Christians and Jews, Americans and Israelis. We are one. We are united. And we will not be discouraged, and we will not be defeated. In the end, when the last battle has been fought, the flag of Israel will still be flying over the ancient walls of Jerusalem. Israel will prevail. – *Pastor John Hagee*[29]

> In Lindsey's[30] framework, Israel will have the misfortune of hosting the battle of Armageddon, with all its attendant destruction, but Jews can take heart in the knowledge that, if they survive, they will be saved by converting to Christianity. – *Paul Miller*[31]

Evangelical Christians and their conceptualizations of Jerusalem played an important role in the opening ceremony for the US embassy. Protestantism has had a centuries-long influence on US politics, and today Evangelical Christians are at the forefront of that symbiosis.[32] In the 1980s and 1990s, aided by the rise of neo-conservatism, Evangelical Christians developed into a powerful lobby group with a de-

27 Hellinger 2008, 534–535; Mayer 2008, 240; Baumgart-Ochse 2010, 34–36; Reiter 2013, 116.

28 Javadikouchaksaraei 2017, 43.

29 Pastor John Hagee, cited in Durbin 2013, 325.

30 Hal Lindsey is an American Christian writer and conservative commentator who – in his books as well as in his television show – offers an interpretation of "global developments through the theological framework of dispensationalism" (Miller 2014, 12).

31 Miller 2014, 13.

32 Newman 2007, 583–585.

cisive influence on American (foreign) politics. One of the principal agendas of the Christian Right was to lobby for Israel. Vital to maintaining Republicans in Congress, it advocates the military dominance of America and unlimited support for Israel.[33] Christian Zionists form a sub-group within the Christian Right that focuses on that support for Israel.

Since its foundation, the State of Israel has been a central concern of US foreign policy, and today the most vociferous advocates are found not necessarily in the American Jewish community but rather amongst Evangelical Christians. The involvement of the latter is based on a particular reading of the Old Testament as well as a unique eschatology in which Israel plays a decisive role.[34] Within Dispensationalism, a biblical interpretative method that developed in England in the 19th century, the return of the Jews to Palestine is a necessary stage in the progression towards the Second Coming of Christ.[35] With the foundation of the State of Israel, the Dispensationalists gained credibility, reached the American mainstream and established themselves as a political force. New organizations were founded, including Christians United for Israel, which rejects a two-state solution or any territorial concessions to the Palestinians.[36] Today the Christian Right insists that the survival of Israel must be a priority for American foreign policy, whatever the financial or political implications.[37]

Christian Zionists' attitude towards Jews is, however, very ambivalent. While they believe Israel is protected by God, the fate of the Jews is uncertain: only that small part who convert to Christianity will be saved, while the majority will join the forces of the anti-Christ and will be destroyed during the battle of Armageddon.[38] Although Jewish groups in the United States and Israel vehemently opposed the alliance of Israel and the Christian Zionists, they accepted the political coalition because it serves Israeli interests in the United States.[39] Thus the American approach to Israel in general and to Jerusalem in particular is markedly influenced by an understanding of the Bible and a conceptualization of the United States that are both profoundly shaped by Evangelical ideas.

33 Haynes 2012, 37–38; Braml 2005, 19; 24.
34 Miller 2014, 7–8.
35 Mearsheimer/Walt 2007, 188–189; Miller 2014, 8–11.
36 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 154; Mearsheimer/Walt 2007, 190–191.
37 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 155.
38 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 159–161.
39 Haija 2006, 85.

The Opening Ceremony of the New US Embassy as Media Ritual

With the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, President Donald Trump made real one of his promises made during the 2016 election campaign – a promise made by presidents and candidates before him, but never previously realized.[40] Trump has also spoken of a new approach to negotiations to create a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. That new approach was, at the time of the opening ceremony, yet to be explained and certainly the decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv was not greeted peacefully.[41]

The relocation of the embassy infuriated Israel's Arabic neighbors, especially the Palestinian National Authority, which claims East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. The wave of violence that the Palestinian leadership announced in December 2017 did not occur, but tensions rose. The weeks before the opening ceremony saw mass protests in the Gaza Strip, with many deaths, and during the opening ceremony itself, there were protests and violent clashes, again especially along the border with the Gaza Strip.[42]

The ceremony lasted about 80 minutes. It included speeches given by American and Israeli politicians and by two Evangelical pastors and a rabbi as well as ceremonial elements (fig. 2) and two musical interludes.[43] The video analyzed here is of a live broadcast by the US news portal *TIME*, but the ceremony was broadcast by many news channels, especially in Israel and the United States, in the same form, as far as I can establish. People around the world could experience the event live or watch it subsequently. Since the ceremony was held in English, it is easily accessed by an international audience.

As noted, I analyze the video on three levels: rhetorical, performative and in terms of medial representation. My focus is on the speeches, which formed the core of the ceremony. The rhetorical level is therefore pre-eminent, supported by the other two levels, which frame the speeches and influence their reception worldwide.

40 Amerika Dienst 2017.

41 Amerika Dienst 2017; Borger/Beaumont 2017. In January 2020, President Trump has finally unveiled his Middle East peace plan, containing a kind of Two-State-Solution. Given the many concessions made to Israel at expense of Palestinian claims, the Palestinian Authority rejected it (Holmes/Taha/Balousha/McGreal 2020).

42 Anon 2018a; Anon 2018b; Reimann 2018; Underwood 2018.

43 The speakers were, in order, US-Ambassador David Friedman, Pastor Robert Jeffress, Rabbi Zalman Wolowik, US-Secretary of State John J. Sullivan, Donald Trump (via video-message), Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Pastor John Hagee.

Fig. 2: Unveiling the seal, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:29:01).

Rhetorical Level

The speeches given during the ceremony contain religious references of various types. First, there are obvious allusions to Jewish and Christian traditions: for example, almost all the speakers ask for God's blessing or make use of quotations from the Bible. The speeches also contain, on a deeper level, narratives and motifs that refer to Jewish and/or Christian traditions. The religious references in these argumentation patterns at the base of the text are of greatest interest to me. The references to religion within the text can be divided across three (interconnected) lines of argument: first, the construction of Jerusalem as space; secondly, the staging of Israel and the United States individually and of their alliance; thirdly, the presentation of the relocation of the embassy.

In the speeches, Jerusalem is conceptualized as "religious space" and as a modern city, as "profane space". The religious concept is dominant, with Jerusalem shaped in almost all speeches as religious space, irrespective of whether the speaker is a religious leader or politician. In first place, the terminology makes this case: Jerusalem is often called a "holy city" or "city of God" or described as the "eternal capital of the Jewish people" (or with variants of that phrase). Behind these terms lie conceptualizations of space drawn from or entangled with religious traditions. Thus, Jerusalem is superelevated; no longer a purely earthly city, it has the higher status of a heavenly city.

Fig. 3: Netanyahu, *U. S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trumps Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:57:47).

Moreover, almost all the speakers refer to the history of Jerusalem, including its biblical origins. They look back over 3,000 years and stress that King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish people. On this point Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech (fig. 3) is exemplary:

> What a difference, what a difference. So, for me this spot brings back personal memories, but for our people, it evokes profound collective memories of the greatest moments we have known on this City on a Hill. In Jerusalem/ In Jerusalem, Abraham passed the greatest test of faith and the right to be the father of our nation. In Jerusalem, King David established our capital three thousand years ago. In Jerusalem, King Solomon built our Temple, which stood for many centuries. In Jerusalem, Jewish exiles from Babylon rebuilt the Temple, which stood for many more centuries. In Jerusalem, the Maccabees rededicated that Temple and restored Jewish sovereignty in this land. And it was here in Jerusalem some two thousand years later that the soldiers of Israel spoke three immortal words, "Har ha'bayit be'yadeinu", "The Temple Mount is in our hands", [Applause] words that lifted the spirit of the entire nation. We are in Jerusalem and we are here to stay.[44]

44 TIME 2018, (01:01:50–01:03:10).

Fig. 4: Kushner, *U. S. Opens New Embassy In Jerusalem After Trump's Decision To Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:43:43).

Netanyahu draws a clear connection between biblical history and current events and ascribes them the same status. The religious reference here consists in the first place of an allusion to biblical history. The Bible and its authority are deployed to load Jerusalem in a certain way; the aligning of current events with the biblical Jerusalem endows them with the same authority. The eternal connection of the Jews with Jerusalem is emphasized, legitimizing their possession of the city. That "Jerusalem" is not necessarily the earthly Jerusalem, for the archaeological evidence casts doubt on the linkage, but rather the heavenly Jerusalem, which is a central longing in Judaism. The equation of the earthly Jerusalem with that heavenly Jerusalem ensures the latter becomes the rightful object of desire, and a rightful possession, in turn.

