Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder, and Baldassare Scolari
(eds.)

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in
Media Ethics and Religion

JRFM

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> You see in this world there's two kinds of people, my friend –
> those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig.
> > Blondie to Tuco at the cemetery, THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

The so-called spaghetti westerns, movies such as THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY (Sergio Leone, IT/ES/GE 1966), challenged the western genre, with its strict definitions of "good" and "bad", by focusing on anti-hero protagonists. Distinguishing a bad bandit from a good priest or a good bandit from a bad priest became impossible. The ambiguity of characters and actions reflected the social change shaping America in the late 1960s. The myths of opportunity and hope of the earlier westerns were now replaced by a vision of a desolate and vacated land where violence, hypocrisy, and greed reigned. These new "Italian-style" westerns reflected on a meta level on what it is to "act ethically" in difficult circumstances, when authorities are corrupt and the individual is left to serve up justice themselves. These films' socio-political critique is obvious: they show the consequences of a society that has lost or is betraying its norms and values as a result of individual claims to power or capitalist ideals.

   Today the dramas of world politics and a global economy continue to be represented and reconstructed on television and the Internet: as the Ukrainian athletes arrive in the stadium during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing, Putin sleeps. China flexes its will to have absolute control over even a virus, and on the border between Ukraine and Russia, the latter amasses its military might. During all of these events on the political and economic world stage, the flame of Olympia remains lit, symbolising peace and traditionally dedicated to the Greek goddess Hestia, who protects family harmony. Religion and the media play a crucial role in this performance: the ancient religious ritual should guarantee that the tradition of international understanding and peace continues – at least during

the Olympic Games – while these events are represented and reconstructed by the media. The latter decide what we see and how we see it – are we presented with the sleeping Putin or the sabre-rattling at the Russian–Ukrainian border, which became a military invasion, filmed, or photographed by drones, cell phones, and television cameras? The media coverage of the distressed Ukrainian population in air-raid shelters or fleeing their homes and their country trigger sympathy and also frighten. Whom do these images serve? Is the news independent and without bias, as we might expect? Are we as spectators in a position to assess how balanced that coverage is?

There is no set script for the depiction of these events. The media coverage involves choices, and those decisions can subsequently be examined. Critical reflection on media images is one important task of media ethics. When secularized-religious rituals, as in the case of the Olympics, followed by images of war are scrutinized through a media ethics lens, the focus is sharper – questions of representation are centre stage, embracing all media spaces, from production to distribution to consumption, and the practical and normative dimension of religion is highlighted. How do groups and individuals refer to religion through and within media practices in order to express, challenge, legitimize, or criticize moral values, norms, and principles? How and to what extent do the media themselves influence the articulation of the relationship between morality and religion within the public space and as understood by groups and individuals? Media ethics thus asks essential questions about religion, religious practices, and religion's actors. It contributes fundamentally to religious studies' debates about its own subject matter.

The current issue presents four contributions that discuss media ethics and religion from different perspectives. The editors of the issue, Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder, and Baldassare Scolari, are responsible for the first contribution. *"Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" Women! Encountering Media Ethics and Religion in Theory and in the Classroom* presents a theoretical and methodological framework for a cultural studies approach to the complex relationship between media ethics and religion. On the basis of several concrete examples, the article sheds light on the centrality of religious worldviews, symbols, figures, and narratives within different media practices, in which moral norms, principles, and values are reproduced, rediscovered, discussed, legitimated, and contested. Moreover, the article highlights how the examination of concrete media content can be implemented in teaching, in order to stimulate and increase students' capacity

to understand, analyze, and evaluate the normative function and power of the media, especially in the contemporary digitalized and globalized world.

Claudia Paganini, professor for media ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy, is the author of the second contribution, *The Face of the Other (Faith) as a Threat. How Images Shape our Perception*. The article examines how a Christian perspective encounters the non-Christian "other", or, with reference to Emmanuel Lévinas, "the faith of the other", in the media. The faith of the other is frequently absent from images of migration, war, and terror in newspapers. The same applies for religious websites and social media, where biblical quotations and depictions of idyllic landscapes predominate, and people – or people's faces – are lacking.

The third contribution, *Angels as Interpretive Figures. Interdisciplinary Aspects of a New Angelology* by Rüdiger Funiok, professor of Communication Science and Pedagogy, and well-known media ethics scholar who defined the field from its early days. Funiok considers angels as a media within the theoretical frame of Angelology (or Angeletics). Angels are messengers not only in religion but also in arts, literature, and film. By discussing different examples, the author highlights the mutual responsibility between the messenger, the angel, and the message's content, which leads to a discussion of angels who invite us to develop human virtues, especially those needed in a world full of pain.

In *Serious Games. The Asymmetry of Images in Harun Farocki's Work*, the final contribution in the section of this issue concentrating on media ethics and religion, the philosopher Maurizio Guerri discusses the role played by new technologies and new ways of producing images in media representation of war by analyzing Harun Farocki's video installation *Serious Games* (2009–2010). Guerri highlights that Farocki's work effectively discloses how over the last decades images of war have become more and more part of war itself, but he also traces the path for a subversive, but not propagandistic, production and deployment of war images, where images still have a "testimonial capacity".

The Open Section of this issue consists of two articles that on first sight may seem to have little in common but are in fact both concerned with the representation of specific Christian characters/forms of Christianity by filmic means and with the ethical and moral spheres that are challenged or may be experienced as a result.

Frank Bosman reflects in *"There is no order in which God calls us". The Depiction of Christianity and Christians in the Netflix Series Squid Game* on

the Christian characters and Christianity portrayed in the South Korean hit series Squid Game. Bosman approaches the series' criticism of religion, especially South Korean forms of Protestantism that seem closely linked to a capitalist vision of wealth and fulfilment, using a communication-oriented analysis. Bosman suggests that Squid Game criticizes institutional Christianity, because Christian agents in the series do not practice what they preach. His investigation highlights that "Christian" qualities such as compassion and altruism can be found mostly in those who do not identify as Christian. Thus, the series' criticism of religion may be read as a statement that moral behavior and acting ethically have nothing to do with an explicit Christian identity.

Milja Radovic's article *Liturgy on the Reel. Ascesis through Film* investigates the representations of the Eastern Orthodox practice of ascesis in the Russian film Ostrov (Pawel Lungin, RU 2006) and in Man of God (Yelena Popovic, RU 2021), a film about the Greek saint Nektarios of Aegina. The article looks at concepts and expressions of ascesis in Eastern Orthodoxy and explores how film with its specific aesthetic means conveys the inner processes of the characters to an audience. Referring to Andrei Tarkovsky's idea that the creation of art can only be authentic if it mirrors the true meaning of life, the subjective and existential spiritual experience of the artist, Radovic links the concept of poetic cinema with ascesis.

It has been a delight for us to have been able to steer this issue of the JRFM, with its focus on media ethics and religion. All three of us are scholars of religion, researching and publishing in the subfield of media and religion. For several years now we have also been teaching media ethics at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (FHGR) and the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), in Switzerland. The idea of publishing a special issue on media ethics with a focus on religion has been brewing for some time. Now finally it's published. We wish you inspiring reading!

Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder, and Baldassare Scolari

"Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" Women!

Encountering Media Ethics and Religion in Theory and in the Classroom

Abstract

The article presents a theoretical and methodological framework for a cultural stud-ies–oriented approach to the complex relationship between media ethics and religion. On the basis of several concrete examples, the article sheds light on the centrality of re-ligious worldviews, symbols, figures, and narratives within different media practices in which moral norms, principles, and values are reproduced, rediscovered, discussed, le-gitimated, and contested. Moreover, the article highlights how the examination of con-crete media content can be implemented in teaching in order to stimulate and increase students' capacity to understand, analyze, and evaluate the normative function and power of the media, especially in the contemporary digitalized and globalized world.

Keywords

Media Ethics, Religion, Cultural Studies, Teaching, Spaces of Communication, Values, Norms

Biographies

Natalie Fritz is a scholar in the field of religion, media, and culture. She received her master's degree in the Study of Religions and Scandinavian Studies from the Univer-sity of Zurich, where she also completed her doctorate in the Study of Religions. She currently works at the Catholic Media Centre in Zurich as an editor and journalist for film, media, and religion, and is coordinator of JRFM. She also teaches media ethics at the Bern University of Applied Sciences and at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons. Fritz is a member of the international research groups Media and Re-ligion (www.media-religion.org) and International Exchange on Media and Religion (https://media-religion.net).

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Baldassare Scolari is a scholar in the fields of media studies, religious studies, and political philosophy. In 2019 he published his doctoral thesis, on the performativity of martyrological representations of political violence (https://www.media-religion. org). He teaches media ethics at the Bern University of Applied Sciences and the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons and research methods at the Bern University of the Arts. He is a member of the research groups Media and Religion (www. media-religion.org) and International Exchange on Media and Religion (https://media-religion.net). His research focuses on religion and politics, religion and media, cultural studies, media ethics, philosophy of language, and political theory.

The research field of media ethics has been influenced by a wide range of disciplines: media philosophy, media sociology, ethics of technology, communication, and media studies, to name only the most prominent.[1] A similar diversity of disciplines is reflected in the research field of the study of religion. Both areas of research embrace diverse schools of thought, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and thematic focusses. In this contribution, we present a theoretical and methodological reflection that approaches the complex relationship between media ethics and religion from the perspective of cultural studies. If we understand religion as an important element within cultural practices of meaning production and exchange, a cultural studies approach to media ethics and religion promises to be a productive endeavor. Our approach addresses the context of media actors and media sources, scrutinizes power relations in representation processes, and explores the responsibilities and loyalties of media actors in the spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution.

The contribution has two parts. The first section presents the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual framework of cultural studies and shows how it can be fruitful for an examination of the relationship between religion and the media, with a focus on media ethics. This section focuses also on how the media define religion as well on the role religious signs, figures, and narratives play in the media. The second section addresses the teaching of media ethics in schools and universities. Using a case study, it considers how ethical reasoning might be taught. Careful analysis of specific media

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1   See Schicha/Brosda 2010; Heesen 2016; Funiok 2011; Leschke 2001.

content and its spaces of production, distribution, and perception allows for reflection on the values and norms that content transmits. This section also shows how such an examination of media content broaches the responsibilities of both producer and audience, guiding students towards a critical understanding of media, its sociopolitical impact, and their personal use of it.

A Cultural Studies Approach to Media Ethics and Religion

Culture and Cultural Studies

Culture can be described as a way of life or a lifestyle. People and communities express cultural belonging and its limits in everyday practices like how they dress or what they eat. We all use linguistic codes and systems of representation – written language, spoken language, language of the body, visual language and so on – to express who we are and who we are not, to understand others and the world that surrounds us. Culture can thus be described as a system of practices by which we express and exchange meanings. These meanings regulate and organize our conduct, since "they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed",[2] as Stuart Hall, the founder of British cultural studies, stated. Cultural practices are therefore related to specific normative/regulative systems used by individuals and groups to defend their values, which are expressed in actions or regulated forms of action, or so-called norms.[3] In some cultures it is polite to take off one's shoes when entering a private house, while in other cultures shoes should not be removed. The value of politeness can be associated with a variety of situations and sometimes with contradictory behaviors.

Culture can therefore be understood as an ongoing process of interpretation during which people exchange, share, and even argue about how people, objects, and events are to be understood and classified. As Stuart Hall observes, "the question of meaning arises in relation to all the different moments or practices in our 'cultural circuit' – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct".[4] In each moment of the cultural cir-

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2 Hall 2013, xx.
3 More about the differences for values and norms can be found in Kettner 2011, 219–231.
4 Hall 2013, xx.

cuit, people are *doing* something to provide meaning. Representation can be added here, as a further moment in the cultural circuit. People perceive the world, have an idea of the world, and express their ideas by means of signs. These meaning-making processes belong to the basic human activities that define culture as a set of practices.

Representation is pivotal because it connects meaning with symbolic expressions like language and images with cultural practices. Hall describes this interface between cultural practices and representations as follows: "The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'."[5] Meaning needs to be communicated. Language and images are examples of symbolic expressions that communicate meaning. Representation includes two processes: the first contains mental representations that are individual and part of human imaginings and ideas and are produced by sensual perception and intellectual examination of the world. Meaning takes place in the tension between the world and these mental representations. Shared meanings are shared mental representations, shared by signs as the second process. Whole systems of signs enable humans to communicate complex ideas – language and images, for example, but also sounds or material artefacts. Sign systems retroactively influence human mental imaginings and concepts. This circuit of meaning is inexhaustible, with no beginning and no end.

For example, every person imagines the concept "woman" differently. Our attribution of a certain meaning to the term "women" is influenced by our hermeneutic horizons, the contexts we are living in that shape our personality. As the collage in figure 1 shows, signs for "women" are manifold.

Difference and plurality are integral to representation. There is no single meaning, for different perspectives and contexts have their own truths. From this plurality of symbols and signs, of models of women's representation, a series of questions arises: How is the mental representation of women expressed? Which system of signs refers to the idea of women? Who are the main media actors who determine which representation of "women" circulates in the public sphere? How far do the media define what "woman" means? Indeed, who has the power to define meaning?

This example indicates that power relations are central in meaning-making processes and need to be taken into account in a media-ethical analysis.

5   Hall 2013, 5.

Fig. 1: The collage shows images and signs that refer to the concept of women.

As "signifying institutions", the media provide means by which social groups produce and exchange ideas of their own values, opinions, and practices and also those of other groups.[6] Media order and inventorize the repertoire of images and ideas and thereby create normative and evaluative classifications and hierarchies. In the media, different opinions are reorganized into the "mystical unity of consensus".[7] Media do not merely reflect this consensus, they also actively produce it. The production of consensus is only possible through conflict and closure. Media representations are always embedded within existing discursive formations. According to Hall, "These discursive formations […] define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and 'true' in that context; and what sorts of persons or 'subjects' embody its characteristics."[8] Meanings are constituted in an ongoing discursive process, in a social interaction into which every member of a language community is born and which forms the basis for the interiorization of subjective worlds of meaning. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault highlighted, power relations are shaped by communication "which transmit information via a language,

6   Marchart 2003, 12.
7   Hall 1979, 339.
8   Hall 2013, xxii.

a sign system or another medium".[9] If power imbalances are internalized and the actors even identify with them, they become effective. Self-policing preserves power structures and hierarchies and prevents them from being questioned. But a critical media-ethical analysis will question those power relations. Its political agenda is to prevent unquestioned representation processes that reinforce injustice. We can return to the issue of the representation of women and ask whether the depicted women agreed to their representation or how a specific representation of a woman influences the idea of how a women should look. It is the task of media ethics to challenge the conflation of, in this case, the representation of the woman (signifier) and the woman in the world (signified).

Media Ethics

Ethics is a two-sided approach to morality, for it is both scientific and philosophical. There are three important dimensions to ethical reflection. First, moral judgements can only be made of human actions because people, unlike animals, can usually choose how they want to act. Secondly, people need to have free will if their actions are to be judged, Thus, for example, we cannot pass moral judgement on the actions of animals, for they cannot decide on the basis of free will how to act – a dog's barking is not to be ethically judged, but the owner's ability to control the animal is.

The third dimension concerns the central task of descriptive ethics in examining ideas of the highest good, that is, ideas of the good that consider it an absolute, indispensable, and indisputable value. The highest good is something that one agrees is worth achieving, an idea that guides individuals and groups in their actions. To give an example: in the contemporary world there is broad consensus that vulnerable persons should be protected and supported by a society.[10] Ethics of care, a concept originally elaborated by Carol Gilligan focusses on differences in the moral development of girls and boys. It defines correct moral behavior less in terms of the wellbeing of the individual and more in light of networks and the well-being of of all those who are part of such groupings.[11]

9   Foucault 2013, 252. Translated by the authors.
10   We are aware that the idea that protecting vulnerable people is a highest good is already subjective. A neo-liberal understanding of good conduct might look different, with each person responsible for their own success or failure.
11   Gilligan 2003.
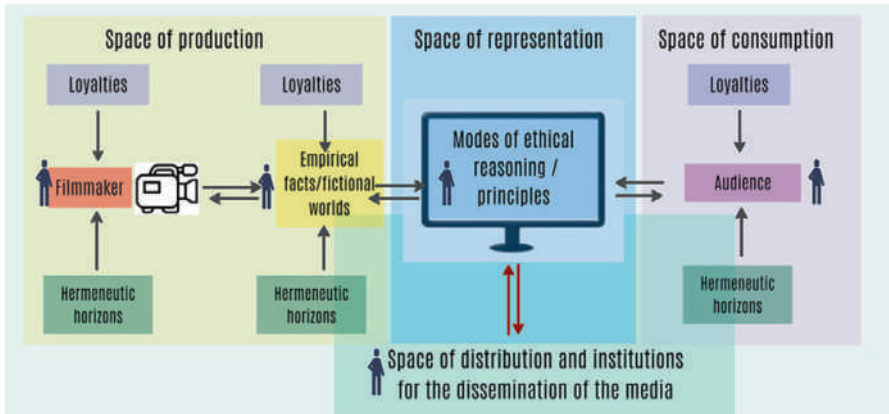
Fig. 2: The four spaces of media communication: spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution/institutions for the dissemination of the media.

Media ethics belongs to the field of applied ethics. It examines media practices and the normative principles and orientations that regulate them, formulates normative instructions for the various media actors and institutions, and critically judges the media actor's moral behavior in the different fields or spaces of the media.[12] Media ethics also assesses the normative dimension of communication between people by means of the media. According to media ethicist Jessica Heesen, "The core business of media ethics concerns the interaction of human communication partners mediated by media. The area of particular relevance to media ethics therefore relates to mediatised human communication."[13] The human communication of the media actors takes place in four different media spaces or spaces of communication, those of production, representation, consumption, and distribution. In each of these interrelated spaces, media actors perform actions, make decisions, and communicate with media actors in other spaces (fig. 2), only between the spaces of production and consumption is no immediate communication.[14]

Media professionals are located in the space of production, which is where the media – for example, newspaper articles, advertisings, fiction films, and documentaries– are made. More than one actor is usually in-

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12 Heesen 2016, 3; Veith/Bohrmann/Reichelt 2018.

13 Heesen 2016, 2. Translated by the authors.

14 The interface between religion and the spaces of communication is explored in detail in Mäder 2020, 48–62.

volved in the media production process. For example, the production of audio-visual media involves actors both behind and in front of the camera and often also in the production office. In this space people decide what stories are told with what kind of means. For both documentary media and fiction film, social actors behind and in front of the camera, who may be non-professional or professional depending on the film genre, make myriad decisions about how to depict the story. Thus producers and directors of documentaries select the social actors for their particular case and decide which statements are included in the film; they determine how a scene is shot, from which angle the (social) actors are filmed, and how the narrative is edited. The (social) actors in front of the camera influence this decision process too. An actor interprets a character in collaboration with the director, and the social actor's relation with the filmmaker is often a key factor in how a documentary's narrative evolves. Filmmakers and (social) actors' mutual relationship defines how the empirical facts of a documentary or the fictional world of a feature film are presented.[15] Thus the actual (re)presentation is affected not only by the dialogue and action, but also by the setting in which the film is shot, how the costumes look, and what props are used. The filmic staging and editing, the encoded story in the space of representation, is what the audience receives and decodes.[16]

As was noted above in the context of mental representations and the system of signs, the space of representation is central to meaning-making processes and the relation between ideas about the world and the interpretation of the historical world. Also, in this space actions formed as narratives, both fictional and documentary, define how the story evolves. Here someone tells a story that can be scrutinized. Some individuals or groups of people are more eligible to define which narratives are told and how the stories are shaped. Some human beings are granted a voice, while some do not appear at all or are depicted by others. Therefore, in the space of representation, the media actors themselves apply modes of ethical reasoning.

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15 There are documentaries without social actors, for example nature films. But even there, nature is not objectively depicted. The narrative always has a specific aim, which determines for whom it is produced and what story the producers want to tell. Often nature itself becomes a social actor that represents a paradise-like version of a perfect world, as in films produced by National Geographic or in BBC Wildlife documentaries. See Aufderheide 2007, 117–124.

16 The model of encoding and decoding refers to the model elaborated by Stuart Hall in the 1980s in the context of television productions. See Hall 2006, 233–246.

A revealing example is provided by the Bechdel test, which considers female stereotypes in fiction films and was first proposed by graphic novel Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*.[17] To pass the Bechdel test three questions must be answered in the affirmative: Are there at least two female protagonists? Do they talk to each other? Are they talking about something other than a male character? It is striking how many films and series fail this test. That result is confirmed by a scientific study undertaken by Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film in San Diego, about the under-representation of women in cinema and television.[18] Lauzen concludes that the proportion of female protagonists dropped from 40 percent in 2019 to 29 per cent in 2020.[19] The Bechdel test and the investigation of the representation of women form just one indicator of the unequal distribution of media presence and the part played by privilege in meaning-making processes. For race and ethnicity, other criteria included in Lauzen's study, the results are similar.

The space of consumption is where the film is received. Film reception is understood as an active process in which the audience decides not only what they watch but also how they judge it. Being a spectator in the digital age allows preferences to be easily communicated both to the online community and to algorithms that ensure similar content or media format pops up for that spectator again. Preferences turn into persistent "filter bubbles". The audience therefore is left with the responsibility to think critically about what it likes and dislikes and also to pursue strategies to engage less convenient content.[20]

And finally, in the space of distribution media actors make decisions about how and where media are distributed. In the case of pornography or violent or discriminative representations, the institutions which distribute such content – for example social media platforms – can be held liable for protecting underage consumers. The extent to which social media platforms like Instagram are responsible for the content provided by their users is currently much debated. Thus, for example, stereotypical and hegemonic representations of "beautiful bodies" have been shown to affect the physical and mental well-being of young people, leading to eating disorders like

17 Fischer 2015.
18 Lauzen 2021.
19 Also remarkable is the fact that the presence of male characters aged sixty or more is almost twice more likely than the presence of female characters of the same age (10 % versus 6 %).
20 See Zuboff 2019.

bulimia and anorexia.[21] Yet within social media groups, likes and emojis motivate members to deprive themselves of sustenance, while algorithms endorse such damaging behavior by revealing to those members more sites with similar content.

The media actors in the spaces of production, representation, consumption, and distribution follow a variety of goals through a variety of strategies. They are connected, however, from an ethical point of view by their responsibility for their actions that might impact others well-being. For this reason in particular, the concept of responsibility is central in media-ethical discussions. It has been elaborated by the media ethicist Rüdiger Funiok, who breaks down the question of responsibility into six sub-questions: Who is responsible? For which action is that person responsible? What are the consequences of the action? Who is affected by the action? To which authority or instance (personal conscience, the public) does the acting person have to answer for the action? Why does the acting person have to answer for the action (values, norms, criteria)?[22] Through these various aspects of responsibility, moral agency in all its complexity can be ethically analyzed. The question of the authority to which the actor must answer is particularly challenging. Social actors may hold fundamentally different ideas about what is good or bad, feel a certain loyalty towards certain groups, and follow specific agendas.

Loyalties particularly influence the ethical decision-making process and moral reasoning, as the theologian and social ethicist Ralph B. Potter noted. Building on the work of social ethicist Walter Georg Muelder (1907–2004), Potter sought to span the gap between guidelines and appropriate action.[23] His "Potter Box" is a tool that allows differentiation between four elements of a moral argument: (1) the empirical facts, (2) the hermeneutic horizons of the parties, (3) the parties' loyalties, and (4) the modes of ethical reasoning.[24] Disagreement about the correct moral decision may form in any or all these aspects.

In the following section moral reasoning is considered in light of a poster produced by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in March 2021, at the time of the veil-ban referendum (fig. 3).[25]

21 Morris/Katzman 2003, 287–289.
22 Funiok 2011, 68–74.
23 Potter 1972, 102.
24 For a detailed discussion of the Potter Box see Mäder 2020, 266–269; Christians/Fackler/McKee/Kreshel 2020, 4–13.
25 Unknown author 2021.

Fig. 3: Poster issued by the Swiss People's Party's at the time of an initiative to ban veiling.

Religion, Moral Reasoning, and a Political Poster

Different moral arguments can lead to either the rejection of the poster or its appreciation.

We can understand where moral dispute can arise in relation to this poster by posing four questions related to the four elements of the Potter Box.

(1) What is depicted on the poster? The poster shows a person wearing a black veil. The eyes are endowed with feminine attributes in the form of long lashes and their almond shape. The person wears a niqab, a veil that covers the head and all but the eyes on the face. We can assume that a Muslim woman is depicted. Her facial expression tells us that she is angry. The red background highlights her emotional attitude. So far so good. But can we see more? We might wonder if her emotional attitude is connected to the poster's text: "Stop extremism! Veil ban, yes." But the decoding of the empirical facts might be contested. Should extremism be stopped because veiled women are angry or are angry veiled women a signifier for extremism? The application of different values in answering this first, empirical, question may produce a moral dispute – does the response focus on perceptions of the woman's emotions or on veiled women as an expression of extremism?

(2) How might the image on the poster be interpreted? Let us accept that she is angry. Additional text and context might help us understand the reasons for her expression. But is she angry because she did not agree to be depicted on this poster? Or is she angry because Switzerland is going to vote on banning the veil. Or, and this is most likely, is the poster-producer's intention to suggest that niqab-wearing women are extremists, even terrorists, and a threat to Switzerland? Whether the woman is angry about being used for a political campaign or about the suggested connection between

veiled women and terrorism provides the woman with different messages and meanings. For this question the disagreement is about how the facts should be interpreted and is thus related to the hermeneutic horizon of the disputants. We are concerned here with the way in which a statement or event is decoded. Interpretation is connected to the cultural, educational, or political context of the person who is interpreting. Some people will already feel threatened by the idea of a woman wearing a headscarf because they experience it as alien to their lifestyle and what they consider their own cultural (or national) values and identities. For others, a woman in a headscarf represents a legitimate part of what they consider a cosmopolitan lifestyle in a globalized world. These two interpretative options are not the only possible interpretations, but they exemplify how images that are read as religious narratives and symbols can trigger affirmation or rejection. Contradictory opinions about religion often emerge on the basis of belonging and identity processes that are referenced with the third question.[26]

(3) Who is loyal to whom? The image can generate different relationships of loyalty that are a result of worldviews, political convictions, social milieus, and the experiences of individuals and groups. In the act of reception, some people will identify with the right-wing referendum committee, while others will relate to the woman wearing a niqab. Such expressions of loyalty depend on the interpretation of the image or, more precisely, the articulation of signs within the image by means of existing cultural frames. A quantitative study shows that religious spectators generally respond more positively than non-religious spectators to the depiction of religion in documentaries. And that the reverse also holds: less religious people are more critical of the positive depiction of religious actors.[27]

(4) Which modes of ethical reasoning are used to assess the moral values expressed by the image? This final question relates to the principles by which people decide what is correct or incorrect conduct. Ethical reasoning seems the most challenging dimension because it asks about an ethical classification that is more abstract than the first three questions. It involves defining preferences or hierarchies of concepts to determine the

26 A detailed discussion how images of religion define groups or how individuals identify with specific depictions of religion can be found in Fritz/Höpflinger/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati/ Knauss 2018, 153–192.

27 The study also showed that audiences have greater empathy for a Mormon protagonist than for a Muslim even when both are depicted positively. See Mäder/Soto-Sanfiel 2019, 98–114.

ethical reasoning that is most important for a society or individual – in this instance posing freedom of expression against presumptions generated by cultural-religious background. For some people the moral argument about freedom of speech is more important and permits the public disseminatation of any kind of opinion. For others, the connection of a people by type to corrupt and illegal activities is morally contemptible. The Swiss voted in favor of the veil ban in the 2021 referendum, suggesting that the poster's producers had indeed given visual form to the population's latent fear of "the foreign". Since March 2021 covering one's face in public spaces, for example by wearing a niqab, is illegal in Switzerland.[28] Ironically the result of the referendum was presented at a press conference by Minister of Justice Karin Keller-Suter wearing a face mask that covered all but her eyes. She wore the face mask as a response to the pandemic. Whose face is covered and for what reason is a key element of ethical reasoning around this issue. Our example also shows the extent of the power of the media and its actors to define what religion is and which values are communicated by means of religious signs, symbols, and narratives.[29]

Religious Media and Religion in the Media

As we have seen, media ethics can be defined as the critical investigation and discussion of media practices on four levels of action (representation, production, consumption/reception, and distribution). We turn now to specific practices of interest to a cultural studies–oriented investigation of the relationship between media ethics and religion. An approach to this relationship may focus in first place on the media practices of religious individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. It would emphasize the intentionality of the agents and center on questions such as: How do religious agents use the media to express, represent, and disseminate their values, worldviews, and moral principles? How do religious agents consume and receive the media? In fact, the study of religion has always been a study of media as well, because religious action is and always was essentially a communicative act through a range of media. People have always used different

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28 Bondolfi 2021.
29 For an introduction to this topic see, for example, Fritz/Höpflinger/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati/ Knauss 2018.

media – the body, ritual objects, images, spoken and written language, for example – not only to convey religious views and beliefs but also to interpret and understand the world around them religiously. The mediatization of religion is thus not a new phenomenon that started with the "new media" but an essential aspect of religion itself.[30] However, the emergence of new media and media practices in the modern and contemporary world has led to a major transformation in how religious actors use and receive media and in the cultural and social roles played by religion in general. As Mia Lövhheim and Gordon Lynch observe, mediatization – understood here specifically as "a meta-process shaping modern society along with individualization, globalization and commercialization" – entails the transformation of three aspects of religion:

> First, the media become the primary source of information about religious issues in society. Second, the media are not only distributors of religious information and experiences, they also produce religious experiences through shaping these according to the demand of popular media genres. Religious symbols, practices and beliefs thus become raw material for media's own purposes and narratives. Third, through their position in society, media become social and cultural environments that take over many of the functions of institutionalised religions such as providing moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community.[31]

The last point is particularly interesting in relation to our subject. If the media are taking over many of the functions of institutionalized religion, including providing moral guidance, then a critical study of the relationship between media ethics and religion should not only examine the phenomena of religious media production, distribution, and consumption/reception, but also address the role that religious symbols, motives, figures, and narratives play in media representation, including when producers, distributors, and receivers are not explicitly and intentionally acting religiously. This approach bases on an understanding of religion, according to which "religion must be conceived in an open way, as social stakeholder in the form of institutions, organisations, and communities as well as a communication system of worldviews and practices involving individuals and

30 Funiok 2010.
31 Lövheim/Lynch 2011.

Fig. 4: Film still
First Reformed
(Paul Schrader,
USA 2017), 01:06:56.

communities".[32] In other words, the relationship between media and religion is embedded in a cultural environment and not just in specific religious traditions. The medial dimensions of religion and the associated meanings interact constantly with individuals and collectives as well as with social actors and systems such as politics, economy, art, and education. While some theories of religion may assume that religion takes place within the sphere of activity of religious institutions and organizations, religious communication is not contained within the limits of religious institutions and communities. Media representations of religion wander through various social and cultural spheres and times, where they are adapted and changed. This recognition marks a conscious departure from the assumption that religious institutions are largely responsible for the theoretical determination of religion and that the loss of power by these institutions causes a direct loss of religion. The point here is not to question the validity of theories of secularization, but to examine other forms of religious presence in culture.

We can illustrate the breadth of religious communication with an example. Figure 4 shows a church notice board displaying the question, "Will God forgive us?" We can read the question in light of its syntax, so independently of its location or context: a subject (God) is linked to an action (forgive) and an object (us). The question mark indicates that it is not a statement but a query; it exists in an extra-linguistic situation in which someone asks a question of an unspecified number of people. Although the sentence does not specify what we have done that needs forgiveness, it is likely that most

32   Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015, 17.

recipients will have an inkling of the intended reason: "Will God forgive us *our sins*?" Here, however, the recipient has left the purely formal level of syntactic analysis and has already begun to interpret. The recipient refers back to their own experiences and memories to determine more than what the sentence explicitly says. They recall that the terms "God", "forgive", and "us" often appear together with the words "our sins". In other words, they interpret the sentence according to conventions of language use that they have learned throughout their life.

But who is the author of the sentence? And who are the addressees? Which "we" and which "God" are meant? To answer these questions, the recipient must consider the pragmatic and hermeneutic context in which the sentence is embedded. Much can be learned by analyzing the image or the internal context of the sentence. The medium of the sentences is a sign belonging to "First Reformed Church". One can therefore assume that a Reformed pastor or another person with connection to the Reformed church placed the inscription on the board and that the question is addressed to a local Reformed church community in the Anglo-Saxon world. We can therefore also assume that the sentence refers to a Christian, more specifically Reformed, understanding of God and sin. One could go further and hypothesize that given the usual function of church signs, the phrase may introduce the theme of a worship service or some other form of religious gathering. In addition, the fact that the sentence is on a church sign could be interpreted as an indication that the question is not intended to be answered directly, but rather is posed in order to stimulate thinking about sinfulness and forgiveness. But it could also be understood as an accusation packaged in the form of a rhetorical question, as a moral judgement. Knowledge of the medium provides only partial information about the intended function of the sentence's display.

To confirm or reject such presumptions we can turn to the context in which the image appears and is embedded. The recipient must consider where, when, by whom, for whom, and why the sentence was placed on the church notice board. But the recipient is seeing the panel not directly on site, but mediated in a picture, and therefore needs to know also where, when, by whom, for whom and why the picture was taken. Specifically, in this instance the recipient has to interpret the image as part of the cinematic language employed in Paul Schrader's FIRST REFORMED (US 2017). The cinematic narrative gives us information about the meaning of the sentence on the church sign: it was put up by the protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller. The

story relays that the protagonist interprets and denounces the human actions responsible for climate change and environmental pollution as sinful.

First Reformed tells the story of former military chaplain, Ernst Toller, who now ministers at the First Reformed Church in the small town of Snowbridge, in upstate New York. Toller lost a son in the Iraq war and feels guilty for not stopping him from going to war. In the voice-over Toller shares with the viewer the thoughts that he writes in his diary. His desperation and hopelessness become clear. An encounter with a married couple, Mary and Michael Mensana, sets the story in motion. Michael explains to the pastor his belief that because of climate change, it is morally wrong to have children. However, Mary is pregnant and wants to keep the child. Pastor Toller tries to change the climate activist's mind by pointing out that the choice of an abortion does not rest solely with him; the decision is also Mary's. And he criticizes Michael's hopelessness and despair as an expression of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death" that can be overcome by the leap of faith that is only possible when the individual is aware of their own limitations and thereby leaves behind rationality and engages in an experience of transcendence.[33] This reasoning does not seem to convince Michael, as he takes his own life a few days later. Driven by feelings of guilt, Toller increasingly adopts Michael's position and begins to interpret the ecological catastrophe theologically, as a result of sinful actions. Before Michael's suicide, Toller learns from Mary that Michael has hidden an explosive belt in the basement. He later takes it home, along with Michael's laptop and documents. The pastor soon comes into conflict with Edward Balq, an entrepreneur who is financing the renovation of the First Reformed Church. Balq criticizes the pastor for allowing the climate activist's funeral to be staged as a political event in a polluted area – the church choir sing Neil Young's protest song "Who's Gonna Stand Up and Save the Earth" from the 2014 *Storytone* album. While trawling through Michael's computer, Toller learns that Balq Industries is ranked fifth in the hundred that make up the "World's Top Polluters". The viewer's suspicion that Toller is planning a suicide assassination of Balq is confirmed towards the end of the film when he puts on the explosive belt just before the inauguration of the newly renovated church.

The consequences of human actions during the Anthropocene are addressed in First Reformed by using symbols, motifs, and rhetorical patterns that are an integral part of Christian language. Catastrophe is looming on

33   As for the concept of "leap of faith" see Evans 2006, 3–29.

two levels: the destruction of nature by humans and Toller's self-destruction through excessive alcohol consumption are the two poles of the same metaphor for sinful behavior. To symbolize the corruption of God's creation, the film refers to the Last Supper – Toller breaks the bread and then dips it in the whiskey. It is difficult to say whether Schrader uses Christian signs, symbols and narrative patterns to metaphorically illuminate the present ecological crisis or whether, on the contrary, the thematization of the ecological macro-crisis serves only as background and pretext for the protagonist's existential crisis and to relate his attempt to master or process that crisis. Both interpretations are probably correct: the macro and micro crises are the subject of the story, so to speak, and should illuminate each other. The reference to the rhetoric of sin and forgiveness creates the frame of meaning within which the actions of the protagonist and the actions of humankind in general illuminate each other.

