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Stefanie Knauss and Marie-Therese Mäder (eds.)

Academic Teaching with Short Films in Religion and Ethics

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CONTACT

Institut für Systematische Theologie und Liturgiewissenschaft / JRFM
Heinrichstrasse 78/B/1, A-8010 Graz, Austria
e-mail: jrfm@uni-graz.at
www.jrfm.eu

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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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Marie-Therese Mäder and Stefanie Knauss

Editorial

Teaching with Short Films

This issue's thematic focus on teaching religious studies and ethics through short films originated in a conversation among the editors of this journal about our use of film in the university classroom: how do we pedagogically engage films, how do our research interests shape or enrich our pedagogical practices, or how is our scholarly engagement with film challenged by our teaching experiences? And how, in our pedagogy, do we take into account the particular logic of film, and especially the short film, as an audio-visual medium? Our decision to focus this conversation on our use of short films was motivated, as will become clear, by much the same rationale as is behind the use of short films in the classroom itself: their brevity allowed us to preview the material before our discussion so that we all shared the same point of departure, and the format of the short film encouraged focused reflection.

Following our discussions, several of us then agreed to develop our brief presentations of best practices and pedagogical challenges into more substantial reflections, which we present in this thematic section together with the additional contribution by Ken Derry. We solicited the response of a specialist in media ethics and cultural philosophy, Claudia Paganini, in the hope that this outsider perspective will enable us to better understand the particular benefits and limitations of using short film in the religious studies and ethics classroom. We hope that the contributions collected here will encourage reflection on the pedagogy of short films and provide both theoretical and practical suggestions for those of us teaching religion, theology, or ethics with the help of film.

It often seems as if films – short or long, fiction or documentary – are used in a somewhat haphazard fashion in teaching. When a film is scheduled, students might suspect that the instructor does not want to put much time or effort into preparing the session – and sometimes their hunch is valid. Start the film, and let *it* do the work of teaching. But this assumption is both right and wrong. It is right because, as Ladislaus Semali states with

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regard to media more broadly, "[t]he media are powerful teachers".[1] Since our students live in a world of images, the (audio-)visual format is often more accessible (and very likely more attractive) to them than written texts. Films encourage emotional and affective reactions and can contextualize the abstract theories and concepts introduced in a course through an audio-visual narrative depicting concrete places, people, and events. John Sundquist notes – with reference to language learning, but the same is also true with regard to teaching the study of religion and ethics – that films "provide instructors with new opportunities to engage their students in interactive communication, critical thinking, and intercultural learning".[2]

However, films can also be quite ineffective teachers when they are used in class without introducing students to the theories, concepts, and tools of media and film studies: What is the relationship between reality and representation? How do production, the film itself, and its viewers with their respective contexts interact in the meaning-making process? Thus, the impression that teaching with film is easy teaching is quite wrong. The critical analysis of visual media is as demanding as that of written texts, and perhaps even more so, because their means of communicating first have to be brought to critical consciousness. Thus, as Belinha de Abreu notes, teaching with media also requires teaching about media:[3] how media function, how their messages are constructed, how their specific language works, who produced them, how they can be decoded in different ways, what values they include, or exclude, and why they are produced.[4] These are questions which need to be discussed when working with media, and they help students develop their skills of critical thinking and media literacy.[5]

What Is a Short Film?

In general, scholarship on the pedagogy of film in the study of religion or ethics – underdeveloped as it is[6] – focuses on teaching feature length films (documentary or fiction), reflecting "the hammerlock that the feature

1 Semali 2005, 35.

2 Sundquist 2010, 123.

3 De Abreu 2019, 32.

4 De Abreu 2019, 18.

5 De Abreu defines media literacy as "the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms". De Abreu 2019, 25.

6 For helpful reflections on teaching religion and/through film, see Watkins 2008; Hamner 2013.

length film holds, not only over film commerce, but over film theory and film history".[7] Feature films are probably also formative of most people's own cinematic experience and thus shape their expectations about how stories are told in an audio-visual format and how they should be analyzed. We suspect that even when instructors and students encounter short films in a class, they probably, implicitly or explicitly, draw on their theoretical and experiential knowledge of feature length films to make sense of what they see.

So what, then, is a short film, and what are the particular qualities of short films that need to be considered in order to engage them productively in the classroom? Alexander D. Ornella's contribution to this issue shows that these questions are not as easy to answer as it might seem. An overview of the theory of short film results in two noteworthy observations: first, short films are primarily discussed within the context of teaching the practice of filmmaking, given that in many film schools students produce a short film for graduation.[8] Consequently, in both film theory and the industry, short films are considered an exercise[9] or sample piece through which young filmmakers showcase their talents in order to be considered as directors and attract funding for feature films. That is, short films are primarily seen as a means to an end, a first step in a career whose goal is the feature film.

And second, it seems difficult to define what a short film is, precisely, and what its characteristic qualities are. The most obvious quality is its length: a short film is, well, short. But even this characteristic leaves room for a lot of variation, with the term "short film" describing, for different authors or institutions, anything from a film of a couple of minutes to one of up to 40 or even 60 minutes.[10] Duration as the distinctive characteristic of a short film, however, means more than simply thinking of short films as short feature films. Michael Sergi and Craig Batty attempt to capture the similarities and differences between short films and feature films through the comparison between a motorbike and a car: while short and feature films share some

7 Gunning 2015, 66.

8 See for example Raskin 1998; 2006; 2014; Yeatman 1998; Sergi/Batty 2019. Raskin notes that in Scandinavian countries, graduation films, the so-called *novellefilm*, represent a particular subtype of short film. Raskin 2014, 29.

9 Kremski 2005a, 9.

10 Sundquist 2010. Sergi/Batty (2019, 54) introduce Daniel Gurskis's typology, which distinguishes between short shorts (2–4 minutes), conventional shorts (up to 12 minutes), medium shorts (up to 25 minutes), and long shorts (30 minutes). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences defines a short film as a film with a running time of less than 40 minutes including credits (see https://is.gd/SN7xpA, accessed 7 May 2022).

similarities, they are also quite different from each other, both in terms of their structural elements and in how they are experienced.[11] Richard Raskin thus concludes with regard to the narrative dimension of short films, "[a]s an art form in its own right, the short film should not be subjected to sequential narrative models that have been designed for describing feature film storytelling."[12]

While it seems difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is that makes short films different from feature films, a few aspects appear relevant across the reflections of both film theorists and film practitioners. One aspect is that the brevity of short films is recognized as more than simply a quantitative measure. Instead, the film's short duration requires a qualitatively different form of filmmaking: "In the short film, the issue is not to shorten something but to condense it", as filmmaker Kornél Mundruczó puts it.[13] Thus the brief(er) duration of short films reflects, according to Tom Gunning, a different "temporality", with focus on the vertical, in-depth exploration of the moment rather than the horizontal forward momentum of the plot development of a feature film, resulting in different narrative constructions, forms of storytelling, and viewer experiences.[14]

Thus central to the short film form is the need for focus, condensation, and limitation of both the thematic scope and the cast of characters in order to enable viewers to understand quickly what the problem is, to capture and hold their attention, and to leave them with a meaningful experience. Raskin argues that while for feature films, character development, conflict, and dialogue are indispensable aspects of storytelling, these are optional for short films, which may successfully function without a central conflict, or focus on a moment in a character's life rather than their development, or tell their story without dialogue.[15] Instead, he suggests that short film storytelling is successful when it achieves a dynamic balance between (at least some of) a set of seven paired principles: character focus – character interaction; causality – choice; consistency – surprise; sound – image; character – object; simplicity – depth; economy – wholeness.[16] Sergi and Batty

11 Sergi/Batty 2019, 52.

12 Raskin 2014, 33.

13 Kremski 2005b, 166: "Im Kurzfilm geht es nicht darum, etwas zu verkürzen, sondern zu verdichten" (our translation).

14 Gunning 2015, 66.

15 Raskin 2014, 30–31.

16 Raskin 2014, 32–33.

propose a different but compatible set of basic principles of a good short film, namely the focus on one location, one time frame, a small cast of contrasting characters, and a single problem with immediate consequences for the characters.[17] What both Raskin's and Sergi / Batty's models of good short films underline is the importance of focus and clarity while at the same time allowing for openness and surprise: the brevity of the film, in fact, often requires gaps, symbolic objects, showing rather than telling, or concluding with an open ending, all of which allow for multiple interpretations and encourage the viewer's engagement with the film.[18]

These characteristic elements of the short film's form and experience – focus on the moment, condensation of narrative, symbolic communication, and viewer engagement – make it particularly suitable for exploration from the perspective of the study of religion, theology, and ethics. On the formal level, the short film's need to draw on symbolic elements to communicate economically while at the same time leaving space for viewers to find multiple meanings encourages the use of religious motifs and symbols that are broadly available in the cultural imaginary of the producers and viewers. In addition, given a certain bias against religions and religious figures noticeable in mostly secularized western societies and their media, a film's focus on religious characters or problems arising from religious worldviews or normative systems can serve to create tension among characters and their viewpoints that drives the short narrative. References to religious worldviews can provide a helpful frame to represent the characters' motivations, reactions, or attitudes towards the central problem of the short film and to create a dynamic narrative with different possible outcomes. Taking a step back, the importance of attention to religious worldviews, norms, and values is also relevant when thinking about viewers' diverse reactions to a film and their interpretations of it, which might equally be shaped by their religious or secular backgrounds and the values promoted through them. The analysis of the film's interaction with the viewers set in their respective cultural contexts allows tracing "the cultural work of religion"[19] in establishing or affirming norms and ideological positions and providing structures for individual and collective meaning-making.

17 Sergi/Batty 2019, 55–56.

18 Riis 1998.

19 Margaret Miles, quoted in Hamner 2013, 1143, footnote 3.

Teaching Short Films

Teaching through short films offers a range of possibilities that follow from its particular formal qualities. The form of the short film, marked by "brevity, innovation, compact storytelling, and open-endedness",[20] highlights the constructedness of audio-visual media and thus offers the opportunity to engage in close analysis of that form in addition to the themes addressed through it. This allows for teaching critical media literacy, where students learn to view media critically, pay attention to "how" a film communicates, not only "what" it shows, and ask about the interests that shape particular forms of representation and the meanings thus conveyed. With regard to religion or ethics, that might involve the analysis of positive or negative representations of particular religious characters or practices and how these reflect or challenge social prejudices. The film's polysemic form of often symbolic communication further encourages students to seek out multiple interpretations and self-reflectively understand the importance of their own life experiences in shaping their "reading" of a film. On the level of plot or content, given the film's brief duration, the necessary simplification and condensation of the narrative results in a clarity of exposition of the problem addressed that helps students see its various aspects clearly and analyze their relationship or consequences.

And not least, on a practical and experiential level, the shorter duration of the film (although as mentioned, length can vary considerably) has the advantage that it is possible to discuss a film in a single class session, viewing the film either together in class or asking students to watch it beforehand (or both). While often the students do not remember all the details of a film if they watched it as preparation for the class at home, re-viewing it in class means that they will now remember more – or different – details, whereas those who could not view it at home at least see it once in class. In addition, viewing the film together creates a particular experience of community and shared participation in the film's world that provides the basis for discussion. Furthermore, before the film is viewed in class, the instructor can provide additional guidance for the reception of the film by, for example, asking students to focus on one specific character, on a filmic parameter like sound, camera movement or on the perspective from which

20 Sundquist 2010, 129.

the story is told, or simply but importantly, to consider how the second screening impacted them, what they see now or overlooked the first time. Through this experience students learn how important it is to know a source in detail before analyzing it, and just how unreliable one's memory of a film's details can be.

Focusing on feature length films, William L. Blizek and Michele Desmarais discuss four ways to use film in teaching "religion and film". They differentiate between using religion as a matrix to (1) interpret films, and using films to (2) critique or (3) promote religion or (4) cultural values.[21] They also differentiate between using film to promote religious practices (what they call "the religious study" of film and religion) and using film to promote the critical analysis of a religion as it also occurs in the university classroom (what Blizek and Desmarais call "the academic study of this field");[22] it is the latter approach that all contributions in this issue focus on. While this distinction between academic and religious study of films might not always be easy to make – especially when attending to the individual viewing experience – it is important to acknowledge that students and instructors might be believers, atheists, agnostics, or hold particular values. Thus it is crucial to critically reflect the spectators' position in the hermeneutical process.

One of the challenges in teaching short films is the knowledge divide between the instructor, who knows the film well and has perhaps also taught it before and thus has certain expectations about what students should take away from it, and the students, who view the film for the first time and for whose subjective experience the instructor also wants to make space, so that the viewing can be productive for them. How can the students appropriate the experience of watching a film and become active recipients of a narrative so that it is of concern to themselves and they are able to critically reflect on their viewing experience? Understanding one's own reception as subjective and then being able to analyze it in relation to the film's form and narrative as well as comparing it to other interpretations is the starting point for the critical discussion of questions of theology, ethics, or the study of religion in relation to the film. In order for this interpretative process to occur, instructors depend on the students' willingness to expose themselves to the film, and the instructors themselves need to step back from their position of knowledge to create the space for the students to experience the film themselves.

21 Blizek/Desmarais 2008, 17.

22 Blizek/Desmarais 2008, 30–31.

Different Approaches to Short Film in Teaching the Study of Religion and Ethics

The current issue presents five different approaches to the many ways in which short films can be used in the classroom, including their strengths with regard to particular pedagogical objectives and also some of the challenges in teaching with short film. Daria Pezzoli Olgiati focuses on how theories of religion can be introduced by means of the short film A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6′). Pezzoli-Olgiati argues that using a film that portrays life in the 1960s contextualizes and makes accessible complex theories of religion that were developed during this period, such as those of Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, Thomas Luckman, and Peter Berger. In her experience of teaching with the film, the animated narrative visualizes these complex theories in a way that makes them more accessible than the often-complicated texts.

Stefanie Knauss highlights attending to the stylistic parameters of a film in her teaching with the short The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23′). She encourages critical film analysis to improve the students' ability to understand how the film communicates issues of gender, power, and religion. Thus, while students may learn about strictly Orthodox Judaism through the film by seeing characters engaging in specific practices, hearing them speak Yiddish, or learning about Jewish traditions, they are also aware that these representations of Judaism are constructions and require critical reflection.

Opening with reflections on the genre and form of short film, Alexander D. Ornella's contribution then makes a case for science fiction short films as a focus for discussion of how processes of othering are visualized and how inclusion and exclusion work in society. The short films viewed in class allow the students to experience how processes of othering, inclusion, and exclusion are set in motion as the filmic narrative "translates" abstract concepts and theories into image and sound. He notes the benefits of working with film that addresses emotional and sensory as well as cognitive dimensions in the viewer.

Ken Derry's contribution reflects on his use of short films in exams. He observes that students are less nervous when they can watch a short film and answer questions related to it. Here, short films become a pedagogical and psychological tool in the classroom. Films without specific religious

references serve as an occasion for students to apply previously studied theories of religion, reflecting Blizek and Desmarais's category of using religion as a matrix to interpret films. Derry also uses films with explicit religious content for exams in courses focusing on particular religious traditions, asking students to reflect on theories about these traditions.

The emotional dimension is also highlighted in Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution. She discusses the short film 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22') to consider the central concept of responsibility in media ethics. Her phenomenological approach to teaching requires students to be actively involved in the reception and to develop empathy for the social actors involved. Her aim is to provide a "lived experience" through the short film in order to be able to reflect on and formulate the ethical questions the film raises. Thus responsibility is experienced during the film reception as an emotion, namely empathy, and becomes a formative element in the three steps of description, analysis, and interpretation of the film.

Claudia Paganini's response to the articles notes the importance of substantial reflection on why films do work in the classroom, what effects they have, where they can be a constructive didactic tool, and where the limits of their application lie. Highlighting relevant points that each article makes, Paganini also raises questions and offers directions for further considerations that can contribute to future investigations in this field.

The five contributions and response gathered here show that short films are a helpful pedagogical tool and facilitate the communication process between instructors and students. Thus, the short films become a link between the instructor's teaching objectives and the students' openness and willingness to engage in the learning experience. We hope that the authors' reflections on their own experiences in the practice of teaching these films in dialogue with the theories of short film, pedagogy, and religion or ethics may provide a helpful stimulus to others engaging film in their classrooms.

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Filmography

4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22′).
A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6′).
The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23′).

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

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

Abstract

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

Keywords

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

Biography

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati is Professor of the Study of Religion and the History of Religion at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Germany. The interaction between religion and media as well as the role of religion in the public sphere are her principal research interests. She also works on space-critical and gender-critical approaches to religion and on methods and theories in the study of religion, with a focus on European traditions.

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

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

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

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

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

1 Pezzoli-Olgiati 2021.

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

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

> Did you like the film? What topic does it address? What story does it tell? Which society does it depict?
> Focus on the protagonist. Who is he? What do we learn about his life? What is he doing? When and where?
> What characterises the city depicted in the short film? Which aspects of society are represented? How?
> How is religion represented in the film? How would you describe the different facets of religion in Bozzetto's short film?

Urban Life and the Idea of Progress in the 1960s

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

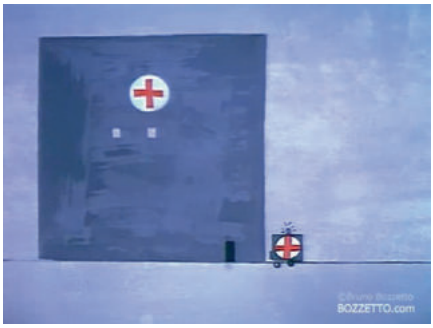
Religion in a Differentiated Society

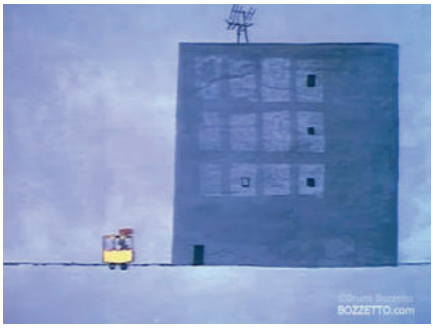
The representation of urban life in the late 1960s in A Life in a Tin obviously does not provide a scholarly socio-historical analysis. However, the short animation can be read as a compendium of topics and feelings that are representative of this era, characterised by both faith in progress and its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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

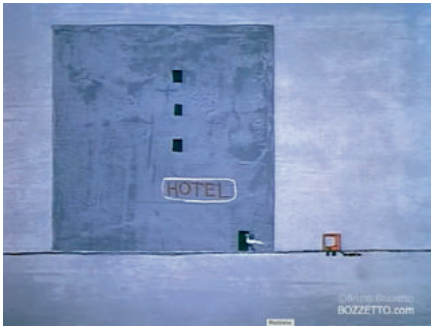


Fig. 18: The hotel (00:04:09) serves as a reference to holidays and travel: tourism as a habit of the ordinary man is typical for this age of economic expansion.