We turn to the portrayal of the United States, Israel and the alliance between them. The United States is explicitly presented as powerful and its position at Israel's side is emphasized, as we see in the speech given by Jared Kushner, President Trump's representative in the Middle East (fig. 4),

> presidents before him have backed down from their pledge to move the American embassy, once in office, this president delivered, because when President Trump makes a promise, he keeps it. But today also demonstrates American

Fig. 5: Robert Jeffress, *U. S. Opens New Embassy In Jerusalem After Trump's Decision To Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:14:24).

> leadership. By moving our Embassy to Jerusalem, we have shown the world once again that the United States can be trusted. We stand with our friends and our allies and above all else, we have shown that the United States of America will do what's right and so we have.[45]

Here the United States is presented as a trustworthy nation that stands with its allies and does "what's right", language that claims moral superiority for the United States. For Kushner, peace is made possible by a strong America that recognizes and effects the truth, which is, in this case, that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. The United States is tasked with doing good, with the responsibility to do "what's right".

Several times Israel is presented as a "blessing to the world". The first occasion comes in the words of Pastor Jeffress, of First Baptist Church in Dallas (fig. 5), who conflates the ancient and modern Israels:

> Four thousand years ago, you said to your servant Abraham that you would make him the father of a great nation, a nation, through whom the whole world would be blessed. And now, as we look back, we see how Israel has been that

45 TIME 2018, (00:45:30–00:46:10).

> blessing to the entire world through her innovations in medicine, technology and energy. But most of all, Israel has blessed this world by pointing us to you, the one true God through the message of her prophets, the scriptures and the messiah.[46]

The nation of Israel in the Bible is equated here with the contemporary state of Israel, and the "blessing" that the ancient Israel would be to the world is put on a level with the technical innovations of the modern Israel. The Israel of today is presented as God-given and beneficial, and thus legitimized.

Kushner in turn describes Israel as a blessing:

> Israel proves every day the boundless power of freedom. This land is the only land in the Middle East in which Jews, Muslims and Christians and people of all faiths participate and worship freely according to their beliefs. Israel protects women's rights, freedom of speech and the right of every individual to reach their God-given potential. These are the same values that the United States cherishes. These are the values that bind us together. These are also the values that have made Israel one of the most vibrant nations in the world. This tiny population has spurred advancements in technology, medicine and agriculture, making the world a healthier, safer and more prosperous place. These are the blessings we hope Israel can one day share with its neighbors.[47]

Kushner points to liberal-democratic values like religious freedom, women's rights and freedom of speech, which make Israel an island of freedom in the dark seas of the Middle East, a land that prospers because God loves it. The United States must support Israel as part of its own mission from God, evident in their similar values.

Finally, we turn to the representation of the relocation itself. Almost all the speakers emphasize that Jerusalem is undoubtedly the capital of Israel and that consequently the relocation of the embassy is a recognition of general truth and a reality. "Truth" is a repeated theme across these speeches. For example, Zalman Wolowik, an Orthodox rabbi from Long Island (fig. 6), draws a picture of the unchanging truth that is the eternal connection of Jews with Jerusalem. In a next step, this "truth" is connected to a hope for peace:

> Peace is ingrained in the marrow of Jerusalem, but the prophet Zachariah said: "You must love truth and peace" Peace, Shalom, is the inseparable sister of

46 TIME 2018, (00:14:17–00:14:52).
47 TIME 2018, (00:47:19–00:48:06).

Fig. 6: Zalman Wolowik, *U. S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:17:32).

> truth. I pray that from today's exalting of truth, there flow to Jerusalem, her neighbors, and to the entire world a true and perfect peace. May that day, visualized by the prophets swiftly arrive. When nation shall not take up its sword against nation. When there will be harmony, not war, respect, not envy, love, not hate. In the words of the psalmist who sang his longing for peace not far from right here, pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be at peace. Amen.[48]

Drawing from the Bible, in this passage Wolowik declare that truth and peace go hand in hand. Recognition of the truth is a precondition for peace. He draws a vision of the future that begins with the relocation of the embassy, which thus becomes the starting point of, or a station in, an eschatological process. Netanyahu also calls the event the beginning of peace and then connects this peace to truth:

> But I believe it's also a great day for peace. I want to thank Jared, Jason and David for your tireless efforts to advance peace, and for your tireless efforts to advance the truth. The truth and peace are interconnected. A peace that is built

48 TIME 2018, (00:19:20–00:20:10).

on lies will crash on the rocks of Middle Eastern reality. You can only build peace on truth, and the truth is that Jerusalem has been and will always be the capital of the Jewish people, the capital of the Jewish state. [Applause] Truth, peace and justice – as our Justice here, Hanan Melcer, can attest – truth, peace and justice, this is what we have, and this is what we believe in. The prophet Zechariah declared over 2,500 years ago, [Hebrew] "So said the Lord, 'I will return to Zion and I will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth.'" May the opening of this embassy in this city spread the truth far and wide, and may the truth advance a lasting peace between Israel and all our neighbors. God bless the United States of America and God bless Jerusalem, the eternal, undivided capital of Israel.[49]

The concept of an "eternal truth" – that Jerusalem is forever the inseparable capital of Israel – is here deeply bound in with the city itself. Jerusalem *is* the "city of truth", as, again, the Bible proves. Recognition of this eternal truth must lead to peace, so the event being celebrated can only be beneficial. No explanation is given of how the embassy might contribute to peace, an absence all the more striking as many expect the opposite.

The Palestinians are almost never mentioned in the speeches, and certainly not in relation to their claim to Jerusalem. Within the ceremony, no reference is made to the conflict about Jerusalem, with the relocation of the embassy framed in the speeches exclusively in positive terms. The veiling of the Palestinians and their claims during the ceremony denies their existence.

Performative and Medial Representation Levels

We turn now to the staging of the ceremony, looking at aspects such as its structure, timing, location and music, and at its medial representation. How does the raw material of the speeches become ceremony or, indeed, religious ritual? How does the audience view the events depicted on their screens and why?

On the performative level, we first consider the symbolic significance of the time and place selected for the ceremony (and for the embassy). The ceremony was held on Israel's 70th Independence Day and on the border ("green line") that divided Jerusalem before 1967. Both time and place speak of Israel's authority and power over the Palestinians. The speeches given by the religious figures came at the start and end of the ceremony. Sermon-like and prayer-like, these speeches are reminiscent of a church service and forge the ceremony as religious ritual.

49 TIME 2018, (01: 06:25–01:08:02).

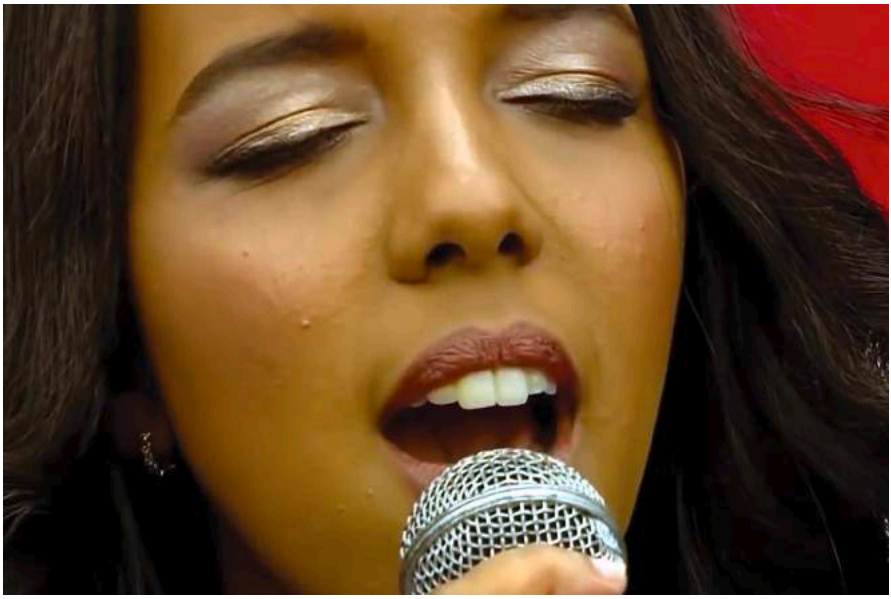

Fig. 7: Chagit Yasso, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:35:05).