To what extent is such a medium relevant for the media-ethical examination of religion? First Reformed is a cultural artifact that takes up religious signs and uses them aesthetically and narratively, but can it be directly interpreted as religious? In his famous work *Transcendental Style in Cinema* (1972), Paul Schrader expressed his love and fascination for films and directors who he believed capable of expressing the transcendent through certain stylistic and dramaturgical features. The fact that First Reformed contains many elements of a cinematic style that Schrader himself described as "transcendental" can certainly be interpreted as an indication of a religious intent.[34] However, this does not mean that the film is necessarily received as a religious film and even less is it the case that it is intended exclusively for a religious audience. The recipient does not have to be a believer or a member of a religious institution to understand the film and to feel addressed by it. As soon as one focuses on the diffusion and reception of the film, the relevant question is not so much whether the religious semiotics and narrative used in it are also interpreted religiously, but rather what they do or how they relate to a specific cultural and discursive formation. First Reformed clearly addresses the anxiety of the contemporary public concerning the climate crisis and uses religious signs, figures, and narrative patterns to problematize the way individuals and communities deal with that crisis. As a discursive practice within the discursive formulation of the climate crisis debate, the film uses religious language to highlight the moral implications

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34 See Schrader 2018; Scolari 2021.
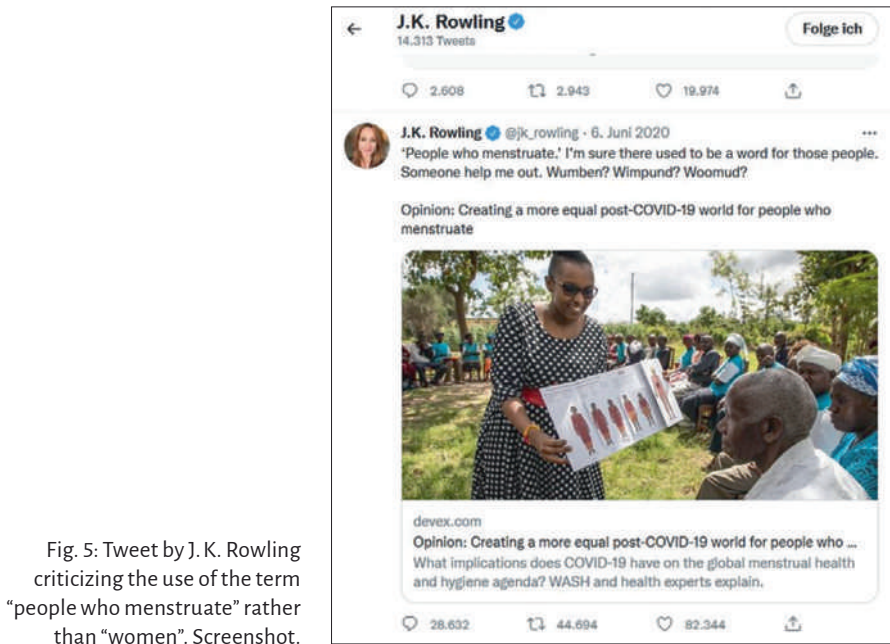
Fig. 5: Tweet by J. K. Rowling criticizing the use of the term "people who menstruate" rather than "women". Screenshot.

of the debate: Who is responsible for the climate crisis? And how should we deal with this responsibility? The film's performative force – that is, its ability to appeal to the public and to demand a moral positioning – lies in the fact that it does not present religious worldviews as the solution to the climate change problem, but rather uses religious language to frame the problem in one certain way rather than another.

"People who Menstruate" – Or, On the Need to Teach Media Ethics

Why Teach Media Ethics?

On 6 June 2020, British author J. K. Rowling posted a tweet in which she criticized the definition "people who menstruate" as a synonym for women in a campaign by Devex, a connective media platform for the global development community (fig. 5). Her tweet stated, "'People who menstruate?'

Fig. 6: Reaction to J. K. Rowling's tweet, pointing out that "women" does not mean the same as "people who menstruate". Screenshot.

I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?"

Reactions to this tweet were immediate, and even though there were positive responses, many were not at all sympathetic. Rowling was labelled "transphobic" or a "TERF" (Trans-exclusionary radical feminist), while other tweets highlighted that the ability to menstruate is not exclusively female (fig. 6)

The heated discussion on Twitter led to other statements by Rowling, who tried to explain why she – as a long-standing feminist – thinks it important not to erase the concept of sex in light of the continuing worldwide suppression of female and trans people by male power and violence.[35] GLAAD, an American organization that highlights defamatory coverage of LGBTQIA+ people, also took up the discussion on social media, stating, "JK Rowling continues to align herself with an ideology which willfully distorts facts about gender identity and people who are trans. In 2020, there is no excuse

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35   J. K. Rowling on 7 June 2020 on Twitter, https://bit.ly/3NT8Exk [accessed 10 January 2021].

for targeting trans people."[36] Even though Rowling published an essay on 10 June 2020 on her home page presenting her reasons for her position and expressing her sympathy for trans people,[37] the public debate continued.

Because of Rowling's celebrity, journalists from all over the world picked up the controversy immediately and made it known to people who were not necessarily active on social media. Whether these articles were descriptive or provided commentary, this media coverage always contained a specific moral or political standpoint: "Where J. K. Rowling's Transphobia Comes from"[38] or "Feminists Like J.K: Rowling Struggle with the Transgender Movement, but They Should Not Be Silenced".[39]

The debate soon was used as a teaser for political or ideological discussions on gender, sex, and LGBTQIA+. Actors from the HARRY POTTER films felt forced to take up a public stance, and publishing houses, intellectuals, and politicians joined the debate with various objectives: some tried to save their own reputations, others explained gender concepts or warned of a cancel culture.

Since 6 June 2020 media coverage of the *Harry Potter*-author has usually been linked to transphobia, gender debates, or radical feminism even when that debate is not relevant to the story at hand.

Why have we chosen to recount here the story of a well-known author whose public statement was interpreted variously by a range of (social) media users and producers? Because it is a perfect vehicle for teaching media ethics!

If we accept art historian Hans Belting's proposal that "We live with images. We comprehend the world with images",[40] media ethics should be a vital discipline, taught as early as in secondary school. In a mediatized world – for Belting "image" is not just a picture on the wall but also encompasses mental and virtual images – it is essential we can read and evaluate media content critically. Understanding how media devices function is not the same as being media literate. As highlighted above, different norms regulate form and content according to the media format, its technical specifi-

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36 GLAAD on 7 June 2020 on Twitter, https://bit.ly/3LJ5P04 [accessed 10 January 2021].
37 J. K. Rowling, 10 June 2020, on her home page jkrowling.com, https://bit.ly/3uqGNx7 [accessed 10 January 2021].
38 Robertson 2020.
39 Goward 2020.
40 Belting 2011, 9.

cations, and the target audience. The same content may be considered and valued in absolutely different ways.

Teaching media ethics is about instruction in how to critically engage mediated acts in their specific contexts of production, distribution, and reception, and in how to recognize that these mediated acts impact individuals and society by transmitting specific norms and values. It is not about passing categorical verdicts or practicing censorship, but about reflecting on the ethical dimensions of media content as a cultural product. Thus, a discourse on the ethics of media necessarily includes an analysis of values and responsibilities. As the discussion above has made evident, questions about who shows what, why, how, when, and to whom, or about what perceivers expect from specific media formats must be posed in exploring the production values of content and form and in understanding the perceivers' expectations and reactions. Furthermore, today we are all potential producers of media content, for we use social or digital media as a platform for communicating our opinions, to comment on diverse issues, or to search for knowledge and orientation. So, how we communicate through social media and other media and how that communication shapes our perceptions of the world also need critical examination.

The field of media ethics is broad and complex and contains a range of possible starting points, which makes case studies all the more useful. Media ethics, a so-called applied ethics, is essentially practical, because it is about rethinking and evaluating mediatized norms, roles, and institutions that regulate our everyday lives, and about adjusting idealized moral principles for daily practice.[41] Using a case study such as the "Rowling controversy", we can highlight the diverse dimensions of a media ethics' approach and instruct students in how to think critically and express their evaluations cogently.

"What Do We See?" – Reading the Representation

The first step in approaching J. K. Rowling's tweet in response to a global hygiene campaign is to look at it in detail, in other words to undertake a close reading of the image and the language. In the original tweet, Rowling comments on the title of an article. Image and text in the original tweet are not obviously linked: the image depicts a campaigner showing a flipbook to

41 See Schicha/Brosda 2010, 11; Ward 2021, 3–7.

a mixed-sex audience sitting in a circle somewhere outdoors. The setting looks very basic and rural, all those depicted are people of color. The actual text refers to the title of an article that highlights the importance of the campaign. The campaign itself is not the subject of Rowling's comment; she reacts to the use of the term "people who menstruate" with a satirical suggestion of alternative expressions for "people who menstruate" – "Wumben", "Wimpund", and "Woomud".

An analysis of the tweet's representation immediately raises several ethical questions: Why does Rowling not directly criticize the use of the inclusive term "people who menstruate"? What is the effect of the satire? How do comment and image interplay? Do the suggested terms raise specific connotations? Say "Wumben" aloud and we have a sound like "dumb"; "Wimpund" may be linked to "wimp", and "Woomud" to "mud" – a term Rowling deploys in her *Harry Potter* series when those with magical powers speak in a derogatory way of wizards and witches with a non-magic family background as "mudbloods". Is Rowling – on a meta level – criticizing a global development organization for promoting inclusive language in a highly heteronormative and exclusive society, where the patriarchal hierarchy and traditional gender roles are omnipresent, and diversity is still in its infancy? The image of the campaign give raise to such an assumption for it clearly refers to a rural and traditional African community.

This close reading of the actual representation is a first step in a hermeneutical approach to a cultural product that presupposes the interpreter's awareness of their own cultural imprint and expectations. Academic engagement with a tweet, a widely accessible source, may heighten sensibilities for critical readings of representations of every kind and for the interpreter's own handling of sources. This initial approach may lead to a subjective interpretation and possibly to a positioning in relation to the representation and the related debates. To advance an argument or position themselves in an existing debate, the students need to know more about the context of a representation such as the Rowling tweet. So, the question that should determine the next step should be, Who produced the artifact we are discussing?

"Who Published What?" – The Producer's Background

The producer of the tweet is, as we have noted, J. K. Rowling. She is the author of the *Harry Potter* series. She knows how to write; she is a professional. She is involved with several charity organizations that focus on alle-

Fig. 7: Rowling's tweet from 19 December 2019 in which she supported Maya Forstater's view on sex. Screenshot.

viating social deprivation for children, single-parent families, and women.[42] Rowling's philanthropic focus may be explained by her past experiences, for she was herself a single parent. Since her success as an author has given her a public voice, she has advocated for female empowerment and gender equality. To publish her opinions, she has used different media, such as interviews with magazines or newspapers as well as speeches or social media. She was fully aware of what she was doing when she posted the tweet. To establish whether the reaction was unexpected, we can turn to the responses to Rowling's earlier posts or likes.

In December 2019 Rowling had voiced her support for a female researcher who had lost her job due to her gender critical views.[43] In her tweet Rowling had stated, "Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who'll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is

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42 Rowling established the Volant Trust, https://www.volanttrust.org/about-us/; co-founded Lumos, https://www.wearelumos.org/; and is president of Gingerbread, https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/.

43 Gallagher 2019.

Fig. 8: Comment on Rowling's tweet wherein she supports Maya Forstater. Screenshot.

real?" (fig. 7). This tweet insisting that sex is a biological fact had sparked harsh criticism, and not only from trans-community activists. Rowling was accused of being transphobic and of denying trans people's rights. The discussion thus changed focus, from a genuine tweet on the essence of gender, sex, and gender inequality to a heated debate on transphobia, trans people's rights, and radical (and thus discriminatory) feminism. Some comments explicitly referred to the power of a person like Rowling in the public space and highlighted the responsibility that comes with that power (fig. 8).

Rowling would therefore have been prepared for a heated discussion when she posted her tweet on 6 June 2020. Again, in reaction to expressions of outrage, to the so-called shitstorm that followed, she generated several clarifying tweets. This did not stop the accusations, so she published an essay on the issue on her website, avoiding the limitations of Twitter as a concise message service.

A scholar of media ethics might ask about the impact of her feminist background on this controversy. Why did she react to this specific headline with a satirical tweet? Why did she feel that inclusive language threatened women's position within society? What kind of (feminist) perspective does

her tweet express? What values did the tweet communicate? What role did Rowling's renown play here? Why did she choose Twitter as the medium in which to publish her critique?

When we contextualize the representation within the producer's background, new questions arise concerning responsibilities and values. Furthermore, a specific position within the debate may be gained by following the producer's argumentation and by evaluating its consistency. Also, the choice of Twitter as means of communication becomes important when we try to contextualize the representation and to evaluate its meaning and the values and norms it communicates.

"Twitter, the Megaphone of a Global Community?!" – The Ways of Distribution

Rowling's tweet was immediately commented upon by a multitude of Twitter-users and organizations, and, somewhat later, through other channels by journalists and intellectuals. A tweet about inclusive language became a morally charged public discussion about social inclusion, equality, and power structures.

To choose Twitter to criticize inclusive language is to likely trigger discussion, because this microblogging service aims to provoke immediate reactions. Twitter is used to spread global or regional news, promote specific devices or articles or companies, and to communicate informally. The limitation to 280 characters for a tweet forces the user to write in a compact form. An explanation of an earlier statement may require several tweets. Pointed or even polemic statements are thus common, provided not only by "private" users (in the sense of non-economic or non-marketing tweets), but also by "public persons" like politicians, news anchors, scientists, intellectuals, organizations' agents, or celebrities from the entertainment industry. On Twitter the lines between the private and the public persona often blur. Donald Trump – to just name one prominent agent – used Twitter to provide users with his political views and agenda and with his personal opinions.[44] Twitter became a prominent political media during Trump's presidency, used not just by Trump,[45] but also by protesters and political

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44   See e. g. Keith 2016; Ecker/Jetter/Lewandowsky 2020; Gambino 2021.
45   Andrews 2020.

communities, for whom Twitter was a means to spread news and opinions and to organize gatherings and demonstrations.

In the space of social media much is allowed and restrictions are few. The Twitter regulative system[46] specifies a code of conduct, but in practice, the administrators need the help of the users to find a potential breach of the rules – more than 330 million people are users. Unless the system's administrators detect a violation of the rules, nothing will happen.

In Rowling's case, using Twitter meant reaching her 14 million followers. Many of them probably follow her because they like her books; others, because they know her philanthropic work; some, because she is famous – the motives are many. In addressing a subject that is the object of much controversial discussion, Rowling must have calculated on high user activity. Furthermore, issues related to trans identities, gender norms, and LGBTQIA+ tend to reach a relatively young, social media-savvy audience. Why did she want to launch this discussion on Twitter? Why not write a novel or an essay?

From a media ethics perspective, the question is not whether Rowling, particularly when so famous, should be allowed to post this kind of statement on a social media channel such as Twitter; it is rather about why she chose to do so and whom she reached. The moment in which she posted the statement should also be assessed. Did she do so as part of a marketing strategy three months before she published the next installment in her Cormoran Strike crime novel series?[47] We should also note that Rowling chose her website and not Twitter as the location for her explanation. Did the user comments and critical media reaction to her tweet force her to write an emotionally charged essay, which in turn required her to change media?

Analyzing the media a producer uses to distribute a specific message requires us to think about the target audience, the range of influence of the specific media, as well the limitations of the media's form. On a meta level one can also revisit the impact and power of social media.

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46 Twitter rules and policies can be found at https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies.
47 Interestingly, in the Cormoran Strike novel *Troubled Blood*, one villain dresses as a woman to deceive his victims. But he is not, as the novel highlights, a trans person, but a master of deceit. We can muse about that characterization.

"Just Shut Up" – The Perception Level

With Twitter as the medium, reactions to Rowling's tweet were pointed and often subjective, and at the debate's climax the comments became threatening and transgressing.[48] It was no longer a matter of contradicting or convincing; the debate became personal and very emotional. There were resonances with the witch hunts of the early modern period, when the wrong word in the wrong ear could lead to public accusation and execution. It is striking that even professionals such as journalists now approached Rowling and her complete work from a particular perspective. Several reviews of the next Cormoran Strike novel made reference to Rowling's tweet and the assumption that she is transphobic.[49] Up to today, the media coverage of Rowling – independent of its political slant – has continued to tend to link the author with trigger terms such as trans community, radical feminist, and denier of gender theory, even if the news being covered has absolutely nothing to do with these issues. The discussion Rowling launched will probably adhere to her for a long time yet.

Crucially, we must note that the discussion was never about the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive language, as Rowling's tweet suggested, but focused only on the author's potential transphobia. The limitations and fast dissemination of social media make it a space almost impossible to control, particularly when the debate is around such a controversial issue. As Judith Butler noted in an interview, "The quickness of social media allows for forms of vitriol that do not exactly support thoughtful debate. We need to cherish the longer forms."[50] The rules of conversation, which involve listening (here reading) attentively, thinking about the argument, and replying constructively, obviously do not work in this context. The speed of the response is crucial here. Several hashtags that libeled or threatened the author were created and are still active.

Negative user comments ranged from declarations of delusion to accusations of ignorance to the issuing of threats; positive comments supported Rowling's concept of femaleness by biology or by decision. This was not a conversation as usually understood: it was not about trying to understand the other person's opinion but about denouncing that opinion. Rowling her-

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48   The picture is easily acquired by following the thread on Twitter.
49   See e. g. Kolirin 2020; Haynes 2020.
50   Ferber 2020.

self has pointed out this character. Freedom of speech and opinion, as it is intended in the Twitter policies, looks different one might think. Some journals and magazines have at least used the tweet as a starting point for careful analysis and commentary on gender, sex, and transition, on trans people's rights and gender hierarchies. They have tried to show the complexity of the issue and both sides of the discussion. Famous voices subsequently condemned the type of public outrage that leads to a sort of censorship, applied to someone who does not agree with a public statement. As we have seen, the consequences of this Twitter debate did not remain in this specific space, for it also touched other areas of social life: people dissociated themselves from Rowling or from the concepts she defended; schools renamed houses in order to distance them from the author; and Rowling does not appear in the anniversary documentary Harry Potter 20th Anniversary: Return to Hogwarts (Casey Patterson / Joe Pearlman / Eran Creevy / Giorgio Testi, UK/US 2021), available for streaming since 1 January 2022.

An analysis of the tweet and how it was perceived makes evident that conversations on social media follow other rules than in real life, for there is much room for misunderstanding and the response time is brief. We are able to see the effect of social media on the formation of opinion and also how "news bubbles" can discard any opinion that does not correspond with the views of a specific community. We need to ask questions such as, How would I react to a tweet like this? Why would I react? What are my responsibilities as a user or perceiver? And on a meta level: Is a fruitful and respectful discussion on social media possible? What would be its premises? What are we to make of cancel culture and what does freedom of speech encompass?

Media ethics is hardly a dry theoretical topic. When it is addressed in the classroom, students are encouraged to think critically and to rethink media practices, to take on responsibility as receivers, and also as potential producers, not only in an academic context but also in everyday life. It is important school pupils and university students understand how and why values and norms are established, legitimized, and challenged through media transmission. Media ethics provides theoretical and methodological tools that can be deployed in the scholarly investigation of media representations, knowledge that can then be transferred to everyday situations.

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Claudia Paganini

The Face of the Other (Faith) as a Threat

How Images Shape Our Perception

Abstract

According to Emmanuel Lévinas, the face of the other is the starting point of ethics. The following article therefore examines in which form of media representation Christians meet with the other or, more precisely, with "the faith of the other". Across the photo reporting of migration, war, and terror, it will be shown that de-subjectifying images dominate and that the face of the other is absent. The same applies to religious websites and social media, where biblical quotations and idyllic landscape images predominate and people – or people's faces – who could be a challenge to one's own faith hardly appear. This affects the perception of "the own" and "the foreign", and it does so in an even more negative way because the competence to interpret images is not particularly well-developed in most people.

Keywords

Media Representation, Pictorial Turn, Migration, Filter Bubbles

Biography

Claudia Paganini studied philosophy and theology at the University of Innsbruck and the University of Vienna. After completing a doctorate in cultural philosophy in 2005, she turned to media ethics for her habilitation. Since April 2021 she has been professor for media ethics at the Munich School of Philosophy.

Faith and Face: Preliminary Observations

Religious faith is both individual and private, because even within a single religious community no two people will believe in a Supreme Being and the tenets of the related faith in exactly the same way. A philosopher, and with particular regard to the philosophy of mind, might explain this uniqueness in light of the fact that mental states, and thus states of faith, can only be experienced in a first-person perspective, while they can be but partly

understood from a third person perspective. A theologian would probably argue by focusing more strongly on spirituality: the basis for faith – at least in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is the personal encounter or relationship with God, which will never be the same for any two people, just as two people will never have the same relationship with a third human being. The faith of the other is always different from my own.

In this article, however, the faith of the other is understood in the sense of an explicitly defined, distinct denomination as seen from a Western Christian perspective. I will ask in what context and in what way Christians meet with "the faith of the other", and, more specifically, in which form of media representation, through which images conveyed in the media, this encounter takes place. I focus even more narrowly on the face of the other because – following Emmanuel Lévinas and in the context of what can be called the philosophy of vulnerability – the face is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary philosophy.[1]

For Lévinas, the other, and not the self, is the starting point of ethics, which he describes as the questioning of one's own spontaneity through the presence of the other.[2] It is in and through the other that we experience ourselves and the world. The encounter with the other is *the* significant experience or *the* significant event par excellence and cannot be reduced to the simple acquisition of additional knowledge. Only when the other is experienced as other and is not judged or condemned can ethics arise. The other appears to the self as a face. In the face of the other, the self feels the strangeness of the world and of humankind. The face transcends every idea we can have or make of the other. By experiencing the other solely in their appearance, the self perceives the other in their difference.[3] This difference questions the self. The appearance of the other through the face means that the other calls on me and – through their nakedness, through their need – invites me to respond.[4] And it is in the appearance of the other through their face, that the self beholds not only a singular human being, but also humanity as a whole. The face thus has the character of an appeal which urges the self to assume responsibility for the other. This responsibility is borne by the

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1   Lohwasser, 2019, 57–72.
2   Lévinas 2012, 224.
3   Wimmer 2007, 167.
4   Lévinas 2012, 224.

self; no one else can take this responsibility away from the self, no god, no other human being, no technology.

Against the background of the various normative approaches with their legitimate claims, it is clear that the reference to the face of the other cannot be the one and only solution to moral philosophical reasoning. Nevertheless, it can and should be a starting point for ethics, especially with regard to motivation – why should I even bother to seek the (however defined) good? If this is so, it seems obvious to ask whether, where, and in what way the face of the other (faith) appears in the images we are confronted with every day, in particular with regard to media representations.

Where Do We Meet Images of the Other Faith in the Media?

The first issue to address is where or in which images people of other denominations or faiths appear, and where they are absent. From a Western Christian perspective, we encounter images of people representing other denominations or faiths especially when migration, war, and terror are being reported. In the narrower religious context by contrast – i. e. when faith communities introduce themselves in the media, when prayers and other spiritual offerings are being shared, etc. – very few images only show faces or even people. We will return to this question in the section below entitled "Pictures on Religious Websites and in Social Media".

Pictures of Migration, War, and Terror

Let me start with an example. Figure 1 is a photograph of two men, one of whom is a policeman, the other a dark-skinned young man with short black hair, full beard, strong upper body, and aggressive body language. The eyes of the latter are fixed on the former with a threatening look; his face is much too close to the policeman, as if he might strike him at any moment.

This picture was posted on Facebook in May 2018 by the right-wing group German Meme Defence Force and subtitled with the sarcastic words, "14-year-old refugee bravely confronts a Nazi deportation police officer." Within a short time, the post had been shared around 8,400 times, mainly by German users, but also by users in Austria, Sweden, and Hungary. Soon after, it appeared on Twitter, where a user commented on the page of the equally right-wing Junge Alternative Essen, "The sympathetic young pro-

Fig. 1: Several right-wing groups deliberately miscontextualise the picture of Vito Pirbazari taken while filming the Netflix series DOGS OF BERLIN, https://is.gd/xRQmvi [accessed 4 January 2022].

tection seeker will win in the long run because he has the German government on his side." The Austrian FPÖ local group Oggau commented similarly: "The future of Germany explained by exactly one picture."

A good part of the users seemed to agree that this picture is yet more proof of the aggressive behaviour of refugees, more precisely of young male Muslim refugees, who pose a massive threat to Christian Europe. But for those who think along these lines, this photograph presents three particular challenges. The first problem is relatively banal. Contrary to what the original posting suggests, what we see here is not a confrontation between a refugee and a policeman documented by a photographer; it is a picture taken during the filming of the Netflix series DOGS OF BERLIN (DE 2018). The "policeman" is a member of the special investigation team of the Berlin police, whereas the "Afghan refugee" is a well-paid German actor named Vito Pirbazari. The photo, which has provoked hundreds of outraged comments, is therefore a fake, or rather, strictly speaking, it was made fake by the text, which provided it with a specific hermeneutic framing and deliberately miscontextualised it.[5] The second problem is the naïve assumption that a photograph is an actual eye-witness, that it represents what really happened. And finally, problem number three is related to the idea of the refugee, the idea of flight, both constructs that fulfil certain socio-political functions.

We start with the problem of eye-witnessing, an issue that predated the invention of photography. Reflections on the ontological and epistemological status of images can be found across cultural history. The change of

5   Paganini 2019, 110–115.

mode from drawing to photograph did not initially bring any fundamentally new arguments, for the authenticity of hand-drawn illustrations – as they were to be found in magazines from the 1830s onwards – had already been judged according to the same criteria – namely, eye-witnessing and the intention to report truthfully. The fact that the two visual modes were regarded as epistemically equal at the time of the advent of photography is reflected inter alia by the fact that for several decades photographs and drawings could stand alongside one another without any difficulty, often even "illustrating" the same article.[6]

However, the more photography replaced hand-drawn illustration, the more the debate shifted. Rudolf Arnheim was focusing exclusively on the photograph when he postulated in 1978 that an image was authentic precisely when it depicted reality – posed or unposed – and true when it expressed the essence of the matter represented. Similar media-ontological considerations can be found in André Bazin, who speaks of the objectivity of photography, and also in Roland Barthes, who appraises the photograph as empirical art and a perfect analogon of reality.[7] At the beginning of the 1990s, photography received even more philosophical attention. Almost simultaneously, Gottfried Boehm and William J. T. Mitchell developed the concept of the "iconic"[8] or "pictorial turn".[9] Both were arguing in line with the "linguistic turn": Boehm took up Wittgenstein's concept of the language game and the family resemblance of concepts as he sought to derive his programme of the self-sufficiency of the image from the pictoriality of language; Mitchell orientated himself more strongly on Charles S. Peirce and argued for a substitution of the primacy of language by the symbolic. Boehm and Mitchell were not alone in calling for a radical relationship between language and image.

Instead of going into detail, here I content myself with noting that the "iconic turn" is probably the reason that in recent years photography has been increasingly reflected upon not only in its aesthetic dimensions but also in its ontological, epistemological, and ethical ones. As far as the last of these is concerned, first and foremost the manifold possibilities for deception, either conscious – by deliberate technical manipulation – or un-

6   Bucher 2016, 280–317.
7   Blunck 2016, 96–106.
8   Boehm 1994, 11–38.
9   Mitchell 1994, 11–34.

conscious – by a lack of contextualisation, an unsuitable choice of extracts, etc. – constitute a media-ethical problem. Additionally, the question of representation or non-representation demands consideration. While most recipients are well aware that a report in words reflects the author's opinion and therefore requires a critically reflective and questioning approach, the recipient's similar competency with regard to images cannot be nearly so readily assumed.

As was also the case for the early realistic interpretations of photography, it is often overlooked that a photograph does not refer to reality directly; the spectator must first establish this reference semio-pragmatically. The similarity between the photograph and the world is therefore not the result of simple reproduction but a product of interpretation, for the photograph evokes ideas and thoughts in the spectator that would otherwise be evoked by the object. Only those who are aware of this do not run the risk of naïvely taking photographic material disseminated on the Internet as proof that something happened in exactly this or that way. When we then turn to a photo's particular context, further difficulties can arise. In the case of images of migration, war, and terror, where people of other denominations or faiths figure with particular frequency, the production of stereotypes requires our attention.

The images we are confronted with in online newspapers and on social media every day do not offer (neutral) documentation. They bear witness to how a society thinks – for example, about refugees. In this instance they contribute to the emergence or consolidation of a certain idea of the refugee, providing an interpretation scheme for social phenomena and thus instigating and steering a construction process during which a refugee is codified – regardless of the concrete character and story of the particular person. The result is a "banal racism"[10] that is manifested as the border between "us" and "them" created by that construction process increasingly penetrates everyday life and finally takes possession of people's perception and thinking such that the self-created demarcation line ultimately appears as a given parameter and not as a constructed instance in need of explanation.

Typical of this construction process are de-subjectifying images such as overcrowded rubber dinghies or crowds of people seeking to scale border fences or heading in caravans towards an uncertain destination (fig. 2). This type of photograph automatically reminds the viewer of natural forces and

10 Terkessidis 2004.

Fig. 2: Pictures of masses of people running against border fences have a de-subjectifying effect on the spectator, https://is.gd/imUBAh [accessed 4 January 2022].

catastrophes, of chaos, disorder, and violence, and these chains of associations are reinforced by typical verbal comments and headlines such as "migration wave" or "flood of refugees" or by metaphors such as "invasion" or "onslaught", borrowed from the context of war. Images and words thus construct migrants as a homogenous and threatening mass, so that it is completely clear to the recipient that the term "refugee crisis" refers exclusively to the excessive stress on their homeland provoked by the current refugee situation, and not to the crisis of people who have had to leave behind their belongings, their families, and their respective histories. This instance is but one example of the above-mentioned construction process.

Depending on the circles or filter bubbles in which we move on the Internet, this general attribution process can additionally be connoted negatively or positively. To give a negative example: members of right-wing populist groups who come across postings by acquaintances with xenophobic convictions will most likely be confronted with photo material explicitly focusing on the topoi of danger and burden.[11] These images, often borrowed from completely different contexts, as in the example given above, clearly

11 Wengeler 2003, 132–133.

symbolise aggression and destruction and are accompanied by such terms as "immigrant criminality", intentionally invented to reinforce negative attributions. Thus, they contribute to the fact – one example is New Year's Eve in 2015 in Cologne – that problems such as (sexual) violence are located away from the sphere of the "us". The "us" is stylised as *the* place of non-violence, as an oasis for women's sexual self-determination. However, this is obviously not the case when one looks at the statistics on sexual assaults in our (own) German families.

But the topoi that have been created to counterbalance these aggressive master narratives are not unproblematic either. Demarcated against the topos of burden – peculiar in that in the absence of quantitatively ascertainable criteria, the limits of the "bearable burden" remain ambiguous and invariably portrayed as already reached or even exceeded – the topos of benefit has emerged. In place of images of uncontrollable masses of people, migrants are shown as eagerly absorbed in their work or standing next to their happy bosses, smiling into the camera. Refugees are good for our economy, they help make up for the lack of apprentices – this is the message behind the photographs. But even the humanitarian topos, whose images wish to evoke compassion and claim responsibility for migrants, has its dark side. The outside perspective on the refugee as a vulnerable victim tends to reduce individual human beings – who very likely see themselves as active subjects consciously taking steps to improve their situation – to passive recipients of aid, and thus silences them.

Perspectivisation is a considerable problem in the case of figurative speech about refugees, for the vast majority of the images of flight regularly reproduced in Western media embody the outside perspective. Additionally, there are hardly any migrants on the producer side. A similar problem of perspective is central in war reporting, where "embedded journalists" reflect the events through their pictures primarily from the perspective of the shooters and not from that of those who are hit.[12] At the same time, the images of suffering, of those who are injured or even dead, create a strange complicity of photographer and viewer, both of whom watch and do not intervene. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, American writer Susan Sontag even goes so far as to claim that only those who are ready to help should be allowed to look at pictures exposing extreme suffering.[13]

12   Chimelli 2008, 37.
13   Sontag 2004.

Fig. 3: Nick Út's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph is said to have contributed significantly to the massive growth of opposition to the Vietnam War, https://is.gd/QpQ6B3 [accessed 4 January 2022].

That said, the effects of war photography as such are highly controversial. Does war photography merely serve to maximise economic profit or does it help raise the public's awareness of the horror of war and thus possibly even contribute to reducing the duration of wars? As an example of the second option, the German media ethicist Christina Schicha cites Nick Út's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of children fleeing from a napalm attack, which contributed significantly to the massive growth of opposition to the Vietnam War (fig. 3).[14] In both instances, however, the person depicted is instrumentalised to a certain degree and what is unique and individual is profanised through its depiction. Viewed from this angle, photography can be attributed a special form of violence, in that it appropriates human destinies and preserves them in unchangeable images.

In war photography, people of religious denominations or faiths that are not those of the majority of the recipients often appear as sufferers and sometimes as perpetrators of violence, not infrequently inhabiting bloodthirsty poses, such as holding a victim's severed skull in their hands. The latter is also the case with images of terror. Both types of representation tend to kindle fear in the audience. In the case of the media-staged cruel

14 Schicha 2021, 93; Stepan 2000.

perpetrator, this is not surprising. But the images of victims, too, can cause pressure and anxiety, for whenever we feel we do not have the resources to respond to a challenging situation, tension arises, and ultimately a feeling of threat. Therefore, paradoxically, danger can seem to emanate even from the other (believer) who is a victim. In addition, images in themselves tend to simplify complex issues, a process reinforced by the emotional activation of the brain which misleads viewers into uncritically adopting stereotypes and master narratives, as has been shown above with regard to migration contexts.

As far as the coverage of terror is concerned, the main function of the media is not to inform but to comfort. As Clément Chéroux has pointed out in connection with the images of 9/11, the almost endless repetition of a multitude of very similar images is a way of overcoming trauma.[15] The shock of the catastrophe is processed by quickly integrating the inconceivable into a comprehensible story that makes sense, thus satisfying a need for orientation by means of a constant supply of information and the suggestion that ultimately everything is under control.[16] But media reporting and the associated mediation rituals do not only provide security in chaotic situations. They also ensure that the audience is moved emotionally and thus they awaken feelings of community. They set in motion collectivisation processes, through which the collective can better stabilise itself and the outbreak of panic can be avoided. However, these collectivisation processes also lead to a stronger perception of the boundary between the "us" and the "them" and reinforce the growing desire to separate oneself as a group from the outside. It is therefore not surprising that people with other religious convictions quickly become part of this outside and are hence perceived as a danger once more.

Pictures on Religious Websites and in Social Media

On the Internet people talk explicitly about faith, about their own or other people's religious convictions: Facebook and Twitter pages proclaim divine messages; on dating platforms users can make contact with singles who belong to the same religion; on Instagram accounts and YouTube channels

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15 Chéroux 2011, 37.
16 Weichert 2011, 188–192.

Fig. 4: It is impossible to tell whether Jana intends to manipulate her audience or whether she herself is being instrumentalised by the agents behind her page, https://is.gd/OdDw8Q [accessed 4 January 2022].

in place of cosmetics or sporting goods, religious influencers advertise their faith and their own religious communities. A closer look at these posts establishes that only a few of the many ways of speaking of God as cultivated in the theological-philosophical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are to be found here. Classical philosophical approaches such as the *via negationis*, the *via eminentiae*, or the *via analogiae* hardly ever occur, and if they do, then in a vaguely allusive, unreflected way. The same can be said of other ways of speaking, such as the mythical, the dialectical according to Karl Barth, or the paradoxical according to Søren Kierkegaard. Instead, one finds an abundance of quotations and metaphors from the Bible and the Koran, usually backed by expressive images of nature. Additionally, and in contrast to Web 1.0, the need for an informative or even theological discourse is only marginally met by social media (the so called Web 2.0), which essentially communicates the poster's own religious experiences or seeks to motivate others to believe.

From the point of view of media ethics, this raises the question of the authenticity of such religious "speech". In addition to politically motivated fear production, fake news, interest-driven PR communication, hidden advertising, strategic military influence on public opinion, acting under someone else's identity, etc., in Web 2.0 we are also dealing with religious manipulation, in the form of the deliberate use of psychological techniques to influence users emotionally, to steer and eventually control them. It is not necessarily simple to establish from an outside perspective whether it is the 20-year-old beautiful influencer herself, with her mane of blond curls, who intends to manipulate her audience or whether she is being instrumentalised by the agents behind her page (fig. 4). What can be said, though, is that highly emotional professions of faith are often followed immediately by

an invitation to enter personal data, to fill out a membership application, or to make intensive financial contributions to a community.

