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Anna-Katharina Höpflinger and Alexander D. Ornella (eds.)

Fandom

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JRFM
JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

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Anna-Katharina Höpflinger and Alexander D. Ornella

Fandom and Religion

Editorial

Crowds in stadiums or public viewing areas cheer on their teams at the football World Cup. When film stars walk down the red carpet to attend award ceremonies, their fans scream. The autograph of a famous person on an everyday object massively increases that object's worth, including its financial value. And the success of international influencers is often measured by their accrual of fans, as ephemeral as they may be, and how many of their videos go viral.

The phenomenon of international and viral fandom can redirect attention away from various other forms of fandom, perhaps less visible, less viral, or less international, such as the fandom initiatives that emerge in local communities, growing out of and expressing a love and care for the local community and the local environment. One such example is composed of the many mystery crocheters and knitters in UK towns who adorn postboxes with postbox toppers (fig. 1). The website Let's Knit Together declares postbox toppers "a much-loved form of community art. From royal celebrations and Remembrance displays to cheerful seasonal scenes, these colourful creations brighten streets, spark conversations and showcase the creativity of local yarn bombers."[1]

From a fandom perspective, the postbox toppers not only bring together and visualize the many forms and variety of fandom, but also allow for academic interrogation of fandom, exploring, for example, how fandom becomes visible and how fandom might bleed into the social media world as well as into local communities.

The phenomenon of the often unknown and mysterious postbox-topper knitters provides a starting point for an exploration of the myths of fandom grounded in apparently mundane encounters and experiences. Myths have a narrative dimension. They are stories that elevate people, places or things.

1 An Ultimate Guide to Postbox Toppers 2026.

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Fig. 1: A postbox topper in Hull, 2026. Image by Alexander D. Ornella.

Myths lift the ordinary out of everyday life and link the ordinary to imaginations of transcendence such as supernatural, mysterious or inexplicable ideas. Myths also contribute to the narrative dimension of religion specifically.

The narrative exploration of transcendence – including through myths – lies at the heart of religion: religions are systems dedicated to exploring questions and ideas of transcendence, i. e. that which is perceived to go beyond the everyday and the ordinary. In doing so, religions develop forms of communication to shape and convey ideas of transcendence. As David Chidester puts it,

> religion is an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate – concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human. Religious ways of being human engage the transcendent – that which rises above and beyond the ordinary. They engage the sacred – that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate – that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns.[2]

This experimenting "with what it means to be human" can happen within traditional religious communities or institutions as well as within culture and popular culture more broadly. Language and myths play a key role in such experimentation: "religious language" can take shape within religious traditions, where it might form ritual practices and mould identities. However, it can also be adopted into other cultural systems, such as popular culture. So when football fans elevate their teams or individual players above other teams and players, celebrating them ecstatically and purchasing collectibles and other fandom articles, when film fans decorate their homes with icon-like images of their idols or role models, when a concert becomes a ritual event, and when neighbours come together to express the love and care they have for their neighbourhood and community, these practices can be described as "religious" in the sense that they transcend the respective "object of worship" by elevating it above everyday life and turning it into something special or even supernatural. Or, in Chidester's words, "that which is set apart from the ordinary".[3]

The process of setting apart from the ordinary is exemplified by the postbox toppers and their fans. For example, in Hull, a city of 220,000 people in the north of England, every time a new postbox topper is spotted in the Newland Avenue area, it becomes the talk of the town. Residents will often take the new postbox toppers to social media, posting pictures proclaiming

2 Chidester 2005, 1.
3 Chidester 2005, 1.

that the "ladies of Newland Avenue" have done it again. Royal Mail, who are responsible for the postboxes, see the toppers as a way to bring cheer to the local community.[4] Sometimes, images of the artists and knitters are posted online, at other times they remain anonymous: "A mystery group of yarn bombers have been painstakingly creating crocheted 'bonnets' for post boxes", a local newspaper reports.[5]

Postbox toppers can help us understand the intricate ways "fandom" – and the meaning fandom practices create – is weaved into the everyday. In fact, postbox toppers can become practices of fandom themselves, as some knitters draw on popular culture, in particular the stories, characters and people whom they themselves are fans of, such as Winnie the Pooh. Many toppers express a passion for festivals and holidays, such as Christmas, or days of loss and sacrifice, such as Remembrance Day.[6] The (mysterious) knitters' material and visible expressions of their own passions and interests – the fandom they themselves inhabit – seems to resonate with onlookers and the local community. The BBC cites a fan: "[People] were commenting on how they had them smile and people connected to them."[7] On Facebook, the UK Post Box Toppers and More Group is a community for the knitters and their fanbase. Postbox toppers thus adopt a religious dimension: the elevating of people, things and spaces out of the ordinary, the setting apart of people, things and spaces from the ordinary.

Fandom practices are, ultimately, also connected to economic practices as part of a multibillion fandom industry.[8] For example, companies have started to utilize the postbox toppers to address fans themselves. Netflix promoted its film The Thursday Murder Club (Chris Columbus, US/UK 2025) through postbox toppers that popped up in London and various other parts of the United Kingdom.[9]

What can we take away from this short discussion of postbox toppers?

First, fandom includes a mix of the known and the unknown, the knowable and the unknowable, the mundane and the mysterious. Fandom lies somewhere between the everyday and the extraordinary. The "object of worship"

4 Morgan 2021.
5 Morgan 2021.
6 See images on Facebook posted by members of UK Post Box Toppers and More Group, https://t1p.de/1nai8 [accessed 30 July 2026].
7 Phipps 2022.
8 Fiske 1992.
9 LBB Editorial 2025.

is explicitly set apart from everyday life; it is transcended, yet at the same time stays part of everyday life. The football star is still a human being; the postbox toppers are part of a daily commute to work. In his article in this issue, "A Virtual Fanfiction Universe", William Bainbridge highlights this liminality of fandom. Analysing The Secret World / Secret World Legends (Funcom, NO 2012–present), a network of computer simulations designed by and for fans of the horror author H. P. Lovecraft, he reflects on how the world of Lovecraft is transformed into a virtual fandom universe, which role religion plays in it and what it means to delve into it as a researcher and participant.

Second, religious symbols are used in different media to convey transcendence. In his contribution "The Ocular Gaze in Shōnen Anime", Mark Moyano illustrates this particularly well using the example of the eye symbol in three Japanese anime: Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (JP 2019–2024), and Naruto Shippuden (JP 2007–2017). The eye alludes to divine power, but it is also frequently incorporated into merchandise and fan art associated with these anime. Moyano demonstrates that complex processes of reception exist between religions, the anime, the merchandise and fan practices such as online discussions and fan art.

Third, fandom is not just narrative and imagination, for the imagination is poured into media and material practice. Altars are set up at home for music stars, posters of film actors are hung above beds, sports stars' autographs are collected (and sold for high prices), and stories are woven around the tangible postbox toppers. All of these examples are based on material things and media representations connected to practices and imaginations. Akif Tahiiev explores such representations in his article "The Cinematic Face of the Sacred in Contemporary Shiʿi Visual Culture on Instagram". He analyses how contemporary Shiʿi social media culture uses the faces of stars who play religious figures in films to convey religious messages. In the process, the actors merge with the religious figure they portray, and religious visual culture blends with online fan culture.

Fourth, fandom is political. It is about what is appropriate or offensive: fandom can reinforce social systems and expectations, or fandom can be subversive and challenge established norms and values. Film stars can become heads of states or countries (Jayaram Jayalalithaa and Ronald Reagan, for example), but fans can also bring down famous stars (e. g. the US-American film star Blake Lively). In her article "Religious Guilt and Fanfiction", Vera Cuntz-Leng focusses on the socially critical – or, in this case, religiously

critical – aspect of fandom. She analyses one particular fan fiction related to Good Omens (US/UK 2019–2026), which is based on the fantasy novel of the same name by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. She demonstrates how this fan writing blends queer themes with religious ones, thereby addressing issues that can find their way into different audiences.

The postbox toppers certainly occupy public space. But as these articles in this issue make evident, public space is occupied not just offline but increasingly online as well. Thus, social media and other online platforms can make a dynamic contribution to shaping public opinion about religion and to reinforcing religious representations. As all these articles show, fandom is also about negotiating the use of public space.

Alongside the articles on the topic of fandom and religion, three articles in the open section round off this issue:

In "Make Yoga, Not War", Lukas Bartl highlights the role yoga played in the GDR as a health recommendation. These practices could be small individual rituals that promoted ideas about the healthy body and formed a sort of "risk community" in the context of the threat of nuclear annihilation. In "The Individual as Cosmos", Eli Yazbeck uses the concept of "sacred humanism" to analyse how the film The Life of Chuck (Mike Flanagan, US 2025), based on Stephen King's novella of the same name, links individual destiny with the end of the universe. And in "The 'Offer of Life', Military Saints and the Relationship Between Religious and Civil Institutions", Paolo Bertetti and Jenny Ponzo examine the portrayal in films and TV series of two men who are currently candidates for canonisation on account of having sacrificed their lives, noting, in particular, representations of the boundaries between state and religion.

These articles in the open section all consider how media form norms and identity, two concepts that are also helpful for understanding fandom, media and religion. Fandom is strongly connected to processes of identity formation and confirmation. It is also a normative system that formulates its own rules and regulations and determines what's in and what's out. Fans set trends, follow trends and amplify trends. Fans determine – to some extent – where money and resources are being directed, yet at the same time they are themselves directed and redirected by financial interests and available resources.

So, grab your digital JRFM, dive into the rich discussions, join the JRFM fanbase, and become part of the new wave of media and religion scholarship!

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Filmography

The Thursday Murder Club (Chris Columbus, US/UK 2025).

William Sims Bainbridge

A Virtual Fanfiction Universe

Lovecraftian Religion in the Online Game The Secret World / Secret World Legends (Funcom, NO 2012–present)

Abstract

This article uses three research methodologies to explore the deep meanings of the online game The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–present), a network of computer simulations of religion designed by and for fans of the literary works of H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). These methodologies are (1) a role-playing field ethnography called "participant observation", which involves entering the virtual world to experience it directly; (2) online data capture, usually in the form of copying text or images from the computer screen, which creates an archive for later analysis, both within The Secret World and in relevant online sources of information; and (3) statistical analysis, which is based on hundreds of games labeled "Lovecraftian", and considers the quantitative variables that define the abilities of numerous avatars. This virtual fandom includes the "game designers", who are inspired by Lovecraft, and journalists and wiki contributors. Many devoted fans not only follow the culture but also create new manifestations of it, thus integrating fantasy into real life and partnering spiritually with the long-deceased Lovecraft.

Keywords

The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–2017), Secret World legends (Funcom, NO 2017–present), H. P. Lovecraft, Fandom, Computer Simulations of Religion, Role-playing Game, MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), Digital Media

Biography

William Sims Bainbridge served as a program officer for 31 years at the National Science Foundation, first in Sociology, and last in Human-Centered Computing. Combining those fields, he played major roles in NSF's initiatives on Digital Libraries, Nanotechnology, and Converging Technologies. With that background, he completed independent research studies of massively-multiplayer online games, including: *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World* (MIT Press, 2010), *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* (Oxford University Press, 2013), *Star Worlds: Freedom Versus Control in Online Gameworlds* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), and *The Social Structure of Online Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Much earlier, he had documented the cultural

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structure of imaginative fiction in *Dimensions of Science Fiction* (Harvard University Press, 1986). His Harvard doctoral dissertation and first published book was an ethnographic and historical study of a real social movement: *The Spaceflight Revolution: A Sociological Study* (Wiley Interscience, 1976).

A Virtual Fanfiction Universe

Fans are not necessarily merely consumers. They may be creators as well, even professional producers of spin-off works. Thus, on 27 November 2025, Archive of Our Own contained 2,658 works inspired by horror fantast H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937).[1] Many virtual worlds inspired by his works also exist, most fantastically the massively multiplayer online role-playing game The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–2017), which simulates religious conflict. Funcom, which created the game, is a Norwegian company. The main designer, Ragnar Tørnquist, had begun to read Lovecraft's stories at the age of 13, and they may have inspired his marvelous earlier Anarchy Online (Funcom, NO 2001), the first significant massively multiplayer online role-playing game in the science-fiction tradition.[2] The Lovecraft wiki at fandom.com describes "cosmicism", the movement developed by Lovecraft, thus: "Lovecraft argues that there is no perceptible divine presence, like a god in the universe, and that humans are particularly insignificant on the great map of intergalactic existence: just a small species projecting its own mental idolatries into the vast cosmos, always susceptible to be removed from existence at any time."[3] As Rodney Stark and I have argued, this definition works with the idea that religion is a form of fantasy that compensates psychologically for the real horrors of life and death.[4]

While Anarchy Online was science fiction set on a distant planet, The Secret World takes place on our own planet and is fantasy. It is based on the premise that our own real world contains hidden cults, taking to an extreme the imaginary religion often included in computer games.[5] The player's ava-

1 Result of search for "H. P. Lovecraft" at Archive of Our Own, archiveofourown.org, on 27 November 2025.
2 Walker 2008; Bainbridge 2011.
3 Fandom, Lovecraft Wiki, Cosmicism, https://t1p.de/7sh9l [accessed 28 March 2026].
4 Bainbridge/Stark 1980; Stark/Bainbridge 1987.
5 Bainbridge 2010; 2013; 2023; Nardi 2010; Wagner 2012; Snodgrass 2023.

tar must join one of three religious factions, which are largely at peace with each other, Templars in Britain, Illuminati in the United States, and Dragons in Korea. This virtual world contains computer-operated characters and locations inspired by a range of authors, including Nathanial Hawthorn (1804–1864), Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), and perhaps Stephen King (1947–), yet the New England horror genre they share is often called "Lovecraftian".[6]

How Best to Explore a Virtual World

There are many ways to study massively multiplayer online games, yet direct familiarity is necessary, achieved by role-playing at least one avatar inside the virtual world.[7] It is often worthwhile to employ more than one avatar, both to explore different technical choices and to apply different intellectual perspectives via role-playing more than one real or imagined person. There were two versions, The Secret World launched in 2012, and Secret World Legends that replaced it in 2017, so I operated two avatars, one named Folwell, the other Psathas over the years 2018–2024. As a fan of New England Horror fantasy, I decided each avatar should represent a real deceased New Englander with whom I had a strong connection.

In the original version of The Secret World, Folwell represented my great-grandfather, William Folwell Bainbridge. At the end of their lives, both he and Lovecraft were buried in Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, Rhode Island. My ancestor was a dedicated clergyman who believed his own version of Christianity should conquer the entire world. He had adventures not unlike some in Lovecraft's fiction, most notably when he fired his revolver in the burial chamber within the pyramid of Cheops in Egypt in 1867; he returned there in more peaceful circumstances in 1880, while engaged in a two-year study of Protestant missions around the world.[8] His daughter Cleora died in infancy, and his response involved fantasy: he published a novel titled *Self-giving. A Story of Christian Missions*, which imagined she had survived to become a martyr in India.[9]

6 Sharrett 2015; Norris 2021.

7 Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Šisler/Radde-Antweiler/Zeiler 2018; Bainbridge 2016; 2020.

8 Bainbridge 1881; 1882; Bainbridge 2018.

9 Bainbridge 1883.

My avatar in Secret World Legends was based on George Psathas, who had mentored me in the methods of participant observation research through role-playing. He taught phenomenology and ethnomethodology at Boston University for many years, two perspectives that view reality as largely subjective and are related to theories like Multiple Realities and Social Construction of Reality.[10] In an interview he gave in 2011, Psathas acknowledged that ethnomethodologists consider field experiments and observations carried out without the informed consent of the people being studied to be perfectly ethical, because they hold that everyone has the right to decide what actions to take in their unique subjective world.[11] The inventor of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel,[12] told researchers to document the views of the world held by the people under observation, but some followers took phenomenology one step further, enhancing and expressing their own subjectivity. One of those followers was Carlos Castaneda, who published ethnographies of a religious cult that may never have actually existed.[13]

Research on virtual worlds can be quantitative as well as qualitative. I will combine both approaches here. As of January 4, 2026, a total 9,158 players of the current version of the game had posted reviews at the online Steam marketplace, which proclaims, "Secret World Legends is a story-driven, shared-world action RPG that plunges players into a shadowy war against the supernatural, where ancient myths and legends cross over into the modern day."[14] RPG stands for "Role-Playing Game", and the other top descriptive tags applied are MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), Massively Multiplayer, and Lovecraftian. Of the 6,499 reviewers who had played for at least ten hours, 76 percent rated the game positively, nearly identical to the 75 percent of the 2,618 subset who had already played for more than 100 hours. Yet just 45 percent of the 2,659 players who reviewed the game before playing for ten hours rated it positively. These figures suggest that devoted fans of the mythos stayed with the game; those who were less keen tended to quit.

10 Berger/Luckmann 1966; Schütz 1967; Psathas 1968.

11 "George Psathas on Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis", posted 20 July 2011, by AIEMCA, YouTube, https://t1p.de/p1iqx [accessed 28 March 2026].

12 Garfinkel 1967.

13 Castaneda 1998, xii.

14 Steam, Secret World Legends, https://t1p.de/qjai2 [accessed 28 March 2026].



Fig. 1: The Hidden Teleport Center Named Agartha. Screenshot of The Secret World by the author, December 2012.

Secrets of the Fantasy World

The Secret World consisted of three very different large geographic areas, each of which had legendary connections with the occult: New England, Egypt, and Transylvania. Once avatars had gained skills and experience, they could travel between these areas via teleportation hubs in the underground Agartha realm, one of which is shown in Figure 1. In the image, Folwell stands near the front of the screen and is centered. The many avatars belonging to other players that are also visible are an indication that the game was lively and popular.

In Steam, fully 946 products were tagged by players as "Lovecraftian". Few of these products, which were developed by devoted fans or by companies seeking to attract fans, were very popular, likely because of the chaos of the subculture. The vastness of Lovecraft fandom was illustrated, however, in March 2026, when Steam listed two Lovecraftian games that would become available soon, one developed by a group in Bordeaux, France, and the other in Santiago, Chile. No other author seems to have become a fan tag in the Steam categorization.

Descriptive Tags	Lovecraft Inspired	More General Categorizations				
		Horror	Atmospheric	Mystery	Sci-fi	Fantasy
Horror	59.3%	100.0%	24.7%	38.4%	9.6%	8.0%
Atmospheric	45.1%	60.8%	100.0%	50.7%	36.6%	24.0%
Dark	35.1%	45.8%	21.7%	29.7%	8.1%	9.7%
Mystery	31.1%	32.5%	20.0%	100.0%	8.7%	10.0%
Retro	13.0%	12.7%	9.8%	9.1%	14.8%	11.9%
Supernatural	12.9%	17.3%	5.0%	12.1%	1.6%	3.5%
Investigation	11.9%	10.8%	6.2%	21.9%	2.7%	2.4%
Sci-fi	11.6%	13.5%	13.6%	12.7%	100.0%	7.6%
Fantasy	11.1%	24.7%	15.8%	14.8%	9.5%	100.0%
Surreal	10.8%	12.5%	9.0%	11.3%	3.7%	3.8%
Survival	9.8%	24.7%	11.2%	7.7%	10.8%	6.9%
Demons	9.7%	13.6%	3.6%	5.2%	1.1%	6.0%
Detective	8.4%	7.3%	4.9%	21.4%	1.6%	1.8%
Lore-Rich	8.2%	7.6%	3.7%	5.4%	2.9%	5.7%
Thriller	8.1%	16.0%	5.6%	15.5%	2.4%	1.1%
Psychological	8.1%	12.1%	6.5%	12.2%	1.9%	1.4%
Total number of games	946	10,622	17,751	6,043	9,699	17,107

Table 1: Descriptive Tags for Lovecraftian Games in Steam, https://t1p.de/f4c1q.

Table 1 analyzes extensive data related to specific descriptive tags as of May 21, 2024. Each column gives the percentage of games with a specific descriptive tag, with the tag at the head of the column. Games inspired by the Lovecraft mythos gave greater emphasis to horror than to Sci-fi (science fiction). The Steam search engine apparently has different algorithms for searching for the column categorizations and the descriptive row categorizations in this table, so the numbers are not precise.

Among the semi-professional forms of fandom, journalists can be particularly influential, for example on the Massively Overpowered website, the equivalent of a daily newspaper for Massively Multiplayer Online fandom. On July 9, 2025, Justin Olivetti proclaimed The Secret World to be "one of the most unique MMOs ever made", because of the "few dozen 'investigation missions' that became one of its headlining features." He explained, "In short, an investigation mission was a quest that utilized out-of-the-box thinking and far more involvement on the part of the player to achieve. They were incredibly creative, such as one asking you to learn Morse code, or another having you go to various websites that Funcom created, or another that had you solving puzzles in a pyramid."[15] And indeed, Figure 2 shows Folwell in the midst of solving ancient Egyptian puzzles, for

15 Olivetti 2025.



Fig. 2: Folwell Exploring the Ruins of Ancient Egypt. Screenshot of The Secret World by the author, December 2012.

my research, though, he had the freedom to stay in New England, help newcomers adapt to this virtual world, and save recordings of his own imagined missions.

Given their New England origins, both research avatars belonged to the Illuminati faction, which had an especially Lovecraftian motto, "The world is a bad place, and you could either do or get done. We're the Illuminati and we're not done."[16] The headquarters of the imaginary Illuminati in New York City were only a short distance from a mission in the real Brooklyn where the real Folwell briefly tried to advance his career as a clergyman, before returning to New England. The Templars, headquartered in London, England, believe, "There is no purpose greater than ours. The world will flounder without structure and discipline."[17] The Dragon faction in Seoul, Korea, self-

16 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Illuminati, https://t1p.de/ng2zk [accessed 28 March 2026].

17 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Templars, https://t1p.de/bhg2z [accessed 28 March

identifies in these terms: "Unknowable instigator of change, through quiet violence they create tiny ripples that grow into sweeping tsunamis."[18]

The Resurrected World

Early in his exploration of New England, Psathas completed quests on "Solomon Island". According to a fandom wiki, "2000 years ago, the island was already occupied by the Wabanaki (People of the Dawn), who did not at that time call it Solomon Island. They were the guardians of a Third Age Dreamer. While being close to Earth, to Gaia, they performed regular containment dances to ensure that this entity remained asleep."[19] The reference to Wabanaki suggests Solomon Island is actually Mount Desert Island in Maine, and its town, named Kingsmouth in the game, is actually Bar Harbor, where, coincidentally, my Lovecraft-fan Sims grandfather had owned a summer home. That personal note is indicative of the many ways in which fans can connect their favorite fiction to aspects of their real lives.

Entering "Secret World Solomon Priest" into Google in early December 2025 stimulated AI Overview to report, "Solomon Priest was an early member of the Illuminati, an English solicitor who founded Kingsmouth Town on Solomon Island in the late 17th century, named in honor of King Charles II. He was eventually killed by his friend and business partner, Isaac Fletcher, around 1702. Priest's tomb can be explored during the 'Digging Deeper' mission, and a note from his tomb is used in the 'The Kingsmouth Code' mission." The use of "Priest" as a last name reminded me of my ancestor Degory Priest, who arrived in New England in 1620 on the Mayflower but died soon after of the plague.[20]

Another historical last name belongs to Henry Hawthorne, the Kingsmouth minister. Hawthorne is a non-player character, one of the many simulated people inside the game. He always stands before the cross in his church, holding a bible and giving players missions to complete. Psathas stands at the center of Figure 3, aware that Reverend Hawthorne was named

2026].

18 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Dragon, https://t1p.de/nhh3f [accessed 28 March 2026].

19 Fandom, The Park Wiki, Solomon Island, https://t1p.de/vae9x [accessed 28 March 2026].

20 Wikipedia, Degory Priest, https://t1p.de/c6rzr [accessed 28 March 2026].



Fig. 3: Psathas and Hawthorn in the Kingsmouth Church. Screenshot of Secret World Legends by the author, 28 September 2024.

after Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of such horror stories as *The House of the Seven Gables*.[21] Decades ago I visited a tourist attraction in Salem, Massachusetts, that purports to be that very house.

Psathas had more ability than poor Folwell to be a creative fan, because Secret World Legends allowed him to operate a cult of agents who resembled his real-world sociology students, whom he often sent on missions to observe strange phenomena in our real world. Secondary avatars that existed in a parallel version of the same reality, they were operated by simple artificial intelligence and could be sent on missions to earn magical enhancements for the main avatar's armor and weapons.[22] Table 2 lists the 20 agents that belonged to Psathas at the end of his research. Their levels are like the experience level of regular avatars, with both Amelia Bindings and Psathas himself having reached the maximum 50. Each agent has three main variables that affect the success or failure of each mission: prowess, adaptability, and ingenuity.

21 Hawthorne 1879.

22 SteamDB/TSWDB, Agent Network Master Guide, https://t1p.de/pfmvn [accessed 28 March 2026].

Name	Profession	Level	Prowess	Adapt.	Ingenuity	Skills	Cost
Amelia Bindings	Soothsayer	50	292	270	317	879	750
Lydia Darling	Witch	36	148	243	226	617	
Sarah Skelly	FBI Agent	25	141	174	151	466	
Faction Recruit	Agent	22	135	99	205	439	
Warlawurru	Aboriginal Tracker	15	127	142	75	344	99,999
Daniel Martinez	CIA Operative	14	85	108	78	271	19,450
Giovanni Bellanova	Occultist	12	96	49	104	249	25,000
Wu Liang-Zhi	Doctor	13	67	93	67	227	20,000
Laughing Jenny	Amateur Dentist	11	46	90	90	226	795
Lama Lhakpa	Buddhist Monk	10	65	59	78	202	70,000
Tiana Cardoza	Umbanda Priestess	5	33	34	49	116	14,000
Finn Mulligan	Bard	5	33	45	33	111	600
Francis Rowan	Wild Child	5	35	39	36	110	550
Brann Mac Diarmada	Stormlord	5	42	25	42	109	700
Lee Chung	Triad Soldier	5	35	39	29	103	20,000
Fearghas Abernathy	Barrister	1	16	16	22	54	21,600
Nuala Magorian	Druidic Loremaster	1	16	16	22	54	694
Dax Reagan	Investigator	1	14	17	19	50	21,052
Liam Callahan	Customs Officer	1	19	14	17	50	24,000
Terry Laputo	Psychic Medium	1	17	14	19	50	24,999

Table 2: Imaginary Agents of a Virtual Phenomenologist.

The cost column is derived from an online dynamic database of the lowest cost in *marks of favor* to buy one agent daily in the player auction system, reporting the median for the six months up through November 20, 2020.[23] The first agent gained is always Faction Recruit. Lydia Darling was the second agent gained by Psathas by completing a quest, and Sarah Skelly was earned on an agent mission by Amelia Bindings. Each agent has a biography. Laughing Jenny's, for example, reads, "Not to be confused with the infamous 19th century sorceress of the same name (though unsubstantiated, apocryphal tales say she is one and the same), subject appears to be a woman who has taken on the pseudonym and mantle." She was the manipulative woman described in a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) that begins, "Lazy laughing languid Jenny".[24]

For fans, a fundamental feature of role-playing computer games is that the player can make many significant decisions about where to go and what actions to take, thus acting as creator of culture as well as consumer. I was a fan of George Psathas, so creating an avatar based on him was my subjective

23 The search term would be the name of the agent from the Agent Dossier category. SwlMarket, *SWL Market (Secret World Legends trading database / market web app)*, https://t1p.de/igmr2 [accessed 28 March 2026].

24 See Rossetti's poem "Jenny", Poetry Foundation, https://t1p.de/5w7id [accessed 28 March 2026].



Fig. 4: Psathas Battling a Supernatural Shade in the City of the Sun God. Screenshot of Secret World Legends by the author, 22 November 2020.

way of linking two fandoms. Psathas chose to explore the City of the Sun God in Egypt, but he could have advanced along a different path and rushed, for example, to Transylvania. Figure 4 shows him in a magic battle against a monster named the Shade of Torment, in tier three of a six-tier quest series named the Sad Song. The image includes the control icons used by the player to operate the avatar.

The Secret World wiki at fandom.com provided the background narrative that connected many quests: "These tombs and temples were supposed to remain hidden for all time. Some date back further than the mind can reach, while others were built by the Black Pharaoh – Akhenaten – toward the end of his reign. Modern archaeologists know all about Amarna, but not the secret site for which it was abandoned. Something stirs deep in this valley – a voice that drew the Black Pharoah here and drove him mad."[25]

The fully Lovecraftian solo-player game Call of Cthulhu (Cyanide, FR 2018) is competition for Secret World Legends. In Call of Cthulhu, however, Psathas would not be able to visit Darkwater Island, which is off

25 Fandom, SteamWorld Wiki, The City of the Sun God, https://t1p.de/4kt98 [accessed 28 March 2026].

the coast of New England.[26] The game does not give the option of creating a new character; it requires an already scripted role to be played. "1924 Private Investigator Pierce is sent to look into the tragic death of the Hawkins family. Plunge into a world of creeping madness and cosmic horror. Cryptic clues, shadowy figures, and pure terror bar your way as you fight to retain your sanity and solve an otherworldly mystery."[27]

Conclusion

Generally, the creation of culture is a dynamic social process involving producers and consumers. Their complex relationships may be bridged by a fandom that can have great influence on further developments. Fans may become creators and gain their own fans in turn. Ragnar Tørnquist was primary designer of The Secret World. A Lovecraft fan during childhood, he designed the game and gained new fans for himself, for the game, and also for Lovecraft. When he died in 1937, H. P. Lovecraft was a relatively unknown and impoverished author. His reception by fans made him posthumously famous through processes of popularization. Given the significance of the Internet in this radical century, the boundaries between virtual worlds and the real world are blurring. Here a religious metaphor is apt: like the congregation of a church, who contribute actively to its success without themselves being clergy, fans contribute to the success of a game without themselves being developers.