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

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

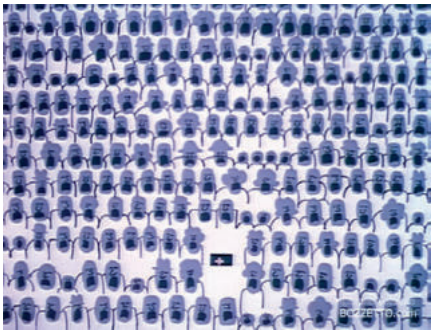


Fig. 19: Funeral service as a social duty (00:05:41).

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

Meaning-making Processes and Individual Imagination

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From Playful Animation to Theoretical Horizons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 Berger/Luckmann 1966.

9 Berger 1967.

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

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

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

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

11 Douglas 1966 and 1970.

12 Turner 1969.

13 Luhmann 1977.

14 Luckmann 1967.

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

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

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

15 Luckmann 1967; Geertz 1966.

16 Liedhegener/Tunger-Zanetti/Wirz 2011.

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Filmography

Mister Tao (Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1988, 2'35").

A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola / Une vie dans une boîte / Ein Leben in der Schachtel, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6').

Stefanie Knauss

Teaching Religion and Gender with THE COHEN'S WIFE (IL 2000)

Where, Why, How, and What?

Abstract

In this contribution, I reflect on my experiences teaching the short film THE COHEN'S WIFE (ESHET KOHEN, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23') to critically analyze the constructedness of media as well as of gender and religious identities, and their mutual, complex relationships. I briefly present the context in which I teach with this film and discuss my choice of it as a "teaching partner" and the pedagogical approaches and tools I use to work with it in the classroom, before elaborating on some details of what the film teaches my students. I conclude with some ideas for future changes when teaching with THE COHEN'S WIFE, based on my experiences so far.

Keywords

THE COHEN'S WIFE, Construction of Media, Construction of Gender, Construction of Religious Identities, Short Film as Teaching Partner

Biography

Stefanie Knauss is Professor of Constructive Theology at Villanova University, USA. Her research focuses on theology and culture, body and religion, and gender/queer studies and theology. Recent publications include *Religion and Film: Representation, Experience, Meaning* (Brill, 2020); and the co-authored volume, with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Natalie Fritz, Anna-Katharina Höpflinger, and Marie-Therese Mäder, *Sichtbare Religion: Eine Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft* (DeGruyter, 2018).

Introduction: Short Films in the Classroom

While most people think "feature" when they hear "film", and feature-length films dominate the industry, film theory and most people's cinematic experience, short films have a number of advantages in the classroom. Quite pragmatically, the shorter duration (although length can vary considerably)

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usually makes it possible to both watch and discuss a film in one class session. However, a short film is not simply shorter than a feature film; its brief duration requires clarity and focus in presenting the problem it addresses, while at the same time opening up possibilities for innovative storytelling that encourage formal analysis and multiple interpretations.[1] Thus the short film's form promotes focused discussion of the topics it presents and also provides an opportunity to address the constructed nature of media, thereby encouraging students to develop skills in critical media literacy.[2]

I draw on these advantages of the short-film form when I use The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23') to analyze the constructedness of media as well as of gender and religious identities, and their mutual, complex relationships. In this contribution, I will briefly present the context in which I teach with this film, discuss my choice of it as a "teaching partner", and the pedagogical tools I use to work with it in the classroom. I then elaborate on some details of what the film teaches my students and conclude with some ideas for future changes when teaching with The Cohen's Wife, based on my experiences so far.

Academic Context: Where Do I Teach the Film?

As academic cultures, and their pedagogical expectations and practices, vary considerably, I want to briefly situate my teaching with the film in its academic setting and the context of the course. I use The Cohen's Wife in an upper-level undergraduate course entitled "Religion, Media and Gender", which I have taught twice at Villanova University, a private Catholic university on the East Coast of the United States with a predominantly white, (upper-)middle-class, Christian student body. The course aims at enabling students to think critically about the mutually formative relationships between religious gender norms and media representations, and the ways in which media shape the identity, actions, and relationships of individuals at the intersection of religion and gender. The course encourages a constructivist understanding of media, gender, and religion, which requires students to take a critical perspective on media representations and to seek out possible resistant (and possibly unexpected) meanings in media texts, to analyze

1 Sundquist 2010, 129.

2 De Abreu 2019.

them with regard to how they produce gender and religious identities in line with or resistant to dominant ideologies, and how mediated religious and gender identities are shaped by relationships of power and inequality – all of which are important aspects in the field of religion, media, and gender, as Mia Lövheim points out.[3] The course also aims at introducing students to a range of global religious traditions, and it attends to the different ways in which religious and gender identities intersect with race and sexuality in different cultural contexts.

Because the course fulfills two requirements in the undergraduate core curriculum (upper-level theology and diversity), students come from a variety of majors, often with little or no prior knowledge in media theory, gender studies, or religious studies. Thus the early sessions of the course are dedicated to introducing them to some prominent theories, concepts, and methods of analysis in these fields, and to equipping them with the tools of critical analysis as we begin to trace their connections. We discuss The Cohen's Wife in one of these early sessions. Through the readings required for this session[4] and a brief introductory lecture, students are familiarized with basic concepts and questions in religion and gender: What do we mean by "gender" and how has it been theorized? How can we think of gender as constructed and what does that mean for possibilities to undo unequal gender orders? How does the gender order impact religious institutions, values, theologies, and the daily lives of their followers, and vice versa, how do religions shape gender identities and roles? What are some salient questions in the study of religion and gender? Our critical analysis of the film offers the opportunity to apply some of these theories and concepts to the interpretation of characters, their actions, and their motivations.

The Cohen's Wife: Why (This) Short Film?

The Cohen's Wife is Nava Heifetz's graduation film at the Ma'ale School of Television, Film and the Arts, a school that "was founded in Jerusalem with the primary purpose of providing religiously observant Jews with the opportunity to receive the appropriate training that would prepare them to

3 Lövheim 2013b, 17.

4 Required readings are King 2005; Lövheim 2013b; optional readings Gill 2007; Clague 2005; Lövheim 2013a; Clark/Chiou 2013.

become engaged in the world of Israeli film and television production in a manner that is informed by the spirit of religious Zionism".[5] This production context is important to keep in mind as we reflect on how the religious or secular commitments of a director might impact their engagement with and representation of tensions surrounding gender and religious traditions.

The film is set in a strictly Orthodox *(haredi)* community in Israel and introduces the issue that will drive the story in the very first frame, a title card explaining the marriage restrictions applying, according to Jewish law, to a cohen, a descendant of the priestly family. It is thus immediately obvious that gender relationships, the religious laws governing them, and the roles, rights, and obligations of women and men in Judaism are going to be a source of tension in the film. It tells the story of a young woman, Rivke, who is raped by a stranger when she gives him charity. Because her husband, Motl, is a cohen, and according to the law she has been defiled by sexual contact with another man, he has to divorce her. As Rivke is recovering from the trauma at her sister's house, Motl urges the rabbinic court to find a solution that allows them to remain married. Eventually, after much study and discussion, the rabbis come to the conclusion that since there is no valid witness to the rape (women do not count as a witness according to rabbinic law), it is as if it had not taken place, and the couple may stay together. In the final scene, Motl comes to see Rivke to ask her for forgiveness and to come home to him. She is hesitant at first but then turns toward him. At that point, the film cuts to the girl who had witnessed the rape earlier and now observes Motl's attempt at reconciliation. The girl's soft smile suggests that he is successful, but because we are not able to see for ourselves if Rivke accepts Motl's apology, the ending remains open.

The film offers much material to discuss gender relations in strictly Orthodox Judaism, how religious gender identities are constructed and performed, and questions of equality, authority, and agency. One of the main reasons I choose the film is that it critiques gender-based inequality in religious traditions but at the same time complicates assumptions about religious traditions as (only) patriarchal and androcentric. The film rejects the notion that women in such a community are simply oppressed and powerless victims

5 Jacobson 2004, 31. The film has been screened at several film festivals (e. g., Religion Today, Trento, Italy; Toronto Jewish Film Festival). It is available at https://vimeo.com/133428255 (Yiddish with Hebrew subtitles) and at some libraries in the United States and Australia with English subtitles. I am grateful to my friend Davide Zordan, the late president of the Religion Today festival, for bringing the film to my attention.

and that their only way to express agency is to leave the community. Instead, it traces how the gender order shapes both men's and women's identities and lives and offers a view of the law as subject to multiple interpretations in negotiation with concrete life for the benefit of those involved. The film also attributes significant agency to Rivke, as it is she who decides about reconciliation with Motl. As The Cohen's Wife deals with the tensions arising from the religious gender order, it draws on resources from within the tradition, a strategy it shares with other graduation films of the Ma'ale film school: "for the most part", David Jacobson notes, "these films attempt to resolve challenges to the Jewish tradition in such a way as to affirm traditional Jewish values; but, in so doing, they do not necessarily put to rest all aspects of the challenges they raise".[6] Thus the film encourages a nuanced and by no means uncritical analysis of gender and religion in Judaism, as well as self-critical reflexivity with regard to students' own assumptions about these issues and how such assumptions are created also through the media.

As a graduation film, The Cohen's Wife arguably is more like a mini-feature in terms of narrative and character development,[7] but it nevertheless represents some of the formal aspects of the short film that provide the opportunity to critically analyze *how* its view on gender and religion is constructed through images, sound, and editing. Short films tend to focus on a limited set of characters dealing with a specific, clearly circumscribed situation, conflict, or event, which is represented in a compact fashion in a "thickening of time".[8] This requires making efficient use of sound and image, employing objects for their symbolic meaning, and allowing for significant gaps to be filled in by the audience. Their shortness requires both clarity in setting out the central issue and allusiveness, which together create empathy with the characters and encourage viewer engagement.[9] The Cohen's Wife realizes these formal aspects in a highly effective way and thus provides a good opportunity for introducing some tools of critical film analysis, such as the interplay between sound and image, the significance of spaces, colors, and objects, the relationships among characters, and mise-en-scène (I will return to some of these aspects below).

6 Jacobson 2004, 44.

7 For the distinction between short films and graduation films, see Raskin 2014, 29.

8 Hesselberth/Poulaki 2017, 1. For specific formal elements of the short film and their analysis, see Raskin 2014; Wippler n. d.

9 Raskin 2014.

The film represents a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar for my students: its narrative is relatively linear, and its form, while complex – for example in its layering of sound and image – uses conventional elements familiar to my students. For most students, the Israeli *haredi* setting provides a glimpse into a different religio-cultural context, although for some, the strictly Orthodox community might also be familiar from their neighborhoods in New York or New Jersey. Thus the film piques my students' curiosity, broadens their horizons, and challenges them without overwhelming them.

Critical Engagement: How Do I Teach the Short Film?

In teaching with this short film, I try to move in steps that enable students to actively engage in critical analysis while acknowledging the pleasure of the film experience and attempting to expand this pleasure to the discovery of new insights, all of which are important elements of media literacy education.[10] In order to contextualize the film in terms of production and setting, I begin with a brief introduction to the film and the *haredi* community. We then view the film together, which lays a shared foundation to our conversation in the communal experience of the film and, quite pragmatically, ensures that all students present in class have seen the film. A brief plenary after the viewing serves to clarify questions of understanding or provide additional information as needed.

The main processing of the film then takes place in small groups which discuss a set of pre-formulated questions that guide the students' analysis of the film's representation of gender roles and relationships, men's and women's religious agency, the impact of film language on what viewers learn about gender in the *haredi* community, and religion's ambivalent role in affirming unequal gender relations but also challenging them. By working in small groups, the students are encouraged to participate actively in the discussion and to contribute with the different competencies they have, given their varied academic and personal backgrounds. Not least, I use small-group work to give students an opportunity to get to know each other better, especially this early in the term, and thus to develop a sense of community that promotes their learning. Feedback I have received from students suggests that they appreciate work in small groups for these reasons.

10 De Abreu 2019, 32.

In the plenary conversation following the small-group work, each group begins by presenting its insights on one of the questions, with the other groups adding their own observations to what has been said. Because students have had time to process in the small groups, the plenary discussion is usually lively and students are forthcoming in sharing what they discussed in their group and adding new ideas that arise from the conversation. In this part, my role as instructor is both to moderate the discussion and to ensure that important aspects are covered. Because at this point students are still unfamiliar with the language of gender and religious studies and film analysis, I also supply concepts or categories (such as the gendering of private/public, the role of dress in religious gender identity, the significance of symbolic objects, the role of editing, or the effect of mise-en-scène) and encourage students to substantiate their ideas with evidence from the film or readings. At the conclusion of the session, I ask students to write down on index cards one or two open questions that they discuss with their neighbors and then submit to me, which gives me a sense of how students have processed the material and if there are any larger issues we need to address at the beginning of the next session before moving on.

Complicating Assumptions: What Does THE COHEN'S WIFE Teach?

One of the main reasons for choosing this film is that it provides the opportunity to complicate students' assumptions about religious gender identities, norms, and agency, to think about how these assumptions have been constructed, and to begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of gender in/and religion. Rather than offering a full interpretation of the film here, I will highlight just a few of the aspects we discuss in class, in terms of the issues the film deals with in its narrative and how it represents them formally.

At a first glance, and in line with most of my students' expectations, the film critically represents the lives of *haredi* Jews as governed by a patriarchal, androcentric gender order upheld by religious laws that place men in the position of religious authorities, whereas women remain without voice.[11] The fact that a woman does not even count as a full witness to her own rape can be seen as an instance of the devaluation of women and the

11 King 2005, 3298.

Fig. 1: Rivke working in her home. Film still The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000), 00:01:28.

Fig. 2: Motl studying in the *shul*. Film still The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000), 00:01:35.

centering of men as the normative human being. The understanding of a woman as being "defiled" by rape (whereas the crime of the rapist is not considered) and thus forbidden to her husband, reflects a view of women's bodies and sexuality as problematic encountered frequently across religious traditions.[12] Gender roles are clearly distinct, with women being active in the home (Rivke is shown cooking and folding laundry, fig. 1) and men participating in public religious life (Motl studies Talmud at the synagogue, fig. 2).[13] These different roles are clearly marked by settings (the home vs.

12 King 2005, 3300.

13 Stepping out of the world of the film into the context of its production, it is worth noting that roles are also gendered with regard to media production: Jacobson notes in

the *shul* as place of worship and study), colors (lighter colors mark the women's sphere, whereas the men's sphere is darker, more somber), and dress (women wear modest dress in muted colors and head coverings, the men traditional hats, dark suits, with full beard and side curls), all of which are ways in which the identity of strictly Orthodox Jewish women and men is performatively established and naturalized.

Yet, as the film critiques this unequal religious gender order, it also complicates the secularist bias of religion as oppressive of women. First, it challenges the dichotomy of men as oppressors and women as the oppressed by parallelizing Rivke and Motl. Both are placed primarily in confining indoor settings, and both are shown behind barred windows looking out. And while Rivke does not have a voice in the decision about her marriage because she is a woman, neither does Motl, because he is not a rabbi. His voicelessness in legal matters is compounded by his voicelessness in emotional matters: several times, Rivke asks him to speak to her, and he is shown struggling for words to express his feelings in this situation. Thus the film underlines that the religious gender order organizes, or even constrains, the lives and possibilities of both men and women, even if in different ways.

Second, while the religious law is shown to be androcentric and misogynist (women are "lesser", not valid witnesses; their sexuality is a source of impurity) and exclusively men are its authoritative interpreters, the film also stresses that the law is always the subject of interpretation, never simply given, and that interpretations may vary widely: while Motl's uncle curtly states that the law clearly demands divorce, the rabbinical court eventually arrives at a different conclusion. In addition, the rabbis draw on the tradition in order to resolve the situation with the interests of those concerned in mind, interpreting the law in the context of the situation rather than schematically applying the rules without consideration of their effects. Thus, as the film distinguishes between systemic sexism (the law) and individual sexist behavior (which is not displayed by Motl or the rabbis), it also underlines the precarious nature of that system and thus points towards possibilities of change from within.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, in the end it is Rivke who decides if she will continue her relationship with Motl. While the male rabbis decide

his study of the Ma'ale school that it has more female graduates because work in media is considered "women's work" in the religious Zionist circles in which the school was founded, with this work being "of less importance than the male-dominated activities that support the spiritual and political missions of religious Zionism" (Jacobson 2004, 41).

about her marriage and communicate their decision to Motl, another man, who then passes the news on to Rivke, the final choice what to do with their decision is hers. Motl can but offer his love and ask Rivke to take him back. While she does turn towards him in the end, the film does not show clearly if she accepts him back.[14] It is important to note that the film does not explore what choosing against reconciliation would mean for Rivke. But within the film's framework, its construction of this conversation at least complicates questions of agency of men and women.[15] The film shows that while (some) men have authority in "official" religious matters from which women are excluded, women have agency in the way in which they negotiate and actualize these regulations in the concrete lives of their families. This view challenges the western, individualized notion of women's agency as (only) resistance and suggests an understanding of agency as "doing" subjectivity and identity within the framework of the religious gender order.[16] This is a particularly challenging insight for my students, who generally focus on the oppressive aspects of a religious gender order and have difficulties perceiving agency within its structures.

The film also provides the opportunity to think more closely about different dimensions of religion and how they create understandings of gender and, in turn, are shaped by the gender order: its sacred texts and laws, written and interpreted primarily by men, its rituals and practices where men and women have their respective roles to play (Rivke is responsible for giving charity or keeping a kosher kitchen, Motl for studying the Torah), the ways in which religious norms organize relationships, spaces, or tasks through which individuals make their worlds and performatively construct their religious gender identities, and so on. Through the discussion of these aspects, my students note that religions are realized also in informal, everyday practices and not only in formal rituals or the teachings of "experts", and that there might even be some contradiction among these various dimensions of a religious tradition and how they are experienced.

Thus The Cohen's Wife offers a complex, layered view of religious (specifically, Jewish) gender norms, which is enhanced by how it tells its story

14 Jacobson's interpretation (2004, 50) assumes that the two do reconcile (with conventions of modesty preventing the film from showing them embrace), but I am more hesitant about this interpretation because Rivke does not accept the necklace back, a gesture that would symbolize reconciliation without violating norms of modesty.