As far as the referential intention is concerned, we are confronted with two types of players: those who intend to refer to God, but exclusively in order to optimise their own advantage – e. g. their position in the community as a response to the number of their "converts" – and those who do not want to refer to God but merely use the term "God" as an instrument of manipulative strategic communication. In both cases the value of any religious conviction triggered by psychological manipulation is questionable as is uncertain how such a conviction can grow and mature. Finally, we would require empirical evidence to establish whether the believers recruited in such a (questionable) way will be respected by the community as independent personalities or whether manipulation and control continue to permeate everyday interactions. This need for evidence also applies to the question whether and under which circumstances withdrawal from the community will be permitted.

But let us turn to cases of religious speech in social media where we cannot assume a manipulative intention and we have reason to suppose that we are simply dealing with believers who wish to share their own religious beliefs and spiritual experiences with others. As mentioned above, this goal mainly happens through biblical or Koranic quotations and metaphors, usually in combination with images. As far as quotations from the Bible are concerned, these are almost consistently taken out of context, badly translated, or paraphrased so strongly that the act of quoting equals distortion.

Difficulties can also arise with regard to the metaphorical speech about God, in particular whether such metaphors about God can convey cognitive content and if so, of what kind. Whereas in the tradition of logical empiricism metaphors were often regarded as mere rhetorical ornaments without cognitive content, panmetaphoricists argue that all religious speech is metaphorical.[17] If we follow our everyday intuition with regard to metaphors, we have good reason, I believe, to advocate for a moderate position that assumes a cognitive as well as an explanatory function of metaphors. To give an example, I can conclude from the metaphor "God is our father" that God takes interest in my life, that I can turn to God with confidence and need not fear God. By enabling such a conclusion, the metaphorical assertion becomes part of the space of reasons, for it can be argued with them.

17 Gäbe 2019, 216–218.

At the same time, however, the metaphor expresses a content that cannot (or can only with difficulty) be expressed in literal speech. The degree of "absoluteness" of this irreducibility is one of the central points in the debate on God-metaphors in philosophy of religion and is not discussed here.

Relevant here, from the point of view of media ethics, is, however, the question whether the viewer can be assumed to have sufficient interpretive competence. This concern relates not just to the biblical or Koranic quotations and metaphors, but also to the images with which the religious texts are combined. In addition to the challenges already described above, here we also face the specific problem that these images are not neutral but instead provide an interpretation scheme within which the quotations and metaphors are perceived and decoded. It is striking that religious content is consistently transmitted through pictures of aesthetic solitary natural landscapes, suggesting an individualistic and noncommittal interpretation. A personal experience of nature is transmitted pictorially; the faces of other people – or indeed of people with a different faith – hardly ever appear. The experience of God offered in the text thus runs the risk of being interpreted as private, as something individuals consume, just like their Netflix subscriptions. What falls by the wayside, so to speak, are the faces and faiths of others, and consequently also all aspects of community and social responsibility for others, whether they belong to one's own confession or not.

The problem of a slanted interpretation is exacerbated by these nature metaphors occurring *en masse*, which turns them into "master narratives", narratives that dominate media discourse without being singularly appropriate on an argumentative level, more appropriate than other interpretations of religion, human nature, or the world. Although the mechanism behind the viral spread of master narratives in social media has not yet been sufficiently explored, the first empirical studies suffice to show that their dynamics are self-reinforcing and difficult to break.[18] One way of possibly achieving interpretative diversity in religious speech could therefore involve deliberate invention and the spreading of alternative narratives – such as images of people interacting with each other, helping each other, and ideally not all of them would be young, healthy, wealthy, good-looking, and white.

Finally, a peripheral locale of religious speech should be mentioned – satirical sites. Such sites might comment critically on world events by assuming the first-person perspective of God. On Facebook, for instance,

18   Hochman 2020, 1043–1061.

Fig. 5: One form of religious speech is satire as we find it on Facebook, where "God" has around 3.9 million followers, https://www.facebook.com/TheGoodLordAbove/.

one finds a god with around 3.9 million followers who explicitly describes himself as a comedian and who clearly took a stand against the actions of the then president Donald Trump in a post from 4 January 2020 – "Thou shalt not start World War 3 just to win an election because you are terrified of going to prison" (fig. 5).[19] What place should satire have in religion? Where are the boundaries with blasphemy, how much ironic criticism are believers required to tolerate? Does ironic distance make ideological dialogue easier, or by scandalising people does it only push them further into their filter bubbles and thus encourage radicalisation? This said, most of the postings do not contain images at all, only brief cynical statements. Some of them provide images of migration and war, particularly when the users are called upon not to be indifferent to the suffering of the people affected. In general, however, as noted above, these images primarily express the neediness of (vulnerable) others from an – albeit well-intentioned – external perspective.

Conclusion

The images with which we are confronted in the media every day and which shape our idea of people representing other denominations or faiths present a multitude of dilemmas. They can perpetuate problematic constructs, they may profane what is unique, and they are sometimes violent[20] in that they

19 God@TheGoodLordAbove, 2020.
20 Lévinas 2002, 320–321.

appropriate human destinies and irreducibly freeze them into unchangeable pictorial representations. They establish the complicity of photographer and viewer, reduce complexity, or do not allow other "faces" to appear. But these problems form only half the story for what these images show often becomes visible only through and because of them. Pictures open windows to other worlds, they are processed by the brain more effectively than words and sentences, they are better remembered, they set free emotions and attitudes, they motivate more strongly than abstract imperatives. Therefore, a ban on pictures – similar to the ones religions have repeatedly pronounced – would be counter-constructive. Just as images serve stereotypes and breed misinterpretations, they also have a positive potential that should not be underestimated. How this potential can be activated still needs to be clarified, but first and foremost the viewer's image competence must be improved and then changes must be made to existing production conditions, with those whose fate, life, and faith are recorded photographically given the opportunity to participate in shaping them.

If we are to counteract the current tendency for people of other faiths and denominations either not to appear at all in religious figurative speech or to be portrayed as a threat – as demonstrated in the context of migration, war, and terror – it is surely worthwhile to return to Emmanuel Lévinas and his reflections on the face of the other. Perhaps we so seldom see the face of the other when believers of other denominations are being portrayed because the face always conveys an appeal. It appeals to the viewer to seek to understand the other, to consider them as persons in their own right, and to take responsibility for their well-being. When we do not see faces, we can more easily ignore demands upon ourselves or banish them from our minds; we can continue exactly as before and hold on to our own stereotypes. Therefore, the increased appearance of the "faces of the other (faiths)" might be an important step in breaking down – at least to some extent – the boundaries between "us" and "them" or even in engaging in interreligious dialogue.

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Rüdiger Funiok

Angels as Interpretive Figures

Interdisciplinary Aspects of a New Angelology

Abstract

This article treats Angelology (or Angeletics) as a series of theories about angels. Angeletics applies a communication theory approach to its subject of study. It underlines the elements "message" (content) and "messengers" (media) and suggests evaluating the message (whether positive or negative) and underlining mutual responsibility between communicants.

The classical theory of angels follows a theological approach and is not only based on biblical and Qur'anic narratives but also uses systematic reflections and philosophical speculations. Modern literature rather avoids the idea of angel figures; nevertheless it describes existential situations in which a "heavenly" message is received. For centuries the fine arts have depicted angels in biblical scenes not only in an illustrative but also in a more abstract, even critical, way. Ultimately, angels can be seen as an invitation to develop human virtues, especially those needed in a world full of pain.

Keywords

Angels, Communication Theory, Angelology, Bible, Qur'an, Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee, Ernst Barlach, Wim Wenders, Pope Francis, Ecological Spirituality

Biography

Rüdiger Funiok has been a member of the Jesuit order since 1962. He studied philosophy, pedagogy, theology, and communication science. He received his doctorate in pedagogy at the University of Munich in 1980 and his habilitation in pedagogy at the University of Regensburg in 1992. From 1993 to 2010 he was professor of Communication Science and Pedagogy at the Munich School of Philosophy (Faculty of Philosophy S.J.) and head of the Institute for Communication Science and Adult Education (IKE) at this faculty. He has published and lectured on adult education, media education, and media ethics.

Composition and Method

In ancient cosmology, angels, even as human-like beings, were assistants of a God seen as directly acting in the world. They helped God in unleashing storms, causing rain and snow, and moving the waves of the sea. Some angels were tasked with communicating messages from God to human beings. Greek philosophy and later Christian theology developed Angelology, the theories of angels.

Why is it useful today for scholarship to deal with these personified energies? And what is the most adequate method for so doing? In applying a hermeneutic approach to probe old narratives and speculations, this author participates in a renewed understanding of angels in our time. Common to these attempts is an examination of the communicative function of angels as messengers.

First, some media scholars use the term Angeletics to raise questions about the content of everyday communication – that is, the relation between the initiator and the recipient, as well as their mutual responsibilities.

Second, theological Angelology gathers and reflects on testimonies about angels in authoritative biblical and Qur'anic texts. What are their central ideas? How can we understand them with modern textual critical and dogmatic (systematic theological) approaches?

Third, the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries created narratives to describe moments of insight and decision-making which can be interpreted as transcendent messages. The term "angel" was thus avoided. Works of fine art, such as paintings and sculptures, illustrate biblical scenes with angels, even in abstract form. The arts can also articulate protest and warning in the form of an "angel of history", as exemplified in the works of Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee.

Fourth, within an anthropological perspective, angels have become metaphors for human virtues, such as a new ecological consciousness and sense of responsibility.

Angeletics, a Media-Philosophical and Historical Exploration of the Medium

Today, the characteristics of "messengers", the secular "colleagues" of angels, are approached in a field of study called Angeletics. This represents a specific approach in media communications studies in which the element "medium" is emphasized – more explicitly and differently than in social

science-oriented communications studies. This idea goes back to Marshall McLuhan's findings (1964) that the "medium" as it originates in specific cultural-historical contexts is already part of the message itself ("The Medium is the Message"). McLuhan, as well as other cultural-historical researchers such as Harold A. Innis and Walter Ong, point to the fact that it makes a difference whether something is communicated in an oral or written culture with one-of-a-kind texts, for instance on parchment, or later printed en masse in books, or is conveyed as moving images on film (and later television) or as a spoken word with music on radio, or ultimately appears in new combinations on the Internet.

"Angeletics", as it was developed by Rafael Capurro[1] and Sybille Krämer,[2] differs from theological angelology, although the terms share the same root. The primary meaning of the Greek word "angelos" is "messenger" or "ambassador" – in the religious sense, the messengers of God, i. e. angels. "Angelía" translates as "message" from which "euangélion", or "good message", is derived.

The "Theory of Message" or Angeletics, is a special philosophical theory of *media* studies. As Krämer has proposed, it falls to media to create an awareness of something while at the same time ensuring the media itself fades into the background; the media is thus in effect 'transparent' in order that the subject might be seen.[3] In contrast to today's emphasis on producers and authorship, Angeletics "tries to develop a media theory based on the (archaic) messenger figure and its seemingly uncreative transfer processes".[4] Messengers are mediating third parties who retreat into the background but remain effective and significant.

We are accustomed to letting sociality emerge from dual-conceived relationships, be it speakers and listeners, broadcasters and receivers, ego and alter ego, lord and servant, me and you. [It is crucial to Krämer] that "dyadic figures are latently triangulated". And does the messenger not precisely exemplify such a figuration of the third [...]? The messenger builds a social relationship through his/her mediating role. And it is not far-fetched to assume that thirdness, not duality, is the nucleus of the

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1   Capurro 2003a; Capurro/Holgate 2011.
2   Krämer 2004; 2008; 2011.
3   Krämer 2011, 55.
4   Krämer 2011, 54.

social dimension, that therefore it is only in triadic interactions that it establishes social institutions.[5]

The angelic approach therefore distinguishes the following elements of the communication process:

the producers / source of the message,
the messenger,
the message (which is more than information), and
the possibilities of interpretation and appropriation of the addressees.

The research zeroes in on the element "messenger". Ethical questions also arise – for example, the correctness, credibility, and respect of the messenger in relation to the addressees. One can, in turn, demand from these questions a fundamental openness and critical thinking. In any case, recipients in the field of mass communication are to be thought of as selective and resistant individuals, as the American psychologist Raymond A. Bauer showed with his theory of the Obstinate Audience.[6]

Rafael Capurro and John Holgate identify the principles of transfer and appropriation by the addressees:

Messages can be of *imperative*, *indicative* or *optional* nature. A human sender, an individual or a group, may believe to have a message for everybody and for all times and *vice versa*, someone may think everything is a message to them. Between these two poles there are several possible hierarchies. In order to select or interpret a message *the receiver must have some kind of common pre-understanding with the sender of the message*, for instance a similar form or (linguistic) code.

What kind of specific criteria can be postulated by a message theory concerning the way a sender, a medium and a receiver of messages should act in order to be successful under finite conditions? By finite conditions I mean that neither the sender, nor the messenger, nor the receiver have any kind of certainty that their actions will fit the ideal situation in which:

a sender addresses a receiver, sending them a message that is new and relevant for them, i. e. they follow the *principle of respect*,

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5   Krämer 2011, 60.
6   Bauer 1964.

a messenger brings the message undistorted to the receiver, i. e., they follow the *principle of faithfulness*,

a receiver reserves judgement, based on a process of interpretation, about whether that the message is true or not, i. e. they follow the *principle of reservation*.

Messages can be studied according to their *form*, *content*, *goal*, *producers*, and *recipients*.[7]

Angeletics is understood as a network of questions rather than a developed theory. At any rate, it is an interdisciplinary theory, with psychological, political, economic, esthetical, ethical, and religious aspects.[8]

Even if Angeletics as located in the field of communication studies is explicitly distinguished from angelology, the theological doctrine about angels, one can certainly ask what the application of this secular messenger theory imparts to angels as heavenly messengers. The suggestions are mainly of a formal nature. For further characterization of the process of revelation and for clarification of the function of angels, phenomenological and theological considerations are needed.

In these considerations, for example, God is seen not only as a source of the message, but also as its content (self-communication of God). With respect to their *form*, angels' messages communicate literal stories, because they were told to others following mystical experiences and subsequently recorded. The *purpose* of this particular form is for the addressees to be willing to cooperate with God (in God's plan of salvation). According to the *content*, these experiences are – for the addressees – relevant messages, messages with novelty value (information); at the same time, they also make impossible demands (in faith and trust), often forcing the acceptance of suffering (for example, social ostracism due to illegitimate pregnancy, Luke 1:34), and thus also display characteristics of the bad and the ugly. Capurro suggests that in today's mass media and on the Internet there is also something like "dysangelia" – an excess of irrelevant, sometimes destructive messages.

7   Capurro 2003b, online, chapter "I. Angeletics as an Interdisciplinary Theory".
8   Capurro 2003a, 107.

Angelology: Theological Theories of Angels

Angels are entities whose presence is "recognized" by devout people when they have religious experiences and "hear" messages or beckonings from God. Angels are ultimately named as such when "listeners" and "seers" speak about them before a community that is already established or has begun to take shape. These people are called "followers" when they later begin to record these messages and give them form. Contemporary perceptions of personal messengers in a given historical context play a defining role in giving form to these spiritual entities. The terminology used to explain who represents God in such matters was drawn from the language of secular rulers in appointing envoys as their diplomatic representatives. These envoys enjoyed diplomatic immunity, and when they spoke, they did so in the first person, as representatives of the ruler who had sent them. They were authorized to negotiate and sign contracts.

The institutionalized role of envoys was transferred to the religious context in depicting invisible messengers. The "seers" and their followers drew on traditional ideas about the physical appearance of angels, identifying insignia and their given names. These identifiers were often assimilated by other cultures. For instance, Hermes, the Greek messenger of the gods, became the Roman Mercury.

Angels are figures used in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to give shape to special religious experiences. Angels act as *mediators* or as *media* of God's self-revelation. This communicative function of angels is the focus of this article. Other types of angels that exist in the mythological worldview of former periods are God-praising and adoring angels (the heavenly court), deterring angels (guarding paradise or a holy district), the playful and music-making angels of the rococo (puttos), guiding and healing angels (Raphael in the story of Tobit), warrior angels (Michael), angels of punishment (as in Sodom and Gomorrah), redemptive and nourishing angels (Elijah in the desert), and of course the guardian angels again so popular today. The testimony of the Bible is essential for understanding the role of angels in religious experiences, but systematic theological considerations are also important if we are not to get lost in a polytheistic or esoteric angel cosmos.

At the beginning of the Bible there is only one reference to a nameless "Malak Yahweh" – Malak is the Hebrew word for messenger. For example, Hagar, Abraham's second wife, whom he rejected, is addressed in the wilderness by such an "angel of the Lord" (Gen. 16:7), and it is said that he heard

Fig. 1: *Holy Trinity*, icon by Andrey Rublyov (about 1411), Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, https://is.gd/KhMNpB [accessed 18 January 2022].

the cry of their son Ishmael (whom the Muslims regard as their progenitor) (Gen. 21:17). When Moses had his decisive encounter with God at the burning bush in the desert, an "angel of the Lord" is said to have appeared to him immediately thereafter (Exod. 3:2) to say that God had called out to him from the bush: Moses, Moses! (Exod. 3:4). So, if Yahweh's messenger in the biblical narratives stands for God, the messenger acts thus out of reverence, to preserve the transcendence of God. When God visited Abraham before Sodom and Gomorrah, there were even *three* messengers who represented God. (In the Eastern Church, Andrey Rublyov's icon became the canonized representation of the Holy Trinity, see fig. 1.)

And when Jacob, Abraham's grandson, is spoken to by God in a dream, he sees God at the top of a ladder on which angels ascend and descend (Gen. 28:12 – an image that John claims for Jesus in John 1:51). The fact that the encounter with God – or God's angel – has something unsettling is shown by the story of Jacob's struggle with an unidentified visitor emerging out of the dark (Gen. 32:25–31); Jacob wrestles him down, forces him to bless him, and finally says of him, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life was spared."

Mohammed is similarly held firmly by an angel, whom he later named as Gabriel (Arabic: Jibril). His first revelation was perplexing and distressing.[9] The 40-year-old Mohammed had retreated to the cave of Hira in 610 for prayer when Jibril came to him and twice called upon him to write down a verse (later Sura 96:1–5). Mohammed replied that he could not write. The third time Jibril squeezed him even more tightly. So Mohammed dictated Allah's revelations again and again in the following 22 years of his life to those in his growing community of followers who could write.

Mohammed received Allah's revelations not only at night in dreams or half-sleep, but also during the day when he had to make specific decisions. There is the following tradition:

> Yala b. Umayya went to the Prophet and asked him what he should do in Umra. When the revelation came to the Prophet, he was covered with a cloth (cloak). Yala asked Omar if he could see the Messenger of God receiving the revelations. Omar did him the favor and opened a corner of the cape. Yala looked at the Prophet, who made panting noises. He "thought it was the sound of a camel." […] So this was how Mohammed spoke to Allah through the Archangel Gabriel, with panting sounds like a camel.[10]

The whole Qur'an thus arose through the mediation of the angel Gabriel and is understood as the word "of God the Most Merciful" – a wording with which each of the 114 Suras begins. Even if the individual verses refer to particular military and religious conflicts or contain specific instructions for a religiously ordered life, this statement about God, the Most Merciful, also the righteous judge, is the central meaning of the Qur'an.

Christian dogmatics has the same priority in matters of revelation or the graceful experience of God's closeness. The content of such experiences, as Karl Rahner says, is always God; it is about his *self-revelation*, not about proclaiming any clarifications about facts. Thus, the angels – seen or heard – are never the *subject* of the revelations, only their mediators, their presented context. When God – the invisible and silent mystery that is with us – wants to communicate with a human being, God's message must be made communicable before it can be revealed to others. To do so, God must use their

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9   See Osama Gaznavi 2016, paragraph "Die erste Offenbarung" (The first revelation).
10 Osama Gaznavi 2016, paragraph "Wie bekam Mohammed Offenbarung?" (How did Mohammed receive revelation?).

native language and take up the ideas and images of their culture, including the image of messengers as God's communicators. The Word of God is thus "never 'pure'; it is only conveyed via the word of man, but as a perceptible word of God, which does not lead astray."[11]

Since the 19th century, narratives of earlier times have been examined critically: the stories in the Bible, the legends of the saints, as well as secular fairy tales and sagas. Is it possible to *demythologize* these narratives – to use Rudolf Bultmann's term – to free them of these images? The First Testament scholar Claus Westermann writes,

> The angels as mythical beings, as intermediary demigod-like forms with wings and flowing robes and idealized faces, have ceased to exist for us […] On the other hand, the study of the Bible has shown me that these Messengers of God, through some form of exegesis, cannot be purged, eliminated, spiritualized, symbolized, or demythologized from the Bible without removing a central part of it.[12]

Should we eliminate these stories because they are part of an outdated mythical world view? Plato repeatedly used myths in his philosophy as underpinning, even if he no longer adhered to their cosmology. When theologians demythologize, they interpret the substance of a biblical text using only abstract statements about their existential meaning. In contrast, Herbert Vorgrimmler has us "consider whether there are not phenomena which have necessarily, in all their scope, in all the developing facets of the human psyche, to be expressed and told in metaphors, images and even myths, whereas abstract formulations do not interest the 'listeners to the word' in an 'existential' way".[13]

In any event, the biblical texts would lose their narrative quality. The bountiful renderings, drama, and surprises of their personas would be lost, as would the "presentation of the scene" espoused by Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises.

As far as implicit statements about communicating angels are concerned, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and most church fathers have repeatedly emphasized that angels are subordinate to the one God – this went against the spirit faith and polytheism of the Old Orient – and that they are at God's

11   Vorgrimmler 2000, 460.
12   Quoted in Krauss 2000, 116.
13   Vorgrimmler 2000, 154.

Fig. 2: Winged griffin. Frieze from the palace of Darius I in Susa. Glazed bricks, around 500 BCE, https://is.gd/Yg5LuI [accessed 18 January 2022].

service and obey God's commands. Praising and worshipping God is their first task; the second is to convey God's loving devotion to people, to make it tangible. Augustine had long dealt with the nature and power of angels – for instance, their power to enable visions of God. In contrast to Plato and Aristotle, he repeatedly stressed their subordination to God, the one Creator.[14]

There were other church fathers (of medieval times) who made ontological statements about the angels: they were pure spirits, could see the hidden, and, for example, read our thoughts – Wim Wenders in Peter Handke's screenplay portrayed this touchingly in his film WINGS OF DESIRE (DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN, BRD/FR 1987). Nevertheless, in our imagination – and in iconography – they possess bodies, mostly adolescent male bodies. And also wings, an old oriental convention with which their power and influence is expressed: they bear weight, free of earth's gravity; they wield power, they move about in the air, in higher spheres, even if they are earthly animals (fig. 2).

14   See Pelz, 1912.

Fig. 3: *St John the Baptist, Angel of the Desert*, Russian icon, 17th century, https://is.gd/V8kRyn [accessed 18 January 2022].

Even John the Baptist, a historical person, is occasionally depicted with wings in Byzantine icons (fig. 3), as the messenger who precedes the Messiah (Mark 1:2).

In medieval scholasticism, the example of angels was used to reflect on (human) freedom, and, as for church and state, hierarchies were constructed, with the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael at the head, along with nine angel choirs and (military) legions. Evil spirits or temptations were understood as fallen angels, especially Satan. Like Christian theology, the Jewish Kabala was very creative in speculating and enumerating angels. Of the myriads of angels, for many today only the personal guardian angel has remained. The surprising and frightening aspects of the appearance of angels, which the Bible regularly expresses, have largely faded. "Fear not, do not be afraid", say the angels.

One last function of angels should be mentioned: they are proxies or patrons for communities. For example, the archangel Michael, also known as the German "Michel", is a patron saint of Germany. In addition, the last book of the New Testament, the "Revelation", refers to angels in the introductory letters to the seven churches. John the seer is tasked, "Write to the angel of the church of Ephesus" (Rev. 2:1). The fact that 'the angel' does not mean (only) the bishops of the seven congregations is clear from the content of the church letters: it is about renewal of the first love of God, fidelity in persecution, adherence to sound doctrine, and rejecting false prophets. It is a beautiful thought to entrust such spiritual renewal and development to an angel.

From this function comes the final spiritual interpretation of angels: as companions to the growth and preservation of a moral way of life or virtues. A remarkable confirmation of this role is found in the Book of Tobit, a moral text in the guise of a historical narrative on how to behave in a pagan environment. The faithful Tobit buries fellow believers although to do so was forbidden by the state; when he finds himself in trouble and goes blind, his own wife complains to him of the uselessness of his faith. His son Tobias travels to find a bride and is accompanied by an angel; on his return, the angel heals the blindness of the father. The angel reveals himself to be Rafael and says to Tobit, "I have carried your prayers to God. I was near you when you paid your last respects to the dead fellow believers" (Tob. 12:12–15).

But also outside the Jewish-Christian faith there is a new discovery of angels: in literature and the visual arts. Here angels seem to have found a new cultural home. Westermann writes, "In common language, angels stand for the fact that the human being is not alone on earth, but is exposed to their visitations. They have entered the language of modern man and retain their place there regardless of whether one believes in God."[15]

Angels in Contemporary Literature and the Visual Arts

The topos angels also has roots in (literary) figures that no longer appear in the religious experiences of the present and the written depictions (diaries, novels, etc.) of today. An illustration of this may be found in the conclusion of Heinrich Krauss' very informative book about angels:

15   Krauss 2000, 116.

Martin Luther King says that in the first few weeks of the bus boycott in Montgomery, he received a threat on the phone at night, still undecided about the nature of his engagement, and then awake with a cup of coffee, full of the threat. 'Something said to me, "You can't call on Daddy now, you can't even call on Mama. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way." With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak right now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I'm afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world."'

The Bible, one might speculate, could have reported in the case of Martin Luther King that an angel from God had appeared and shouted, "Martin, Martin!", and after the response, "Here I am," said in a loud voice: "I have seen the misery of my people. Martin, I will send you: Get up and fight for what's right …"[16]

So, are communicative angels an outdated notion? How does it work in novels of the last two centuries when the protagonist ends up in an existential crisis and looks for a nod or a word from God? Instead of angels, the responding people are parents, grandparents, revered teachers, or educators – in inner or open dialogues. The fact that one sees angels working through these persons has become rather rare – despite the saying "You are an angel", which means someone helps another person in a dilemma. Today, one hardly calls upon the topos angel to find a meaningful answer in a crisis.

In religious contexts, angels are described as messengers of God. Despite the distinction today between the religious and secular worlds, the separation between the ecclesiastical and state spheres arose only in modern

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16   Krauss 2000, 117.

times. In the past, some angelic forms were more figures of a state ideology or personifications of human longings. Statues of victory angels (Nikes) were erected before or after military successes, angels of peace as intercessions or expressions of gratitude for peaceful times. The Cupids of the ancient world were aimed at the pleasureful experience of erotic love; the cavorting and music-making putti of rococo churches, which were designed like banquet halls, were full of anticipation of the fulfillment of all the sensual and spiritual pleasures of heaven. Angels have always been and remain today representationally conceived desires, symbolic figures of feelings such as joy or sorrow – like the mourning angels on graves – but also the fear of death or the temptation to commit evil. Artists have always been aware of their universality and transcendence in everyday life and have given them a corresponding form.

Let us consider literature and the theatre. The baroque depicted virtues and vices, angels and devils in a naïvely dramatic form, such as in the Jesuit theatre with its refined stage technology. In the Enlightenment, however, on the one hand there was skepticism about such representations; on the other, a psychological interpretation of angels and their adversaries emerged. The literary representation of Satanism, established in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), found differentiation and refinement in English Romanticism with Lord Byron, John Keats, and Percy B. Shelley. If one adds the works of the Marquis de Sade and Charles Baudelaire, the dark and the morbid have been transfigured here, steeped even in barbarity. "They probably did not believe in a real-life Satan, but under this topos they wanted to glorify the human longings for absolute autonomy and an unrestricted lust for life, which would be 'demonized' by the prevailing doctrine of the Church", writes Krauss.[17]

German Romanticism, however, in its devotion to medieval religiosity, was more oriented towards the holy angels. The group of artists known as the Nazarenes wanted to rejuvenate art on a Christian basis following the example of Old German painting and Raphael. The 240 pictures of the Bible published by the landscape painter Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld in 1860 led the way in creating a style (fig. 4). Alois Senefelder's earlier invention of lithography (1797) aided in their dissemination by making possible a cost-effective mass reproduction of black-and-white representations.

Angels were also rediscovered outside a religious or ecclesiastical context. Many writers of the 20th century took them as a metaphor for the

17 Krauss 2000, 105.

Fig. 4: Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Die Bibel in Bildern*, "Jacob's Dream", around 1860, woodcut, Leipzig. Sheet 32: Jakob sees a ladder to heaven in a dream, https://is.gd/5Pu7hC [accessed 18 January 2022].

profound dimensions of existence. Among these authors were Rainer Maria Rilke, Nelly Sachs, Else Lasker-Schüler, Franz Kafka, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürenmatt, Werner Bergengruen, Mascha Kaleko, and Robert Walser. Although Rilke may have resisted identification of the angels in his *Duino Elegies* with biblical angels, as Krauss notes, "he has struck an important foundation of many biblical angelic narratives, namely the shock that occurs when a man becomes aware of the mysterious reality that lies behind his everyday existence".[18]

Many painters and sculptors, like the above-mentioned poets and prose writers, shared a desire to express similar experiences in the image of the angel. Paul Klee (1879–1940) began his "Creative Credo" (1920) with the

18   Krauss 2000, 105.

Fig. 5: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, https://is.gd/qtRIAr [accessed 18 January 2022].

following sentence: "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible." A member of the Bauhaus, he tried to depict objects in compressed graphic form – typical characters, human relationships, movements, and thoughts. The root from which his forms grew was "a psychologically interpretive, modern romantic 'irony with deeper meaning'".[19] In his more than 80 angelic images, he seems to have grasped what he wanted, but also what appeared as an imminent threat. He produced most of his angel images in the last year of his life, when his progressive illness (scleroderma) made his work more arduous and gave him a sense of impending death. The titles are remarkable and include *Poor Angel*; *Guardian Angel*; *Angel, Still Feeling*; *Angel, Still Female*; *Angel, Still ugly*; *Angels in Crisis*; *Angels in Three*; and *Angels Everywhere*.

An early angel drawing by Klee is the *Angelus Novus* (New Angel) from 1920 (fig. 5). Walter Benjamin had acquired it in Munich in 1921 and he took it with him when he went into exile in Paris. There he gave it a bleak interpretation shortly before his suicide in 1940, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back

19 Giedion-Welcker 1961, 147.

Fig. 6: Ernst Barlach, *Floating Angel*, https://is.gd/mETabE [accessed 18 January 2022].

is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[20]

The term "angel of history" gave not only Benjamin but also an entire generation of thinkers the insight that technical achievements hold a potential for destruction and downfall and that progress does not per se benefit humankind. This critical assessment grew out of the experience of the catastrophes in and around World War I and the use of industrial weapons of mass destruction, acts of war against civilians, and genocide.

Paul Klee's early painting of an angel and Walter Benjamin's commentary were the initial spark for the publication series "Angels of History" by Swabian woodcut artist Helmut Andreas Paul (HAP) Grieshaber (1909–1981). From 1964 to his death in 1981, in collaboration with writers Heinrich Böll, Sarah Kirsch, Volker Braun, Franz Fühmann, and Walter Jens, he produced a total of 23 pieces as a total work of art. Grieshaber termed each of these angels an "action". Each issue bearing Grieshaber's work was given a title such as "Atonement Angel", "Disguised Angel", "Juniper Angel", "Angel of Psychiatry", "German Peasant War 450 Years", or "I have a dream". The latter refers explicitly to the famous speech given by Martin Luther King Jr in 1963 at the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" and to King's violent death, in the spring of 1968.

With the "The Angel of History", the demands of political ethics were framed in a memorable figure. A similar form, reminiscent of a historical catastrophe, is the bronze sculpture *Floating Angel* (fig. 6), which Ernst Barlach

20 Benjamin 1969, 249.

Fig. 7: Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin, Wim Wenders, BRD/FR 1987), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6S7mz3u4fc (00:02:10). Cassiel (Otto Sander, left) tries to prevent the young man's suicide.

(1870–1938) made for a chapel in Güstrow Cathedral as a memorial to the victims of World War I. It was his first monumental work, created without commission and donated to the cathedral community. His motivation and objective are expressed in the following quotations:

> For me, time stood still during the war. It would not fit into anything earthly. She hovered. I wanted to reproduce something of this feeling in this figure of fate floating in emptiness. [...] I was aware that I had to give form to a completely otherworldly impassiveness, in a sense a crystallization of the notion of endless time, to do justice to the greatness of this task.[21]

Our final example is taken from Wim Wender's poetic film Wings of Desire, based on Peter Handke's screenplay. Set in Berlin before the fall of the Wall, the film shows angels as companions of people in many life situations; they can read people's minds and feelings, but they cannot intervene – the angel Cassiel (Otto Sander) leans his head on the shoulder of a man considering suicide but he cannot prevent his plunging to his death (fig. 7). Damiel's (Bruno Ganz) desire to have a body, to feel carnal life and everything that goes with it, arises from this spiritual limitation.

The angelic images of the aforementioned writers and visual artists often reveal distraught or silently grieving beings. They stand in contrast to

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21 In Krahmer 1984, 87–88. The author describes in note 128 (p. 138) the fate of this work: "The National Socialists had the Güstrow Angel melted down (1937). The cast, however, could be saved. In 1942, to preserve Barlach's art, a second cast was privately commissioned. Since 1952, it has been hanging in the Antonite Church in Cologne. A third casting was mounted in the original location in Güstrow Cathedral."

the popular – sometimes "kitschy" – representations of today, such as baby angels made of painted plaster or "worry stone" angels made of wood or bronze. They are accompanied by texts and pictures. Their creators choose angels as orientation points for a spiritual way of life and as prophetic callers to a new social responsibility.

Angels as Invitations to Virtues

One contemporary interpretation of angels orients itself toward the idea of life-supporting attitudes in order to lead a mindful life. Mindfulness can be instilled by Christian spirituality, but it can come also from other religious traditions or modern movements such as anthroposophy, New Age, eco-spirituality, or the Scottish Findhorn Community. In almost all these traditions, angels are believed to be helpers or guides for adhering to a chosen way of life. People who believe in these spiritual ideas see angels as mentors who encourage them to follow specific ways of exercising these life-benefiting attitudes so that these attitudes can gradually take hold of them and become "second nature". Angels thus act as companions for those engaged in internal work, in exercises traditionally called asceticism. Only through repetitive exercise can the attitude of calm, of serenity, for example, be honed to become a routine in everyday life.

This sought-for attitude can then act as a crutch in the face of the constant, destabilizing changes in modern life. It is synonymous with *virtue*, but it has a social component. The Latin word for virtue is 'virtus': (male-)strength and firmness, from which the English 'virtue' is derived. In German, virtue *(Tugend)* comes from good, to be capable.

Anselm Grün, today the most published author of spiritual books in Germany, writes,

> It is not always clear whether they [angels] are independent beings or just images for God's loving and comforting presence. […] Imaginations of a longing for another world of security and lightness, beauty and hope. […] Angels are images of a deep, enduring longing for help and healing that does not come from ourselves. […] They are a source of inspiration. [Increasingly, people are convinced] that we can come to an understanding with angels. They give us support and imbue us with new attitudes. […] Angels represent our potential of transformation and calling them angels

refers, of course, to the fact that these attitudes are only the expression of our own efforts. They are also a gift, grace, wisdom given to us.[22]

He suggests choosing one angel for spiritual orientation for a year (or longer), selecting from a list of 50 angels: the angles of love – reconciliation – exuberance – safekeeping – leaving – community – calm – passion – truthfulness – gratitude – risk – renunciation – confidence – solitude – sisterhood – self-surrender – warmth – courage – patience – lightness – openness – temperance – forgiveness – freedom – parting – mourning – transformation – enthusiasm – healing – faithfulness – tenderness – cheerfulness – devotion – harmony – clarity – slowness – retreat – attentiveness – mildness – humility – fulfillment – endurance – trust – compassion – comfort – prudence – reverence – understanding – darkness – quiet.[23]

A description of another angel, who represents calls for social change, may be added here: the Angel of Global Responsibility (see fig. 8 for this angel as depicted by Theresia Eben). Only with a new value orientation and its corresponding institutions can our global ecological crisis be overcome. A new ecological spirituality is needed for which an angel can also stand as a representation. Because the nations of Africa and Oceania will suffer more from this crisis, this angel has darker skin, and because poverty affects mostly women, the angel is female.