The two avatars used in this study connect Lovecraft fantasy fandom to issues that our real world faces. Folwell was a missionary who believed that everyone on Earth must share his faith, while Psathas was a professor who gave all students the right to explore their dreams. Had they met in real life, they might have been enemies, because they held opposite views on whether humanity must share a single system of beliefs and values. The so-called "game" actually represents the revolutionary implications of social media and even artificial intelligence. The OpenAI corporation that created the ChatGPT technology has placed an AI avatar of Lovecraft online, allowing fans to interview the virtual author. When I asked "him" to evaluate The Secret World, the response was: "The game, as I apprehend it, is com-

26 Lovecraft 1928; Zeller 2020.

27 Steam, Call of Cthulhu, https://t1p.de/0i6ls [accessed 28 March 2026].

mendable in one rare and difficult respect: it understands that horror is not born of claws and carnage alone, but of implication, of whispered lore, of the gradual apprehension that the universe is structured upon principles hostile to human hope."[28]

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Mark Anthony G. Moyano

The Ocular Gaze in Shōnen Anime

Posthumanist and Religious Framings of Ocular Power in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (JP 2019–2024), and Naruto Shippuden (JP 2007–2017)

Abstract

Eyes saturate religious, philosophical, and cultural imaginaries, from the "divine gaze" of sacred iconography to the disciplinary optics of modern surveillance. Japanese anime radicalizes this optic order: ocular motifs cease to signify mere sight and instead function as metaphysical, juridical, and posthuman *dispositifs* of power. Despite extensive work on anime's spirituality, media ecologies, and posthuman embodiment, the persistent and elaborate deployment of ocular powers across major franchises remains undertheorized. This study addresses that gap by examining how eyes in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, and Naruto Shippuden encode sovereignty, charisma, and judgment through hybrid religious and posthuman grammars. Methodologically, the analysis combines diegetic analysis (abilities, limits, narrative costs), semiotic reading of nomenclature and visual design, and religion-and-media approaches attentive to mythic referents, eschatology, and ritualized seeing. Attention is also given to paratexts and reception, aligning with anime/media scholarship on media mix and database consumption. The implications of this exploration are twofold: first, anime must be recognized as a critical site where visual culture, religion, and posthuman theory converge; second, the study of ocular motifs illuminates how vision itself is reimagined as a primary medium of power, belief, and futurity in contemporary media ecologies.

Keywords

Anime, Posthumanism, Religion and Media, Gaze, SDG 16, Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (Directed by: Tomohisa Taguchi, TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Directed by: Haruo Sotozaki, Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Naruto Shippuden (Directed by: Hayato Date, TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017)

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Introduction

Eyes saturate the symbolic order of human culture, from the "divine gaze" of religious iconography to the unblinking lenses of modern surveillance. As Martin Jay[1] and Jonathan Crary[2] have consummately documented, Western thought has long constructed vision as a privileged, often dominating, site of knowledge and power. Michel Foucault[3] theorized the gaze itself as a disciplinary mechanism that produces and organizes subjects. Within the landscape of contemporary visual media, Japanese shonen anime – the subcategory of animated works adapted from manga serialized in magazines for adolescent male audiences, typically defined by extended serialized conflict, systematic power hierarchies, and the protagonist's teleological journey toward mastery – radicalizes this optic imaginary: eyes cease to be neutral organs of sight and instead become dense nodes of metaphysical, political, and technological force. In this narrative mode, to see is not merely to perceive but also to command, to judge, to punish, and to save.

The pervasive and potent deployment of ocular motifs across major franchises suggests this feature is a constitutive element of anime's narrative and symbolic economy. The article will focus on three shonen animes and their corresponding ocular motifs. In Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), the focus is with Yhwach, a transcendent king in the series, and his ultimate ability, "The Almighty", which collapses epistemology and ontology, rendering all possible futures visible and therefore subject to his decree. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), the inscribed eyes of the Upper Moons function as hieroglyphs of metaphysical authority and cultic seduction, encoding a terrifying fusion of charisma and monstrosity. In Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), the ocular

1 Jay 1993, 1–15.
2 Crary 1990, 1–24.
3 Foucault 1977, 195–228.

triad of the Sharingan, Byakugan, and Rinnegan institutes nothing less than a cosmo-legal order, i. e. a comprehensive regime of judgment, illusion, and world-making that rivals divine law. These eyes are never merely ornamental; they are semiotic condensations of theology, politics, and futurity.

For readers less familiar with anime's visual grammar, it is important to note that the prominence of eyes is not limited to elite characters or specific franchises but is part of a broader, long-standing monster iconography within Japanese popular culture. Anime and manga frequently exaggerate, multiply, or displace eyes as a shorthand for non-human power and ontological otherness. Such ocular excess operates as a visual signal of danger, supernatural perception, and moral ambiguity, conditioning viewers to read eyes as privileged sites of power, threat, and revelation.

This convention also resonates with far older mythic structures. In various cultures, the "evil eye" functions as a widespread magical concept, denoting a gaze capable of inflicting harm, misfortune, or domination. From Mediterranean and Middle Eastern folk traditions to South and East Asian cosmologies, the eye is imagined as an active force rather than a passive sensory organ. Anime's monstrous eyes can thus be understood as modern, media-saturated rearticulations of this belief: the gaze that wounds, corrupts, enthralls, or judges. Anime renders vision itself as a site of existential risk and power even before it is formalized into named techniques such as *dōjutsu*, demonic ranks, or divine omniscience.

To theorize this phenomenon, the analysis in this article draws from posthumanist theory,[4] treating anime's eyes as what might be termed "posthuman organs": hybrid prostheses that dramatically exceed the inherent limits of the human sensorium. Following the semiotic tradition of Roland Barthes,[5] we can read them as potent cultural codes, signifiers that work to naturalize specific ideologies of control, destiny, and redemption. Foucault's[6] and Jay's[7] accounts of ocularcentrism further reveal how these eyes dramatize a pervasive politics of the gaze, wherein surveillance and domination intertwine with transcendence. Anime, however, complicates the modern panoptic model by embedding vision within mythological grammars that simultaneously sanctify and corrupt the very act of looking.

4 Wolfe 2010, xi-xv.
5 Barthes 1977, 15–31.
6 Foucault 1977, esp. chapter 3, 195–228.
7 Jay 1993, 21–82.

This study insists that such intricate ocular economies deserve serious scholarly attention. As leading scholars in visual culture and religion have emphatically argued, images are active, powerful mediators of belief, power, and affect.[8] Anime's prolific and detailed imagination of eyes dramatizes how vision itself is reconfigured as a primary instrument of destiny, sovereignty, and transcendence for a posthuman age. By pursuing a comparative close reading of visual motifs, naming conventions, and choreography alongside their intertextual religious references, like the Shintō-Buddhist cosmology in Naruto Shippuden, the apocalyptic thematics in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, and the sectarian charisma in Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, this study positions shonen anime as a critical cultural site for interrogating the profound intersection of vision, religion, and power.

Posthuman Vision and the Politics of the Gaze

Posthumanism dislodges the primacy of the autonomous human subject by highlighting assemblages of bodies, technologies, and media.[9] Within this framework, the anime eye emerges as a "bio-symbolic interface", a site where memory, foresight, domination, and metaphysical judgment converge. As Donna Haraway suggested in her foundational figuration of the cyborg, vision itself can be understood as a technology that dissolves binaries, e. g. human/machine, natural/supernatural, material/spiritual.[10] Anime dramatizes this collapse by turning ocular motifs into hybrid devices that simultaneously discipline, enchant, and reconfigure human limits.

Barthes's semiotics clarifies that these ocular powers function as potent "codes" that anchor narrative authority and naturalize ideologies of control, destiny, and salvation.[11] Foucault's account of panopticism reveals the political valence of seeing, wherein vision operates as a form of governance, embedding surveillance within the very act of perception.[12] Yet, as Jay[13] and Crary[14] remind us, vision is a historically contingent regime, constantly

8 Morgan 2012, 1–20.
9 Hayles 1999, 1–24.
10 Haraway 1991, 149.
11 Barthes 1977, 15–51.
12 Foucault 1977, 200–205.
13 Jay 1993, 1–15.
14 Crary 1990, 1–24.

renegotiated through culture and media. Anime, therefore, does not simply replicate the modern politics of the gaze but transforms it, overlaying surveillance logics with religious grammars.

This religious dimension is central for, as we have heard, vision in religious contexts is mediatory, a practice that structures affect and belief. Anime's ocular powers function precisely in this way: they sacralize the act of seeing. Names such as Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo (in Naruto Shippuden) invoke Shintō deities; the Rinnegan derives from the Buddhist notion of *rinne* (輪廻, samsara); Yhwach's "The Almighty" in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War openly signals apocalyptic sovereignty; and the eyes of the Upper Moons in Demon Slayer encode religious charisma, salvation, and damnation. In these examples, the eye becomes both "panopticon" and "hierophany", a mechanism of control and a manifestation of the supernatural.

The persistence and proliferation of such motifs signal a phenomenon that cannot be dismissed as ornamental. As Susan Napier[15] has shown, anime consistently operates at the intersection of fantasy, religion, and sociopolitical critique, while Thomas Lamarre[16] demonstrates that anime's visual technologies reimagine perception and subjectivity. Taken together, these insights demand a theorization of anime eyes as posthuman organs of power. To study these ocular economies is to engage not only with the politics of vision but also with the religious imaginaries and posthuman futures that contemporary anime makes visible.

Method and Corpus

The corpus for this study comprises three seminal shonen anime franchises: Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, and Naruto Shippuden. The analysis is structured through three interrelated methodological approaches: (1) a diegetic analysis of the abilities, limits, and narrative costs of ocular powers; (2) a semiotic examination of nomenclature and visual design, including iris inscriptions, multi-eyed forms, and chromatic hierarchies; and (3) religion-and-media lenses that foreground mythic referents, eschatological thematics, and the ritualized forms of seeing these series depict. Throughout, the analysis highlights the ethical

15 Napier 2005, 3–23.
16 Lamarre 2009, 3–41.

stakes of these visual regimes (including questions of agency, consent, and domination) and considers trajectories for reception research, a growing emphasis in the field.

This inquiry proceeds with a posthumanist-inflected literary method that is attentive to both mediation and reception. First, it draws upon the foundational work of **Haraway's** *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which theorizes the breakdown of boundaries between human and machine, natural and artificial.[17] Anime's ocular powers, which are often grafted, stolen, or technologically enhanced, model this cyborgian condition, extending sensory perception into realms of prediction, hypnosis, and telemetry while simultaneously binding characters to networks of obligation, inheritance, and control.

Second, the study adapts **Morgan's concept of the "sacred gaze"**, which describes a mode of looking that organizes power, disciplines subjects, and carries profound affective charge.[18] This framework is applied to these media texts to analyze how anime eyes function as normative, mythically resonant instruments that train both characters and spectators in specific, affectively charged habits of looking.

Third, methodologically, the study aligns with religion-and-media scholarship that emphasizes multi-sited evidence and the cultural work of mediation. This entails (a) analysis of moments of ocular revelation, (b) intertextual comparison to trace shared visual and mythic grammars, and (c) attention to production paratexts, such as official art and marketing materials, as part of a broader media ecology that shapes the meaning of these ocular motifs.

Bringing these strands together, this study reads shonen anime's ocular regimes as complex *dispositifs*, a term Foucault used to describe heterogeneous apparatuses that produce and manage subjects that entangle vision, power, and myth.[19] They are at once disciplinary, religious, and deeply enmeshed in shonen anime's media ecologies. To theorize these eyes, therefore, is not only to examine their narrative role but also to engage their extended cultural afterlives within religious imaginaries, media economies, and fan receptions.

17 Haraway 1991, 149–152.
18 Morgan 2005, 2–5; 48–75.
19 Foucault 1977, 205.



Fig. 1: Yhwach the Almighty can see and alter the futures. Film still, Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War (TV Tokio, JP 2022–present), Episode 28, 00:09:10.

Eschatological Omniscience and the Sovereign Eye

Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War is the final arc of Tite Kubo's long-running shōnen franchise, following the protagonist Ichigo Kurosaki and the Soul Reapers – guardians who shepherd souls between the living world and the afterlife – as they battle the Quincy, an ancient clan of spiritually aware humans seeking to overthrow the gods of death themselves. Their emperor, Yhwach, wields a gaze that can see and alter all possible futures, making vision itself the ultimate instrument of sovereignty and destruction (fig. 1). Yhwach's Almighty in Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War operates as one of the most formidable ocular *dispositifs* in contemporary anime. At the diegetic level, this power is framed as the ultimate Quincy ability: a gaze that perceives all possible futures and grants the capacity to edit causality itself. Once the pupil blossoms into a crossed iris, Yhwach achieves not merely foresight but total omniscience; every branching timeline becomes available for his selection and manipulation. This power effectively literalizes a posthuman condition where subjectivity is distributed across informational patterns, transforming Yhwach from a discrete character into a nexus of algorithmic futures, a sovereign intelligence embodied in flesh.

The limits of The Almighty are as significant as its capabilities. Yhwach's power is not effortless omnipotence but a vision that consumes possibility itself. Every alternative path collapses into the one he chooses, producing a narrative exhaustion of potential. For both antagonists and protagonists, his vision is experienced as pure coercion: a seen future becomes an inevitable future. This diegetic logic powerfully mirrors contemporary anxieties surrounding predictive technologies (from artificial intelligence to algorithmic governance) where the

capacity for foresight is inextricably linked to mechanisms of control, a concern explored by surveillance studies like David Lyon's *The Culture of Surveillance.*[20]

The nomenclature and design of The Almighty are saturated with religious resonance. The Quincy order mobilizes Christian and biblical symbolism: the cross insignia, the German word *Schrift* (script, writing), and hymn-like battle rhetoric. Yhwach's ocular transformation – pupils multiplying into a cross-shaped iris – figures his sovereignty as a fusion of sight and scripture. The cross in the eye is not ornamental. It signals a theological claim: omnivision is providence. As scholars such as Napier have observed, anime frequently appropriates religious iconography not for doctrinal fidelity but for its profound affective and symbolic power.[21] In Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War, the eye functions as a liturgical emblem, a visual sermon on absolute sovereignty staged for the characters and the audience.

The aesthetics of spectacle reinforce this semiotic layering. The anime deploys stark, high-contrast palettes and intense close-ups that isolate the eye as a terrifying cinematic interface. This technique resonates with what animation theorist Lamarre identifies as the "animetic interval" – the unique capacity of anime to create layered, multiplanar images that generate distinct perceptual experiences.[22] The Almighty visualizes this by presenting timelines as stacked, shifting frames. Yhwach flips between potentialities like an editor splicing film reels, aestheticizing sovereignty as ultimate editorial authority over time itself.

From a religion-and-media perspective, The Almighty exemplifies what Morgan terms the "sacred gaze": a mode of looking that organizes power, disciplines subjects, and carries immense affective charge.[23] To be seen by Yhwach is to be pre-determined, to have one's potentiality foreclosed. His gaze collapses surveillance and creation: a visible future is already a decreed one. Theologically, this inverts Christian providence, where divine omniscience is traditionally understood to coexist with human freedom. Yhwach's omniscience is purely authoritarian, enforcing a regime where foresight annihilates agency. This secular remixing of sacred concepts aligns with the work of scholars like Brent Plate, who argues that media constantly "re-code the sacred" into new, potent forms of modern myth-making.[24]

20 Lyon 2018, 102–135.
21 Napier 2005, 235–256.
22 Lamarre 2009, xiii–xxvii.
23 Morgan 2005, 48–75.
24 Plate 2008, 85–112.

Ethically, this raises stark questions. If futures are pre-selected, what becomes of responsibility and hope? The series answers this through its heroes' resistance. Ichigo and his allies refuse to yield, insisting on loyalty, courage, and sacrifice even in the face of inevitability. These actions embody what Morgan, in a later work, describes as a vision rooted in the body and its affective relations – a site where love, grief, and commitment resist total capture by systems of control.[25] Even under algorithmic omniscience, human bonds generate alternatives irreducible to calculation, staging a narrative contest between cold sovereignty and passionate humanism.

This analysis must also account for reception and media ecologies. As Marc Steinberg illustrates, anime functions within a "media mix", extending beyond the screen into tie-in merchandise, artwork, and paratexts.[26] Paratextual imagery of Yhwach (on trading cards, posters, and figurines) consistently highlights the proliferating pupils and cross-shaped iris. These images circulate as detachable icons of absolute power, consumed independently of the narrative. This dynamic resonates with Hiroki Azuma's theory of "database consumption", where audiences engage with modular, decontextualized motifs, like the omniscient eye, recombining them across forums, memes, and fan art.[27]

Read through Foucault's theory of the *dispositif*, an apparatus or institution of power that produces and manages subjects, Yhwach's eye functions as a supreme technology of discipline, making all life calculable and governable. Yet the narrative insistently reveals cracks in this apparatus: acts of defiance, unquantifiable sacrifices, and a steadfast refusal of determinism. These ruptures demonstrate how anime can dramatize the core tension between totalizing systems of surveillance and the persistent, residual force of human values.

In sum, a theological, media studies, and posthumanist perspective reveals that Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War operates at the intersection of theology, media aesthetics, and posthuman politics. Yhwach's Almighty enacts eschatological omniscience as algorithmic governance, collapsing foresight into decree. Yet, in response, the anime foregrounds an ethical resistance, rooted here in love, loyalty, and sacrifice, that remains incalculable. This dual movement, between determinism and fragile freedom, exemplifies

25 Morgan 2012, 1–18.
26 Steinberg 2012, 131–158.
27 Azuma 2009, 79–98.

how shonen anime's ocular motifs function not only as narrative devices but as sophisticated posthuman mythologies embedded within global media ecologies.

Cultic Charisma, Corrupted Salvation, and Ocular Hierarchies

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba follows Tanjiro Kamado, a young boy who becomes a demon slayer after his family is slaughtered and his sister Nezuko is transformed into a demon. Set in Taisho-era Japan, the series pits the human Demon Slayer Corps against the Twelve Kizuki (Upper Moons), an elite hierarchy of demons led by the immortal Muzan Kibutsuji, with the eyes of the Upper Moons serving as visible insignia of their rank and corrupted power. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, ocular motifs encode not only combat capacities but also a sophisticated theology of corrupted vision. At the diegetic level, the eyes of the Upper Moons constitute starkly visible indexes of rank and authority. Inscribed irises (numerals and kanji are literally etched into the pupil) render hierarchy as bodily semiotics. These ocular inscriptions operate as both identity and function: Akaza's ringed eyes signify his relentless martial ethos (fig. 2), Dōma's prismatic irises aestheticize a charismatic and cold detachment (fig. 3), while Kokushibō's six-eyed visage hyperbolizes perception into pure monstrosity (fig. 4). Here, the diegesis frames the eye as a living archive of power, incising social order directly into the flesh.

The limits and costs of these ocular augmentations are explicit in the tension between enhancement and dehumanization. Kokushibō's proliferation of eyes grants him unparalleled perception, yet it transforms his humanity into a grotesque excess. To "over-see" is to lose empathy; vision becomes monstrous when utterly divorced from ethics. Likewise, Dōma's radiant, hypnotic gaze conceals a vampiric predation, consuming those who entrust themselves to his cult of "Eternal Paradise". Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba thus dramatizes a central paradox: ocular power amplifies ability but simultaneously corrodes moral responsibility.

In terms of nomenclature and visual design, the eyes in this shonen anime participate in a richly symbolic semiotics. The kanji numerals burned into the irises function like indelible religious tattoos: inseparable from the body, impossible to conceal, and perpetually signaling status. The multiplicity of



Fig. 2: Akaza's ringed eyes symbolize his ethos. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 32, 00:11:18.

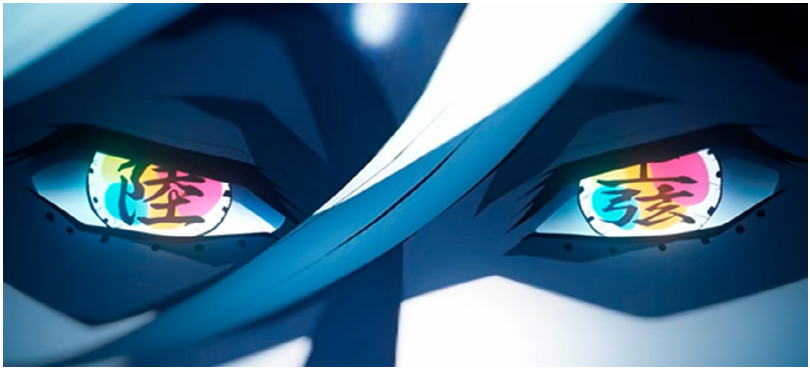


Fig. 3: Dōma's prismatic irises. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 44, 00:19:33.



Fig. 4: Kokushibō's six-eyed visage. Film still, Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba (Tokio MX, JP 2019–2024), Episode 45, 00:15:29.

Kokushibō's eyes recalls Buddhist and Hindu iconography of divine beings who are "full of eyes" (e. g. the *thousand-eyed* Avalokiteśvara), but this motif is inverted into a demonic grotesque. Dōma's lotus motifs and crystalline irises draw from Buddhist imagery of paradise and enlightenment, but they are twisted into the aesthetics of false salvation. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, the sacred lotus becomes bait for consumption, not a path to transcendence.

A religion-and-media lens illuminates how the series' ocular hierarchy dramatizes a dualistic cosmology. The Breath techniques and Nichirin blades of the Demon Slayer Corps represent disciplined, ascetic training, modeled on martial and Buddhist practices of bodily mastery. In contrast, the ocular powers of the demons constitute an anti-*darshan.* In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, *darshan* is the auspicious, mutual act of seeing and being seen by the divine, a conduit for blessing and grace.[28] Here, to be seen by a demon is to be unmade. This aligns with Morgan's concept of the "sacred gaze". Dōma's gaze enchants and enthralls followers, while Kokushibō's overwhelming multiplicity paralyzes them. In Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, eyes become liturgical instruments of domination, orchestrating worship and sacrifice for a malevolent end.

From a posthumanist perspective, these ocular powers reveal the demonic body as endlessly reconfigurable, mutable, and technologically extended. The demons' regeneration, grafted eyes, and ocular mutations dramatize the body as a site of both upgrade and degeneration. This resonates with notions of the posthuman body as a malleable interface, which returns us to Haraway's framing of breaching of the boundaries between organism and machine. Akaza's ringed eyes function as bio-symbolic circuits tuning him for combat, while Dōma's irises calibrate charisma to invite trust before devouring it. In this sense, demonic vision is operational, akin to a kind of predatory programming written in the flesh.

The ethical stakes are profound. The series insists that ocular enhancement without virtue degenerates into pure domination. It starkly contrasts demonic ocularity with human discipline. Breath techniques represent ascetic training grounded in restraint, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. Demonic eyes, by contrast, aestheticize the absence of restraint – unbounded vision, charismatic domination, and sensory excess utterly detached from ethical moorings. The cosmology is clear: perception must be disciplined by virtue

28 Eck 1998, 45–60.

or else it corrodes into monstrosity. This moral logic is embodied in the sacrificial deaths of the Hashira, whose human eyes shine not with supernatural inscriptions but with unyielding conviction and care.

Attention to reception and paratexts reveals how these ocular motifs circulate beyond the anime's narrative. Upper Moon eyes are reproduced in fan art and official goods as modular icons of "coolness", charisma, or dread, often detached from their narrative context. This practice similarly aligns with Azuma's theory of "database consumption", where audiences engage with decontextualized character elements (moé) as often as with overarching plots.[29] The affective response to these images is complex; viewers may admire the aesthetic spectacle of Dōma's gaze while simultaneously recognizing it as an allegory of predatory authority. This dual response exemplifies what Morgan describes as the interplay between the visual as spectacle and as a site of ethical and affective training.[30]

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba thus codes ocular power as both charismatic enchantment and cautionary allegory. The Upper Moon eyes form a visual liturgy of domination: they are eyes that promise paradise but deliver predation, that multiply vision until it dissolves empathy, that reduce religious symbols to hollow spectacle. Yet within this economy of corrupted sight, the series affirms an ethical counter-vision grounded in human discipline, sacrifice, and embodied care. The posthuman body may regenerate and graft eyes without limit, but without virtue, such vision is nothing more than domination in a luminous disguise.

Genealogies of Sight, Theological Adjudication, and the Posthuman Eye

Naruto Shippuden is the sequel to the original Naruto series (TV Tokio, JP 2002–2007). The young ninja Naruto Uzumaki returns to his village after two years of training to face the criminal organization Akatsuki. Set in a world where chakra (life energy) enables supernatural abilities passed down through bloodlines, the series elaborates a comprehensive "triptych of ocular lineages" – the Byakugan, Sharingan, and Rinnegan – that collectively structures its cosmology, ethics, and political theology. Where Bleach:

29 Azuma 2009, 3–33.
30 Morgan 2012, 7–11.

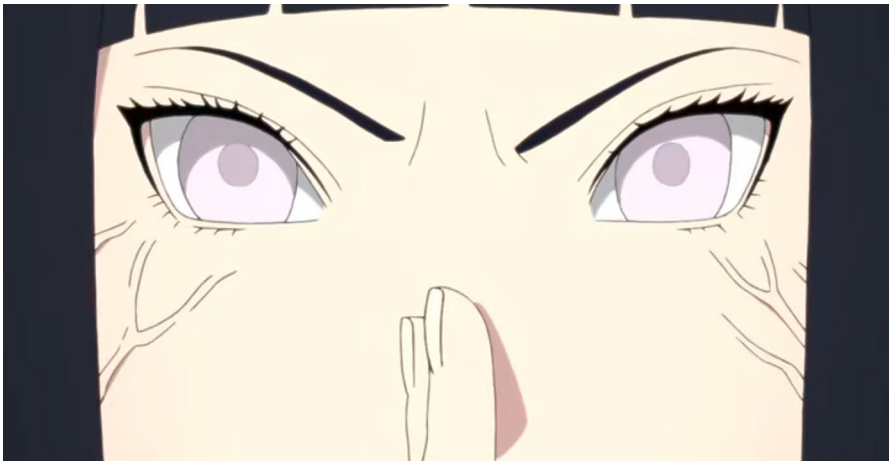


Fig. 5: Hinata's Byakugan activation. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 484, 00:08:06

Thousand-Year Blood War configures the eye as apocalyptic omniscience and Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba frames demonic ocularity as corrupted charisma, Naruto Shippuden articulates a distinctly juridical theology of vision: to see is to adjudicate, and judgment itself authorizes sovereignty.

This system is rooted in the diegetic functions and limits of each eye. Possessed by the Hyūga clan, the Byakugan (白眼, "White Eye") offers near-total panoramic sight and the ability to perceive chakra circulatory systems, operating as a forensic gaze that reveals lineage, purity, and hidden energy flows (fig. 5). Yet its power is constrained by social hierarchy, weaponized through rituals of control like the "caged bird" seal used to subordinate branch family members. The Uchiha clan's Sharingan (写輪眼, "Copy Wheel Eye") embodies mnemonic and hermeneutic functions – copying techniques, predicting movement, and rewriting perceived reality through *genjutsu*. Its divine-named techniques, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo, embed Shintō deities directly into ocular practice, yet this power is explicitly indexed to trauma, requiring profound emotional loss to awaken and evolve. Rare and godlike, the Rinnegan (輪廻眼, "Samsara Eye") links to the Buddhist concept of *rinne* (transmigration), aligning ocular power with the cycle of death and rebirth. Through its Six Paths techniques, including resurrection and soul extraction, it situates the gaze as cosmic magistracy. As Nagato's use demonstrates, however, it is never neutral. It often reduces individuals to puppets, highlighting the dehumanizing cost of wielding divine jurisdiction. Together,

these eyes literalize social and metaphysical capacities into biology: surveillance, interpretation, and ultimate judgment are inscribed in the iris itself.[31]

The naming conventions and visual design of these *dōjutsu* intensify their theological registers. The Byakugan evokes purity and priestly transparency, the Sharingan implies reflective repetition and hermeneutic cycling, while the Rinnegan explicitly anchors vision in Buddhist cosmology, tying authority to karma and reincarnation. Visually, each eye is codified through striking geometric motifs (concentric rings (fig. 6), tomoe spirals (fig. 7), veined pale irises (fig. 8)) that recall both mandalic diagrams and targeting systems. As Lamarre suggests, anime's "animetic interval" gives transcendent concepts tangible form, and these ocular designs function as both aesthetic spectacle and cosmological diagrams: the Sharingan's tomoe resemble wheels of fate, the Rinnegan's ripples evoke endless cycles of samsara.[32] This visual and nominative symbolism dramatizes a hybrid religious semiotics. The Sharingan's techniques invoke Shintō *kami*, enacting deity through spectacle, while the Rinnegan draws on Buddhist structures, its Six Paths paralleling the realms of rebirth and its function mirroring a karmic judge. In this way the "sacred gaze" becomes a mode of looking that disciplines, authorizes, and sanctifies, i. e. to possess these eyes is to bear juridical authority.