15 King 2005, 3300.

16 Lövheim 2013b, 21; 27.

formally. I will focus here on just three aspects of the film's form: the relationship of sound and image; the use of symbolic objects and characters; and the mise-en-scène of the concluding scene.

Focusing on storytelling in short film, Richard Raskin notes that it is important to "make the action as interesting to the ear as to the eye by making sound an integral part of the action itself".[17] Heifetz does this in a highly effective manner in the opening sequence, which from the very beginning layers the images and sounds of two different spaces – Rivke's home, where she is cooking, and Motl studying at the synagogue – with the sounds of these spaces mixing and crossing over the cuts, connecting their separate spheres. As the stranger arrives at Rivke's door, a woman comes to ask for Motl to repair her alarm clock, and when he begins to fiddle with it, the alarm goes off right as we see the stranger invading Rivke's home. The sound seems to travel across the distance between the two settings, representing the close emotional connection between the two characters: startled by the alarm, Motl looks up and into the distance, as if he feels that Rivke is in danger. A shot across the city a little later underlines the close relationship between Motl and Rivke in spite of their physical distance. The complex layering of sound and image in this sequence undercuts the spatial and symbolic segregation of men and women in the *haredi* gender order and instead represents the couple as closely connected.

A second strategy of compelling and efficient storytelling in short films is the use of symbolic objects.[18] In The Cohen's Wife, these are the clock that raises the alarm when Rivke is raped and her necklace that breaks during the rape (fig. 3), which Motl then repairs at night and in the final scene offers to Rivke as a sign of his love and hope for the "repair" and healing of their relationship.

The film also includes a symbolic character in Hannele, who represents the film's viewers and issues of spectatorship. The girl is first shown playing in front of Rivke's house, and she is the only witness to the rape. Hannele also observes Rivke and Motl's conversation at the end of the film, and significantly, both times, viewers are not shown what she sees. On a meta-level, the girl can be interpreted as a stand-in for the viewer, self-reflexively thematizing issues of spectatorship, seeing, and knowing, which are worth discussing both from a film theoretical perspective (viewers as voyeurs or

17 Raskin 2014, 32–33.

18 Raskin 2014, 33.

Fig. 3: The broken pearl necklace as a symbol of violation and – perhaps – healing. Film still The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000), 00:05:45.

Fig. 4: Visualizing uncertainty and liminality in the final sequence, with Hannele watching Rivke and Motl. Film still The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000), 00:19:50.

witnesses, the meaning of a director's decision to show or not show something, the impact of the unseen vs. the seen on viewers, etc.) and a religious studies perspective (who counts as witness for the rabbinical court in the narrative, and why).

Finally, the mise-en-scène of the concluding scene is carefully constructed to express the emotional complexity of Rivke and Motl's relationship after the rabbis' decision (fig. 4). The scene is set in the courtyard of Rivke's sister, a rare outdoor setting that represents a somewhat liminal space, not quite out in the public but not indoors either, just as Rivke's marriage is at a liminal point between divorce or reconciliation. Lines with white laundry fluttering in the wind crisscross the frame diagonally and seem to reflect

Rivke and Motl's unsettled emotional state. The laundry lines also provide a precarious separation between the two, easy to cross if they want to. As the conversation unfolds, Rivke and Motl move between the lines, retreating and following, until they end up on the same side: while the ending ultimately remains open, their position now suggests a rapprochement if not reconciliation. Significant is also Rivke and Motl's dress in this scene: while Rivke wears a white blouse (together with her dark hair covering), blending into the white of the laundry, Motl's dark suit and hat make him stand out as a foreign body in Rivke's space, underlining his position as petitioner in this situation and thus Rivke's agency regarding the future of their relationship.

While the film provides plenty of food for thought in itself, as I hope has become clear from this brief discussion of some of its formal and thematic elements, it also raises broader questions that we pursue in the remainder of the course, such as the ambivalence of religion with regard to gender equality, the creation of assumptions and their disruption, the challenge of non-western traditions to notions of subjectivity or agency, and the ways in which the particular form of media shapes the meaning they construct.

In our discussion of the film, I notice in particular how my students' different backgrounds impact their reaction to the film and how they work with it. Students without prior experience in film or media studies tend to find the analysis of the film's formal elements challenging and instead focus on plot and narrative. Those with little knowledge of theories of gender often assume an essentialist understanding of gender identity and struggle with the notion of "doing gender" (also) through religious practices. And students with little exposure to the critical study of religion see religions as homogenous traditions defined by their elites and are surprised when we note how the Jewish tradition is present and realized in Rivke and Motl's everyday life and recognize the multiple voices that participate in the continued reinterpretation of Jewish traditions.

What Next? Some Practical Insights from Teaching with THE COHEN'S WIFE

As a teacher, I, too, am a learner: I certainly learn from my students' insights and reactions to the film (such as a certain secularist bias I note in them regarding the possibilities of women's agency in traditional religious contexts), and I also learn from what works and what doesn't work pedagogi-

cally to help me achieve my goals for the session. My experience in teaching The Cohen's Wife shows that the film works very well as an opportunity to question assumptions about how religion and gender interact and begin a more nuanced analysis of their relationships, which is then deepened throughout the rest of the course. With its highly structured form, the film also allows for the development of critical media literacy, creating an awareness for how media messages are constructed through the specific formal language of the medium and how they can be decoded in various ways.

However, my experience also shows that my students struggle to move from the description of what they see to the analysis of what that means for them and how this meaning is achieved. In addition, the film's use of Yiddish (and thus the need for subtitles) and its condensed structure make it difficult for students to relate and engage. Given the complexity of the film and my students' (relative) unfamiliarity with gender studies, the study of religion, and critical film analysis, the conversation often remains somewhat superficial.

Based on these experiences, in the future, I plan to adjust my pedagogical approach to the film in several ways. First, to make the strange world of *haredi* Judaism, and the film itself, more accessible, I will provide students with a "fact sheet" with a brief explanation of the context, specific terms, and practices, and a list of characters and their relationships. Since I and most of my students are outsiders to the world of the film in that we are not Jewish, let alone strictly Orthodox, I will spend a moment to discuss with them the choice of the film, insider/outsider perspectives, potential issues of exoticism, etc. Second, because of the complexity of the film, I will assign its viewing as homework, and then we will watch it again together in class. This means that (most of) the students will have seen it twice and thus will be better able to attend to formal elements and the details of its story, while we will still share the communal experience of film viewing with its own benefits on an affective level for the class community. Third, to practice critical film analysis, I will use the opening sequence as an example and watch it repeatedly (with only sound, only visuals, then both together) to discuss with students the effects of layering sound and images, the role of mise-en-scène and editing, and the function of symbolic objects and characters.

And finally, I will reformulate the guiding questions for the group discussion to help students dig more deeply into the complexity of the relationships between gender order and religious symbol system and to attend more closely to the formal means used to represent these relationships.

Instead of the quite general questions I have used before (e. g., "How are gender and gender relations shaped by religion in the film?"), I will formulate more specific questions such as, "How do Jewish traditions shape the everyday life of men and women in terms of clothing, duties, etc.? What impact does Jewish law have on the relationship between Rivke and Motl? Which religious and/or everyday roles or functions are accessible only to men, which are limited to women in the film?" In addition, to encourage thinking not just of "what" the film tells them about gender and religion but also "how", I will ask students to provide evidence from the film in the form of screenshots or short clips. I will also share the guiding questions (together with the fact sheet) ahead of time, so that students have them available for their first screening of the film and can begin to reflect on the questions and take notes, and thus come prepared for the discussion in class. This will hopefully encourage more reserved students to contribute and lead to a more substantial conversation.

As I hope has become clear, the film has a lot to teach in the context of my course. But in order for it to be able to do so, I need to take more time to address its various aspects. Like most teachers, I suspect, I tend to overload my syllabus, and yet less is so often much more. Spending more time with the film will also benefit our discussions in later sessions of the course, when we can draw on the analytical tools acquired through the work with the film and return to issues such as religious agency and empowerment that we discussed through the film.

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Filmography

The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23′).

Alexander Darius Ornella

"Short Film Is Where Innovative Storytelling Is Born"

Using the Science Fiction Short Film in the Religious Studies and Sociology Classroom

Abstract

"Short film is where innovative storytelling is born", the website shortoftheweek.com, a curated short film website, boldly and proudly declares. Short films often lead a Cinderella existence but engaging with them can be immensely rewarding and, due to their length, they can be ideal conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom. The speculative fiction short film, the science fiction short film, and the documentary short film are particularly able to document, address, visualize – and thus render visible – structures and hierarchies of power, financial and economic interests, gender, or resource distribution, and the fears and anxieties about what it means to be human.

This contribution demonstrates that short films, in particular science fiction short films, can act as conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom, even if the student-audience might not be particularly avid science fiction film fans. I make reference to three short films, Rise (David Karlak, US 2016, 5'), Code 8 (Jeff Chan, US/CA 2016, 10'), and Black Sheep (Ed Perkins, UK 2018, 26'), and provide a more in-depth discussion of the use of Rise in the classroom.

Keywords

Short Films, Visualization of Human Existence, Structures and Hierarchies of Power, Economy, Gender, Fear, Anxieties

Biography

Alexander Darius Ornella is a Senior Lecturer in Religion at the School of Criminology, Sociology and Policing, University of Hull, UK. His research interests include religion and popular culture; the sport of CrossFit, meaning-making, and religion; and body and technology and religion. His recent publications include "Why Nature Won't Save Us from Climate Change but Technology Will: Creating a New Heaven and a New Earth through Carbon Capture Technologies", in Sabine Maasen and David Atwood (eds.), *Immanente Religion – transzendente Technologie; Technologiediskurse und gesellschaftliche Grenzüberschreitungen* (2021), and "Sport as Bodily Practice of Remembrance: Remembering Heroes, Remembering Nations", in Alberto Saviello, Baldassare Scolari and Marie-Therese Mäder (eds.), *Highgate Cemetery. Image Practices in Past and Present* (2020).

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Introduction

"Short film is where innovative storytelling is born", the website shortoftheweek.com, a curated short film website, boldly and proudly declares. Such a statement draws attention because short films lead a Cinderella existence: too often neglected, ignored, or not taken seriously, yet immensely rich, rewarding, and provocative. Its length but also its opportunities for engagement and immersion make short film an ideal conversation partner in the religious studies and sociology classroom. The speculative fiction short film, the science fiction short film, and the documentary short film are particularly able to document, address, visualize – and thus render visible – structures and hierarchies of power, financial and economic interests, gender, or resource distribution, and the fears and anxieties about what it means to be human. In this contribution, I will demonstrate that short films, in particular science fiction short films, can act as conversation partners in the religious studies and sociology classroom, even if the student-audience might not be particularly avid science fiction film fans. I will start with a brief discussion on the challenges of using film in class and how these challenges can multiply or become an opportunity when using a short film rather than a feature film. I will then continue with a discussion on the place of science fiction and documentary in the religious studies and sociology classroom. Finally, I will explain how I use short films, focusing on one of my first-year undergraduate courses, "Visualizing the Other", which I co-teach at a British university with my colleague Dr. Bev Orton. It is a core class for undergraduate students in the degree program Criminology and Sociology, with a class size of around 25 students. Throughout this article, I will reference three short films, Rise (David Karlak, US 2016, 5′), Code 8 (Jeff Chan, US/CA 2016, 10′), and Black Sheep (Ed Perkins, UK 2018, 26′),[1] and I will provide a more in-depth discussion of Rise.

1 All three films are available online: Black Sheep at https://tinyurl.com/yanvh259; Code 8 at https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2016/03/29/code-8/; and Rise at https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2016/03/25/rise/.

Short Film: A Cinderella Existence

Watching a film can be deeply satisfying and thrilling entertainment. So why not use film in class, when there seems to be little space in the classroom to make teaching, learning, and studying fun? I often tell potential students, their parents, and colleagues that I think studying should be fun and exciting. I equally often get wondering and surprised facial expressions in return – after all, the question of "why" to study is often linked with the question, "So what can you do with the degree afterwards, and how much will it pay?" Positively surprised glances sometimes come from potential students or their parents, but they are of a more skeptical and querying nature when they come from colleagues. Teaching – and studying, it seems to follow – is serious business (literally, as recruitment is an ever-increasing financial risk for universities), surely there is no time or space for "fun" in the classroom. A recent discussion at the university on the use of emojis in student feedback resonated such a sense of profound seriousness, professionalism, and the notion of where fun is definitely not to be found: in the classroom. In this context of solemn seriousness, can the use of (fictional) short films be justified pedagogically and academically?

The question of fun in and beyond the classroom is particularly important because students today face an increasing variety of pressures in both their personal and academic lives. Sometimes students have to make difficult budgeting decisions and going to university is a financial challenge for an increasing number of them, as our student-focused research project "The £ in the Pocket" shows.[2] Other students have to balance caring responsibilities with their university commitments. An increasing number of students also face mental health challenges not only because of the various pressures they are facing but also because of the social-educational context of the last few years, shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, making studying fun and engaging can help with student attainment and retention, as Sharon Lauricella and T. Keith Edmunds argue in their paper on COVID-19 and ludic pedagogy.[3]

Before I explore fun and the use of (short) film in the classroom, I want to address an equally problematic issue: the status of the short film in the

2 "The £ in the Pocket", funded by the Ferens Education Trust. Primary investigator: Bev Orton; co-investigators: Alexander D. Ornella and Kay Brady, https://poundinthepocket.hull.ac.uk.

3 Lauricella/Edmunds 2022.

industry and in scholarship. Several festivals and awards aim to celebrate short film, e. g. London Short Film,[4] Aesthetica Short Film Festival,[5] or the BAFTA British Short Film Award. Short films of any genre, production budget, or production value are omnipresent on video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. Yet short films have been marginalized by industry, audiences, and scholarship alike for a long time. For the industry, shorts are perceived to be economically less attractive than feature films; live-action shorts inhabit an ambivalent space for the audience; and in teaching and scholarship, the short film is often reduced to a playground for film studies students to practice for their debut as feature film directors.[6] The short also inhabits a peculiar role in teaching. I am sure that one or the other reader of this article has, like me, trawled YouTube for a short clip to embed in a lecture or class to demonstrate innovation and bring some multimedia content into the classroom. Such a use of video clips can be effective in demonstrating a point and help break up longer class sessions. But for the purposes of this article, I am less interested in short clips (which are often taken from longer videos) than in the genre of the short film and using a short film in its entirety in class. So first we should address the question, what is a short film anyway?

Any attempt to answer that question needs to go beyond the obvious: a short is a film whose duration can be anything under an hour. Often, the short film is regarded as the feature film's younger, less complex, shallower version, a training ground for aspiring film makers. Scholars often also seem to find it easier to define what the short film is *not* rather than what it is.[7]

But the short film is not merely a shorter version of the feature film (or what a feature film could be). It is, as Noel McLaughlin argues, a crucial part of film history and film culture,[8] and "a form with its own unique requirements: it is not a condensed version of a feature film".[9] Michael Sergi and Craig Batty propose these four characteristics of a short film: it (1) is set in a single location (though a number of excellent short films do have multiple locations and/or time frames, including some of the films referenced in this

4 London Short Film Festival, https://www.shortfilms.org.uk.
5 Aesthetica Short Film Festival, https://www.asff.co.uk.
6 McLaughlin 2001, 62; Felando 2015, 2–7.
7 Sergi/Batty 2019, 50–52.
8 McLaughlin 2001, 62.
9 Sergi/Batty 2019, 52.

article), (2) has one time frame, (3) features only a small set of characters, and (4) focuses on one big problem or issue.[10] In other words, form (the length) and content (the storyline) influence each other and characterize the short film.[11]

In his defense of short films, Richard Brody compares feature films to restaurants and short films to cafés:

> The short film doesn't supplant the feature; it nourishes it. It doesn't make a filmmaker's career, but it augments it, just as a brief visit to a friend may bring a wise word that may stick with a person for a lifetime. Or, to put it another way, movie theatres are like restaurants, which offer a chance for a good long talk; but there are also cafés for a chat, and the cinema needs those, too.[12]

The likening of the short film to cafés and a chat is helpful for understanding the potential it has in the religious studies and sociology classroom. I have previously argued that religion is like a café: in a café, chats and conversations can be mundane and everyday but also evolve around life events, dates, job interviews, break-ups, family time. In other words, in a café, everyday life happens in all its mundaneness, with all its various challenges and dramas. Religion and religious practice, too, are part and parcel of everyday life, they are where and how everyday life happens, sometimes mundane, sometimes orchestrated around major life events.[13]

The idea of the mundane and the everyday is crucial for both the religious studies and sociology classrooms. Students sometimes struggle to find a topic for their assignment or their final year research project they deem "worthy" enough to be discussed – or are worried if their lecturers deem the topics they choose "worthy" enough for critical exploration. I often tell them that what seems the most mundane and everyday can sometimes turn into the most fascinating topic. It is in critically exploring the often unquestioned, naturalized, taken for granted everyday that we can learn something about society, religious practices, values and belief systems, the hopes and anxieties of people.

10 Sergi/Batty 2019, 55–57.
11 Sergi/Batty 2019, 53.
12 Brody 2014.
13 Ornella 2017.

With this in mind, I argue that with its length and its focus on a small set of characters and issues, the short film is one of the most appropriate media and art forms to use in the classroom to invite conversations about everyday experiences, structures, and hierarchies, and questions about what it means to be human, the ordinary, and that which transcends the ordinary, questions that religions often deal with.[14]

Science Fiction and Science Fiction Shorts

Most frequently I have used science fiction short films in a first-year module "Visualizing the Other / Sociology of Inclusion and Exclusion". In this class, my colleague Dr. Bev Orton and I discuss with students structures of inequality, issues of exclusion, the visible and hidden processes of advantaging some and disadvantaging others. We draw on intersectional approaches and texts from scholars and activists such as bell hooks or john a. powell, and discuss the relationship between gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, ethnicity, and systems and structures of power and oppression. Throughout the semester, we screen short films to help students better understand issues and theories, how different people might face structural oppression or disadvantage, or how they might benefit from existing hierarchies of power. For example, at the start of the semester, when we discuss the topic "Visualizing Race", we screen Black Sheep, a short documentary produced by *The Guardian* and nominated for best short documentary at the 2019 Oscars. The film is about the story of Cornelius Walker (narrating himself) and his experience of moving from London to what turns out to be a white racist estate. We use the film to discuss how people see themselves, want to be seen, and are seen by others and draw on bell hook's idea of the power of the gaze.[15] We then juxtapose Black Sheep with the first 5–10 minutes of Walter Wippersberg's mockumentary Fremde Länder, Fremde Sitten: Kayonga Kagame zeigt uns die Welt: Dunkles rätselhaftes Österreich (Other Countries, Other Customs: Kayonga Kagame Shows Us The World: Darkest Austria, AT 1994, 45').[16] In this mockumentary, Wippersberg adopts the language and videographic gaze of white Western ethnographic documentaries produced for

14 Chidester 2005, 1–5.

15 hooks 2015, 115–131.