What symbols does this Angel of History today hold in their hands to remind us of the great challenge of the 21st century – overcoming humanity's ecological crisis? They certainly hold the Declaration of Human Rights. In doing so, they call for equal rights for all, regardless of origin, gender, age, culture and nation, or economic status. Jesus had already linked one of these rights with angels: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10).

According to human rights conventions and most constitutions, opportunities and goods are to be distributed fairly both within a nation and internationally – for example between North and South. So that the disadvantaged also receive their rights and the wealthy forfeit some of their abundance, national and international institutions with the power

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22 Grün 1998, 7–10.
23 Titles of chapters in Grün 2009.
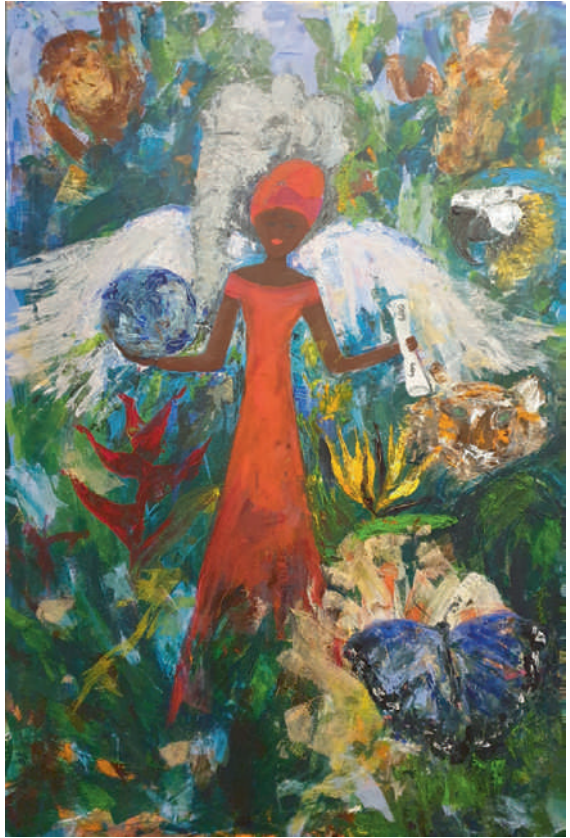
Fig. 8: Painting by Theresia
Eben, Assling (Germany), 2021.

to impose sanctions are needed. They can perhaps be symbolized as a courthouse with columns. Such a building is held by the angel in their left hand.

And in their right hand, they hold our blue, vulnerable planet as observed from a satellite or from the International Space Station. In photos taken from space, the slash-and-burn of the Brazilian rainforest or the melting of the Arctic ice cap can clearly be recognized, just two signs of global climate change caused by our industrialization. Pope Francis writes in his encyclical letter *Laudato si*, from 2015: "Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone." In order to do justice to this consensus, nothing less is required than a change in our production and economic system and in our way of thinking and planning:

> Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.[24]
>
> Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as *to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*[25]

The Pope sees here an epochal responsibility:

> Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities.[26]
>
> We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.[27]

As the image of a scroll bearing legal conventions held in the left hand conveys, a common approach by all nations, major strategies, and effective international conventions are required. In order to anchor the new culture both internationally and locally, local associations and the formation of a new common identity are necessary. And this ecological conversion will not succeed without virtuous life by many individuals or without their change of heart. A dimension and consequence of this conversion is a healthy relationship with creation, following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi and expressed by the plants and animals surrounding our Angel of Global Responsibility.

If angels are interpreted as role models for a spiritual way of life with distinct attitudes and guideposts for new consciousness, ethical questions are

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24 Pope Francis 2015, ∫111.
25 Pope Francis 2015, ∫49.
26 Pope Francis 2015, ∫165.
27 Pope Francis 2015, ∫112.

implicitly raised, with regard not only to the fulfillment of responsibilities but also to the voluntary practicing of virtues and developments with an appropriate mindset. Individual ethics and structural ethics will play equal parts here.

Outlook

Although angels as interpretive figures for religious experiences were developed 3,000 years ago, they remain a prevailing idea today for understanding the formation of the human spirit, not only in the communication sciences but also in secular literature and the visual arts. It remains to be seen whether in the future the shift of meaning within the concept of angel as a foil for the development of the personality will progressively add new aspects through cultural and societal criticism.

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Maurizio Guerri

Serious Games

The Asymmetry of Images in Harun Farocki's Work

Abstract

The video installation *Serious Games* (2009–2010), by director, artist, and image theorist Harun Farocki (1944–2014), investigates the relationship between virtual reality, augmented reality, and war in the contemporary world. The question that guides Farocki's research is, How have new technologies and new ways of producing images changed contemporary wars? Farocki's analysis shows how the images themselves have become a part of war – not as propaganda, but as part of communication and part of the tactics of war, and how, within the way wars are conducted, images are becoming more and more "operational" and therefore entail an increasing asymmetry in both the materiality of conflicts and their perception. Farocki's work on the relationship between images and wars is not only a genealogy of our view of wars, but also an attempt at "profanation" – to use Giorgio Agamben's notion – that allows for a restitution of the testimonial capacity of images in relation to wars.

Biography

Maurizio Guerri teaches contemporary philosophy and history of social communication at the Academy of Fine Arts in Brera, Milan, and works for a number of didactic labs at the Department of Philosophy of the State University of Milan. He directs the series "Aesthetics and Visual Culture" published by Meltemi in Milan.

"How Can We Show You the Way Napalm Acts?"

Harun Farocki's video installation *Serious Games* (2009–2010)[1] was exhibited for the first time at the São Paulo Biennale in 2010. *Serious Games* consists of four videos (respectively titled *Watson Is Down*, *Three Dead, Immersion*, and

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1   The video installation *Serious Games* can be seen at https://vimeo.com/370494311 [accessed 10 May 2021].

A Sun with No Shadow) that were created in an attempt to bring to light the ways in which wars take place in the contemporary world and the role that images play within contemporary war conflicts. *Serious Games* is one of the final chapters in Farocki's articulated genealogy of contemporary wars in images.[2]

In Farocki's work, wars and the relationship between wars and images first emerged in the 1969 film *Unerlöschbares Feuer (Inextinguishable Fire)* and relates historically to the Vietnam War. Farocki's film opens with a close-up of the director himself, framed by the camera and seated at a table reading a letter from a Vietnamese citizen recounting his own story: while he was engaged in household activities he was hit by the "inextinguishable fire" of a napalm bomb that destroyed his house and damaged his body forever. After reading the letter, Farocki asks,

> How can we show you the way napalm works? How can we show you the damage caused by napalm? If we show you the images of napalm damage, you will close your eyes. First you will close your eyes to the images; then you will close your eyes to the memory; then you will close your eyes to the events; then you will close your eyes to the relationships between them. If we show you a human being with napalm burns, we hurt your feelings, you will feel as if we tried to hit you with napalm. So we can only give a weak representation *[schwache Vorstellung]* of how napalm acts.

After saying these words, Farocki puts out his cigarette on his forearm. How is it possible to show in pictures the violence of an occupation war, the pain and death of those affected by napalm in Vietnam? How is it possible to show these violent events in images without forcing the viewer to "close their eyes"? We close our eyes to images when they hurt us, or we close our eyes because we are indifferent to what is happening; similarly, our eyes are closed – or we close our eyes – when images of pain become spectacles, as they conceal the event they are supposed to witness. One of the questions Farocki asks himself in his films and installations concerns how the violence of war can be shown through images. How can we work with images and words so that the filmmaker and the viewer open their eyes and try to understand what happens during war? In *Unerlöschbares Feuer*, Farocki states that in this case a "weak representation" allows us to open our eyes. We

2   On the genealogy of wars in Farocki's work see Cervini 2017.

know that the weak representation Farocki is talking about consists of the gesture with which Farocki puts out the lit cigarette on his own skin, the act he performs at the end of the statement quoted above. It is a very weak burn compared to someone who is hit by the inextinguishable fire of napalm, but – as Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out – this "weak representation" at least allows us to "compare",[3] to make a comparison between the 400 degrees of the embers of a cigarette and the unquenchable 3,000 degrees of napalm, which devours flesh: the image of Farocki putting out his cigarette on his arm allows the spectator to take in a gesture that will then allow him to broaden their understanding of those affected by napalm fire. Farocki's gesture makes it possible for European and American citizens to see what is happening in Vietnam, that is, it brings to the imagination what is invisible and unimaginable for most people.[4] Farocki writes in *War Always Finds a Way*:

> My gesture [the act of putting out the cigarette on the skin of my arm] was directed at the here and now. Vietnam was far away and that limited contact with the heat was meant to bring it closer. The small gesture was meant to disturb the image, it was directed against the system of cinema and indeed confirmed […] the testimonial power of the filmic image.[5]

So comparison is a first step towards breaking the anaesthetisation and spectacularisation of images, which effectively prevent us from seeing. They stop us from seeing the bodies of so many individual Vietnamese human beings – soldiers and civilians, men and women, adults and children – who are burning. In a different direction to the "metaphorical" reading that Thomas Elsaesser has given of Farocki's gesture,[6] Didi-Huberman speaks of a "choreography of dialectical comparison", of a "metonymy", if one considers "the punctual wound as a single pixel of what Jan Palach suffered on his entire body".[7] And again, writes Didi-Huberman, "the burning mark does not constitute an end point or a weakened metaphor, but a relative point, a point of comparison: 'When he has finished speaking, the author burns himself, even if only a single point on his skin. It is precisely here that a point of contact

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3   Didi-Huberman 2009, 44.
4   On the imagination in Farocki's work see Montani 2017.
5   Farocki 2015, 59.
6   Elsaesser 2007, 17–18.
7   Didi-Huberman 2009, 44.

with the present world is given.'"[8] Understanding the violence of war in images requires a capacity for comparison, and comparison is one of the fundamental elements of the genealogical method.[9] Another fundamental element of the ability to read the war/image relationship is the dialectical dimension, that is, the ability to read the complexity, tensions, and contradictions that run through what we are observing.[10] In the specific case of *Unerlöschbares Feuer*, Farocki works on the anaesthetisation generated by the images in order to overturn it into a new "testimonial power" of the images themselves.

Serious Games

Since the end of the 1960s, the function of image production devices in warfare has remained central to Farocki's work. In this respect, the installation *Serious Games* is particularly important, as Farocki confronts the most technologically advanced forms of warfare by which the most powerful armies conduct warfare today. Specifically, at the centre of the installation are VR (virtual reality) as a form of combat training for US soldiers and AR (augmented reality) and VR used in rehabilitation programmes for veterans suffering from post-traumatic disorders. The video installation, as Farocki himself recalls, was born out of a newspaper article in 2008:

> In the summer of 2008 my collaborator Matthias Rajmann sent me a newspaper clipping. Traumatised U. S. troops returning from combat are treated with video games. In therapy they watch virtual scenarios that simulate some of the situations they experienced in Iraq. The idea is that the virtual images will help the soldiers to remember the events that caused their trauma. From previous research we knew that similar virtual environments were being used to train troops for combat. Images that prepare the war resemble those that help process it. The idea for a project was born.[11]

The first aspect to underline is the need to show in images what is not normally seen: both the preparation of soldiers with VR programmes and their

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8   Didi-Huberman 2009, 44.
9   For this understanding of genealogy, see Foucalt 1977.
10   On the dialectic of images in Farocki's work, with reference to Walter Benjamin's thought see Didi-Huberman 2009.
11   Farocki 2014, 1.

rehabilitation from post-traumatic disorders are dimensions that do not belong to the visual heritage of the majority of the population, despite the fact that these serious programmes derive from videogames that are very popular among enthusiasts all over the world.[12] To try to explore this area of contemporary life, Farocki and his collaborators obtained permission to film inside Fort Lewis army base and at the Marine Corps training base at Twentynine Palms. In "Immersion", a text written in 2008 before they started filming, Farocki states, "We would like to show how they [worlds of artificial imagery] are used constructively in ways that go beyond self-contained fictional universes."[13] The "self-contained fictional universes" dimension of the imagery of AR and VR programmes stems from their genealogy: training and therapy programmes derive from war video games, which in turn derive from military technologies. Farocki's video installation therefore answers the question of whether these "worlds of artificial imagery" can be "used constructively".

In the first video (two channels) *Serious Games I (Watson Is Down)*, we see the training of American soldiers using the Virtual Battlespace 2 programme – the professional version of the video game – which uses all the available data for the territory to recreate a space as close as possible to the reality within which the soldiers will have to move to wage their war. Through the programme's menus, the trainers can place various types of ordnance and different enemies on the virtual path the soldiers have to take and modify the weather conditions, light, etc. Parts of the video show the soldiers or trainers in action in front of the screen, other images capture the screens where the soldiers are preparing. The only tense moment is when one of the American vehicles is attacked by enemy soldiers: the Americans successfully return fire, but Private Watson is shot (virtually) by the enemy. Watson (in the flesh) in front of his computer sighs and lets himself down on the back of his chair. The dominant feeling transmitted by the attitudes and gestures of the soldiers is boredom; even when they are attacked, the young soldiers react in a way that is strangely apathetic and inadequate to the "game" in which they are moving.

The second video (single-channel) of the installation *Three Dead* is also dedicated to training strategies in the military environment. Here we are no longer in a VR space but in a physical space that mimetically reconstructs

12   On videogames in Farocki's work see Fassone 2017.
13   Farocki 2012, 239.

the conditions in which the soldiers will find themselves when they arrive at their destination. The exercise is dedicated to a Military Operation in Urban Territory (Mout), so soldiers are training by interacting with figures who play the parts of citizens, carrying out all the activities present in the urban context of the territory in which the soldiers are going to operate. Some fake citizens try to fraternise with the soldiers who are guarding the neighbourhood; an open-air canteen is set up in a square where food is distributed to all those who request it.

The terrorist-figures suddenly burst into this square, shoot wildly, then flee, as do all those who were eating at the canteen; in the foreground a figure returns to get something to eat that he had left on the table. Then, soldiers are shown carrying out an operation in which they seem to be trying to flush out suspected terrorists. This video opens and closes with two fragments of 3-D simulations of the same fake city in which the exercise just described takes place, developed by the company Maraizon.[14] In the reconstruction of physical spaces too, the role of VR has become fundamental. As can be easily guessed, the aim of this video is to explore a further aspect of soldier training: learning to move in physical spaces reconstructed to simulate the conditions in which they will be operating, but with the material reconstruction of spaces increasingly dependent on virtual representations. At the centre of the installation is the theme of reciprocal exchange and interpenetration between VR and reality, one of the most advanced areas of experimentation in military training.

The third two-channel video is *Immersion*, which shows in images the rehabilitation therapies for soldiers returning to the United States suffering from PTSD. The video opens with images of Dr Albert Rizzo of the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California in Marina del Rey, who explains the principles of virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) and how the Virtual Iraq programme works. VRET is a behavioural therapy that is based on "literally immersing patients in their wartime experiences".[15] Next, the video shows the person undergoing the therapy and what he or she sees while wearing the immersive visor. Several soldiers follow one another, and while they relive through the programme's simulation the war attack they suffered, they have to tell in words what happened,

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14   Maraizon's works can be seen at http://maraizon.com/gallery [accessed 15 May 2021].
15   Farocki 2012, 243.

with the therapist intervening and urging the patients to verbalise, to give details about the traumatic event.

Most of the minutes of the video are dedicated to the last patient: encouraged by the psychologist, the patient recounts the aggression suffered during an operation in enemy territory, the death of his companion, the panic, the inability to react. At times the soldier would like to take off the visor because it is too hard to return to confront those tragic and painful moments. He even feels a sense of nausea and the therapist reminds him that he has a bucket nearby. The video ends with a round of applause from those present (until now we knew nothing about these "spectators"); the soldier takes off his visor and says, "Yes, my nausea was real." The psychologist also explains that the soldier's first test was very good, taking into account that she too is not yet fully acquainted with the programme. We then discover that these images are not of a real case of therapy for a soldier suffering from PTSD, but are from a demonstration video promoting the use of this behavioural psychology technique to deal with cases of people suffering from post-traumatic disorders.

The last seconds of the video show, without further comment, a few seconds of the programme in question relating to the Subjective Units of Disturbance Scale (SUDS). SUDS is used in the context of cognitive-behavioural therapy to make patients aware of progress they have made in dealing with the situations causing mental distress. The scale ranges from 0 (condition of total absence of disturbance) to 10 (condition of absolute distress, total despair). The images of the programme show an environment reminiscent of an Afghan city, and then a loud explosion, smoke, screams, gunshots are heard. In conclusion, as Anders Engberg-Pedersen notes,

> The multiple repetition of the trauma then desensitises the soldier again to return the senses to a stable condition *(allostasis)*. In other words, the same immersive VR technology is now employed both before and after combat in an attempt to manage and control human responses to extreme experiences.[16]

The fourth and last video (dual channel), *A Sun with No Shadow*, constitutes a sort of synthesis of the video installation as a whole; in fact, Farocki returns with these images to the questions he has addressed in the previous

16 Engberg-Pedersen 2017, 160.

videos. The video opens with images from *Watson Is Down* showing soldiers training with the virtual battlespace programme: the words commenting on the images remind us that all the data used to construct the virtual images are based on very precise surveys of Afghan territory: "The computer landscape depicts real details: hills and valleys, roads and vegetation – go back to cartographic data." Even the shadows cast by military vehicles are real insofar as they are drawn by tracing the position of the sun in Afghanistan at a precise moment. Then we see an instructor placing enemies by choosing them from a menu; a man wearing a palandrana and flip-flops, a woman covered by a burka, another man with a dirty shirt and tennis shoes: "An instructor places enemies. Poorly-armed enemies in asymmetrical wars." And more images of a military vehicle moving through the desert: "These images should follow up the war." They will be used for therapeutic purposes. The "light mood" allows the choice of the type of light, daylight, night etc. However, Farocki notes in a caption for *Serious Games IV*, "Images that should evoke memories, images of the horrors of war of the attacks and snipers, the images for follow-up resemble those that prepare the war. Although the follow-up images are shadowless." Farocki adds very dryly, "The system for reminding is somewhat cheaper than that for training." The installation closes with a juxtaposition of images of the training system and images of the cheaper system for treating traumatised soldiers. Finally, Farocki's written comment: "But both systems use *asymmetrical* images."[17]

Asymmetrical Images

In a very thorough analysis of *Serious Games*, Virgil Darelli author observes that Farocki's statement about "asymmetrical images" remains in some ways "mysterious".[18] Indeed, Farocki's statement may seem so until it is placed in the frame of all his previous work on the relationship between images and war. I am thinking in particular of *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1998), *Auge/Machine I, II, III* (*Eye/Machine I, II, III*, 2000–2003), and the video *Ausweg* (*A Way*, 2005). Farocki himself suggests an interpretation of the "asymmetry of images" in an interview he gave on the occasion of the exhibition *The Image in Question:*

17   On the asymmetry of the wars see Kaldor 2012.
18   Darelli 2019, 112.

War–Media–Art, held at the time of his lectureship at Harvard University. When asked, "What do you think are the difficulties of representing modern warfare?", Farocki replied,

> Wars today are very asymmetrical – one side is far stronger than the other, which is quite unlike earlier warfare. We also see that the classical moments in which wars have been decided – moments like the battle, the siege, and so on – no longer exist, and now we have remote weapons, where you can sit in a bunker in Florida and launch a weapon. All of these things have changed. Plus, the images themselves have become a part of war – not as propaganda, but as part of communication and part of the tactics of war.[19]

There are two principal reasons why we can speak of an "asymmetry of images" in contemporary wars: (1) the general and absolute disparity of forces that characterises contemporary wars in a systematic way, generating the *overall asymmetry* of conflicts; (2) the *asymmetrical function* that images play in the war process, since the "images themselves have become part of the tactics of war". An increasingly decisive part of the asymmetry concerns precisely the asymmetry in the *use* of images.

More specifically, Farocki clarifies the issue in his response to the next question, "What sorts of images are playing an active part in warfare?"

> They are what I call operational images: no longer needed just to depict something, they are needed as tools of pattern recognition. We see satellite images being used by software to find certain shapes and then they are translated into round shapes or square shapes or whatever to find the target. Images are a means of recognition, of tracking; it's a total integration into the strategy of war.[20]

Thus, for Farocki operational images (or operative images; in German, *operative Bilder*) are the kind of images that have an "active part" in the conduct of wars, images that "are not necessary to represent something" but become essential as "tools of recognition schemes" in the functioning of war. It is clear that the reference to the asymmetry of images with which *Serious*

19 Farocki 2010.
20 Farocki 2010.

Games closes derives from the relationship they have with the sphere of "operational images".

Probably the clearest definition of "operative images" given by Farocki is the following: "In my first work on this subject, *Eye/Machine* (2001), I called such pictures, made neither to entertain nor to inform, 'operative images'. These are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation."[21]

One of the captions of *Eye/Machine I* reads, "They [operational images] are not for edification, not for reflection." In several places Farocki points out how operational images dissolve their mimetic relationship with reality and that they often tend to become idealised schemes – according to Max Weber's definition – for the construction of reality.[22] "Simulator produces an idealized image from geographical data. It models the world according to requirements of labs and factories", reads a caption in *Eye/Machine I*. Increasingly, we find ourselves in an anaesthetised or unconscious relationship with images that, unlike in the past, are not produced as mimetic representations of things and have no cognitive or playful purpose. These images are parts of a technical process that operate in different ways in different areas of life. Operational images are "functional images".[23] They have a function in a technical working process, but in relation to a human gaze they have no meaning. Their preservation is therefore redundant or completely senseless. They are produced, used, and deleted. They are disposable images. We can include in this category all the different images that make industrial production processes work, video surveillance images, and, first and foremost, the images by means of which a missile can recognise, track, and hit its target. These images escape the human gaze, either because in different ways these images make themselves unavailable or because the human gaze is entirely secondary or irrelevant to the functioning of these same images. The most disturbing perspective put forward by Farocki in *A Way* is that while "there are not yet any weapons that can direct themselves at their own target, even if no projectile can yet identify its own target", the technical potential for automatic warfare is there, as demonstrated by the fact that there are now "robots that find their own targets" in industry.

21 Farocki 2004, 17.
22 "So in a Max Weberian term, 'ideal type', somehow these images are very close to an ideal type. I think they are asking reality to be as calculable as these systems are", Farocki 2012, 284. On ideal type in Farocki's works see Franke 2012.
23 Didi-Huberman 2010, 17.

For Farocki, therefore, the operational process functions independently of the human eye and its perception, imagination, knowledge, and memory. Human freedom and responsibility are thus deactivated with regard to the functioning of operational images. If these images are not dependent on vision and responsibility, when they function in the field of war, they tend once again to escape human vision and responsibility. Farocki proceeds to genealogise the disappearance of the images that function or bear witness to what happens during conflicts: this disappearance is attributable to the ever-increasing weight of operational images in the spheres of our lives. The fact that such images are increasingly at the centre of how conflicts are conducted is in itself one of the main reasons why we see less and less of what happens in wars. At the same time, the imagery of war is increasingly dependent on wargames, which in turn form the basis of an ever-larger part of soldiers' training.

The first Gulf War, in 1991, is taken by Farocki as a turning point in the relationship between images and warfare because for the first time operational images were used in a systematic way to control missiles launched against their targets: images transmitted by a camera placed on the head of the missile, which is seen and controlled by the pilot of the plane that launched it. These images dissolve the moment they hit their target. Since the first Gulf War, we have seen fewer and fewer war dead, despite the increased use of imaging devices and the increasing involvement of civilians in warfare. Operational images, Farocki writes, "more than just propaganda and despite strict censorship were aimed at erasing the two hundred thousand dead of that war".[24] Images that are produced increasingly independently of humans, operational images that work in the operation of war and are not made for human eyes occupy ever greater space within wars in which the dead disappear. The 200,000 dead of the first Gulf War are more than censored; they fall out of the field of visibility to the point of slipping below the threshold of existence.[25] For Farocki, operational images work to remove the dead from wars independently of propaganda logic. In the installation *Eye/Machine I*, Farocki associates commentary captions with phantom subjects and other operational images taken from various industrial production processes, traffic control, surveillance, etc. Farocki's work is focused on the

24 Farocki 2015, 58.
25 Fundamental on the relationship between violence and invisibility in the "small" wars is Weizman 2018.

images sent by missiles.[26] In particular, for the images sent by missiles before they hit their target, we read, "We saw images like these in 1991, of the War against Iraq. In 1991 we saw these images of the war against Iraq. Operational images, no propaganda. Not propaganda yet. An ad for intelligent machines." There is no need for direct propaganda in favour of war because, according to Farocki, the kind of operational images we are dealing with actively work precisely to transform reality in its effects, removing themselves not only from the human hand, but also from the human eye.

Operational images are the junction between the industrial production of global capitalism and the work of destroying wars, central issues in videos such as *Eye/Machine II* and *A Way*. If, as Farocki shows in *Eye/Machine III*, the images of the Vietnam War still "threatened" and "entertained", the purely operational images of the first Gulf War perform functional operations and therefore no longer arouse any passion, primarily because they remove themselves from the interest of the human eye and simply function, no longer arousing any passion or resistance.

The properly operative dimension of operational images is explored in the interweaving of images and words of the video installation *Eye/Machine I*: "Industrial production abolishes manual work and also visual work." Any kind of working process that functions on the basis of operational images makes the activity of the human hand and eye superfluous. For Benjamin, the emergence of photography and film entailed that "For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction-tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone."[27] Farocki with his work on images shows how operative images today tend to impose themselves as an exclusion of the contemporary human eye. Finally, the characteristic dimension of the operative image – as it develops in military and production apparatuses – is captured by Farocki in a sort of new form of *religious* relationship with images, in a retreat of this sphere of images from public viewing and sharing, as I try to explain later, based on Agamben's theories. In this sense, Farocki writes in a caption to *Eye/Machine I*, operational images are devoid of a "social purpose" *(soziale Absicht)*.

In the first Gulf War, Farocki writes, photographed images and those produced by computer simulation were no longer distinguishable from one another. With the loss of the "authentic image", the possibility of the his-

26 On *Eye/Machine* see Blumenthal-Barby 2015.
27 Benjamin 2008, 20.

torical eye witness was also erased. "This led to the use in the Gulf War not only of new weapons, but also of a new politics of images *(Bilderpolitik)*. In the Gulf War, the foundations of an electronic way of conducting war were produced".[28]

This "electronic mode of warfare" is connected to a "new politics of images". Both are based on a simulatory condition in which the absence of the "authentic image" erases the possibility of "historical testimony".

As Engberg-Pedersen noted,

Clearly, the point is not that VR has fully replaced reality in a procession of simulacra, as a quick reading of Baudrillard would suggest. It is, rather, that reality no longer stands in opposition to simulations but, for better or for worse, has come to include them. When our representations of war become the means by which war is waged, we need to expand our notion of the real, not shrink it. As Farocki's Serious Games makes evident, embodied immersive simulations form an integral part of what we must now think of as the military real. And it points to the fact that this expanded notion of military reality is organised aesthetically.[29]

The Profanation of Operational Images

As mentioned earlier, Farocki's intention with this video installation was to explore if and how worlds of artificial imagery "are used constructively in ways that go beyond self-contained fictional universes". Its conclusion in this sense is clearly in the negative. The AR and VR technologies used in the military environment fit perfectly within that system of operational imagery noted in the previous paragraph. Both training and therapeutic images are asymmetrical images, that is, they express the asymmetry which increasingly characterises contemporary conflicts and in which the mutation of wars into exercises, the absence of an (external) enemy, the so called "humanitarian" motivation of conflicts, the subtraction of war processes from the human gaze are increasingly widespread and normal elements.

This exploration by Farocki in the sphere of AR and VR images relates to many of the questions addressed by Walter Benjamin when he confronted

28 Farocki 2008.
29 Engberg-Pedersen 2017, 164.

photography and film in the 1930s. Benjamin saw in them forms of perceptive training based on shock, on repetitions that impose themselves as corporeal "innervations", which through a form of "subjugation" has the possibility of overturning themselves to form modes of "liberation".[30] In the final analysis, the liberation to which Benjamin refers is a liberation from work as a function of the construction of a "space of play" *(Spielraum)*.[31] The work/play dialectic in Benjamin must be understood in at least two respects: (1) the receptive innervation that allows the human body to enter into relation with technical instruments (in some of Benjamin's examples, the child's ball, the painter's brush, the keys of a typewriter), expanding and modifying the human's perceptive sphere. The work and enslavement carried out in order to become innervated with the instrument are overturned in the construction of an extension of the perceptive possibilities and of operation on things. Reception and passivity turn into creation and activity. And (2), in addition to this aesthetic level of the work/play dialectic, there is another level that we could define as collective and political. Benjamin writes in a famous passage from *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*,

> Revolutions are innervations of the collective – or, more precisely, efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology. This second technology is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [*das Spiel*] with natural forces. Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach.[32]

Aesthetically and politically, the subjugation to photography and film is important not only on an individual level, but also on a collective one, in the sense that it constitutes a revolutionary chance for the use of technique no longer under the sign of sacrifice and work, but under the sign of "an interplay between nature and humanity".[33]

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30 On "innervation" in Benjamin see Somaini 2018.
31 An essay on *Serious Games* that highlights Benjaminian implications can be found in Darelli 2019.
32 Benjamin 2008, 45, n. 11.
33 Benjamin 2008, 26.

If observed from this Benjaminian perspective, AR and VR devices in the military context are employed in a direction of subjugation and passivity that tends to change – at least for those who have access to them – into a new form of that "spectacle" of which Benjamin spoke in reference to the "aestheticizing of political life",[34] such that the subject of the spectacle is humanity reduced to its own blind "self-alienation" and "annihilation".[35]

In another well-known passage, Benjamin used an image taken from the sphere of medicine to illustrate the relationship between the pictorial image and the filmic image. The painter's relationship to the image he produces can be compared to the relationship of the traditional doctor or magician with his patient: "The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority."[36] By contrast, the relationship of the film operator with the image can be compared to that of a surgeon with his patient:

> The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient's body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs [...]. The surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating *[er dringt vielmehr operativ in ihn ein]*.[37]

What emerges from the montage is therefore a disorganised image, the image "of the cinematographer is piecemeal", as Benjamin put it, as opposed to the organic image, the "total image" of the painter. For Benjamin, "the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the most significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment".[38] This fragmented and shocking dimension of the photocinematographic image translates into an aesthetic-political "chance":[39] photography and cinema shatter the

34 Benjamin 2008, 41.
35 Benjamin 2008, 42.
36 Benjamin 2008, 35.
37 Benjamin 2008, 39–40.
38 Benjamin 2008, 35.
39 On these aspects see Gurisatti 2012, 49–86.

presumed single reality of things. The "second" reality that cinema produces leads to an explosion of the banality, contradictions, and limits that run through the "first" reality. At the same time, however, this shock opens dialectically to a "chance": the destruction of the reference to the original, the overcoming of the image as a mimesis of reality opens up an operational relationship between the human being and the world. The photocinematographic gaze is an allegory of a world that humankind has the possibility of constructing on the basis of their technical ability, free for the first time from the passive reference to a being or an order of values that pre-exists with respect to humankind's own activity. In particular, montage – as a constitutive element of the photo-cinematographic gaze – constitutes for Benjamin a powerful aesthetic-political allegory: the shocking element essential to photography and cinema stands as a destructive element of the traditional mimetic relationship of the image to reality. Benjamin believes that cinematic images appeal to us as follows: there is no other reality than that which is realised through imaginative construction; today the imagination has equipped itself with sensitive prostheses, we must aesthetically form ourselves and develop our sensitive-imaginative faculty in accordance with those innervations that are already operative in our lives. In this sense, the photocinematographic image is operative in that reality is handed over to human action and needs. Farocki, by contrast, uses the term "operative images" to define images that are totally unbalanced on an operativity from which humankind is systematically excluded, as we have seen.

That kind of operativity in the emancipatory sense of AR and VR images comes precisely from the kind of work on images that Farocki himself carries out with his video installations. As Didi-Huberman noted in an illuminating essay on Farocki, "The gift of images" that Harun Farocki gives us therefore has to do "with what Giorgio Agamben calls profanation".[40] he adds, "Farocki certainly does not dishonour the images he shows and reassembles in his films and installations. On the contrary, he shows exemplary respect for the images (respecting their modes of operation as much as possible, in order to show them better)."[41] But the respect that Didi-Huberman is talking about is *profanation* in the precise sense that Agamben gives back to this word: "Farocki 'profanes' the visual strategies of international trade or the contemporary military industry: he tries, through reassemblies, to

40   Didi-Huberman 2010, 15.
41   Didi-Huberman 2010, 15.

abolish and cancel separations [...] [to teach us] to make a new use of them, to play with them. And it is in this way that life in prison or the way of conducting a war really become our business, all of us."[42]

For Agamben, *profanation* is a key word, in which he condenses his critique of contemporary spectacular capitalism, which imposes itself as a new form of religion:

> Religio is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct. It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine, therefore, that stand in opposition to religion, but "negligence" that is, a behaviour that is free and "distracted" (that is to say, released from the religio of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use.[43]

Profanation should not be confused with secularisation, as Agamben clearly explains:

> Profanation, however, neutralises what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first (secularization) guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second (profanation) deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.[44]

From Agamben's perspective, Farocki's work on AV and VR images is therefore a form of profanation that works to restore human beings' gaze, their capacity for decision and action.

Pietro Montani, I believe, grasped one of the most important aspects of Farocki's work when he observed that "the proper place of Farockian cinema, its essential 'poise', is to be grasped in the space of reversibility (between image and word) and in the peculiar productivity present in the work of schematisation carried out by the imagination".[45]

42 Didi-Huberman 2010, 15–16.
43 Agamben 2007, 75.
44 Agamben, 2007, 77.
45 Montani 2017, 262.

Serious Games can also be conceived as the restitution of humankind's aesthetic and political action, of a weave made up of empirical data, images, and written words that emerges in the relationship of American soldiers with the AR and VR devices they work with for training and in some instances in immersive post-trauma therapy. But in order for these images to be taken out of the operational and functional sphere to which they are relegated by governments, states, and the big companies of war and videogames, they must become *common* property, they must be returned to the *community*, profaned from the cultic sphere to which they are relegated through the work of exposure, editing, and reinterpretation that Farocki offers in his works. It is through this work of profanation that Farocki can give back to AR and VR images the "testimonial power" of the images themselves that allows us to judge and actively operate in our history.

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Open Section

Frank Bosman

"There is no order in which God calls us"

The Depiction of Christianity and Christians in the Netflix Series SQUID GAME

Abstract

The highly successful and also somewhat controversial Netflix series SQUID GAME takes a very critical stance on the – supposed – intimate relationship between specific layers of South Korean Christian traditions and capitalism, especially regarding what is known as the "prosperity gospel". The series features some explicitly Christian characters who do not act according to what they preach, that is, they behave egoistically instead of altruistically. The series even seems to suggest that "true" Christian compassion and self-sacrifice are to be found outside the boundaries of institutionalized Christianity rather than among nominal Christians. This article explains in more detail this twofold criticism that the series provides regarding (South Korean) Christianity by carefully examining key scenes and figures.

Keywords

Squid Game, Netflix, Prosperity Gospel, Capitalism, Criticism of Religion

Biography

Frank G. Bosman is a theologian of culture and a senior researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He is the author of many articles and books on the relation between culture, theology, and faith, and focuses on the role of religion and religious themes in video games. In 2019, he published a synthesis of his previous research on religion and digital games in *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge).

"The only one who can save us now is the Lord." Player 244 stops praying for a second or two to preach to his fellow game contestants. He and his team are about to embark on a bizarre version of tug-of-war in which the losing team will be drawn into falling to their untimely deaths. His devotion to God does not yield very much attention from the other contestants until later – when his team miraculously wins the deadly game. Ji-yeong, another contestant, mocks Player 244's faith in God, since he and his team have

just practically murdered their adversaries: "Heavenly Father, we worked together as a team today to send many people to your side. Please, help us send more people to your side from now on."