At two points in the ceremony, a band plays. The choice of both singer and songs is symbolical. The singer, Chagit Yasso (fig. 7), is the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, whence they fled and were "saved" by Israel. The two songs are "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen[50] and "May Peace Yet Come to Us All" by Mosh Ben Ari[51], an Israeli artist. Both songs are sung half in English and half in Hebrew. The songs underline the message conveyed by the speeches. "Hallelujah" contains references to the biblical King David and it too emphasizes the 3,000 years of Jerusalem's Jewish history and the legitimizing continuity from King David to today's State of Israel. "May Peace Yet Come to Us All" again relates the event to a promised peace, underlining its beneficial character. Moreover, music is part of religious worship and arouses emotion. Almost all of the speakers – religious figures and politicians alike – ask for God´s blessing at the end of their speeches, suggesting God's participation, perhaps even that God has brought about this event.

Turning to the medial representation, we observe a play with closeness and distance. Camera settings showing the speakers (fig. 8) are interspersed with settings that show the audience. Additionally, wide settings that show the whole audience

50 TIME 2018, (00:31:20–00:35:18).
51 TIME 2018, (01:13:30 – 01:16:35).

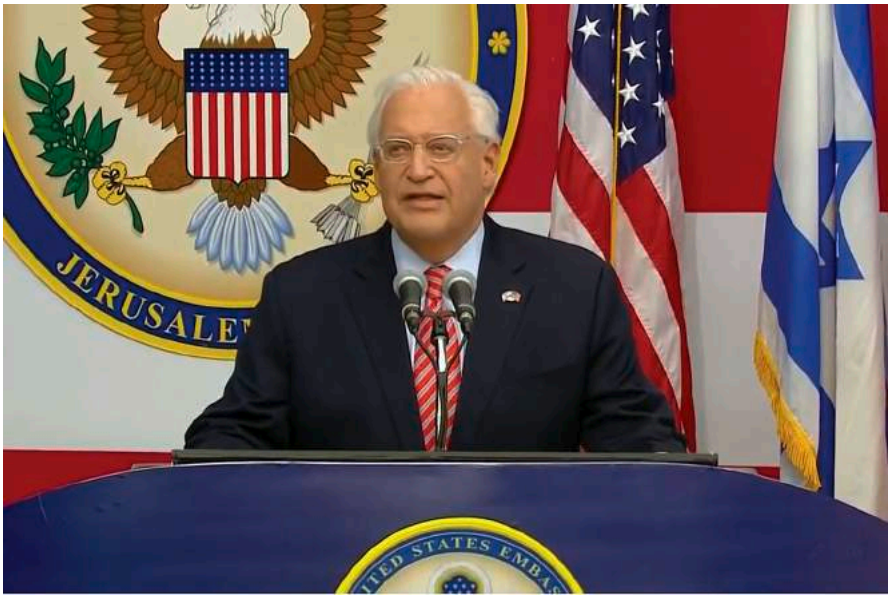

Fig. 8: David Friedman, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:03:55).

Fig. 9: Audience from above, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:40:55).

Fig. 10: Audience in close setting, *U. S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:13:05).

Fig. 11: Ivanka Trump, *U. S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (*TIME* 2018, 00:43:56).

from above (fig. 9) are exchanged with settings that zoom in to the speaker or to a single person or group within the audience (fig. 10 and 11). The shots often concentrate on VIPs like Kushner, Ivanka Trump or Netanyahu. The switching between speaker and audience suggests a dialogue between them or their interaction. The viewer of the event on a screen sees both the speakers close up, with each speaker's demeanor discernible, and the behavior of the audience at the event, for example whether they applaud. Thus, these viewers see people in large numbers, stressing the importance of the event, as well as close-ups of individuals within the audience. With the mood on site transported to this distant audience, the latter can empathize with the emotions of the local audience. They feel as if they are participating in the event, as if they are part of the ritual. The settings also change, with views from above providing an overview and views from within the audience giving the impression that the viewer is amongst the guests.

The Religio-Political Legitimization of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

At the rhetorical level, a dense network of religious legitimations of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is produced, with many references to Jewish and Christian traditions. The religious references are found both in quotations from the Bible and in the narratives of the argumentation. Jerusalem is constructed as sacred space and the actors and the event are superelevated by religious conceptualizations of space that focus on the heavenly Jerusalem as well as by the emphasis on American exceptionalism and Jewish particularism. The alliance of the United States and Israel and the event of the opening ceremony itself are conveyed as beneficial.

At the performative level, the ceremony is staged as (religious) ritual in the speeches given by religious figures, the timing of these speeches during the event and the repeated requests for God's blessing. The music and choice of songs and singer bolster the message. Furthermore, the ceremony overall is endowed with particular meaning by the highly symbolical choice of space and time. In sum, the performative level sees the event superelevated and given "holy" status. At the level of medial representation, the play between closeness and distance involves the distant viewer, who then feels more like a participant. Close-up shots bring an emotional component, for they provide access to the responses of individuals within the audience.

How do these elements relate to the theoretical framework set out at the start of this article? With their respective religious ideas, the actors (the United States

and Israel) perform a ritual that constructs Jerusalem as sacred space. Jerusalem already bears a distinct religious identity, which is then bolstered by the reiteration of powerful religious concepts. Religious concepts are naturalized and the actors sacralized, giving both Jerusalem and the performers a standing that has consequences for the Middle East conflict. Religion's special role is a result of its privileged relationship to power, which makes loading a space with religious concepts especially lucrative. The sacralization of the actors gives them power and a monopoly of truth. A complex web of legitimization is created, binding together the actors, their concepts and space, which then legitimize one another and form an unassailable whole, within which and through which power functions in multiple ways. Already-powerful religious concepts derived from different religious traditions (according to a particular interpretation) are advanced in the ceremony, where they merge with political interest to form a powerful synthesis that serves the actors by legitimizing their claims and giving them a powerful position within the conflict. Thus, the religio-political legitimization of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is intensified.

Moreover, the absence from the ceremony of the Palestinians' claim to Jerusalem and of the holy status of the city in Islam erases their existence. The connection between power and sacred space is realized: since Israel is more powerful, unlike the Palestinians it has the resources to produce sacred space (e.g. to perform rituals and convey them to a worldwide audience), which heightens its powerful position within the conflict. The struggle over Jerusalem can thus be described as a struggle over sacred space: the group that is most successful in endowing Jerusalem with its religious concepts can claim Jerusalem, which Israel is evidently in the stronger position to do.

In the ceremony in particular and in the Middle East conflict in general, religion and politics are tightly interwoven and sometimes cannot be separated. Where the substantial ends and the symbolical begins is often unclear. Conceptualizations of space (the "heavenly" and the "earthly" Jerusalems) are often equated. (Sacred) space, ritual and media are evidently central concepts for an analysis of the entanglements of politics and religion in Middle East conflict, as we have seen from this telling example.

The holiness of Jerusalem is not absolute, but rather a product of political, societal and cultural factors with which the city interacts. With religion and politics in turn interwoven into the Middle East conflict, the constructed holiness of Jerusalem is a vital factor in that conflict.

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Media Reviews

Stefanie Knauss

Book Review
S. Brent Plate, Religion and Film
Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World

Second edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, xviii + 207 pages, ISBN: 978-0-231-17675-0

How can we think about religion and film as being structurally analogous, and consequently, what can we learn about religion through the study of film, and about film through the study of religious rituals, myths and sacred spaces? In the much expanded second edition of his volume *Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, S. Brent Plate continues to think about these questions and elaborates on ideas developed in the first edition of this volume (published in 2008 by Wallflower). Plate's basic thesis has not changed since then: in the preface to the first edition, republished here in the second one, he writes, "I argue that religion and film are *like* each other, and that their similarities exist on a formal level" (xiii). Both film and religion frame the world, give meaning to specific elements of existence and experience, and thus create order out of chaos. Drawing on Peter Berger and Nelson Goodman, with Emile Durkheim visible in the background, Plate describes the worldmaking happening in religion and film as a re-creation that uses the materials of the present world to create an alternative (better?) version of it. Religious and filmic re-creation of the world is at the same time recreation, a fantasy, a vision that takes us out of the everyday, that allows us to see the world differently. Given these structural and formal analogies between religion and film, Plate argues that "by paying attention to the ways films are constructed, we can shed light on the ways religions are constructed, and vice versa" (3).

