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## Religion and the Visual

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### Religion on the Silver Screen

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#### Introduction

[1] There is an ongoing debate in the field of religion and film studies about whether or not film makes a unique contribution to our understanding of religion. Since most religion and film scholars are concerned about the representation of religion on the silver screen, only a few scholars who are interested in something more than how religion is portrayed in the movies carry out the debate about the uniqueness of film. So far, the debate has not yielded results that would move the question of the uniqueness of film to the center of religion and film studies. It seems to me, however, that the uniqueness of film deserves more attention than it has received. In this paper, I explore the debate about the uniqueness of film, identify several of the efforts to explain the uniqueness of film, and try to see if there is enough in common to influence the future of religion and film studies.

#### The Unseen Audience

[2] Let me begin by posing the following question: What do we need to know about film in order to better understand religion and film? I am framing the general issue in this particular

way because this is how I first encountered it in a number of e-mail exchanges between my friend, Greg Watkins, and myself. Following these exchanges, Watkins published an article, “Seeing and Being Seen,” in the *Journal of Religion & Film* and an essay, “Introducing Theories of Religion through Film,” in his book, *Teaching Religion and Film* in which he lays out his position on the uniqueness of film.

[3] Drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell, Watkins believes that one of the basic features of film is that when we watch a film we see something that is not directly present to us. We see an image on the screen, but whatever that image represents, “a world,” is not present to us. We may see a couple holding hands on the screen, but we are not in the presence of a couple holding hands. Because we are not in the presence of what the images on the screen represent, we, the audience, remain unseen by the world. That is, watching a movie provides the viewer with an unusual level of privacy. We might even call this anonymity. “. . . [T]he photographic medium allows us to see something that is not present, and, in seeing what is not present, we are able to remain unseen” (1999: par. 5). As movie watchers we have become comfortable as observers who remain unseen – a kind of voyeur rather than a participant.

[4] Watkins also thinks that some filmmakers, at least “many of the great ‘auteurs’ of filmmaking,” actually set out to disrupt or subvert this comfortable relationship with the audience (1999: par. 5). In doing so, the filmmaker forces the viewer to become, at least in some sense, a participant in the film rather than merely a spectator. The filmmakers seek “to transform the once safely distant world viewed into one that returns the viewer’s gaze and places ethical demands on the viewer” (1999: par. 7). It is this placing of ethical demands that Watkins takes to be a kind of religious experience; an experience that is made available by the uniqueness of film. What film makes available to the viewer is not just a commentary on religion, but an actual religious experience.

[5] Watkins provides two examples of “auteurs” who subvert the usual relationship between film and audience, Lars Von Trier and Andrei Tarkovsky. In the first of the Golden Heart Trilogy, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), Lars Von Trier has the protagonist, Bess, look directly into the camera on some occasions, as though she is looking directly into the eyes of the audience.<sup>1</sup> Watkins believes that this gaze disrupts the comfortable position of the viewer as unseen by the world inhabited by Bess. This direct look engages us in the film. It draws us into the film and challenges us with Bess’ ethical perspective, “an ethic of love and self-sacrifice dependent on her relationship with something other-worldly (1999: par. 9).

[6] In Tarkovsky’s award winning film, *The Sacrifice*, the strategy of disruption is different, but the result is the same.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the film, when Alexander is burning down the house, in a single take, a longshot, we see a picture, but it is a picture of two different worlds. In one of these worlds, Alexander’s family is safe, but Alexander looks to those in the film as though he is insane. In the other world, Alexander is actually making a bold gesture of caring

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<sup>1</sup> The Golden Heart Trilogy is about naïve heroines who maintain their “golden hearts” in spite of the tragedies that befall them. In addition to *Breaking the Waves*, the Golden Heart Trilogy includes *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> *The Sacrifice* won the Gran Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 1986.

and sacrifice. The tension between these two worlds implicates the audience, Watkins claims, and the audience is no longer able to remain unseen by those worlds. In becoming “seen,” the ethical weight of the film comes to bear on the audience as well as the characters in the story. Again, the longshot single take scene engages the audience, draws the audience into the film and challenges the audience with the ethical tension of the film.

[7] To summarize, some directors use film techniques (for example, the actor looking directly into the camera or a single scene representing two very different worlds and ethical perspectives) to make the audience seen (rather than unseen) and thereby to engage them in the film or, more accurately, to engage them in the ethical considerations of the film. The result is that through the medium of film, viewers have a particular religious experience. Taking this approach to religion and film adds something to merely talking about religion on the silver screen, but it also seems to make religious experience equivalent to some kind of ethical experience. Alternatively, we might apply something that Tarkovsky says of this situation: “The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning good” (Watkins: 2008: 245-246).