This authority is physically literalized through the frequent transplantation of eyes, which points toward a posthuman condition where subjectivity is networked and technologically grafted. Ocular techniques function as transferable modules, suggesting that identity and capability are not essential but assembled. The eye becomes a site of exchange, a biological upgrade, and a cosmic inscription.

Yet if vision authorizes judgment, the central ethical question becomes whether compassion can redeem a power predisposed to control. Itachi Uchiha embodies this tension in that his Mangekyō costs him his sight, yet he uses his gaze protectively, transforming ocular sovereignty into sacrificial care. In contrast, Nagato deploys the Rinnegan as a disciplinary apparatus, imposing his vision of peace by stripping others of agency. The series continually dramatizes this tragic dialectic: ocular ascension is purchased with sacrifice, trauma, and loss. The Byakugan's surveillance is twisted into clan coercion, the Sharingan's genius risks deceit, and the Rinnegan's sovereignty courts tyranny. Still, the narrative ultimately refuses ocular determinism,

31 Lamarre 2009, 3–41.

32 Lamarre 2009, 7.



Fig. 6: Itachi's newly awakened Sharingan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 453, 00:20:49.



Fig. 7: Itachi's Mangekyō Sharingan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 136, 00:19:51.



Fig. 8: Nagato's Rinnegan. Film still, Naruto Shippuden (TV Tokio, JP 2007–2017), Episode 128, 00:13:40.

insisting that vision must be mediated by empathy, loyalty, and hope, which Morgan might classify as an "embodied" and ethical mode of looking.[33]

Beyond the narrative, NARUTO SHIPPUDEN's ocular motifs also proliferate through the "media mix" identified by Steinberg, i. e. manga, anime, games, merchandise, where they function as detachable, portable signs. The Sharingan, in particular, circulates as a global icon. This practice exemplifies Azuma's "database consumption", where audiences engage decontextualized elements like eye designs as modular units of affect, consumable as codes of power or tragedy. Fan discourses often celebrate the aesthetic spectacle of these powers while grappling with their ethical weight, elevating Itachi's compassion or critiquing Nagato's authoritarianism.

In the end, NARUTO SHIPPUDEN's ocular triptych constitutes nothing less than a full political theology of sight. The Byakugan stages a forensic gaze of transparency, the Sharingan dramatizes hermeneutic vision as mimesis and domination, and the Rinnegan codifies cosmic magistracy. Together they serialize a theory of sovereignty legitimated by genealogy, administered through surveillance, and contested through interpretive technologies. Read through posthuman theory, these eyes are bio-prosthetic codes circulating among hybridized bodies; through religious studies, they remediate Shintō and Buddhist concepts of divine sight and karmic adjudication. Ultimately, they dramatize the series' central ethical tension: can a vision that governs ever be reconciled with a vision that cares?

Conclusion

Shonen anime's ocular powers are architectures of metaphysics. They function as posthuman prosthetics that recalibrate the boundaries of perception and agency; simultaneously, as potent religious semiotics, they sacralize sovereignty, adjudicate truth, and proffer (or pervert) pathways to salvation. To read these motifs through the intersecting lenses of posthumanism, the study of religion, and visual culture theory is to recognize how contemporary anime serves as a cultural forum for working through urgent ethical dilemmas of our time: the seductions and tyrannies of omnipotent surveillance, the nature of legitimate authority, and the possibility of ethical relations in a world mediated by technical sight.

33 Morgan 2012, 1–3; 71–74.

Placing these three shonen anime franchises in dialogue reveals a shared narrative investment in vision as a foundational technology of the real. These eyes are not decorative; they are narrative organs that compute futures, enthrall communities, and adjudicate reality. They are, in essence, theological-political interfaces that pedagogically train the viewer in specific habits of looking: modes of submission, recognition, and resistance. A critical approach clarifies that to "see" in these worlds is to be irrevocably enmeshed within dense networks of power, obligation, and social bond.

The relentless focus on the ocular across these series issues a powerful reminder: vision is never innocent. It is an inescapably world-constituting act, laden with theological weight and political consequence. To trace the function of these gazes, as sovereign decree, seductive trap, or juridical instrument, is to hold a mirror to our contemporary condition, where we are perpetually enmeshed in economies of seeing, from the biometric gaze of the state to the predictive algorithms that curate our digital realities. The critical task, therefore, transcends interpretation. It demands that we, as scholars and educators, leverage this recognition for a more vigilant and ethically responsible praxis of looking, in the form of a commitment to discerning the power embedded in every gaze, both on screen and in the mediated world we navigate daily.

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Akif Tahiiev

The Cinematic Face of the Sacred in Contemporary Shiʿi Visual Culture on Instagram

Abstract

This article explores the circulation of cinematic and televisual images of sacred Shiʿi figures on Instagram, examining how digital media shape devotional practice, memory, and collective identity. Using the example of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī's portrayal in the TV series Mokhtarnameh and that of other figures such as ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī and Imām ʿAlī, it traces the movement of cinematic faces from screen to social media, highlighting their function as mnemonic placeholders and affective anchors. Drawing on theories of collective memory, remediation, and premediation, the study argues that Instagram edits, video montages, and fan-generated content constitute "rememory" practices, reactivating sacred history through multimodal engagement. The article also examines tensions between clerical authority and popular devotional creativity, generational differences in visual religiosity, and the emergence of digital piety as an everyday practice. Ultimately, it demonstrates how contemporary Shiʿi audiences negotiate, circulate, and experience sacred history in a networked digital environment in which screens are transformed into sites of devotion, memory, and communal belonging.

Keywords

Digital Islam, Digital Historiography, Memory, Digital Piety, Shiʿism, Social Media, Fan Edits, Instagram

Biography

Akif Tahiiev is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Culture and Religion at Goethe University Frankfurt. Previously he was Research and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Human Rights and Legal Methodology, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine, and Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Göttingen), the University of Vienna, and the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna). His research interests include Shia Islam, digital religion, Islam in Europe (especially Eastern Europe), minorities, and Islamic law.

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Fig. 1: Poster announcing the *majlis* "Mukhtar Nama" by Syed Akbar Mehdi Jaffery in Hyderabad, India. Photo taken on 27 August 2025 by the author.

Introduction

On 27 August 2025, near one of the numerous *imāmbārgāhs*[1] in Hyderabad, India, I noticed a poster (fig. 1) announcing an upcoming *majlis*[2] entitled *Mukhtar Nama* (The Story/Chronicle of Mukhtār). The event, scheduled for the 1st and 5th of Rabīʿ al-Awwal, was to be addressed by Maulana Syed Akbar Mehdi Jaffery, a preacher well-known for his interest in the figure of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, a revolutionary and the man remembered in Shiʿi historical imagination as the avenger of Imām Ḥusayn's killing.[3]

1 *Imāmbārgāhs* (also written *imambargahs*) are congregation halls or religious buildings used primarily by Shiʿa Muslims for gatherings, especially during the commemoration of Muḥarram and other events related to the remembrance of Imām Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī and the martyrs of Karbalāʾ. These spaces function as centers for *majālis*, recitations, sermons, and community activities.

2 In the context of Shiʿi Islam, *majlis* (plural: *majālis*) refers to a religious gathering convened to commemorate and reflect upon the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn and the events of Karbalāʾ, by extension, the term is also used to denote the sermon or oration (often delivered by a khaṭīb or ẓākir) that forms the centerpiece of such a gathering. These assemblies, which may include sermons, elegies *(marṣīyā)*, recitations, and acts of mourning, serve as central spaces for expressing communal grief, transmitting religious knowledge, and reinforcing Shiʿi identity and collective memory.

3 In Islamic studies, the figure of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī is considerably more complex and contested. His legacy is marked by significant theological and historical controversy,

At first glance, the poster seemed unremarkable. Its presence within Hyderabad's public devotional spaces is consistent with broader dynamics of Shiʿi performative and visual culture in urban India (as documented by Epsita Halder[4]). Also, the month of Rabīʿ al-Awwal marks the final days of the mourning season in Hyderabad, a city known for its extended mourning period – two months and eight days of *majālis* beginning on the first of Muḥarram. Yet one detail on the poster stood out. Alongside the preacher's portrait appeared a second image: a bearded man in battle attire, identified as Mukhtār himself. Mukhtār lived in the first century AH / seventh century CE, and no historical likenesses exist. The image was, in fact, a promotional still of the Iranian actor Fariborz Arabniya, who played Mukhtār in the celebrated television series Mokhtarnameh (The Book of Mokhtar, IRIB, IR 2010–2011).

This juxtaposition was immediately familiar. As part of my ongoing research project entitled "Images of Early Shi'a History in the Digital Spaces", I conduct digital ethnography and observe a range of Instagram accounts related to Shiʿi devotional content and its historical (re)interpretations. In the course of this fieldwork,[5] I have encountered numerous similar visualizations depicting historical figures, such as ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī[6] from Ḥusayn, Who Said No (Rastākhīz: Rooze Rastākhīz, Ahmad Reza Darvish, IR 2014) and Imām ʿAlī[7] from The Lady of Heaven (Eli King, UK 2021). As examples for this article, I have selected two Instagram posts featuring ʿAbbās[8] and two featuring ʿAlī.[9] These posts are not a representative sample in a strict

encompassing questions about his religious authority, his claims to Imāmate, and the legitimacy of his methods. See, for further discussion, Inloes 2009.

4 Halder 2019, 59.

5 Published as Tahiiev 2026a.

6 Abū al-Faḍl ʿAbbās ibn ʿAlī was the half-brother of Imām Ḥusayn, son of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. He is revered as the standard-bearer of Ḥusayn's army and a symbol of loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice during the Battle of Karbalāʾ (680 CE). His refusal to drink water from the Euphrates while his companions were thirsty and his defence of Ḥusayn's camp play important roles in Shiʿi narratives of devotion and martyrdom.

7 Imām ʿAlī was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad and father of Imāms Hasan and Ḥusayn. He is regarded by Shiʿi Muslims as the first Imām and rightful successor to the Prophet. He is venerated for his wisdom, justice, and spiritual authority, embodying the ideal of divine leadership.

8 For ʿAbbās: Instagram posts by abas_oficial, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNYarFZI-2Oz/ and halaleditor, https://www.instagram.com/p/DMxWlr7sQ2e/ [both accessed 13 September 2026].

9 For ʿAlī: Instagram posts by s.vsn_, https://www.instagram.com/p/Db-VsbQt7lS/ and

methodological sense, but they are illustrative of a devotional form observable across numerous accounts: short videos or image edits accompanied by lamentation, verses, or sometimes even secular music and accumulating hundreds of comments filled with invocations like *Salām yā Abā al-Faḍl* (Peace be upon you, O Abā al-Faḍl), *Yā ʿAbbās"*(O ʿAbbās), *Labbayka yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī).[10]

Such imagery encapsulates a wider transformation unfolding within contemporary Shiʿi visual culture: the increasing circulation of cinematic faces – actors from religious films and television series – as icons of sacred history. While figural depictions of the Prophet's family and other revered personalities have long existed within Shiʿism, what is new is the media genealogy of these images. Sacred figures are no longer rendered through idealized or anonymous devotional art, but are now embodied through recognizable actors, whose performances and visages become repositories of memory and devotion across social-media platforms, especially Instagram. What emerges here is not simply fan culture, but rather a devotional re-inscription of media imagery with religious memory and pious affect.

In this article I examine this emerging trend, situating it at the intersection of cinema, social media, and Shiʿi devotional practice. I argue that these Instagram-mediated representations operate as *digital sites of memory*, where historical and sacred figures are continuously reimagined, circulated, and affectively engaged with by contemporary audiences. By tracing the movement of cinematic faces from screen to social media and by analysing the devotional practices they inspire, this study explores how digital media shape collective memory. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which modern technologies both transform and sustain the commemoration of sacred history.

aza.e.lucknow, https://www.instagram.com/p/DI-qQxFSH7b/ [both accessed 13 September 2026].

10 These expressions are devotional invocations commonly used by Shiʿi Muslims to call upon revered figures from early Islam, especially members of the Prophet Muḥammad's family (Ahl al-Bayt). Such phrases express both reverence and an emotional connection to their virtues. Overall, these invocations function as performative acts of remembrance, love, and solidarity with the named personalities central to Shiʿi piety and identity.

Mediating the Sacred: Theoretical Context

In his *La mémoire collective*, Maurice Halbwachs famously illustrated the social dimensions of memory with the example of a person's first visit to London. The experience of the city, he argued, and hence the memory of it, is shaped not in isolation but through the descriptions, images, and narratives of London that the visitor has previously encountered, whether in conversation, literature, or art.[11] Memory, in this sense, is always mediated: it is constructed through frameworks provided by others, through what a society or group makes available as its collective imagery of the world. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney observe that this social conditioning of memory is inseparable from media. In their words, "Media of all sorts –spoken language, letters, books, photos, films – provide frameworks for shaping both experience and memory."[12] They propose that media perform this work in two interconnected ways: (1) as *instruments for sense-making*, they mediate between the individual and the world and (2) as *agents of networking*, they mediate between individuals and groups.[13] Memory, then, does not merely reside within individuals or even collectives – it circulates through material and symbolic forms of mediation that link past and present, self and community.

This theoretical lineage is particularly productive for understanding contemporary Shiʿi visual culture, where cinema and digital platforms have become key sites for shaping how believers see sacred history. Just as Halbwachs's visitor to London experiences the city through premediated representations, the Shiʿi devotee today often encounters figures like Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī, or Imām ʿAlī through visual schema provided by film and audiovisual media. These representations become in turn templates that structure imagination of the sacred. For many, spending more time on social media than in traditional ritual spaces means that the cinematic or digitally edited image becomes the most immediate reminder of these revered personalities.

David Morgan's study of Christian visual culture offers a compelling parallel.[14] Morgan demonstrates how the circulation of Warner Sallman's

11 Halbwachs 1980, 23.
12 Erll/Rigney 2009, 1.
13 Erll/Rigney 2009, 1.
14 Morgan 1999. For the discussion in this paragraph, see pp. 12–21, 34–58.

Head of Christ (1940), an image reproduced millions of times across homes, churches, and devotional materials, actively shaped the lived experience of belief. The image's ubiquity, Morgan argues, endowed it with the power to configure experience, both ordinary and extraordinary, by embedding sacred imagery into the routines of everyday life. Such images, he continues, "serve as a material means of conducting the rituals that define the public, domestic, and private spheres in which believers discern their identity and the characteristic horizons of reality that link them to one another".[15]

The digital remediations of Shiʿi sacred figures (cinematic faces circulating on Instagram, AI-generated portraits, and fan edits layered with mourning chants) perform a similar function. They constitute new sites of visual familiarity and affective engagement that anchor the believer's sense of belonging and devotion. The faces of Fariborz Arabniya as Mukhtār and Bahador Zamani as ʿAbbās or the portrayal of Imām ʿAlī in The Lady of Heaven are not believed to *be* these figures, Islamic scholars explain,[16] just as Sallman's Christ is not Jesus himself; rather, they operate as "useful conventions", to borrow Morgan's phrase,[17] as placeholders that enable believers to visualize, recall, and feel close to the sacred.

What distinguishes the present moment is the digital intensification of visual mediation. The circulation of these images across platforms like Instagram multiplies their reach, allows for participatory reinterpretation (through remixing, captioning, or adding devotional soundtracks), and embeds them within the rhythms of online sociality. This marks what Andrew Hoskins calls the "connective turn" in memory: a move from static, institutionalized forms of remembrance toward networked, continuously updating memory ecologies.[18] Within such ecologies, memory is not stored but performed, remixed, and re-experienced through posts, shares, and visual edits. For devout Shiʿi users, cinematic faces of Imāms and martyrs act as mnemonic interfaces, mediating between sacred history and everyday digital practice.

In this sense, cinematic and digital images of Shiʿi sacred figures make memory, offering believers new ways of seeing, remembering, and relating

15 Morgan 1999, 17–18.

16 See Al-Islam.org, Ask a Question, Are the pictures of Imam Ali (as) that we see in some Shia communities the actual images of him?, https://t1p.de/h5v2m [accessed 28 April 2026].

17 Morgan 1999, 32.

18 Hoskins 2011, 20.

to their past.[19] The collective frameworks of remembrance today have expanded to include not only the sermon and the shrine but also the streaming platform and the Instagram feed.

From Cinema to Instagram: Digital Remediation of Sacred Figures

On Instagram, the circulation of cinematic and televisual images of sacred Shiʿi figures manifests in a distinctive pattern of social-media edits. These posts often combine multiple fragments of film or series scenes, alongside screenshots taken from various cinematic sources, creating short video compilations or image montages. Original audio is frequently preserved, including film dialogue or music, but many posts incorporate additional religious or devotional soundtracks. Examples include lamentation recitations such as *Hamah Kāreh-ye Ḥaydar* (Ḥaydar Handles Everything / Ḥaydar Does It All) by Sajjād Muḥammadī,[20] *ʿUrs bi-Arḍ al-Ṭufūf* (A Wedding in the Land of al-Ṭufūf) by Sayyid Salām al-Ḥusaynī,[21] and *Abolfazle Bā Vafā* (Abā al-Faḍl the Faithful/Loyal) by Maḥmūd Karīmī,[22] as well as excerpts from sermons[23] layered over video edits. These audio-visual combinations create a multimodal devotional experience, where visual and sonic cues work together to evoke memory, recognition, and pious affect.

The actors' faces in these cinematic fragments function as mnemonic placeholders, allowing viewers to connect with historical figures. In general, depictions of sacred personalities are a long-established presence in Shiʿi communal spaces and are broadly understood within Shiʿi religious culture as visual conventions rather than literal likenesses. Scholarly fatwas generally permit their circulation while cautioning that they should not be mistaken for authentic portraits.[24] Thus, they are not considered to be images of the historical person, but rather serve as visual anchors for devotional memory and imagination.

19 Tahiiev forthcoming.

20 Instagram post by halaleditor, see footnote 8, second mention.

21 Instagram posts by s.vsn_ and aza.e.lucknow, see footnote 9.

22 Instagram post abas_oficial, see footnote 8, first mention.

23 Instagram post by s.vsn_, footnote 9, first mention.

24 See Al-Islam.org, Ask a Question, Are the pictures of Imam Ali (as) that we see in some Shia communities the actual images of him?, https://t1p.de/h5v2m [accessed 28 April 2026].



Fig. 2: Bahador Zamani in the role of ʿAbbās, an image used in two of the Instagram posts discussed in this article. Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account on 29 October 2025, https://www.husseinmovie.com/.

Cinematic depictions and their media circulation often occur against a backdrop of clerical regulation and religious sensitivity. For example, the depiction of ʿAbbās in Mokhtarnameh faced strong objections from senior Iranian religious authorities, including Āyatullāh Nasser Makarem Shirazi and Āyatullāh Wahid Khorasani, who argued that showing his face could provoke unrest or offend devotees.[25] Similarly, Ḥusayn, Who Said No underwent extensive cuts owing to clerical concerns about the portrayal of ʿAbbās (fig. 2), Imām Ḥusayn's sons, and other sacred figures, leading to its delayed and restricted release.[26] An interesting approach can be observed in The Lady of Heaven. This film depicted the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām ʿAlī (figs. 3a, b) through computer-generated imagery (CGI) rather than live actors. A disclaimer at the beginning and end of the film clarifies that "the performances of Holy Personalities were achieved through a unique synthesis of actors, in-camera effects, lighting, and visual effects." No single actor is credited with portraying these holy figures, whose faces are often rendered as dazzling sunbursts or abstract visual motifs.[27] Despite this technical creativity, I have not seen Instagram posts featuring such portrayals of the Prophet Muḥammad, suggesting that digital devotees remain cautious.

Despite scholarly objections[28], online audiences, particularly Instagram users, demonstrate enthusiastic engagement, repurposing fragments for

25 Martyrdom of Hazrat Abbas – Deleted scene from Mokhtarnameh, *YouTube*, posted 29 November 2012 by guiders14, https://t1p.de/xx3ct [accessed 28 October 2025]. The YouTube video description recounts the circumstances behind the scene's removal, including the objections raised by mentioned scholars.

26 Sabet 2019.

27 Tahiiev 2025b, 31.

28 See footnotes 16 and 24.





Figs. 3a and b: The CGI-generated portrayal of Imām ʿAlī in The Lady of Heaven (Eli King, UK 2021). This depiction is used in two of the Instagram posts discussed in this article. Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account on 29 October 2025, https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/.

personal or communal devotion, commenting with invocations such as *yā ʿAbbās* (O ʿAbbās) or *Labbaik yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī), and sharing widely across networks. Beyond their role as visual content, the posts are also a moral and mnemonic interface, training attention, affect, and piety. The affective engagement in these posts often mirrors Charles Hirschkind's concept of "ethical listening",[29] which I extend to "ethical viewing".[30] From multimodal combinations of image, text, and sound, users gain pious affect and moral awareness. Viewers actively cultivate devotional sensitivity through attentive observation, comment interaction, and sharing, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging while simultaneously performing individual memory practices. Here the visual encounter with cinematic depictions accompanied by listening to lamentation and reading poetic captions constitutes an embodied, moralized engagement with the past.

Together, these cases illustrate the tension between clerical authority and popular digital practice. While scholars enforce boundaries on visual representation, online users creatively negotiate these constraints, producing remediated visual narratives that preserve devotional engagement while

29 Hirschkind 2001.
30 Tahiiev 2025a, 12.

adhering to religious norms. Instagram thus functions as both a space of communal memory and a laboratory of mediated devotional practice where cinematic and digital images of sacred figures circulate, are recognized, and are affectively engaged with in new ways.

Remediation, Rememory, and the Ethics of Seeing

The circulation of the cinematic faces of sacred figures on digital platforms exemplifies what Astrid Erll calls the "remediation" of cultural memory: the continual migration of narratives and icons across new media environments.[31] In the case of Shiʿi devotional culture, the filmic and televisual representations of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, and Imām ʿAlī are re-embedded in social-media ecologies, where they acquire new meanings through editing, captioning, and sharing. This process is not merely reproductive but also transformative, for very repost, remix, or fan edit constitutes a new act of remembering through media.

The concept of premediation[32] – the anticipation of future remembering by the shaping how events and figures are likely to be recalled – is also useful here. Cinematic works like Mokhtarnameh or Rastākhīz were created with an expectation of devotional remembrance. The filmmakers' careful visual stylizations, such as the shining halo, the dramatic framing of ʿAbbās's loyalty, and the poetic language of martyrdom, predetermine the emotional and mnemonic vocabulary available to audiences. When these images migrate into Instagram edits, the process of premediation intensifies: users engage with fragments already designed for remembrance, amplifying them with affective soundtracks and devotional captions.

This interplay between remediation and premediation produces "rememory", as described by Caroline Rody[33] and later expanded to Shiʿi contexts by Zahra Aleeha Ali[34] – the reactivation and reconfiguration of memory through repeated representation. Each digital reproduction of Mukhtār's defiance or ʿAbbās's heroism becomes a site of rememory, an instance where viewers recall not only the historical episode but also their previous

31 Erll 2009, 111.
32 Erll/Rigney 2009, 10.
33 Rody 1995.
34 Ali 2022, 130.

mediated encounters with it. In this sense, these Instagram posts function as mnemonic nodes linking multiple temporalities: the Karbalāʾ narrative itself, the cinematic retelling, and the present moment of online devotion.

Within Shiʿi thought, the visual encounter with sacred figures carries a tension between the prohibition of direct representation and the desire for proximity. The cinematic and digital remediation of the sacred thus involves an ongoing negotiation between reverence and risk. In Instagram edits, this negotiation is palpable. The layering of lamentations and sermons places the cinematic image in a devotional register, transforming entertainment footage into an act of remembrance. At the same time, the digital circulation of these images exposes them to algorithmic logics of visibility and virality, where sacred imagery coexists with secular content, advertisements, and comment-thread humour. This dynamic points to what I call processes of desacralization[35] and resacralization: once removed from the controlled space of the mosque or shrine, the image loses its ritual framing, but through users' affective engagement – for example, comments like *Salām yā Abā al-Faḍl* (Peace be upon you, O Abā al-Faḍl) or *Labbaik yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī) – it is resacralized in the digital sphere.

In this regard, the Shiʿi Instagram aesthetic operates as a form of everyday digital piety. It transforms cinematic faces into mnemonic icons, integrating them into the daily affective rhythms of scrolling, liking, and sharing. The believer's screen becomes both archive and altar – a site where memory is continuously enacted, negotiated, and felt.

Mediating Memory: Generational Shifts and Digital Devotion

Erll and Rigney note, "[M]edia are more than merely passive and transparent conveyors of information. They play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in 'mediating' between us (as readers, viewers, listeners) and past experiences, and hence in setting the agenda for future acts of remembrance within society."[36] The cinematic and digital representations of Shiʿi sacred figures exemplify precisely this mediating function. Through film, television, and now social media, memory is not simply transmitted but

35 Tahiiev 2026b, 137.
36 Erll/Rigney 2009, 3.

continually reframed, thus reconstituting how the sacred past is imagined, felt, and collectively lived.

Foregrounding the mediating agency of images and platforms in this way does not, however, diminish the centrality of human actors in this process. The posts analysed here are simultaneously shaped by the affordances and logics of the media through which they circulate and actively authored by believers whose devotional intentions drive their production and sharing. The lay users who select, edit, and circulate these cinematic fragments are not passive conduits of algorithmic flows. They are agents of memory in their own right, and it is precisely their vernacular creativity and pious affect that give these fragments their *digital afterlife*: once released into the circulatory economies of social media, the cinematic faces of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, or Imām ʿAlī become detached from their original filmic narratives, endlessly reanimated through user edits, reposts, and algorithmic recommendations. Media and human actors, in other words, are mutually constitutive rather than competing explanations.

This shift may produce notable generational differences in the experience and visualization of the sacred. Older generations whose memory of the Imāms or companions of Ḥusayn was shaped primarily by oral narratives, sermons, and shrine-based iconography are more likely to retain a more textually or ritually grounded relationship to the past. In contrast, younger publics, especially those socialized in digital media environments, encounter these figures through screen-based images, cinematic affect, and algorithmically circulated edits. Pierre Nora's claim that "memory is blind to all but the group it binds"[37] is substantiated here: digital memory binds a new kind of community, one defined not by physical proximity or lineage but by shared visual repertoires online.

As Tony Judt observed, "[I]n the absence of any common culture beyond a small elite, and not always even there, the particular information or ideas that people select or encounter are determined by a multiplicity of tastes, affinities, and interests. As the years pass, each one of us has less in common with the fast-multiplying worlds of our contemporaries, not to speak of the world of our forebears."[38] The digital sphere creates such a new elite of access: those able to navigate Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube may form their devotional imagination around cinematic imagery, while those outside

37 Nora 1989, 9.
38 Judt 2009, 5.

these digital networks retain different, often more traditional, mental images. Thus, Mokhtarnameh's Mukhtār, Rastākhīz's ʿAbbās, or the luminous CGI Imām ʿAlī from The Lady of Heaven become visual references immediately recognizable to younger Shiʿi audiences but largely unfamiliar to elders. As these cinematic icons become more dominant, the distance between digital and non-digital believers in the imagination of the sacred subtly widens.

Yet this does not mean that modern believers have abandoned collective or affective memory. On the contrary, as Jesseka Batteau argues, communal, non-reflexive memory persists within religious communities: believers "do live within memory, a memory which sustains their self-image as a group following in the footsteps of their forebears".[39] In this sense, Shiʿi digital devotees continue to inhabit a living memory-world – one in which the visual and auditory cues of cinema and social media have replaced, or supplemented, earlier mnemonic frameworks like shrine architecture or oral *majālis* recitation.

David Morgan's application of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's threefold model of how artifacts objectify the self offers another lens for interpreting this transformation.[40] First, religious images broadcast and stabilize cultural identity. The display of cinematic depictions of Mukhtār or ʿAbbās, whether as Instagram profile pictures, phone wallpaper, or physical posters at *majālis*, signals belonging to a global Shiʿi community. The same image, however, is differently interpreted by distinct publics: for instance, depictions of Imām ʿAlī in Omar (MBC 1, SA/QA 2012) or Al Hasan and Al Husein (Qatar TV, KW/SY/JO 2011), both Sunni-produced television series, are largely ignored by Shiʿi users, whereas the depictions discussed in this article have become internal markers of Shiʿi identity.[41] The selective adoption of particular visual codes thus reveals the community's ongoing negotiation of authenticity and authority.

Second, devotional images shape both personal and collective memory. Through repetition, circulation, and emotional engagement, they allow believers to narrate their lives in relation to the sacred. The cinematic Imām

39 Batteau 2009, 231.

40 Csikszentmihalyi/Rochberg-Halton 1981; Morgan 1998, 18.

41 During my fieldwork, occasional exceptions to this pattern were observed: some Sunni-run accounts posted edits featuring the depiction of ʿAbbās from the Shiʿi-produced Ḥusayn, Who Said No, suggesting that the affective charge of cinematic portrayals can, if infrequently, transcend sectarian boundaries.

or companion becomes part of the believer's autobiographical timeline – an image first encountered in a series, then remembered in a sermon, and finally re-experienced in an Instagram edit layered with lamentation or poetry.