Plate's work is situated in what he considers the third wave in the field, when methodologies move away from literary models to more media-specific approaches (with attention to the specifically filmic ways of worldmaking through, for example, camera movement, framing, sound or editing), and attention shifts from the analysis of a film itself to how it is received by and what it does to its audience. Consequently, this second edition includes a particularly interesting expanded reflection on the

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.8

audience's experience during and after the screening, paying special attention to the sensory, embodied nature of reception, and the "afterlife" of a film in real-life rituals, spaces and experiences (chapters 4, 5 and 6). Plate also combines the earlier two waves' respective attention to arthouse cinema and Hollywood, drawing on a wide range of films from Hollywood and US independent cinema, international cinema, contemporary films and material from the very early times of filmmaking. With generous illustrations serving as visual arguments and including stills from less accessible old films, the volume provides a substantial theoretical advancement in the reflection on film and religion through in-depth engagement with cinema across the breadth of time and space.

The volume is divided in three parts, which focus, respectively, on parallels in aesthetic choices in religion and film, on audience experience during the screening and on the traces that films leave after the screening in "real life". The first part's investigation of the "similarities of aesthetic tactics between religion making and filmmaking" (4) analyzes the filmic forms used to put the afilmic world into the diegetic world of films, looking in particular at myth, ritual and sacred space (chapters 1–3). While the discussion of myth is probably the most developed, all chapters show how the study of film and its techniques can contribute to the understanding of religion, and vice versa, for example by analyzing the way in which myths, like films, are made through the montage of pre-existing, multimedia elements rather than being original creations *ex nihilo*. Especially interesting in this part is Plate's analysis of how myths, rituals and spaces in film and religion are shaped by ideologies and can serve to perpetuate them, such as the myth of white male supremacy or the gendered hierarchies of spatial orientation, with the vertical axis being associated with the masculine and transcendent, and the horizontal axis with femininity and worldliness. But as both films and religions re-create the world, they can also function to resignify spaces or re-edit myths in a way that reconfigures their ideological matrix and thus provides an alternative vision.

The second part focuses on reception, and especially, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological tradition, on an analysis of the viewing subject that takes seriously their embodied presence and participation in the film. This includes a reflection on the body as a medium and the synaesthetic nature of reception in the cinema, when audio-visual stimuli can create a variety of sensory perceptions that combine to make sense of a film (chapter 4). Returning to the notion of ritual, Plate notes how film functions much like religious rituals in forming sensory perceptions and physical and emotional responses. The ethical dimension of such embodied reception is developed through an analysis of the filmic technique of close-ups in dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas's reflection on the face of the other person as issuing an ethical challenge (chapter 5). Drawing on cognitive sciences as well as the Hindu

practice of *darshan* (a devotional practice in which the devotee connects with the deity through an extended exchange of gazes), Plate argues that cinema can enable a form of identification with the other person as the other, with consequent shifts in perceptions and attitudes: "As the viewer becomes conscious of her or his sensing body perceiving words, music, and images, she or he also becomes conscious of the self's relation to, and dependence on, others" (150).

The third part (chapter 6) focuses on the afterlife of films in real life, and on the way that films can influence religious rituals (such as Star Trek–themed Bar/t Mitzvahs) or become the source of their own ritual performances (such as those surrounding screenings of The Rocky Horror Picture Show [Jim Sharman, GB/US 1975]). Plate's underlying thesis about the necessary blurring of neat distinctions between film and reality is most clearly developed in this part in the investigation of how filmic narratives, characters, even whole filmic universes become a part of the everyday-life worlds and communities of their viewers.

Plate's volume offers important contributions to the development of theory and analytical methods in the field of religion and film. Especially his attention to the embodied reality of viewers and the role of body in meaning making and worldmaking are important contributions to an emerging conversation. His careful analysis of a film itself, its reception and the ways in which it becomes incorporated in the lives, rituals and myths of the world of its viewers vastly expands the scope of scholarly focus in the field and opens up new and exciting avenues for research. Plate shows how studying film contributes to our understanding of religion, while studying religion allows us to better understand film. In particular, his analysis of the lived practice of film watching and ritual making contributes to the further development of the concept of "religion", shifting the attention from teachings or theologies to lived practices, a shift that is already being theorized in the field of religious studies but is given a new dimension through the focus on film.

Given this broadened understanding of religion and Plate's attention to the religious function of secular rituals, the Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane which Plate evokes does not seem to provide a very helpful theoretical frame to understand how religion is lived in the continuum of filmic and afilmic reality. A shift in theoretical framing might provide further inspiration and the language and tools to develop some of Plate's broader ideas – for example about space or the connection between the body of the film and that of the viewer – with a similar degree of detail as in the case of his analysis of myth in film and religion. It would also be interesting to see Plate's argument developed beyond the classical categories of religious studies of myth, ritual and space, departing perhaps instead from important categories of filmmaking, such as rhythm, light or mise-en-scène.

With its wide range of films discussed and its depth of theoretical reflections, in its second edition Plate's study elaborates on previously made points and adds substantial new material in response to the recent developments in the reflection on the relationship between film and religion. His volume is a stimulating contribution to the field of film and religion that will be read with profit by scholars in the field, graduate students and others with an interest in this conversation.

Filmography

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Jim Sharman, GB/US 1975).

Marie-Therese Mäder

Book Review
Elisha McIntyre, Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture

London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 221 pages,
ISBN 978-1-350-00548-8

At first sight one might think that religion and humor do not belong together, or at least do not make a fruitful pairing. The study *Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture* by Elisha McIntyre, an Australian scholar in the study of religion, shows that such is not the case at all, although the effectiveness of such humor will depend on its purpose and participants. The study distinguishes between humor about religion and religious humor. Defining the latter, McIntyre writes, "it must be made by religious people, include some sort of religious theme(s), or is at least informed by a religious worldview" (2). This genre supplies the religious market and communicates philosophical and theological ideas. The sources included in the study share a broad, contemporary production context that includes written jokes, cartoons, stand-up comedy, film comedies and sitcoms. One of the central questions in the book is "How does religious belief inspire and/or control humor creation and appreciation?" (6). As the analyzed sources primarily concern Mormon and evangelical productions – often created by evangelical or Mormon comedians, cartoonists, or television producers and mostly intended for evangelical and Mormon audiences – a second set of questions ask, "What are evangelicals and Mormons watching, reading, and listening to for the purpose of humorous entertainment? What criteria do believers use to make their entertainment choices? How does that help them to express and, importantly, reinforce, their religious beliefs and practices?" (6). The last question addresses one of the theses of the book, namely that jokes feed boundary-formation processes for religious groups and individuals because what someone perceives as funny is indicative of that person's worldview. Shared laughter and shared offence-taking are social expressions of group belonging or of disassociation from others. McIntyre proposes that "understanding what

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.9

individuals and communities laugh at and do not laugh at is instrumental in understanding the value, boundaries, and wider culture of that group" (182). The book's aim is to understand religious groups and their worldviews through an exploration of humor and its effects.

McIntyre refers to discourse analysis in chapter 2 and to humor studies in chapter 5, but in the remaining chapters her method is not explicit. Much of the study involves hermeneutic analysis of the sources within their context of production and in light of the intended audience. The discussion of this material is enriched by insightful interviews with comedians and other producers of religious humor. Although they are not systematically analyzed but instead used for commentary, excerpts from interviews provide a hermeneutic framework that allows access to the possibilities and limitations of religious humor. The interviews also show that a comedian must fully understand their audience's moral priorities if they are to be able to touch or even push against that audience's boundaries but avoid violating them.

The book is structured in five chapters, with an additional introduction and a short conclusion. The first chapter, "Evangelicals, Mormons and Popular Culture", situates Christian and Mormon comedy in the wider setting of popular culture. McIntyre explains the sensitive relationship between religion and popular culture from the perspective of religious actors. Both evangelicals and Mormons, she notes, are concerned about and often reject popular culture, turning away because in their view it transmits dangerous worldviews, particularly in relation to family values (17). Strategies deployed to counter the dissemination of such representations include the production of an alternative popular culture and regulation, for example via a rating system, two methods that form the core of this study. The discussion of how Mormons are particularly intensely engaged in film productions leads to the observation, "The desire of many religious media producers is to persuade their audiences toward belief in God as well as to beliefs in certain moral principles. […], even though the majority of evangelical and Mormon media ends up being consumed by people who are already believers" (28). McIntyre depicts how religious comedy can be enjoyable while also instructional and persuasive, a multiple intent comprehensively demonstrated in chapters 3–5, in which humor strategies across various sources are explored.