### Seeing Rather Than Thinking

[8] Another effort to identify the uniqueness of film in relation to religion and film comes in an essay on Buddhism and film by Francisca Cho. In her essay, Cho wants to distinguish between a literary approach to religion and film and an approach that is not literary. “A literary approach to film enlists religion as a theory that moves the viewer toward clear conclusions” (119). A literary approach asks us to treat a film in the same way we would treat a text. It calls for analysis, interpretation, and cognitive thinking. “Cognitive thinking” is comprised of language, its conceptual categories, and its inevitable values – the mental doings and makings that Madhyamika Buddhism deems *prapañca*, or “fabrication” (118). The literary approach to religion and film has been the most popular approach taken by scholars. All of the authors I am discussing in this essay, however, are making an effort to move beyond the literary approach.

[9] The literary approach to religion and film stands in marked contrast to the non-literary approach, an approach that focuses upon “seeing” rather than “thinking.” “Seeing,” Cho asserts, “stands in for all of the receptive experience, insofar as we can postulate a physical experience that is separate from the mental constructions that we use to give them meaning” (119). Film enables us to focus on seeing rather than meaning and it does so by controlling the pace and duration of the images that film presents. Film controls time. In the case of photography, for example, how long we look at an image is dependent upon us. When we are ready to move on to another image, we do so. In film, however, the filmmaker determines how long we view an image. We cannot move on until the filmmaker allows us. Thus, film “possesses a unique ability to address the religious phenomena of attention and contemplation” (118).

[10] Once we move beyond the literary approach to religion and film, we find ourselves concerned with “seeing” and film has a unique ability to control what we see. Film is a seeing medium. And, Cho claims, “seeing” is a form of religious practice. The very nature of religion is to see the world differently, to see or recognize truth in the world, rather than trying to calculate truth. Cho also believes that “seeing the truth” is something that applies to

all religions, not only Buddhism or forms of mysticism. The difference between seeing truth and calculating truth is one way of distinguishing between religion and contemporary philosophy, where contemporary philosophy is fully devoted to cognition as the way to understand the world.

[11] To summarize, because film uniquely controls how long the viewer sees an image on the screen, film helps us to focus upon the process of seeing rather than the process of cognition or the making of meaning. What is unique about film is its control of time in relation to seeing. If we define or describe religion as a process of seeing, especially seeing truth, then film provides us with the opportunity for a religious experience.

### Art and Religious Experience

[12] In an article, “From Peepshow to Prayer,” Richard Blake considers various connections between religion and film. He reviews issues related to the religious content of film and discusses auteur criticism – the idea that some filmmakers bring to their craft a particular religious sensibility that careful viewers can discern while watching a film. Blake goes on, however, to examine the art form itself in hopes of finding something more than content analysis or the religious sensibilities of the director. He especially wants to challenge the idea that film, “since it mechanically reproduces physical objects set before the camera’s lens, is much less successful in capturing spiritual realities than other media, like literature, painting, or music, each of which involves an apparently more aggressive intervention of the artist and thus a more intimate, spiritual relationship between artisan and audience” (par. 41).

[13] Since Blake wants to focus on the art form (rather than the content of film or the sensibilities of directors), he is interested in what is unique about film that is important to religion and film. Blake identifies this as “direct religious experience.” “I want to suggest,” he says, “that by moving beyond content to the nature of the medium itself one can discover an avenue toward an awareness of the Divine” (par. 43).

[14] Before turning to Blake’s analysis of the art form, I want to register an objection, not to the suggestion that the art form might bring us direct religious experience, but rather an objection to the idea that content does not do well in this area. Blake contends that considering content alone, “most films do a pretty poor job with inviting the viewer to enter into any direct awareness of the presence of the Numinous: . . .” (par. 42). The swelling choral music and other elements of film, he says, “don’t really do it for me” and he refers to these elements as “ham-fisted shenanigans” (par. 42).

[15] I would agree with Blake that some movies, especially movies that want to give the audience some kind of religious experience, do a very poor job. Other movies, however, seem to me to do a very good job. I take film to be a powerful medium and the power of film comes from the story, the images that are used to tell the story, the camera angles, the lighting, the sets, and, of course, the music. With regard to music, try to imagine watching *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg’s first big hit in 1975) without the music (just two notes) that we have all come to associate with the film.