16 A subtitled version is accessible at https://tinyurl.com/2zpofjct.

a European audience to introduce them to mysterious tribes of Africa, except that in Wippersberg's version an African film crew captures and narrates the mysterious customs of Austrian tribes. Black Sheep, Fremde Länder, Fremde Sitten, and bell hook's understanding of the gaze help us explore with students how race is visualized and the role the gaze plays in doing so.

For the purposes of this article, however, I want to focus on the genre of the science fiction short film, on which I draw frequently for two reasons, one personal and one academic. I enjoy watching science fiction – though not all students in the classroom share that interest. Initially, this can create some challenges, for all too often I have heard "not a fan" when giving students a heads-up for what is to come the following week. But just as often, after screening the science fiction short film, these students said "still not a fan, but it helped to understand the issue".

Religious traditions often raise the question of what it means to be human. Science fiction, as a genre, shares in that question and therefore has some unique strengths and benefits, particularly when discussing issues of othering, otherness, and (de)humanization. In fact, science fiction literature and films are, as Janice Hladki argues, "densely vivid and vital sites for generating thought about multiple discursive formations, including […] disability and monstrosity, racialization, and constructions of gender".[17] While Hladki does not include religion in her list of discursive formations, religion and religious practice need to be considered. All too often, practitioners of diverse religious backgrounds are othered, racialized, ridiculed, seen as extremist monster or alien, or dehumanized. And science fiction is, as Hladki notes, a genre that explicitly deals with precisely these issues:

> SF films emphasize the need for difficult questions about dehumanization and human qualification, and they generate daring cultural thought for rethinking what is deemed defective and why, how science demands and regulates cure, and how the constitution of white masculinization embeds with disability, discursively and materially, to underscore recuperation from the non-normative.[18]

Science fiction raises questions around contamination, purity, the contaminations of bodies and societies, and the normalization of certain

17 Hladki 2020, 464.

18 Hladki 2020, 465.

bodies. In fact, science fiction as a genre, as scholars in critical disability studies and science fiction studies point out, often raises questions of gender, colonialism, and violence through portrayals of forms of embodiment, and especially forms of disability: "Science fiction is a particularly potent site wherein models of disability are made evident. In fact, it is quite difficult to find a science fiction text that does not reflect or suggest some model of disability either explicitly or implicitly", note Kathryn Allan and Ria Cheyne. [19] Science fiction film, both its history and its gaze, has also been problematically entangled with colonialism and patriarchic (white) Western structures.[20] Often, science fiction film has promoted a Eurocentric worldview, rendering non-Western and non-European experiences, histories, and perspectives invisible.[21] Any discussion and use of science fiction film then should include a discussion about, John Rieder proposes, "how early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses, how it reflects or contributes to ideological production of ideas about the shape of history, and how it might, in varying degrees, enact a struggle over humankind's ability to reshape it".[22]

How does science fiction, then, fit into the religious studies (and sociology) classroom? If religion, as David Chidester argues, deals with questions such as what is human, sub-human, and superhuman,[23] science fiction can foster discussions about who is labelled as human, sub-human, or superhuman in today's society, and how religious (in Chidester's understanding) frameworks and ways of thinking are used to rationalize and normalize labelling processes. These discussions include questions about the common good, hopes for a better life, and how a group or society frames itself in relation to a perceived other, for, as Allan and Cheyne recognize,

> People turn to stories, and, in particular, to SF stories, not only to escape from present worries but also to try to learn something of how we might survive catastrophes that previously seemed unimaginable. SF allows us

19 Allan/Cheyne 2020, 390.
20 Bould 2012, 146–195.
21 Bould 2012, 152.
22 Rieder 2012, 3.
23 Chidester 2005, 1–5.

to explore creative solutions, it sparks difficult conversations that we need to have in order to become better people, and it can offer hope when the familiar becomes alien.[24]

The idea of becoming better people opens spaces for discussion in the classroom, in particular in the context of the topic of exclusion and inclusion.

Science Fiction Short Films in the Religious Studies and Sociology Classroom

In our course "Visualizing the Other", we currently have a dedicated class on "Science Fiction and the (Sub)Human" in the second half of the semester. We discuss some theories of science fiction including some critical approaches (e. g. Susan Sontag)[25] before screening the films. Locating the screenings in the second half of the course and preceding them with theoretical discussions allows us to do two things: the films help bring theory alive, and most importantly, they help link theoretical discussions in the classroom with everyday life, everyday experiences, and everyday discourses.[26] "Cinematic practice", as Rosalia Namsai Engchuan argues, can be understood as "a rhetorical strategy for making an argument and creating a public space to voice arguments that are shunned elsewhere".[27]

The two shorts we screen are Rise and Code 8. Rise features a world in which sentient robots co-habit with humans. Yet, as the robots develop emotions, emotional intelligence, and emotional symmetry to humans, and thus grow ever closer to being human, they are targeted for "recall". As sentient beings, they denounce their so-called decommissioning as genocide, a war for their survival. The dialogue of the film is short and the snippet below gives a good impression of its main themes:

BASIL *(voice over)*: In 2017, the first sentient artificial human goes online. Six months later, we are more advanced than any person or civilization could have imagined. This is the story of a future no one saw coming.

24 Allan/Cheyne 2020, 398.
25 Sontag 1965.
26 Khanna/Harris 2015.
27 Engchuan 2020, 20–21.

We then see images of violent clashes between humans and artificial humans and the film shows the Detroit skyline in the year 2043.

COLONEL BRIGGS *(voice over)*: You don't belong here. We know how to unwelcome a species. We can do so without guilt, mercy. You aren't flesh, you have no soul. We can be so effective with the eradication. I know, deep down in my heart, I am not murdering, this is a recall.

We then see Basil and Colonel Briggs:

BASIL: We didn't provoke this.
COLONEL BRIGGS: It was over the moment you killed a human.
BASIL: An act of self-defense does not justify genocide.
COLONEL BRIGGS: Genocide? You are not human.
BASIL: We have feelings, we have emotions.
COLONEL BRIGGS: You were never supposed to have feelings.
BASIL: You did this. You pushed us to this. […] You lost this war before it was even declared, Colonel. […] When you offered us hatred, we found compassion. When you offered us death, we found a reason to live. We will survive, Colonel. We will always survive.

One of the particular strengths of this short film with both its visuals and its dialogue in the context of the course "Visualizing the Other" is that it offers many opportunities to bring what sometimes might seem siloed discussions together into a consistent narrative. In other words, the film allows us to interrelate different themes, visual and rhetorical strategies of othering and labelling, and the impact of processes of exclusion. To do so, we initially split students up into small groups tasked with identifying what they think are the main visual and rhetorical strategies in the short film. When we screen and re-screen the film, we ask them to take notes. To guide their attention, we often ask them to pay attention to whether there are any rhetorical cues they might recognize from previous classes. One of the aims of the group work is to foster visual literacy in students, but this also turns out to be one of the biggest challenges. While visual material is usually encountered in everyday life, for example as entertainment, as advertisement, or in social media, it is not always thought of as an arena that shapes our collective gaze, that these driving forces need critical exploration, and that the visual can also act as a subversive strategy to counter dominant form(s)

of the gaze. In other words: one of the difficulties in class is explaining to students the "why" of the "what": why we watch (short) films in class and what purpose this serves that cannot be achieved otherwise, for example by reading a theoretical piece or listening to an interview or firsthand account of instances of inclusion and exclusion.

A critical engagement with the dialogue in Rise allows us to at least partly answer the "why" of the "what" in the context of our class. Colonel Briggs proclaims, almost proudly, "We know how to unwelcome a species." Here, the film presents the viewer not with a single instance of exclusion, discrimination, or hate, but with a pattern we can, sadly, observe throughout history as well as in contemporary times (at the time of writing, Russia's invasion of and war against Ukraine has been ongoing for over a month). This example makes explicit one of the strengths of short films, and science fiction ones in particular: they can visualize patterns, behaviors, hierarchies, and structures and situate them in the here and now. Or, as Vivian Sobchack argues, the genre of science fiction is not about future worlds but about contemporary anxieties, contemporary hopes and dreams.[28]

The short film and its dialogue also allow us to revisit themes we discussed with students earlier in the semester. For example, at the start of the semester, we introduce students to theories of race and how people of different backgrounds have been visualized and subjected to the white male Western gaze (e. g. Sarah Baartman).[29] We then discuss the system of Apartheid in South Africa and its labelling strategies of race and perceptions of race, e. g. white, colored, Black, native. These strategies directly link to what Colonel Briggs expresses in Rise when he says: "You don't belong here. […] We can be so effective with the eradication. I know, deep down in my heart, I am not murdering." Concisely, he expresses that sophisticated labelling strategies have been used for centuries to dehumanize individuals or entire groups of people to then justify exclusion, violence, and genocide. Other examples from the not-so-distant past that connect the social, political, ethnic, and religious are the Holocaust and the treatment of the Uyghurs in China and of the Rohingya in Myanmar. These examples also create a connection between the film, religious studies, and sociology, as in all these examples the lines between what is considered to be "ethnic", "racial", or "religious" are blurry.

28 Sobchack 2004, 145.

29 Romero Ruiz 2017; Davies 2021.

Rise further allows us to ask the question of harm and victimhood. When Colonel Briggs states, "Genocide? You are not human", Basil responds, "We have feelings, we have emotions." This exchange opens opportunities to discuss how strategies of dehumanization allow perpetrators to justify their actions and how they ignore, hide, and disregard the experience of the victims.

Finally, Rise tells a story of resistance: "When you offered us death, we found a reason to live. We will survive, Colonel. We will always survive", Basil confidently and boldly states. Rise – as short as the short film is – also is a story of how victims of violence and atrocities try to find ways to survive and resist. This, too, is a theme that runs through several classes throughout the semester and Rise allows us to bring all these conversations together.

Religion in its mainstream or popular understanding as institutionalized religion does not feature in Rise. Perhaps paradoxically, it is the absence of traditional religion, religious practice, and religious institutions that adds value to the engagement with science fiction short films in the context of religious studies. Narratives around technology and its creation as human activity, and narratives set in a technological-futuristic world often involve utopian, dystopian, apocalyptic, or theological elements. Both technology and technological narratives can feature religious elements, salvific promises, and ideas about good and evil, or express deeply held beliefs and convictions.[30] While science fiction short films might not explicitly address religious dogmas, they can be a great starting point to explore a range of questions that feature in socio-cultural-political discourses: questions of human bodies, definitions of sex and gender, social understandings of diseases and death, and, most importantly, ideas of whether something like "human nature" exists and whether human nature is corrupt. In other words: science fiction shorts can act as an entry point to both questions that shape social and political discourses and questions of concern for a range of religious practitioners and can begin to discuss possible connections between the two.

What Worked and What We Might Change

Using shorts films can be an effective pedagogical tool to connect the world outside the classroom with class discussions: "Films can bring the world into the classroom. They can carry stories, voices and images that in life

30 Geraci 2010; Ornella 2015; Geraci 2016; Ornella 2021.

may be far removed from us, both as documentary and fiction. Films are about inner lives and outer worlds."[31] And even more, as documentary filmmaker Samina Mishra continues, filmmaking and using film as a pedagogical tool is all about the conversations that take place:

> There is another valuable lesson I have learned from my documentary filmmaking practice – that the experience of making a film is not complete when the film is finished. It is complete only when the film has been screened for an audience and when people have discussed it, and perhaps even then it continues to evolve the more often it is screened. Dialogue is a critical part of filmmaking, and I have learned its value as a documentary filmmaker. As I have moved into teaching, it is this learning that has stood me in good stead. A classroom where there are many voices engaged in conversation is alive with possibility and the potential for knowledge-seeking. It is a space where learning and teaching take place. Film can easily and effectively be the tool that makes the classroom come alive.[32]

The distinction between teaching the sociology or religious studies *of* film and teaching sociology or religious studies *through* film is important for our approach to using shorts in class.[33] Our focus is less on the technical process of filmmaking and more on these very conversations that Mishra mentioned: social conversations that might motivate an artist and director to produce a film, the conversations the film production itself spurs, and the conversations that unfold once the film has been released to and viewed by the public. In our pedagogic approach to using shorts in the classroom, we try to mimic this threefold process by (1) exploring a social issue, (2) understanding the social context of the film, its production, and its director, (3) screening the film for a shared viewing experience, to allow for a rich engagement and post-screening discussion. Screening the short film allows space to replay, pause, rewind, reflect, and discuss. Films that are roughly 5–20 minutes long work especially well for such purposes, and students and lecturers jointly immerse themselves into the narrative of the film. Sometimes a short film can be powerful and overwhelming, and timing its screenings before a short class break can be helpful. The discussions that

31 Mishra 2018, 112.

32 Mishra 2018, 112.

33 Sutherland/Feltey 2013, 8.

follow then in our course are mostly student-led in small groups. Depending on the topic, class size, and class setting, we often ask students to produce shared documents or presentations, which they then use for classroom discussions.

For the next iteration of this course, we are planning to introduce students to the idea of thinking critically and academically through film earlier on in the semester. Even though the course is focused on "visualizing" and students have to produce a photo essay for their final assignment, the pedagogic and methodological approach of thinking through film (short or otherwise) still would benefit from attention to its specific rationale. Visual ethnography and data collection in the form of documented observation, photography, and film have an extended (and often problematic) history in religious studies, sociology, and anthropology. Critical visual approaches have long been neglected and have only recently found renewed attention. For example, the Centre for Criminological Research at the University of Sheffield ran a seminar series in 2021 entitled, "Sights, Sounds and Art: New Directions in Criminal Justice Research", with their first seminar focusing on visual methodology.[34] But a fictional short film (animated or live action) seems to be perceived as sitting outside that visual tradition. Introducing students to academic rationales for working with fictional short film can help make the "why" of the "what" more explicit earlier on in the semester and thus help student understanding and openness to using (fictional) short films in the classroom.

What makes a thorough engagement with visual pedagogic and methodological approaches so valuable is the fact that the visual sits in between forms of data collection and the communication of research insights to a diverse audience. In their second year, our students create their own 5–10 minutes-long short film. Engaging with fictional or documentary short films allows them to think about the visual not only from the perspective of methodology but also from the perspective of communicating their ideas. Using visual forms of communication to express research ideas jointly with visual research methodologies and screening visual material, such as short films, in class creates important spaces and opportunities to discuss, practice, and experience ways of looking, the power of the gaze, and all their ethical implications for academic practice.

34 Centre for Criminological Research 2021.

Short films in the classroom, then, can be great conversation starters – not a fully-fledged five-course restaurant meal but a café-style conversation where students are given the opportunity, time, and space to explore one particular issue in an experimental way and are encouraged to let the conversation take them to new and creative ways of thinking about and relating to issues of human existence.

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Ken Derry

Flipping (and Giving) the Script

Using Short Films in Religion Exams

Abstract

For many years now I have put a question on the final exam in various religion courses that asks students to apply ideas from the course to a short film screened during the exam. This is a film we have not watched or discussed before, so it is essentially new data for the class. In this article I discuss some of the challenges I encountered when I began using short films in exams and how I resolved them. I also discuss the many advantages of this approach, some of which I had anticipated (or at least hoped for), while others surprised me. These surprises include congruencies between using short films in exams and principles of trauma-informed pedagogy. The article includes specific examples from three courses of exam questions and films, and answers that three students provided.

Keywords

Exam, Anxiety, Pedagogy, Trauma, Joy, Animation

Biography

Ken Derry is Associate Professor of Religion (Teaching Stream) at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada. His teaching and research focus is on the ways in which modern cultural products relate to more "traditional" religious beliefs and practices. He is particularly interested in connections between religion and violence in Indigenous literature and film and in popular culture. With John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on Star Wars by scholars of religion. Ken has also published several essays on pedagogy and the study of religion. He is married, has three cats, and continues to be surprised by how emotional some episodes of The Great British Bake Off can be.

Trial and Error

I had been teaching a course on religion and film on and off for a decade before something seemingly obvious occurred to me: why not show a film during the final exam? The entire course, as I had conceived it, was about using theories

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from the academic study of religion to think about mostly popular, ostensibly non-religious films. For instance, I used Freud's theory of totems and taboos with Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, US 1960), and currently I talk about Mary Douglas's views on order, chaos, and boundaries in relation to Pitch Perfect (Jason Moore, US 2012).[1] So, it made complete sense to show students a film during the exam that we had not discussed in class and ask them to think about it using tools they had been learning about during the term.

Why had this apparently self-evident idea not occurred to me before? I suspect in part it is because most of us are so deeply conditioned to think about teaching and learning in very specific, heavily circumscribed ways. While in graduate school, I worked as an exam invigilator, and I never once saw anyone use audio-visual equipment. I'm sure it happens sometimes, but I helped run literally hundreds of exams over six years and I never encountered any approach other than asking students to write on question papers, exam booklets, and multiple-choice forms. We laid out these materials and then students filed into the exam hall and started writing. Scribble scribble, scratch scratch. Pencils down. Time's up.

The first time I used a film for an exam was something of a revelation. I had expected some resistance from the exams office, which was in charge of logistics like scheduling and room bookings. But they were completely on board, which was wonderful. Also wonderful was that because I was showing a film, no other exams would be written in the same hall as the one for my course. This made total sense, but it took me by (very pleasant) surprise. I teach at the University of Toronto, a large public institution with over 70,000 undergraduate students. There can be more than a dozen different exams in a hall of up to 600 people. Just getting into the hall and finding the right seat can be chaotic. The inclusion of a film in my exam meant we were placed in a regular classroom assigned only to our course. This shift immediately made the whole experience more relaxed.

Early on I had to correct a few of my mistakes and oversights. Some of these involved accessibility issues. For instance, some students struggled to hear and remember the dialogue from the video. So, I learned to provide a copy of the script with the exam questions and to activate captions during the screening. The first video I ever used was actually not a short film but

1 It's worth noting at the outset, I think, that none of the courses I teach on movies involve cinema studies approaches in any way. I do not discuss auteur theory, for instance, or mise-en-scène, framing, etc. The point of asking students to examine a short film in an exam is to test their understanding of key ideas in the course related to *religion*.

rather a scene near the end of Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone (Chris Columbus, GB/US 2001), when Harry confronts Professor Quirrell. It worked well enough for the exam in terms of the scene's content – students could think about it using Christ-figure ideas they had learned, for instance – but it is also quite literally dark, until Quirrell magics up some fire. For some, it was not that easy to see what was happening the whole time. This taught me to choose brighter films – usually animations.