Chapter 2, "Introducing the Challenge of Humor", considers the relationship between humor and religion and elaborates the theoretical framework for the analysis of the sources. The categories for "appropriate" humor developed in this chapter systematize the discussion of the sources. Humor held to be appropriate by religious actors is defined as non-blasphemous, clean, and nonhostile (39). The vital distinction between humorous and offensive is, as McIntyre shows, is often con-

nected with blasphemy: "Blasphemy", she writes, "is what makes religion particularly vulnerable to offense through humor. [...] To laugh about religion is to play with its meaning, something that is potentially dangerous for a comic who is both expressing their own faith and entertaining an audience that does not want to hear its faith as the butt of a joke" (41). The author traces Christian and specifically Mormon sensitivity to laughter and the challenges faced by religious humorists as they seek to "reassure their audiences that evangelicals and Mormons are supposed to be funny, that humor not only is compatible with their religious lives but will even bring spiritual benefits, while at the same time chastise them (gently) for taking themselves too seriously" (45). For a joke to achieve this goal, social factors like its production and reception contexts are as important as its content.

The humor theories considered are not specific to religious jokes and address authors such as Jerry Palmer, Ted Cohen, Mary Douglas and William Fry (46–49). One particular achievement of the study, however, lies in its careful elaboration of the definition of a joke and that definition's adaptation to religion. The moral purpose of the joke is a key element of appropriate religious humor, which must be meaningful rather than empty and frivolous. One such example is found in the connecting of a humorous narrative with humility. The chapter concludes by defining those three principal factors of religious humor that provide the basis for evidence-based chapters 3–5: it must be non-blasphemous (chapter 3: "Blasphemy and Belief"), free from sexual humor and coarse language (chapter 4: "Clean and Dirty Humor") and nonhostile (chapter 5: "Safe and Subversive Humor").

These three chapters provide contextual discussion of the evidence, adopting an inductive approach to what these categories mean in evangelical or Mormon contexts and how they can be further differentiated through detailed analysis. The approach proves fruitful, for it comprehensibly demonstrates the effectiveness of religious jokes. Chapter 3 explains that in the context of this study theologically appropriate jokes not only must be non-blasphemous but also must promote evangelical or Mormon worldviews by depicting Christian values, practices and experiences positively (91). Chapter 4 considers the idea of "clean humor" as opposed to "dirty humor", with the former requiring the exclusion of material on premarital or extramarital sex and homosexuality and a concentration on topics such as purity (95). Purity is understood as modeling how dirty jokes can become clean. McIntyre observes that religious actors and comedians actually talk about sex a lot, but in their own language, which is shared and accepted by their group. Chapter 5 includes an enriching discussion of cartoons from *Sunstone* magazine, which is produced by Mormons but not officially supported by the church (163–175). It shows how religious humor can be subversive but safe, by criticizing religious authorities and religious institutions but not the religious actors' worldview.

According to McIntyre, religious satire can even work as a corrective that criticizes the church authorities' interference in and control of the religious practices of individuals.

In general, *Religious Humor in Evangelical Christian and Mormon Culture* makes a substantial contribution to the growing field of the study of humor (specifically the genre of comedy) and religion. The focus on producers of humorous religious media, and on comedians in particular, in relation to religious audiences proves especially fruitful. However, the large quantity of materials examined is both a strength and a weakness of this study. On the one hand, the study is founded on rich material that allows the development of a persuasive and comprehensive argument. On the other hand, the analysis could be even more acute if it considered the stylistic properties and effects of the different source types: it makes a difference if a joke is presented in a film comedy, by a stand-up comedian or in a cartoon. The approach employed here focuses largely on dialogue, with only occasional reference to action. To determine how religious humor actually works, we must take into account the media in which it is presented. But this hesitation suggests only a desideratum for future studies and does not diminish this book's valuable contribution.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Book Review
Richard Walsh (ed.), T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film

New York / London / Oxford / New Delhi / Sydney: t&tclark 2018, 416 pages, ISBN 978-0-5676-6620-8

"The strength of the Bible lies in the fact that it is a good screenplay", wrote Jean-Luc Godard in 1985 in a press presentation of his film JE VOUS SALUE, MARIE (FR/CH 1985).[1] The *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh, demonstrates that Godard was absolutely right. The book is a treasure trove that can be used as an introduction to research in this field and for teaching at the university level.

The volume is organized in three main sections, which focus on contexts, theories and texts respectively. In the first part, the emphasis is on genres and other constructs used to classify filmic narratives. The multi-layered relationship between the Bible and film is scrutinized through the lenses of film noir, science fiction, horror, comedy and Western or by considering contexts of production such as cultural or national background, for example for the Jesus film in Germany or for adaptions of biblical material through the perspective of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The second part is dedicated to theoretical reflections. The collection of articles offers a wide range of approaches to the interplay of biblical traditions and audio-visual representation: formalism in cinema studies, the role of affects and emotions in dealing with cinematic productions, readings in light of gender and postcolonial theories, issues of translation and the themes of slavery and violence are some of the conceptual frames discussed in this section. The last part is dedicated to specific biblical themes in relation to film. Some chapters focus on biblical characters and related narratives, for example, Noah, Salome or Jesus, while others deal with specific books, such as Exodus or Esther. Reflections on biblical topics such as the question of the canon or belief complete the third section.

1 Paini/Scarpetta 1985.

DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.10

The 31 chapters are written from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives; they vary widely in style and film selection. For instance, readers will find an analysis of a blockbuster like The Passion of the Christ (Mel Gibson, US 2004) alongside a study of the experimental arthouse Passion film Su re (Giovanni Columbu, IT 2013), filmed in a Sardinian dialect.

The openness to the multiplicity of approaches to both the Bible and biblical studies as well as to films drawing on biblical symbols, narratives and concepts makes it challenging to summarise the richness of this volume in a few sentences. The broad range of approaches and topics makes it impossible to include them within a consistent theoretical paradigm. The editor, Richard Walsh, resists the idea of a general theory. In his introduction, he interprets the manifold thinking about religion and film as an expression of dynamism and explicitly addresses developments in this broad research field in the last decades. Particularly, he highlights the undeniable and enriching contributions that the study of the Bible and film has made on the one hand to reception history and on the other to awareness of the relevance of semiotics and cultural studies approaches.

Walsh then discusses two main questions. The first relates to how to define a film as "biblical". He does not try to funnel diversity into a rigid concept of "biblical", seeing the definition as a matter of negotiation between film production and interpretation. The reference to the Bible might be explicit, located for example in quotations of narratives, characters or topics, or it might be assumed as a working hypothesis in the hermeneutical procedure. This second approach, even if it seems more fragile in term of argumentation, is likely to produce "new insights, previously hidden by theological/biblical/political certainties" (4). According to the editor, the relationship between film and Bible must be understood as reciprocal. Both the biblical tradition and film (not just the "biblical film") can illuminate relevant dimensions of religious interpretation: the Bible and film are understood as hermeneutical frames rather than defined in any essential way. To cope with the complexity of approaches, categories like Bible on film (when an epic narrative is represented in film), Bible in film (when a film includes allusions to biblical symbolism) and film on Bible (when a film is used to understand biblical aspects, narratives or concepts) are discussed.

The second question is *why* Bible and film? Walsh recapitulates the interconnections of the history of Bible reception and the history of audio-visual media. At the beginning, the Bible provided legitimation for the new technology of moving images in the form of well-known stories audiences could easily recognise. Today many biblical narratives (the Passion is no exception!) still offer possibilities for expansion because they are not consistent or hold curiosities and puzzling constellations that film art can explore. The Bible has a peculiar power, derived from normative read-

ings of the opposition between good and evil, that is widespread in society and also influences political thinking.

The transmission of the Bible in film is not linear. The references to sacred texts, narratives, characters, symbols and reflections that can be found in film production are enacted within a thick and complex intertwining of the history of music, drama, fine arts, architecture and popular cultures.

Although the relationship between Bible and film is so broad, the topic has tended to attract scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology or the study of religion rather than from other disciplines. The research often therefore mirrors a specific interest in religion, rather than other questions related to film as a medium. Nevertheless, research into Bible and film is highly varied today, which explains the range of approaches and concerns gathered in this volume.