[16] For me, all of the elements of film combine to give film its power. The music swells; the camera moves upward (looking down on the scene); the song is “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” and the movie is about two characters who have been walking alone throughout the film and

now find each other in a special moment of connection and forgiveness. All this brings a tear to my eye every time I see Antonia Bird's *Priest* released in 1994.

[17] Getting back to business, Blake asks, "Is the image on the screen an object, a collection of lights and shadows, that we observe, or is it a lens, through which we observe the material universe . . . ?" (par. 48). He concludes, "the cinema is a medium for contemplation. It forces us to look not at itself, but through film to the marvels of the material universe that it presents for our gaze" (par. 50). Blake believes that the spiritual component of film is largely a Catholic one, but one that can have implications for other religions as well. The idea is that "Catholics tend to see God as present, immanent in the material universe of time and space, not as distant other" (par. 51). Therefore, in contemplating the material universe presented to us on film, we are seeing "the face of God" (par. 51). That is, we are able through the medium of film to have "direct religious experience." Since all that we require for this religious experience is an image of the material world, it follows that all films make a religious experience possible because all films show us the material world in which God is immanent.

[18] To summarize, Blake believes that film is a medium that forces us to look through it to the material universe that it presents to us. The unique character of film is that it does not ask us to look at the medium itself, but to look beyond it to the material universe. Since the material world is "charged with the grandeur of God," or tends toward "the presence of God as its deepest reality," film takes us to God or to the material world in which God is immanent (par. 51). This provides us with an explanation of what Blake calls "a spirituality of the movies" (par. 51).

### Myth Making

[19] In one of the most popular books on religion and film, *Film as Religion*, John Lyden claims that movies function in our lives in much the same way that religion functions in our lives. Following Clifford Geertz, Lyden defines religion as "a symbol system that provides meaning in the midst of chaos and suffering through 'conceptions of a general order of existence'" (212). These "conceptions of a general order of existence" are what Lyden refers to as myths. Myths are available to us from various sources, but one of those sources is religion and another is film. Both religion and film are activities of myth making. Myths are important to us whether they are literally true or not, but since they do provide order and meaning to the world around us, they are not merely fairy tales.

[20] One of my favorite myths comes from the biblical story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). In this story, the unprotected David accepts the challenge of the giant, Goliath. Goliath is not only huge, but armor covers him from head to toe, making him almost invincible. As almost everyone knows, however, Goliath was vulnerable at the point of his forehead and, after mustering his courage, David overcomes virtually impossible odds to defeat the giant.

[21] There can be several interpretations of the story. At one level, it is a story about a little guy who, through courage and determination, defeats the big bad giant. This is itself a popular ordering of the world – even big bad giants can be defeated by the little guy. You can imagine how many movies express this general myth or world order, from *Rocky* (1976) and *Rocky II* (1979), through *Hoosiers* (1986), *A Civil Action* (1998), *The Insider* (1999), *The*

*Straight Story* (1999), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Michael Clayton* (2007), and *Flash of Genius* (2008). You may or may not claim that David has right on his side or that David has God on his side. The connection to religion may or may not be a part of the myth. However, the basic “little guy conquers big bad giant” remains. If you want to argue that the myth does not describe the way the world really is, you can argue that the myth shows us how the world ought to be – another result of myth making, whether in religion or film.

[22] Given this example, it is not difficult to see how movies tell stories that order the world for us. Since Lyden believes that this is also what religion does there is an important similarity between religion and film, thus, the title, *Film as Religion*.

[23] To summarize, movies provide us with myths that give order to the world, as we know it, or that provide us with an order to which we might aspire. Defining religion as “a symbol system that provides meaning,” then means movies provide us with religion. For Lyden, the story or the myth provided by film performs the same function in our lives as does religion.

### **Making a World**

[24] “World making” is also the topic of Brent Plate’s essay, “Filmmaking and World Making: Re-creating Time and Space in Myth and Film.” Drawing on Peter Berger’s book, *The Sacred Canopy*, Plate argues that as human beings we “collectively create ordered worlds around us to provide us with a sense of stability and security . . .” (220). Plate goes on to say: “And if culture staves off meaninglessness at the societal level, religion does so at the cosmic level as it keeps the forces of chaos at bay” (220). For Plate, then, myths are about chaos and order, whether at the level of society or at the cosmic level.