These two scenes are taken from Season One's Episodes 2 ("Stick to the team") and 4 ("A fair world") of the popular South Korean Netflix series Ojing-eo Geim (Squid Game, Hwang Dong-hyuk, KR 2021). The series, created by Korean writer Hwang Dong-hyuk, has taken the world by storm.[1] Most people are very enthusiastic about the series, praising its criticism of modern capitalism by way of a sequence of life-or-death games performed by society's financial outcasts in front of an audience of international multi-billionaires, who are so utterly bored that only the spilling of real human blood can revive them.[2] Others are more critical, pointing to the fact that minors will imitate the dangerous versions of the series' children's games.[3] In the meantime, adults also seem to be interested in re-enacting the series' games, although probably with a less lethal outcome.[4]

A less discussed but nevertheless very interesting topic that the series touches upon is Christianity. The series is rather critical of the way Christianity functions within South Korean society, as the two scenes quoted above have already illustrated.[5] The focus of this religion criticism is the – supposed – intimate relationship between South Korean Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms espousing what is known as the "prosperity gospel", and capitalism.[6] "Prosperity gospel" is a term given to the religious belief of certain Protestant Christians who strongly associate financial and physical well-being with God's blessing and was especially popularized by North American evangelists from the second half of the 20th century onwards, although its origins can be traced further back in history.[7]

In this article, I wish to explore Squid Game's criticism of religion in general and of South Korean Christianity more specifically. To do so, I will utilize a communication-oriented analysis (COA) of the series (see fig. 1).[8] The COA distinguishes strongly between the text-immanent communication of

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1   Venable 2021.
2   Mahdawi 2021.
3   Power 2021.
4   Hirwani 2021.
5   Forst 2021; O'Hare 2021.
6   Hazzan 2016.
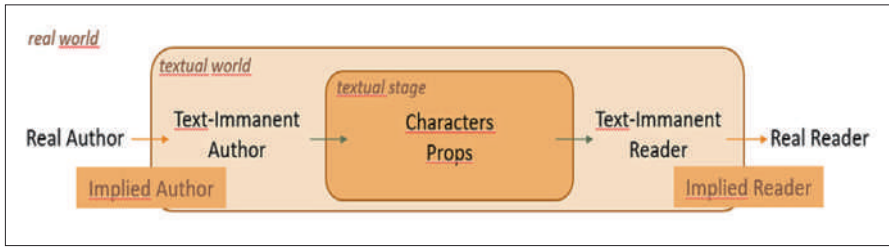7   Bowler 2013.
8   Wieringen 2020.

Fig. 1: Schematic overview of the basic structure of the communication-oriented analysis methodology.

the textual world (text-immanent author to text-immanent reader) and the text-external communication in the real word (real author to real reader).[9] Within the text, there is a textual stage (containing characters and props) on which the characters interact under the control of the text-immanent author for the benefit of the text-immanent reader. Negotiating the communication between the textual world of the text and the real world outside the text are the implied author and implied reader, who create and guarantee the socio-historical paradigm shared by real author, text-immanent author, text-immanent reader, and possibly, but certainly not necessarily, individual real readers.

In the case of SQUID GAME, the real author of the series is the aforementioned Hwang Dong-hyuk, a writer of flesh and blood, living in the real world. The real readers of SQUID GAME are all those individual viewers of the series including their normative judgement of it, either positive or negative. Within the text itself an implicit and unspecified text-immanent author, in the form of an all-knowing narrator, tells the story of the series to an equally unidentified immanent reader. The implied author and reader provide the possibility-conditions for the communication between the text and the outside world, including knowledge of both the English and the Korean language and a basic understanding of contemporary South Korean society, including the position of Christianity within it.

In this article, I want to focus on the text-immanent reader's understanding of the series as provided by the immanent author. This disregards the perspective of the real author and his original intentions, as well as the perspective of any particular real readers, including their normative judgements of the series' content. The question I want to address in this article

9   Bosman/Wieringen, forthcoming.

is, technically formulated, How does the text-immanent author of Squid
Game portray the Christian characters in this series to the immanent reader
through the implied author/reader?

To come to an answer, I will introduce the series itself, providing a short
but complete overview of the series' narrative and relative characters (sec-
tion 1). Next, I will sketch the context of Christianity in contemporary South
Korean society (section 2). This is followed by a more detailed presentation
and discussion of Squid Game's explicit and implicit Christian characters,
both major and minor roles (section 3). This examination leads to the con-
clusion that Squid Game criticizes (South Korean) Christianity for its liaison
with (neo)capitalism and suggests that truly "Christian" behaviour is to be
found outside the boundaries of Christianity rather than among its vocal
adherents (section 4).

In this article, I will base myself on the English translation of the series
provided by Netflix, and exclusively on Season One (since it is not certain at
the time of writing if there will be a second season). For the romanization
of the Korean names, I use those found on the Internet Movie Database.[10]

SQUID GAME, the Series

The premise of Squid Game is not an unfamiliar one: people forced to com-
pete with one another to the death for the pleasure of others. Films like The
Hunger Games trilogy (Gary Ross/Francis Lawrence, US 2012–2015), Gamer
(Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, US 2009), and Ready Player One (Steven
Spielberg, US 2018) paved the way. But Squid Game distinguishes itself from
its predecessors by the effort it makes to explain why the contestants sign
up for a series of lethal games more or less voluntarily. For convenience's
sake, in figure 2 all relevant roles are listed for reference.

Staged in contemporary South Korean society, the series follows the
struggles of Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), a divorced chauffeur and gambling
addict. Seong is burdened by many character flaws and an unbearable num-
ber of debts owed to both the bank and some criminal loan sharks, who
force him to sign away some of his organs as payment. At a subway station,
Seong meets a businessman who challenges him to a game of Ddakji (see
fig. 3 for details of all games). After many losses, for which he has to pay by

10   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10919420.

Character	Number	Role
Main Roles		
Seong Gi-hun	456	Contestant and the series' protagonist.
Cho Swang-woo	218	Contestant, manipulative, and Seong's youth friend.
Kang Sae-byeok	067	Contestant, self-reliant, and North Korean refugee.
Oh Il-nam	001	Oldest contestant, secretly 'the Host'.
Abdul Ali	199	Contestant, very strong, labour immigrant from Pakistan.
Ji-yeong	240	Contestant, murdered her abusive father.
Minor Roles		
"Player 244"	244	Contestant, devout Christian.
"Businessman"	...	The recruiter of the game.
"Religious Sister"	...	Works at the orphanage where Ji-yeong's brother lives.
"Street Preacher"	...	Warns about the end of times.
"Compassionate Man"	...	Warns the police about a homeless man dying in the streets.

Fig. 2: Overview of relevant characters from Squid Game.

Round	Players	Name and Description
Preliminary	1 vs 1	Ddakji: the goal is to flip the opponent's tile with your own one.
Round #1	1 vs all	Red Light, Green Light: the group of contestants may only move when the "tagger" is not looking at them.
Round #2	Individual	Honeycomb: the goal is to stamp out shapes pressed in honeycomb candy without breaking it.
Round #3	8 vs 8	Tug-of-War: two teams tug a rope between them, until one team has pulled the other one over a line.
Round #4	1 vs 1	Marbles: one contestant has to win all his opponent's marbles.
Round #5	Individual	Glass Stepping Stones: players cross a bridge with glass stepping stones; every successive contestant has to decide which tile is safe to stand on.
Final (#6)	1 vs 1	Squid Game: one player must reach the squid's head (drawn on the ground), while the other player tries to prevent this.

Fig. 3: Overview of games from Squid Game.

being struck in the face by the businessman, he wins a considerable amount of money and a telephone number to call if he wants to play more.

Seong initially refuses, but when he learns that his daughter will be emigrating to the United States with her mother and stepfather, he calls the phone number and is picked up by a black van, only to be immediately brought into a deep gas-induced sleep. After some time, Seong finds himself

Fig. 4: Five of the main characters of the series. From left to right: Oh Il-nam, Seong Gi-hun, Ji-yeong, Cho Swang-woo, and Abdul Ali. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 4, 00:33:08.

to be one of 456 equally financially desperate players housed in a closed facility on a remote island. The players, guarded by heavily armed masked personnel, are brought into a sort of arena, where they play a deadly version of Red Light, Green Light (see fig. 3). More than half of the players are shot dead during the game, to the great dismay of many of the surviving players. They demand to be permitted to leave the facility by majority vote, which is granted to them, but not before the dazzling amount of prize money already accumulated as a result of the deaths of so many contestants is presented to them in bearer bonds.

Nevertheless, they vote – with the tiniest margin possible – to get out. And even though they are indeed released into the world, the vast majority of players return in a couple of days to play the games again. Their financial situation is so dire and their desperation so extreme that they freely opt to partake in a game everyone knows will have only one winner, leaving the rest dead. They include Seong, whose mother is in serious need of (very expensive) surgery that neither she nor Seong can afford.

Back in the games, Seong befriends – sometimes very reluctantly – players: his old friend the failed banker Cho Swang-woo (Park Hae-soo), Pakistani migrant worker Ali Abdul (Anupam Tripathi), North Korean refugee Kang Sae-byeok (Jung Hoyeon), Oh Il-nam (O Yeong-su), a senior citizen with a deadly brain tumour, and Ji-yeong (Lee Yoo-mi), who murdered her abusive father (see fig. 4, excluding Kang). They all need the money very

badly, just as Seong does. Cho needs money to flee the police, Abdul hasn't been paid in months while his wife and baby are starving, and Kang wants to pay smugglers to retrieve her mother from North Korea and rescue her little brother from the orphanage. Why Oh partakes in the games remains unexplained (until very late in the series). And Ji-yeong does not have anyone left in the world and has joined presumably out of boredom or general lack of direction in life.

Together they try to stay alive, both inside and outside the games, where they are attacked by more powerful players. Cho Swang-woo plays a morally dubious role: on at least three occasions he betrays his comrades for his own survival, even though he will eventually take his own life in order for Seong to win the games. The games themselves are overseen by a secretive Front Man (Lee Byung-hun), who maintains strict order among both contestants and security personnel. He lives according to the letter of the rules of the games, giving the whole operation a hint of legitimacy and order. He insists that the deadly games are morally defensible since all players have agreed – twice even – that they wanted to participate even though they knew (the second time) what losing would mean.

Eventually, Seong wins the games, but he is mentally so broken that he cannot put himself to the task of kickstarting his life, especially when he learns – after being released again into the real world – that his mother has died from her disease. He roams the streets like a beggar, even though he has been given an incredible amount of prize money. On 24 December, he is invited – by means of a now familiar business card – to come to the 7th floor of a certain building in town. There he meets Oh Il-nam again, the old man who was thought to have been killed in the aftermath of a game of marbles in which Seong cheated to win.

The old man, who is dying of a brain tumour, reveals himself to be the "Host", the leader of the games and the Front Man's supervisor. Oh explains that he and several other multibillionaires were so existentially bored that they devised the lethal games to entertain themselves (by watching live and gambling on the outcomes). In a subtle form of anti-colonial criticism, all the multibillionaires are white, English-speaking men, except for the Host. Oh himself chose to enter the competition as a player incognito, since he wanted to relive his childhood games one more time and because participating was even more thrilling than just watching.

After the old man dies, on Christmas Eve, Seong finds the strength to get his life organised. He finances Cho Swang-woo, who unknowingly lost her son

to the games, and connects her to Kang Sae-byeok's younger brother, who has lost his mother, presumably in North Korea. When Seong understands, however, that the next round of the games is starting, in spite of Oh Il-nam having died, he swears to destroy them. The first season of Squid Game thus ends with a major cliffhanger, reaching ahead to a (possible) second season.

South Korea and the Prosperity Gospel

Christianity was brought to Korea by missionaries as early as the 16th century, although in the form of the forced baptism of children by Japanese invaders, encouraged to do so by a Spanish Jesuit.[11] Since then, after decades of officially sanctioned persecution of Christians throughout the peninsula, things have changed dramatically in the South (Christians in the North are still heavily persecuted). According to a 2015 survey, 56 per cent of South Koreans do not identify themselves as religious. The remaining 44 per cent who identify as religious are divided across Christianity 27.6 per cent (Protestantism 19.7 per cent and Catholicism 7.9 per cent), Buddhism (15.5 per cent) and others including Confucianism, Won Buddhism, and Islam (0.8 per cent).[12] Where Christians made up less than 1 per cent of the Korean population at the beginning of the 20th century, they now have become the single largest religious group in South Korea.

The unusual success of Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, has puzzled scholars for a long time.[13] Some have argued that Korean "folk religion" was very compatible with Christianity, others point to the role of Protestantism in Korean social and political activism, and yet others suggest that missionaries in Korea applied better evangelisation strategies than those in China or Japan. Most scholars agree, however, that the emergence of Japanese imperialism and colonialism, and the "Christian" West's political reaction, helped forge a positive association between Christianity, Korean nationalism, and Western capitalism.[14]

The quantitative success of Christianity in Korea is visible especially through the emergence of megachurches. "In Korea size is important", the

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11 Kim/Kim 2014, chap. 2.
12 Quinn 2019.
13 Kane/Park 2009.
14 Park 2003.

theologian Sebastian Kim explains. This means that "influence and significance are measured largely in terms of the number of members and the size of church buildings".[15] The largest church building in the world is Korean and belongs to the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul. It has clear Evangelical and Pentecostal characteristics, including baptism in the Holy Spirit, glossolalia, and faith healing.[16] The evangelisation practices of several Protestant churches are radical and "loud", as Dave Hazzan explains:

> From miniscule, storefront chapels to the biggest church in the world, the skyline of every major city is ablaze with neon crosses. Evangelical Christians proselyte house to house, distribute pamphlets and church-emblazoned tissue packets on street corners, and cycle through town blaring sermons and homilies through bullhorns, urging you to either accept Jesus, or be prepared for the Devil's wrath below. It is very rare to spend more than a few days in Korea without being preached to.[17]

The position and practices of the Protestant churches in South Korea have produced their own criticism. In 2008, a survey was conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea. Among self-identifying Protestant respondents, 48.3 per cent answered that they (strongly) distrust "their own" churches. If widened to non-Protestants, 57.24 per cent voiced (strong) distrust.[18] The most important criticisms were the "discontinuity between words and deeds", between "sermons and lifestyles of ministers", and between "the message and operation of churches". Christians, according to the survey, do not act according to what they preach; they act hypocritically.

Another characteristic – and a source of potential criticism – is the adherence of many Korean Protestant churches to the prosperity gospel.[19] Many megachurch leaders connect the rise of free-market capitalism in South Korea with a (supposed) theological causality between, on the one hand, the extent of individual piety, faith, prayer, church attendance, and donations and, on the other, physical, mental, and financial blessings.[20] The "problem",

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15 Kim 2015, 93.
16 Cartledge/Dunlop/Buckingham/Bremner 2019, 63–64.
17 Hazzan 2016.
18 Kim 2015.
19 Poling/Kim 2012, chap. 4.
20 Hong 2018.

Explicit Christian + Discontinuity Preaching vs Praxis	
	Player 244.
	The businessman (allegedly).
	Ji-yeong's father (only indirectly).
	The street preacher.
Explicit Christian + Continuity Preaching vs Praxis	
	The religious sister towards orphans, including Kangs Sae-byeok's brother.
Non-Christian + Praxis Without Preaching	
	Ji-yeong towards Kang Sae-byeok by letting her win the 4th game.
	Cho Swang-woo towards Seong Gi-hun by committing suicide in the 6th game.
	Seong Gi-hun towards Kang Sae-byeok's brother and Cho Swang-woo's mother.
	The "Samaritan" towards the homeless man on Christmas Eve.

Fig. 5: Overview of Christian and non-Christian characters from Squid Game.

so to speak, with the concept of the prosperity gospel is that it works two ways: if one is rich and healthy, one is blessed by God, but if one is poor and sick, one is not blessed by God. If you find yourself at the bottom of society, as the contestants of Squid Game do, you have two black marks against you: you are poor and – apparently – also lacking in faith.

Both criticisms of Korean Christianity are found in Squid Game: the perceived discontinuity between Christian words and deeds, and the problematic notion of the prosperity gospel.

Squid Game's "Christian" Characters

When we turn our attention to the Christian characters of Squid Game, and thus to the characterisation of Christianity in the series, we can distinguish between three categories (see fig. 5). The first one consists of characters depicted explicitly as Christian who suffer from the aforementioned discontinuity between words and deeds. The second category consists of characters depicted explicitly as Christian, but this time their words and deeds align. The third and somewhat problematic category, as I have already indicated above, consists of non-Christians who nonetheless possess those qualities lacking in the first category.

Fig. 6: A nameless preacher calls upon the world to redeem itself before the end of times. Screen shot SQUID GAME, Episode 9, 00:39:42.

Player 244 and the Three Preachers

The first category – (self-)identifying Christians suffering from discontinuity between their preaching and praxis – consists of four characters, three of them (supposedly) Protestant preachers. In the first episode ("Red Light Green Light"), Seong meets the nameless recruiter of the games, dressed as a common businessman. When the man asks Seong if he could have a minute of his time, Seong replies, "I don't believe in Jesus" and shifts away from the man. When the man insists, Seong points a (fake) gun at his face and says, "I come from a Buddhist household so stop bothering me and get lost." Even though this is clearly a case of false identification, the scene illustrates prejudice against and loathing of the praxis of street evangelisation, a practice common in South Korean society.

The same sentiment is found in the ninth and last episode ("One Lucky Day"). When Seong is brought back from the games, he is thrown out of the car into the pouring rain, blindfolded and tied up. A street preacher witnesses the scene (fig. 6). He evangelizes loudly:

Believe in Jesus or go to hell! You foolish people who deny the Lord! Repent! Judgement day is upon us! Believe in Jesus or go to Hell! Only the fiery pits of hell await you! Kneel down before the Lord! Believe in Jesus or go to Hell!

When he sees Seong, he loosens his blindfold and says again, "Believe in Jesus." Instead of helping out Seong, who is clearly in some sort of predicament, he remains occupied with his religious undertaking. Trying to blatantly convert people who are traumatized, hurt, and in need of help is not usually the most successful method, nor one people tend to sympathize with. Even if probing on the vulnerable produces missionary goals in the short term, this usually backfires in the long run: as soon as people realise their vulnerability has been abused for missionary reasons, their initial gratitude is swapped for disgust towards the religious organisation that helped them for the wrong reasons.

The third "preacher" is not shown, only talked about in Episode 6 ("Gganbu"). The North Korean refugee Kang and the South Korean Ji-yeong have volunteered to team up for the next game, which – to their horror – positions them as direct adversaries: only one of them can leave the game alive. Conscious that they will not speak to each other after this game has ended, the two young women open up to one another. And Ji-yeong explains why she was imprisoned before entering the games: she tells Kang about a certain day she returned home from school.

> The first [dead body] I saw was my mom. One day I came home after school, and found her dead on the floor. Next to her was my so-called dad with a knife in his hand. The next person I saw dead was my dad. And the one standing next to him with a knife was me. He was a pastor. Whenever he beat my mom and did the unthinkable to me, he always prayed for our sins to be forgiven. But he didn't pray the day he killed my mom. Maybe he knew he couldn't be forgiven.

The fourth and last character of this category is the one most discussed on the Internet regarding the theme of Christianity in SQUID GAME, the nameless player 244 (Kim Si-hyun). We do not know why he signed up for the games. Neither do we know anything of his faith prior to the games, but he has the largest, if not very positive, role of all Christian characters in the series, as indicated at the beginning of this article.

Player 244's role starts in Episode 4 ("Stick to the Team") when he begins to pray, waiting for his team to enter the Tug-of-War (round #3), while the numbers of defeated members of another team are announced. Eventually, Player 244 ascends in the elevator together with all other significant contestants, including Seong, Cho, Ji-yeong, Kang, and Oh-Il nam. When the old man ex-

Fig. 7: Player 244 prays on the floor of the elevator (on his knees on the right), while Ji-yeong scorns him (the middle woman on the left), after the Tug-of-War. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 5, 00:49:36.

plains to the rest of the team that only teamwork and strategy can help them win, Player 244 interrupts: "The only one who can save us now is the Lord."

In the next episode ("A Fair World"), after the team has been victorious – due indeed to teamwork and strategy – Player 244 is kneeling on the floor of the elevator, his hands folded and his eyes closed (fig. 7). Ji-yeong, who is critical of religion – a fact of which the viewer of the series is not yet aware – mocks him:

> He! Who are you praying to right now? To God? Do you think you're alive thanks to God? You're still breathing and moving that tongue of yours thanks to that old man and that guy over there who pulled out that awesome trick last-minute. So if you're going to thank anyone thank them.

Player 244 replies angrily to her,

> You poor lost lamb. Can't you hear the cries of those who were nailed to the cross today? We lived to see another day thanks to their blood and sacrifice. On behalf of all us sinners, I am thanking the Lord for his decision and their sacrifice, and saying a prayer.

Theologically, much is happening in these sentences. Player 244 identifies his now dead adversaries as being "nailed to the cross" in a clear reference

to Christ's death. Even more, Player 244 holds God responsible for who gets to live and who dies, diminishing his own responsibility in light of his involvement in the death of eight fellow contestants. He even goes so far as to speak of their killing as a "sacrifice", projecting agency in their deaths from him onto the victims themselves.

Ji-yeong scolds him: "Bullshit. You killed them yourself." When Player 244 continues his silent prayer, she mocks him again by closing her eyes and folding her hands:

> So we all get to go to heaven if we mumble a few prayers? Shit, then I have to pray too. Heavenly Father, we worked together as a team today to send many people to your side. Please, help us send more people to your side from now on.

Player 244's hypocritical behaviour emerges a couple of times again in the series. First, in the same episode as the "poor lamb" speech, he suggests to his team that they carry out a pre-emptive strike against their remaining competitors by killing them in their sleep. Again Ji-yeong scolds him, "The Lord's servant is the vicious one here." Player 244 replies, in a sudden act of self-judgement, "We're all sinners already. Our hands are drenched in blood."

In round #5, the remaining contestants must choose a number between 1 and 16, while unaware of the consequences of their choice (Episode 7, "VIPS"). Player 244 chooses number 6, arguing, "God created man on the sixth day. I'm going back to that day God created the sinless and innocent man." Again, the player shows his hypocritical nature: he chooses the number six because of its association with the biblical paradise and its innocence before the Fall of Humankind even as his hands are "drenched in blood", as he earlier said.

Genesis seems to be Player 244's favourite biblical text: one episode earlier ("Gganbu"), he makes a reference to God creating Eve from Adam's rib, arguing, "God has given men and women different roles and uses." To which Ji-yeong replies, "Idiots. This isn't the Garden of Eden."

The players find out they have to cross a high bridge with glass stepping stones ("VIPS"), unable to tell which tiles are strong enough to hold them and which are not. The number they have chosen earlier marks the sequence in which they have to try to cross: the higher the number the higher the chance of getting across, and vice versa, the lower the number, the

Fig. 8: Player 151 (left) is appalled by Player 244's praying while kneeling on a glass tile. Screenshot Squid Game, Episode 7, 00:24:38.

higher the chance of dying, so the next contender can safely proceed a little farther. When it is Player 244's turn to jump to the next tile, he collapses and starts to pray the Lord's Prayer on his knees, to the anger of all other players, especially Player 151, who is just behind him (fig. 8).

As Player 244 prays the line "and lead us not into temptation", he is interrupted again by Player 151, who shouts, "Just go! Or we'll all die!" This provokes Player 244 to answer angrily, "There is no order in which God calls us." And when looking up, "Judgement Day is upon us. All of us will end up in hell anyway." Significantly, the last line of the Lord's Prayer, "and deliver us from evil", is rather aptly absent here. Player 151 jumps to Player 244's tile to make him jump forward, but in the ensuing struggle it is the former who falls forward through the glass panel to his death. When Player 244 successfully jumps to the next panel, apparently with tempered glass, he thanks God, "Thank you, Lord." But as soon as the prayer has left his lips, he is pushed through the next panel by yet another player trying to avoid getting pushed by others. Now player 244 also falls to his death.

The Sister at the Orphanage

The second category – (self-) identified Christian without suffering a discontinuity between preaching and praxis – is occupied by one character only: a Roman Catholic sister who is taking care of the orphanage where Kang's

Fig. 9: Ji-yeong with her brother in the orphanage, while in the background the nameless religious take care of the orphans. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 2, 00:32:09.

little brother lives, awaiting the realisation of his sister's promise to take him out from there to be reunited with their mother. This nameless sister stars in Episode 2 ("Hell"). She is dressed in grey clothes and a white veil and is probably supposed to be a Salesian sister, whose religious order runs orphanages all over the world.

First, while Kang and her brother are sitting aside talking to one another, she invites the children playing on the playground to "come and have some ice cream". When the siblings hug each other – for the last time, as it will turn out to be – the sister is seen watering the plants around the playground as the children resume their peaceful children's games (fig. 9), which are sharply distinct from the "adult" ones featured in the majority of the series' episodes.

The Salesian sister remains nameless, but her character forms a threefold exception to the rule of the rest of SQUID GAME: she is the only female Christian character and the only explicitly Roman Catholic one – the other Christian characters supposedly belong to Protestant denominations – and she is also the only Christian character whose preaching and praxis align. She is actually helping the poor and the homeless, as her Salesian Order preaches. She is the opposite of the multibillionaires who fund and appreciate the "adult" games. They are mostly white males and come down on the poor, while she is clearly of Asian origin and is devoting her life to those who are prone to becoming the Host's new contestants.

The "Christian" non-Christians

The third and last category is the trickiest one: it comprises those who are not explicitly or implicitly (self-)identified as Christians but nevertheless are presented by the series as the "real" Christians in terms of their praxis. They have "good praxis" without any need of preaching, and thus form the counterweight to the first category, which was characterised by its discontinuity between Christian praxis and preaching. Player 244 supplies another tool legitimizing such an "appropriation" precisely because he introduces the element of (self)sacrifice, even though he uses it in a corrupted sense from an authentic Christian point of view: he applies the term to those who were killed by Player 244's own actions and by those of the other players, suggesting that the decision who gets to be "taken" is in not human but divine hands. (Self)sacrifice, but in the non-distorted sense, thus becomes an identification marker for "crypto" Christian behaviour.

Four characters from Squid Game qualify for this category: Ji-yeong, Cho Swang-woo, Seong Gi-hun, and an unidentified man thus far not discussed in this article. We begin with Ji-yeong, who opts to team up with Kang Sae-byeok before entering the fourth game (Episode 6, "Gganbu"). Since the two women have no idea what to expect, they presume they will have to work together. When the game itself is presented – Marbles – the two quickly realise that only one of them will see the end of the day. Ji-yeong takes the initiative and suggests they play only one round together, for all their marbles at once: the winner is the one who can throw one marble the closest to a brick wall. But before they play this one decisive round, the two women share their life stories, as described earlier in this article, including Ji-yeong's confession of having murdered her abusive father. Kang also opens up and tells the story about her dark life in the North and how she and her brother were in the process of fleeing from North Korea when their father was shot and their mother taken captive.

When time has almost run out, the two begin to play their one round. Ji-yeong insists Kang starts: she throws her marble reasonably close to the wall. When it is Ji-yeong's turn, she just lets her marble drop to the ground, thus deliberately losing the game, sacrificing herself for Kang to win this round. Refusing to take Kang's offer to retry, she explains her sacrifice, referring to Kang's brother in the orphanage: "I don't have anything. […] You have a reason to leave this place. But I don't. […] Someone with a good reason should be the one to leave. That is the right thing." Very reluctantly

Fig. 10: Seong Gi-hun refuses to kill his friend Cho Swang-woo during the last game of the series, even though the latter gave him all the reasons to do so. Screenshot Squid Game, Episode 9, 00:45:47.

and visibly upset, Kang accepts Ji-yeong's sacrifice, and when she walks away, the other woman is shot dead by the security personnel overseeing the games.

During the last round of the games (episode "One Lucky Day"), Seong and Cho Swang-woo are the only two contestants left standing. Seong tries to kill Cho Swang-woo, but ultimately he is not capable of delivering the fatal blow, planting the knife instead into the ground next to Cho's head (fig. 10). Rather than claim victory, Seong halts and exclaims that he wants to quit. Based on the rule described earlier, the games can be ended if a majority of the players vote to do so. If both Seong and Cho vote to quit, both can go home, although without any prize money. Initially, Cho seems to want to take this opportunity, but then he says, "I am sorry" and plunges the knife into his own throat, taking his own life and thus making Seong the winner.

Cho's sacrifice at the last possible moment is even more remarkable in light of his earlier conduct. During the fighting, Seong's shouts have recalled those actions: "You killed them all!" Even though Cho has not technically killed all the other competitors, he did try to get his closest competition out of the way, even if that competition was his own team, including Ali, Seong, and Kang. During the second game (Honeycomb), Cho guessed the game before playing and purposefully made sure Seong got the hardest tasks. During the fourth game (Marbles), he cheated grossly by misusing Ali's trust in him to rob him of all his marbles, getting him killed by the security personnel. And

Fig. 11: A drunken homeless man appears to be freezing to death until the police arrive, alerted by an anonymous pedestrian. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 9, 00:39:42.

in the aftermath of the fifth game (Glass Stepping Stones), he cold-bloodedly killed Kang, who had been mortally wounded by splintering glass.

The dissonance of the preaching and praxis dichotomy, however, reaches its peak in the ninth and last episode of the season ("One Lucky Day"). When Seong Go-hun is invited by the old man he thought was dead and the true nature of the games is revealed to him, both men witness a specific scene playing out outside the window of the apartment. It is 24 December, a half hour before midnight, so Christmas Eve, as the series conveniently signals to the viewer. Outside in the snow, a very drunken, apparently homeless man slowly passes out, risking freezing to death. Oh Il-nam, in between explaining his existential boredom and organizing the games, remarks on the situation outside:

> That man over there. He must be drunk because he's been sitting there for hours. He looks homeless too if I had to guess. He's going to freeze to death if he stays out there any longer. And no one is going over to help or anything. Would you help out that guy? You think that you will stop walking and help that disgusting, stinking drunk, little piece of trash, huh?

And then, even on the brink of his own death, the old man cannot resist making a final critical point on human existence, while giving in to his gambling hobby. He offers Seong a bet:

> Let's play something tonight. That man out there … if he remains out there until midnight, I win. If anyone … goes to help the drunk before then, in that case, you win. […] Well, he's still out there. It looks like you've run out of luck. Tell me … you still trust … in humanity being good? […] Look at that. There's someone who cares.

Seong clings to his hope that someone will intervene even as the old man giggles, certain that no one will. People in the street ignore the drunken man, passing him by, looking at him but not acting. Eventually an unknown young man checks on the homeless man, but he too walks away, apparently uninterested in his fate. Several seconds before midnight, a police car arrives (fig. 11). From within it two officers and the young man from earlier on, who seems to have alerted them, appear. Together they hoist the homeless man into the car and drive him away, presumably to safety. At the same time, Oh Il-nam dies, having barely witnessed his final defeat, while Seong Gi-hun comments, "They're here. People came to help. You saw it, didn't you? You lost."

After this experience – made up of learning the truth behind the games and viewing the example of the young man in the street – Seong puts his life together again. Having taken care of his personal hygiene and appearance, he collects Kang's younger brother from the Salesian religious sister's orphanage and introduces him to Cho's mother, both unaware of the fatal ends of their sister and son respectively. Seong offers a childless mother a new child to care for, while giving the orphan a caring mother. Seong leaves a trunk full of money for the two and disappears into the night.

SQUID GAME's Religion Criticism

The ninth episode of the series seems implicitly to quote two famous stories from the New Testament. The young man altruistically caring for the stranger dying at the side of the road echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), in which a beaten, naked traveller is left to die alongside the road after being abused by robbers. A Jewish priest and a Levite, supposedly of high moral standards, pass by and do nothing, while a Samaritan – a foreigner in the eyes of the Jewish people – stops and goes to great lengths to help the stranger.

Likewise, the drunken man in the ninth episode has been robbed and abused by the harsh capitalistic society he is forced to live in, left to lie there by those who pass him by, only to be helped by an unlikely candidate. The

drunkard also shares certain qualities with the Samaritan: just as the Samarian was regarded as a social outcast not worthy of attention, so too the supposedly poor drunkard is treated as a social parasite. And like the non-Jew of the Lukan parable, the non-Christian pedestrian enters to shame the rest.

The second implicit biblical quotation of the ninth episode is found when Seong links Kang's brother to Cho's mother. It seems to closely echo John 19:26–27, when Jesus, moments before his death on the cross, makes sure his mother and his "beloved disciple" will be taken care of. Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" And then to the beloved disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that day on, the gospel tells, the disciple took Jesus' mother into his house, taking care of her for the rest of her life.

Even though the roles are reversed in "One Lucky Day" – the older woman here taking care of the younger man – the allusion is clear. Seong will leave the two behind after this scene: he will leave their company apparently forever, giving the woman and the boy to one another to nurture and love each other in the absence of both the woman's son and the boy's mother. Seong, as becomes clear at the end of the episode, will be "dead" to the world, for he cancels his flight to meet his daughter, probably already in the United States with her mother and stepfather, vowing he will dedicate his life to the prevention of the continuation of the games he had earlier participated in.

There is even a third quotation of, or rather an allusion to, the Christian metanarrative. The series points out that the seminal scene takes place on Christmas Eve, practically exactly at midnight, when Christmas Day starts. Christmas is the Christian celebration of its continuing faith in the notion of the incarnation, signifying that the transcendent creator of heaven and earth became "enfleshed" in Jesus Christ; the feast celebrates the birth of the Christian saviour. Due to inculturation and a continuous process of adaptation, the "birthday" of Jesus was marked in mid-winter, hence the image of snow. In "One Lucky Day" the remembrance of the Christian incarnation is embodied (!) not in an explicitly Christian character, as should have been the case, but in an anonymous character, a stranger in the streets with apparently no other motive to help a complete stranger than the intrinsic one of *caritas* (Christian charity). It is relevant in this context to mention that in Luke's gospel the risen Christ reveals himself precisely in the "stranger" who accompanies two of Jesus' disciples on their way home to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32).

These quotations, allusions, and characterisations of (Christian) characters discussed in this article illustrate the "critical theology", so to speak, of

SQUID GAME. Nominal Christians advocate their belief in helping one another because of a divine commandment central to their religion, but they fail again and again to live up to their own words when put to the test. Player 244 is the most outspoken but certainly not the only character in the series exemplifying this. By contrast, we witness several other non-Christian characters who display that specific behaviour so fruitlessly sought after by the Christian ones: compassion and care for their own sake, even at the cost of their own fortune, happiness, or even life (self-sacrifice). Seong and the Good Samaritan from the ninth episode are the prime examples belonging to this category.

Two options are possible. These altruistic non-Christians may actually be "crypto" Christians who simply do not know that they are acting out of Christian inspiration, as the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has suggested with his idea of the anonymous Christian.[21] Or good behaviour may not be exclusive to Christians, but can be found in all people "of good will", as the angels sing to the shepherds in Luke's version (2:14) of the birth of Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to people."[22] I argue that the series opts for the second perspective, especially in the context of the South Korean prosperity gospel, refraining from "encapsulating" everything positive in human behaviour as inherently and necessarily Christian.

Goodness and evil can be found in all persons alike, the series suggests, in Christians as much as in non-Christians. But at least non-Christians do not brag about their faith-based moral superiority like some Christians do, even while unable to live up to the standards their religion holds before them.

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Milja Radovic

Liturgy on the Reel
Ascesis through Film

Abstract

This article investigates representations of ascesis in film. Ascesis (askesis, ἄσκησις) is an ancient Christian praxis that remains an integral part of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Its aim is the restoration of the human being into its wholeness, which in Orthodox theology is referred to as the growing of person from the image to the likeness of God. Ascesis is bound to the Divine Liturgy: it is a continuation and manifestation of the experience of liturgical life and its aim is the (kenotic) fulfilment of love. Ascesis is a constant metanoia, a precondition of reconciliation, a transformative process, and an artistic creation, and it is the divine inspiration that leads to salvation. This article examines the depictions of ascesis in two films: Ostrov (The Island, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006) and Man of God (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). The overarching aims of this article are to show (1) the ways in which asceticism is conceptualised and expressed in Orthodox Christianity and (2) the ways in which film expresses the inexpressible, moving from descriptive language to the expression of inner liturgical life by the means of film language. It seeks to provide novel perspectives within the field of religion and film in researching asceticism through film. Building upon Andrei Tarkovsky's thought, this article finally suggests approaching ascesis in film through the lens of poetic cinema.