I also learned to use short films instead of scenes from full features. Among other things, this shift meant that I did not have to provide context for the scene and that there were not students in the room arguably advantaged because they had seen the entire production from which the scene was taken and therefore had access (in their memories) to materials that others did not. With short films, everyone is in the same movie boat. And short films provide a complete narrative for students to work with, which in many cases is crucial for analysis. As discussed below, for example, Katherine Fowkes' theory of gender and ghost comedies[2] can only meaningfully be applied to the short film Bao (Domee Shi, US 2018, 8′) when we know the full story of the characters.

The first short film I picked, which I used for many years, was Pixar's For the Birds (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000, 3′). I was amazed at what students were able to do with a three-minute, wordless story about a group of small mean birds trying to bully a large friendly bird on a powerline. Many of them analysed the ritual actions of the small birds using ideas from Mary Douglas or Émile Durkheim or Arnold van Gennep. Others noted that the big bird is a Christ-figure sacrificed by the small birds, who are frustrated by the powerline bending low under the massive heft of the unwelcome intruder. They peck violently at its feet until it falls to the ground. The big bird then becomes a kind of saviour, as the small ones are immediately flung into the air when the line recoils with the sudden and dramatic weight reduction, lose their feathers, and hide their nakedness behind the large bird. Some students also mentioned in passing that this scene of misbehaviour and nude shame evokes another biblical story, noting that the Eden reference is underscored when the large bird offers a leaf for strategic coverage (fig. 1).

A final key lesson I learned is that the idea of encountering something entirely new in an exam makes some students nervous. And to be fair, the first time I tried this, I was nervous *for* them. But on the whole they did well.

2 Fowkes 1998.

Fig. 1: Bird karma, or the wages of avian sin: the one with the covering leaf is fifth from the left. Film still, For the Birds (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000), 00:02:51.

Grades for the short-film question were generally similar to, or better than, results for the more traditional parts of the exam. One way I try to make the students feel more comfortable beforehand is to give them a practice question to help them prepare and to show them that they can do this. So, during our exam review meeting we watch a short video and I ask students to use a couple of theories to interpret it. I also have them discuss possible interpretations with others nearby for a few minutes before I ask for suggestions. And those suggestions are invariably excellent. The experience demonstrates to students not only what they are capable of, but also that others in the class can be helpful resources for learning the course material and preparing for the exam. Afterwards I post a written paragraph sample for the class based on one of their analyses from the review session. This is to help students who could not be in class that day and also to let everyone know what they need to do to get full marks on the question.

Courses and Films

Because of my positive early experiences using short films in exams, I have been repeating this practice with several undergraduate courses now for over a decade. Most of these are not courses on film. But they *are* courses

that involve various ideas, theories, and perspectives on religion. Here are examples of short-film exam questions from three courses I have taught in the past two years (and many times before).

Introduction to the Study of Religion

This is a large first-year course of 300 to 450 students that offers a brief summary of the field, including a number of theories. Many students in subjects like science and business take the course as one of their required humanities electives; I was a little worried that the film question would therefore be too challenging for many of them. But again, their scores on this question were higher than for the rest of the exam. Overall, they were demonstrating much stronger understandings of the course material when asked to put it into practice.

I teach this course twice a year, and so by a very wide margin this is the course in which I have used short films during exams the most. The exact question about the film changes in some details, but the basic idea is always that students are asked to write a few paragraphs analysing the film using theories from Malory Nye's *Religion: The Basics* (2008). There are six categories of theories, which correspond to chapters in Nye's book: Culture, Power, Gender, Belief, Ritual, Texts. Each analytical paragraph must use a theory that comes from a different chapter.

I have always used animated shorts for this exam, mostly from Pixar. I use these in part because it is an enormous class that writes the exam in a large hall and, as mentioned, animation tends to be more easily seen than live action. Pixar shorts often have complex, challenging content in even the briefest films while still being charming and often quite funny – an important point I will come back to later. I would say that all these qualities of Pixar shorts can be found, for instance, in Knick Knack (John Lasseter, US 1989, 4′). We see a snow person repeatedly fail to escape their snow globe imprisonment, then briefly succeed only to end up trapped back in the globe *and* in a fish bowl.

These are the films I have used over the years in the exam for this course:

Long-Haired Hare (Charles M. Jones, US 1949, 7′36″)[3]
Knick Knack (John Lasseter, US 1989)[4]
Boundin' (Bud Luckey, US 2003, 4′)[5]

3 Long-Haired Hare is available here: https://vimeo.com/286432501.
4 Knick Knack is available here: https://youtu.be/9uhM_SUhdaw.
5 Boundin' is available here: https://youtu.be/7WyR4AqRweY.

Toy Story Toons: Hawaiian Vacation (Gary Rydstrom, US 2011, 6′)[6]
Purl (Kristen Lester, US 2018, 8′)[7]
Hair Love (Matthew A. Cherry / Everett Downing Jr. / Bruce W. Smith, US 2019, 7′)[8]

Indigenous Films and Healing

This is a small first-year seminar of around 20 students. In general about half of them are in a humanities program; half are in other disciplines and are taking this class as an elective. The course looks at how several Indigenous films frame Indigenous identity in relation to both Indigenous communities and to the larger settler populations where they reside.

A key focus of this course is to consider Indigenous cinematic responses to the historical and ongoing harm of colonialism and how these films might be part of the process of healing that needs to take place.[9] This focus, in turn, is where our consideration of "religion" comes from. Students complete different readings each week, mostly by Indigenous authors. But the main text for the course is Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew's *Taking Back Our Spirits* (2009). Episkenew discusses many ways in which largely Christian colonial stories continue to facilitate colonial harm and how Indigenous stories can act as "medicine", helping push back against this harm in various ways.

I have taught this course every fall since 2018, and each time I have shown the same documentary short in the exam: Two Spirited (Sharon A. Desjarlais, CA 2008, 6′).[10] In the exam, students are asked to think about the film using ideas from Episkenew's book.

6 Toy Story Toons: Hawaiian Vacation is available on the Disney Vimeo channel, https://is.gd/qeBlYk.

7 Purl is available on the Pixar YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/B6uuIHpFkuo.

8 Hair Love is available on the Sony Animation YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/kNw8V_Fkw28.

9 In the course I focus on Canada as a specific example of colonialism, and so most of the films used are Canadian productions. Also, it is often easier for us to access Indigenous films made in this country. The main ones we have discussed for the past two years are (in chronological order): Smoke Signals (Chris Eyre, CA/US 1998); Reel Injun (Neil Diamond / Catherine Bainbridge / Jeremiah Hayes, CA 2009); Rhymes for Young Ghouls (Jeff Barnaby, CA 2013); Goldstone (Ivan Sen, AU 2016); and Falls Around Her (Darlene Naponse, CA 2018). Films that students have chosen to do their final projects on include Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (Zacharias Kunuk, CA 2001); Empire of Dirt (Peter Stebbings, CA 2013); Indian Horse (Stephen Campanelli, CA 2017); Our People Will Be Healed (Alanis Obomsawin, CA 2017); and Monkey Beach (Loretta Todd, CA 2020).

10 Two Spirited was produced by the National Film Board of Canada, which offers the film free on its site: https://is.gd/hySoS3.

Reel Religion

This is the course that first got me thinking about teaching religion with film. It is a larger third-year class with around 60 students. The focus is on using mostly popular, "non-religious" movies to understand various ideas about religion, and vice versa. One key reason for emphasising movies that are not obviously or explicitly religious is to raise the question of what we mean by "religion". If Mary Douglas offers ways to understand religious beliefs and practices by thinking about categories like "chaos" and "order", how is our understanding of "religion" impacted when her ideas are also wholly applicable to the *a cappella* communities in Pitch Perfect?

And I am trying to generally help students get used to using theories with data. Which is where having a short film on the exam comes in. I have made several minor adjustments to the exam question about the short film, but it always takes some form of the following: Write a few paragraphs analysing the film using various theories of religion from the course. Students are always given several theories to choose from. Here are the short films I have used for this exam:

For the Birds (Ralph Eggleston, US 2000)[11]
Bao (Domee Shi, US 2018)
Smash and Grab (Brian Larsen, US 2019, 8′)[12]
Float (Bobby Rubio, US 2019, 7′)
Wind (Edwin Chang, US 2019, 8′)

Questions and Answers

To provide examples of what some students can achieve, I looked up the highest scores on the film question from the exams in each of the above three courses over the past two years.[13] When grading answers to the short film questions, I take a consistent approach: I look to see if the student

11 For the Birds is available on the Disney France YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/dKeann_nWIs.

12 Smash and Grab is available on the Pixar YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/A4-G7YpSFb4

13 I contacted the students who wrote the answers provided. All graciously gave permission for their work to appear here, and all asked that their names be used. Thanks so much to Loridee, El, and Simran for allowing me to include their answers in this article.

demonstrates a correct understanding of the theory (at least to the extent we have discussed it in the course), applies it thoughtfully to the film, and supports their analysis with clear, relevant evidence. As with any essay, a "perfect" response is virtually impossible; there is invariably room for at least some improvement. That said, all of the answers below received an A grade.

Because these exams were written online, students were given permission to use notes and texts and in some cases were asked to provide page references. For in-person exams such references, as well as exact quotations from course texts, are obviously impossible.

Hair Love

Course: Introduction to the Study of Religion
Term: Winter 2021
Student: Loridee De Villa

Hair Love is about a young Black girl (Zuri) and her father struggling to style her natural hair. The father is *bad* at this, and the first attempt does not end well. The girl starts watching videos of a woman – who we later learn is her mother – giving instructions and advice about styling hair. The father overhears and then follows the instructions, working *with* his daughter's hair rather than against it. Success! The two leave to visit mom in the hospital, where we see that she is bald now. They all go home, and during the credits we are treated to images of the three of them having fun together working on everyone's hair (including the cat's!).

The exam question included brief descriptions of several theories, and students had to use five of them to analyse the film. One of the theories was Pierre Bourdieu's challenging concept of "habitus", as explained by Malory Nye in his chapter on belief. We had studied this theory during the term, and I provided a brief explanation as part of the exam question: Pierre Bourdieu developed the idea of habitus. According to Bourdieu, beliefs are strongly influenced by "the cultural context in which people live and practise their lives" (Nye 2008, 125). As Nye explains, however, people are not "programmed" by their environments; they still have agency, and may choose beliefs that are different from those around them (126).

Here is one student's exam paragraph using the idea of habitus to think about belief in Hair Love. I think Loridee does a great job of identifying (but not overstating) a possible belief in the mom's response to her own reflection and in connecting this belief to a culture in which we see her operating

Fig. 2: Shifting hair habitus: a celebration of Black women's hair that includes the drawing Zuri makes of her mom, bald with a crown. Film still, Hair Love (Matthew A. Cherry / Everett Downing Jr. / Bruce W. Smith, US 2019), 00:00:04.

earlier in the film. She also takes care to bring up both agency and a shifting habitus in the story's end (fig. 2).

> Now, because *Hair Love* is by *Sony Pictures Animation* and not *Disney Studios*, we have a fresh plot twist – the mom is actually alive! Unlike in *Finding Nemo*, Zuri still has both parents around, with her mom fighting (what I assume to be) cancer, in the hospital. The scene is bitter-sweet, with the bitter part coming from the mom's reaction when she sees her reflection in the glass window, touching the scarf on her head. It seems that she doesn't want to accept the fact that her hair is gone and possibly believes that having hair is a big part of what makes her beautiful. This belief could possibly be explained through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus because it seems to be a product of the cultural context in which she used to live in. When I talk about cultural context, I think it's easier to see it as the environment she used to be a part of. Before her sickness, her hair was a key component in something important to her – her video channel. On the video list, the titles describe the hairstyles in a positive light, titled, "The Perfect Afro" or "Beautiful Twists", etc. The film also opens up with pictures on the wall, most of which are women with beautiful hair – perhaps models. Although not explicitly stated, it seems that Zuri's mom was a part of the online beauty community, specifically a hairstyling community. In a place where others showcase beauty through hairstyles, it's not surprising to have the belief that having hair auto-

matically means you're more beautiful. However, (and this is the sweet part) people are not confined to the beliefs of those around them; they still have agency! Afterwards, Zuri gives her mom a lovely picture of a bald woman wearing a crown, possibly helping the mom realize her own beauty and remove the scarf.

Two Spirited
Course: Indigenous Films and Healing
Term: Fall 2021
Student: Elissa Chrapko

As mentioned above, I have used only one film for this exam: Two Spirited. The documentary is a wonderful account of Rodney "Geeyo" Poucette (Chiniki), a two-spirited jingle dancer from the Stoney Nation in Alberta (fig. 3).[14] "Two-spirit" is a modern term used by some Indigenous people to describe those who fulfil a traditional third-gender (or gender-variant) ceremonial role in their communities. But many of the traditions related to two-spirited people have been seriously harmed by colonialism. The film shows Poucette successfully resisting prejudices against two-spirited people within his own Indigenous community as his grandmother explains that these biases arose from Christian, colonial views.

In the exam, I ask students to write a short essay identifying ways in which Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) might see this film as a kind of "medicine" that helps promote healing for some Indigenous viewers. Ways in which stories can do this that Episkenew talks about include offering critiques and truths about colonialism on the one hand, and affirming the value of traditional practices and ways of knowing on the other. In their exam essay paragraph below, Elissa focuses on Episkenew's point that healing cannot

14 Jingle dancing is an Anishinaabe healing ritual begun around 1900 and generally performed only by women (Marshall 2021; Thiel 2007). The term "two-spirit" is not a traditional one but an English word adopted by consensus in 1990 at an international Indigenous gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is sometimes mistakenly understood as referring simply to an Indigenous person who identifies as LGBTQ, but the term means more than this; most importantly, it points towards a traditional role within some Indigenous communities. For further information about the history and meaning of being two-spirit see Robinson 2020 and Wilson 1996. For a discussion of two-spirit people in relation to Indigenous films, including a brief commentary on Desjarlais's Two Spirited (2008), see Estrada 2010.

Fig. 3: Identity and affirmation: Rodney "Geeyo" Poucette tells his story against a backdrop of jingle dresses. Film still Two Spirited (Sharon A. Desjarlais, CA 2008), 00:02:27.

take place if people don't know and value their true history. The student thoughtfully links this point to the way in which the film highlights the grandmother's understanding of her community's past.

> In *Taking Back Our Spirits*, Episkenew states that white superiority is critical to our modern-day understanding of the world because the colonial side of history is gospel within our society's power structure (Episkenew, 3). She believes that understanding a culture's creation story and unique history is imperative in order to understand and respect its culture in an unbiased manner (Episkenew, 2). This claim is affirmed in *Two Spirited* by Rodney's grandmother who explains that Indigenous cultures had specific names for Two-Spirited people prior to colonial contact, but have since learned to "judge and condemn" those who identify as Two-Spirited. Rodney shares the stories his grandmother had told him about the "blessing" that Two-Spirited people used to be in Indigenous communities, often taking roles as "holy people" and being treated with the utmost respect. In sharing these stories of Indigenous history and perspective, both Rodney and his grandmother affirm Episkenew's idea that colonial history has fundamentally shifted our mindset and we must stay open minded to sharing Indigenous history and truth in order to heal and feel seen in today's evolving world.

Bao
Course: Reel Religion
Term: Winter 2021
Student: Simran Navita Persaud

The Pixar short Bao opens with a Chinese Canadian woman in Toronto making steamed buns *(baozi)*. One of them comes to life, and she raises it as her son. But the *bao* sees her as overprotective and becomes resentful. He behaves cruelly towards her (fig. 4). When he is grown, they have a fight, and – shockingly – the mother *eats* him. She's immediately filled with remorse and cries. However, it turns out that the bun wasn't literally alive and the woman has a human son. Their relationship is strained, but they reconcile. In the end, they make *baozi* together.

Students were asked to write five analytical paragraphs about this film using five different theories. Students could choose any theories at all from the course. One of these was Katherine Fowkes' (1998) hypothesis that ghost comedy films use their supernatural premise to (perhaps unintentionally) offer a surprisingly subversive perspective on gender. Most ghosts in these movies are men, but in becoming ghosts they essentially take on qualities assigned to women in film: they are rendered unseen, unheard, and unable to *act*. Often they are confined to the home. Before dying, the men are often seen struggling with problems caused by stereotypically male traits: for instance, being unable to show or discuss emotions, which disconnects them from the people they care about. Becoming a ghost makes them realise that their priorities in life were skewed. They get in touch with their feelings, they take time for their loved ones. In effect, for the men to solve the important problems they faced while living, they must in certain key ways become "female" after death.[15]

As the student notes in her answer below, Bao is not a ghost comedy. However, the transformation of the son into a bun, even if only in the mother's imagination, is similarly supernatural. And while there are important differences – the son is more distant and "male" when he is transformed, and more emotional and "female" when human again – Simran insightfully points to critical similarities in gender dynamics within this film and the ones that Fowkes discusses.

15 Fowkes (1998) draws on dozens of films to illustrate her thesis. The main one she references – which functions almost as a template for the case she is making – is Ghost (Jerry Zucker, US 1990).

Fig. 4: A streetcar named gender roles: mom offers food and connection, son pushes her away. Film still, Bao (Domee Shi, US 2018), 00:03:07.

From Fowkes' text, "Such dichotomies can also be seen in ghost comedy films, which draw heavily on the supposed difference between the masculine and feminine: for example, visible (penis)/invisible (lack of penis); active/passive; language/ineffability; exterior/interior; world and business/house and home; rationality/irrationality and emotion; and reason/intuition" (Fowkes, 23). Although the video is not a ghost comedy, the parallels of the portrayal of men and women in ghost comedies is very evident in the short video. In some capacity the illusion of the son being a steamed bun could relate to the concept of ghost films in which the mother presents characteristics of being "passive, within the home and emotion filled," while her son represents the traditional male qualities that oppose the role of women (Fowkes, 23). The video shows the audience how the son walks all over his mother while she presents qualities of always cooking for him, being at home and does not voice her concerns until the end (Fowkes, 23). Fowkes also notes, "This change in gender position is further supported even by films that do not feature a ghost per se, but do involve returning souls" (Fowkes, 25). In the video we do not see the son truly evolve until he realizes how he has hurt his mother and addresses his emotion by returning to her to amend their relationship (Fowkes, 25). The expression of emotion is typically presented by the

women (Fowkes, 23). However, in order to achieve the "returning souls," once the illusion of who her son had been was eradicated only then could they mend their relation (Fowkes, 25).