[25] There are important differences between Plate and Lyden on religion and myth, but Plate says of his own view: “The general argument I am making is that films formally function like religion” (230). So, I take the basic claim of both Plate and Lyden to be similar, even if they are not identical. There are, however, two elements of Plate’s view that are worthy of special notice. First, Plate believes that movies are not just narratives. “The deeper implication for a religious study of the cinema is that films are not simply verbal narratives. They create and re-create the world through color, form, design, symbols, movement, and music” (230).<sup>3</sup> I do not think that this is contrary to Lyden’s view, but it does distinguish between a view that movies are a complex set of elements and a view that movies are unique because we see the material world (and thus God) through the lens, or because movies control time, or because movies have one or two special techniques that can be used to disrupt the viewers comfort zone.

[26] Second, Plate claims that movies affect the viewer at some visceral level. Movies are not merely prompts for the intellect. When we know something as a result of watching a movie, we know it in our hearts as well as our heads. “. . . [T]hese audio visual experiential stories impact human lives, offering models for living, not just cerebrally but through the body as well” (230). Plate’s talk of “models for living” reminds us of the ethical features of film

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<sup>3</sup> Plate adds to the list of elements of film when he talks about how movies present myths. “They do this in verbal dialogue, as well as through a careful use of visual symbols, including props, clothing, and camera angles” (228).

expressed by Watkins and Cho. The connection of the ethical to the body suggests what I would call a kind of visceral ethics or what Alyda Faber calls “visual ethics.” Ethics is something more than theory and its application to dilemmas. Ethics on this view is a part of our very being – a part of who we are.

[27] To summarize, Plate holds that movies function in our lives in the same way that religion functions in our lives, by providing order to an otherwise chaotic universe. Movies do this by presenting myths that create and re-create the order of the world around us. For Plate, what makes movies unique is not one or another of their elements, but rather the combination of all of their elements, including camera angles, symbols, sounds, and so on. This combination of elements, then, affects the viewer at a bodily level and not merely at the level of the intellect. When movies offer us a model for living, they do so in a way that affects our very being.

### **Discussion**

[28] We have looked briefly at the efforts of five authors to explain what unique contribution film might make to our understanding of religion and film. The accounts we have examined are, relatively speaking, quite brief. This means that we might draw rather different conclusions from more complete explanations of what makes film unique in relation to religion. I also have given my own interpretation to the accounts we have examined. That is, others might interpret the efforts of the authors discussed above in some different fashion and that might yield rather different conclusions. The authors we have considered take quite different approaches to the questions of film and religion, even if there are some similarities. This means that it is unlikely that all of the parts of each author’s view will fit neatly into some kind of coherent whole. Given the material we have examined, however, I think that there are several conclusions we might reasonably draw.

[29] First, all of the authors seem to think that film can give us something more than the mere meaning of a text in relation to religion. There seems to be agreement that film can provide the viewer with a special kind of religious experience, a kind of religious experience that other media cannot provide. There is something unique about film in relation to religion. Examining this religious experience is what Plate calls the “religious study of cinema.” We are looking at the religious experience brought about by watching films. Providing or inducing a religious experience stands in marked contrast to the literary approach to religion and film. The literary approach is more concerned with meaning and cognition, than it is with having a particular kind of experience.

[30] While there is agreement among the authors discussed about film generating some kind of religious experience, there does not seem to be much agreement about either how film generates religious experience or what kind of religious experience film brings about. Watkins suggests two elements of film as unique elements that produce religious experience – the actor looks directly into the camera and the long-shot single take scene. These film elements may produce a religious experience. However, if these are the only elements, then it does not seem to me very many movies will produce a religious experience. Indeed, there will be only a few movies by a select group of auteur directors. My own view is that many more movies can produce a religious experience, and so I want to argue that while the

elements of film identified by Watkins may be used to produce a religious experience, they are not the only elements that can be so used.

[31] Francisca Cho identifies the control of time as the element of film that enables film to produce a religious experience. Controlling time focuses our attention and contemplation, enabling us to see truths not found in our usual logical reasoning process. Controlling time, or what I would call the pacing of a film, is important to the impact the movie has on the viewer. Again, I think this is only one element of filmmaking that contributes to generating a religious experience and that it should not exclude others.<sup>4</sup>

[32] Blake is not satisfied with “swelling music” and I agree. In Blake, we get the first hints that what is unique about movies is the combination of elements that make up a film. It is not just swelling music or camera angles that generate religious experience for Blake, but rather all of the elements that give us a representation of the material world in which we find the “face of God.” What seems odd to me about Blake’s view, however, is that it seems to me that it makes every movie a movie that generates religious experience and it seems to make movies unnecessary. After all, we can find the face of God in the material universe in which we live our daily lives.