The strength of this Companion lies precisely in this profile: it gives voice to renowned scholars who present very diverse analyses of the relationship between biblical tradition and film. Its kaleidoscopic character will surely stimulate further research in this fascinating domain. In spite of its methodological diversity, the volume is somewhat homogenous in its own context of production: most of the authors are based in North America, with a few from the Netherlands or Germany. Perhaps this scholarly base is a limit of the volume, but the resulting collection still opens a truly interdisciplinary conversation.

The *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film* proves that research on the Bible and film has entered a new phase: now established within the canon of scholarly studies, it is flourishing in ways that enhance theology and biblical studies, the study of religion and also film and media studies.

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Kathrin Trattner

Game Review
PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR

StoryTale Studios, Point-and-Click Horror, ID 2018

In indie and mainstream popular culture alike, Asian horror has been gaining worldwide recognition for quite some time. The most widely known digital cultural goods are produced in Japan and South Korea. However, as a Google search demonstrates, the global popularity of Indonesian horror narratives has also seen a sharp increase despite their being less broadly disseminated. For example, the number of Indonesian horror titles on Netflix is striking. Interestingly, the majority of those stories draw on and incorporate the country's rich folk traditions. Thus, tradition in its plural meaning is absolutely key here: with its diverse ethnic groups, languages, and religious traditions, Indonesia is anything but culturally homogenous. This cultural plurality is often depicted in Indonesian horror tales just as they are deeply embedded in Indonesian everyday life and its practices. In fact, the remarkable proximity of horror and the seemingly mundane is the basic premise of PAMALI, an Indonesian folklore horror game. The first-person point-and-click horror game was (and is still being) developed by StoryTale Studios, a small indie studio based in Bandung, Indonesia.[1] As Mira Wardhaningsih, co-creator of PAMALI, explains in an interview, one of the intentions in creating the game was to introduce international audiences to a distinctively Indonesian approach to horror. As she elaborates:

> We believe that every culture has a different perception towards horror. [...] In Indonesia, it's not a big, catastrophic, one-time phenomenon that is terrifying; it is something else, something closer. We are scared of our ghosts, of our monsters, our spirits, because we can actually meet them at any time, for they are closely related to our own daily lives.[2]

Strictly speaking, PAMALI is an anthology game: it is divided into four episodes, two of which have been released since late 2018 with two more in development. Each

1 Trattner 2019, 117.
2 Trattner 2019, 122.

www.jrfm.eu 2019, 6/1, 166–171
DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.11

Fig. 1: A haunted house in «The White Lady». Press still: StoryTale Studios.

episode features a ghost or another supernatural entity from Indonesian folklore. There is, for instance, Kuntilanak, a female ghost deriving from Indonesian and Malayan mythology. She purportedly died during childbirth, which keeps her longing for newborn babies and haunting her former home (see fig. 1). Another example is Pocong, the restless spirit whose burial shroud was not untied in time, according to Muslim burial customs. Those two characters, who are central to the first two episodes – «The White Lady« and «The Tied Corpse» – were heavily inspired by and hence serve as illustrations of Indonesian horror tales and the diverse religious traditions from which these tales originated. The game effortlessly implements such aspects of Indonesian cultural plurality. On the whole, the most intriguing moments of gameplay include the player actively experiencing the amalgamation of the various religious and cultural traditions in everyday contexts.

In general, a frame narrative connects all episodes, granting the player the role of a game designer in search of supernatural phenomena for a particular project. A dorm room serves as point of departure. Here, the protagonist starts their investigations primarily by reading emails. Each activated attachment initiates a playable episode that follows the respective narrator's point of view. When I played the game for the first time, I spent nearly an hour in the tiny dorm room looking at every single item, reading every newspaper clipping lying around, curiously inspecting each and every piece of furniture. In my view, this is one of the game's top qualities: the extremely detailed depictions of everyday Indonesian life fascinated me. I will return to this point in more detail.

The central episodes do not follow a linear plot: how each episode ends depends entirely on the player's actions and behavior, particularly on how they interact with their surroundings. Hence, the time it takes to complete an episode can vary considerably and most players will explore each episode repeatedly and by every conceivable means. Overall, the episode endings – and, quite frankly, the degree of scariness – primarily depend on the player's regard or disregard for certain cultural taboos. This is, in essence, the gist of the game, and herein lies the source of its name, too. As Mira Wardhaningsih explains:

> The name *Pamali* comes from the Sundanese (an Indonesian tribe that comes mainly from West Java) word *pamali*, loosely meaning taboo or prohibition in English. It is one of the most common words, as we actually grow up hearing *pamali* over and over again. […] Examples of *pamali* that we've implemented into the game are "you shouldn't take a bath at night, or ghosts will come to you", or "you shouldn't throw scissors away because they will protect you against evil spirits".[3]

But how exactly do these *pamali*, these rules for dealing with the supernatural, become effective in the gameplay experience? At the beginning of each episode, the protagonist is given certain tasks they need to carry out. In the first playable folklore part, «The White Lady», the player takes the role of a young man returning to his family home after his father's death. Hence, his duty is to make preparations and, among other things, to clean the property in order for it to be put up for sale. «The Tied Corpse», Pamali's second folklore part, is about a new graveyard keeper who is tasked with burying a body and tending to the graves at night – activities that are accompanied by numerous taboos (see fig. 2).

The player interacts with all kinds of objects and from a first-person perspective explores in detail the eerie game world that is reinforced by an equally uncanny musical backdrop. A lot of times, the player can comment on objects, and players are given the choice to do so in either a polite or an abusive manner (see fig. 3). As Holly Green from *Paste Magazine* pointed out, Pamali successfully subverts genre conventions with this broad-ranging possibility for interaction with objects: most point-and-click (horror) games limit the player to interacting with objects that are solely of immediate relevance to the player's objective.[4]

In Pamali, however, protagonists can spend countless hours in the tiniest of rooms because seemingly every single object on the screen can be investigated,

3 Trattner 2019, 120–121.

4 Green 2019.

Fig. 2: In «The Tied Corpse», the player has to tend to a graveyard without angering the spirits. Screenshot, Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror (StoryTale Studios, 2018).

Fig. 3: Items can be interacted with or commented on in various ways, causing different effects. Press still: StoryTale Studios.

read, touched, commented upon, or interacted with in various ways. Although looking at items can unlock hints, a certain feeling of irrelevance comes up as numerous actions barely provoke any immediate consequences. However, in the course of the game it becomes clear that nothing, absolutely nothing, is irrelevant, as every single move and word has an effect on the progression of the game (see fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Some objects must be handled with particular caution or the player could anger the spirits. Screenshot, Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror (StoryTale Studios, 2018).

Far-reaching consequences might follow from the protagonist's interaction with apparently mundane items such as a comb or a pair of scissors. Accordingly, each episode offers between 30 and 35 possible endings. The ending will depend on the degree of respect a player shows a particular *pamali* and the extent of the player's interference with the spirits.

Finally, Pamali is not so much about mythical creatures or ghosts from Indonesian folk traditions as about how to (or more or less how *not* to) act in their presence. Accordingly, Michael Audish, in his review of Pamali, asserted that the game was basically a "ghost etiquette simulator".[5] Although this slightly ironic statement rings true to a certain point, I would argue that this view is somewhat reductionist. Certainly, a major issue of the game is that the developers' ambitions to grant the player maximum options in gameplay severely threaten the game's entertainment value. If one reads all hints with care, acts properly towards the supernatural and simply attempts to be respectful (e.g. by not making any foul comments, not throwing talismans in the trash), next to nothing happens. The ghosts will only appear if the protagonist behaves in a blasphemous and rude way. Thus, the player will likely disregard various *pamali* on purpose, in order to provoke the potential consequences, which was probably not the intention of the developers. In other words, as Holly Green from *Paste Magazine* put it, the game "teaches you Indonesian custom by

5 Audish 2019.

encouraging you to completely disrespect it".[6] Nonetheless, even disregarding cultural and religious taboos means learning about them and knowing how they are implemented in everyday life in Indonesia. In addition, particularly for someone like me who knows very little about life in Indonesia, one of the game's strongest points is the rich and detailed depiction not of the supernatural, but of the ordinary. The time I spent observing the kitchen of the haunted house simply to see how a typical Indonesian kitchen is organized or carefully examining every single band poster in "my" dorm room provided some of my most immersive experiences during the game. From time to time these banalities made me forget all about the supernatural hauntings I was meant to uncover. Yet if Pamali taught me anything, it is that these are exactly the moments when one should be scared.