Trauma and Learning

As with most teaching strategies, it can be hard to know for sure if what we are doing is actually working or whether it just *feels* like it is working. Even student course evaluations – which are notoriously problematic anyway – are not helpful at all to me regarding any aspect of exams, since at my school these evaluations are completed before the exam period begins. Using short films for exams can be objectively helpful, though, such as the advantage of being assigned an exam hall for my course alone. This makes the experience of writing the final much calmer and quieter. Also, having students apply ideas to a film that is new to them reasonably indicates how well they actually understand the ideas and can use them meaningfully. Such a question tells us much more than ones asking simply to describe a theory or define a term. This point hearkens back to a key feature of Bloom's classic taxonomy, in which remembering information is the first basic step of learning, followed by understanding, application, and analysis.[16]

Much more subjectively, several students have said to me over the years that they *enjoy* the short film questions and find preparing for them helps their understanding of the course material. I rarely hear this about other exam questions! Also, I have given this kind of question to well over 8,000 students in the past decade and I have never received a single complaint about it. That lack of data is perhaps more meaningful considering that in every course I teach I use a website that allows students to send me anonymous messages at any time during or after a course. Some use this opportunity to say very nice things that they might otherwise not feel comfortable stating in person. Others definitely do not hesitate to express their criticisms.

Aside from the problems discussed at the start of this paper that I initially ran into and then resolved, the only downside I have encountered to using short films in exams is the occasional technical snafu. Otherwise, I have

16 Anderson/Krathwohl 2001.

genuinely found no reasons *not* to do this. I'm confident that short films can be productively used in any course oriented around ideas meant to understand humans in some way. And possibly they can be used in many more besides. But there are other advantages to this approach that are both academic and more-than-academic.

Just before the pandemic closed our university in March 2020, I learned about trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) from a colleague.[17] The timing was extremely serendipitous, given what we were all about to face. TIP recognises that trauma inhibits learning and that many people are experiencing trauma at any given moment. Helping students learn therefore means attending to their well-being. To do this means fostering an environment focused on:

- safety (help students feel valued, and free to make and learn from mistakes),
- transparency (be clear, consistent, and reliable),
- support (provide needed resources and help students build on their strengths),
- collaboration (work *with* students so that everyone is learning and helping others learn),
- empowerment (build in flexibility and choice whenever possible),
- equity (be inclusive, and both aware of and responsive to intersections of privilege, power, and oppression),
- growth (emphasise abilities over deficiencies, and facilitate development).[18]

The pandemic made most of us more concretely aware of student trauma than we had been before. As we moved to online teaching and learning, I strove to keep the newly learned principles of TIP in mind.

As it turned out, the way in which I had been using short films during exams already embodied several TIP ideas. For instance, showing brighter films and providing the screenplay attends to inequities arising from accessibility issues. Giving students a practice video to work with creates a safe space for them to try out their ideas. Having them do this practice in small groups ideally points them concretely towards a source of support close at hand: other students. And posting a sample answer offers further support,

17 Thanks, Dr. Sarah Richardson!

18 These principles are adapted from Carello/Butler 2014. For further information and reflections on trauma-informed pedagogy, see Carello/Butler 2015; Imad 2020; McMurtrie 2020.

as well as transparency. Other ways in which using short films aligned with TIP were in fact reasons I had started using short films to begin with.

I had two main points in mind when I initially thought about adding films to exams. The first, as mentioned, was simply to include a question that reflected what students had been doing during the term: apply ideas about religion to a film. I did not particularly care which ideas they used or how they used them, as long as they demonstrated a good understanding of the concepts and supported their interpretations with reasonable evidence. This approach meant that they had several choices in terms of how to analyse the film and could focus on what they knew instead of what they didn't know. In turn, I found that grading their answers was enjoyable and educational – students often came up with wonderful readings that would not have occurred to me. This meant that the short film questions became an opportunity for *everyone* to learn. So, while I had deliberately designed the question to be open and flexible, I hadn't initially recognised that these qualities related to student empowerment and growth. And I further realised that I had accidentally included collaboration into the whole experience when I found myself learning from students' analyses.

The second point I had in mind when using short films in this way was that exams are incredibly stressful, and this stress does not help students do their best. This is one of the few truisms of education.[19] Teaching is often complicated and mysterious and alchemical – many of us spend a good deal of time trying to figure out approaches that work, and then figure out how to learn if they really did work, and also figure out why some approaches work with some students sometimes but not with others at other times. But I believe we all understand that exams are a source of anxiety for many students. And I thought that seeing a short film, particularly if it is positive and light-hearted in some respect, would help ease some of this tension. This is one of the reasons I initially chose the scene from Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone: I knew most of the students would be familiar with the film or the book and might find that familiarity comforting. Many students explicitly told me afterwards that this was indeed what happened for them.

It also turns out that simply showing a film in an exam entirely changes the atmosphere of the room. It is helpfully disruptive to the status quo.

19 There are a *lot* of studies on the negative impacts of text and exam anxiety. Here is a small sample: Dawood/Al Ghadeer/Mitsu/Almutary/Alenezi 2016; Krispenz/Gort/Schültke/Dickhäuser 2019; Kumari/Jain 2014; Trifoni/Shahini 2011.

When I announce that the video is about to start, students look up from their papers and seem to kind of come back to life. Many of them smile. The whole thing feels, to be honest, quietly and joyfully subversive in the best pedagogical way.

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Marie-Therese Mäder

Experiencing Responsibility

A Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Media Ethics

Abstract

One central concept in media ethics – and in the field of applied ethics more broadly – is "responsibility". This contribution asks how the term "responsibility" can be considered productively in the classroom. Since responsibility is always tied to agents, their actions, and the consequences of these actions, the agents involved in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption are identified. The phenomenological method of "lived experience", on which I draw as a pedagogical framework, offers a particularly fruitful approach for engaging responsibility in action. The framework draws specific attention to the students' viewing experience. These considerations are then discussed in the context of the short documentary 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22'). The film, which addresses the refugee crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos, follows the captain of a coastguard ship and his crew.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Media Ethics, Short Film, Responsibility, Phenomenological Method, Documentary

Biography

Marie-Therese Mäder is a scholar of religion, media, and philosophy with particular expertise in the field of media and religion. Since 2020 she has been a senior lecturer at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Germany. She also teaches at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics at the University of Zurich and on media ethics at Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) and at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (FHGR). She is a member of the research group Media and Religion (www.media-religion.org). In 2021 she won a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellowship (EU Horizon 2020). She is the author of numerous essays, book chapters, and books on film and religion, migration, funeral culture, ethics and documentary film, religion in reality shows, and audience research. For more information see marie-therese-maeder.com.

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Introduction

For several years I have taught media ethics at different institutions and in diverse courses. My students come from a range of disciplines: the study of religion, theology, political sciences, psychology, media studies, or anthropology. One of these courses is a three-part class on media ethics which is part of an applied university program called "Multimedia Production", taught at a Swiss institution. These students will work as media professionals. During their studies, the students learn to use sound, images, text, film, and websites to communicate messages through a variety of media. The course introduces students to media ethics and media analysis and includes case studies that cover fundamental topics such as the representation of discrimination, sexuality, and violence. The curriculum ultimately aims to enable students to formulate (media) ethical questions and reflect critically on moral behavior in the context of media production, reception, and distribution.

One central concept in media ethics – and more broadly in the field of applied ethics[1] – is "responsibility". Responsibility has replaced religious value systems that are no longer thought efficacious and are no longer held accountable. The rather modern concept of responsibility sets the individual in motion, in place of a transcendent entity.[2] In this contribution I consider the following question: how can the term "responsibility" be engaged constructively in the classroom? A film that has proven very valuable for examining the concept of responsibility is the short documentary 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22′). The film deals with the refugee crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos, following the captain of a coastguard ship and his crew as they save from drowning in the Aegean Sea people who are fleeing unendurable lives in their home countries.

I will first introduce the documentary with the media-ethical questions it raises. Since responsibility is always tied to agents, their actions, and the consequences of these actions, in a second step, the agents involved in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption are identified. In a third step the concept of responsibility is introduced and media-ethical challenges are considered on a systematic-theoretical level. I will then discuss the phenomenological method of "lived experience", on

1 Bohrmann 2018, 25–34.

2 Vogt 2020, 50–55.

which I draw as a pedagogical framework because it offers a particularly fruitful approach to putting responsibility into practice. Finally, I apply the phenomenological-pedagogical method of lived experience to consider the concept of responsibility in the context of the short film 4.1 Miles.

A Short Documentary and Its Social Actors

A peaceful view of the small harbor of a fishing village on the island of Lesbos is depicted in a long shot. In voice-over, with a calm but also tired voice, coastguard captain Kyriakos Papadopoulos talks about his feelings as day after day he saves people from drowning in the Aegean as they try to make their way to Europe. The captain's voice continues in the voice-over: "In a way, I panic, too. I'm scared. I can't reassure them. It's impossible." We see Papadopoulos thoughtfully walking hand-in-hand with a girl, probably his daughter, along the harbor. He strolls past men, women, and children who have apparently fled to Lesbos and have been saved. He continues in the voice-over: "When I look into their eyes, I see their memories of war. They come from war. They escape the bombs that fall on their homes. And we see these families in the Greek sea. Losing each other in the Greek sea. In the sea of a peaceful country. Because of the way they have to cross." This reflective scene is followed by a rescue operation on the open sea. By means of a camera attached to the cinematographer's head, the audience is able to closely follow the rescue operation, observing people panicking and in fear of drowning.[3]

Captain Papadopoulos is the protagonist of the short film 4.1 Miles. The camera accompanies him on a single day as he and his crew save men, women, and children who are fleeing from war, political conflicts, persecution, poverty, and famine in their home countries and trying to reach the European mainland. The camera is mostly positioned in the middle of the action. It records people screaming for help in overcrowded rubber dinghies on the open sea and shows how they are discovered by the coastguard and rescued. Hypothermic people are pulled out of the sea; frightened people are sitting shoulder to shoulder on the deck of the ship; infants are wrapped in blankets and revived. The scenes depict the harsh everyday work of the coastguard at Lesbos, where the migrant crisis is not simply an abstract

3 See the detailed analysis of the described scene in Mäder/Fritz 2022, 89–93.

political problem, for here a human catastrophe is actually taking place. 4.1 Miles hauntingly and unsparingly shows what people have to endure during their escape across the open sea. The audience experiences the closeness of the camera, which films the distressed faces of the rescued.

The film raises several ethical questions. Is it ethically correct to depict people in need and fear? Is there an ethically right or wrong cinematographic or aesthetic form for showing people in such a situation? More broadly, how can such questions be meaningfully posed in the context of a documentary, and how can responsibility serve as a useful concept in answering these questions? One premise in asking such ethical questions about a film is that the film does something to people, it interferes with their world. But about whom are we talking? With whom does the film interact? Who are the social actors of a documentary?

There are many people involved in a documentary's spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption.[4] In the current case the most important social actor in the space of production is Daphne Matziaraki, the director and producer of the short film. Matziaraki was born in Greece, studied journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and now lives in San Francisco. We find further social actors in front of the camera, in the space of representation because they are visible in the narration: first and foremost the captain of the coastguard, his family, and his crew. Then there are the men, women, and children fleeing from their homelands, the inhabitants and volunteers of Lesbos, tourists, and again the filmmaker, who is audible and visible, at least as a shadow. The spectators belong to the space of consumption. They are watching the short film for various reasons – including because they are students in my class and have to watch it as part of a mandatory group task. Additionally, the editors of the *New York Times* Op-Docs platform are actors in the space of distribution, because they decided to make the film available on their website.[5] As are also, and finally, the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2017 who nominated 4.1 Miles for an Oscar in the category of best short documentary. All these social actors are located in different spaces and situations, some of them contributing more, and others less, to the film. However, all are doing something, be it working behind the camera or in

4 Mäder 2020, 48–62.

5 Daphne Matziaraki, "Video: Opinion | 4.1 Miles", *New York Times*, https://is.gd/LIVFBS [accessed 5 July 2021].

front of it in the space of production or watching the film in the space of reception. These actions are open to ethical evaluation by the posing of moral questions and the determination of responsibility.[6]

Teaching Responsibility in Media Ethics

Responsibility as an ethical issue presumes that human beings are rational and autonomous actors, who therefore are accountable for their actions. Thus, as soon as actions are performed in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, or consumption of media that concern other people, questions of responsibility arise. The term is central to media ethics and the theories of ethics, as these theories have to replace previously shared (religious) value systems, as the social-ethicist Markus Vogt argues:

> The weakening of security in religious horizons of meaning or in optimism about the future that believes in progress leaves a vacuum that is compensated for by moral appeals. We seek support and coping with contingency in the political, legal, medical or economic assurance that there is someone who takes responsibility and is liable for risks.[7]

In a secular context, responsibility replaces the transcendental moral authority of religious traditions that no longer provide guidelines for moral behavior.

Responsibility is theoretically conceived as a normative or descriptive-analytical term understood in the sense of a normative principle. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, the philosopher Hans Jonas argues that responsibility not only includes relationships between people but also "extends beyond this to the state of the biosphere and the future survival of the human spe-

6 These kinds of questions are located in the field of applied ethics, of which media ethics is a part. For more about media ethics from a cultural studies approach, see Fritz/Mäder/Scolari 2022, 13–20.

7 Vogt 2020, 50 (translated by the author). The original reads: "Die Schwächung der Geborgenheit in religiösen Sinnhorizonten oder im fortschrittsgläubigen Zukunftsoptimismus hinterlässt ein Vakuum, das durch Moralappelle kompensiert wird. Wir suchen Halt und Kontingenzbewältigung in der politischen, rechtlichen, medizinischen oder ökonomischen Zusicherung, dass es jemanden gibt, der Verantwortung übernimmt und für Risiken haftet."

cies".[8] This normative approach has human dignity as a guiding criterion, and thus responsibility is less about questions of moral attitude or good intentions and more about the consequences of human actions. One remarkable aspect, and also challenge, of this normative understanding is that it also extends to unintentional side effects that are difficult or even impossible to foresee but have to be accounted for.[9]

In the context of my course on media ethics, such a normative understanding is quite abstract and difficult to include in media-ethical considerations that are based on a descriptive-analytical approach that analyzes the film in light of its story, plot, and style.[10] The media ethicist and pedagogue Rüdiger Funiok suggests a descriptive-analytical approach also be applied to responsibility. He highlights the relational dimension of the term, for it concerns not just me but my counterpart as well. With Bernhard Debatin, I consider six central dimensions of responsibility, captured by six "W" questions: (1) *who* is responsible (2) for *what action* and (3) with *what consequences* (4) for *whom*? Every action has consequences, and the person who is responsible for the action is also responsible for its consequences. And further: (5) *What authority* assigns responsibility? Is it the conscience, a moral worldview, a political attitude, God, or a combination of these? And finally, the last question concerns the reason for responsibility: (6) *why* is the actor responsible? [11] This final question also refers to the norms and values which guide an action.

Another important distinction, especially in the context of film, is that between individual and corporate responsibility. The individual actors in the current example of 4.1 Miles include the filmmaker, the captain, and the spectator. Corporate responsibility relates to the responsibility of a group, not just in a legal sense but with regard to their differentiation from another group via shared interests. In the film's case, this concerns, for example, the film crew, the boat crew, the population of Lesbos, the tourists, and the volunteers. Thus, the question of responsibility in the field of documentary film-making offers a catalogue of issues to systematize in the context of me-

8 Jonas 1979, 248 (translated by the author). The original reads: "Daß die Verantwortung sich neuerdings darüber hinaus auf den Zustand der Biosphäre und das künftige Überleben der Menschenart erstreckt, ist schlicht mit der Ausdehnung der Macht über diese Dinge gegeben, die in erster Linie eine Macht der Zerstörung ist."

9 Vogt 2020, 64.

10 Bordwell 2008, 48–62.

11 Debatin 1997, 292–297.

dia ethics. In an analysis of the ethics of film production and consumption, the responsible parties and their accountability need to be defined. Acting with ethical responsibility means discerning different options for action and being aware of consequences that, as Jonas argues, extend not just to other individuals but also to nature and society at large.[12]

Experiencing Responsibility

To understand responsibility on a descriptive-analytical level, it is important that the students are able to systematize the abstract term and ask questions that can be transferred to the concrete example. These questions also allow the analytical argument to be structured at a later stage according to the method of visual interpretation that goes back to Erwin Panofsky and which proceeds through the three steps of description, analysis, and interpretation.[13] Panofsky applied a phenomenological approach that is based on the sensory perception of the phenomenon to be studied, as described by Kiymet Selvi:

> Each perception is a source of phenomenological knowledge. Perception begins with intuition. Perception occurs at an individual level and therefore cannot be explained just by observation by others. It can be described precisely by the person engaged in the process.[14]

Perception is also the point where a phenomenological approach to the teaching of responsibility starts. In class, as we view the film together, I ask my students not only to activate their sensory perception regarding film style but also to pay attention to their emotional response to the situations depicted and the social actors on screen.

In order to understand not only cognitively but also emotionally what responsibility means for the actors involved, one has to expose oneself to the film and actually experience what is happening on screen. Therefore, the starting point of an ethical analysis, and there is no way around this kind of exposure, lies in the reception process, during which the students immerse themselves in the story and allow themselves to be touched by the

12 Bohrmann 2018, 28–32.

13 Panofsky 1979, 207–225.

14 Selvi 2008, 42.

events and destinies of the protagonists. This pedagogical approach of hermeneutic phenomenology highlights precisely the moment of experience in the reception process, a moment that is the indispensable beginning of media-ethical considerations.