[33] Lyden and Plate both see religion as a myth making process. Through religion, we create and re-create myths that give meaning to the world around us and our place in that world. Since film is a process of presenting myths that give meaning to the world, film functions in a way that is very similar to religion. This is why Lyden calls his book *Film as Religion* and why Plate says “films formally function like religions.” For Plate, the creation and re-creation of myths in film is the product of all of the elements that go into the making of a film, from color and symbols, through story and music, to lighting and set design. I see no reason to think that Lyden would object to this.

[34] On the basis of the suggestions made by the authors discussed in this essay, I would conclude that what makes film unique in relation to religion is not one or two or even three special elements of film, but rather all of the elements of film in combination. When movies produce a religious experience, they do so by arranging all of their elements in a particular way. The authors are correct. It is not just the story that generates a religious experience, but rather how the story is told. In addition, in film, how the story is told is by utilizing all of the elements of filmmaking. This means, I think, that not all movies will generate religious experiences, but it also means that more movies will generate some kind of religious experience than just those movies by a select group of auteur directors that we can see only in art theaters. Some popular films (not just art films) will generate a religious experience,

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<sup>4</sup> I do believe that movies have a very significant impact upon their audiences. One reason for this is that you get the entire story in a relatively short period without any interruption. Most narrative films run about two hours. This is a good reason for seeing movies in the theater, rather than on the television screen at home. At home, there are interruptions that reduce the impact of the film. Another reason movies have an impact is that the audience shares the same images. If you read a story or hear a story told, your imagination may give you different images from the images constructed by others. You share the same story but not the same images. Movies, however, give you more material that is communal and the fact that we all see the same images gives movies more of a wallop.

and I think this fact is in part responsible for the growth of interest in the field of religion and film.

[35] So far, I have concluded that movies can generate some kind of religious experience in their audiences (rather than merely providing cognitive information about religion) and that what makes film unique in producing religious experience is the combination of elements that make up a film creating a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Now we must see what conclusion we might draw regarding the kind of religious experience that movies generate.

[36] What kind of religious experience does film produce in the audience? Watkins suggests that the religious experience we have while watching a movie is an ethical one. That is, when watching a film we feel the ethical weight of the movie on our shoulders. Cho and Blake both suggest that through film we encounter something beyond ourselves. For Cho, this is a kind of truth and for Blake this is the face of God. We arrive at this by seeing the world differently. Something like this can be said of Lyden and Plate as well. We see the world differently through film – the creation and re-creation of myths that give meaning to our lives. However, Plate adds to this that the impact of the movie is not limited to our minds, but also applies to our bodies. We do not just see the movie; we feel it.

[37] On the issue of what kind of religious experience movies generate, there seems to be less agreement. It is more difficult to draw a conclusion here than with regard to whether movies have an impact and how movies achieve that impact. Nevertheless, I will draw a conclusion here. If we take the notion of ethical weight from Watkins and the idea of models for living from Plate, we end up with a religious experience that is ethical in nature. And, if we take the seeing (as opposed to thinking) from Cho and Blake and the myth making from both Lyden and Plate we end up with a mechanism that allows film to have an impact on us as ethical beings. I am tempted to take the ethical dimension from Watkins and Plate and leave the other authors out, but there does seem to me to be some connection between the seeing and myth making discussed by the other authors that is relevant to this idea of ethics. I think this means that the religious experience provided by film is essentially an ethical experience, an ethical experience felt at some deep bodily level and not only at some intellectual level. Ethics and religion go together. One might even say that religion and ethics are one and the same thing. This conclusion explains why the experience we get from watching film is “religious” in nature, rather than the experience of any particular religion. It is a “religious” experience that film provides and not a “religion” experience. Then, what is religious is ethical, whereas what a particular religion is can include many other things. I am not entirely comfortable with this conclusion – that the religious is the ethical – but it seems to me to be a reasonable conclusion to draw from the material provided by the authors.

[38] I have been exploring the efforts of five authors to explain what is unique about film in relation to religion. All of the authors agree that movies provide the viewer with some kind of religious experience. I think the idea of producing a religious experience is an important part of religion and film studies, even if I also want to determine how religion can help us interpret film and what film tells us about religion. Obviously, there is much more work to do in the exploration of film and religious experience. My hope is that this essay will generate more discussion of what is unique about film in relation to religion.

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