And third, images symbolize and materialize relationships. Their circulation in domestic or communal spaces, whether as posters in *majālis* or as shared social-media posts, reaffirms belonging within a network of pious affect. This social power of images is evident in the adoption of the Mokhtarnameh portrayal of Mukhtār in official procession posters and banners (see fig. 1), where the cinematic face now functions as a collective devotional emblem. Taken together, these developments indicate that digital media have not displaced Shiʿi memory but remediated it, generating new mnemonic regimes that bind digital publics through shared affective imagery.

At the same time, these mediated images generate what I have termed *digital afterlives* of sacred figures. Once released into the circulatory economies of social media, the cinematic faces of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, or Imām ʿAlī live on, detached from their original filmic narratives yet endlessly reanimated through user edits, reposts, and algorithmic recommendations. Their persistence online blurs the boundary between representation and presence: each repost is both an act of devotion and a renewal of existence in digital space. These figures thus acquire afterlives that unfold across the shifting temporalities of the platform, sustained by the rhythms of mourning, commemoration, and affective sharing.

What is striking, however, is the social asymmetry of production and circulation. Whereas the cinematic or televisual depictions of Shiʿi sacred history are produced within elite, professionally financed infrastructures of religious and/or national media, the afterlives of these images are predominantly grassroots phenomena. The Instagram edits and short video montages that populate Shiʿi digital space are usually made by lay believers with no institutional affiliation, technical training, or clerical authority. They operate within a participatory economy of memory, where devotion substitutes for expertise and affective resonance becomes a measure of legitimacy. In this sense, the sacred image is reactivated not by clerics or filmmakers, but by ordinary users who select, reframe, and circulate fragments that move them spiritually. This vernacular authorship blurs boundaries between consumption and production, transforming spectators into producers.

The comment sections accompanying such posts further perform devotional collectivity. Users respond with blessings, invocations, and emotive

expressions that transform otherwise secular affordances of social media into acts of remembrance. The accumulation of comments becomes a digital litany, a participatory extension of devotion in textual form. In this way, Instagram functions not merely as a site of visual consumption but also as a ritualized communicative space, where affective engagement, repetition, and collective witness sustain the vitality of Shiʿi memory.

In this hybrid devotional ecology, the sacred is no longer confined to the shrine, the pulpit, or the ritual gathering. It now also unfolds on the screen, within algorithmic flows and digital networks. The believer's engagement with these images – scrolling, listening, reposting, for example – is both an act of remembrance and a reconfiguration of what it means to see and feel the sacred in the twenty-first century.

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Vera Cuntz-Leng

Religious Guilt and Fanfiction

Explorations of Queer Desires and Institutional Shame with the Good Omens Fandom

Abstract

Religious guilt and shame are prevalent topics discussed in fan writings. This article identifies tropes and motifs typical for fanfiction that deals with religious guilt, using one particular text from the Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026) fandom as a case study: "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) by seekwill. The aim of this paper is to highlight a strong link in fan works between queer identities and sexuality, on the one hand, and the Catholic Church (as an institution), on the other. By overcoming the contradictions between what the fictional characters have learned is right and what they actually feel, these fanfictions address sensitive issues of queer (auto-)biographies. They may send a hopeful and powerful message to queer individuals conflicted by their religious beliefs, underline the significance of choice / free will, and contribute to current perspectives on religion in popular culture.

Keywords

Fanfiction, Religious Guilt, Auto-biographic Writing, Queerness, Queer Sexuality, Coming-Out, Free Will, Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026)

Biography

Dr. Vera Cuntz-Leng is a permanent research associate at the Institute for Media Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg. A founding editor-in-chief of the peer-reviewed fan studies journal *Fandom | Cultures | Research* (2024–), her academic work centers on fanfiction, *Harry Potter*, queer readings, and seriality. Her book *Harry Potter que(e)r. Eine Filmsaga im Spannungsfeld von Queer Reading, Slash-Fandom und Fantasyfilmgenre* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015) won the Dissertation prize of the German Society for the Fantastic in the Arts.

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Introduction

As many fanfictions deal with the personal experiences of their writers and are sometimes in part auto-biographical, they frequently discuss sensitive topics like suicide, (sexual) abuse, child loss, gender inequality, or addiction. A search for fan works tagged with the term "religious guilt" on the multi-fandom fanfiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3) generates, perhaps surprisingly, over 30,900 results.[1] Evidently, explorations of religious doctrine and belief systems as well as reflections upon the writer's religious upbringing are also on this list of popular sensitive fanfiction topics. A constantly growing queer community that is now associated with fanfiction writing (in contrast to earlier findings that the majority of fanfiction writers identified as heterosexual women) explains the presence of religious guilt as a topic, because it is intertwined with stories about coming-out, queer identities, and desires that conflict with Christian doctrine, Roman Catholicism in particular.

Religious guilt can be conceptualized as an internal spiritual struggle arising from a perception of having violated the moral code, rules, or standards of one's faith.[2] It is often associated with strong feelings of shame and self-condemnation and may be triggered by rigid, authoritarian settings that leave little room for questioning or doubt. In the case of queer experience, such feelings may stem from the Catholic Church's doctrinal silencing, exclusion, and erasure of homosexuality and of identities that fall outside the binary gender norm.[3]

Among the many recent TV shows with a strong fan following that deal with religion[4] – Supernatural (The WB / The CW, US 2005–2020), The Good Place (NBC, US 2016–2020), House of the Dragon (HBO, US 2022–present) are just a few examples – Good Omens (Amazon Prime / BBC Two, US/UK 2019–2026) stands out. This show is deeply invested in examining is-

1 As of 27 July 2026, a total 173,020 fan works had been tagged with the term "religion", 30,926 with the term "religious guilt", 7,807 with the term "religious conflict", and 6,622 with the term "catholic guilt".

2 Pargament/Murray-Swank/Magyar/Ano 2005.

3 Jordan 2000.

4 Here religion is conceptualized as a spiritual belief system in supernatural beings and an "unseen order" (James 1902, 53), as well as, more practically, a social phenomenon, as defined by Emile Durkheim: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1995, 44).

sues relating to free will and the capacity to find and explore a (queer) identity, and sets these concerns in stark contrast to Old Testament guidance. It therefore stands to reason that fans of the Good Omens TV show further explore these aspects in writings that engage with the heart of the original work. Here they discuss the seeming incompatibility of queer self-determination and faith, which leads to inner conflicts for characters in their story.

Following a brief discussion of the relations between fan culture, religion, queerness, and fanfiction writing – a cultural practice that is profoundly linked with the queerness and identity formation of its writers – this article offers a close reading of the rather popular Good Omens fanfiction "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) by seekwill, locating fannish strategies deployed to elaborate on inner religious turmoil and queer desires.[5] As prosumers,[6] Good Omens fanfiction writers both consume the TV series and produce their own content. Hence, the analysis of fanfiction sheds as much light on the derivative work as it reflects back upon the original object of fandom. This qualitative study necessarily uses a mixed-methods approach,[7] which is informed by literary and film analysis alongside concepts derived from fan and reception studies. Its goals are to emphasize how, as Marie-Therese Mäder has written, "responses to religious references in the media can provide valuable insight into how religion is (re)constructed through media reception"[8] and to show how fanfiction can serve as a vehicle for discussion of the perceived incompatibility of religious doctrines and queer self-determination.

Write What You Love, Become What You Write

The writing of fictional texts that are derived from a explicitly declared source (object of fandom) is a widespread fan-cultural practice.[9] These texts

5 As of 27 July 2026, "That This Could Be the Kingdom" (2019) had received 24,418 hits, had been commented on 391 times, and had been liked by 2,172 individuals, while 727 fans had added a bookmark for the story on AO3. It has been translated into Chinese and is available as an audiobook on Apple podcasts.

6 Toffler 1980.

7 Mäder 2025, 58–59.

8 Mäder 2025, 56.

9 Many scholars have discussed the relations between the object of fandom, various fannish practices, and the texts that fans derive and create (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1994; Pugh 2005; Jamison 2013; Busse 2017).

have in common that they follow what fan scholar Abigail Derecho has identified as an "archontic principle".[10] Derecho uses the term "archontic literature," in reference to Jacques Derrida, to describe fanfictions as literary works that seek to expand the never fully closed fictional universe (or archive) around a certain fan object. In doing so, Derecho offers a more neutral term than, for example, "textual poaching", proposed by Henry Jenkins in 1992, which can be read as questioning the legitimacy of fanfiction. These fan works are produced without commercial interests; they are published and shared within a community of other fans. Fanfiction writing, which began even before social media, has become a mainstream phenomenon in recent years, with large online platforms, archives, and gathering points.[11] Kristina Busse, one of the most influential and pioneering voices in the study of fanfiction, notes that "media fans have become more visible and multiple as fannish behavior has entered mainstream audiences".[12]

This development makes it harder to answer the question, who actually writes and reads fanfiction. During the early days of fanfiction – when texts were still published in fanzines and club magazines – fan scholars highlighted the subversive and feminist quality of the phenomenon and identified the majority of fanfiction writers as heterosexual women.[13] The homoerotic subgenre of slash fanfiction was embraced as a feminist counter-response to the construction of gender in mainstream media. Slash fanfiction focuses on romantic or sexual relationships between same-sex characters – usually men – taking its name from the solidus, or slash, symbol (/) used to link the characters' names. In her recent reflection on the phenomenon, Anne Kustritz emphasizes that slash "not only takes sexual variation as benign, but positively revels in these ecstasies".[14] Decades earlier, the feminist science-fiction writer Joanna Russ had euphorically called slash the "only sexual fantasy by women for women that's produced without the control or interposition of censorship by commercial booksellers or the interposition of political intent by writer or editors".[15] However, this assumption has changed over the past decades, as today fanfiction enthusiasts measurably

10 Derecho 2006, 64.
11 Busse 2017, 141.
12 Busse 2017, 181.
13 Russ 1985; Frazer Lamb/Veith 1986; Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1994.
14 Kustritz 2024, 163.
15 Russ 1985, 95.

more often identify as queer, in the broadest sense of the term.[16] In fact, a quantitative study of AO3 recently showed that 76 percent of platform users have a sexual orientation other than heterosexual and more than 40 percent identify as non-cisgender.[17]

Alongside this increase in queer-identifying fans over the years, we can recognize an increase in explicitly queer content or at least queer-coded content in mainstream media.[18] Moreover, we are seeing a strong interest in religious content in film and television productions – indeed, religious and (as in the case of Good Omens) biblical themes and references seem to be a guarantee of success.[19] When these three aspects are woven together – sustained interest in religious and biblical themes in popular culture, increasing sensibility for and visibility of queer themes in film and television, and a noticeable overlap between the LGBTQIA+ community and fan communities – the presence of "religious guilt" as a significant trope in fanfiction seems almost inevitable. As religion tends to address existential questions about the human condition, including questions about the meaning of life, identity, and gender, in doing so, religion can give rise to both open and very closed normative systems, which may stand in a stark conflict to the individual's experiences.

On many levels, fanfiction writing operates as a unique medium for autobiographical expression. Fanfiction writers explore their own experiences, desires, traumas, and social positions in a relatively safe environment. That safety results from the rather closed nature of the community of presumably like-minded fans, from the ability to establish personal but anonymous relationships with individual members (separation of fan identity and real-life persona), and from the fictionalized playground of the texts themselves.[20] Some fanfiction writers may, for example, choose to insert a new character into the beloved storyworld of their fan object as an extension of themselves

16 Halperin (1995, 62) explains, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."

17 Rouse/Stanfill 2023.

18 Cuntz-Leng 2026.

19 Tiemann 2022, 17–26.

20 Kustritz (2024) coined the term "pocket publics" to describe slash fanfiction communities as simultaneously protected and public spaces: while sufficiently accessible to be located, they are also sufficiently secure to insulate participants from harassment, censorship, and attention from the "outside" (e. g., workplace, family).

(e. g., "Mary Sue"[21]).[22] Others may use their fanfictions to explore their own sexuality and – in some cases – eventually to come-out as queer within an collaborative and supportive sandbox.[23] As the storyworld they write in is already well-established by the fan object, fanfiction authors can focus on the emotional and personal resonances of the characters' journeys. In doing so, they use their own authorial voice and are empowered.[24] In this sense, the act of writing fanfiction serves, among other functions, as a way of building a personal narrative and finding "authorship" over one's own life story.

Fans with a conservative religious upbringing who identify as queer (or are in the process of finding out who they are, what they feel, and whom they desire) may find that fanfiction that shows queer fictional characters experiencing feelings of shame and guilt resonates with their own experiences. The fandom becomes an explorative playground for their own creative expressions and a network of like-minded yet possibly anonymous individuals. The expressions of queer sexualities and the repercussions, including rejection by a (religious) community or family, are more personal and much more immediate in fanfiction than in queer-friendly TV programs or movies. In the former, the fandom can contribute and share their own feelings of fear, dislocation, and guilt, while in the latter they witness them rather passively.

Among the many popular media fandoms that currently deal with religious themes, the Amazon Prime adaptation of the 1990 fantasy novel *Good Omens. The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, is of particular interest for issues of religious guilt. The series evolves from a text heavy with queer undertones in the first season (a close adaptation of the original book) to a tragic queer love story in the second. Until recently, the ending was still open, but the concluding movie, which was highly anticipated by the fan community, aired (quite symbolically) on Ascension Day in 2026.

The narrative operates within a theological framework: an angel (Aziraphale) and a demon (Crowley) gradually become partners after first meeting while witnessing Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise, and they stick to-

21 The "Mary Sue" is an idealized fictional character who is portrayed as unrealistically perfect and over-competent, often serving as a vehicle for the fan author's wish fulfillment and often scorned in fan communities.

22 Pugh calls them "avatars of yourself". Pugh 2005, 87.

23 Pugh 2005, 116–142.

24 Pugh 2005, 193–217.

gether to prevent Heaven and Hell from bringing about the Apocalypse. The shift from queer readability (novel) to queer text (TV series) sets the stage for a variety of queer readings of the fan object in tension with religion, the Bible, and the Roman Catholic Church as an institution (represented by Heaven in the series). Interestingly, Good Omens borrows heavily from mythologies and iconography, with numerous references to the Hebrew Bible, Christian representations (enriched by allusions to Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, among others), hints at European religious history, and references to new religious movements. Good Omens' underlying philosophies and narrative style are also strongly influenced by Jewish thought.[25]

"That This Could Be the Kingdom"

Although the slash fanfiction "That This Could Be the Kingdom" by seekwill was published on AO3 in response to the first season of Good Omens TV series, which aired in 2019, it touches upon many aspects that were then explored by the second season, which aired in 2023. "That This Could Be the Kingdom" is a one-chapter story of just roughly 21,000 words. It is structured into twelve parts with subheadings. In the author's note, seekwill declares the fanfiction to be a gift to another AO3 user, Mussimm, that has been inspired by the prompt "confession". As a Human-AU[26] fanfiction, it departs from the fantastic narrative of Good Omens. It tells the story of the Catholic priest Father Aziraphale Fell, who is unexpectedly invited to participate in a public debate with Anthony Crowley, his former seminary roommate and long-lost friend. The narrative alternates between their tense present-day reunion and flashbacks to their time together as young men 26 years earlier, exploring their deep connection and their separation when Crowley chose to leave the priest seminar. As the two men reconnect in the present day, Aziraphale is forced to confront decades of suppressed pining and religious guilt regarding the life-altering choices he made about his vocation. Ultimately, the pair reconcile their past, leading

25 Aaron 2023; Goldfarb Styrt 2023; Naylor-Davis/Warren/Sheinfeld 2024; Doak-Keszler 2025.

26 In a Human-AU (Human Alternate Universe) the supernatural beings of the original work are transformed into mortal humans, which in this instance marks a significant alteration to the Good Omens canon.

Aziraphale to abandon the Church and find a sense of personal salvation in his romantic love for Crowley.

seekwill's story explores many themes that are typical for fanfictions dealing with religious guilt in the broadest sense and with the romantic pairing of Aziraphale and Crowley in particular. The story is preceded by a content warning: "this piece makes reference to real life conflicts, scandals, and crimes within the Catholic Church. They are not discussed in detail, but I wanted to flag it in case any reader wishes to avoid."[27] Thus, this example demonstrates through its paratext that it belongs to a certain tradition of fan culture, for the author is aware of the conventions of the community. The content warning recognizes that fan realms are understood as safe spaces. Moreover, it prepares the ground for the criticism of the Catholic Church found throughout the story. Although scandals that have roiled the Catholic Church are not discussed in detail, these institutional failings serve as the background for Crowley's scepticism and Aziraphale's internal conflict. During the public debate, Crowley argues against the Church's role in a "world on fire",[28] specifically criticizing religious institutions for fostering attitudes that lead to environmental collapse and the mass death of creatures. In addition, the narrative explores the lies and shame Aziraphale feels he was subjected to by the institution, which he later views with anger, describing his past as a time spent "flogging himself and steeping in shame".[29]

The narrative frames the core conflict between Crowley and Aziraphale as an incompatibility of religious belief and philosophy. Crowley is described as a "philosopher of free will and the human condition",[30] whereas Aziraphale serves as an obedient servant, in many ways Crowley's opposite, as a tool used and abused by the institution. Aziraphale secretly shares many of Crowley's ideals but is scared that if he abandons the Church (and allows himself to love Crowley), he will be abandoned in turn by God: "'The Church doesn't have a monopoly on God, Aziraphale.' Crowley speaks directly to Aziraphale's greatest fear. That without that building, the collar, that chain of command, that Aziraphale will go without."[31] The institutional Church is represented here by its architecture, regalia, and hierarchy, not by devotion

27 seekwill 2019, "Author's note".
28 seekwill 2019, "It is a ghost story".
29 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".
30 seekwill 2019, "It is a ghost story".
31 seekwill 2019, "North Bank".

to God. Crowley's most important message to Aziraphale is that there is no promised land, no paradise waiting in Heaven for those who suffer and sacrifice – "to be alive itself is a reward."[32] When Aziraphale finally decides to leave the priesthood and chooses to end his suffering and self-denial in the name of God ("I have lived my whole life with a wrecked heart"[33]), he is in fact reconciled with God – "he comes to the realization that Crowley looks at him like he is a holy thing, and for the first time he feels like it might be true."[34] He finds God's love not only in Crowley but also in himself when he finally accepts who he is: "God is with him, he knows. Because God is love and how could this have been anything else?"[35]

Four tropes that can be found in fanfictions dealing with religious guilt are evident here: the transfer from the fantastic setting of the fan object to a more realistic setting (Priest AU in this case), the tension between institutionalized religion and free will, the shame and guilt forced upon believers by the institution, and the (brief) discussion of the Church's shortcomings and scandals in the real world, which adds a more realistic, political tone. Further, Aziraphale's desperate need for belonging, for companionship and family, which paralyzes him and thus prevents him from being capable of acting himself, is a staple of these texts and mirrors the fears of queer people surrounding possibly coming-out to their conservative religious families.

Another interesting element is the use of flashbacks as a narrative tool, for while they are a means to reflect upon past decisions and regrets, they also offer the characters in the present a second chance for happiness, an end to feelings of shame and guilt. Lastly, Aziraphale's exit strategy – leaving the priesthood – mirrors the well-known narrative of women who (attempt to) flee from abusive relationships or people who (try to) leave restrictive religious groups.

Aziraphale is only able to admit his romantic feelings for Crowley in the secluded secrecy of the confessional – it is an admission before God, unbeknownst to the Church. This key scene is a subversion of established conventions: it is not the apostate Crowley who asks for forgiveness for his sins; it is the priest who confesses. Crowley uses the language of confession to express his real grievance: not his lack of faith, but his "sin" of never being

32 seekwill 2019, "A world without us".
33 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
34 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".
35 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".

able to let go of Aziraphale. Crowley challenges Aziraphale's choice to stay in the priesthood, making it clear that their separation is his own form of penance for the time they lost. Much of Aziraphale's dialogue is internal or consists of hesitant, clipped responses. The subtext is his overwhelming religious guilt and his realization that his vocation has become a cage. Usually, the screen of the confessional is meant to hide the sinner's face, but instead it represents the emotional distance Aziraphale has tried to maintain – and which Crowley is now dismantling. However, Aziraphale is not yet able to leave. "'You will always have a place to go,' says Crowley, voice changed, a cautious optimism taking hold. 'If you leave.'"[36] He presents Aziraphale with the simple gift of a business card, an address, a promise of refuge. "Aziraphale could say that he has a choice to make. But this is no choice. There is one reality now. There is this card."[37] When Aziraphale finally takes the big step, it is this card that keeps him going, as might the contact address for a women's shelter or for a counseling center for victims of restrictive religious groups, strongly suggesting Aziraphale was being abused. Its physical presence constructs a reality that did not exist before: "But when he brings his fingers up to the pocket, rubs over the place the card is, where it stiffens the fabric, it is a totem. *You are here. You are alive. You are going to Crowley's.*"[38]

The subversion of the confessional scene – reimagining a ritual of judgment as a space for vulnerable, mutual admission – demonstrates how fan works can dismantle oppressive structures and traditional power dynamics. By framing Aziraphale's departure from the priesthood as escape from an abusive system, the narrative provides a totem of hope for those seeking to reconcile their own identities with their religious upbringings.

Concluding Thoughts

"That This Could Be the Kingdom" strongly divides religion as institutionalized Church from religion as belief system. If queer characters manage to exclude themselves from religion as institution, they become free to love as they wish and find God. "That This Could Be the Kingdom" serves as a poignant example of how fanfiction functions as a transformative medium

36 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
37 seekwill 2019, "Salve".
38 seekwill 2019, "Tell you what to do".

for processing the intersection of religious guilt and queer identity. By transposing Aziraphale and Crowley from a fantasy comedy into a more realistic Priest AU setting, the narrative exposes the friction between personal faith and the shame often perpetuated by the Catholic Church. The story's resolution suggests that religious fulfillment is found not in institutional obedience or self-denial but in the realization that "God is love", thereby allowing queer desire to be reclaimed as a form of holiness rather than a sin. Fanfiction contributes to normalizing the simultaneity and compatibility of queerness and religiosity in popular culture, and it is precisely through the explicit depiction of queer desires and sexuality that it breaks taboos that mainstream media still impose upon themselves.

The prevalence of religious guilt as a fanfiction trope reflects a need for stories that prioritize choice and free will over dogmatic suffering. These fannish narratives do more than just expand the storyworld of a beloved TV show. They offer a powerful tool for identity formation and personal empowerment. By separating institutional religion from a personal belief system, fan writers transform religious guilt from a debilitating cage into a vehicle for self-discovery and a path toward personal salvation found in human connection.

"That This Could Be the Kingdom" is paradigmatic for fanfiction's potential to serve as a grassroots catalyst for cultural change, reshaping ideologies or discourses by offering a backdoor for alternative perspectives to enter the mainstream. Within the realm of fan cultures, contemporary anxieties like religious guilt are explored (so too are heteronormativity, mental health, and climate change, among others) and sometimes actively dismantled. Such narrative interrogations can facilitate the individual fan's identity formation. In addition, on a broader cultural scale, reflections on religion in fan texts democratize and popularize complex theological concepts. By exploring everything – from the appearance of a priest and institutional rules to the boundaries between faith, philosophy, and dogma –fanfiction contributes to contemporary knowledge about religion. In doing so, it reproduces certain stereotypes but also points out inconvenient truths and transgresses social norms.

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Open Section

Lukas Bartl

Give Yoga a Chance

War Anxieties, Rituals and the Pitfalls of Community Building in GDR Health Advisors of the 1980s

Abstract

Health-care magazines both disturb and reassure their readers – they may even seek to soothe the very anxieties they have created. Within their pages, communal and individual problems are interwoven, and complicated affiliations are created between writers, readers and their surrounding world. This article examines the twelve issues of the GDR health-care magazine *Deine Gesundheit* published in 1984 to illustrate how existential and banal concerns together formed an all-permeating apprehension. Two topics that appear throughout the issues of 1984 are (1) the threat of nuclear war and (2) yoga. They formed the two ends of a discourse of apprehension by GDR advisors that had begun in the 1970s and peaked in 1984. Drawing on James Carey's theory of ritual communication, this article illustrates the political use of such a discourse to rally readers around the flag, but it also raises the pitfalls of such attempts at community building, for advice media tended to individualise health problems.

Keywords

History of Health, History of Emotions, German Democratic Republic (GDR), Ritual Communication, Subjectivation, Yoga, Cold War History

Biography

Lukas Bartl is a doctoral student in Contemporary History at the Max-Weber-Centre Erfurt and the University of Graz. His research focuses on the topics of nervousness, stress and relaxation in health magazines published in the GDR which he interprets as political tools fostering individual responsibility and self-governance.

Introduction

A rope is looped around and across the inflated red balloon, deforming its shape and squeezing it to bursting point. "Overpressure" is the visual message and the title above the balloon, which appeared on the cover of the

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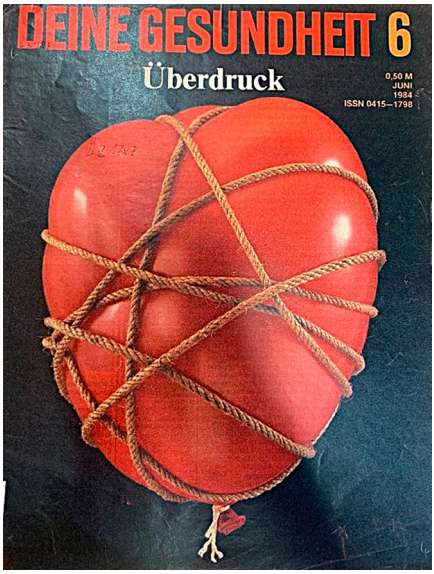


Fig. 1: "Überdruck" [Overpressure]. Cover by Norbert Vogel, *Deine Gesundheit*, June 1984.

June 1984 edition of *Deine Gesundheit* (Your Health), a health magazine published in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (fig.1).

The June issue and its central theme, "psycho-nervous defects", are testament to a growing preoccupation with both the physical burden created by the outside world and the psychological burden induced by what educational films by the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden called "sensory flooding" *(Reizüberflutung)*, or the "growing environmental noise of our days".[1] Questions of how to deal with the stimuli of an ever-faster, ever-louder environment kept the directors and writers of movies, guidebooks and health-care magazines busy. The red balloon served to illustrate the ever-tighter squeeze on people's health, which made the search for relaxation and peace a pressing issue. The key was to find the balance between too much pressure and too little.

In 1984 that balance seemed more at risk than ever, not only on a personal level but also on the level of global politics. The development of SS-20 rockets by the Warsaw Pact and the subsequent NATO double-track decision in December 1979 had raised the temperature of the Cold War and had created concern and protest in both German states.[2]

A multitude of ecological (pollution, Waldsterben, the threat to the ozone layer), medical (AIDS) and political uncertainties peaked in 1984, the "year of maximal and multiple fears", as Jens Balzer describes it.[3] Nature was no longer eternal. A neighbour's body was a potential threat. Now the balance of the nuclear powers might be shifting. The red balloon might explode at any minute.

1 Gesundheit ist trainierbar (Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden / DHMD, GDR 1974); Lärm (DHMD, GDR 1979).

2 See e. g. Hanisch 2011.

3 Balzer 2021, 279.

A health-advice magazine might seem a curious lens through which to examine the emotional climax of the Cold War, but as we will see, *Deine Gesundheit* and other GDR health-care advice offer an illuminating perspective on the interwovenness of communal and individual anxieties and of existential and banal problems and cast light on the complicated ties between writers, readers and their surrounding world. This article concentrates on the 12 issues of *Deine Gesundheit* published in 1984 and on two topics that dominated their coverage: the threat of nuclear war and yoga. As we will see, the appearance of these topics side by side is more than simply a curious blending of otherwise unconnected concerns. Growing fear of an escalation of the no-longer-so-Cold War went hand in hand with existing concerns about stress, noise and accelerating pressures, and together they merged into a wider sense of unrest and risk to which the readers of the magazine were subjected.