Keywords

Ascesis, Orthodox Theology, Film, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ostrov, Man of God

Biography

Milja Radovic is an international scholar in film and religion. Her primary focus has been on nationalism, religion, acts of citizenship, and Orthodox theology. She has published two monographs with Routledge, *Film, Religion and Activist Citizens: An Ontology of Transformative Acts* (2017) and *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths* (2014), and lectures internationally. She has also served as a jury member with Interfilm, the International Interchurch Film Organisation, at international film festivals (Berlin, Cottbus, Locarno, Karlovy Vary, Oberhausen, St Andrews).

Introduction

This article examines representations of Christian ascesis through film. One of its overarching aims is to demonstrate the ways in which film can express the inexpressible, moving from descriptive language to the artistic expression of the experience of inner liturgical life by the means of film language. According to Andrei Tarkovsky, "The poet does not use 'descriptions' of the world; he himself has a hand in its creation."[1] The artistic expression of ascesis in film requires this shift, from the descriptive to the creative and authentic act in which personal and objective, ontological and historical meet. In other words, it is the auteur who begets the subject from within, which manifests as artistic expression. The ways in which ascesis has been transferred into cinematic space are examined here through the films Os-trov (The Island, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006) and Man of God (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). The films have been selected on the basis of their explicit focus on the theme of Christian ascesis, concentrating on the life of ascetics while attempting to visually translate the ascetic praxis into artistic form. The internalisation and externalisation of the subject of ascesis makes these films an important source for studying the cinematic conceptualisations of ascesis and for understanding their unique capacity to convey ascetic experience as a personal one, that is, to communicate the inexpressible through an artistic form of film language and at the same time to communicate the life of an ascetic in its whole historicity through cinematic space. The selected films provide a unique perspective on the ways in which ascesis is perceived and portrayed by contemporary filmmakers. The examination of two films does not limit the subject of research; on the contrary, it facilitates better focus on the subject. This article inevitably poses the question of what a "religious film" is and how we understand "transcendental style in film". It argues that films depicting ascesis do not have to be of any particular genre,[2] suggesting that scholars must find new and creative ways of examining the cinematic space and the ways in which film expresses transcendental experience and Christian praxis. The research on ascesis reveals the potentiality of cinema, as "the most truthful art form", as a meta-language,[3] to express "the state

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1   Tarkovsky 1989, 42.
2   The true cinema image is built upon the destruction of genre, upon conflict with it. For further reading, see Tarkovsky 1989, 150.
3   Tarkovsky 1989, 40.

of mind" both of those represented and of those who create, imparting themselves into their creation.[4]

The ways in which ascesis of the Orthodox Christian tradition has been expressed through film and via film language is a subject that has not yet been examined adequately in scholarly research on religion and film. The well-known and much written about film Andrei Rublev (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1966) provides one of the most insightful cinematic expressions of ascesis, yet the ways ascesis is expressed in the film have not been studied. Although Tarkovsky's film is not analysed in this article, his work serves as a point of reference for investigating this topic further. Paul Schrader made a major impact in film criticism by developing a specific approach to *film art*, which is important for scholars working in the field of religion and film, investigating how the transcendent, the holy, or the inexpressible is transferred into the cinematic space. Schrader finds it useful in film criticism to employ the term "transcendental style", as opposed to "religious film",[5] and applies this term for analysing films such as those of Yasujirō Ozu, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and Robert Bresson.[6] Schrader argues that "the function of transcendental art is [...] to express the Holy itself"[7] and precisely because "style" is "the way to approach the Transcendent",[8] it can be analysed. Although Schrader did not engage with the Orthodox Christian tradition, his theory is important for furthering research in theology and film within this specific religious tradition. Schrader argues that the "more a work of art can successfully incorporate sparse means within an abundant society, the nearer it approaches its transcendental 'end'."[9]

What for Schrader is a "miracle", when "cinema can create a style of confrontation",[10] for Tarkovsky, one could argue, is the cinema of poetry, which he continuously expressed through his own opus. In that sense,

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4   Tarkovsky 1989, 41.
5   Schrader 2018, 37.
6   Schrader 2018, 37.
7   Schrader 2018, 39.
8   Schrader 2018, 35.
9   Schrader 2018, 35.
10 The moment of confrontation can only occur if at the decisive moment the abundant means have lost their power. If the "miracle" can be seen in any humanistic tradition, psychological or sociological, the viewer will avoid a confrontation with the transcendent. Schrader 2018, 35.

their understanding of the ways in which cinema art connects life and the transcendent is perhaps one of the most striking similarities between Schrader and Tarkovsky, even a meeting point. Schrader's understanding of transcendental style and Tarkovsky's cinema of poetry are important for further theorisation and understanding of asceticism and film from the perspective of Orthodox Christian theology. The role of the artist in the creative process whereby inner life is expressed in external circumstances as the search for the truth is related to time (as cinema itself is), but it is also surrounded by the "timeless time" – that of the liturgy, which starts here but reflects eternity, the Holy itself.

For Schrader the transcendental style, although just a style, "can bring us nearer to that silence, that invisible image, in which the parallel lines of religion and art meet and interpenetrate".[11] For Tarkovsky, artistic creation is an authentic act which only humankind, created in the image of God, possesses. In Orthodox tradition, art was not a substitute but an expression of the inexpressible that arises from an authentic experience of humankind lifted to the divine sphere, a foretaste and transformative image of theosis, both historical and eschatological reality.

Schrader further argues that many film directors "have forged a remarkably similar form" which "was not determined by their personalities, culture", but "is the result of two universal contingencies: the desire to express the Transcendent in art and the nature of the film medium".[12] This is what gives the transcendental style, according to Schrader, its universality. This article argues that the personality of the auteur, and frequently also the cultural framework,[13] shapes the artistic form and expression. Tarkovsky reminds us that "unless there is an organic link between the subjective impressions of the author and his objective representation of reality, he will not achieve even superficial credibility, let alone authenticity and inner truth".[14] This article claims that rather than "the *desire* to express the Transcendent", it is the experience of life – "being absorbed into God"[15] – that informs the degrees and ways in which

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11 Schrader 2018, 35.

12 Schrader 2018, 35.

13 Andrei Tarkovsky represents both the rule and the exception: while Andrei Rublev was made at a time of persecution of religion during the Soviet era (in this sense it is in principle not shaped by its immediate cultural framework), the film is informed by rich Russian Orthodox tradition and spirituality.

14 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.

15 On being absorbed into God, see Tarkovsky 1989, 240.

that experience will be expressed through art. This art, in the case of Orthodox ascetic art, has its own tradition, which shapes yet does not replicate itself.

Only in this existential sense can true artistic creation be a form of sacrifice[16] and not a desire for self-expression. It is through this sacrifice of self that the divine can be found. Tarkovsky compares artistic creation to "a confession [...] an unconscious act that none the less reflects the true meaning of life—love and sacrifice". It is closest to the highest forms of poetry.[17] For Tarkovsky *poetic cinema* is "the observation of the phenomenon passing through time",[18] as cinema has like no other art "force, precision and starkness with which it conveys awareness of facts and aesthetic structures existing and changing within time".[19] Poetic cinema is not how you "shoot something", it is not sacrificing "concrete, living, emotional content"[20] for the sake of convention, for the "purity of cinema" lies precisely in the "capacity of the images to express a specific, unique, actual fact".[21] Infinity cannot be described or captured, but it can be apprehended "in faith and through the creative act".[22] Thus, poetic cinema is important as it creates an authentic cinematic space by means of poetic linkage in which an honest disposition of the heart in moving towards God with all its subtlety is disclosed by film language. Poetic linkages through which "the poetic design of being" can be glimpsed "beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying the deep complexity and truth of impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life".[23] If the language of the soul is the language of love, it can only be expressed through poetry.

The representation of ascesis for what it is through film must involve both faith and the creative approach, where poetry serves in expressing the most inner experience of life in specific time. Depicting ascesis from the outside, that is, projecting the outsider's gaze onto something that is in

16 Tarkovsky 1989, 40.

17 Tarkovsky 1989, 239.

18 Tarkovsky 1989, 66.

19 Tarkovsky criticised "pseudo-poetic cinema" and its "empty symbolism" which involves "breaking off contact with fact and with time realism, and makes for preciousness and affectation", Tarkovsky 1989, 68–69.

20 Tarkovsky 1989, 69.

21 Mise-en-scene, that is, "the disposition and movement of selected objects in relation to the area of the frame", in poetic cinema arises from the "psychological state of the characters", Tarkovsky 1989, 73–74.

22 Tarkovsky 1989, 39.

23 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.

itself intangible, would not merely result in a cliché, but would also degrade both cinematic potential and human creativity. This does not mean that the filmmaker is an ascetic in a literal sense, but rather that the approach to the subject contains ascetic quality so to speak, such as self-sacrifice, sincerity in expression, or going beyond the worship of oneself in order to point to the truth, which art in its highest form can express. Only then, when cinematic space reflects the sincere relation of the auteur to the subject, will this shape the relationships within the filmic frame, which receive a poetic form. In other words, poetic expression is the result of an authentic human act of creation.

Tarkovsky showed how cinema works as a "sculpting in time", and while scholars mistook Tarkovsky's quest in time to be an end in itself,[24] they did not discern the theology which informs the content of Tarkovsky's films and more importantly how the specific theological tradition informs the film language.

In analysing two films which are rooted in the same Orthodox Christian artistic tradition within which Tarkovsky begot his Andrei Rublev, this article aims to show (1) the ways in which asceticism is conceptualised and expressed in Orthodox Christianity, and (2) the ways in which this is conveyed through film and by means of film language. In doing so, its author hopes to offer novel perspectives on ascesis and its transformative dimension, which can perhaps be best expressed through film if we understand film art as the poetic quest for the truth. "The meaning of religious truth is hope"[25] and when "an artist can discern the lines of the poetic design of being […] he is capable of going beyond the limitations of coherent logic, and conveying truth of the impalpable connections and hidden phenomena of life".[26] Poetry[27] is closest to prayer. Thus, building upon Tarkovsky's thought, this article suggests ascesis in film be considered through the lens of *poetic cinema*.

On Ascesis

Before we turn to ascesis in the films, it is useful to clarify what ascesis is within Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Ascesis is the heart of Christian life and the continuation of the liturgical event. *Ascesis* (askesis, ἄσκησις) in

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24 Schrader 2018.
25 Tarkovsky 1989, 43.
26 Tarkovsky 1989, 21.
27 ποίησις – to bring something into being; ποιεῖν – to make, to create.

the literal sense means training (ἀσκέω, I train) and it is a living praxis of Orthodox Christianity. As such ascesis is both an internal and external event, a personal and historical occurrence. Ascetic praxis is a manifestation of continuous repentance – metanoia. Ascesis is praxis of the hesychastic monastic life, but it also extends beyond monasticism.[28] In that sense, ascesis is not a practice reserved for a few, as it is often misconceived, or one of the ways of acting in the world; it is a way of existence that integrates all aspects of human life and as such it spreads to all humanity. It is at the core of the Christian life and the life of the Church. Ascetic life is not a life of self-punishment or despair, as it is often wrongly understood, but the life of sorrowful joy which comes from kenotic humility. It is living to fulfil the commandment of love for the neighbour and love for the enemy, and this can be achieved only through humbleness and humility.[29] Thus, ascesis is not a rejection of humanity and the world, but the renunciation of the ways of this world, which is the beginning of repentance. Ascesis is the theology of experience rooted in hesychastic prayer and continuous metanoia.

Hesychastic prayer is neither an artistic creation nor scientific investigation; it is neither philosophic research and speculation nor abstract intellectual theology.[30] An ascetic strives to live Christ's commandments, centralising Christ in the centre of their heart. Prayer transforms the purpose of life, transferring one's heart and nous from temporal to eternal. The fruit of prayer is knowledge of oneself and through that of the whole of humankind, which produces weeping over the state of humankind, which is lifeless without God, but also gives freedom that is outside human boundaries. It is through metanoia and kenotic prayer that the gift of discernment between good and evil and the gift of contemplation of divine reality as the grace of God descend upon the ascetic. Ascesis is the manifestation of faith through praxis whose fruits are fruits of love, as God is Love. It is through the synergy of God's act of grace and humankind's freedom to respond to God's call that ascesis manifests as transformative power – in love for the enemy and in the love for God, which precedes all forms of love. This love that manifests in ascetic life is not love out of obligation, a moral act, and contains no "ethical must", it is "love because of ontological affinity".[31] The

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28 1 Cor. 9:24–27 points out the importance of training, the roots of ascesis.
29 Sophrony 1991, 138.
30 Sophrony 1991, 156–157.
31 Zizioulas 2004, 8–11.

prayer of the heart, hesychastic prayer, is central to ascetic life, for the ascetic struggle is in the heart. Only once the heart is enlarged is it possible to experience the ontological love for the enemy and ontological freedom. Ascesis aims for the restoration of the human being as a whole, bringing the potentiality of a person, the image of God, into its fullness – the likeness of God. Acquiring a true hypostasis is, however, not possible merely by human effort; it is possible only by the grace of the True Person of Christ. Ascesis is inseparable from liturgical life and is its most profound expression. Liturgy is a unique and authentic event as an act of God in which humankind participates. It is the thanksgiving of people (λᾱός). Although the liturgy may appear to be something that repeats and is based on specific rules, it is not a repetitive performance. Every liturgy is a unique event, a union between God and humankind that permeates the whole human life. Hence, ascesis cannot be reduced to "the activity of thought" or to "intellectual conformity".[32] Ascesis is a continuation of participation in the Divine Liturgy, and the Divine Liturgy surpasses space and time, the spatio-temporal dimension, remaining at the same time a historical occurrence for it takes place in concrete historical time and space.

The transformative dimension of ascetic-liturgical experience and ascetic *podvig* has been expressed through ascetic art, iconography, and poetry. The Orthodox iconographic tradition which adorns the spaces of liturgical worship is both the story of ascesis and the space of ascesis. The icon in Orthodox theology is sacred; it is a window onto eternity, mystically representing Christ – the Person par excellence – the transfigured saints and the world to come. The icon depicts God because God became man; it represents the Person and a personal relationship, and in that sense the icon is meta-historical. It is important to say that the icon refers to another, not to itself, to the relationship between persons (God and humankind), to the Church itself. "The Church becomes a real depiction of the Kingdom of God, leading us to the Divine Eucharist, which St Maximus the Confessor described as the image or Icon of the Kingdom."[33] Furthermore, "when an image becomes an Icon, it no longer refers to itself anymore – to its ephemeral existence; rather, it refers beyond itself: to something beyond this corrupted world".[34]

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32 See Foucault in McWhorter 1992, 243; 252.

33 Bishop Maxim 2010.

34 Bishop Maxim 2010.

Poetry as the highest form of expression gives a foretaste of the eternal, of that which cannot be described, preparing, inspiring, and imparting to the soul the taste of communion in God's love, beginning here and stretching to the age to come. Hence, prayer is often expressed through hymnography and supplication, forming an integral part of liturgical life. Music equally forms a constitutive part of liturgical life: hymns and prayers, like the whole Divine Liturgy, are sung. All these expressions do not aim to satisfy humankind's emotional or psychological needs and desires or to make an impression, but seek rather to inspire and invite humankind onto the narrow path of sorrowful joy, the ascetic liturgical life in Christ. Ascesis reveals that being is being-in-communion and that "the purpose of life is Love".[35] This love is the divine imprint in the being that is the image of God.

Ascesis is thus a means and not the goal. The goal of ascesis is the salvation of humankind, the reconfiguration of the distorted human being unique in its occurrence, the restoration of the human being into person, that is, into the likeness of God. Ascesis is the way of life which harmonises the whole human being. Ascesis in Orthodox Christianity as expressed through art, its iconography, poetry, and music is the fruit of the inner experience of ascetic-liturgical life. In what ways and to what extent this can be transferred into film is the subject of the next part of this article. The films examined here approach ascesis as both an internal and external event. The internalisation and externalisation of liturgical-ascetic life by the means of film language and also depictions of the liturgical life of metanoia and kenotic prayer will be considered further.

Ostrov

The film OSTROV, by Pavel Lungin, which received much international attention, is one of the first films made in post-Soviet Russia that focus explicitly on ascetic life in Orthodox Christianity. Through his film, Lungin explores ascesis as liturgical life, relying upon his own tradition and the experience of Orthodoxy, following a Dostoevskyian quest in discerning good from evil, truth from lie, virtue from crime.

The film concentrates on the life of Father Anatoly, a monk who lives in a small monastery on an island somewhere in the Arctic. Prior to becoming a

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35 Sophrony 1991, 159.

monk, as the film narrates, he was a sailor who murdered his officer-in-command, Tikhon, forced to do so by German soldiers in 1942. After ship and harbour were destroyed by the Germans, the future monk, who had been blown out to sea by the explosion, was saved by monks. The film continues with the life of Father Anatoly, thirty-four years later, in the monastery on an island. Father Anatoly lives in constant repentance because of his sin, praying for the soul of Tikhon. His way of being, which is embedded in the monastic life of *opštežiće*,[36] is somewhat distinct from the rest of the brotherhood: the sick, the abandoned, the suffering all come by boat to Father Anatoly for help, advice, or healing. For this reason, Father Anatoly is challenged by Father Jov, who questions his lifestyle, his eccentric behaviour, and his relationship with the people, but nevertheless at the end is conquered by love for Father Anatoly. Father Anatoly heals the sick and prophesises – even his own death. Father Anatoly finally discovers that captain Tikhon, for whose soul he prayed for more than three decades, is alive. Father Anatoly heals Tikhon's possessed daughter, after which he dies peacefully.

The film focuses on the personality of Father Anatoly and is divided according to the major events on the island. His character, portrayed at times as eccentric and at other times as simple-minded, is perhaps the reason why he has been understood as the classic cinematic figure of a "holy fool", "a fool for Christ" or *jurodivi*.[37] Exploring the concept of the holy fool in Orthodoxy and particularly in Russian tradition,[38] Alina Birzache builds upon G. P. Fedotov in considering *jurodstvo* as "the most radical form of Christian kenoticism".[39] Birzache's research is important for understanding specific manifestations of asceticism in Russian Orthodoxy and their relational aspects both for society and for Christianity in the East.[40]

While in his film Lungin may draw upon the praxis of *jurodstvo*, he does so only to the extent required by the story. *Jurodstvo* is not employed merely for

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36 Coenobitic life – κοινωνία (κοινός): joint participation, a life in the monastic community.

37 "The film depicts a traditional conduct of a fool in Christ [...] He provokes sinners to repent. He provokes the other monks, claiming that they ought to fully give themselves to Christ and have no other aspirations", Bodin 2011, 3.

38 The first Russian holy fool – *iurodstvo* – is considered to be Saint Isaak Zatvornik in the 11th century, a hermit of the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev, but the phenomenon reached a climax in the sixteenth century. Birzache 2012, 61.

39 Birzache 2012, 21.

40 *Jurodstvo* has kenotic character but also a social role, reminding both monastics and laity that God cannot be constrained by human factors, by a set of rules. See Birzache 2012.

Fig. 1: Realisation after the murder: future monk, Father Anatoly, stares at the Nazi flag. Film still, Ostrov (The Island, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:08:58.

Fig. 2: The Island of repentance: the darkness is replaced by light. The whiteness of the Monastery on the deserted island where Father Anatoly starts his monastic life. Film still, Ostrov (The Island, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:11:17.

the sake of representation of Russian Orthodoxy or for a catechetical lesson for people returning to their roots via film in a religiously awakened Russia. On the contrary, it is a means of expressing deep repentance, or metanoia, through kenotic prayer. Just as *jurodstvo* in Russia was only a means, not an end, and directed to something bigger, Lungin points to what is beyond the form of the holy fool: he investigates the possibility of a constant state of repentance through kenotic prayer. In that sense he uses a well-known praxis of Russian Orthodoxy not as illustration but for contemplation.

Lungin opens his film with darkness and a sense of oppression, which the blinding interrogation-like lights behind the German soldiers suggest (fig. 1). In these several minutes of darkness the whole drama of human existence takes place. A sailor, an ordinary man who is loading coal onto a ship, will murder his captain in order to save his own life. The sailor will become Father Anatoly, metaphorically losing his own life through repentance. The site of the murder, close to the monastery, is a reminder of his sin. However, the dark mood does not prevail in the rest of the film, indicating that repentance has begun (fig. 2). The monastery and landscape are surrounded by water and covered in ice and snow, giving brightness to the film. Lungin creates a space that seems both isolated and approachable, cold and warm – an ascetic space similar to that of the deserts where ascetics of the past lived, a space where the inner battle between good and evil is unceasing. This space is not a space of austerity but rather a space of sincerity and freedom, as the open

Fig. 3: Father Anatoly lies on the ground praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner". Film still, OSTROV (THE ISLAND, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006), 00:02:12.

space and landscape visually communicate. The coldness of snow is soothed with constant prayer, while the camera on Father Anatoly's moving feet or on him lying on the ground personalises the space, bringing in warmth to a space which otherwise could be perceived as cold (fig. 3). He is entrenched in the natural world; his proximity to the earth shows both the mindfulness of death and the beauty of life in prayer. The shots of Father Anatoly in his cell are never completely dark; light always penetrates the space.

Father Anatoly's *podvig* is deeply personal for his relationship with God is personal. This personal relationship with God is central to the character and the film. The film unfolds the life of Father Anatoly through dynamic shifts between a steady slow pace and abrupt intrusions that show us the different ways in which visits touch his life. Through continuous shifts between still and abrupt, his personality and his life of repentance are revealed gradually, almost at the intimate level. He is portrayed as a hidden ascetic who continues to dig and load coal (this time for the monastery) and hides even from his superior (the abbot) that he sleeps on the coal. The burning coal, intertwined with the hesychastic prayer, symbolises the burning of his sin. The camera-eye is both an observer and a participant and is the only witness of what cannot be seen by others.

Further, Father Anatoly's relationship with the lay people, as well as with the monks, is both gentle and violent, indicating eccentricity or *jurodstvo*: for instance, he pretends that he is not the clairvoyant Father Anatoly of whom the people have heard; he shouts at a woman who asks him for his blessing for an abortion; he reproaches a widow and a mother for their hesitation to perform God's will to the end; and he has an outburst at the abbot for his attachment to earthly things, burning his boots and blanket.

While the actions of the main character may appear externally difficult, his humour, spontaneity, and constant prayer reveal that what appears difficult is light. Lungin's framing of Father Anatoly, the main character, is often decentralised from both specific frames and whole sequences; sometimes

he is with the people, sometimes with the monks, and sometimes alone doing work or praying on his island far off from the monastery. In this way Lungin avoids creating a spectacle of the character of Father Anatoly and enables us to see how the life of prayer flows in the small monastic community of which he is a part.

In between the major events, the film shows Father Anatoly's life of prayer, and it is prayer which links the events. In taking this approach Lungin shows that it is not a mere sense of guilt that drives his character into the monastic life, but that it is through his crime that the terrible knowledge of his own fall emerges, and through this knowledge he can see the fallen state of the whole world. Coming to see himself as nobody – a person capable of committing a murder – enables him to put God and the "deceased" Tikhon in the centre of his heart. This is achieved through his life of kenotic prayer and humbleness, despite his seemingly foolish outbursts. Lungin's perceptions and cinematic expressions of ascesis make the film an organic event of metanoia and kenotic prayer. The liturgy is depicted throughout the film, with the short sequences of services or the sound of monastic chanting in the background intertwined with continuous prayer, natural sounds, and action – such as Father Anatoly's jumping into the cold water to bring back a sick child – indicating the permeation of liturgical life and continuous metanoia. Prayer is a thread woven through the fabric of the whole film.

The camera work is dynamic and constantly changes. The space is not symmetrical; but asymmetry, as in the scene with the liturgy, conveys not a lack of order but rather the organic way in which order arises, without the need for formalist, that is, surface expressions of piety. External and internal are contrasted: what externally seems difficult, such as the life of Father Anatoly, the film shows as internally light, and what internally is difficult, such as the burden of sin, is externally expressed and transformed through prayer, such as in the scene in which a possessed woman is cured. The film questions and transforms our own view: the camera-eye communicates that what is seen by the eye is not always accurate and that which is not seen, what remains hidden, is the truth. Lungin thus thematises asceticism not solely through the story of the main character but also through film language: his framing, camera, and sound work in composition bring forward the inner perspective on metanoia and kenosis, the *podvig* of liturgical life. The island is both a symbolic and a real space, with the whiteness of the snow indicating both coldness and warmth, and the surrounding sea giving the sense of the Church as an island of salvation.

Fig. 4: Close-up of Saint Nektarios saying the ascetic prayer of the heart. MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

MAN OF GOD

The film MAN OF GOD, directed by Yelena Popovic, focuses on the life of ascetic and bishop Saint Nektarios of Aegina (1846–1920). It is – in terms of production and targeted audience – one of the major contemporary films to centralise asceticism and show its significance for human life. Popovic decided to make this film after reading a life of Saint Nektarios; seized by the life of the saint and able to relate to the problems he experienced, she started the journey of constructing the story, which would receive a whole new form on the reel. Popovic understood that "the truth cannot be dramatised".[41] She describes her approach as follows: "I made this film from the inside out. That was the main focus."[42] With an intimate relation to the theme and an intuitive approach in creating the film, Popovic did not merely reconstruct the life of an exceptional person[43] but instead created an experience of his life, enabling the audience to find and follow the poetic thread in discovering "the way of the ascetic".[44]

Popovic opens her film with a prayer, peacefully, from within, introducing us to the inner state of its main character (fig. 4). The film follows the life of Saint Nektarios, but Popovic, although faithful to biographical facts, does not take a descriptive or catechistic approach. Instead, she unfolds the life

41 Popovic 2021.
42 Popovic 2021.
43 See, for example, the biographical drama GANDHI (Richard Attenborough, GB/IN/USA/ZA 1982).
44 For further reading, see Colliander 1985.

of Saint Nektarios intimately, as something that is happening here and now, starting with the major disruptive event that will have greatest impact on the saint's life. The film starts in 1890 in Egypt, where Saint Nektarios was consecrated the metropolitan bishop of Pentapolis by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, later the Greek Patriarch of Alexandria, Sophronius IV. The beginning of the film relates the beginning of the trials of Saint Nektarios, as he is about to be expelled from his position as the result of false accusations, which were never presented to him openly. In his words, he is "sentenced without a crime". Even the Patriarch, his spiritual father, does not want to see him. Although popular among the people, he leaves Egypt for Greece, only to find that the jealousy and accusations in Egypt follow him. In Greece his persecution continues: unable to continue his episcopal office, he struggles to find any job or service. As the Archbishop of Athens refuses to see him, he seeks a placement from the Ministry of Religion, where he is not rejected outright but receives a bureaucratic response – is not a Greek citizen. He therefore becomes the man who will be known as the travelling hierarch. The ministry appoints him as an ordinary preacher in the diocese of Vitineia and Euboea, but met by hostility from locals inspired by the gossip from Alexandria, he resigns and returns to Athens. People who know him find no justification for the slandering of this humble man and draw closer to him. The reputation he earns on his own merits is confronted by the animosity of others, which follows him to the end. He is appointed dean at the Rizarios Seminary in Athens, where rumours and jealousy continue, but he also gains the love and respect of many. During this whole time, he lives a life of asceticism and ceaseless prayer, ministering to the poor and sick. Because of his spiritual daughters and his age, he seeks to establish a female monastery in Aegina, to which he retires from the seminary in 1908. However, the monastery, in spite the promises of some bishops, is not recognised by the Synod, and his trials continue – his monastery is maliciously accused and the nuns interrogated. Despite all these trials, Saint Nektarios continues to live the ascetic life of *podvig*, enduring all the slander that befalls him. The monastery's spiritual life blossoms, as does the love of people for him. In his final years, he is hospitalised by illness, tended by nuns and medical staff who witness his compassion and miracles for the poor and suffering in the hospital. Saint Nektarios died on 8 November 1920. At the time of his death, a man paralysed for many years was healed. At this point, the hand we have seen throughout the film finishes writing and the camera moves out to reveal the bigger picture, the apology of the Patriarchate to the saint.

Fig. 5: The 'unjust council' plotting against Saint Nektarios, the high camera angle indicating that God is watching Man of God (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The image of the writing hand is woven into the visual fabric of the film and anticipates what we already understand at the end: "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matt. 5:10, NIV).

Yelena Popovic decided to focus on the crucial events in the life of Saint Nektarios, breathing into the film his life of prayer. Popovic achieves a contrast between the way of the world and the way of the ascetic. She offers the authentic experience of the ascetic life of a man in impossible circumstances. The way in which the film is shot and its imagery serve the purpose of the story and are never exaggerated. The opening sequence shows a line of icons before which the saint bows, doing metanoia, moves to the handwriting, and then to an Arab man who addresses Saint Nektarios saying that he was healed because of the saint's prayers. We see the saint's face for the first time in the daylight as he humbly replies, "He heard your prayers." The film almost abruptly moves on to the gathering of the hierarchs who discuss Saint Nektarios. They sit in the dark, shot from a high angle, and we hear the plotting of his opponents, who find him "a fanatic" and "a man close to streets and harlots" (fig. 5).

The scene with the Patriarch Sophronios, before whom the accusations against Saint Nekatrios are brought, is also shot from a high angle in the

dark. The chanting *Kirie Elesion* is heard in the scene where Saint Nekatrios is serving in the church, with people approaching him, offering their support in disbelief. The scene signals his peacefulness and the storm that is about to start. The film takes us then on the journey to Greece, where Saint Nekatrios, denied access to church officials, sits in the street with a beggar. We see him and the beggar exchanging warm words. When the hierarchs pass by, their coats cover the sight of the two men sitting on the ground. Before he leaves, Saint Nektarios gives his shoes to the beggar. The scene establishes a quiet understanding between the saint and the poor man, while the framing of the mantels reinforces the beggar's words that the hierarchs do not seem to care about him (just as they do not seem to care about the saint). The character of Saint Nektarios is expressed through his acts, paying for the poor boy's treatment in the hospital (for which he pays), secretly taking the place of the seminary's janitor when he falls ill, planting and working with his hands, putting his hands gently on people to console them, and giving his small salary for the sick and the poor, for the renewal of the seminary's church and finally for the monastery in Aegina.

While the actor Aris Servetalis as Saint Nektarios has a major role in transmitting and transcending the prayerful disposition and peace of the character, it is the filmmaker who reveals the significance of the ascetic prayer of Saint Nekatrios, weaving it in between the crucial events that will determine his whole life. "Have mercy O Lord on the sick, and poor, have mercy on those who hate me and let them not perish because of me the sinner." In response to new persecutions, Saint Nekatrios replies, "God bless them." His every prayer in the film is different and each time is shot in a different way, revealing ascetic prayer as dynamic, as an always new, authentic conversation with God. The prayer "Please give me the strength to do what is right, what is your will" followed by metanoias is contrasted with the shouts of men in his small parish on Euboea. The men surround him, their hands and bodies jeering at him with anger, and as they shout their voices are muffled and appear like a collective howling. The camera entrenched among the men circles around them, distorting the focus and the geometrical sense of space. By contrast Saint Nektarios stands calmly and speaks to them with an imploring voice in which we can clearly make out his preaching. The short scene ends with a shot from inside the altar in which the top of the wall makes up the upper half of the frame while in the lower half we see Saint Nektarios in the centre, with the men surrounding him (fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Saint Nektarios preaching while the villagers protest, as the slander continues in Greece. MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The scene conveys the bitter experience of slander. Through the camerawork and the sound Popovic confronts different realities: the reality of this world as temporary and passing, just like the generic noise worldliness produces, and the reality which has eternal meaning, eternal value, the reality of God, in which the main character remains unshaken. The scene is framed as a response to his inner prayer, his desire to do what is right. The ascetic is portrayed with his inner tribulations, well summarised in one sentence of prayer: "What have I done? What did they tell him [the Patriarch of Alexandria]? Please Lord give me a chance to speak to him." In the seminary, in between the events that take place there, Saint Nektarios is shown pronouncing the major ascetic prayer "Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me the sinner."

The film conveys asceticism aesthetically through poetic expression: the scenes flow, connecting time and space, the shots are non-symmetrical, and rather iconic; the camera focalises through and often intimately follows the main character; the camera changes as the prayer changes and is often positioned in unusual high angles, giving the impression that God is observing all the events and people. The eyes of the camera thus frequently resemble the eyes of Christ as represented iconographically in the cupola of Orthodox churches.

Fig. 7: The Athonites pray for the world: Saint Nektarios in one of the ascetic caves in Athos. MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

The scene of the saint traveling, first from the city through the forests and then to the cave of Mount Athos, where with a fellow monk he prostates himself in noetic prayer, connects spaces in a poetic way, indicating that the saint enters from the wider world (the landscape) into what is essential (the cave), from the mind to the heart (fig. 7). The physical flow and continuity of the composition and camera movement reflect the spiritual flow and continuity which characterise the inner life of prayer – the depth of the cave that frames the monks shows the depth of the inner heart of Saint Nektarios. The scene of prayer for a sick student, underlined by the Byzantine chanting of *Kirie Eleison*, shows Saint Nektarios with his students on their knees in prayer, shot from above within the doors of the altar, with Saint Nektarios's hands raised and eyes looking up, then it moves to a close-up of his face and the flower he is cultivating when news is received that the boy has been cured. The scene reveals the connection between ascetic prayer and human life, the prayer of supplication and the fruit brought forth by love well captured in the image of the flower. The film also shows people of different age, sex, and background reading his writing on the Mother of God, thus revealing the impact of prayer and truth on the lives of many, regardless of their social background.

The director uses mirroring shots to connect spaces, but she also contrasts this with more abrupt montage, giving a sense of both the continuity of ascetic life and the tension that surrounds the ascetic. The light in the dark spaces, which often comes from behind and shines onto Saint Nektarios, is the same light that one of the protagonists, the blind girl Xenia, who will become a nun, spiritually anticipates. The camera conveys this light, which is measured, non-intrusive, inducing beauty into the characters' simplicity. Shots depicting Saint Nektarios carrying stones on his back past the native villagers on the island of Aegina and a wide shot of him walking across an open field, where the sky reflects the earth in composition with the sun shining through the dark clouds, give a sense of moving forward, in a small reflection of the inner rays which shine upon the person who although surrounded by darkness perseveres in living in God.

Scenes of poetic beauty and prayer are followed by scenes of interrogation: his persecution culminates in a scene of open violence, as the police prosecutor enters with a soldier, first verbally and then physically attacking the now elderly Bishop Nektarios, hitting him in the face, which throws him off his chair onto the ground. They then ransack the monastery, breaking furniture, stripping rooms clean, and even mercilessly throwing an elderly debilitated nun off her bed onto the floor. The camera primarily tracks characters but to different effects: first the policemen, with whom instability and asymmetry are associated, and then the saint, who stoically follows the violence around him. The tracking shot visualises his painful gaze and thus affects us. The director creates a circular motion in space, moving among and around the nuns and Saint Nektarios during the police invasion of the monastery. The movement of the camera and the stability of the standing nuns and their bishop in the yard indicate an inner peace that contrasts with the violence.

The drunkard cries out that he knows his sin "represents the tragic and fallen state of the humanity who our Lord loves and calls to repentance".[45] The drunkard is aware of his sin, unlike the "pharisees, those who believe they are righteous".[46] "The main ingredient for repentance is honesty", and Saint Nektarios "has the sensitivity and humility not to judge this person but to take in what he is saying".[47] The sound, the movement of the camera, and the low angle with the close-up of Saint Nektarios, through whom we gaze

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45 Popovic 2021.
46 Popovic 2021.
47 Popovic 2021.

Fig. 8: The paralysed man in the hospital lying in the room with Saint Nektarios. MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021). Photograph courtesy of Yelena Popovic and Simeon Entertainment.

at the drunkard, visually communicate the fall and the stillness, the humble state of an ascetic struggle between two worlds, two states of being.

Saint Nektarios's final prayer is taken in one continuous hand-held shot, following him as he goes to the Mother of God and leans onto her icon, confessing to her his pain and praying to her to keep his children and all those on the island safe. The light penetrates through the windows and covers a part of the frame and Saint Nektarios like a cloud. The scene is a culmination of the saint's life of prayer and veneration of the Mother of God. Different icons of the Mother of God often appear subtly in shots behind the saint and at times he is shown lighting the oil lamp before her. Before his death, he entrusts himself and his flock to her. Moreover, this is the last time we see the saint pray. While the previous scenes always showed dynamic movement and changes in representation, both in his words and in the ways the scenes were shot, here the camera is still and a continuous over-the-shoulder shot captures the spiritual sincerity of his prayer. The scene gives a sense of deep intimacy, brought out authentically by Aris Servetalis, and for this reason the director decided to keep this shot.