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6 Green 2019.

Natalie Fritz

TV-Series Review
Herrens Veje (Ride Upon the Storm), created by Adam Price

DR 1, DK 2017–2018

"Today, in this country, it's more difficult to confess one's faith than talk about one's favourite sex practices." With these words, Johannes Krogh (Lars Mikkelsen), the charismatic pastor of a parish in Greater Copenhagen, defends the right to believe and calls on his audience to stand up for their convictions just as, he claims, the Muslims across the road do. In this instance, he is speaking not to his congregants but, as a contender for the most prestigious position within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, that of Bishop of Copenhagen, principal of the Marble Church. Even though his rhetoric was impeccable and his strong faith almost tangible, Krogh is not selected; the position is given instead to a younger woman, who in Krogh's eyes – and later in his nightmares – has the grinning face of a devil. After being passed over for the promotion, he drinks until he is hardly able to walk and then has sex with the female assistant to the parish's gardener in a shed somewhere on the grounds of the stately pastor's house.

Watching this sequence, the audience realises that this fascinating speaker, this man of God, has a serious problem: he is incapable of controlling his emotions. This drama series, although set in a Danish-Lutheran context, is less concerned with exploring the specific theology of the church or the daily routines of its clergy than with presenting unsettlingly complex questions about faith, religious orientation, rules and community in a globalised society. Although the setting of Herrens Veje is genuinely Danish, its universal relevance may help explain why screenwriter Adam Price's second series for DR1, which comes after the highly acclaimed and award-winning Borgen (DR 1, DK 2010–2013), is also reaching a worldwide audience.

www.jrfm.eu 2020, 6/1, 172–179
DOI: 10.25364/05.06:2020.1.12

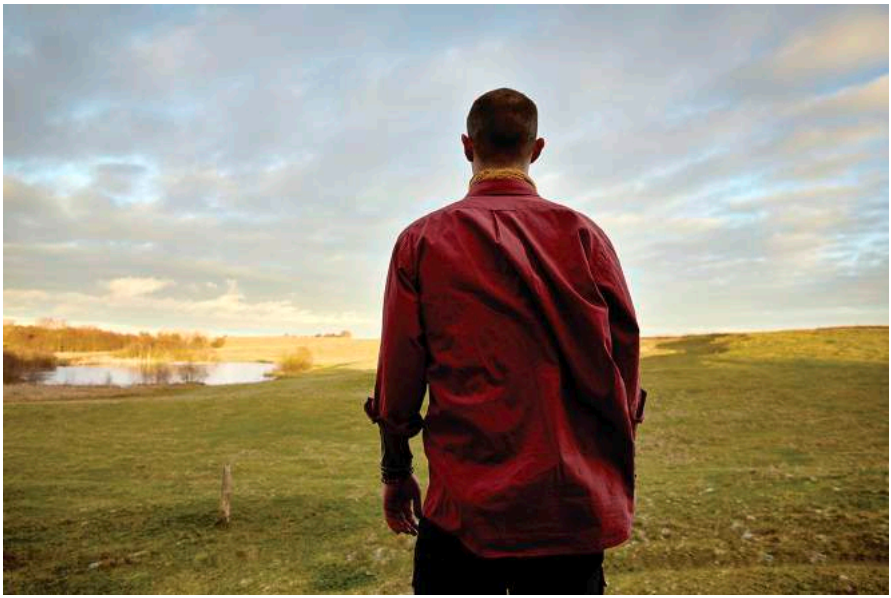

Fig. 1: Christian (Simon Sears) seeks new orientation © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Of Fathers, Sons and the Gap Between …

For nine generations, all the men of the Krogh family have been pastors. Johannes's two sons, Christian (Simon Sears) and August (Morten Hee Andersen), were also meant to follow that path, but only the younger, August, fulfilled the destiny, and he now works as a promising pastor within Provost Johannes's district. Christian also once studied theology, but he quit; now he is banned from the Economics Department because of plagiarism (fig. 1).

His mother, Elisabeth (Ann Leonora Jørgensen), tries to comfort Christian, but she does not succeed in calming down her husband. Christian feels unloved by his powerful or almost "almighty" father and is angry with him. The gap between father and son is a result of Christian's disobedience, a behaviour Johannes is not willing to accept. "Obey or fail" seems to be Johannes's motto. And he acts according to it. When he throws Christian out of the family home, Johannes declares with a mean smirk that Christ was the one who "liked happy endings", forgiveness and such, but he, Johannes, believes in consequences. Christian's existence is deeply shaped by feelings of inadequacy and a desperate wish for Johannes's approval.

August also seeks his father's attention. He leaves Denmark to serve as an army chaplain in a Middle Eastern war zone. During an attack, August feels forced to fire –

even though he is a pacifist and as a priest not allowed to – and kills a civilian. He returns home deeply traumatised and the face of the dead Muslim woman haunts him day and night. When August tells his father what has happened, Johannes advises him not to confess his deed to the bishop as it would cost August his job and – not to forget – damage Johannes's reputation. He also advises August not to see a psychiatrist or take psychotropic drugs. Were he to do so, Johannes explains, August would no longer be able to hear God's voice, a gift that marks him both as chosen by God and as a member of the Krogh family. Here Adam Price weaves a dense web of cross-media references that situate the plot in a specific cultural and cinematic context. The reference to Carl Theodor Dreyer's great drama ORDET (THE WORD, DK 1955), in which another Johannes, the second son of a rich farmer, exhibits signs of mental illness after studying Søren Kierkegaard and believes himself to be Christ, is obvious. Johannes of HERRENS VEJE also constantly condemns society's lack of faith. In August, he detects a fierce faith paired with the gift of rhetoric – for him the most important instruments for a clergyman. August must therefore keep his ears open to receive God's words, that he might preserve his own faith and persuade others. But how can one keep one's faith as one's doubts grow stronger and there is no one there to save one?

"My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?" – of Faith and Self-Doubt

The "almighty father", the character Johannes likes embody in public, is too much of a narcissist and egotist to recognise the problems that trouble his own family (fig. 2). Every setback – his rejection as bishop, Christian's dropping out or Elisabeth's affair – lead to new doubts, which he tries to supress with alcohol or religious fervour. Johannes's ambivalent nature makes him very human, showing the man behind the mask and knocking the priest – the human *exemplum virtutis* – off his pedestal. Yet the audience may be unsettled to see that those who are supposedly moral authorities do not necessarily practise what they preach.

As a true believer, Johannes is eager to spread God's word, but as a human being, he makes poor decisions and feels inadequate when the unexpected happens. This charismatic and credible spiritual leader is a man with doubts, but his doubts are never about God's existence – maybe the one thing he is sure about – only about his own suitability and capacities as a pastor. His conviction distinguishes him from another well-known pastor in film history, Tomas Ericsson (Gunnar Björnstrand), protagonist of Ingmar Bergman's NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA (WINTER LIGHT, SE 1963). Having served in the Spanish Civil War, Ericsson doubts God's existence as he struggles with the problem of theodicy.

Fig. 2: Johannes (Lars Mikkelsen) is a charismatic pastor © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Struggling with self-doubt, Johannes begins a dialogue – actually a monologue – with God, whom he implores to answer his questions or show him a sign that will reassure him of God's presence. In these scenes Johannes acts manically, angrily spitting out all his doubts and concerns, desperately seeking confirmation and with that confirmation, peace. The audience is thus prompted to rethink the origins of Johannes's faith: does it stem from religious conviction or is it perhaps the manifestation of an inherited mental illness (Johannes's father also was able to "hear" God)?

Both of Johannes's sons try to fulfil their father's wishes and follow his path. Just as their father feels unheard by his heavenly father, the two sons feel unheard by their father. The consequences are serious: August follows his father's recommendation that he does not talk about what happened abroad and does not seek medical help. He compensates for his guilty conscience with a pseudo-religious activism that leads to two haunting television moments that remind us of lyrics from the series' main theme: "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform".[1] We, the audience, witness how August's intense prayers prevent the deportation of

1 The main theme music of Herrens Veje (Ride upon the Storm) was written and produced by Claus Hepler and Dragonborn, who adapted the words of the hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" (1773). The hymn itself adapts the words of a poem by the English poet William Cowper, "Light Shining out of Darkness" (1773). For more information on Cowper see https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Cowper and https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cowper [accessed 2 September 2019].