Ritualistic Reading

The thinking of American media theorist and critic James W. Carey about community and media has helped shape this article, although in the end, as we shall see, it is possibly too simplistic for our topic. Carey differentiates between two modes of communication.[4] The dominant understanding of communication as the sending and receiving of information falls into the category of "transmission", but if the cultural and societal meaning of communication is ignored, the story is only half-written. Carey therefore adds a second function to communication, which falls under the heading "ritual". Influenced by the Durkheimian assumption that ideas and beliefs emerge from social practices, he emphasises how communication can strengthen mutually lived experiences, creating bonds and shared beliefs. Communication as ritual reinforces such beliefs and stabilises society over time. The reading of a newspaper or magazine, Carey proposes, can be interpreted as both an intake of transmitted information and a ritual act, with the reader participating in the construction, demolition or affirmation of a view of the world shared by a community of writers and readers.[5]

Living and thinking in North America, James Carey drew inspiration and examples from his experience of a media market where opinions and ideolo-

4 Carey 2008, 12–14.

5 Carey 2008, 18.

gies compete for the reader's favour. Every periodical in such a market must provide its readers with what Margaret Beetham has called an "offer of identity", to keep them returning.[6] The magazine market in the GDR did not face such competition over identity. The media were controlled by the state. The only "offer of identity" was the "socialist personality", the ruling party's idea of a harmonious, active, class conscious and, lest we forget, happy GDR citizen.[7] The absence of alternative identities in GDR media makes it harder to judge whether readers actually saw themselves as part of the medially constructed community, but it does not thwart analysis of the *invocation* of that community. Additionally, GDR media did not unreservedly serve the purposes of the state as has often been supposed. They each had their own voice, which sometimes blended with the voice of the state but sometimes took on a surprisingly independent tone. The notion that media was "the sharpest weapon of the Party", a phrase coined by Gunter Holzweißig in the early 2000s, obscures the leeway available to journalists, photographers and graphic designers.[8]

Deine Gesundheit

The magazine that is this article's focus was a popular health magazine in the GDR, famous for its graphic design and its broad spectrum of topics.[9] In the 1980s its circulation reached 345,000 copies,[10] and its readership was likely considerably higher: estimates by the magazine itself assumed a possible monthly readership of more than one million.[11] Subordinate at first to the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden and from 1972 to the National Committee for Health Education, *Deine Gesundheit* was a central element of official health education in the GDR. It was intended to do more than simply inform citizens about health-related issues, for, in the words of a member of the National Committee for Health Education, it was to "influence the lifestyle of a large section of the population in a regulating

6 Beetham 2000, 95.

7 Düring 2021, 74–78; Dengel 2005, 86.

8 Holzweißig 2002.

9 See e. g. Linek 2015, 88–106.

10 Letter from head of the publishing house *Verlag Volk und Gesundheit*, Dolf Künzel, to the press office of the GDR, dated 8 July 1987. Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch) DC/9/1527.

11 Misgeld 1975, 168.

manner".[12] Health education was not simply a matter of the communication of information; it should inform desires, character traits and behaviour.[13] On a semantic level, the articles and opinion pieces spoke directly to the reader as an individual, but as an individual within the broader society. The title of the magazine used the second-person singular possessive form, ***Deine** Gesundheit*, **your** health, to remind each reader of his/her individual responsibility for his/her health, but the editorials and articles were largely dominated by the first-person plural form, translating as "**we**" and "**our**". Unlike film and radio, print was able to address the masses through individual consumption.

The magazine sought to change the behaviour of GDR citizens, but it was not the ideal tool for the job. We know little about the work of journalists and editors at *Deine Gesundheit*, but judging from memories of head editor Ursula Hertel and longtime journalist Cornelia Fischer-Börold, the influence of the SED *(Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands)*, the ruling party in the GDR, on its content seems to have been rather lose.[14] Dietrich Mühlberg has gone so far as to propose that the magazine was one of the few forums in the GDR where daily problems could be discussed.[15] The letter section, titled *Dialog*, published a few readers' letters each month and did indeed provide an opportunity to share anxieties, hopes and frustrations. *Deine Gesundheit* was part of the GDR's *Eingabensystem*, or petition system, which allowed individuals to voice complaints to authorities as long as they did not question economic or political arrangements as a whole.[16] But unlike other forums, *Deine Gesundheit* published on otherwise taboo topics, with articles mentioning homosexuality, mental health and environmental problems. Only rarely do we find in the magazine long blocks of dense text conveying political speeches by anyone from a government minister to the temporary secretary of some committee. And occasionally the magazine did voice critique, sometimes in text but more often in illustrations or graphic designs. Despite these occasional deviations from the ideological guidelines on spe-

12 Letter by member of the National Committee for Health Education Dr. [unknown first name] Thräuradt to Kurt Blecha, head of the National Press Office, dated 1 June 1972. BArch DC/9/9080.

13 Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in der DDR 1980, 20.

14 Mühlberg1999, 77–90; Interview with Cornelia Fischer-Börold, conducted by the author, 21 January 2021.

15 Mühlberg 1992, 49.

16 See e. g. Port 2007, 102–103; Mühlberg 2004, 243–244.

cific topics, the magazine nonetheless remained committed to socialism and to its duty to educate readers in the interest of the state.

As for other media in the GDR, for *Deine Gesundheit*, too, the relationship between writers and readers can be summed up as a form of what Madleen Podewski has identified as "authoritarian understanding".[17] Its writing oscillated between educational emancipation and paternalistic subjectivation, and it is fair to assume that readers were aware of its contradictory nature. Carey wrote of communication as ritualistic, but in this instance the overt ritual was less than perfect. Reading between the lines was just as important as reading the lines themselves. Readers could discern the occasional societal criticism in text and image, but they would also have noticed the repetitive rendition of Party views. They had the option to select what was important for their own lives.

Reagan and Relaxation

Chronobiology, sleeplessness and the noise levels of disco music had dominated the journal's reports in the last months of 1983.[18] The year before, articles had been published on psychology, the accelerating effects of technical innovations, and the changing relationship of humans and nature.[19] The world presented in *Deine Gesundheit* was moving ever faster and becoming ever louder. Its articles and movies told of an "overload of stimuli",[20] fed fears of a widespread "social desynchronisation"[21] and diagnosed disturbances in the "clock of life".[22]

The cover of the January 1984 issue presents a counterpoint. A shirtless man sits in *Gomukhasana* (cow-face pose) to welcome the readership of *Deine Gesundheit* to the new year (fig. 2). A series on yoga would then

17 The term goes back to Madleen Podewski's presentation „Was bleibt von uns? Was die Neue Berliner Illustrierte (NBI) nach der ‚Wende' aus der DDR machte" given at the workshop *Zeitschriftenmilieus in der DDR und während der Wende* in Erfurt, 7 to 8 February 2025.

18 Seibt 1983, 260–263; Fischer 1983, 292–294; Siegmund/Brinkmann 1983, 324–327; Walter 1983, 342–343.

19 Handt/Vaic 1982, 58–59; Bach/Ott 1982, 83–85; Hofmann 1982, 156–157; Mann 1982, 248–249; Dörre 1982, 260–263; Pachmann 1982, 264–266.

20 Gesundheit ist trainierbar (DHMD 1974), DHMD 2007/614.

21 Seibt 1983, 261.

22 Mletzko/Mletzko 1982.

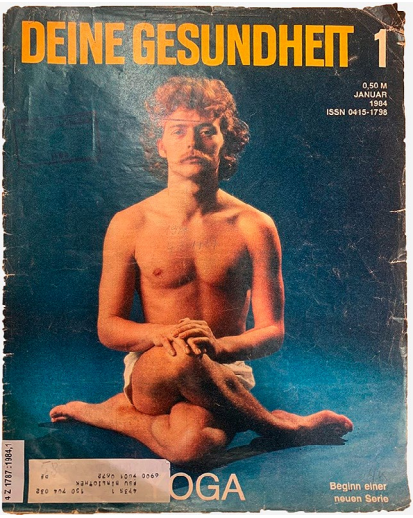


Fig 2: "Yoga", cover by Joachim Kirchmair, *Deine Gesundheit*, January 1984.



Fig 3: Image by Wolfgang Geisler, back cover of *Deine Gesundheit*, January 1984.

accompany readers through a year marked by dread of war. Stoking those fears, the back cover of the January 1984 issue (fig. 3) was as discomforting as the front cover was calm.[23]

The back pages of the issues of 1984 were each designed by a different artist and revolved around the arms race and fears of a nuclear war. In each instance, the artwork was accompanied by a short article, about one column long, by a medical practitioner who was a member of the initiative International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).[24] These texts on the magazine's last page further contributed to a poignant address to the readership as a community under threat. "We need to prevent a nuclear inferno", warned urologist and member of the SED's Central Committee Professor Moritz Mebel in the January 1984 issue. His choice of pronoun is an interesting example of the confusing distribution of responsibility presented to the readers: the nuclear threat was the fault of the West, the United States

23 Back cover of *Deine Gesundheit*, January 1984. The slogan on the back cover may allude to the song "Do the Russians want War? / Khotyat li russkiye voyny?" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which was performed by chansonnier Mark Bernes in 1961.

24 It is worth noting that the IPPNW was an international association with members from both sides of the Iron Curtain, but the columns in *Deine Gesundheit* were written exclusively by East German members.

or simply US president Ronald Reagan, but the duty to prevent nuclear war was everyone's, including the readers of *Deine Gesundheit*. While authors and designers changed, the message remained. Readers were reminded of both their individual responsibilities and their belonging to a collective beyond their immediate control. In February 1984, Dr Wolf Rainer Cario, head of a paediatric clinic in Berlin-Buch warned, "The increased threat of war in Europe because of the craze of armament must make us close ranks in a resolute manner."[25]

Whether *Deine Gesundheit*'s politicisation in 1984 was the outcome of a deliberate order by the SED's Central Committee or whether it was the result of internal discussions by the magazine's editorial board cannot be answered, owing to a lack of sources. It is striking, though, that in 1983 two articles in another health magazine had condemned West Germany's rearmament and harshly criticised the alleged pressure there on medical practitioners who were outspoken pacifists.[26] These two articles are remarkable as they were published in the *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Hygiene und ihre Grenzgebiete*, an academic journal that circulated very largely amongst only health educators and doctors, who made up a significant part of the circle of writers publishing in *Deine Gesundheit*. The conflation of public health and the global arms race was therefore not exclusive to *Deine Gesundheit*. The fact that a journal with a narrow focus on health and social hygiene had shifted from its established course would seem to confirm the suspicion that a push by political decision-makers was behind the publication of pacifistic content, even in magazines on the fringes of public attention. Articles in both *Deine Gesundheit* and the *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Hygiene und ihre Grenzgebiete* had always included ideological references, but while pacificism was a key component of the SED's claim to legitimacy, it had not been the main ideological component of their articles.

The intensification of public reminders of the shared fate of the socialist community and its shared enemy came as the GDR was experiencing both international and domestic pressure. A growing number of increasingly "impatient" and "insistent" petitions reached the various state institutions from the late 1970s onwards.[27] The introduction of "military lessons" *(Wehrunterricht)* in the ninth grade in 1978, subsequently also in the tenth

25 Cario 1984, 63.

26 Rohland 1983, 631–633; Richter 1983, 633–635.

27 See e. g. Staadt 1996, 17–18; Hanisch 2011, 167.

grade, led to a general unease and fed small but growing political activism in the GDR.[28] The expulsion of peace activist Roland Jahn in 1983 moved the GDR into the international spotlight. The number of exit-visa applications reached a new height in 1984,[29] which in combination with the deteriorating economic and financial situation forced the SED to loosen its regulation of emigration. Even as the socialist state was feeling the strains, the deteriorating relationship between the two blocs in the period before 1984 and the threat of nuclear war cast a shadow not only over the future of the state but over life itself. Since the late 1970s, non-state actors, especially the church, had gradually wrestled the torch of pacifism from the hands of the Party, which therefore no longer had a monopoly on calls for peace. This ideological opposition threatened the SED's legitimacy and reinforced the need for intensified pacifistic propaganda.[30] The emphasis on communal effort and pacifism in *Deine Gesundheit* can therefore be read not only as a reaction to world events but also as an attempt to regain the initiative by emphasising the state's idealistic core.

Both articles and images now directed their criticism at two targets. One was the opposition within the GDR, although it was never openly termed "opposition". *Deine Gesundheit* focused on "idealists" who thought an ethical commitment to pacifism sufficient to prevent war. They were reminded of their naivety and that a *Friedensbewegung* (peace movement) was of no consequence without its dialectical relationship with the *Friedenskampf* (peace struggle) fought by the Soviet Union and its allies.[31] Most columns and graphics were more direct and did not hesitate to name and shame the second target of criticism: warmongers from the West. The risk of nuclear war was personified by President Reagan, the bogeyman in the press and culture of the GDR. In 1983, Reagan had been nicknamed "crazy star" by the rock band Berluc in their single "No Bomb", which topped the East German charts.[32] A year later, in its July 1984 edition, *Deine Gesundheit* chose a more serious tone when the back cover, designed by Utz Müller, compared the "crazy star" to Adolf Hitler. The illustration described the invasion of Grenada by the United States in 1983 as a test run for a third world war and

28 See e. g. Koch 2000; Kowalczuk 2009, 234–237.
29 See e. g. Wentker 2011, 152; Gieseke 2011, 182–183.
30 See e. g. Hanisch 2011, 161–164.
31 Werner 1984, 127.
32 See e. g. Leitner 1994, 23–24.

compared it with Germany's support of General Franco through its infamous Condor Legion. The text read, "Hitler rehearsed the II. World War in GRANADA in 1936 … in GRENADA in 1983, Reagan rehearsed the III." The comparison was accompanied by the depiction of a swastika merging into a dollar sign.[33]

Not all the illustrations and articles were so confrontational. On some of the back covers, the reader can discern – by looking very closely – greetings across the blocs. For instance, the November 1984 issue's back cover with its slogan "Become active – not radioactive" *(aktiv werden – nicht radioaktiv)* hinted at a popular slogan of the West German environmental and anti-nuclear movement: "Rather active today than radioactive tomorrow" *(lieber heute aktiv als morgen radioaktiv)*.[34] In the GDR, the slogan had already decorated the stage of the 1982 rock concert *Rock für den Frieden* (Rock for Peace).[35] Its embrace by the political leaders, even if only when accompanied by clear anti-Western slogans like *Sonne statt Reagan* (Sun instead of Reagan/rain, a play on words as the German *Regen* [rain] is phonetically similar to *Reagan*), can be interpreted as a concession to a growing environmental and peace movement in the GDR that drew inspiration from West German role models.[36] A comparably soft approach towards West Germany is discernible in *Deine Gesundheit* throughout the year. While Reagan was directly attacked in the illustrations, current West German chancellor Helmut Kohl and his predecessor Helmut Schmidt were not mentioned at all. The exclusion of West Germany and its leaders from critique was in line with the attempt by Erich Honecker, leader in East Germany, to find a middle ground from which to oppose what was deemed Western aggression and intensify cooperation with West Germany.[37] The series of illustrations ended in December 1984 with a citation from Honecker's open letter to Helmut Kohl in 1983: "no new weapons of mass destruction, no new missiles, no confrontation, but disarmament!".[38]

Pressure compresses. Writing and reading about pressure and feeling under pressure can also compress. In a society experiencing ever-stronger

33 *Deine Gesundheit*, July 1984, 224.
34 See Tompkins 2016.
35 Mählert/Stephan 1996, 232–233.
36 Saunders 2005, 285.
37 Wentker 2011.
38 *Deine Gesundheit*, December 1984, 384.

centrifugal forces, the war-related series in *Deine Gesundheit* served to rally its readership around a common hope for peace and aimed to strengthen a sense of community. The topic of pressure was a medial tool used to remind readers of their belonging to a socialist community under threat. But when we apply Carey's concept of ritualistic reading, we notice that the community-building effect was more complex and more difficult to control than his theory allows. There is not one single community discernible in the discourse of *Deine Gesundheit*, but rather many. The demonisation of the Western enemy was apparent, albeit with notable gaps, namely the lack of mention of neighbouring West Germany. The staggering existential threat complicated community building: a nuclear war would have had such all-encompassing effect that it was futile to present one specific community as at risk. The aim of *Deine Gesundheit*'s coverage was to strengthen a distinct East German sense of community, but the community it actually fostered was more comprehensive than it intended.

The community discourse was further complicated by the confusing distribution of responsibility for peace, which the magazine laid on all shoulders, including those of politicians and *Deine Gesundheit*'s writers and readers. Such arbitrary breadth could not be compartmentalised and created instead a collectivised sense of being under threat. This effect will become even clearer when we consider attempts to soothe readers, to provide relief in the face of general threat.

Do-It-Yourself Rituals

We need to return to Roland Bier, the shirtless man on the cover of the January 1984 issue (fig. 2). Bier's poses and those of his female counterpart, Inge Lehmann, featured in every issue throughout 1984. The series was not the first time yoga was mentioned in *Deine Gesundheit*, for three years earlier it had been presented as a means to counter fear.[39] But the front page in January 1984 and the extensive series that followed marked the breakthrough of yoga practice into the GDR mainstream. The history of yoga in the GDR, and especially the perspective of East German practitioners, is yet to be fully explored, although a pioneering study by Matthias Tietke has laid valuable groundwork.[40]

39 Frohburg 1981, 239.
40 See e. g. Tietke 2014.

Yoga – or *Yoganastik* as it was sometimes called in the GDR – had been eyed with suspicion for some years by the government because of its roots in Indian spirituality and growing popularity in the Western world. However, no unified policy towards yoga was ever established. In the 1950s and 1960s, there had seemed no need to officially address something performed by only a small group of people, although one known practitioner was excluded from Party membership.[41] If ever mentioned in health guides, yoga featured at most as one "occult" practice amongst others, against which the government campaigned. Some authors did admit to an admiration for the tranquil state of the prototypical yogi, but they did not advise their readers to try the technique.[42] From the 1970s onwards, yoga was allowed to feature in media and grow in popularity, although only in a form aligned with socialist ideals. Advocates pointed out yoga's potential for optimising health and productivity. In September 1978, at a conference in Mariánské Lázně, Czechoslovakian physician Ctibor Dostálek argued that yoga could help citizens become "more resistant" to the "stimuli resulting from the complexity of modern society" and therefore more productive.[43] Such manipulation enabled yoga to be integrated into the meritocratic tone of GDR media, although the trope of the lazy and withdrawn hippie remained strong, featuring as late as 1980 in the cinema hit Und nächstes Jahr am Balaton (And Next Year at Lake Balaton, Hermann Zschoche, GDR).[44]

Yoga's status remained ambiguous. In 1979 an official ban on yoga by the *Deutscher Turn- und Sportbund*, the main East German sports organisation, coincided with the foundation of a working group on yoga and traditional Indian medicine in Leipzig.[45] The group was infiltrated by the Stasi[46] but continued to be tolerated because yoga was observed to help combat the challenges of modern life. The first guide to yoga, published one year earlier, treated yoga as a form of physical exercise with no transcendental associations. *Yoganastik für jedermann* (Yoganastik for Everyone) was a collection of lessons that aimed to provide "active relaxation" for the stressed worker.[47] First published in 1977 as a series of articles in the newspaper *Volksstimme*,

41 Tietke 2014, 30–31.
42 See e. g. Kleinsorge/Klumbies 1967, 12.
43 Lang/Arend 2023, 207.
44 Tietke 2014, 24–25.
45 Wiese 2003, 459; Tietke 2014, 86–87.
46 Tietke 2014, 76–78.
47 Stahlberg 1978, 4.

the instructions were turned into a book in reply to the overwhelming response and demand by readers for more.[48] The 1984 series in *Deine Gesundheit* sang from the same hymn sheet. It refrained from any sacralisation and made clear that yoga should be understood only as healthy for the physical body. Any "mystification" of yoga was an abuse and a distortion of the benefits of the exercises.[49]

The series' author, Fritz Klingberg, a neurophysiologist from the University of Leipzig and regular speaker at the *Arbeitskreis für Yoga und altindische Medizin* (Working Group for Yoga and Ancient Indian Medicine) wrote before a backdrop of a reawakening of religiosity in countries bordering the GDR and to some extent within the GDR itself. In Poland, the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978 had ignited a new enthusiasm for Roman Catholicism,[50] while in West Germany both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were amplifying the country's growing peace movement.[51] In the GDR itself, the Protestant church provided space for articulation and protest in relative safety, at a remove from the grasp of the state, and as noted above, it positioned itself as representative of pacifism, one of the SED's own legitimising claims.[52] Display of the symbol "Schwerter zu Pflugscharen" (swords to ploughshares) in late 1981 accompanied a newfound and religiously infused pacifist and political sentiment.[53] The repetitive statements against a religious or mystical interpretation of yoga should therefore be read not only in light of ideological distance from religion but also alongside attacks on pacifistic idealists. The attribution of religious meaning to yoga was explicitly rejected, but *Deine Gesundheit* could still advocate for its rituals in the secular life of readers. The explicit goal was to teach readers not only how to improve their physical wellbeing, but also how to reach a state of mind untroubled by external distractions. Only a few years earlier a practice such as meditation would have been identified as a relic of a superstitious past now overcome by the scientific-technological progress of socialism. Now, however, in the face of an end to all progress and history, Klingberg's question in the November 1984 issue "Do we need meditation?"[54] could only be answered in the affirmative.

48 Tietke 2014, 33–34.
49 Klingberg 1984b, 215.
50 Bösch 2013, 170–171.
51 Lepp 2010, 379–381.
52 Pollack 2009, 272–275; Hanisch 2011, 161–164.
53 Garstecki 2011, 368.
54 Klingberg 1984d, 303–306.

Erving Goffman has suggested that while religious rituals persist in modern societies, God or gods have been replaced by the individual self.[55] Yoga as advised in *Deine Gesundheit* served precisely this purpose. It promised enhanced exploration of the emotion of its practitioners and their social environment. In September 1984, the magazine explained how facial expressions could be trained and asked readers to practise in front of a mirror, where they could engage in an emotional conversation with themselves.[56] Being in contact with one's "true" feelings was proposed as a way to deepen "emotional resonance", a form of nonverbal, emotional communication with others and oneself.[57] Such practices bring us to Anthony F. C. Wallace's concept of modern solitary rituals as a form of "autocommunication".[58] But as much as communication with oneself was emphasised, the magazine made clear that yoga would also shield its practitioner from overstimulation. Yoga promised peace, stability and balance.[59] The magazine's aim here was not to deepen its readers' connection to the outside world but to reduce it. The articles on yoga were in line with a shift in health education towards an emphasis on the individual, its potential, precariousness and responsibilities.

The response to the series was overwhelmingly positive. The June 1984 issue of *Deine Gesundheit*, on pressure and psychology, resonated strongly with its readers and resulted in a flood of letters to the magazine's editorial board.[60] In a seemingly uncontrollable world, control over at least one's own body was welcome. Reader Lore K. reported the positive effect she was feeling, which, she wrote, would surely only improve over time.[61] Rainer J. from Schwerin wanted to know more about the "purposeful and aware structuring of daily routines".[62] Words from a letter from Günter B. in Leipzig suggest that yoga landed with the readership of *Deine Gesundheit* precisely as had been hoped: "The main reason I occupy myself with yoga: 1. Achieving inner peace, 2. Improving relaxation and body posture."[63]

55 See e. g. Goffman 1967, 95.
56 Klingberg 1984c, 271–274.
57 Klingberg 1984c, 271.
58 Wallace 1996, 63.
59 Klingberg 1984a, 143.
60 Misgeld 1984, 226.
61 *Deine Gesundheit*, July 1984, 214.
62 *Deine Gesundheit*, July 1984, 214.
63 *Deine Gesundheit*, July 1984, 214.

Conclusion

In 1984, in a world in turmoil, *Deine Gesundheit* offered a monthly warning of the grave dangers ahead, but it also sought to reassure its readers through a shared identity, shared enemy and shared practices. The actual outcome was more complex. The conflation of the comparatively small health risks of the everyday with the overwhelming risk of nuclear annihilation enforced but also diluted a sense of community. The existential risk of nuclear war brought home to readers the danger they faced as individuals and as citizens of the GDR, but it also highlighted their membership of a global, or at least cross-bloc, community. Within the collective, individuals sensed the threats they faced. The series on yoga further individualised the handling of emotions: relief from anxiety could be found in disconnecting from the world. The twelve issues of *Deine Gesundheit* that appeared in 1984 provide a case study that is all the more fascinating specifically because it is contradictory, particularly when it touches on ritual communication and community building. As so often, the reality proved more complicated than the theory.

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Elie Yazbek

The Individual as Cosmos

Personal Eschatology and the Sacred Humanism of The Life of Chuck (Mike Flanagan, US 2024)

> We know that a dream can be real, but whoever thought that reality could be a dream? We exist, of course, but how, in what way? As we believe, as flesh-and-blood human beings? Or are we simply parts of someone's feverish, complicated nightmare?
>
> The Twilight Zone, Season 2 / Episode 62

Abstract

Mike Flanagan's 2025 adaptation of Stephen King's *The Life of Chuck* presents a radical reconfiguration of apocalyptic imagination in contemporary cinema. Rejecting spectacle-driven depictions of collective annihilation, the film reframes the end of the world as the death of a single individual, which unfolds through a reverse-chronological narrative that aligns cosmic dissolution with neurological decline. Drawing on Walt Whitman's transcendentalist poetics – particularly the line "I am large, I contain multitudes" – as well as Christian eschatology, post-theistic spirituality, and religion-and-film scholarship, this article argues that The Life of Chuck (US 2025) articulates what it terms "sacred humanism". In this framework, individual consciousness functions as a sovereign universe, memory becomes liturgical, and death signifies the extinction of an entire cosmos of meaning rather than the judgment of a soul. Through close analysis of the film's three acts and comparative reference to other religiously inflected films, the article positions The Life of Chuck as a significant cinematic meditation on mortality, interior sacredness, and personal eschatology in a secular age.

Keywords

Personal Eschatology, The Life of Chuck (Mike Flanagan, US 2025), Apocalyptic Cinema, Post-theistic Spirituality, Consciousness and Finitude

Biography

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Introduction: The Internal Apocalypse

Apocalypse has long occupied a central place in both religious imagination and cinematic spectacle. From biblical visions in the Book of Revelation to modern disaster films, the "end" is typically imagined as a collective, external event, a rupture in history marked by divine intervention, cosmic judgment, or planetary destruction. Cinema has amplified these motifs, rendering apocalypse as visual excess – cities collapsing, skies darkening, and oceans rising. Films such as The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, US 1951), Armageddon (Michael Bay, US 1998), and 2012 (Roland Emerich, US/CA 2009) exemplify a tradition in which the end of the world is spectacular, communal, and externally imposed.

Mike Flanagan's The Life of Chuck (US 2025), adapted from Stephen King's novella of the same name,[1] offers a striking departure from this paradigm. Rather than depicting the end of the world as a universal catastrophe, the film presents apocalypse as an intimate, interior event: the death of an ordinary man named Charles "Chuck" Krantz.[2] The world does not end because of divine wrath, nuclear war, or ecological collapse; it ends because Chuck's brain shuts down. The film thus collapses the distinction between cosmic eschatology and personal mortality, suggesting that in a meaningful sense the end of a single consciousness is the end of a world.

This inversion aligns with a broader shift in contemporary religious thought, particularly within post-theistic and humanistic spiritual frameworks, which relocate the sacred from transcendent realms to immanent human experience.[3] The British philosopher Don Cupitt defines *post-theism*

1 Stephen King's *If It Bleeds* (New York: Scribner, 2020) is a collection of four novellas: "Mr. Harrigan's Phone", "The Life of Chuck", "If It Bleeds", and "Rat".

2 For the apocalypse in literature see e. g. Zamora 1989.

3 See e. g. Rahner 1978.

as religion after the collapse of belief in a metaphysical, external God – a spiritual framework grounded in human meaning, language, and finitude rather than supernatural transcendence.[4] By moving away from traditional views of a distant deity, this perspective suggests that spiritual depth is something created through human stories and shared values rather than something inherited from a higher power. The philosophical backbone of humanistic spirituality informing this approach is based on Charles Taylor's model: Taylor describes how modern subjects experience "fullness" within the "immanent frame". This concept refers to a modern outlook in which people find profound meaning, moral depth, and purpose entirely within the natural world and their everyday lives, without recourse to transcendence. Essentially, these frameworks propose that the most sacred aspects of existence are found in the richness of human consciousness and experience itself.[5] Within religion-and-film studies, cinema is frequently understood as a medium uniquely capable of portraying interior experience – memory, perception, and subjectivity – as dimensions in which sacred meaning manifests.[6] The Life of Chuck exemplifies this capacity by rendering consciousness as cosmos and memory as liturgy. The theological vision articulated by The Life of Chuck may be most coherently described as a form of "sacred humanism": a mode of sacrality grounded not in transcendence, afterlife, or divine judgment, but in the irreducible interiority of finite human consciousness. In this framework, the individual does not merely inhabit a world governed by external order; rather, a world is *constituted* by memory, perception, and relation, and its "end" coincides with the extinction of that constituting consciousness. Death, accordingly, is not framed as the soul's passage into another realm but as the extinction of an internally generated cosmos of meaning. This conception echoes the wisdom tradition of the scriptural text *Ecclesiastes*, in which the final horizon of human existence is not judgment or reward but the fragile, vanishing totality of lived experience itself.[7] Walt Whitman (1819–1892), in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), celebrates the expansive, plural nature of the self, declaring in the poem "Song of Myself", "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" The final line expresses a vision of the individual as inherently complex and capable of en-

4 Cupitt 1997, 45–72.
5 Taylor 2007, 539–593; Taylor 1989.
6 Plate 2008; Marsh 2007.
7 Eccl. 12:1–7.

compassing diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives, which has often been interpreted in literary and philosophical scholarship as a model of internal plurality and human universality.[8] Whitman's claim acquires a rigorously eschatological dimension within the film: what ends at Chuck's death is not simply a biological organism but an entire universe of lived experience. The film does not deny the gravity traditionally assigned to apocalypse; rather, it relocates it from the destruction of the external cosmos to the collapse of an interior one. In doing so, The Life of Chuck transforms eschatology from a doctrine of cosmic termination to a phenomenology of personal finitude in which the sacred is encountered not beyond death but precisely in the fragile, time-bound totality of a single human life.[9]

Apocalypse Reconsidered: Eschatology in Religion and Film

To appreciate the theological significance of The Life of Chuck, it is necessary first to situate it within the broader discourse of eschatology in religion and film. Traditionally, eschatology refers to doctrines concerning "the last things": death, judgment, heaven or hell. In Christian theology, these concepts are typically divided into *collective eschatology* (the fate of the cosmos and humanity as a whole) and *personal eschatology* (the destiny of the individual soul).[10]

Cinema has overwhelmingly favored collective eschatology. Even when films engage religious themes, they often externalize theological anxiety through global catastrophe. Conrad Ostwalt has observed that apocalyptic cinema frequently serves as a secularized expression of religious fear, translating theological concepts into spectacle-driven narratives.[11] In doing so, such films can avoid direct engagement with personal mortality, instead projecting existential dread onto planetary destruction.