Finally, it is in the closing scene that we hear the eponymous words "man of God". Saint Nekatrios and the paralysed man are shot from above as they talk; they are both seen intimately from God's perspective, under God's eye (fig. 8). Lens flare seeps in as Saint Nektarios raises himself up, saying, "Are you speaking to me, my Lord?" and then lies back down to die in peace. This is followed by the healing of the paralysed man, shot in slow motion as he stands up and weeps profoundly, and accompanied by the soul-piercing opera of Zbigniew Preisner we are led to the shot of the completed writing.

The music of Preisner expresses and enhances the spiritual content implied by the visual composition, as in this last scene. Music does not deter-

mine the rhythm of the film but instead encompasses the image. Preisner, the editor Lambis Haralambis, and the director of photography participated fully in the process of creation (on set), in order to feel more tangibly what was to be achieved. Popovic notes that the film was "shot in an aspect ratio of 1.66 so that we can focus on the character instead of the surroundings, to make the audience identify with the character as much as possible and feel what the character feels".[48] In the auteur's words, "This aspect-ratio leaves more space above the head of a character which also aids in another thing: the main character is constantly searching for God and this gives the viewer a subconscious feeling of it."[49] A desaturated look characterises the film, which does not have overly bright colours, because, in the director's words, "Saint Nektarios's life was very difficult and it also gave a timeless and at the same time modern feeling to the picture."[50] The auteur chose this approach as "this made it feel like the story is happening right now"; it was "another way of bringing the viewer *inside* the story".[51]

Popovic's construction of cinematic space conveys the inner life of ascesis – for instance as Patriarch Sophronios tells the priests to leave, we see him in asymmetrical frontal wide-shot as he sits in the background of the much larger patriarchate room. As they leave, the film cuts to Saint Nektarios walking towards the altar in the foreground, and the altar and the larger church can be seen in the background. The layout of both rooms and the movement convey a sense of connected space, with the church appearing as a mirror reflection and continuation of the room in which the Patriarch sits. Connecting the space in this way gives the impression that they are together in the church, and although they are divided, the Patriarch and his disciple are connected in Christ. By connecting the spaces, the film auteur conveys the love they had for one another but which they have no opportunity to express again face to face. This is the experience and expression of ascetic and self-emptying love, where even if the one rejects the other, the rejected keeps the one who abandoned him as a part of his being and through love restores the space which would otherwise remain irrevocably divided. This space in asceticism is the liturgical space, the timeless mystery that unifies all humankind.

48   Popovic 2021.
49   Popovic 2021.
50   Popovic 2021.
51   Popovic 2021.

Conclusion

> Cinema is capable of operating with any fact diffused in time; it can take absolutely anything from life.
>
> — *Andrei Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*

This article has examined the ways in which ascesis of Eastern Orthodox tradition has been depicted and expressed through two films, Ostrov and Man of God. The films actualise ascesis as inseparable from human existence and they show its relevance for the life of every human being today. Ascesis is a matter not of lifestyle but of ontology, of life itself. The ascetics are not superficial figures; their greatness arises from their lowliness, for persevering in the struggle which happens in the heart of every man. The only, although major, difference is that they choose the narrow path and stay on it, depicted through the hesychastic self-emptying prayer which permeates the films. Ascesis is not limited to a description of a potentially higher state of being, of someone who stands above other people, but is expressed as a struggle and related to the human condition. The films engage with the problems of suffering, persecution, crime, punishment, envy, power, and citizenship, that is, the question of belonging. Ascetic praxis is explored explicitly and is the subject of the debate in the films (as ascetic art, iconography, is the matter of debate in Andrei Rublev). In Ostrov asceticism is a stumbling point even for the monks living with the main character. In Man of God similarly, ascetic life is not only the theme but also the decisive element, the breaking point for the people involved. This tension between two paths is revealed in the films as the tension with which every person is confronted in this life, showing the relevance of ascesis in all periods of human history. This is revealed in the debate on ascetic life: the president of the seminary, induced by envy, accuses Saint Nektarios of cultivating asceticism in students, calling it "a radical approach to religion". The saint replies, "A true ascetic does not worry about their out worldly appearance at all. His main focus is to correct himself inwardly so he can get closer to God. He is in fact a true Christian."

Ascetic life appears as an obstacle, a matter of envy, a "rupture in this world",[52] and at the same time as the only way to true life, as healing through Christ. The issue of statelessness, so to speak, that is, of not be-

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52   See Engin F. Isin in Radovic 2017, 9–12; 24–27.

longing, is revealed in two ways. The bureaucratic obstacle based on Saint Nektarios's place of birth (today modern-day Turkey) is used against him (he is not technically a Greek citizen). However, this points to a whole new dimension of ascetic life – that of not belonging to the ways of this world[53] – which is developed throughout the film. This dimension is also present in Lungin's OSTROV. Father Anatoly's not belonging to this world is established from the opening of the film. In shooting Tikhon, he dies with him; physically lost to this world by falling into the ocean, he is found by God through the monks from the island. By experiencing the bitterness of sin, he turns to repentance, just as through the transition from ship to monastery, from the Second World War to the 1970s, layman is transformed into monk, man of the world into man of prayer, murderer into healer of human souls. Father Anatoly's not belonging to this world also permeates the whole film as he surpasses even the experience of the brothers of the monastery, only seemingly because of his *jurodstvo*.

Behind their lack of understanding (as evinced by Father Jov) is vainglory and envy, that of Cain and Abel, and the will for power. In MAN OF GOD, the issue of power is central to all the trials. In the words of the main character: "Power is like a cancer, it eats you, slowly, and you don't even know it. Before you realise, you can turn into something you once despised. Many great men have fallen because of the power they were given." Popovic exposes the issue of power that permeates all human existence, including the Church. The way of the ascetic (in both OSTROV and MAN OF GOD) shows that the only antidote to power, that is, to pride, is humility. Humility as the fruit of prayer is what gives the characters the strength and peace that is not of this world. In MAN OF GOD, the peace of Saint Nektarios in face of such trials springs from his unceasing prayer. The unceasing prayer is linked with inner peace. As Saint Nektarios says to the president of the seminary, "Without having the peace you will never know the truth", elucidating the overwhelming truth that peace cannot be obtained by humankind on their alone, nor can it be achieved in an intellectual way.

MAN OF GOD further tackles bigotry towards the Church and a number of clichés related to monasticism, such as the one that only broken people end up in monasteries. The scene of the ravaging of the monastery makes evident the truth of ascetic life as a spiritual phenomenon in the midst of

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53   "But our citizenship is in heaven", Phil. 3:20–21, NIV.

material life,[54] which in Ostrov is shown through the portrayal of the rebirth of Father Anatoly.

Persecution, false accusations, modernity versus dark ages, intellectual enlightenment and asceticism, power and glory – all are intertwined within Man of God. Popovic actualises all these problems without losing sight of the whole picture, inviting the audience into the "truth of direct observation".[55] The film reveals the auteur's perceptiveness about the praxis of ascesis both for the characters represented and for the whole of society. It focuses upon the life of a real person, now venerated as a saint throughout the Orthodox world, through whose character the film auteur brings forward the life of ascesis, its meaning and application in contemporary life. Saint Nektarios and the fictional Father Anatoly are ascetics who experience brutality, which leads them to the rediscovery of the truth "of open hearted love".[56]

Popovic internalises the subject, providing the inner perspective of a person of prayer on the human condition and suffering. In Ostrov Lungin similarly internalises the ascetic experience. The themes of crime and punishment, exclusion, and judgment permeate the film, placing the ascetic in the environment of this world, with which his inner dynamics often collide. It is through the examples of ascetic life that we see how perplexing situations can be overcome. In their exposure of asceticism, both Popovic and Lungin achieve the goal of "relating a person to the whole world", which, as Tarkovsky reminds, is "the meaning of cinema."[57]

Poetic Cinema

> When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality.
> — *P. Adams Sitney, Andrey Tarkovsky,*
> *Russian Experience, and the Poetry of Cinema*

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54 While the police ransack the monastery and the distraught nun pleads, Saint Nektarios only points his finger upwards, towards heaven, indicating that God is in charge.

55 As the Holy Trinity in Andrei Rublev is the living link between the people of the 15th and 20th centuries, so Saint Nektarios is the living link between the people of the 19th and 21st centuries, and is the person who shows the way of life which represents an answer to all the problems we mentioned. Tarkovsky 1989, 78.

56 Tarkovsky 1989, 207.

57 Tarkovsky 1989, 66.

Lungin and Popovic move beyond descriptive narrativisation and into an aesthetic logic of poetry, which emanates from the artistic image that can be created in the spirit of complete self-surrender.[58] Once stripped of self-love, the artist rises above themselves,[59] in order to show life itself, its struggle and its beauty. Film has ability to impart to the viewer a taste of the grace in which the ascetics of the Church lived: the inward approach to the subject enables us to see through the eyes of the ascetic and the experience of the ascetic is contrasted with the ways of this world. The films discussed in this article attempt to transfer this experience through their personal relationship to the subject, approaching ascesis on an intimate rather than descriptive level. In investigating asceticism in film, this article has argued that it is an authentic and creative act[60] of the film-artists that transforms the cinematic space into a form of liturgical space. In building artistically the cinematic space, the film becomes a symbol where "the spiritual truth"[61] is revealed and within which ascesis is experienced. Characters, historical time and events, and ascetic praxis are not a matter of the past nor are they "a museum object".[62] The auteurs allow the characters' lives to unfold in front of the camera-eye. The characters of the two ascetics (one fictional but based on a number of *jurodivi* ascetics well known to Russian tradition, and the other a historical figure), enacted by two brilliant artists, Aris Servetalis and Peter Mamonov,[63] become relatable and relevant: their search for the truth, their inner wrestling with the world and themselves (similarly to ANDREI RUBLEV), determines the pace of the films, taking a viewer on the journey of confrontation, of passing down the narrow path which leads to the source of the meaning of life itself. Through the depiction of their lives as the life of metanoia, a life-long process, the auteurs reveal the goal of ascesis, which is the salvation of humankind.

In representing asceticism both Yelena Popovic and Pavel Lungin build cinematic spaces in which the objective is shown through the subjective inner experience, where artistic expression overcomes the outsider's gaze – ascesis is an inner event and at the same time a historical event. It is

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58 This is the sacrifice of which Tarkovsky spoke. See Tarkovsky, 1989, 241–242.

59 Radovic 2017, 43.

60 Radovic 2017.

61 Tarkovsky 1989, 37.

62 Tarkovsky 1989, 79.

63 They do not play personae but live their own inner lives in front of our eyes. Tarkovsky 1989, 151.

impossible to arrive at an authentic representation of ascesis without the authentic personal relationship of the auteur with the subject. Without this relationship the film would be a mere shadow – a shallow look at praxis without deeper meaning or relevance. This inwardly approach is precisely what Popovic chose: in her artistic approach the "worldly approach" perception of asceticism is of less importance. The inwardly approach in creating the cinematic space in Popovic's case is a result of her personal relationship to the theme and her dynamic and frequently spontaneous negotiation of cinematic space on the set: with the intuition of an artist, Popovic frequently decided on the spot how to narrate the story, which elements to focus upon, and how to approach specific scenes.

Lungin's cinema reminds us yet again that art is the quest for truth, for the eternal. In painting the eternal through film language, Lungin is informed by Orthodox tradition, composing a film that draws the viewer in; Popovic by contrast invites the viewer to take in what is created within the cinematic space. Popovic's personal relation to the subject shows that poetic style is not premeditated but springs from the personal: the sense for sacrifice, the quest for truth and real life, "not ideas or arguments about life".[64] Being concerned with the reality of spiritual truth, both film auteurs approach film as a window upon life itself, pointing beyond themselves towards the source of meaning. In that sense their films resemble *Aesthetica Patrum*, where "aesthetics sees human being as the work of art, and this view connects aesthetics with the spiritual enhancement of man".[65] Their cinematic-liturgical space is closest to *poetic cinema*, as only through a poetic approach is it possible to transfer liturgical experience into cinematic space. The film becomes a symbol in which "the absolute spiritual truth"[66] is revealed. If directing in the cinema is being able to "separate light from darkness and dry land from waters",[67] then poetic creation in film is an act of sacrifice and service: like childbirth it gives humankind a chance to experience the truth that the artist begets in themself. Poetic cinema need not describe the world because the world "manifests itself" to the camera[68] as the most real space of human experience. Both Lungin and Popovic allow

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64 Tarkovsky draws upon Gogol in that the function of the image is to express life itself. Tarkovsky 1989, 111.

65 Radovic 2017, 43.

66 Tarkovsky 1989, 37.

67 Tarkovsky 1989, 177.

68 Tarkovsky 1989, 60.

the reality of ascetic life to unfold before the camera eye. The liturgical event of ascetic life surpasses space and time, which is precisely what Popovic and Lungin attempt to achieve with their films.

Additionally, the films point beyond the frame, imparting to the viewer a taste of the spiritual reality that needs to be discovered beyond the screen. This is perhaps the most iconographic element of OSTROV and MAN OF GOD. In their expression they represent poetic cinema rather than "religious film", for they attempt to engage with the reality of the spiritual life through film language, that is, they create an innovative space, stripped of illusion, that invites and communicates the off-screen reality.

This article has argued that the films OSTROV and MAN OF GOD follow the aesthetic logic of poetry, thus bringing asceticism in a novel and original way to the big screen. Inspired strongly by Orthodox praxis and aesthetics, together with a personal and intimate approach to their subject, they represent a certain phenomenon in itself, as they surpass the category of "religious film". Their engagement with the transcendent is not abstract, nor is it an attempt to intellectually understand it; rather it is in service of the reality of life itself. The films manifest the reality of the lives of ascetics, avoiding artificial means of identification, while their aesthetics and mise-en-scène are neither austere nor abundant but emerge "from the personality of the characters and their state".[69] The films attempt to avoid the illusion of the transcendental experience, seeking rather to invite the viewers to lift their hearts and minds to the level of Christ. The lifting of the heart is a liturgical call which cannot be described other than by means of poetic expression. In attempting to do so in novel and authentic ways, the films move the boundaries of our understanding of film's capacity to communicate the experience of ascesis in the ways it has been depicted in iconography and, more importantly, in the ways in which it has been lived in the lives of the saints. As such they serve as a good platform for further investigation of the capacity of film to express the truth of faith and the human condition and to reframe research in religion and film through the lens of poetic cinema. If the aim of cinema is to break the illusion of "vulgar realism" or ideological abundance and to reach the point of "silence" where art conveys the timeless time and the liturgical, the ascetic experience of the joy of being

69 Tarkovsky 1989, 25.

alive, then only poetic cinema can do so, by capturing "man's potential […] his spiritual striving to go beyond the ordinary bounds of his life on earth".[70]

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Filmography

ANDREI RUBLEV (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR 1966).
GANDHI (Richard Attenborough, GB/IN/USA/ZA 1982).
MAN OF GOD (Yelena Popovic, GR 2021).
OSTROV (THE ISLAND, Pavel Lungin, RU 2006).

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70   Turovskaya 1989, 78.

Media Reviews

Jacob Given

Book Review
Sarah K. Balstrup, Spiritual Sensations
Cinematic Religious Experience and
Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 333 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-3501-3019-7 (ebook)

In *Spiritual Sensations: Cinematic Religious Experience and Evolving Conceptions of the Sacred*, Sarah K. Balstrup explores the religious qualities of cinematic experience, particularly in 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1968), Enter the Void (Gaspar Noé, FR/DE/IT/CA/JP 2009), and Melancholia (Lars von Trier, DK/SE/FR/DE 2011). Balstrup demonstrates the coherence of these three films as objects of her study, with 2001, Stanley Kubrick's psychedelic masterpiece, as a point of departure. She then treats Enter the Void and Melancholia, whose directors both cite 2001 as an influence and seek to craft films that elicit a similar spiritual response in the viewer.

Following theorist Paul Schrader, Balstrup focuses on the "transcendental style" of film (p. 23). For Schrader, film can be a "means of accessing the Holy" in a moment of transcendent "stasis" (p. 27). Not all films exhibit this style. Rather, Balstrup (like Schrader) analyzes films that specifically aim to bring the viewer into a transcendent experience or "a 'meditative' state" (p. 37), such as in the cases of 2001, Enter the Void, and Melancholia. For Balstrup, the cinematic approach to transcendence in these films takes its cues more from "alternative spirituality" than from Christianity (p. 77). After introducing the "transcendental style" and alternative spirituality, Balstrup spends the remainder of the book closely examining 2001, Enter the Void, and Melancholia, paying special attention to how the films affect viewers viscerally, and how each film exemplifies the transcendental style and an alternative spiritual ethos.

The biggest strength of *Spiritual Sensations* is its contribution to both film studies in general and religion and film in particular. Balstrup intentionally moves away from a focus on narrative and symbolism (p. 16) and toward a focus on "the state of mind and affective qualities" of experience (p. 33). Directors, in this approach, are more than storytellers. They are also creators of sensory experiences that may or may not be tied to a narrative plot. The sensory experience of cinema, then, is capable of affecting viewers in ways that are not strictly dependent on empathizing with characters (p. 33). For Balstrup, Stanley Kubrick represents an important turn toward sensory-centric directing, "away from plot-driven narrative and characterization" and toward "visual and aural excess" designed to "evoke visceral or sensory response" (p. 72).

In the area of religion and film, *Spiritual Sensations* opens promising new directions. By focusing on the experiential qualities of film, Balstrup draws on the importance of "alternative spirituality" (p. 46), a new religious paradigm that prizes personal experience and religious autonomy. It is also a broad religious sensibility that inspired Kubrick's 2001. Commenting on Kubrick's declaration that 2001 is a religious film, Balstrup writes, "This overt declaration of religious meaning is not, however, drawn from Christianity but from a type of alternative spirituality that embraces the potentialities of science" (p. 77). Balstrup also explains the often ambiguous style of arthouse cinema in terms of alternative spirituality: "As the value of self-determinism is so strong in alternative spirituality, it is crucial that art film directors present moments of ambiguity and paradox, as this provides the opportunity for pluralistic responses, even if audience reactions end up looking rather uniform" (p. 180). With a move toward a sensory-centric cinema, Balstrup is able to bring more experience-centric religious movements (like alternative spirituality) into conversation with film. While symbolism and narrative have an important place in the films that she discusses, it is primarily non-representational sensory experience that communicates religious transcendence. For example, Balstrup includes an analysis of the "meditative qualities of sound, composition, and pace" in 2001 (p. 98), focusing first on how Kubrick uses an extended black screen to isolate the sense of hearing in the viewer, resulting in "contemplative perception" (p. 101).

A few ambiguities pervade *Spiritual Sensations*, but they are generative ambiguities that accompany complicated and textured topics like film and religion. The first concerns method and subject. Is Balstrup's mode of reading film dependent on the content of the film itself? Asked differently, could

a transcendental interpretation work on just any film, or must the director have transcendental intentions, and if so, to what degree? Second, are narrative and sensation opposed? Balstrup tends to pit one against the other, at least casually. For example, Balstrup writes that the type of film viewing in *Spiritual Sensations* "is distinct from classical modes of viewing that are plot driven and rely on the development of empathy with the characters on screen" (p. 33). It makes sense that Balstrup would focus on the distinctive qualities of the transcendental style, but it also seems that viewers often experience (and directors often construct) Schrader's "stasis" in predominantly narrative films. A film like THE THIN RED LINE (Terence Malick, US 1998) comes to mind as a possible example of a primarily narrative film that exhibits the transcendental style. Balstrup's method is likely also applicable to a wide variety of films outside arthouse cinema.

Overall, *Spiritual Sensations* is important reading for any scholar of religion, film, or religion and film. It contains thoughtful readings of films (as well as qualitative analysis of audience reactions) in a fresh theoretical paradigm. I hope that the future of the study of film and religion contains more of this kind of engagement with cinema, where visceral and affective experiences do not need to be mapped symbolically onto narrative mythologies in order to make religious sense. The religious sphere is not confined to symbol and narrative. It occurs also in the body and in consciousness; in excess, in ecstasy, and in equanimity. Neither is the cinematic sphere exhausted by narrative and plot. The cinema, too, affects the body and consciousness of the viewer, harboring excesses, ecstasies, and equanimities of its own. The cinema holds the potential to be a spiritually significant experience *in itself*, and *Spiritual Sensations* helps us make sense of that fact.

Filmography

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1968).
ENTER THE VOID (Gaspar Noé, FR/DE/IT/CA/JP 2009).
MELANCHOLIA (Lars von Trier, DK/SE/FR/DE 2011).
THE THIN RED LINE (Terence Malick, US 1998).

Céire Kealty

Book Review
Robert Covolo, Fashion Theology

Robert Covolo's work *Fashion Theology* challenges the reader, and the academic discipline of theology, to "take fashion seriously" (p. 2). In this groundbreaking text, Covolo sets out to define and explore the resonances and tensions between the distinct worlds of theology and fashion – an important task given fashion's status as an evocative medium of expression, dissent, and power in the current political sphere. Despite this flattering portrait, Covolo acknowledges that fashion is known for its fads, but insists that "fashion is part of a much larger cultural phenomenon that boasts its own history" (p. 3). This history, as he goes on to prove, includes a robust theological history. Covolo's study endeavors to demonstrate the pas de deux performed by theology and fashion, in the hope of retrieving a better understanding of both.

Covolo is a cultural theologian by trade, and his exploration of fashion and theology is deeply attuned to the Augustinian call to engage faith with culture. Covolo divides his work into five chapters, each attending to a particular facet of "fashion theology". These chapters endeavor to answer a question that weaves the work together: what has been, is, and could be, fashion theology?

Chapter 1, "Fashion Theology as Tradition", explores commentaries on fashion among Patristic and medieval thinkers, to organize historical and theological opinions towards dress. He guides the reader through the development of sartorial signification in the Roman world and employs especially the works of Tertullian and Augustine to gesture towards theological interventions in daily dress (p. 4). This chapter explores, among other things, Tertullian's caution against adornment, Augustine's navigation of fashion in

the cities of God and man, and Aquinas' understanding of fashion and social dress through the lens of virtue ethics. Covolo's reflections illuminate the overlapping functions of dress – to distinguish sex, rank, and other social markers, to communicate and cultivate virtue, to temper oneself towards others, and even to communicate aesthetic beauty, divine or otherwise, to the created world. The author exposes the dynamism of dress while teasing out unique and provocative insights for today, for example, that Augustine serves as the "father of fashion theory" (p. 10). Who knew that the Bishop of Hippo could share resonances with semiologists like Roland Barthes?

Chapter 2, "Fashion Theology as Reform", focuses on the developments of fashion and theology with specific attention to the Protestant Reformation. In this chapter, Covolo offers an examination of John Calvin, whose writings on fashion stressed the role of dress in enabling opportunities for sin (p. 23) and distraction (p. 26). Calvin's caution towards dress, Covolo surmises, was fueled not only by soteriological concerns, but also by his social landscape, which was rife with unrest (pp. 25–26). Calvin prescribes order and discipline regarding dress to remain focused on the priorities of earthly and heavenly existence. Though Calvin is guarded as far as earthly dress is concerned, he employs striking sartorial language of God, who appears "magnificently" arrayed in the fabric of the world (p. 27). Here, Covolo yet again demonstrates how claims of fashion and theology as enemies are reductive and fail to grasp the full vibrancy of theological, fashion-laden language.

From here, Covolo introduces the work of Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper. While Calvin eschewed fancy, Kuyper embraced the "luxuriant dress of the past" (p. 31). He further celebrated sartorial vibrancy as the God-given impulse humans have "to adorn" and "to make ourselves beautiful" (p. 32). He couched this claim in an overarching distrust of French influence, fearing its fashion to be distracting and its society morally vacuous (p. 33). Covolo further teases out theological tensions in Kuyper, specifically his caution towards radical social reconstruction, which "he perceived as a usurping of God's sovereignty in the historical process" (p. 33). Covolo then recounts Karl Barth's evaluation of fashion as "complicit with dark forces" (p. 39) and his warnings that fashion endlessly conscripts masses into capricious rituals, which amplifies the power of the Zeitgeist (p. 39) and enables capitalists to run amok (p. 40). Barth feared the reduction of the human person through capitalism and saw fashion as a willing accomplice towards this end. Barth's words generate further discussions of freedom, creative expression, and historical disruption.

Chapter 3, "Fashion Theology as Public Discourse", attends to the role of fashion and faith in modern public life, specifically in democracies. Fashion uniquely communicates democratic impulses within a society (p. 46). Individual sartorial expression, for example, can elucidate challenges to convention, fluctuating public opinion, and even the role of elite classes in social spaces. Covolo offers three "dispensations" of fashion: first, its proliferation among the aristocracy as a fanciful status marker (p. 50); second, its modern iteration, reflected in the haute couture gown and the mass-produced simulacra (p. 51); and third, its democratized form in the 20th and 21st centuries, reflected in mass marketed, homogenized tastes found in fast-fashion stores lining city streets (p. 51). Covolo grapples here with two interpretations of fashion: fashion as top-down (where the upper classes control the lower classes), or fashion as bottom-up (where the individual subject is revalorized) (p. 53). Neither successfully captures the dynamic role of fashion in religious and public life (p. 54).

The chapter further explores the atheistic tendencies of modernization. Individuals freed from the "burden" of tradition are now individuals burdened anew by the task of self-expression without normative evaluations (p. 59). And Christian fashionistas are caught in the crossfire, "participating in a visual discussion that by its very nature retains a logic that is less hospitable to transcendence" (pp. 63–64). Covolo, through Kuyper, pushes for a more complex understanding of the intermingling of fashion, faith, and public discourse.

Chapter 4, "Fashion Theology as Art", interrogates the merit of fashion's claim to be art. Covolo presents philosophical critiques of the aesthetic, including Kant and Hegel, and shares their concern that fashion is too superficial, too consumption-driven, and too earthly to ever inspire the contemplation of art, and thus theology (p. 71). Yet fashion too is capable of aesthetic prowess, which Covolo teases out via Dewey and Benjamin (pp. 72–74). His study necessarily engages with beauty, requiring response from Patristic scholars (pp. 76–77). He further articulates Protestant prescriptions towards the visual arts by addressing the potentially "iconoclastic" impulses of Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin, while also exploring the complex role of art in Neo-Reformed thought (pp. 84–89).

Chapter 5, "Fashion Theology as Everyday Drama", explores the affective power of fashion to "heighten one's experience with time, narrative, and performance" (p. 91). Covolo notes how the constantly changing nature of fashion can devolve into chaotic inconsequentiality, without a "larger drama from which to invest […] meaning" (p. 95). The chapter's attention to

time (p. 92), personal narrative (p. 99), and narrative arc (p. 102) helps develop a more coherent stage on which fashion, hand-in-hand with theology, can endeavor to put "God's glory […] on display" (p. 111). The chapter closes with avenues for Christians to "perform Christ", employing dress to evoke revelation and response.

Covolo's study allows for deeper exploration of the mundane sartorial encounters we experience each day. For instance, his foray into the French Revolution reveals the political roots of the black suit (p. 29). Contemporary readers may regard their dress suits as the innocuous standard of formal wear; Covolo reveals that the emergence of the black suit signaled the emergence of bourgeois male suffrage and a subsequent "shift in political life to a new kind of access […] to shape public opinion in a public square freed from […] the aristocracy" (p. 29). This is a great example of the strength of Covolo's writing – he actively engages the reader's notions towards dress while simultaneously reshaping them.

Covolo's exploration of seminal Christian texts and thinkers is carefully done, and he adeptly balances the tensions between fashion and theology without reducing either discipline, articulating their resonances while preserving their distinctions. He also takes great care to elaborate on the fashion contexts in which different theologians and church figures were born and were active, showing, for example, how the developments of Italy, Spain, and France in furnishing European fashion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries prefigured the life of Calvin (p. 23).

There are aspects of the book, however, that leave more to be desired. Though Covolo's work addresses matters of ethics, the text does not engage fully with the ethical implications of fashion as an industry, such as its prominent role in the Atlantic slave trade or its present threats to garment workers and the natural environment. The book is distinctly Reformed, and while those from all (or no) traditions can learn from this work, this study will likely inspire explorations from a Catholic perspective and from that of Eastern Christianity, with the latter of which may further complicate fashion's "Western" locus. Since Covolo's study opens towards a new and emerging realm of study in theology, there are ample opportunities for emerging scholars to build upon this work and plumb the depths of fashion theology.

Fashion Theology is a necessary read for fashion-minded people of faith and academics, and will surely inspire further studies of fashion in academic theology. This work is sure to reinvigorate its readers' attitudes towards fashion, theology, and the clothes they wear.

Richard Wolff

Book Review
Andrew J. Owen, Desire after Dark Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021, 220 pages, ISBN: 978-0-253-05382-4

An evocative synergy exists between, on one hand, unabashedly queer identity and expression in the media and, on the other hand, the wondrous, even eagerly strange, worlds of occult-themed film and television, wherein that which is both queer and occult may be valued, explored, and enjoyed for its eccentricities. This observation lies at the heart of Andrew J. Owens's excellent and insightful book *Desire after Dark: Contemporary Queer Cultures and Occultly Marvelous Media*. Owens explores how non-normative, queer personas have emerged, evolved, and been celebrated by horror TV and film creators and fans over the past 60 years for their resistance to conformity, particularly in media focused on witchcraft and vampires. Basing his approach to queer media studies in part on Alexander Doty's influential *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993), Owens explores how the production and reception of queer characters broadly conceived in occult media re-center and relish that which challenges "heteronormative hegemony".

Proceeding historically in Foucauldian fashion to mine how different eras and industrial practices reveal particular cultural engagements of the occultly articulated queer, *Desire after Dark* engagingly examines cinematic and televisual vampires, witches, warlocks, and other monsters for how they challenge the "straight" world by use of their queerly eccentric powers, and the pleasure particular audiences find in such resistance.

Owens begins his analysis in the Sixties, where a convergence of shifts in culture, industry, and audiences created new possibilities for television

programming and avant-garde film. The countercultural movements of the era opened the way to anti-assimilationist attitudes, particularly among youth who were reassessing prevailing ideas about sex, traditional values, and conformity. Following the lead of more tame TV programs of the era, such as the sitcoms Bewitched (ABC, US 1964–1972), The Addams Family (ABC, US 1964–1966), and The Munsters (CBS, US 1964–1966), which both celebrated the occultly strange and comically examined conventional gender roles and ideas of domesticity, "America's first supernatural soap opera", Dark Shadows (ABC, US 1966–1971), emerged to appeal to the countercultural youth market. Employing camp in the context of a genre whose very open-ended narrative resists stability, Dark Shadows's vampiric storylines, centered around Barnabas Collins and other male characters, invited a fascination with the eccentric and opened avenues for queer readings. The same era saw changes in the film industry – particularly America's elimination of the Hollywood Production Code and creation of the ratings system, and Britain's reconsideration of its own restrictive film practices – give rise to more explicit depictions of same-sex desire explored in vampiric cinema. In this light, Owens smartly examines Hammer Films Productions' Karnstein trilogy – Vampire Lovers (Roy Ward Baker, GB 1970), Lust for a Vampire (Jimmy Sangster, GB 1971), and Twins of Evil (John Hough, GB 1971) – with its focus on the female gaze and lesbian desire, celebrating its frank approach to fantasy in terms both erotic and supernatural.

Owens's analysis then moves to the Stonewall era and the queer community's demand for cultural recognition on its own terms, which he notes corresponds with a simultaneous rise in Satanist interests. Here, Owens connects the frankness of the queer moment with that of visual representations in the form of underground, pornographic, and arthouse cinema. That each of the concurrent "outsider" movements demanded acceptance on its own terms led to an intermingling of occult and queer themes in films such as Kenneth Anger's Fireworks (US 1947), Scorpio Rising (US 1963) and Invocation of My Demon Brother (US 1969) and French director Jean Rollin's Les Frisson des Vampires (The Shiver of the Vampires, FR 1971). As they did in broader culture, efforts to suppress these sexual and supernatural expressions led to censorial scrutiny. With the coming of HIV/AIDS, a discourse of sexual infection found consonance in vampire mythology, with its focus on underworld lifestyles, conversion via "contamination", uncontainable desires, and the power to bestow both death and new life. Owens's close reads of The Hunger (Tony Scott, GB/US 1983) in its urban setting

and THE LOST BOYS (Joel Schumacher, US 1987) in its rural milieu highlight provocative commonalities and contrasts in queer themes and modes of the gaze in disparately set popular films of the era.

Rounding out his study are discussions of millennial cinematic depictions of coming out as both queer and sorceress and an account of the ambivalent politics of later queer occultic cable programs. The former begins with a reflection on the role of Tumblr in forming queer and occult interests and identities for younger Internet users and how "coming out" is increasingly an action undertaken in one's youth; that those who are Wiccan or otherwise witchy "come out" to challenge dominant assumptions about their kind and their interests creates a common experience between these groups, the queer and the occult. Owens picks up on this commonality as he segues into a read on how two turn-of-the-century youth-oriented films, the mainstream movie THE CRAFT (Andrew Fleming, US 1996) and the indie LITTLE WITCHES (Jane Simpson, US/CA 1996), capitalize on this thematic convergence: to wit, both films present women forming "homosocial bonds" as they explore various "powers" that set them apart. Finally, Owens looks at cable programming, unbounded by the regulatory strictures of broadcast TV and in need of developing competitively unique and edgy programming to attract audiences, to find more recent TV shows that explore the queer and occult. Here he examines series that aired on the cable networks Showtime and here!, providing insightful interpretations of THE HUNGER (Sci Fi/Movie Network/Showtime, GB/CA/US 1997–2000), THE LAIR (here!, US 2007–2009) and DANTE'S COVE (here!, US 2005–2007), with their focus on the unconventional, both sexual and supernatural. His carefully nuanced discussion shows complexities in how gay relationships are coded, particularly in relation to occult contexts, such that a central ambiguity about the stability of identities and relationships of the characters is part of the pleasure in the unconventionally empowering portrayals; indeed, this is true not only in terms of the programs' narratives themselves but also in their relation to broader political discussions of queer representation.

Owens's book is well-written and well-conceived. His approach to the films and TV programs examined is to consider these within well-balanced discussions of contemporaneous developments in culture, media industries, and LGBTQ+ history, together with insights gleaned from horror studies, cultural studies, and queer theory. Especially regarding queer theory, those familiar with the literature will appreciate the range of theorists Owens weaves into his analysis. His subject matter, focusing as it does on the una-

bashedly eccentric, will particularly interest those whose politics embrace anti-assimilationist approaches to LGBTQ+ identities and popular imagery. In demonstrating that the queer, both sexual and otherwise, has been central to the success and historical development of the horror genre in popular, pornographic, and avant-garde media, Owens makes a clear case for why studies of sexuality, such as he undertakes in *Desire after Dark*, are important and even integral to media studies broadly conceived. Owens's book is an engaging exploration of how occult horror films and television shows eagerly explore taboos, queer pleasures, the supernatural, and life on the margins, set within the theoretical context of queer media studies.

Given the strengths of his analyses, some may wish Owens had included more media to review. Such readers would appreciate the insights Owens might bring to interpretations of other films and TV programs that meet his focus. Owens himself states that *Desire after Dark* is not intended to be comprehensive, noting that his choice of media is set amidst a much broader field of pertinent films and programs. Even so, there is room for expanded discussion. For example, although Owens acknowledges having excitedly waited for the TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer (The WB [seasons 1–5] and UPN [seasons 6–7], US 1997–2003) to air, celebrates its engagement of queer subject matter and appeals, and highlights its importance in television's focus on gay characters and themes, he affords it minimal attention. Other relevant shows, such as HBO's popular True Blood (HBO, US 2008–201 4), also receive limited focus, and readers who appreciate Owens's highly skilled examination of other texts may wish he had afforded more programs similar engagement. Broadened examples might also lend greater weight to existing discussions, such as that of the chapter on "coming out" in millennial media, which examines one major studio release (The Craft) and one independent film (Little Witches). Including more texts for consideration – perhaps contemporaneous warlock-centered films for comparison and contrast with female-focused ones – would add breadth to the discussion. The book might also benefit from an all-encompassing conclusion, to reflect upon the broader significance of the more focused chapters as well as to suggest avenues for further scholarship. None of this diminishes Owens's expert analysis of the texts and historical moments considered; his consistently piercing study may just leave readers wishing for more.