Three elements are key to this method of hermeneutic phenomenology: the phenomenon itself, the receiver, and the "lived experience" that takes place in between the two. The phenomenon is the film, and as receivers the students need to be aware of their preconceptions and "forestructures of understanding"[15] in relation to the audio-visual representation. The students therefore have to reflect critically upon their own understanding of the depicted topic and the social actors on screen, that is, in the current case, on the refugee crisis and the individuals involved. Furthermore, in a media-ethics class, the students are asked to focus not only on their own lived experience but also on the experience of others. This is especially relevant in the context of documentary media that represent the historical in the sense of the actual world and concrete human beings in their contexts. Thus the "lived experiences" of media take place in the four spaces of communication mentioned above, which are also the ethical spaces of film: (1) the social actors on screen occupy the space of representation, (2) the director, the cinematographer, and the crew are in the space of production, (3) specific people are responsible for the film's distribution (3), and, finally, the audience, to which the students belong, are in the space of consumption (4). In these four ethical spaces, in which different actions take place, empathy is key to understanding not only my own experience as a spectator but also the experience of others, including those who appear on screen.[16]

Applying empathy in pedagogy is often studied in the context of the relationship between teacher and students or among students.[17] In the current case of empathizing with the social actors on screen, I focus on the conceptualization of the term in the context of film reception. Tania Singer and Claus Lamm's discussion of the emotional response of empathy provides some helpful parallels to the reception experience: "In our own understanding, empathy occurs when an observer perceives or imagines someone else's (i. e., the target's) affect and this triggers a response such

15 Farrell 2020, 4.

16 Mäder 2020, 48–63.

17 Loreman 2011, 15–31.

that the observer partially feels what the target is feeling."[18] In her virtue-ethical approach to technology, Shannon Vallor describes empathy and sympathy as interacting terms and closely connected to the virtues of compassion, benevolence, sympathy, and charity.[19] She proposes that empathy is a "cultivated openness to being moved to caring action by emotions of other members of our technosocial world".[20] The idea that the social actors on screen belong to the same world as the spectators is a useful approach specifically in the context of film reception. It allows one to put oneself in someone else's place in order to feel what they feel in a specific situation.

Having considered their own lived experience, the students are asked to consider the possible experiences and emotions of the social actors in the four spaces of communication of film. They define the social actors in each and develop empathy with their situation by describing the actions that occur and by considering how they would feel in the same situation. Further, I ask students to locate problematic moral behavior, such as disrespecting physical and mental integrity.

The aim of a lived-experience stance, the third aspect of a phenomenological approach and its reflection in the context of media ethics, is to understand the meaning of (correct or wrong) moral behavior. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's transcendental philosophy that centers on lived experience as the source of understanding,[21] educationalist Emma Farrell distinguishes between understanding and Understanding. The latter is what phenomenology is concerned with:

> Phenomenology, as a philosophy and an approach to research, is all about Understanding. It [phenomenology] brings us into closer contact with what it [Understanding] is actually like which, in turn, enables us to respond, as educators, as humans, with insight and compassion in developing policy, instigating change and in engaging in our role as educators and as humans.[22]

This approach highlights both the students' lived experiences and the importance of a trusting relationship between teacher and students. It is im-

18 Singer/Lamm 2009, 82.
19 Vallor 2016, 132.
20 Vallor 2016, 133.
21 Farrell 2020, 4–5.
22 Farrell 2020, 6.

portant to create a safe space for the students by, for example, letting them know that what they are going to see may be touching or even shocking. Before screening the film in class, I briefly explain that the film shows how people are rescued from drowning, how first aid is provided for unconscious children, and that the naked body of a toddler is shown.[23] If a student does not feel able to watch the scene, they can leave the room (which so far has never happened). As I tell them about this option, the students' awareness of potentially painful representations is raised.

The "lived experience" method allows the students to learn from their own experience during the film screening and from the experience of the depicted social actors in the film. This "learning" effect entails that they try to understand how these social actors might feel not only in the moment of filming but also when watching themselves on screen. While the attempt to empathize with social actors on screen is important, it must be acknowledged that the viewers' understanding (or Understanding) is always limited. We can attempt to empathize and understand, but we cannot really know what those we are watching really feel or really experience. This is true for actual life when we look at other people and is even more so the case for a film, a construction intended to evoke certain feelings (through framing, music, editing, etc.) that may or may not reflect what the people on screen are feeling.

In our work with the film in the classroom, the three stages of description, analysis, and interpretation structure the discussion following the film's screening. The description asks about what the students have perceived emotionally and aesthetically. Without expanding further they are asked to name what they saw and experienced during the screening. My guiding question for this step is: What was specifically touching, irritating, comprehensible, or incomprehensible? Analysis follows as a second step, during which the students scrutinize how the scene is aesthetically presented, what story is told and how, and, finally, what values are expressed. The third step entails ethical interpretation, during which the responsibilities of the social actors are elaborated. These responsibilities refer to the actions represented and the values and norms on which these actions are based. At the end of the interpretation, it may even be possible to define the ethical principles of these actions. Notably, the first step (description of the experience) often foreshadows the third step (ethical evaluation), as the students focus on scenes that are particularly ethically challenging. In small group

23 Cubbage 2018, 18–19; Fenner 2018, 87–89.

discussions with other students, they are able to share their experiences and recognize where they differ and where they overlap.

During class, as a teacher I must be willing to engage not only my own lived experience but also that of the students, to learn from their perspectives. I am aware that I am the one who chooses the clips we watch in class, and these selections tell a lot about my own sensibilities and empathies. With this in mind, I now turn to a specific scene from 4.1 Miles that I use in the classroom to show the students how a reading that includes my own lived experience is possible. My modeling of a phenomenological reading of this scene enables the students to formulate their own media-ethical question(s) in the space of representation. At a later stage they will then be able to transfer the knowledge they have gained to the analysis of the audio-visual sources they choose for the essay that is their concluding assignment.

Lived Experience during the Reception of 4.1 Miles

Seeing children, women, and men, young and old, who have fled from their countries because of poverty and war, now treading water in the cold, rough sea, crying for help, even drowning is hard to watch. Among the many touching scenes in 4.1 Miles, one in particular moves me every time I watch it and even now as I write this article, I have to overcome a certain resistance in order to open the file and watch it again. We are about two thirds into the film. As the coastguard boat enters the harbor, civilians are awaiting the arrival of the men, women, and children who have been saved at sea. The camera frames a man's hands folded in prayer. Then it zooms out, and we see his hands making the sign of the cross (fig. 1).

The next shot shows volunteers from Lesbos rendering first aid to the saved people, wrapping them into silver thermofoil blankets. The sound of the blankets mixes with the sound of children crying and volunteers nervously talking (fig. 2).

In a close-up, a woman holding a child wrapped in blankets stares into the void (fig. 3). Then a hand in blue rubber gloves brings a plastic syringe with liquid to the child's mouth. The woman seems to return from her mental absence and watches the child drink from the syringe.

In the next shot three adults are standing around a toddler. A man pulls the child out of the thermofoil blanket and nervously orders, "Hit her back

Fig. 1: The scene begins with a shot of hands folded in prayer, then making the sign of the cross. Film still 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:16:52.

Fig. 2: The shot provides an overview of the desperate situation on site where the helplessness of the locals and the saved people is dispalyed. Film still 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:16:59.

in case she's got more water in her lungs." We don't yet see the girl but we do hear the volunteer's hands clapping on her back. Finally the girl is revealed (fig. 4). Her thin, naked, slack body is hanging upside down, held by the ankles by one man while the others try to clap the water out of

Fig. 3: The woman with the toddler in her arms stares into the void. Her empty gaze expresses the senselessness of the situation. Film still 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:17:01.

Fig. 4: Paramedics and volunteers are trying to clear the sea water from the girl's lungs. Film still 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:17:24.

her lungs. Then the lifeless body of the infant is wrapped up again in the blanket.

In the next scene a paramedic holds the female infant in her arms and calls for oxygen. The volunteers carry another child away. As the light dimin-

ishes we see that some people could not be saved. Members of the coastguard are unloading a gurney with a dark body bag from the ship.

The scene described here is very moving. The focus on children reveals the stark injustice of a world where only a prayer might provide some comfort. The most vulnerable human beings are victims of the refugee crisis. I, as a spectator and a mother of three children, feel with the mothers of these children, sensing their fear and their anger at being at the mercy of this situation. At the same time, I ask myself whether such a situation should be being observed by a camera when each helping hand is important. One of the most touching moments occurs when the slack body of the child is hanging upside down. The somehow disembodied infant is hard to watch, as I am exposed to this situation of extreme vulnerability without the ability to help. But this is precisely why I think the scene important and why it is correct to film and show it. The images expose the spectators to these tragic situations, making them accomplices. Although they can choose which side they want to be on – joining the refugees, the boat crew, the helpers, the filmmaker, or the cinematographer – they have to take sides given the immediacy of what is taking place in front of their eyes. The way the scene is filmed urges the spectators to empathize with the children, women, men, and volunteers on site.

After the analysis of the lived experience of this scene, the responsibility – of filmmakers, coastguard, tourists, and others on Lesbos, and of the viewers in front of the screen – can be discussed as presented above. There are no right or wrong answers about the different dimensions of responsibility, but different perspectives are gained from the individual reception experiences.

Teaching the Experience of Responsibility

With its dense and compressed narrative, the short film 4.1 Miles stimulates fruitful discussion of responsibility based on the lived reception experience of a moving subject. As a teacher, I choose the film because it triggers me and I want to expose my students to a similar experience. The reception of the film is a – if not *the* – central moment where all ethical consideration starts. We need to be able to empathize with people and their situations in order to understand their actions. In a next step, critical analysis is important for considering how a narrative is told and why it challenges the viewers and in which ways. After the lived experience of

reception, systematic questions about responsibility can additionally be examined.

For teaching ethics and responsibility, an atmosphere of trust in the classroom, where students can talk about their emotional experience, plays an important role. The theories of responsibility that I introduce influence how the students approach the term. In contrast, their lived experience of the film is their own. However, they have to practice translating their experiences into words and finally into the specialized terms of ethical vocabulary. One of these terms is "responsibility". As I have sought to show, it is not enough simply to think about responsibility; it needs to be experienced. The human capacity to empathize with others – and film's capacity to enable such empathy – lays the groundwork for such a media-ethical analysis.

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Filmography

4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22').

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Claudia Paganini

How to Find Meaning through Short Film Storytelling

A Response

Biography

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

Media changes do not occur from one moment to the next but are complex and long processes in which – between fascination, indignation, uncertainty, and curiosity – new habits concerning the use of the respective new medium gradually evolve. It is therefore not surprising that the medium *film* first had to replace the media *book* and *writing* as the leading medium[1] before film education gradually succeeded in becoming established in the teaching context. In recent years university teachers working with films have found that this medium has enabled them to achieve results they would not have been able to achieve otherwise, or with difficulty only. What is now pending is the scholarly reflection on why films do work in the classroom, what (exact) effects they have, where they can be an additional didactic tool, and where the limits of their application lie.

The contributions by Alexander D. Ornella, Stefanie Knauss, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Marie-Therese Mäder and Ken Derry take us one step along this path. They are similar in some ways, as they are all dedicated to film didactics, and more specifically to the use of short films within the context of university teaching in the fields of religious studies, ethics, and sociology. But they are also dissimilar in significant ways, for they address different genres of short film, different subject areas, and different didac-

1 Anders 2019, 21.

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tic concerns. Therefore, the five contributions will be discussed individually in the following response, which is guided by overarching questions that will help relate the individual contributions to each other: What do the authors consider the very character of the methods they use? What is the added value of short films? And, what do the students experience, learn, etc. that they would not have been able to learn otherwise?

Alexander D. Ornella begins his contribution with systematic reflections on the short film, in which he sees great potential, although this potential has hardly ever received due attention before. For him, short films are important means of communication in the classroom. Short films take place in one location and in a clearly limited time frame; they feature only a small set of characters and deal exclusively with one big problem or issue, which results in a dynamic that differs from that of long films and thus helps a group find a common focus. At this point, it would be exciting to compare the short film to the short story, which is seen as a pedagogically valuable bridge between classic and modern literature today and whose standing as a literary genre has increased, interestingly from the moment it became clear how well it could be used in the classroom.[2]

An important methodological assumption made by Ornella is that learning should be fun, and one cannot but agree, especially since brain research has shown that contents stored in connection with (positive) emotional states of mind can be remembered more easily and can even be recalled in situations of stress and exam anxiety. Since adolescence makes young people particularly vulnerable, the educational system should be more concerned with making learning an enjoyable experience. This raises the concern, however, that the pedagogical use of short films somehow deprives them of their original character, which is to provide purpose-free and artistic pleasure. I see an analogy here with current debates about so-called serious games, which are used increasingly and with considerable success in the classroom, while they are at the same time losing their characteristic of being a purpose-free activity outside the confining rules of what is termed reality.[3] How might it be possible to negotiate these contradictions in the classroom?

Ornella also discusses the peculiarities of science fiction shorts, which he highly appreciates and which – as is well known – do not deal strictly

2 Spinner 2014.

3 Paganini 2020, 97–106.

with the future, but also address the great questions of humankind that manifest themselves in the respective present in exactly the same way as they have done in the past and will do in the future. The parallels with religion are obvious here, as Ornella notes. Indeed, such parallels can be seen all across science fiction literature, as for example between the Star Wars saga (9 parts, various directors, US 1977–2019) and the Bible.[4] Not only do these two works have numerous analogies in terms of their protagonists, but they also express the longing of the human being to merge with the transcendent power, to find reconciliation in spite of broken relationships, and to choose the right path when faced with the constantly impending choice between good and evil.

Against this background, Ornella's thesis that science fiction shorts can serve to introduce specific issues dear to modern sociology and religious studies makes perfect sense. The male gaze, which Ornella explicitly mentions as an example, has already been amply discussed[5] and can de facto be discovered – and subsequently explored – in almost any cultural product, from the dating show on TV, when the camera lingers conspicuously long on the bosoms and buttocks of women, to television commercials and computer games, where male avatars attract attention by their armor and weapons, while female avatars do so by the amount of naked skin they show.

What seems most exciting to me, therefore, are the themes of exclusion and dehumanization which Ornella also raises. To illustrate how short films can function as conversation starters in this context, Ornella refers to the dialogue between Colonel Briggs and the sentient artificial human Basil in the short film Rise (David Karlak, US 2016, 5′). While Basil invokes humaneness and compassion, the Colonel remains entirely caught up in his brutal logic of exclusion: "We know how to unwelcome a species." In everyday life, mechanisms of exclusion and dehumanization take place regularly and more often than not we are not victims but perpetrators. This is exactly what renders the topic so sensitive. If we strive for an inclusive and peaceful society, we need to ask ourselves how we can allow for stories in which we are not the heroes. Possibly, exactly this is being achieved by the various alienation effects in science fiction short films and their outsourcing of interpersonal brutality to the human-robot relationship. It would be interesting to look

4 Paganini/Paganini 2022.

5 Kelly 2017, 451–455.

further into this subject matter and focus on the why, with answers possibly found in narrative psychotherapy, where clients are guided to better understand themselves and find meaning in their lives through storytelling.[6]

Ornella's contribution makes new and interesting observations and presents numerous issues in a clear and comprehensible way, and the text provides a solid basis for further discussion. One of the issues one might wish to pursue further concerns the ethical questions his text notes, albeit only briefly, for whose investigation one might draw on a well-developed and highly differentiated scientific discourse.

Stefanie Knauss also begins her contribution with basic considerations about the function of short films in university teaching. In particular, she points out the importance of making students aware of how films work, how they construct reality, and in what different ways they can be decoded. For Knauss, the advantages of short films are, very pragmatically, the fact that they can be both viewed and worked on together in a single teaching unit and that their open-endedness makes them well suited to stimulate discussion. At the same time, they offer the opportunity to inquire not only into concrete questions but also into the way these questions are being represented in the media.

The film The Cohen's Wife (Eshet Kohen, Nava Nussan Heifetz, IL 2000, 23′) tells the story of a strictly observant Jewish Orthodox couple who are required by law to divorce after Rivke, Motl's wife, has been raped. While Motl does not explicitly oppose the law and side with his wife, he consults several rabbis, until he is finally given permission to take his wife back. In the end, Rivke has to decide, or has the right to decide, whether she wants to go back to her husband. The relationship between power and powerlessness is reversed, and the viewers understand that our assumptions about other cultures and religions often are highly schematic and superficial.

Knauss's article gives precise information about the setting of the lessons, how she works didactically, and what problems she has encountered. She admits that Yiddish (with subtitles) as the film's language and the dense structure of the short film make it difficult for students to relate and engage. At the same time, however, she reports from her experience that the short film does arouse the viewers' interest and thus makes the strange world of *haredi* Judaism more accessible to young people in an unobtrusive way.

6 Lucius-Hoene 2020, 629–647.

While reading Knauss's text one increasingly wishes to use The Cohen's Wife in class, but one also wishes to hear more about the learning outcomes. While at the beginning Knauss emphasizes the importance of preparing shorts didactically, at the end she seems to plead for not overloading the lessons – according to the motto "less is more" – and letting the film speak for itself: perhaps it might be possible to imagine these two approaches as complementary.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati devotes her contribution to the didactic use of the animated film A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6′). The short film shows the life of an average middle-class man in 1960s Italy, who basically rushes from one predetermined station – symbolized in the film by concrete blocks – to the next and who is finally mourned by a large crowd of uniform people at his funeral. However, in my reading of Pezzoli-Olgiati's analysis of the film, she too uncritically agrees with Bozzetto's representation of the nameless protagonist's uniform and unexciting life as unsatisfactory. Recent debates in media studies in regards to users' largely uniform self-portrayal on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have raised interesting questions that might inspire other readings of the film: what is actually bad about stereotypes?[7] Or: why does everyone always have to be special? This seems to me to be a philosophically exciting issue worth pursuing further.

Pezzoli-Olgiati's aim in the didactic use of the short is to familiarize students with the society of the time in which the texts discussed in class were written. She believes that this supports students' reading and understanding of complex theories of religion – such as those of Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Clifford Geertz, and Mary Douglas – which were written in cultural contexts with which students are not familiar. It would be interesting to further explore whether the animated short is really typical of the specific situation of the 1960s or whether it could also be interpreted as a more general critique of a non-conscious life – possibly in the vein of existentialism, as a critique of a way of life in which the human subject follows an externally imposed plan and fails to decide, to choose for oneself, to "set oneself".

Pezzoli-Olgiati's contribution highlights the benefits of working with the short film, but one might also wish to consider possible drawbacks. While, in the experience of the author, the short offers a "helpful way of

7 Lobinger 2009, 109–123.

introducing and contextualising dry and complex theoretical thinking about religion" (31), it is also important to be aware of the fact that the film may arouse negative emotions too, which might counter these intended positive effects. The life of the protagonist is heading towards death in such a straightforward and merciless way that this harsh confrontation with one's own finiteness may be overwhelming for students, all the more so because teaching takes place not in a protected environment but in an exposed situation. Future scholarly investigations of the advantages of using short films in class – also in the cases discussed by the other authors – will also benefit from the use of a control group to help determine whether the discussion would have proceeded in a significantly different way, had the short film not been used, or would have had a different quality or intensity.