The Life of Chuck reverses this logic. The film begins with what appears to be a collective apocalypse – failing infrastructure, vanishing stars, and so-

8 Whitman 2001 (1855), 78–82.

9 See e. g. Becker 1973; Eliade 1953.

10 Eschatology derives from the Greek *eschatos* ("last") and *logos* ("study" or "discourse"), referring broadly to the study of final events. In Christian theology, the end appears in biblical texts such as Daniel, Matt. 24, 1 Cor. 15, and Revelation, encompassing the ultimate fate of individuals and the cosmos. See e. g. Doyle 2022; Goss 1981.

11 Ostwalt 1998, 2–4; 11–12.

cial collapse[12] – but gradually reveals that this "world" exists entirely within the mind of a dying man. The cosmic scale of destruction is not disproportional; it is appropriate, because a universe is ending. This reframing draws on phenomenological and transcendentalist traditions.[13]

Importantly, this approach does not deny the emotional power of apocalyptic imagery. Rather, it reclaims that power for the individual. The terror, beauty, and grief associated with the end of the world are no longer abstract or distant. Here they are the intimate realities of dying.

The film's reverse chronology makes this interior apocalypse visible from the outset, beginning not with origins but with endings, and frames death itself as an eschatological event.

Act III as the First Act

The film's opening act – chronologically its final one – presents a world undergoing a subdued collapse. Rather than erupting into spectacle or mass panic, society appears to be quietly unraveling. Communication systems falter without explanation, digital infrastructures fail, and environmental stability deteriorates. Even the night sky becomes unreliable, as stars begin to disappear one by one. The tone is marked less by fear than by confusion and resignation, establishing from the outset that the film's catastrophe is driven not by visible antagonists or divine intervention but by an unseen and incomprehensible process.

Within this atmosphere of gradual dissolution, a recurring visual motif initially defies narrative logic. Across public spaces, roadside billboards, television advertisements, storefront screens, and digital signage, messages appear bearing the same phrase, "39 great years! Thanks, Chuck!", next to a smiling image of a local accountant. These messages are omnipresent yet unexplained. No information is provided about who Chuck is, why he is being thanked, or who has authorized these public displays. Their cheerful tone sits uneasily alongside the world's decline, creating a dissonance that is both comic and disturbing. For viewers encountering the film without prior

12 The imagery deliberately recalls the cosmic language of Revelation – darkened skies, failing structures, a world losing coherence (Rev. 6:12–14; 21:1) – but here these signs do not announce divine judgment; they mark the disintegration of a single consciousness.

13 Heidegger 1962, 279–311; Taylor 2007, 539–593; Marion 1991.

knowledge of its premise, these messages function as a riddle embedded within the apocalyptic setting.

Crucially, the film offers no immediate clarification. The messages are not introduced through exposition, nor are they commented upon by authorities or institutions within the narrative world. Instead, they simply appear and persist, interrupting ordinary systems of public communication with an expression of intimate gratitude that seems radically out of place. Their mysterious ubiquity suggests that they are the product of a deeper narrative logic that has yet to be disclosed.

Amid these unfolding phenomena, two characters attempt to locate meaning by invoking Carl Sagan's Cosmic Calendar,[14] a metaphor that condenses the entire history of the universe into a single calendar year to illustrate humanity's fleeting place within cosmic time. In the film, high-school teacher Marty Anderson explains this concept to his ex-wife, Felicia Gordon, during discussions of the world's unraveling; if the Big Bang took place on January 1 and the present moment maps onto December 31, then all of human history occupies only the final moments of that year. This conversation underscores how vanishingly brief human existence is when measured on a cosmic scale.

Read alongside the film's recurring invocation of Walt Whitman – first heard in the opening scene, when a student cites *"Song of Myself"* in the very moment the catastrophe begins – the Cosmic Calendar acquires a more intimate resonance. Even though humanity occupies only the final seconds of cosmic time, Whitman's claim that the individual "contains multitudes" suggests that an entire universe can unfold within a single life. The film quietly aligns these perspectives: cosmic vastness is mirrored and recapitulated within consciousness itself. What is at stake in the apparent apocalypse, then, is not merely the insignificance of human life against an infinite backdrop, but the extinction of a richly populated interior world. The collapse of the cosmos is inseparable from the collapse of the multitudes that have constituted Chuck's lived reality. Only gradually, through delayed revelation and shifts in perspective, does the film begin to reframe the meaning of these messages. The apparent apocalypse is revealed not as a global event,

14 The concept was first popularized by Carl Sagan in his book *The Dragons of Eden* (1977) and in his television documentary series Cosmos: A Personal Voyage (PBS, US 1980) and its companion book, *Cosmos* (1980). Sagan goes on to extend the comparison in terms of surface area, explaining that if the Cosmic Calendar were scaled to the size of a football field, then "all of human history would occupy an area the size of [his] hand".

but as the subjective experience of Charles "Chuck" Krantz, a 39-year-old man whose consciousness is failing due to a terminal brain tumor. With this disclosure, the logic of the billboards undergoes a decisive transformation. What initially appeared to be public expressions of collective gratitude are reinterpreted as manifestations arising from within Chuck's own perceptual world. The collapsing systems of society mirror the breakdown of cognitive function, and the messages of thanks emerge as the final symbolic expressions generated by a mind approaching its end.

Understood in this light, the public form of the messages becomes especially significant. Billboards and advertisements – normally instruments of mass address – are repurposed as vehicles for something intensely personal. The world that appears to be thanking Chuck is, in fact, the world as he has known and remembered it. Every relationship, encounter, and fleeting interaction that has constituted his experience finds expression in this ritualized final gesture of acknowledgment. The repetition of "Thanks, Chuck!" thus takes on the character of a farewell articulated by the accumulated contents of a single life, rather than by a transcendent authority.

Viewed through the lens of the Cosmic Calendar, the film's conceptual inversion deepens: the "end of the world" is not a universal cosmic finale but the closing moment of one individual's internal universe. Just as the Cosmic Calendar compresses billions of years into a year, showing that human history occupies only its final moments, Chuck's internal world collapses into the final moments of his life, rendering his subjective experience of time both finite and immense. The opening act thus establishes the film's central thesis – no longer is eschatology framed as a cosmic event imposed from beyond, for it is the internal conclusion of an individual consciousness. It is from this inversion that the present study begins, taking the film's opening act as the point at which questions of theology, subjectivity, and meaning converge. By situating apocalypse within the life of a single ordinary individual, The Life of Chuck reframes death itself as an eschatological event, not of the cosmos at large, but of a world uniquely and irreducibly one's own.

Having established death as the point at which an entire world collapses, the film turns to the life that precedes this ending, shifting attention from dissolution to presence.

The Middle Act

The film's second act – chronologically the middle of Chuck's life – shifts abruptly in tone and scale. Gone are the signs of collapse and cosmic instability that define the opening sequence. Instead, the narrative settles into an apparently ordinary urban environment, following the adult Charles Krantz as he navigates the routines of work and public life. There is no overt crisis, no looming catastrophe, and no explicit reference to the revelations that structured the film's opening act. This return to normalcy grounds the film in the textures of everyday existence.

The act's central moment occurs in a public square, where Chuck encounters a street drummer performing an improvised rhythm. A brief but striking interruption of narrative momentum follows: Chuck begins to dance. The sequence lasts more than five minutes and carries a disproportionate emotional and conceptual weight within the film. Passersby pause to watch, an unknown woman joins Chuck, while others simply observe before continuing on their way. No explanation is offered for Chuck's behavior, and no narrative consequences follow from it. The moment appears, unfolds, and passes without resolution.

Importantly, the scene is not framed as performance or spectacle. Chuck is not presented as exceptional, talented, or seeking attention. His movements are spontaneous, unpolished, and unremarkable in any technical sense. The camera does not elevate the dance through elaborate choreography or dramatic framing; instead, it remains attentive to the physical immediacy of the moment – gesture, rhythm, breath. The surrounding environment continues its ordinary flow, reinforcing the sense that nothing "important", in conventional narrative terms, is happening.

Yet within the structure of the film, this moment functions as a point of concentration. Removed from the apocalyptic framing of the first part of the film and the formative revelations of, as we will see, its final part, the dance exists entirely within the present. It neither anticipates the future nor reflects explicitly on the past. Its significance lies precisely in its lack of justification. The scene does not advance plot, develop character psychology, or resolve thematic questions. Instead, it foregrounds presence itself as worthy of attention.

In the context of the film, Act II thus serves as a counterbalance to both the inevitability revealed elsewhere and the metaphysical weight carried by the narrative's endpoints. By isolating a fleeting, purposeless act within

an otherwise ordinary life, The Life of Chuck grants narrative space to an experience that resists instrumental meaning. The dance does not explain Chuck's life, nor does it redeem or transform it. It simply occurs.

This restraint is essential. Act II does not articulate a theology of presence or sacredness; those interpretations will emerge from the film's overall structure. This act's function is more modest but no less crucial: it insists that a life is not composed solely of origins and endings, for it contains moments that exist without reference to either. The film thus creates space for the present moment to stand on its own, unburdened by narrative necessity but central to the life it momentarily interrupts.

And yet such moments cannot be understood apart from the conditions under which a life begins and the knowledge that quietly frames it.[15]

Act I as the Final Act

The film's final act – chronologically the beginning – moves the narrative into the early life of Charles Krantz, providing the formative experiences that shape his understanding of himself and the world. Raised by his grandparents after the death of his parents in a car accident, young Chuck lives in a Victorian house marked by stability, loss, and quiet mystery. Among its ordinary rooms is a locked cupola, a small space at the top of a staircase that his grandfather insists his grandson must never enter. The prohibition lends the cupola a mythic quality, hinting at unfinished business or hidden truths.

Chuck's early life is punctuated by moments of joy and loss. His grandmother, Sarah, encourages his love of dance, a motif that will recur throughout his life. His grandfather, Albie, alternates encouragement with caution, pushing him toward conventional pursuits such as accounting. Yet even within these familial rhythms, echoes of larger questions emerge. In one classroom scene, Chuck's teacher reads from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", introducing him to the poem's most quoted line: "I am large, I contain multitudes." When Chuck asks what this means, she places her hands gently on his cheeks and explains that it is a way of understanding the richness and complexity of human experience – a single person can contain many possibilities, identities, and memories.

15 See e. g. De Caussade 1989; Kearney 2002.

The timing of this moment is significant. As we have heard, Whitman's line is first spoken in the film's opening scene, as the world begins to unravel, as a link, we now recognize, to a childhood lesson and to cosmic collapse. The poem introduced here in Chuck's youth will frame his understanding of both life and death, binding the film's chronological beginning to its narrative end. What appears in this classroom as an affirmation of human complexity will later reveal itself to be the key to understanding why one man's death registers as the end of a world.

This encounter with Whitman does more than introduce a poetic phrase. It provides Chuck with a conceptual lens through which he begins to see his own life. The teacher's explanation anchors the film's central motif: human experience as a kind of internal universe. Rather than being a simple slogan or feel-good aphorism, the idea serves as a philosophical and emotional compass for Chuck's subsequent choices, grounding his awareness of self and others in a sense of expansive interiority.

The narrative tension of the final-but-first act is heightened by Chuck's relationship with the forbidden cupola. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, the room remains silent – its locked door a barrier both physical and symbolic. After his grandfather's death, Chuck inherits the house and, with it, the key to the cupola. When he finally enters, the film stages a moment of revelation: within the cupola, Chuck experiences a vision of his adult self on his deathbed, identifiable by a scar he acquired during a school dance.

Confronted with this vision, Chuck explicitly rejects any supernatural interpretation, insisting that what he sees is not a ghost or apparition. Instead, he describes himself as "wonderful", recognizing a truthful image of his own finitude rather than a visitation from beyond. In this moment, Chuck claims Whitman's language as his own, quietly affirming, "I am a multitude." What began as a classroom lesson crystallizes into ontological recognition: the world he contains – memories, relationships, unrealized futures – will end with him. This vision is presented not with shock or horror but with quiet inevitability. Rather than paralyzing him, this knowledge becomes a commitment to living fully within the boundaries of time and possibility. The phrase "I contain multitudes" thus transforms from poetic metaphor into both personal affirmation and thematic key, unlocking the deeper logic of the film's reverse chronology and binding Chuck's childhood to his death.

Act I, therefore, does not simply present Chuck's origin story. It establishes the conceptual and emotional foundation upon which the film's theology

of finitude rests – a theology that, while distinctive in its execution, participates in a broader cinematic reconfiguration of eschatology itself. The film's distinctive approach emerges more clearly when viewed alongside other works that have similarly relocated the sacred within finite human experience.

Comparative Perspectives

While The Life of Chuck has a distinctive narrative structure and tonal restraint, it participates in a broader cinematic movement that reconfigures eschatology around interior experience rather than cosmic finality. In contrast to classical apocalyptic cinema – where the end of the world is marked by external destruction, divine judgment, or collective catastrophe – these films locate ultimate meaning within the life of a single subject. The "end" no longer arrives as a universal event, for it is a personal horizon, shaped by memory, perception, and embodied experience.

A useful point of comparison is David Lowery's A Ghost Story (US 2017), which similarly abandons spectacle in favor of temporal and subjective dislocation. Lowery's film frames death not as a transition to transcendence, but as a prolonged confrontation with absence and persistence. The ghost's silent observation of a world that continues without him mirrors The Life of Chuck inversion of scale: significance is located not in what happens to the universe, but in what is lost when a single consciousness can no longer perceive it. Yet where A Ghost Story emphasizes duration and repetition, The Life of Chuck foregrounds finitude, structuring its narrative around a life that is complete precisely because it is bounded.

Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life (US 2011) offers another instructive parallel. Malick juxtaposes intimate family memory with cosmic imagery, drawing explicit connections between personal grief and the vastness of creation. However, The Tree of Life ultimately situates its interior reflections within a metaphysical framework that gestures toward transcendence and reconciliation beyond time. The Life of Chuck, by contrast, resists this upward movement. Its cosmology remains resolutely immanent: the universe it depicts expands and collapses entirely within the contours of an individual life, without recourse to an external metaphysical resolution.

In Wings of Desire (DE/FR 1987), Wim Wenders provides a compelling point of comparison, particularly in its treatment of interiority as a sacred

space.[16] Wenders' angels do not intervene in human history through divine power but attend silently to the inner lives of individuals, listening to their thoughts, fears, and memories as the true substance of the world. Meaning in the film is located not in cosmic order or eschatological destiny but in the fragile immediacy of human consciousness. When the angel Damiel chooses mortality, he does not descend into a fallen world as much as enter a finite one – accepting time, pain, and death as the price of having a lived interior life. Like The Life of Chuck, Wings of Desire thus frames finitude not as loss of transcendence but as the condition under which existence becomes meaningful at all.

A further comparison can be made with Charlie Kaufman's Synecdoche, New York (US 2008), which similarly treats the self as a world composed of innumerable internal relationships and representations. Kaufman's film dramatizes the impossibility of total self-comprehension, constructing an ever-expanding interior architecture that ultimately overwhelms its creator. While Synecdoche, New York emphasizes fragmentation and self-alienation, The Life of Chuck adopts a more restrained posture. Its vision of interiority is finite rather than proliferating, marked not by endless deferral but by eventual closure.

A similar interiorization of cosmic scale appears in the television series Pluribus (Apple TV, US 2025–present), which centers on the gradual realization that multiple seemingly distinct worlds and identities are in fact expressions of a single fractured consciousness. The series treats subjectivity not as a localized psychological state but as a world-generating structure, within which entire realities emerge, interact, and eventually collapse. What Pluribus dramatizes through parallel narratives and proliferating selves, The Life of Chuck renders through reverse chronology and interior apocalypse: the idea that the destruction of a single consciousness entails the disappearance of an entire experiential universe. In both cases, eschatology is no longer a cosmic or theological event; it is now a phenomenological one, marked by the dissolution of the subject that sustains meaning itself.[17]

16 Elsaesser 1989.

17 Regarding this conception of subjectivity, Husserl's phenomenology defines consciousness as world-constituting rather than world-reflecting (Husserl 1970, 48–67), while Ricœur shows how memory and narrative organize this constituted world into a coherent horizon of meaning (Ricœur 2004, 412–451). Together, they provide the conceptual basis for understanding how the collapse of a single subject can entail the disappearance of an entire experiential universe.

Across these examples, a shared concern emerges: the relocation of religious or existential significance from transcendent structures to interior experience. What distinguishes The Life of Chuck within this constellation is its explicit framing of an individual life as an eschatological event. The film does not merely depict interiority as meaningful; it treats the cessation of that interior world as equivalent, in narrative weight, to the end of a cosmos. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary cinematic efforts to articulate forms of sacred meaning that arise from lived experience rather than doctrinal systems or supernatural intervention.

Seen in this comparative light, The Life of Chuck contributes to an emerging cinematic theology of finitude in which the ultimate questions traditionally addressed by religion are reframed through the ordinary contours of human life. The film does not deny transcendence so much as render it unnecessary, finding ultimate significance in the bounded totality of a single existence. Its apocalypse is not universal, but it is complete.

Toward a Cinema of Sacred Humanism

Taken together, the films discussed in this study suggest the emergence of a cinematic orientation that might be described as "personal eschatology". Within this framework, the "end of the world" is no longer imagined as a collective future catastrophe; it is instead an individual certainty embedded within the limits of a single life. Sacred meaning is not sought in transcendent realms or deferred resolutions, for it is located within consciousness itself – within memory, perception, and the lived intensity of presence. Salvation, accordingly, is reframed: it is now fullness achieved before death, rather than deliverance from death.

The Life of Chuck differentiates itself within this developing tradition through its tonal and conceptual clarity. Where comparable films often dwell in ambiguity, fragmentation, or existential anxiety, Flanagan's work adopts a posture of affirmation. Its guiding emotional register is not dread or despair but gratitude. The recurring refrain "Thanks, Chuck" functions less as narrative device than as ritualized acknowledgment. It affirms a form of sacred humanism in which the value of a life lies not in its duration or transcendence but in its capacity to momentarily contain a world.

Rather than rejecting religious structures outright, the film subtly reconfigures them. Liturgical language is retained, but its referent shifts. Praise

is no longer directed toward a divine source beyond the world. It is now focused on the human consciousness that sustains meaning within the world. In this sense, The Life of Chuck does not so much abandon theology as translate it, offering a vision of sacred significance grounded entirely in finite human existence. This orientation ultimately finds its most concentrated expression in the film's closing meditation on death and loss.

Conclusion: The Cosmos of a Single Life

The Life of Chuck ultimately evokes the haunting idea that a person's death is akin to the burning of a library.[18] The film treats this metaphor not as sentiment but as ontological claim. Chuck's death does not mark merely the end of a biological life, for it also signals the extinction of a universe that existed nowhere else – a world composed of memories, relationships, perceptions, and unarticulated thoughts that cannot be replicated or retrieved.

The significance of this vision lies in its articulation of a mature, post-theistic spirituality. The film neither mocks religious tradition nor replaces it with cynicism. Instead, it relocates the sacred within the human person, redefining apocalypse as personal, eschatology as internal, and salvation as the capacity to be fully present within a finite life. This is not a metaphysical claim that reality is reducible to one mind; rather, it concerns how the film represents meaning as generated and sustained through consciousness, memory, and relation. Meaning is not deferred to an afterlife or guaranteed by transcendence. It is generated through lived experience and extinguished with it.

By thanking Chuck, the film ultimately thanks every individual for the worlds they carry and sustain, however briefly. In doing so, The Life of Chuck offers one of contemporary cinema's most resonant meditations on death – not as annihilation alone, but as the irrevocable loss of a singular and irreplaceable cosmos. It affirms the sacred dignity of ordinary life precisely because it ends, and because everything it contains ends with it.

The film offers a final, quietly explicit formulation of this vision. In the middle act, following Chuck's spontaneous dance, the voiceover reflects that Chuck will later wonder why God made the world, only to find the

18 Stephen King writes, "When an old man dies, a library burns", in "Mr. Harrigan's Phone", the first story in the collection *If It Bleeds*.

answer moments later in the fleeting, overwhelming happiness he has just experienced: "*that* is why God made the world". Read in light of the film's personal eschatology, this line does not reinstate a transcendent creator but names the sacred as immanent within lived intensity itself. What justifies existence is not a divine plan beyond time, but the fragile, radiant fullness of moments that briefly make a life feel complete. In this sense, The Life of Chuck affirms a sacred humanism in which meaning, joy, and even God are discovered within the finite interior world of a single human being.

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Paolo Bertetti and Jenny Ponzo

Media and Film Representations of the "Offer of Life"

Military Saints and the Relationship between Religious and Civil Institutions

Abstract

The "offer of life" is a term used to describe the voluntary sacrifice of one's life in the name of Christian charity. In 2017, the Catholic Church introduced the offer of life as a new case for canonisation, adding it to the two traditional main cases, i. e. martyrdom and the "heroicity" of virtues. In the context of the post-conciliar Catholic Church's efforts to adapt to the challenges of today's world, the new case is intended to broaden the concept of holiness and to capture exemplary behaviours that respond to contemporary problems for human society, among which is war. Two of the first causes to involve offer of life concern soldiers: the American military chaplain Father Emil Joseph Kapaun and the Italian carabiniere Salvo D'Acquisto, who embody both civil and religious values. The article analyses how the religious and civil roles relate to each other in their respective cultures. After a brief overview of the case of the "offer of life", it provides examples of how institutional sources comment on these figures before turning to a selection of media representations. Drawing on the semiotic notion of "thematization", it provides a semiotic analysis of an episode of a US television series about Father Kapaun and a television series and a film about Salvo D'Acquisto.

Keywords

Offer of Life, Saints, Catholic Church, Civil Religion, Semiotics, Thematization, Soldier, Canonization, Salvo D'Acquisto, Emil Joseph Kapaun

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Introduction

In 2017, the Catholic Church introduced a new case for canonisation, the "offer of life". A centuries-old legal tradition was changed with the official recognition of this new model of sainthood based on the voluntary offering of life in the name of Christian charity. This fact can be read in the context of the Catholic Church's efforts since the Second Vatican Council to adapt to the challenges of today's world. The new case constitutes an effective juridical instrument to broaden the concept of holiness and to capture exemplary behaviour that is considered particularly timely in responding to the problems that plague humanity in our days. One of these problems is war.

And indeed, among the first causes for canonisation opened for the offer of life are two that concern men who belonged to the military: the American chaplain Father Emil Joseph Kapaun (1916–1951) and the Italian carabiniere Salvo D'Acquisto (1920–1943).[1] These individuals are particularly intriguing because they embodied both civil and religious values. The United States and Italy have regulated the relationship between the nation state and religion in different ways, so the portrayal of these exemplary figures provides an excellent basis for examining the relationship of each man's religious and civil roles within his respective culture.

To do so, this article will analyse the ways in which these different roles are expressed, highlighted, or overshadowed within institutional and media

1 The research presented in this article derives from a close cooperation between the authors. However, the introduction and the first paragraph can be attributed to Jenny Ponzo, and the second paragraph and the conclusion to Paolo Bertetti.

discourse relating to the two figures. After a brief overview of the case of the "offer of life", it provides examples of how institutional sources have commented on the role of these figures and then turns to a selection of media representations. In particular, deploying the semiotic notion of "thematization",[2] we propose a semiotic analysis of an episode of a US television series about Kapaun and a television series and a film about D'Acquisto. This semiotic analysis reveals the main differences between the Italian and the American institutional discourses about these exemplary figures and compares the institutional and filmic discourses within the relevant cultural context.

Religious and Civil Institutional Discourses about Key Figures

Two main paths to sainthood were officially recognised within earlier Catholic culture and became subject to progressive codification that formed the basis of the causes for canonisation. The first was martyrdom, which has its origins in the first centuries of Christianity, and the second was the "heroicity"[3] of virtues, which, after the end of Christian persecutions (IV century), recognised spiritual perfection in life. In 2017, with the apostolic letter *Maiorem hac dilectionem*, Pope Francis added *motu proprio* a third case to these two traditional models of holiness, the sacrificing of one's life for another in the name of Christian charity.[4] At and since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has tried to adapt to modernity. In this context, especially during John Paul II's pontificate, the regulation of canonisation has undergone important changes, which have been accompanied by the proclamation of an unprecedented number of new saints and blessed, who in turn have embodied an extraordinarily wide variety of saintly models. The case of the offer of life was introduced partly because some types of saints did not fit perfectly within one of the two traditional models. Such was the case, for example, for the victims of totalitarian regimes or people who died as caregivers during the spread of contagious disease *(martyrium per pestem)*. The new case made it possible to officially recognise the holiness of

2 See e. g. Greimas/Courtés 1982; Bertetti 2024.

3 The term "heroicity" is used in jurisprudence and specialist literature on canonization to indicate the heroic practice of Christian virtues, see Ponzo/Rai 2019.

4 Pope Francis 2017.

people who freely and voluntarily sacrificed their lives and died for others in the name of charity, i. e. Christian love.[5]

According to the Catholic Italian newspaper *Avvenire*, between the issuing of the apostolic letter in 2017 and February 2025, a total of 13 causes for the "offer of life" have been investigated by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.[6] In 2022, the first cause reached the stage of a decree certifying the "offer of life". That cause concerns the Brazilian Franz De Castro Holzwarth (1942–1981). De Castro was a lawyer and a fervent Catholic. In 1974, he began working with the Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted (APAC). On 14 February 1981, De Castro and the president of APAC, Mario Ottoboni, were asked to work as mediators in Jacareí prison, where a riot had broken out. De Castro offered himself as a hostage instead of a policeman, but when he was released, the military police opened fire, killing five rebels and De Castro. His cause, opened in 2009, was initially a martyrdom case, but when it was presented to the Special Congress of Theological Counsellors in 2017, it received only a partially positive outcome, because it was difficult to prove that the persecutors had acted out of hatred for the faith, as the case of martyrdom specifically requires. However, following the introduction of the new case, it was determined that the case involving De Castro could be examined not as a martyrdom but as an offer of life.[7]

On 24 February 2025, two further decrees were issued confirming cases of offer of life. One concerns Emil Joseph Kapaun and the other Salvo D'Acquisto. Kapaun was a priest from Kansas who joined the US Army as a military chaplain in 1941. He was characterised by the charity and courage with which he assisted the soldiers. In 1950, during the Korean War, he was captured by the North Koreans during the Battle of Unsan when he refused to flee and remained on the battlefield to help the wounded. Despite the terrible conditions in captivity, he never ceased to fulfil his apostolic mission and to help the other prisoners. When his health became very poor, his Chinese captors, who had taken over the camp from the Koreans, took him to the "House of Death", where sick prisoners were left to die without medical care, food or water.[8]

5 An in-depth reflection on the "offer of life" can be found in Ponzo 2020. See also Ciciliot 2018.

6 Muolo 2025.

7 For De Castro's biography and information about his cause, see Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Franz de Castro Holzwarth (1942–1981), https://t1p.de/ism7r [accessed 8 April 2025].

8 Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Emil Joseph Kapaun (1916–1951), https://t1p.de/mp-mwj [accessed 8 April 2025].

D'Acquisto was an Italian carabiniere (a member of the national gendarmerie of Italy) with a strong Catholic faith. At the time of the armistice of 8 September 1943, he was serving as a vice-brigadiere, roughly equivalent to a sergeant, in Torrimpietra. He could have fled, as did many military men at the time, but he stayed to protect the population. On 22 September, while German soldiers were examining stocks of unused weapons, a sudden explosion killed and injured several of them. The accident was attributed to unknown local partisans, whom the Carabinieri were required to track down by dawn the next day; if they were not found, the Germans would carry out a retaliatory action. D'Acquisto, who was standing in for his superior as head of the Carabinieri station, tried to convince the German soldiers that the incident had been an accident. The German soldiers retaliated anyway, indiscriminately arresting 22 people, who were led to an execution site and forced to dig their own graves. Knowing that the Germans were determined to kill somebody, D'Acquisto told the head of the German force that he was responsible for the incident and asked for the hostages to be freed. They were released, and shortly afterwards D'Acquisto was killed.[9]

The three saintly figures inaugurating the new offer-of-life case concretise this abstract category. By comparing their life stories and the representations of their characters in ecclesiastical documents and the wider culture, we can establish a coherent and specific model of this category. These three stories share some fundamental features: the protagonists act in a conflictual environment (De Castro dies during an uprising in a prison, Kapaun and D'Acquisto during a war) in which they play the role of peacemaker and benefactor. Moreover, their decisive action takes place in a situation in which an oppressive power threatens the lives and freedom of people: this problem is recognisable in the common theme of imprisonment. De Castro, Kapaun and D'Acquisto stand up for the weak, for the victims of such regimes. To help others, they all take on the same role by voluntarily and consciously giving up their freedom and their lives. Kapaun and D'Acquisto were military men, but even as they fulfil their civil duties as soldiers, they are described as Christians who care for others and openly profess their faith.