Fig. 3: August (Morten Hee Andersen) speaks in tongues at the Pentecostal service © Tine Harden / Arte France.

a failed asylum seeker – or is it the reactions of his fellow passengers on the plane that lead the pilot not to take-off? Was the outcome a result of God's intervention or of human action (perhaps inspired by the Christian ideal of charity)? The show does not give clear answers but offers an explanation that mixes both points of view in its use of magic realism, a narrative and aesthetic style that combines real, imagined and magical (or at least inexplicable) elements. Thus, the showrunners do not provide a global explanation of the events but leave it to the audience to decide which approach (more scientific or more open to the religious/transcendental) fits better within their own worldview. Formally, the cross-cutting between August's prayers in the church and the events on the plane creates not only simultaneity but also an equality: these approaches stand side by side as equally possible perspectives.

Still, later, when August speaks in tongues at an outdoor Pentecostal service and a sudden wind blows through the seated congregation, a religiously based approach will make sense of the events (fig. 3). A more factual approach, limited to August's mental state or an inaccurate weather forecast, would be unsatisfactory, and consequently, the showrunners do not use cross-cutting here. Instead we see August's ecstatic preaching and the congregation's reaction to his (or God's?) impressive performance.

Fig. 4: A true idyll? The Krogh family at dinner: f.l.t.r. Christian (Simon Sears), Elisabeth (Ann Eleonora Jørgensen), Johannes (Lars Mikkelsen), August (Morten Hee Andersen) and his wife, Emilie (Louise Bernth) © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Through Johannes and August, the series shows how the work and social status of a pastor have changed and the challenges with which a pastor is confronted: living a religious vocation in a pluralist, globalised and multicultural community is not easy. The search for new ways to encounter people is hard and requires tolerance and open-mindedness as well as an ability to compromise.

And Where Are the Women?

"Which sacrifices are you willing to make for your faith?" This is one of the recurring questions of the series. The male protagonists are not alone in having to respond to this question, for the central female figure, Elisabeth, is also forced to make choices. She has been the perfect pastor's wife, supporting Johannes, silently enduring his unpredictable moods and keeping the family together (fig. 4), but then decides to end this farce.

Elisabeth is not willing to accept Johannes's behaviour any longer or to abandon Christian. She begins an affair with her Norwegian lodger, Liv (Yngvild Støen Grotmol), who pays her the fond attention of which her egocentric husband is incapable.

Johannes's female rival is independent, believes in shamanistic rituals, in the power of nature and in her own skills. Even though the lesbian sex scene has a somewhat voyeuristic character and appears to satisfy primarily a male gaze, its symbolic quality unfolds through cross-cutting with a feast attended by the parish staff – due to various reasons set on Good Friday: scenes with the party getting out of control are contrasted with scenes of Liv and Elisabeth's sexual encounter that – like the party – becomes increasingly passionate, uncontrollable until… cross-cut… the parish's garden is set on fire (as a climax) by accident. Johannes leaves the party early, and while looking for Elisabeth, sneaks into Liv's room, where he finds both women naked and asleep. A broken man, he departs along the corridor accompanied by George Frideric Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga – mia crude sorte" (Let me weep over my cruel fate). This last scene from Season One connects the Passion of Christ at the very day on which it is commemorated with the experiences of Johannes, as stories of very human failure and loss. But although these parallels are obvious, the audience perceives Johannes not as a martyr but as a man who made wrong choices and now suffers as a result. Silently crying, this seemingly formidable man who has been outrivalled by a woman drowns in self-pity and drinks until he loses both consciousness and his self-esteem, whereas Elisabeth grows stronger and wins back her self-confidence because of Liv's care.

With Liv, the showrunners skilfully introduce a protagonist who as an outsider sheds light on a metalevel on well-known but still unresolved gender problems within contemporary Christian churches. The mystic but attractive "woman from the North" – a popular figure in Scandinavian saga literature – helps Elisabeth notice and overcome patriarchal structures and heteronormative worldviews that have been legitimised on religious grounds for too long. At a time when #MeToo debates are reaching the churches, Elisabeth's emancipation can be read as an allegorical vision of future churches' emancipation from old concepts and embrace of a new interpretation of biblical narratives that fits better with life today.

Conclusion

The first season of Herrens Veje ends with chaos, betrayal and even death – how the screenwriter will find a way out of this mess and who will keep his/her faith are intriguing narrative threads to be picked up in a second season. Herrens Veje is a drama series that – even though it sometimes tends towards pathos and exaggeration– dares to explore the delicate field of personal faith and its impact upon one's actions and experiences. With its dense web of references to popular culture and many complex questions teased out in the plot, it not only is a perfect example of

intelligent audio-visual entertainment but can also serve as material for seminars on audio-visual approaches to religion. Audience and critics were enthusiastic, and the Danish Broadcasting Company DR immediately ordered a second season, which has already been broadcast in a number of countries.

Seasons 1 and 2 of Herrens Veje (Ride upon the Storm) are available on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and other platforms under the series' original title.

Filmography

Borgen (Created by: Adam Price, DR 1, DK 2010–13).
Herrens Veje (Ride Upon the Storm, Created by: Adam Price, DR 1, DK 2017–2018).
Nattvardsgästerna (Winter Light, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963).
Ordet (The Word, Carl Theodor Dreyer, DK 1955).

JRFM 2021, 7/2
CALL FOR PAPERS

Media, Power, Religion

Reconfigurations in Postcolonial Societies

Media have always been contested spaces which express and shape people's lives and realities. They contribute to forming structures of oppression and of resistance, can facilitate social change, create alternative realities, or provide a venue to imagine different forms of living together. Media, the spaces they create and the spaces we create through them, are part and parcel of power dynamics in societies shaped by competing interests.

Today it is easier than ever to access media productions from a wide range of cultural contexts and tune into the digital lives of a vast part of humankind. What remains often hidden is that the media we prod-use and the voices we decide to listen to shape our horizon, our perception of the world, and of the people we encounter. Media, their uses and users, have played a major role in maintaining colonial power imbalances and they continue to be dominated by the west in postcolonial times. Whereas certain media forms and practices impose a western perspective (in terms of cultural and linguistic values, political domination, economic relationships ec.) on postcoloniality, other media forms, and different ways of using them, provide spaces for creating and expressing postcolonial subjectivity. In the past as in the present, perceptions of 'religion', what it is or does (symbols, practices, resources for participation etc.), have provided key resources for these dynamics.

Thus in this issue of **JRFM**, we want to explore the reconfigurations of media, power and religion in postcolonial societies. We are interested in analyses of the implication of media (broadly understood) in social and political configurations, especially regarding the relationships of power, 'religion' and cultural dynamics in postcoloniality and/or drawing on indigenous resources (Africa, South America, South and South-East Asia, indigenous communities), in present or past contexts. We invite analyses of how individuals, communities, social institutions, or political actors use or have used media to support or subvert existing social structures and structures of power drawing on religious resources, motifs or concepts. Giv-

en this focus on postcoloniality, we encourage a broad understanding of 'religion' as emerging from the cultural context under investigation and appropriate for the questions asked.

Questions may include, but are not limited to:

- How are media used to foster resistance, but also structures of oppression? What role do religious dimensions play in such media discourses?
- How do media producers draw on religious dimensions to promote socio-political agendas? Can continuities be observed between colonial and postcolonial times?
- How can media be a space to imagine and realize socio-religious ideals such as a peaceful society?
- How are traditional or indigenous resources of critique or resistance expressed in contemporary media engagement with socio-cultural issues?
- How does the entanglement of media and religion create powerful structures of affect in collectives?
- What theoretical or methodological questions emerge in the study of media and 'religion' in postcoloniality? In how far are concepts and theories developed in this field in a primarily western context applicable or change when focusing on diverse cultural contexts?

We are interested in scholarly discussions or scholarly/practitioner co-produced case studies from diverse cultural contexts, and we ask that authors keep a diverse cultural audience in mind in their discussions. In addition to the traditional essay, we also encourage the submissions using alternative media formats (e.g. photo essay or articles that use video/audio recordings).

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of **JRFM**. The deadline for all submissions is 28 February 2021. Contributions of 6,000–8,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register and consider the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the stylesheet. Publication is scheduled for November 2021. For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Philippe Bornet (philippe.bornet@unil.ch), Stefanie Knauss (stefanie.knauss@gmail.com), and Alexander D. Ornella (alexander@ornella.info).