Owens's *Desire after Dark* makes clear and important contributions to existing literature on queer theory, media studies, and the horror genre. His insightful, focused study will interest both fans of the TV programs and

films examined and scholars in various disciplines who will appreciate how adeptly Owens incorporates well-balanced discussions of culture, industry, genre, reception, and representation in compelling reads of the media reviewed.

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DARK SHADOWS (Created by: Dan Curtis, ABC, US 1966–1971).
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INVOCATION OF MY DEMON BROTHER (Kenneth Anger, US 1969).
LES FRISSON DES VAMPIRES (THE SHIVER OF THE VAMPIRES, Jean Rollin, FR 1971).
LITTLE WITCHES (Jane Simpson, US/CA 1996).
LUST FOR A VAMPIRE (Jimmy Sangster, GB 1971).
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THE LOST BOYS (Joel Schumacher, US 1987).
THE MUNSTERS (Created by: Allan Burns and Chris Hayward, CBS, US 1964–1966).
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Stefanie Knauss

Series Review
SHTISEL (Yes/Netflix, IL 2013–2021) and
UNORTHODOX (Netflix, DE 2020)

Recently, two series have drawn viewers' attention to stricly Orthodox Judaism: Sʜᴛɪsᴇʟ, a 3-season series created by Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, first broadcast on Israeli TV and then picked up by Netflix (2013–2021), and the mini-series (4 episodes) Uɴᴏʀᴛʜᴏᴅᴏx (2020), created by Anna Winger and produced by Netflix. Both series deal with the negotiation of traditional religious norms with individual dreams and hopes, yet they do so in very different ways that offer much food for thought.

Sʜᴛɪsᴇʟ, mostly set in Jerusalem's neighborhood of Geula, follows the trials and tribulations of the strictly Orthodox *(haredi)* Shtisel family, focusing primarily on the recently widowed father, Shulem, and Akiva, one of his six children, as well as on other members of the extended family (fig. 1). Typical for a TV series, multiple narrative strands are woven together, dealing with issues of love, marriage, family, professional vocation, and dreams for self-fulfillment. Shulem, who considers a second marriage after the death of his wife, is worried that Akiva still hasn't found a wife. Another source of conflict is Akiva's decision to be an artist and give up his job as a teacher in his father's *cheder*, a traditional elementary school. The family also has to deal with death and grief: the series begins with Akiva's vision of his deceased mother and ends with a scene in which all the dead of the family are gathered around the dining table, and these and other, usually formally unmarked, dreams or visions of the dead complicate easy assumptions about the reality depicted in the series. Noticeably absent, apart from one brief story line revolving around Israeli Independence Day, are political issues, reflecting, perhaps, the withdrawal of the *haredim* from Israeli public life.

These central themes appear again and again in a cyclical fashion that expresses their existential character: these are not exceptional issues that will be resolved once and for all, but universal questions that human beings have dealt with across time and space and that will return, in a different

Fig. 1: A Shtisel family council. Film still, Sнтisel (Yes/Netflix, IL 2013–2021), S2:E5, 00:07:25.

shape, for different people. Yet the setting of the *haredi* community brings a particular inflection to their treatment that provides for dramaturgical possibilities. In Season 2, for example, Giti and her husband respond to a childless widow's offer of an award for a family who will name their child after her deceased husband so that he will have a descendant to say Kaddish (a prayer of mourning), which reflects the concern of Orthodox Jews about fulfilling the command to be fruitful and the importance of children in this life and the afterlife. The specific gender roles of the patriarchal *haredi* community are thematized several times, such as in S3:E6, when Zvi Arye's wife, Tovi, gets her driving license and buys a car against his wishes (driving and owning a car are frowned upon, especially when done by a woman), standing her ground against her husband at home while making sure that he maintains his image as head of the family to the outside.

This successful negotiation of the universal with the particular is likely the reason for the show's success among viewers from different backgrounds[1] in spite of its setting in a little-known community whose rules and traditions might appear strange, if not oppressive. While especially in the first two seasons, some plot lines are left unconcluded (whatever happened to that little dog Shulem takes in rather unwillingly as a favor to his grandson? And how about Shulem's two remaining children who are never

1   For some reactions, see Adler 2021.

Fig. 2: Esty walks into her future. Film still, Unorthodox (Netflix, DE 2020), Part 4, 49:53.

mentioned?), the show observes the Shtisels' woes and joys with understated humor and intelligence, creating empathy with its characters, who are depicted with increasing complexity across the three seasons. Shulem (an excellent Doval'e Glickman), for example, might appear as a somewhat unsympathetic character, more concerned with his own creature comforts than with the feelings and needs of others, but his love for his family and his vocation as a teacher are deeply felt, even if he does not always express them well.

In contrast, there is little joy or humor found in the community of the Satmar Hassidim in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where Unorthodox, inspired by Deborah Feldman's eponymous memoir,[2] is set. More like a long film than a 4-part series, the show focuses primarily on its protagonist, Esty (Shira Haas, who also plays, with the same intensity, Ruchami in Shtisel), and her "escape" from her marriage and community to Berlin. Here, she befriends a group of young musicians who help her settle into this unknown world (not least marked by the city's Nazi history and neo-Nazi present), reconnects with her mother, and begins – so is suggested – a new life as a music student (fig. 2). The series interweaves Esty's present with flashbacks to her suffocating life in the Satmar community, her marriage to Yanky and their marital problems (both emotional and sexual), and the community's – es-

2   Feldman 2012.

pecially her mother-in-law's – pressure to conform. These flashbacks are essential as they provide the motivation for Esty's drastic decision to leave her community. In a further plot line, Yanky and his cousin Moishe follow Esty to Berlin to bring her back. While this somewhat melodramatic "chase" narrative creates some suspense (will they find Esty in time to prevent her scholarship audition at the conservatory? Will Moishe use the gun to force her to go back to Williamsburg?), the possibilities of these two characters are unfortunately left undeveloped. Especially Moishe, represented as a rather thuggish, unsavory character who does not shy away from threatening Esty's mother and breaking into her apartment, could have served as a kind of double of Esty, as he himself left the community but returned to it for reasons left unclear. The exploration of the different situations of Esty and Moishe, their respective motivations for leaving, returning, or staying away, would have allowed the series to treat its complex topic with greater depth.

With its "liberation" narrative, Unorthodox creates a binary between the religious community and the secular world. Likely shaped by Feldman's personal experiences of her community in its perspective, the series represents religious traditions and norms mostly as oppressive burdens, especially for women whose bodies and lives are the subject of religious and social control. This is visualized, for example, in a scene in the ritual bath, the mikveh, where the attendant double-checks that Esty's finger nails are really clean, when her head is shorn after her wedding, or in painful images of Esty and Yanky trying to have sex to fulfill the religious and social expectations to have children. Members of the community are portrayed quite negatively and in a one-dimensional way: when Esty leaves, the rabbi is concerned not about her welfare or reasons for leaving, but about making sure that she doesn't become an example that others might want to follow. Positive aspects of communal life – friendship, support, a sense of belonging – are hinted at only in passing, and religious practices appear as empty rituals without any kind of spiritual richness.

Through this dualism of the oppressive religious sphere and the liberating secular world, the series envisions possibilities for individual empowerment, self-fulfillment, and real relationship, especially for women, only in emancipation from patriarchal religion. This secularist narrative is very slightly modified by the fact that it is Esty's passionate rendition of a Yiddish song at her audition that convinces the committee of her talent. This suggests that while her decision to separate from her husband and her

community is irrevocable, her community's traditions and culture are still a part of who she is.

In contrast, Shtisel does not create a binary between the secular and religious worlds, although their differences are recognized. Religious traditions and practices are a natural and meaningful part of the Shtisels' everyday life and closely connect the spiritual and material dimensions of life, from the blessing over food to the frequent invocation of God in conversations and to Talmud study. When conflicts arise between religious norms, communal expectations, and individual needs, the question is not whether to leave the community, but how to find a compromise within it, usually not imposed by some authority but negotiated among the individuals involved. This might certainly sometimes mean for an individual to give up some of their dreams, but just as often for the community to accommodate individual desires even if they don't quite approve: in Season 3, Giti is not excited about her son Yosa'le wanting to marry a Sephardic girl he met by mistake at a date set up by the matchmaker, but eventually she comes around because it means so much to him.

Reviewers of Shtisel have noted the problems of setting a series in a community whose very appearance (sidelocks, black suits, and high hats for the men, muted colors, shapeless dresses, and hair-covering for the women), let alone their beliefs and practices, mark them as different, which might encourage a certain exoticizing voyeurism (which, incidentally, is thematized in Shtisel with regard to Akiva's portraits of *haredi* Jews).[3] In Unorthodox, the otherness of the Satmar Hassidim is underlined and mostly marked negatively, whereas Shtisel has been praised for "humanizing" strictly Orthodox Jews by emphasizing the universal that resonates across specific contexts.[4] Yet I am not sure if that is what the series achieves. Instead, what I appreciate about it is its careful negotiation of the universal and the particular: it certainly treats universal themes of love and death, but in a way that is rooted in the particular context of the *haredi* characters who experience these situations, and it does not suggest that "deep down" we're all the same (translate as: *haredim* are just like secular folks). As a viewer who is not part of the community, I am given the possibility of empathizing with the characters, yet without denying the remaining gap that our different experiences and contexts create. In this sense, Shtisel envisions

3   Margalit 2019.
4   Berger 2019.

difference as a possibility of encounter, whereas Unorthodox constructs difference as separation.

For those interested in religious studies, religion and media, and Jewish studies, both series provide rich material for critical reflections on the role of religion in everyday life, gender and religion, secularization narratives of the encounter between tradition and modernity, individualism and community, and the relationship between the universal and the particular. In their detailed representation of strictly Orthodox communities, both series also offer material for studying Jewish beliefs, practices, and traditions; however, it is important to keep in mind that like all media, these representations are constructions and thus questions of "authenticity" should be handled with care.

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Kathrin Trattner

Game Review
MUNDAUN (First-Person Horror Adventure)
Hidden Fields, 2021

In the past years, a noticeable trend towards folk horror can be observed, particularly in indie culture. In recent films and television series such as Midsommar (Ari Aster, US/SE 2019) or The Third Day (created by Felix Barrett and Dennis Kelly, HBO/Sky, UK/US 2020), isolated landscapes and secluded rural communities serve as eerie backdrops for the resurfacing of ancient evil spirits and archaic superstitions. One of the main peculiarities of this kind of horror is the centrality of a sense of place. The evil encountered by the protagonists is not generic but firmly bound to or even brought forth by the landscape and history of the respective region. While this basic recipe, which was used in The Wicker Man (Robin Hardy, UK 1973), periodically resurfaces in horror films, video game culture has thus far been reluctant to embrace it.[1] The Swiss indie game Mundaun is a notable exception. As Andreas Inderwildi observes, Mundaun is "folk horror that embraces traditional aesthetics and themes that modern games often reject wholesale: the loneliness of alpine landscapes, the centrality of a rural and simple kind of Christianity stripped of all theological intricacies, as well as old folk tales, beliefs and customs".[2]

Mundaun started as an auteur project in 2014. Creator Michel Ziegler is responsible not only for the game's story and programming, but also for its most unique feature – its visuals. Everything in the entire game was hand-penciled, scanned, and then mapped onto 3-D models by Ziegler. This incredibly laborious procedure led to an end-product that sometimes feels like moving inside a sinister Expressionist painting, and at other times, es-

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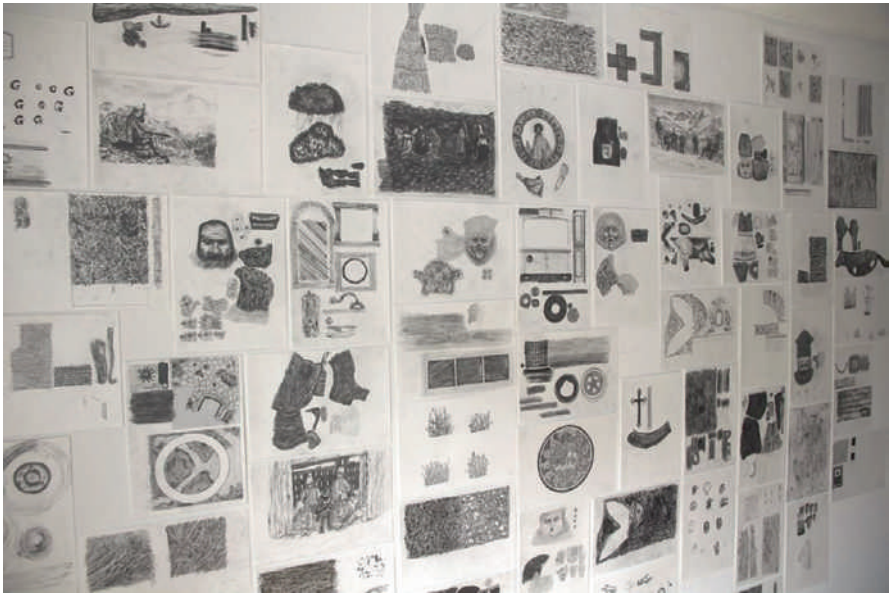1   Wilson 2018.
2   Inderwildi 2021.

Fig. 1: Ziegler's sketches for MUNDAUN. Press still: Hidden Fields.

pecially due to the rough edges, it looks almost as if it was entirely carved out of wood. It is not least as a result of this unique look that the game has received considerable media attention from the beginning of its development. Another striking aspect about MUNDAUN that sets it apart from virtually any other media is that the entire dialogue is in Romansh, a Romance language that is spoken by only around 40,000 people worldwide, predominantly in the Swiss Canton of Graubünden. This truly unparalleled feature contributes to the game's atmosphere of authenticity as well as creating a certain otherworldliness. With the indie game press's initial focus on such aspects of aesthetic and atmosphere ahead of the game's release, I expected to play a short, artfully crafted horror walking simulator set in the Swiss Alps. MUNDAUN turned out to be much more than that.

MUNDAUN opens like many classic horror tales – with a letter. The protagonist Curdin, whose perspective the player takes on throughout the game, is informed by the village priest, Jeremias, that his grandfather Flurin has died in a barn fire. Jeremias writes that there is no need for Curdin to undertake the long journey to Mundaun as his grandfather has already been buried. However, as the game opens, Curdin is already on a bus riding along the serpentines leading up the mountain – a sequence that, accompanied by an un-

Fig. 2: Eerie Mundaun. Press still: Hidden Fields.

settling soundtrack, is strongly reminiscent of the opening of The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1980). Something feels odd about Jeremias's letter, so Curdin wants to see for himself what happened. As he quickly discovers, Flurin's grave is empty. Gradually, Curdin uncovers a dark secret behind his grandfather's death through nightmarish flashbacks. Long ago, in a moment of despair, Flurin made a deal with the devil. However, he did not uphold his side of the agreement – to deliver an unbaptized soul – but tried to cheat the devil by instead offering a goat, Allegria, whose bleating, chatting head becomes one of Curdin's companions throughout the game. As we all know from countless folk tales, cheating the devil is never a good idea. Hence the curse that has befallen the mountainous idyll of Mundaun.

As the story progresses, Curdin makes his way farther and farther up and even into the mountain. I was struck by the unexpected magnitude of the game world. At the beginning of the game, the focus is very much on the exploration of this surprisingly large world, and the player has to solve several puzzles in order to progress. As the game advances, however, Curdin is also confronted by dangerous enemies. The walking hay men, hostile beekeepers, or dead soldiers sunken in the snow, haunting the protagonist, make it feel as though the nightmarish mountain landscape is literally coming alive. In these moments, Mundaun starts to feel more like a horror survival game. The player has the possibility of entering into combat with enemies but with very limited resources, so it is often a better option to avoid

Fig. 3: Grandfather Flurin's house. Press still: Hidden Fields.

confrontation or carefully plot sneak attacks. In its more classic horror moments, MUNDAUN stands out for its excellent pacing – something that is central to horror films, but, I would argue, even more central to games: too many scares and the atmosphere gets lost in the action, which can, oddly, make the game less scary. So "down time" in between intense segments is necessary to keep the "audience engaged and open to being terrified".[3] MUNDAUN does this excellently, as moments of adversity are followed by episodes of relaxation and exploration, for instance, in Curdin's grand-father's house, which serves as a safe house at the beginning of the game. The house was one of the places within the game that really motivated me to explore and made me appreciate all the details of its design.

When enemy encounters do happen, they are additionally complicated by the fact that Curdin's sight narrows and he is briefly paralyzed when he feels fear. This simple yet very unusual mechanism for rendering the protagonist's emotions experienceable through gameplay systems, of translating Curdin's fear into a highly unpleasant situation for the player, significantly increases the degree of immersion. This feeling of actually becoming one with Curdin and the strange world he is exploring is enhanced by other aspects of the game, such as the fact that almost all the information necessary to play is delivered

3   Lins 2018.

Fig. 4: Curdin's backpack serves as the player's inventory. Press still: Hidden Fields.

through haptic in-world objects rather than menus and user interfaces. The inventory is a backpack one is carrying around; the map is hand-drawn by Curdin and kept in a physical journal the player has to pull out to flip through the pages. In MUNDAUN, everything is diegetic, causing the player to never leave the "magic circle",[4] even for a moment. It is these mechanisms that make the game world feel so organic and the overall experience so uncanny.

Besides these remarkable design aspects, MUNDAUN also manages to convey a feeling of authenticity through its skillful inclusion of Swiss folk tales and mythological creatures in the narrative. Although, as pointed out earlier, the sense of place is key to folk horror and also central to MUNDAUN's approach, the game manages to stay subtle in this respect, avoiding any all-too-obvious Alpine kitsch. As Ziegler reveals in an interview, since his childhood he has had a fascination for folk tales, many of which have inspired MUNDAUN, even if more in a certain atmosphere of dark oppressiveness that they convey than in terms of actual content.[5] Two stories, however, stand out as direct influences for the main narrative surrounding the deal with the devil: *Die alte Teufelsbrücke*[6] (The Old Devil's

4   Huizinga 2007.
5   Zurschmitten 2021.
6   Herzog 1887, 174–176.

Fig. 5: The devil and Father Jeremias in Mundaun's chapel. Press still: Hidden Fields.

Bridge), a Swiss folk tale, and Jeremias Gotthelf's 1842 novella *Die schwarze Spinne*[7] (The Black Spider). Both take up the trope of the cheated devil, with *Die alte Teufelsbrücke* even featuring a goat too. Ziegler manages to incorporate this and other classic folk tale themes, such as the appearance of the devil in the form of a well-dressed old man, without slipping off into the all-too-expectable and generic. As somebody who also grew up in the Alps and is well-acquainted with folk tales in the context of this "rural and simple kind of Christianity stripped of all theological intricacies",[8] I cannot help but wonder how the game is experienced by somebody completely unfamiliar with this cultural realm. I believe this is a highly interesting question that may be investigated further.

While in terms of gameplay – despite delivering far more possibilities for interaction than expected – MUNDAUN is hardly revolutionary, the game is impressive in completely different ways. It captivates the player most of all through an obviously extremely detailed and unique design and look that contributes to the player's immersion in this uncanny, oppressive mountain landscape, in which all pieces fall together causing the end-product to feel entirely plausible and authentic. This overall feeling is enhanced by the small

7   Gotthelf 2002.
8   Inderwildi 2021.

things, such as architecture, making coffee in the grandfather's house, or riding a sled down the snowy slopes of the mountain. In Mundaun, the devil is *literally* in the details. And it is these details that make the game a truly extraordinary experience.

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Natalie Fritz

Exhibition Review
Olafur Eliasson, *Life*

Fondation Beyeler Basel, April–July 2021

To enter the park of the Fondation Beyeler, a renowned museum in the outskirts of Basel, Switzerland, is to be immersed in a different world. Outside, people are busy getting home after work, chatter and traffic noise fill the air. But here, on the spacious grounds of a museum exhibiting modern and contemporary art, everything and everyone seems to calm down and begin to listen – to the humming of the bees and the wind in the trees, and to themselves. It is very quiet, the atmosphere is almost devotional. People walk at a measured pace across the great lawn towards the building. The spiritually charged environment reminds me of past church visits. A museum as sacred space? Transcendent aesthetic experiences in a profane ambiance? Transgressing predetermined constraints and borders – be it on an ideational, normative, or physical level – is a recurring subject of the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's exhibition *Life*, which was held at the Fondation Beyeler from April to July 2021.

Of Borders and the Big Picture

Eliasson's *Life* not only questions the concept of borders, it also exceeds them constantly and on different levels. In the view of the artist, borders are unnecessary and constructed.[1] Life, this specific time span, can be controlled only to a certain extent. It changes constantly, confronts us with unpredictable obstacles, new perspectives and experiences. It is not just "our"

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1   Eliasson explains his approach and the goals of the exhibition in a video at https://is.gd/g64tzn [accessed 19 November 2021].

Fig. 1: View from the lawn of the exhibition inside and outside the Fondation Beyeler, Basel. © Natalie Fritz

life; it is coexistence with other human and non-human beings, with nature. In this sense, the question "What is a human life?" cannot be answered without including all that makes human life possible, without seeing beyond one's nose. We should have learned that in the time of the pandemic.

Thus, this exhibition does not provide the visitor with ready-made images, photographs, or artworks, but opens a space to create art as a part of one's own imagination and to perceive life in a new way.

The first sight of the museum's re-designed park is already overwhelming: the lime-green pond reflects the warm light of the evening and the water spreads from the park into the rooms of the museum, which are empty now, except for water, plants, air, and light (fig. 1). The Fondation's management removed the glass front of the building specifically for this exhibition. Now open to the outside, the museum and its grounds provide space for flora, fauna, and humans to coexist. Wooden footbridges lead the visitors from the outside in and vice versa (figs. 2 and 3). The exhibition has no opening hours but is accessible 24/7 – for life does not rest! A lifestream
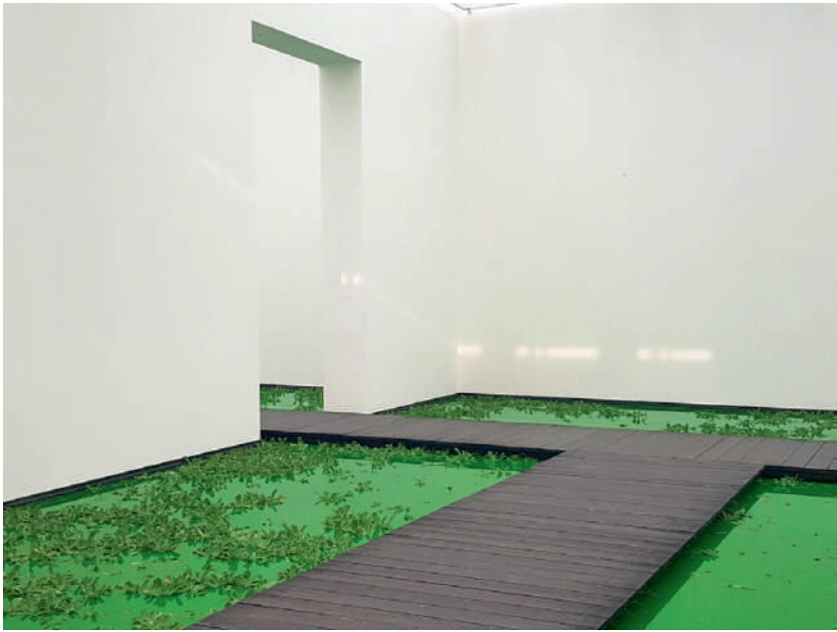
Fig. 2 and 3: The wooden footbridges over the lime-green water that floods some of the exhibition rooms of the museum. © Natalie Fritz

Fig. 4: Inside and outside blur, nature and culture come together. © Natalie Fritz

for virtual visitors was provided by the Fondation on the exhibition web-site[2].

In this space, life can circulate whenever and wherever it will. "Life" is the title of this exhibition, but it is also an experience generated by the art-work, the surroundings, and the visitor alike. The visitors bring life into the exhibition by seeing, hearing, and, finally, transforming their impressions into mental images. Thus, the exhibition itself lives, because the "rooms" no longer function as exclusively human shelters, having become a biotope or natural habitat for all that is alive, day and night. For what is our planet other than an "animated room", a place that provides shelter and a basis for various life forms (fig. 4)? The exhibition in fact lives without our assistance. As visitors we soon get the impression that we are just a small part of this ongoing rhythm of coming and going, of growth and decay.

Eliasson knows very well how to communicate his visions by stimulating the audience's senses. For the artist, "life" means not only human life, but also the whole ecosystem of the planet. The exhibition makes perceptible that we are a tiny part of this big picture, and that the borders we define, the spaces we construct, do not help us be part of it. This experience is also an invocation to act – especially regarding climate change. It is true that Eliasson, who as a child spent most of his holidays in Iceland, feels very connected to nature, but it seems simplistic to reduce his artistic vision, his approach to life, to just his Icelandic heritage. With his team, the Studio Olafur Eliasson, a collective of people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives, he develops artworks that rethink humanity, art, and space from a very elemental and elementary point of view.[3] Even though Eliasson's art is currently reaching many people because of the timeliness of these subjects, he does not follow an ecocritical trend. He has always been interested in how human beings perceive and transform space, light, water, movement, and everything that comes along with them.[4]

Experiencing Art

Life makes us understand the importance of "banal" things like light, air, and water. Do we value them in our everyday lives? Do we know that we are absolutely dependent on them, that we could not exist without them? It is impressive how the composition of the exhibition raises our awareness of these fundamental aspects of our lives and of life as such – because we can see, hear, touch, smell, and even taste them. Maybe this is why Eliasson's art is so incredibly successful: it is accessible for everyone, it has no elitist aura. The only requirement for a visitor is to be open to becoming involved in the œuvre.

As I look at the water lilies swinging softly on the lime-green surface of the pond, Rudolph Otto's famous description of the experience of the numinous as radically different from everyday experiences comes to my mind. The numinous is fascinating, merciful, and terrifying all at the same time because it is so powerful. One may experience such a transcendent insight

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3   See Eliasson's homepage: https://olafureliasson.net/ [accessed 6 December 2021].
4   See the exhibitions listed on https://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition [accessed 19 November 2021].

here, where one is forced to perceive life with all one's senses and in all its beauty.

Critics argue that Eliasson's art is simply too beautiful and thus too superficial to be art. They claim that Eliasson's success is due to the popular appeal of his works, they reach (too) many, not just a knowledgeable minority. The artist replies to such comments: "Sure, market and commerce tend to use beauty to increase profit, but I think that we as artists should reconquer beauty from commerce."[5]

Responsibilities

Light was at the beginning of life. God made it on the first day of creation, as the first chapter of Genesis tells us (1:3–5). Light is elementary in many religious traditions, for it often functions as a symbol of life. In Genesis, we see that on the second day water was made. On the third day, God created plants, and then animals. On the sixth day, God made humankind and gave them "dominion" "over every living thing that moves on the earth" to subdue them (1:28). Olafur Eliasson's *Life* forces us to rethink the terms "subdue" and "dominion", to rethink our position in the circle of life, and to evaluate the legitimating power of myths. Eliasson explains,

> We should shift away from the idea that humans stand out against the rest of the world. Even though this concept is historically anchored through scientific and religious legitimations and insights. For this concept fosters the exploitation of all non-human existences and of the inanimate nature.[6]

Should "subdue" and "dominion" not rather be understood as "right to use or enjoy"? If so, that right requires a specific responsibility. Surely to use something is not the same as to exploit it? As so-called reasonable co-creatures, we should take care of what has been entrusted to us, shouldn't we? Eliasson's exhibition confronts us with many uncomfortable questions and highlights at the same time that we all are responsible only for our own behaviour and for those close to us, but have we not also a responsibility to the next generations?

5   Canonica/Krogerus 2021, 28.
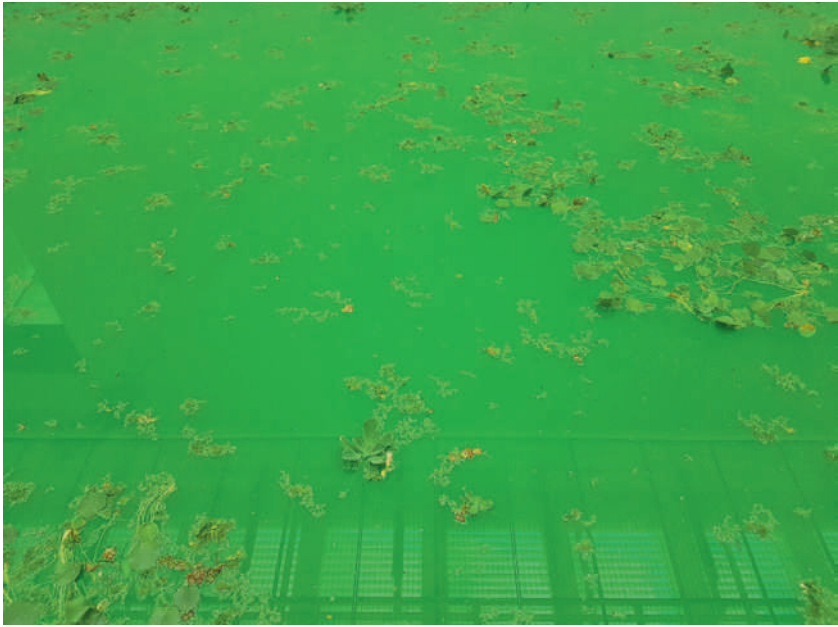6   Canonica/Krogerus 2021, 15.

Fig. 5: Plants and the reflection of the skylight in the lime green water. © Natalie Fritz

Fig. 6: Where and when does life come to a stop? Does it ever stop? © Natalie Fritz

The artist offers us a new perspective of life by directing our attention to the fundamental aspects of being as breathing, feeling, and moving. Also, time and space are experienced in a new form – time is of no importance when watching architecture merge with nature, for the water flows very slowly and visitors adapt their pace to its speed as they explore *Life* (fig. 5). The museum itself is no longer a clearly defined space where art is stockpiled and presented. It has opened up visually and materially, and also on a conceptual level (fig. 6). We are aware that we become a part of the museum because the exhibition is animated through us. We become a part of the artwork because we breath, see, feel, and think of it. A multisensorial way of experiencing art.

Paths of Life?

Walking across the footbridges through the exhibition requires some concentration if you don't want to get wet feet. It's up to you which way to turn first, to see where the path will lead you. Maybe you have to turn back,

Fig. 7: Changing and animated rooms – what else is life? © Natalie Fritz

maybe you can follow the path throughout the whole exhibition. Do these boardwalks function as a symbol for our paths of life? We are equipped with free will to choose how we live – but are we really? And then other questions arise: What consequences does our lifestyle have for our environment? Do we live how we would like to live? Is it the journey that matters, not the destination?

Architecture, water, flora, fauna, the footbridges – all elements of *Life* communicate that everything is changing, nothing remains the same. It is fragile, the world we live in, fragile and changing (fig. 7). For the better? For worse? The exhibition and the artist do not answer this question; they just provide us with more to think about. In this sense the artwork increases our awareness of who we are and where we are and highlights the function of art as a sensual possibility to challenge our views and illuminate our blind spots, on a personal but also political level. We are – for a lifetime – part of a culture, an ecosystem, a world. Vita brevis, ars longa.

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Here Be Dragons

East Asian Film and Religion

Although film production started in China as early as 1905 with Dingjun Mountain (Dingjun shan, Ren Jingfeng, CN 1905), the East Asian media landscape largely remained *terra incognita* for almost five more decades. Little of the remarkable output of its film industry was acknowledged by western audiences. This changed in the 1950s: Whereas Chinese cinema was restricted by censorship after 1930 and politically instrumentalized from the early 1950s onwards, Japanese productions which largely depended on US-American standards found their way into Western cinemas. During the 1960s, the dependency on western cultural standards began to loosen, and a self-confident media industry began to deliver an astonishingly independent output with regard to form and content all over Asia. Since the 1990s, South Korea has entered the stage with an ever growing and lively film industry that gained international acclaim.

Nowadays, the film industry is a vibrant element of East Asian popular culture that has become increasingly important on a global level in the last decades. Japanese, and recently South Korean and Chinese films or TV series have a growing and worldwide audience not least because of easier access through streaming services. The many film productions provide a multifaceted arena of highly diverse content that spans nearly all aspects of the cultural developments in the countries. Religion has always played a major role in these contexts in various ways and in accordance with the highly diversified religious landscape of East Asia. This issue of JRFM will explore aspects of this multifaceted relationship between religion and movies or tv series. Contributions might include questions such as:

- How religion and religious traditions are portrayed in East Asian films.
- In what way characters in the films and their plots are guided by religious patterns and traditions.

- How religious iconography is used or referred to in the films.
- How films mirror recent changes in the religious landscape of East Asia.

We invite contributions from scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including – but not limited to – religious studies, theology, media studies, sociology, digital anthropology, film studies and cultural studies.

The title of this call, "Here be Dragons" has two facets: Firstly, old maps sometimes marked their "white spots" of unexplored territory with this phrase. Secondly, the mythical creature "dragon" is said to be vastly powerful and the current situation shows remarkable power in the creativity, innovation, and, sometimes, unpredictability of the East Asian media scene – not to speak of the immense importance dragons played in East Asian religious and cultural traditions.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 15 February 2023. 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 2023. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Prof. Christian Wessely (christian.wessely@uni-graz.at), Prof. Franz Winter (franz.winter@uni-graz.at) or Prof. Yoshida Yukihiko (yukihiko.yoshida@keio.jp).

The Handmaid's Tale

Connecting Literature, Film, Politics, and Religion

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have a control over the ending.
>
> *Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale*

In 1985, Canadian author Margaret Atwood published a dystopian novel written in fragments. It contains a scary vision, a disturbing compilation of every thinkable evil humankind may be capable of. Offred, the main character and narrator, explains the world she lives in: Gilead, a theonomic state with a totalitarian structure that is ruled by a male military elite. Atwood's novel points out how religious and political fanaticism fuel social inequality, censorship, and the limitation of individual rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* challenges conventions and expectations and enthrals the reader who reconnects all the pieces of this shocking story. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted for TV, film, radio, stage, and opera. There is also a graphic novel. Furthermore, it has inspired women fighting for their rights against conservative forces in many countries around the world. Eventually, in 2019, Atwood published a second novel, *The Testaments*, in which new female perspectives on Gilead and its decline are elaborated.

The Handmaid's Tale has become a frame for articulating and discussing controversial aspects of contemporary society such as gender relationships, power and political structures, ecology and catastrophe, reproduction and family, love and loyalty, domination and subversion, and the role of science. Religion plays a crucial yet still ambivalent role: it offers the main legitimation for the oppressive power of the cruel theocracy and at the same time it is a source of hope and motivation for subverting the whole system. The

Bible is also used in controversial ways, as a means of subjugation and as a text that enables resistance.

The editors of JRFM invite contributions for the May 2024 issue that address the multifaceted and controversial roles of religion in *The Handmaid's Tale* in and beyond the novel of 1985. Consideration of the various ramifications of this narrative in different media and decades and of its impact on politics and social debates are welcome, as is in-depth analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* that focusses on the role and significance of religion, references to the history of religions, and ethical and philosophical aspects as well as its social criticism.

Different approaches can be taken and a variety of questions asked, such as:

- How is religion represented and which aspects of religion are addressed in Margaret Atwood's novels from 1985 and 2019? What is the religious background of Gilead? Whose interests does it serve?
- Can we identify a change in how religion is represented in the novel's adaptations for different media, including audio-visual versions, the graphic novel, and performed iterations? Why?
- What is the hermeneutical dimension of the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- Which contemporary dimensions of religion and society are challenged by the narrative universe of *The Handmaid's Tale*?
- What could be the role of dystopian narrative in staging religion today?

We hope for an innovative scholarly discussion across a broad spectrum of case studies that includes the different adaptations and further works inspired by Margaret Atwood's novel. Scholars of literature, cinema and media studies, theology, and the study of religion, as well as of sociology or political sciences and other disciplines are invited to contribute to this issue.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics in keeping with the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 30 June 2023. Contributions of 5,000 to 7,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal homepage at www.jrfm.eu.

We kindly ask authors to register and to consider the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the style guide. Publication is scheduled for May 2024. For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Natalie Fritz (natalie.fritz@kath.ch) and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (pezzoli@lmu.de).

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