The Church has chosen this specific model for the first three causes for canonisation for offer of life. Evidently the Church considers this model par-

9 For D'Acquisto's biography, see Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Salvo D'Acquisto (1920–1943), https://t1p.de/x4j6e, https://t1p.de/u6cjv and Ministero della Difesa, Carabinieri, "Salvo D'Acquisto, Eroe e Martire Cristiano. I Carabinieri Partigiani di Fiesole", https://t1p.de/qulck [accessed 8 April 2025].

ticularly significant and timely in the current socio-political context. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has promoted an ideal of holiness as a universal vocation to be sought in everyday life, whatever one's status and whatever the situation.[10] This attitude embraces the military, who are to keep the peace at a time when war threatens many regions of the world: in 1965, Pope Paul VI recorded, "Those too who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfil this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace."[11] Although Christian-Catholic culture has a long tradition of warrior saints,[12] the model envisaged here reinterprets this tradition to emphasise the role of the soldier not as a combatant but as a defender of peace and life.

Another feature of the offer-of-life model is that it involves a deep and complex relationship between religious and civil institutions, as is particularly clear in the causes of the two military figures, Kapaun and D'Acquisto. The exemplary nature of their sacrifice is transversal: on the one hand, their model sacrifice is officially recognised by the Church in the decrees certifying the offer of life and in the media close to the Holy See; on the other hand, the paradigmatic offering up of their lives is also emphasised in the official media of the respective government institutions.

Thus, for example, the official website of the US Army dedicates a page to Kapaun, with his biography, the citation of the text justifying the award of the Medal of Honour, and the note that "Kapaun is also lauded by people of the Roman Catholic faith. In 1993, Kapaun received the title of 'Servant of God' from the Roman Catholic Church […]. The Vatican continues investigations into possible canonization." However, the first written text to appear when the page is opened (below a banner with a photo of two soldiers rescuing a third, a portrait of Kapaun and a picture of the medal) is from a speech given in 2013 by former Secretary of the Army John McHugh:

> […] among recipients of the Medal of Honor, Father Kapaun's story is, in itself, wholly unique, wholly different. He didn't charge a pillbox; he didn't defeat an enemy battalion or brigade or division by himself. Rather, Father Kapaun's only weapons were his steely defiance that inspired his fellow

10 Pope Paul VI 1964, ch. 5.

11 Pope Paul VI 1965, n. 79.

12 See e. g. Cammilleri 2003; Corvisier 2006.

> prisoners of war; the words he spoke, which brought comfort to the soldiers with whom he served; and a simple piece of purple ribbon that he wore around his neck, a mark of his chaplaincy, his priesthood. But don't make any mistake about it; Father Kapaun was a soldier; and a soldier in the purest, in the truest sense of the word.[13]

Here Kapaun's action is recognised primarily as a model in the context of military life: he was an exemplary soldier more than an exemplary religious man. The latter characteristic is present and recognised but it is of less importance in this institutional discourse embedded within a civil context.

Similarly, the official website of the Italian Carabinieri Corps mentions D'Acquisto. The heading on the relevant page reads, "Salvo D'Acquisto, Hero and Christian Martyr. The Partisan Carabinieri of Fiesole." In fact, the story of D'Acquisto is placed alongside the stories of three other carabinieri who also sacrificed their lives in the same period to prevent the killing of hostages during a reprisal operation. In this heading, the military value (i. e. heroism) does not outweigh the religious value. They are placed on the same level, one reinforcing the other, as a common mission. This idea returns in the first and last parts of the text:

> And yet during that strange period when the entire Italian war machine fell apart, even before the country could recover from collapse, in the absence of orders and leaders, the Carabinieri were able to find in their fundamental qualities the forces that allowed a young vice-brigadiere like Salvo D'Acquisto to take on the monumental and yet humble role of a Christian martyr.
> [...]
> The two episodes [of D'Acquisto and of the Carabinieri of Fiesole] have in common the heightening of a loyalty pact between the Carabinieri and the innocent: a concept that is very close to that of the "neighbour", in the meaning it had almost two millennia ago in the most affectionate preaching of universal love that has ever been made.[14]

13 U. S. Army, Medal of Honor: Chaplain (Capt.) Emil J. Kapaun, https://t1p.de/rhbho [accessed 9 April 2025].

14 Ministero della Difesa, Carabinieri, Salvo D'Acquisto, Eroe e Martire Cristiano. I Carabinieri Partigiani di Fiesole, https://t1p.de/qulck [accessed 8 April 2025], our translation.

These discourses on the US and Italian websites must be read in light of the relationship between church and state in the respective country. In the United States, as Robert Bellah points out, there is traditionally a civil religion that differs from the religion of the churches but at the same time does not have a nationalistic character.[15] This religion does not glorify or venerate the nation *per se* but tends to interpret national history in the light of a transcendent principle. It refers to a generic and transversal idea of "God" that is compatible with the different denominations present in the national group.[16]

The Italian nation state was founded in the 19th century as a secular institution, independent of religion. Since its foundation, the separation of church and state has been clearly expressed, a product of the historical and political presence of the Roman Catholic state on the Italian peninsula and the affirmation of modern nationalism, which was based on a secular point of view. National unification was sought and realised by a cultural and social elite, with the result that the population's sense of belonging to the nation state was weak and problematic. Traces of this fragility can still be seen in Italian culture today.[17] A Christian mentality and Christian imagery have proven to be deeply rooted in Italian culture, and the civil-national discourse often integrates religious themes, even when its political ideology does not coincide with Catholicism. For example, ceremonies such as commemorations or processions traditionally juxtapose religious and civil symbols and authorities, blurring the line between secular and religious culture. This strong religious background helps explain the superimposition of military and martyr values in the Carabinieri's official discourse on D'Acquisto.

Mediatising the Offer of Life

The religious and military dimensions of Kapaun's and D'Acquisto's actions stand side by side, although they are fundamentally different. Semiotically, we can consider this dichotomy as a phenomenon of thematisation: while both Kapaun and D'Acquisto are simultaneously "soldier" and "saint", the discourse of religious and civil institutions (and secondly, the media) high-

15 We underline the term "traditionally" because the role of religion in US public and political contexts is undergoing significant changes in recent years, but an analysis of this complex phenomenon is not possible in the context of this article.

16 Bellah 1967.

17 On the issue of civil religion and national identity in Italy see e. g. Ponzo 2012; 2015; 2017.

lights one or other thematic role from time to time and segments their actions based on the prerogatives of that role.[18]

From a narrative point of view, however, the offers of life of Kapaun and D'Acquisto lend themselves to being analysed according to two aspectual configurations.[19] Kapaun's story has a more durative nature: his act of comfort, help and support for the captured soldiers was continuous and lasted until physical exhaustion and death. On that count, this action is associated with his role as "military chaplain", which Kapaun took to its maximum expression, to the point of offering his life, which enables him to be re-thematised as a "saint". In this respect, the figure of Kapaun is closer to the classical saintly status based on heroic virtues.

The sacrifice of D'Acquisto was more punctual in character. His heroic gesture did not unfold over time, renewing itself, but took place in a single moment in which the vice-brigadiere sacrificed his life to save the people of Torrimpietra. It is a final act that resolved the narrative arc that opened with the death of the two German soldiers, and at the same time it is the climax of D'Acquisto's existential story.

In cases such as D'Acquisto's, in which death follows almost immediately after the offer of life, the reconstruction of the existential journey that prepared for the gesture of self-giving for the deliverance of others is fundamental for recognising sanctity. That reconstruction is essential to understanding the nature of the heroic act, the values that underlie it and the religious inspiration of the choice; indeed, as Jenny Ponzo has proposed, "a careful analysis of their previous practice of virtues, at least at the ordinary level, can function as a guarantee to validate the system of values adopted by the future saints and plausibly motivating their choice to offer up their lives for others".[20]

The reconstruction of that existential journey is also an essential element of the narrative organisation of the storytelling in media texts, for example in the case of film or television biographies, as we will see below. Thanks to it, the motivations and value systems that support the heroic gesture are emphasised, be they civil and/or religious. It is revealing to identify the interpretative key the different texts have chosen and the thematic roles (and therefore value systems) that are attributed to the characters in each narration – "civic heroes", "witnesses of faith" (if not "saints"), or perhaps both?

18 On the thematization of saints see e. g. Bertetti 2024.

19 On the aspectual configuration see e. g. Greimas/Courtés 1982.

20 Ponzo 2020, 989.

The experiences of Kapaun and D'Acquisto have been the subject of audiovisual narratives. Kapaun's story was staged early on, in "The Good Thief", an episode from 1955 of the Crossroads television series (ABC, US 1955–1957). D'Acquisto's sacrifice was the subject of the film Salvo D'Acquisto (Romolo Guerrieri, IT 1974), based on a screenplay by the writer Giuseppe Berto and with Massimo Ranieri (in the role of Salvo D'Acquisto) and Enrico Maria Salerno. Almost 30 years later, RAI, the Italian radio and television state broadcast company, aired Salvo D'Acquisto (RAI, IT 2003), a television miniseries in two episodes, with the popular actor and showman Beppe Fiorello in the title role.[21] The three texts are very different from each other in terms of lenght, format and genre: the first is part of an anthological series of religious fiction; the others belong more to the genres of historical film and popular fiction of civil/patriotic inspiration. Together, however, they offer us stimulating examples of ways of thematising the extreme sacrifice of surrending one's own life.

The analysis that follows examines the thematic roles of soldier and believer that the three texts ascribe to the two martyrs, focusing in particular on the portrayal of their characters, and on the thematic role(s) initially ascribed to them and the variations in those roles in the course of the plot. According to Dario Tomasi, the presentation of a film character is a process that "lasts until the segments of the story dedicated to him are functional more to his representation than to the development of the story itself".[22] That presentation, he proposes, can comprise five possible phases: evocation, naming, staging, framing and enunciation of the character's proper image. The last of these consists of "that shot which gives an image of the represented character that allows us, and will allow us throughout the film, to recognize him and distinguish him from the other characters",[23] thus fulfilling the same functions as a name in a literary text.[24]

21 In its original two-episode format, the mini-series was first broadcast on Rai Uno on 21 and 22 September 2003. It was subsequently turned into a TV movie, as a single broadcast of 119 minutes. We refer here to the TV movie as only it is available on the Raiplay.it website, https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/salvodacquisto [accessed 16 May 2025]. The story of D'Acquisto also inspired the film La fiamma che non si estingue (Vittorio Cottafavi, IT 1949), which is based on the novel *Itala gens* by Navarra Viggiani. It recounts the self-sacrifice of carabiniere Giuseppe Manfredi, who takes responsibility for an attack to save ten men from German reprisals. The earlier movie is not included in the analysis in this article in light of the fictional nature of the main character.

22 Tomasi 1988, 14.

23 Tomasi 1988, 26.

24 For a general overview of characters in audiovisual texts see e. g. Bertetti 2013.

"The Good Thief"

The story of Kapaun was the subject of mediatisation early on. Just three years after his death, his sacrifice was the subject of a biography; the following year he was played by James Whitmore in "The Good Thief", a 25-minute episode of the television series Crossroads that was broadcast on 25 November 1955.[25] Crossroads was an American television anthology series that aired between 7 October 1955 and 27 September 1957 on ABC, dramatizing the experiences of clergymen of different faiths.

The episode begins with a battle scene, with a voiceover immediately explaining that the story takes place during the "Korean campaign" (spatial and temporal disengagement) and that it is about the figure of the "military chaplain" Kapaun (actorial disengagement). At the same time, the character is framed, first in long shot and then in close-up, as he comforts a dying soldier. If on a figurative level he is identified as a "soldier", from his uniform and eye patch to his physical appearance, which seems to indicate a determined and energetic man, on a thematic level his role as a "man of faith" is immediately explained not only by the voice-over, but also by the actions depicted on screen and by his comforting words to the dying man.

This dual characterisation is repeated in the rest of the episode, in which Kapaun and his comrades are captured and imprisoned in a prison camp. Kapaun is simultaneously portrayed as a heroic defender of American values who resists the communist commander's indoctrination lectures and refutes propaganda in the name of truth and also as a defender of the faith who is harshly punished "for daring to administer to the spiritual needs of his fellow prisoners" (00:05:32) and for defying orders not to hold religious services. The episode shows us how Kapaun does his utmost to help his comrades not only spiritually but also materially in a situation of hunger, cold and lack of medical care, even going so far as to steal food for them. For this reason, he is called "the good thief".

The double valorisation is maintained throughout the episode. As in the speech by former Secretary of the Army John McHugh quoted above, here too he is portrayed as an exemplary soldier, but in this case he is even more so an exemplary clergyman who cares for the bodies and souls of his comrades – his "congregation", as he says in the film – to the point of exhaustion

25 Available at Internet Archive, Crossroads: The Good Thief, https://archive.org/details/CrossroadsTheGoodThief [accessed 16 May 2025].

and starvation. This thematisation does justice to "The Good Thief" as part of a religiously inspired drama series.

Salvo D'Acquisto (television series)

In contrast to "The Good Thief", the television series dedicated to D'Acquisto belongs more to the genre of "civil" fiction, commitment and national memory, a type of production that is not uncommon on the television channels of RAI, the Italian state broadcaster. It is no coincidence that D'Acquisto is thematised as "carabiniere" in the opening credits, which specify, immediately after the title, "Freely inspired by the life of the carabinieri vice-brigadiere Salvo D'Acquisto" (00:00:19). The opening credits are accompanied by a series of archive images that place the narrative in a historical context, alternating with close-ups of two unidentified carabinieri on bicycles. The first scene after the opening credits is introduced by an inserted text giving the space-time coordinates, "Torrimpietra, 22 September 1943, 11.30 pm" (00:02:32); the images show the two carabinieri arriving on bicycles at the scene of the death of two German soldiers and seeing the bodies being loaded onto a lorry. This is where the actorial definition takes place: one of the carabinieri is called "Sergeant D'Acquisto" by the voice of the German commander, who asks D'Acquisto to show him the site of the explosion. The camera approaches D'Acquisto's face and even in the semi-darkness, the spectator recognises that D'Acquisto is played by Fiorello. This image identifies the title character in the film, who is thus also thematised diegetically as a "carabiniere".

According to the true story, the German commander orders the person responsible to be found before dawn. In the fictionalized account D'Acquisto states, "If we don't find the culprit, the … Germans will take care of it, and do you know what that means? That I can no longer do anything to defend you" (00:06:25). These meaningful words locate him in the characters' system.[26] As a Carabinieri officer, he is a mediating figure between the German occupiers and the local population, immanent in relation to the Germans and transcendent in relation to the population. The "we" can be understood as inclusive (including the person who speaks and those who listen), indicating a totality ("We Italians") in relation to the German army. His closeness (and that of the Carabinieri Corps in general) to the population is reaffirmed sev-

26 See e. g. Hamon 1983.

eral times in the series ("I know the inhabitants of Torrimpietra, one by one", 00:04:58). Proximity to the population and the responsibility to protect are values attributed to the Carabinieri Corps, and, as the fulfilment of his duty, they constitute one of the "civil" motivations for D'Acquisto's gesture.

The religious dimension of the character (his thematisation as a "believer") is only hinted at in the fourth sequence, in which D'Acquisto is shown in the church as he kneels in prayer accompanied by his fiancée. This thematisation is immediately pushed aside when the two begin to talk (in the church!) about places from their earlier lives that they will visit together after the end of the war. Here, the thematisation of "lover" immediately replaces and overshadows that of "believer". In fact, his religious faith is completely neglected, and so too – as the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* pointed out[27] – is the religious dimension of his sacrifice. The film does not quote the most famous words attributed to him – "If I die a hundred times, I will be born again a hundred times: God is with me and I am not afraid!"[28] – but it does repeatedly affirm the sense of duty associated with his thematic role as "carabiniere".

The television series conveys an image far removed from how we might well imagine a saint, even a "modern" post–Second Vatican Council saint. Fiorello's interpretation of the young Salvo is the somewhat stereotypical image of a young man who is a little pretentious and loves beautiful girls but nevertheless has a good heart and is balanced and sensitive to the needs of others. Where, as we have seen, in the case of military saints the Second Vatican Council's narrative emphasises the role of the soldier as a defender of peace and life, in this fictional reconstruction of his life, D'Acquisto not only takes part in a battle (if only to defend himself against an attack) but even kills an enemy, which, moreover, does not seem to have particular impact on the course of his life. The classic path of inner maturation through a series of trials is practically absent from the sequence of unrelated events that follows. D'Acquisto is what he is because he has been a "carabiniere" ever since he put on the uniform. His motivations and his values, including closeness to the population and its defence, are those of the Carabinieri Corps: "I was only doing my duty" (01:49:25), he will say at the moment of sacrifice.

27 La Repubblica.it, Archivio, "L'Osservatore contro RaiUno. Un D'Acquisto privo di fede", 21 September 2003, https://t1p.de/12amw [accessed 19 May 2025].

28 Wikiquote, *Salvo D'Acquisto*, https://it.wikiquote.org/wiki/Salvo_D%27Acquisto#cite_note-eroismo-1 [accessed 28 March 2026].

Salvo D'Acquisto (film)

Romolo Guerrieri's film is not a biopic, but the telling of historical facts.[29] The story is set in the historical context of the fall of the fascist regime in Italy, beginning with the arrest of Benito Mussolini on 25 July 1943 and following the vicissitudes of the population of Torrimpietra (and therefore of the whole of Italy) up to the armistice on 8 September, the German occupation and the partisan struggle, showing confusion, the bewilderment of the population and the armed forces themselves, and the difficult and divisive choices that events impose on consciences.

And it is with the depiction of the historical framework that the narration opens: the film begins with the news that the young Romano brings to the socialist barber Rubino (Enrico Maria Salerno) that the workers of the great industries of northern Italy, in Milan and Turin, have decided to go on general strike. Shortly afterwards (00:05:17), the news of Mussolini's resignation and the fall of Fascism comes over the radio, and the different reactions of the population of Torrimpietra are shown, from the socialist fighters to the fascists, from the carabinieri sergeants to the ordinary citizens. The introduction of D'Acquisto is postponed: in an alternating montage, he is first evoked ("the brigadiere") but not named (00:02:53) by a laundress who brings him clothes at the barracks, then framed (00:04:29) as he conducts reconnaissance on a boat, and only in scene six is he called "Brigadiere D'Acquisto", by a corporal who tracks him down at the harbour to tell him the news (00:09:19).

From the outset, the text assigns D'Acquisto the thematic role of "vice-brigadiere of the Carabinieri". Above all, however, it inserts his story into the more general framework of the civil war and resistance to Nazi-fascism – in relation to which various sections of the population of Torrimpietra, and of Italy as a whole, position themselves in different ways – and attempts to sketch out his role as a carabiniere. All D'Acquisto's subsequent actions are attempted interpretations of this role in a highly uncertain historical moment.

With no connection to the commands and no instructions from above, D'Acquisto's behaviour is determined only by his role as a carabiniere. According to his superior, "[For the Carabinieri], public order is one of the most

29 The movie is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzWvqykbFd4 [accessed 30 March 2026].

important tasks. And by public order we also mean the protection of the civilian population" (00:36:48). D'Acquisto tries to maintain public order and protect the population by avoiding an explosion of violence and by striving for balance. He is not against armed resistance, but he does not join in, because he wants to remain close to the population. He talks to the German invaders but does not collaborate with them; on the contrary, he hides the weapons that were kept in their barracks. In this sense, his behaviour, and that of the Carabinieri Corps, is portrayed as a different but no less courageous form of resistance.

The film places D'Acquisto's sacrifice in the resistance movement against Nazi Fascism but anchors it in terms of values and motivations in his role as a carabiniere. Again, any religious dimension to his final gesture is ignored. There is no suggestion that he is a man of faith, and indeed the role of religion in his upbringing is diminished, at least when it comes to his anti-fascist consciousness. "Neither religion nor anyone else told me that Fascism could be wrong" (00:31:53), he states disconsolately after the armistice.

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church's canonising of exemplary personalities who not only professed religious values and practised Christian virtues during their lifetime, but also belonged to a military corps that served civil institutions testifies to the Church authority's efforts to promote and maintain an open dialogue with institutions fundamental in social and political life. This model of holiness is strategically important for the Church, for it is a means to show that the civil values underlying nation states are harmonious, coherent and consistent with religious values. At the same time, it offers a figuratively "thematized" response to a spiritual dilemma that believers may experience in the context of war, when they are called upon by civil institutions to fight or simply to take a moral position on the problem of harmonising the evangelical message, which is based on love, forgiveness and peace, with a reality in which these principles are overturned.

How does secular culture receive this kind of model? Our semiotic-narrative analysis of the mediatisation of the figures of Kapaun and D'Acquisto allows to identify a relevant difference between the United States and Italy. In fact, US culture has no particular problems in harmonising the dual thematisations of Kapaun as a religious man and as a military man, as he is an

exemplary figure for both thematic roles. The situation in Italy seems to be more complex. The dual thematisation is accepted in the institutional discourse of the civilian authorities, and it is not uncommon for open reference to be made to the religious value of the relevant figure, which seems to lend prestige and depth to his civilian value. The official discourse on D'Acquisto clearly shows that the religious and civil institutions recognise and respect each other: even though each claims its own specific identity and sphere of influence, they find a meeting point in figures like D'Acquisto, who embody both religious and civil values.

In media discourse, however, this dual thematisation seems more problematic. In Italy, religious films and fiction based on the lives of holy figures are widespread.[30] It would have been easy to present the life story of D'Acquisto in the well-encoded form of this genre. But the two filmic representations dedicated to him emphasised instead the thematisation of the good carabiniere, the good military man, while the religious thematisation was erased or reduced to a minimum. In these stories, D'Acquisto embodies an ideal of civilian heroism that is self-sufficient and does not presuppose any form of religious heroicity. This resistance to the double codification proposed by the Church can be seen as a sign that the idea that the civil and religious spheres are clearly separated is still firmly anchored in Italian culture, and in popular culture in particular. This distinction is perhaps exacerbated by the relationship between the figure of the soldier and the act of killing, which is deeply opposed to the typical ideal of sanctity. The magisterial and theological discourse that justifies the military action of religious people does not appear to be understood, or at least taken into consideration, by the mass of believers, who can accept and love the figure of a good carabiniere and the figure of a saint, but may find it strange (or perhaps undesirable or uncomfortable) to venerate a soldier of our time as a saint.

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30 See e. g. Perugini 2011; Fumagalli 2024.

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Media Reviews

Wahyudi Akmaliah and Dini Dwi Kusumaningrum

Film Review
Legenda Kelam Maling Kundang (Smothered)

(Rafki Hidayat / Kevin Rahardjo, ID 2025)

In Southeast Asia, mythological and religious narratives function not only as a form of collective memory but also as a moral framework that shapes social attitudes across generations. Within the Malay world, the story of Malin Kundang occupies a significant place as a moral-religious narrative that conveys ethical teachings concerning filial piety, obedience to parents, and the consequences of violating familial obligations. While widely recognised as part of regional mythology, the narrative has also been embedded within Malay Muslim cultural understandings of morality, divine justice, and social order. Across generations, the story has served as a transcendent narrative through which communities negotiate the relationship between individual desire, parental authority, and moral responsibility. Although the majority of the population in West Sumatra is Muslim, the narrative of Malin Kundang does not belong exclusively to the region. Variants of this story are also found among the people of Mandailing Natal in North Sumatra, where it is known as *Sampuraga*.[1] In West Kalimantan, it appears as *Batu Menangis* (The Crying Stones).[2] In Malaysia and Singapore, the story is widely recognized as *Si Tanggang*.[3] In Brunei Darussalam, it is known as *Nakhoda Manis*.[4] Across these versions, the central narrative remains consistent. It tells the story of a child who, after a long period of wandering and success, becomes

1 Aldi 2022.
2 Reza Yunanto 2022; Faizi 2023.
3 See, for example, Shazlina Md Isa 2023.
4 Leman Ahmad 2017.

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disobedient, refusing to acknowledge their mother. As a consequence of this disobedience, the child is cursed and transformed into stone.

Engaging with these narrative materials, directors Rafki Hidayat and Kevin Rahardjo deconstruct this traditional narrative by rearticulating the story from the perspective of the disobedient child. The result is the psychological thriller Legenda Kelam Malin Kundang (which translates as "The Dark Legend of Malin Kundang", although the official English film title is Smothered). This film not only revisits a well-known mythological narrative but also interrogates the moral and quasi-religious assumptions that have historically legitimised parental authority and condemned filial disobedience within Malay society. Specifically, the film raises a critical question that remains unaddressed in conventional versions of the tale: Through what inherited perceptions is Malin Kundang constituted as a disobedient child? In doing so, it interrogates the socio-cultural and structural conditions that led to his condemnation and transformation into stone, while proposing a contemporary reinterpretation that reconfigures the narrative without entirely abandoning its core symbolic signifiers.

The story begins with Alif (Rio Dewanto), a talented young artist, globally recognized for his skill in micro-painting, using small stones as his artistic medium. Alif is involved in a car accident which causes partial memory loss, as evidenced by his impaired recognition and understanding of his immediate family, specifically Nadine, his wife (Faramadina Mufti), and Emir, his child (Jordan Omar). Despite his memory impairment, both Nadine and Emir respond positively to his current condition, as he appears to have undergone a significant transformation in personality compared to his pre-accident self. Not only is he kinder, but he also demonstrates a deeper sense of care and emotional attentiveness toward his family. During his recovery process, Alif receives a sudden reminder on his smartphone that his mother will be visiting him. This notification triggers a sense of panic as he was unaware of her impending arrival after fourteen years of estrangement and has completely forgotten her face.

On the one hand, the impending arrival of his mother spurs on Alif's recovery from the accident and prompts him to respond to Nadine's and Emir's questions regarding her prolonged absence. On the other hand, Alif, Nadine, and Emir's daily interactions with his mother, introduced as Amak Aminah (Vonny Anggraini), along with her accounts of Alif's childhood in a village in West Sumatra, begin to trigger fragmented and unsettling memories that do not align with his recollection of the past. The more Alif

attempts to reconstruct his childhood through Amak Aminah's narratives, the more he experiences psychological distress, as these memories surface only in partial and disjointed fragments. This condition fosters a growing suspicion regarding Amak Aminah's identity. His doubts intensify when he examines her wallet while she sleeps and discovers that the name on her bank card does not match that of his mother. His suspicion is reinforced when she abruptly leaves the house in the night, although without taking any of its valuable belongings.

Rather than simply allowing her to leave, Alif attempts to uncover the woman's true identity. As his memory gradually returns, he begins to trace points of information that might lead him to her whereabouts. This development marks the film's first major plot twist. It is revealed that Amak Aminah is in fact a woman whom Alif had previously, before the accident, hired to impersonate his mother. He had first encountered her during a staged traffic incident in a slum area of Jakarta. She had deliberately thrown herself in front of a passing car; when the vehicle stopped, several individuals associated with her demanded money from the driver as compensation. The directors have based this scene on real incidents reported in certain areas of Jakarta where such illicit tactics are used to obtain money. For Alif, the woman's willingness to endanger herself and convincingly perform in such a scenario demonstrated her capacity as a persuasive actor, prompting him to recruit her to assume the role of his mother. This decision was driven by repeated pressure from Nadine's parents, who insisted on meeting Alif's mother.

The second major plot twist reveals that Alif is responsible for his mother's death. CCTV footage retrieved from his car, recorded before the accident while he was attempting to investigate Nadine's activities, reveals a pivotal scene. In this recording, he discovers that Nadine is engaged in an extramarital affair with Iqbal (Gambit Saifullah), who is not only Alif's trusted lawyer but also Nadine's close associate. Her actions could be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim Alif's attention, given his intense focus on his work, which renders him emotionally distant, introverted, and at times abrasive. Nevertheless, for him, the affair constitutes an unforgivable betrayal. More significantly, this moment serves as a traumatic trigger, recalling his childhood experiences in the village, where his mother had worked as a prostitute. The revelation functions as a temporal loop, reactivating long-repressed memories sublimated into his sketchwork, which he has kept hidden in a locked drawer. Within this recovered memory, the film reveals

that Alif's mother had been compelled to engage in sex work because of the severe poverty in their village in West Sumatra. In a critical incident, Alif had been provoked by one of his mother's clients, leading to a violent altercation. During this confrontation, he not only sustained a machete wound to his forehead but also killed the client. In the chaos of the encounter, he inadvertently caused his mother's death as well.

Watching this film is likely to evoke discomfort among audiences, as the two directors critically interrogate a moral and religious narrative that has long been transmitted doctrinally across generations, namely the expectation that children must obey their parents. Moreover, the film advances a deeper inquiry into the structural roots of the representation of Malin Kundang's disobedience. In particular, it examines two crucial factors: first, the absence or weakness of parental role models, and second, the injustices embedded in economic structures that push individuals into survival strategies such as prostitution. These conditions help explain how characters like Alif internalise and reproduce inherited trauma within their own familial relationships.

This critique of parental authority can be situated within the broader contemporary Indonesian political context. Widespread distrust of political elites amid persistent and unresolved socio-political problems has driven many young Indonesians, particularly those who have become part of the precariat class,[5] to engage in protests and demonstrations, notably in August 2025. Rather than addressing the structural grievances underlying these mobilisations, the state, specifically under Prabowo's presidency, has frequently responded with coercive measures. Law enforcement and military institutions have framed such dissent in moralistic terms reminiscent of the Malin Kundang narrative, positioning youth protesters as "disobedient" subjects, as was evident in the arrest of approximately 7,500 young people following these demonstrations.[6]

At the same time, the film demonstrates that the mythology of Malin Kundang functions as more than a religious lesson on filial obedience. Drawing upon a narrative deeply embedded in Minangkabau cultural memory and Islamic ethical teachings on filial piety *(birr al-walidayn)*, the film mobilises this religiously inflected story as a symbolic language through which broader existential, social, and political questions are articulated.

5 Standing 2011.

6 Irfani 2025.

Rather than presenting disobedience as an individual moral failing within a religious framework, the film invites audiences to reflect on how poverty, intergenerational trauma, social marginalisation, and unequal power relations shape human choices and behaviour.

In this sense, the film serves as a vehicle for interrogating authority, responsibility, justice, and the structural conditions that produce social suffering in contemporary Indonesia. By doing so, it challenges religiously moralistic interpretations that reduce social conflict to individual wrongdoing and instead directs attention to broader systems of inequality and exclusion. Such a reading highlights how narratives of disobedience can displace structural accountability and obscure the systemic roots of social dissent. There can be no doubt that the sources of the crisis lie not with Indonesian youth themselves but with policy orientations among political elites that prioritise capital accumulation and vested interests over collective social welfare.

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Lale Diklitaş

Book Review
Viera Pirker / Paula Paschke (eds.), Religion auf Instagram

Analysen und Perspektiven

Munich: Herder 2024, 392 pages, ISBN: 978–3-451–39626–7

The contributions in this edited volume primarily address Christian content on Instagram. In the introduction, the editors describe Instagram as an emerging research field in various disciplines, including practical theology, religious education, religious studies and communication studies, which has required a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. The editors' goal is to combine hermeneutical and anthropological reflections with recent empirical research, especially that of early career researchers. Methods range from digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis and network analysis to interviews or "social media tours". The book demonstrates, they propose, that transformations of communication and consumption patterns or conceptions of the world through social media also affect religious communication on Instagram. This niche but lively field alters our understandings of (religious) community, identity and authority. As the choice of platform shapes communicative and aesthetic practices as well as content, the editors also delineate the platform's evolution, in particular its increasing economization and algorithmization. Such themes are taken up in the various contributions, which are assigned to one of four sections: (1) Platform, which provides overarching observations; (2) Content, largely based on case studies; (3) Users, which centers user practices; and (4) Practice, containing reflections by content creators.

Section One, on the platform itself, starts with a discussion by Roman-Catholic theologian Viera Pirker about the theme of religion on the community account @instagram. Pirker underlines that trends such as the growing

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relevancy of individual experience also effect religion. As a result, a culturalist view on religious traditions from a "tourist gaze" gives way to questions surrounding social awareness based on users' subjective perspectives. This is accompanied by the popularization of formats such as "stories" which center individuals and a growing focus on Islam and Hinduism.

Anna Neumaier, scholar of religious studies, concisely discusses digital ethnography as a method in religious studies, noting critical developments, such as the emergence of multi-sited ethnography in the 1990s, that also inform the navigation of digital spaces. Reflecting on the implementation of key tenets of ethnography in Instagram research, she discusses methodological, legal and ethical challenges and questions ideological assumptions about the internet being "less real".

Other contributions, including that by Catholic theologians Rebekka Burke, Laura Mößle and Lena Tacke, discuss concepts such as embodied self-presentation, narrativity, performativity and authenticity. Strategies used to convey spontaneity and accessibility across the private-public binary are described as tools of "doing singularity", a means of constructing one's own (commodified) story on Instagram. Philosopher and anthropologist Anna Puzio points to the interdisciplinarity of Instagram research that engages the technical, natural and social sciences as she considers Instagram's relevance for the formation of non-anthropocentric definitions of the human through renegotiation of the human and non-human. Her article is something of a plea for a contemporary anthropology in general, much like Wolfgang Beck and Leopold Kohlbrenner's anthropological reflections (in Section Two) on the role of visuality for the Catholic Church and the development of sacramental theology.

Catholic theologian Florian Mayrhofer opens Section Two, on content, with his contribution on digital storytelling, although his insightful reflections on digitalization, technologies and digitality would also fit in Section One. Arguing that historically the digital-analogue distinction was not as sharp as often assumed, he calls for a broader understanding of storytelling within "digital *circumstances*" (p. 129, my emphasis). With features such as intertextuality, multimodality, interactivity, emotionality, nonlinearity and topicality, digital storytelling today oscillates between authentic self-representation and self-promotion and can present both neoliberal logics and counter-narratives by marginalized communities, all shaped by algorithmic outcomes and platform affordances. These "circumstances" raise questions of reconcilability with pastoral and educational contexts.

Sabrina Müller, who is a Protestant theologian, similarly points out historical continuities. Describing how religious influencers, who may be considered experts, provide meaning through visual communication and the authentic interplay of their personal outlook and relevant themes, she draws parallels with the clergy's role in disseminating the gospel as authentically as possible. She argues that influencers might be answering current calls for more relatable forms of religious delivery.

Deploying a netnographic approach, sociologist of religion Gero Menzel's contribution on the role of married couples in religious communication by the International Christian Fellowship (ICF) in Germany demonstrates the entanglement of online and offline spheres by analyzing the online coverage of a marriage seminar. Based on Heidi Campbell's framework of "religious-social shaping of technology", he reflects on how the ICF's media ideology impacts its Instagram use. In his theoretically dense article, based on the religious-sociological concept of charisma, he analyzes how influencers offer solutions to "modern hyperculture" by promoting their own expertise and Bible-led lifestyles within the context of post-feminism.

Although limited in scope because of the small number of examples, Christine Wenona Hoffmann's study of the pastoral-theological context convincingly argues that digital pastoral care has the potential to transform pastoral care as a whole: rather than being a simple adoption of traditional practices, this form of pastoral care is accompanied by profound changes in key issues such as confidentiality, formal structure and content. One-on-one interactions or peer groups give way to fluidity on Instagram with regard to time, space and target groups, enabling anonymous reception and "interpassivity" while also activating community resources. Here, emphasis is placed on the vulnerability and authenticity of clergy, who embody new roles in parasocial relationships.

Kirsten Wünsche, Antonia Hafner and Tessa von Richthofen's well-structured study, which adopts a media and communication studies lens, is particularly welcome as it is the only contribution to deal explicitly with Muslim perspectives. The authors consider here how Muslims in Germany respond to racism by creating counter-publics. Identifying three main frames – visibility, activation and education – it underlines the importance of social media for the self-representation, participation, and activist purposes of marginalized groups. Although Instagram's reputation is as a visual platform, in these instances it also carries text-heavy content. Activism is also a theme in Catholic theologian Paula Paschke's contribution (in Section Three), in

which she considers the impact of the 2022 #outinchurch campaign, positioned alongside other movements such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo, on the Catholic Church in Germany.

Christoph Novak, Astrid Mattes, Miriam Haselbacher and Katharina Limacher's study, which opens Section Three, on the user, also discusses religious diversity. Drawing on interviews and social media tours through individual users' feeds that are part of the Vienna-based participatory project YouBeOn (Young Believers Online), it investigates the relationship between Vienna's "superdiverse" urban space, the heterogeneous digital space and the construction of religious identity, offering another view of online-offline entanglements. Findings have identified the culturalization, profanation and ethnicization of religious interpretations and practices against the backdrop of popular forms of youth culture – themes considered more relevant than religious affiliations – as well as highly individualized experiences. On this basis, the authors propose that social media tours can be a productive research method.

Commissioned by the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and based on a survey disseminated through Christian influencers' Instagram stories, social scientist Daniel Hörsch examines followers' characteristics, practices, needs, motivations and relationships to church, as well as influencers' missionary potential. He conceptualizes digital communities as innovative, loose and anti-hierarchical social formations that enable individual and simultaneous participation in several contexts. They are, he proposes, a form of lived religion that amplifies the "priesthood of all believers". Followers, mainly female and Gen Z, are interested in "authentic" religiosity, spirituality, (intellectual) stimuli and encouragement.

Section Four contains active Christian-content creators' own reflections on their objectives, self-conceptions, practices and the implications of their practice for church structures and theological debates. In exposing strategies and deliberations that shape the production of religious content, their contributions certainly raise new research questions.

This volume's engagement with a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches and case studies divided in terms of platform, content and users will be helpful for those acquainting themselves with religion on social media. It is a valuable contribution to a growing field that highlights the need for further research. Despite its focus on Instagram, occasional glances at other platforms, for example in Catholic theologian Brodthage's comparison of representations of religion on YouTube and Instagram, un-

derline ever-evolving platform specifics and their varying impact. Several common concepts, among them community, identity, authority, authenticity, individualization, the private-public binary or changing meanings of expertise embodied in the "influencer", connect the chapters. Recurring themes such as queerness, gender roles, racism or empowerment indicate the entanglements of religion on social media with socio-political currents and the role of Instagram in the formation of new (religious) practices and discourses. Reflections on historical continuities, for example by Mayrhofer and by Beck and Kohlbrenner, complement the volume. The numerous and interconnected contributions, some potentially interesting for researchers in fields such as gender or migration studies, demonstrate a complex and quickly evolving field.

Nevertheless, some contributions lack explicitly Instagram-specific findings and/or have a weak empirical foundation. In Burke, Mößle and Tacke's article, several examples of visual practices, embodiment and authenticity are not specific to Instagram and could appear in pre-social media contexts too, while a discussion of continuities and their implications is lacking. Isolated and anecdotal analysis of a small dataset, as for example in Brodthage's use of the documentary method, with only limited engagement with the broader context despite repeated references to the relevance of platform logics, offers restricted analytical insight. Protestant theologian Wormstädt's observations on the changing meaning of confessions would benefit from a more systematic analysis too. Some contributions can thus be described as rather exploratory. A comprehensive perspective on platform affordances and their interplay, for example an explicit focus on audio-visuality as a key structural feature rather than a mere add-on, could provide well-founded insight into what these mean for specifically religious messages. Furthermore, some arguments might be challenged by insights from alternative religious traditions. For instance, Muslim content creators who refrain from exposing their faces might nuance arguments about embodiment, the relation of private and public, and visual practices. Expertise in other religious traditions could also have prevented easily avoided mistakes, such as mislabeling the Muslim *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr* (p. 45). The volume mostly covers German-speaking contexts, and some contributions engage overwhelmingly with German literature. Considering more international perspectives would have enriched it, as would have a broader empirical foundation and a more diverse religious basis, thus doing justice to the universal title "Religion on Instagram". The volume would have also benefited from more careful linguistic and stylistic editing.

Natalie Fritz and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa

Book Review
Joseph Masheck, Faith in Art
Religion, Aesthetics, and Early Abstraction
Aesthetics and Contemporary Art, Bloomsbury London / New York 2023, 226 pages, ISBN 978–1-3502–1697–6, eBook 978–1-3502–1699–0

Can abstract art be conceived and realized only by a non-religious artist? Does modern art have any roots in the rich iconographic tradition and in the religious conceptualities of specific belief systems? In the volume under review, art historian and critic Joseph Masheck tracks the impact of religious socialization on four of the most popular representatives of abstract art: Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and El Lissitzky. Masheck not only reconstructs the biographies of each of the four artists with a particular focus on their religious upbringings and social contexts, but also engages in an in-depth discussion of their writings as sources for and links to religious layers in their artworks. In the introduction Masheck states that the four artists "were, from youth and early adulthood, adherents of institutional as well as 'revealed' (meaning biblical) religion". He then explains that these "ideological origins and enduring worldviews on faith" resonated in their later works (p. 1).

The basic structure of Masheck's approach is attractive. His characterization of the four artists – Kandinsky as Orthodox, Mondrian as Protestant, Malevich as Catholic, and Lissitzky as Jewish – will likely provoke discussion of the epistemic value of such categories as a means to better understand each artist's artwork. At the same time, a critical reader may be inclined to ask throughout the book, What exactly is a "religious artist"? How does Masheck understand the concept? What role do cultural context, time, and perspective play in relation to such categorizations?

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But what strikes us, an anthropologist/art historian and a religious studies scholar, is that in weaving a thick theoretical framework to highlight the religious references in the œuvre of each artist, Masheck loses sight of the actual artworks. In our view, artworks should be the main protagonists when we analyze the impact of religion and faith on artists. As discursive actors with a diachronically changing attribution of meaning, the artworks are, in our opinion, equally, if not more, relevant than theological treatises for exploring religious impact on art, ritual knowledge, or essays on art. Furthermore, we question the premise that an artist brought up in a religious setting must necessarily create religious art, and institutional religious art in particular.

This critique does not mean that Masheck's approach isn't valuable, for he contextualizes each of the artists in a specific social, political, intellectual, and religious setting and highlights the impact of their respective backgrounds on their œuvre. The individual chapters dedicated to each artist make clear that the artistic expressions of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Lissitzky are the result of intensive consideration of what was going on in their respective political arenas and how this deliberation affected their individual ways of living and thinking. Importantly, *Faith in Art* also reevaluates and relativizes the significance of theosophy for the artists in question: it was just one among other trends in occultism and esotericism. Masheck underlines that abstract art is not a nihilist approach to the world, but rather a continuation of what is accepted as the core of being at a certain point in time and in a certain social environment. All four artists were aware, Masheck states, that art might change society. The provocative undertone of the book forces readers to rethink abstract art and the assumptions associated with it.

Before Masheck starts to contextualize the four artists and then look at their ideas and concepts of art and the world (the religious dimension included), he defines some of the most prominent terms of his approach. For the concept of religion, he follows Émile Durkheim's definition of religion as a system of beliefs and practices which unites everyone who adheres to them in one community of shared values and norms, and is wary of the concepts of *laicité*, described as an "aggressive state of 'neutrality' towards religion", and *duoverie*, a term for practicing two religions at the same time (pp. 8–9).

The discussion of the term "spirituality" remains superficial, and the tone becomes slightly disrespectful whenever Masheck returns to comparing spirituality with religion. The former is judged to be purely individual,

a vague, obfuscating concept, while the latter is highly valued, for it is, he suggests, connected to faith, belief, and conceptualities deeply rooted in society. Thus, Masheck's terminology is not always adequate or consistent. It seems odd to define spirituality and religion as antitheses only to then use "spiritual" to describe some of the artists' works or the effects they may provoke.

Masheck goes on to dedicate about forty pages to each of the four abstract artists. In each chapter he explains the circumstances of their upbringing, with references to the specific sociopolitical setting and the dominant religious movements and ideologies of their time. The first case is Kandinsky, and here Masheck highlights the idea that creating art is an almost sacramental act (p. 31) and notes the crucial role of Orthodox Christianity. He explores some of the artist's most important writings. His description of Kandinsky's career and biblical literacy is certainly enlightening, with his analysis helping the reader understand the artist's own concept of "abstract art" as a way of revealing the core – or "inner sound", according to Kandinsky (p. 37) – of an image.

But at the same time, the artworks themselves, the very materialized images that reflect the artist's thoughts, are oddly missing. It takes almost thirty pages before the reader sees the reproduction of an actual Kandinsky, *Accent in Pink* (1926), and learns how it can be interpreted as an abstract reference to Russian iconographic tradition. Masheck asks if a "culturally sophisticated church" would use *Accent in Pink* as a substitute for a Christ-in-Glory icon, but disappointingly, he avoids a direct answer, preferring vague references to different viewpoints and possibilities (p. 44).

The book continues with a chapter on Mondrian. Here, after just four pages the reader is presented with drawings. The effect is encouraging because not only does the artist's development become visible, but the drawings also help make comprehensible Mondrian's concept of art within the matrix of a Protestant belief system, which is explored in great detail by Masheck. The significance of crucial neo-Calvinist concepts for Mondrian's point of view, – *justification* and *equilibration*, for example – becomes clear from the interplay of theological tractates and essays with the illustrated artworks (pp. 63–67). The reader understands that "pure abstract art" in Mondrian's view is "no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships". Such relationships have the power to change society and bring peace and freedom (in a Thy-Kingdom-Come way), whereas inequivalent relationships sow seeds of injustice (pp. 70–71).

The shift from Mondrian to Malevich with the third chapter again highlights the importance of a religious upbringing for the work of the featured artists. As Masheck underlines, the Roman Catholic Malevich's experiences within a Russian Orthodox setting provided him with a sense of both theologies, their rituals, their iconographies, and in the end, their core principles, which then inspired his œuvre. Malevich's concept of "suprematism" defines the common denominator of art, religion, and science as a non-figurative ideal, which he implements in his work by liberating geometrical forms from associations to objects to show or evoke a higher level of insight: "Suprematism is the rediscovery of pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of 'things'" (p. 134). Masheck wonders if Malevich might have seen suprematism as a "vehicle of grace" (p. 136). But again, as with Mondrian, a question he poses does not receive a clear answer. Although, as in the previous chapters, he offers an interpretive reading of the artist's writings, his argument remains somewhat speculative and the line of reasoning is not necessarily clear.

The chapter on El Lissitzky is the logical conclusion to the analysis of the four artists, for Lissitzky was deeply impressed by Malevich's suprematist works, in which he recognized a visual equivalence to social changes: in his view, the suprematist's radicality mirrored on a visual level the creation of a new society. On the basis of his revolutionary thoughts combined with messianic elements of his Jewish upbringing, the trained architect Lissitzky conceptualized his own constructivist approach to art and the world, the "Proun" (Project for the affirmation of the new). Lissitzky explained that "Proun" does not describe anything, but instead creates in a new, voluminous way the "composition of the real world" (p. 165). In this fourth chapter Masheck's analysis of the religious, here Jewish, background and its impact on an artist's œuvre somehow remains less consistent than in the other three, even though it is omnipresent in Lissitzky's early works. This may be due to Lissitzky's sophisticated and deeply political way of creating art, which in his revolutionary, utopian sense must be liberated from all influences and dependencies if the new (whatever that may entail) is to become real. In an institutional sense, religious art is then no longer tangible.

In his conclusion Masheck returns to the point that the religious blindness of modernist art historians obscures the religious aspect of abstract art and thus diminishes its significance, just as, vice versa, the dismissive attitude of many religious recipients may diminish the significance of abstract art with which they are confronted. He then highlights aspects the four cases share:

(a) the biblical and liturgical knowledge of the artist, and (b) art as a means of creating and experiencing the promised future kingdom of God. With this he comes back to his categorical contrast between spirituality and faith and emphasizes that what the four artists created is by no means to be labeled as spiritual art, a terminology designating an empty shell. On the contrary, through their dialectical reasoning all four artists incorporated religion and created an œuvre deeply rooted in a thick socio-religious context.

We read this book with mixed feelings. We appreciated the contextualized analyses of the artist's œuvres and the call for a (re)examination of the bearing of religion and faith on them. But we had our difficulties not only with most of the very categorical premises but also with the neglect of the agency of the artworks themselves. For us, the most irritating aspect of *Faith in Art* was that the book's tone seems unpleasant, if not disrespectful, every time its author writes about worldviews which do not align with his own views.

Robin Weber

Book Review
Mansi Choksi, The Newlyweds
Rearranging Marriage in Modern India
New York City: Atria Books, 2022, 288 pages, ISBN: 978–1982134457

India is often described as a country of contradictions, an expression that highlights the diversity of its landscape and its people, which creates in turn a myriad of lived realities. On a closer look, however, many instances of unity and consensus can be observed, with the centrality of religion and family especially salient. Marriage is a common denominator of the two in a country in which most marriages continue to be arranged by parents. Mansi Choksi writes that approval of premarital dating is low and that marriages based on love are still the exception, especially in rural areas. Consequentially, relationships which cross religions or castes remain rare and can even be perceived as a threat to the social fabric: "Most of us think like our parents and conduct our lives based on the fear of disappointing them. In many ways, marriage is the only intended outcome of growing up" (p. 21).

However, Choksi has also noted a changing dynamic in this regard, which she depicts in her debut book, *The Newlyweds*. Here she portrays three young couples who defied societal norms and family expectations in relation to marriage.

A journalist by profession, Choksi followed the lives of the book's protagonists for several years. She is thus able to portray their experiences in great detail and capture their development through many stages. Born in Mumbai herself, she deliberately chose couples from rural backgrounds. Two thirds of India's population live in a rural environment, and she wanted to explore the lives of average Indians, not the progressive avantgarde in the cities. The people she portrays had internalized the conventions of Indian society

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yet were willing to challenge them to pursue their relationships. In violating various norms – love within a single religious denomination or a single caste, marriage between a man and a woman – they all lost a part of their identity, what it means to be Indian, Choksi writes.

The first story portrays the relationship of Neetu, a Hindu female, and Dawinder, a Sikh male. Additionally, Neetu is from a higher caste than Dawinder. While his family are farmers, hers run a shop and are respected in the community. Yet, their biggest violation is in not being from the same *gotra*, the equivalent of lineage in Hindu culture. Their religious devotion is repeatedly highlighted: for example, Neetu secretly gave up eating meat to convince Lord Shiva of her love for Dawinder. Her family were not to be convinced: the couple had to escape their village when they were exposed. They found refuge in Delhi, in a shelter for so-called runaway couples. Although their hosts supported their engagement, the relationship soured when the couple's financial means ran low, and Neetu and Dawinder got married on their own to start a family. When news of their marriage reached their home village, Neetu's family assaulted Dawinder's mother. The couple eventually convinced the police to arrest the assailants, but their action only further damaged Dawinder's family's reputation: not only had the Sikhs taken a girl from the village, but they had also had a reputable family jailed, so ran the common opinion. Together with his parents, Neetu and Dawinder moved to live with one of his relatives, but there Neetu was continually harassed. Having achieved their goal of creating a family together, they began to question whether their love had been worth the trouble. Neetu missed her family, and Dawinder came to believe his love marriage had destroyed the lives of his loved ones.

The second story follows the lives of Monika, a Hindu female, and Arif, a Muslim male, an interfaith couple from Maharashtra. When Monika first rejected Arif, on account of their religious differences, Arif thought, "History is witness that Hindus and Muslims cannot be together" (p. 39). However, they eventually did start to date secretly. While still a teenager, Monika became pregnant. Unable to find a doctor willing to perform an abortion – the issue was social stigma, not legal constraints – Monika was left with two options, as she explained to Arif: "Either I commit suicide, or I go away with you. Can you arrange everything? Can we get married tomorrow?" (p. 48). In the living room of a Muslim cleric, Monika converted to Islam and married Arif. Without informing anyone, they left their homes and disappeared. Their decision to leave proved justified: their hometown's police station was sur-

rounded by an angry mob the day Monika's family learned about her *nikah*, which was contested in court. The jury ruled in their favor, but Monika was now living with a family she did not know, and Arif had started training in faraway Mumbai. Having given birth to their daughter on her own, Monika started longing for her family again. She and Arif did eventually reunite, but she still could not see him frequently and grew ever more distant from his parents, heightening her loneliness. Monika stayed committed to her marriage, but while their story ends without a twist, it does contain a widening gap between them.

The third and final story depicts a queer couple in Telangana. After Reshma escaped a violent arranged marriage, she started a relationship with her female cousin, Preethi. Her family, which planned her marriage, did not approve, leaving the couple with no choice but to elope. They found refuge in Maharashtra, but they were eventually discovered by Preethi's family after she, in a moment of weakness, called home. After their story caught the attention of the media, the couple received help from a group of social scientists in Mumbai, where they were able to reunite. Broader society remained skeptical, however, about homosexual couples, leaving them wondering whether they needed to "pretend to be sisters their whole lives" (p. 62). Coming from rural backgrounds, neither woman had ever thought her values might become so progressive, with their story occurring at the same time as the repeal of Section 377, part of the colonial-era Penal Code that criminalized homosexuality.[1] In 2023, however, the Supreme Court rejected the legalization of same-sex marriage.[2] Choksi comments, "We confused homophobia with Indianness, even though our mythology brimmed with references to homosexuality" (p. 63). Eventually, the couple had to leave Mumbai, and they moved in with Reshma's family, who regularly demeaned Preethi. Unable to endure this treatment, Preethi found her affection for Reshma drained, and she started to long for a heterosexual relationship. Preethi left Reshma to return to her family and was married to a cross-cousin.

I find this book insightful, not least in examining the relationship between media and religion when it depicts how this association shapes discussions about marriage. As she narrates these stories, Choksi describes, for example, the creation of a group that houses runaway couples, gives context for the

1 Ghosh 2018.

2 Rajagopal 2023.

ongoing practice of honor killings and explains how these cases are treated by the media. Media reports on such marriages have appeared regularly since the publication of this work. When a similar case erupted in Haryana, in 2025 – the house of the husband's family was vandalized – some of the coverage tied the elopement to family honor, suggesting the violent consequences were justified, despite the couple's legal rights.[3] Neetu's uncle argued similarly: "We have lost our daughter, our honor, our everything" (p. 26). When India's Supreme Court ruled that interference in consensual marriages was illegal, *khap panchayats*, traditional village councils in northern India protested. Media outlets continue to report on Haryana's "war with love marriages".[4]

Choksi also provides context for emerging issues, such as the legal background to marriages in India. While Hindu and Muslim marriages are governed by separate laws, the Special Marriage Act of 1954 was created to allow interfaith couples to marry, the law also allows public objections to the marriage to be raised within a month which can turn into societal disputes and even conspiracy theories. The most prominent alleged plot is termed *love jihad*, the theory that Muslim men are seducing Hindu women in order to convert them to Islam. Several Indian states have introduced prohibitions on certain religious conversions, specifically targeting these interfaith couples. In 2025, Maharashtra started discussing the introduction of such a bill,[5] and in Uttar Pradesh the first acquittal of an accused Muslim occurred in the same year.[6]

The Newlyweds combines journalistic and narrative styles in its portrayal of young Indian couples' troubled relationships, which underscore the book's central theme: the reshaping of marriage in India and the hurdles it must clear. While religion continues to play an important role in marriage, younger generations are exploring new possibilities. However, despite the abundance of love stories in Indian media, most engagements continue to follow an arrangement. Choksi highlights this tension by portraying the challenges between romantic ideals and lived realities. Her book is thus an insightful read for people both engaged with and interested in the concerns of Indian youth.

3 Mukesh 2025.
4 Kissu 2024.
5 Gangan 2025.
6 Tiwari 2025.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Religion – Media – Crime

Discourses surrounding crime, punishment and justice are closely entangled with religious ideas and narratives while media function not only as echo chambers but are akin to co-authors of these discourses. Visions of the afterlife, for example, are often linked to earthly conduct and include rewards for a devout life and punishment of irreverent or harmful deeds. Many religious traditions have spent great effort in painting mental and real images of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and developing underlying ethical frameworks with their notions of good and evil. Trying to create narratives about a good life worth living, religious narratives themselves have often developed coercive tendencies. Furthermore, they have also provided concepts and language used in broader social or political discourses to understand crime or legitimize its punishment.

The upcoming issue on "Religion – Media – Crime" aims to bring debates about religion, crime (and related notions like justice, innocence, good/evil), and the visual/communicative aspect together. Its focus is the exploration of the intersection – and sometimes perhaps even clash – of religion, media, and crime. Thus, the issue takes discussions beyond mere questions of media representations of religious traditions or communities in relation with crime. Instead, for the upcoming issue, we are looking for contributions that understand religion, media, and crime as integral parts of a dynamic that provides insights into how societies operate today.

We encourage contributions analyzing the interaction between religion, media and crime from a range of disciplines and fields. Topics may include but are not limited to:

- Religious and media discourses related to the (de)criminalization of communities
- Mobilization of media and religion in social tensions

- Spiritual/theological arguments in social and media discourses about crime, innocence, justice, punishment etc.
- Constructions of crime and/or associated concepts through religious motifs in TV series, films, literature, music, or other media
- Religious actors, institutions and communities as sources or subjects of crime-related media narratives
- The role of religion and media in shaping public perceptions of victims, perpetrators, justice and punishment
- Representations of religious institutions in true crime and other crime-related media genres

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics related to the profile of the JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 1 April 2027. Contributions should be between 5,000–6,000 words (including notes and references) and be submitted for double-blind peer-review through the journal homepage, www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register and follow the instructions for submitting contributions. Manuscripts have to be formatted according to the JRFM's style guide. Publication of this issue is scheduled for 15 May 2028. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Dr. Adam Domalewski (adam.domalewski@amu.edu.pl), Dr. Stefanie Knauss (stefanie.knauss@gmail.com) or Dr. Alexander D. Ornella (alexander@ornella.at).