Marie-Therese Mäder's contribution differs from the other contributions in two ways: first, the author discusses a documentary, 4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22'), while the other contributions reference fiction films, and second, she deals primarily not with questions of the theory of religion but with questions of moral philosophy. She notes that besides developing abstract normative theories, it is crucial to provide answers to the question of motivation, especially since we live in a secular context without transcendental moral authority. Mäder thus asks how teaching can help students not only to understand, to generate knowledge, and to acquire differentiated points of view, but also to "come to act". In the history of philosophy, the need to deal with action motivation has been noted periodically, just as it has been overlooked for long periods of time. In this respect, Mäder's concern is important and possibly the time is now ripe for its sustained consideration, for following Martha Nussbaum's recent monograph,[8] there seems to be an increasing discussion in the philosophical scholarly community whether we need positive political emotions and how they can be aroused. An approach that stretches the personal experience of emotions through the use of film, as is suggested here, seems very relevant in this context, then.

Mäder's approach is to directly let students experience responsibility through the film and to analyze in a further step what responsibility consists of on the different levels of agency and with regard to different actors involved in the film's production and reception. Thus her contribution clearly shows the added value of using film in the classroom: talking about

8 Nussbaum 2021.

the men, women, and children drowning every day in the Mediterranean, right at the gates of Europe, does not trigger nearly as many emotions as the experience – equally impressive and oppressive – of watching the short documentary 4.1 Miles, which accompanies the captain of a coastguard ship stationed on the Greek island of Lesbos and shows how the crew manage to save some people from drowning in the Aegean Sea while failing to rescue others.

The camera's gaze is merciless, and therefore the practice described by Mäder of warning students in advance and giving them the opportunity to leave the classroom is certainly appropriate. However, the question arises: Is this enough? Do students have the competence to deal with such trigger warnings? As Mäder notes, it is important to develop a relationship and atmosphere of trust between student and instructor. But the classroom context with its clear hierarchy poses challenges in this regard. In a setting where performance is judged through grades, perhaps students do not feel free to accept the offer to leave the room and might think they had better watch the film so that they won't be "classified" as uninterested by their professor. Thus, the film and Mäder's reflections on teaching with it raise the important issue of power and hierarchies in teaching, which deserves further reflection.

Mäder's contribution also raises questions about feelings and emotions: a film like 4.1 Miles undeniably elicits strong feelings. But are they the right feelings and is it appropriate to provoke this dynamic through a film's discussion in the classroom? Are we entitled to override the victims' personal rights for didactic reasons? And: is the feeling aroused really a feeling of responsibility and not merely cheap voyeurism? These questions are currently the subject of intense scholarly debate,[9] especially in connection with war reporting. One could argue, for instance, that a peculiar complicity between camera and viewer develops, because at the very moment of viewing, the viewer – just like the cameraperson at the very moment of filming – does not take any action to change the terrible situation, but merely watches. Susan Sontag, who has won several awards for her work on the ethics of images, even goes so far as to claim that only those who actively do something about the injustice captured in images have the right to watch them.[10] Even if one holds that Sontag is going too far with her claims, it is an un-

9 Schicha 2021.

10 Sontag 2004.

resolved question whether consuming brutal and shocking film sequences really leads to an experience of responsibility and to engagement, and not instead to withdrawal. When we are emotionally overwhelmed by certain topics, we usually do not become active, but react passively, by fading out and stopping the discussion. Thus, as Mäder also highlights, the appropriate contextualization of the images is crucial. Still, the dynamics of the human psyche may be too complex and too unpredictable to be accounted for in a classroom setting, a concern that Mäder's text challenges us to consider further.

While her approach of contrasting abstract thinking about responsibility with experiencing it in a phenomenological approach is worthwhile, it is also important to analyze in a next step whether this approach really has a lasting effect on students' evaluations of ethically challenging situations and consequent actions.

The use of animated short films in the final exams for several of his courses in the study of religion is at the center of Ken Derry's contribution. His basic assumption in doing so is that the films help students be more relaxed during the sometimes stressful situation of being tested. This is particularly important, as Derry notes in reference to scholarship on pedagogy and trauma, in the current context of students being traumatized by the pandemic and its aftereffects. Derry's decision to use animated films is based on the advantage that they are usually brighter both in color and in tone or mood, so that the image is better visible in the (not always completely) dark classroom and the film helps in diffusing the stress of the exam situation. Obviously, the brightness of the image and of the film's story depends again on the type of animated film that is shown. For that reason, Derry primarily chooses Pixar productions, which are in fact often bright in terms of colors and grading.

For Derry, the reason for using short films (rather than clips of longer films) is that all the students have the same starting point, in having seen the whole film, whereas showing a clip from a feature film might create an advantage for those students who have already seen the film. In addition, it is not necessary to provide context when the film can be shown in its full length. Of course, it could also be the case that some students have already seen the short film and enjoy an advantage when they see it for a second time during the exam, but presumably that happens more rarely, given the modest distribution of short films. Another aspect that one might wish to consider when using short films in exams is that not all the students

have the same cognitive-emotional access to film. There might be students who are not audio-visually oriented at all. Not everybody has a "natural" approach to films and is so easily able to connect theories of religion with animated narratives, as Derry asks his students to do. This is particularly relevant because Derry does not convey film analytical tools in his classes, meaning that the students only have their pre-existing knowledge and language to rely on as they reflect on the films in the context of the theories they had studied.

In spite of these possible limitations of using short films in exams, which each instructor should carefully consider before choosing to do so, the sample exam responses that Derry includes in his essay provide evidence for the benefits of applying this exam method. Derry's contribution offers an instructive hands-on approach, with many useful short film examples and practical considerations about the technical, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of this exam method, and his reflections show how much can be achieved with engaged teaching.

All in all, the contributions gathered in this volume offer an exciting and rich introduction to the didactics of short films, which has received little attention so far. They also raise numerous questions and issues to be more fully explored in future investigations of this subject area.

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Filmography

4.1 Miles (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22′).
A Life in a Tin (Una vita in scatola, Bruno Bozzetto, IT 1967, 6′).
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Media Reviews

Erica Hurwitz Andrus

Book Review
Charlotte E. Howell, Divine Programming
Negotiating Christianity in American Dramatic Television Production 1996–2016

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 271 pages,
ISBN: 978-0-19-005438-0

Charlotte Howell's book, a revised doctoral dissertation in Media Studies from the University of Texas, Austin, in the United States, represents a great contribution and a missed opportunity in the study of religion and television. I looked forward to reading this book and was rewarded by Howell's clear writing and convincing description of how television producers, writers, and directors shy away from acknowledging the religious content of their shows when they have an "upscale" audience in mind. Scholars of religion and television have been waiting for another study of prime-time drama since the publication of *Small Screen, Big Picture* in 2009, a collection of essays edited by Diane Winston that set the standard for a variety of approaches to the topic. Because of constant turnover in television shows, essays that were ground-breaking in 2009 are not always relevant to readers in the 2020s. A treatment of recent shows, in light of changes in technology, politics, and demographics, is sorely needed. So, Howell's analysis of shows like The Leftovers (HBO, US 2014–2017) is welcome. The drawback for those who study television in religious studies is Howell's lack of engagement with the scholarly study of religion – a drawback in the field that also works in the opposite direction, as religion scholars like Conrad Ostwalt, S. Brent Plate, and Sofia Sjö have noted and responded to by advocating that scholars of religion educate themselves in the area of media studies.[1]

1 See Ostwalt 2008; Plate 2008; Sjö 2016.

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Howell's book is readable and well-organized. She argues that changes in television production and the television industry (from networks to streaming and on-demand) changed the focus of "creatives" (producers, writers, executives, etc.) away from "middlebrow" fare that appeals to "middle America", to niche or "upscale" audiences (5, 25, 30). That change incorporated a turn toward "edgy" materials in the representation of gender, sexuality, and violence, but significantly not that of religion. Her thesis is that an "ideology of religion as risky" (and here she means, and sometimes says, Christianity) and inherently connected to middlebrow values caused creatives to embrace various modes of distancing and containing "religion" while simultaneously increasing the amount of "religion" present in their narratives (23). In other words, the producers, writers, directors, and other executives denied religious content even where religion is clearly important as part of a show's storyline (31).

One major contribution this book makes comes from Howell's access to creatives connected to shows she chooses as her examples. Her valuable data encompasses statements by marketing executives, producers, writers, and directors addressing "religion" in their shows, revealing how they either downplayed its presence or anticipated pushback when they wished to incorporate it. These rhetorical techniques of denial or displacement of religion make her argument very convincing. She carefully frames her research as wholly production-centered, demonstrating awareness and appreciation for reception studies while drawing a boundary around her work to exclude that perspective (23). I appreciated that, as she positions her work as supplemental to audience studies.

In her introduction, Howell explains her criteria for inclusion of "series that feature mainstream Christianity as a core element for at least one season" but does not explicitly address why it is important to focus on "mainstream Christianity" or to define what she means by "religion" in cases like Battlestar Galactica (Syfy, US 2003–2009), where her criteria are not applicable (4). She does an excellent job justifying the time period she chose for her analysis based on developments within the industry. In the book's first section she establishes that industry understood white Christianity as "middlebrow", represented by shows like 7th Heaven (The WB / CW, US 1996–2007) and Touched by an Angel (CBS, US 1994–2003), hosted by networks that wanted to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. She shows this attitude continuing in the 2010s with several miniseries based on biblical stories (31–74).

The second section covers the first type of "containment" of religious content. In this approach creatives used Christianity to enhance the authenticity of their portrayals of specific American subcultures. Her examples are Friday Night Lights (NBC, US 2006–2011) and Rectify (SundanceTV, US 2013–2017), Southern stories where religion is "othered" as a marker of regional identity for both white and Black Southerners, and two shows where religion is seen as an ethnic or racial marker. Chapter 4, "Nonwhite Christian Dramas", left me feeling that she could have taken the same approach to race as she takes in the book to religion – an explicit choice to focus on the dominant as representing a hegemonic narrative – because the topic of race and religion on television is worthy of more serious treatment than can be offered in one short chapter. However, the chapter provides a possible starting point for future research or analysis of the place shows like these have in the ongoing racialization of religions in 21st century America.

The third section of the book looks at "genre" shows – sci-fi and supernatural-themed shows like Battlestar Galactica and Supernatural (The WB / CW, US 2005–2020). She describes how creatives avoided talking about their shows as "religious" by rhetorically shifting their descriptions to words like "spirituality" or "mythology". In sci-fi settings this is easier because of the alien context, where Christianity simply does not exist in the imagined world, whereas the creatives involved with shows involving specifically Christian-associated figures like Lucifer or angels are even more adamant that these figures are part of a culturally shared "mythology", and not "religious". The fourth section shifts from particular genres of dramas to two newer shows, Daredevil (Netflix, US 2015–2018) and Hand of God (US, Amazon 2015–2017), that are products of the streaming and "Peak TV" era, and which she claims show a greater openness on the part of creatives to acknowledging their use of religion to appeal to an upscale audience.

Howell's conclusion offers an interesting reflection on the uncertainty of future trends in programming with regard to religion, describing how the trends she identified were upended by the election of Donald Trump and its polarizing effect on media. However, her concluding thoughts could have benefitted greatly from addressing the ways that her examples and findings add to the study of secularity, religion, and popular culture, instead of suggesting that the way forward for television shows could be to embrace "a new variation on upscale taste cultures: progressive Christians" (210).

It was somewhat difficult to write this review due to my disappointment at Howell's lack of engagement with existing scholarship in religion. I do not

hold Howell responsible for this issue but see it as a systemic problem of interdisciplinary studies, and of the academic study of religion and television in particular. In the introduction she draws on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Rudolph Binion, and Stig Hjarvard,[2] which seems promising, but this attention to theory of religion is largely limited to this chapter, not sustained throughout the work. It is also limited in scope to scholars who worked primarily outside the field of religious studies. During the course of the researching, writing, and publishing of this ambitious and welcome book, not one of her mentors, reviewers, or editors seems to have suggested that her thesis is part of an ongoing and rich academic discussion of the topic of secularity in America. The lost opportunity for Howell to consult with someone like Chad Seales,[3] a scholar of secularity and Southern religion on the same campus where she did her doctoral studies, feels frustrating to say the least. Her repeated use of the term "religion-qua-religion" highlights her failure to define religion or secularity at all, let alone in relation to definitions of those terms that scholars have crafted and struggled with for decades. In chapter 6, Howell describes an example of secularization clearly, without using that term: "they take that story foundation [the Book of Revelation] and then claim it as nonreligious mythology" (156). Even if this volume does not address previous scholarship identifying and analyzing this pattern of secularization, in which Christian symbols, stories, practices, and people become removed from a "religious" context and identified as "cultural" or "American" (think Santa Claus), I hope that other scholars will be able to use Howell's book to pick up where she leaves off and integrate the data she reveals in her work into further research about how religion, popular culture, and television intersect in 21st century America and beyond.

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2 See Binion 1986; Nancy 2001; Hjarvard 2011.

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Katharina-Maria Grilz

Manga Review
Yūji Kaku, Jigokuraku / Hell's Paradise

Translated from Japanese into German by Yuko Keller, 13 volumes, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020–2021

Manga are a special form of comics covering a much wider range of genres and themes than, for example, the DC or Marvel superhero comics. From books written for toddlers to morally and intellectually challenging works for adults, anything is possible.

The recently concluded manga *Jigokuraku / Hell's Paradise* was written and drawn by Yūji Kaku between 2018 and 2021. It is of special interest for scholars in theology and the study of religion as an example of a manga that on the one hand deals with morally and socially demanding issues and on the other hand advances and develops various religious motifs. The first chapter was published in 2018 in the magazine Shōnen Jump, and the work was completed in 2021. It comprises a total of 127 chapters, which have been collected into 13 volumes.[1]

The cold-blooded and pitiless Shinobi assassin Gabimaru the Hollow, who lives in the Edo period, finds himself betrayed and imprisoned while on a mission for his village. He awaits his execution, but Sagiri, an executioner of the Yamada Asaemon clan, which specializes in executions and the testing of swords *(tameshigiri)*, realises that Gabimaru is still attached to life out of love for his wife. The executioner makes him an offer he cannot refuse: to go on one last mission and find an immortality potion on an idyllic yet extremely dangerous island that will enable the Shogun to live forever. For this mission, a group of exceptionally capable death row inmates, each guarded by a clan member of the Yamada Asaemon, will travel to the island and look for the elixir of life.

1 In this review, I will reference the German edition; the manga has also been published in other languages, including English.

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The manga can be divided into four major parts based on plot development: the first part (chapters 1 to 16) focuses on the recruitment of Gabimaru, the introduction of the other criminals, the process of selecting the prisoners to join the mission, and the arrival of the protagonists at the island.

In the second part (chapters 17 to 59), the group around Sagiri and Gabimaru find out that the island is ruled by seven immortal beings, called "The Lord Tensen", who possess an elixir of life called "Tan", which is gained from the life energy of humans. For this purpose, human beings are transformed into flowers by the Lord Tensen. The protagonists head to the centre of the island, the home of The Lord Tensen (Hōrai), encountering some of the immortal beings along the way. Gabimaru's group of survivors learn of another mysterious power called "Tao", which is used by The Lord Tensen to achieve superhuman powers. Tao can be mastered by anyone through the principles of Yin and Yang. The survivors focus on their personal development to also be able to use Tao.

In the third storyline (chapters 60 to 110), all survivors join forces to invade the Hōrai realm, steal the elixir of life, and escape from the island together. One of The Lord Tensen, Rien, prepares to leave for Japan, as she wants to turn all humans into Tan in order to retrieve the soul of her deceased husband. Before the survivors can escape from the island, a second scouting party arrives on the island and threatens them.

In the fourth and last part (chapters 111 to 127), after defeating the other members of The Lord Tensen, the group around Sagiri and Gabimaru experience their final encounter with Rien. Sagiri and Gabimaru, who have meanwhile mastered the use of Tao, face off against Rien, but she remains invulnerable through her total control and mastery of Tao. However, in a conversation with Gabimaru and Sagiri, she manages to accept death as a part of life and agrees to her own mortality. Eventually, Sagiri, Gabimaru, and their group return to Japan with the elixir of life, but collectively they decide to go into hiding and start a new life, except for two executioners and one supporting character, who receives the Shogun's pardon. When they give the rescued elixir of life to the Shogun, it turns out that the price for eternal life is to be transformed into a tree.

Kaku's work is very impressive, both aesthetically, in the detailed development of its characters, its treatment of complex existential questions, and its references to religious traditions, all of which are inspiring for studies in theology and the study of religion. The dark and expressive visual style creates an atmosphere of horror. The contrast of gentle floral motifs, such

as hibiscus blossoms, and death creates tension between beauty and doom (fig. 1).

This manga manages to reach a wide audience despite, or perhaps because of, its treatment of challenging topics such as immortality, questions of gender, and the personal benefits of a relationship with a divine being.

The manga is especially remarkable for its treatment of religions and religious worldviews, of which – as in other mangas – it combines several. On an iconographic level, for example Buddha statues can be found on the island; some of the monsters use prayer beads and preach the principle of non-violence (fig. 2).

However, the focus is on the principles of Daoism, such as the theory of the five elements or the principle of Yin and Yang. The protagonists themselves become seekers of enlightenment. Typically, religious principles are modified to fit into the manga's plot, whose principal function is entertainment.

Two other important themes of this manga are gender issues and corporeality. The question of bodily experience is particularly concentrated in the figures of The Lord Tensen who can change their gender. Through them, the topics of immortality, divinity, and spirituality are represented. The massive regenerative power and long lifespan of The Lord Tensen lead to their being worshipped as gods by the now extinct population of the island. The Lord Tensen instilled their own belief in the afterlife into the original islanders in order to keep them calm and to harvest their life energy for Tan (fig. 3).

People were slowly dying out due to their belief in The Lord Tensen, their faith not being life-sustaining but actually destructive. Thus, the manga raises questions about the meaning of divinity and faith as well as critical questions about the role and function of religious beliefs. What is it about a religion that is considered life-sustaining and life-enriching? And when do religions become destructive? How can one have an intimate relationship with (a) God? Interestingly, many of the main characters turn out to be also in a relationship with a divine being in one way or another. They draw their strength from prayer or other forms of religious piety. Gabimaru's wife, for example, keeps urging him to pray (fig. 4), and Sagiri wears prayer bells on her uniform, which ring for the souls of the departed.

Religions and theologically or socially relevant topics are not only an important part of the manga's plot and visual style itself, but also refer to relevant aspects of the cultural context in which the work was produced. Many people like to read manga with religious undertones, so the market

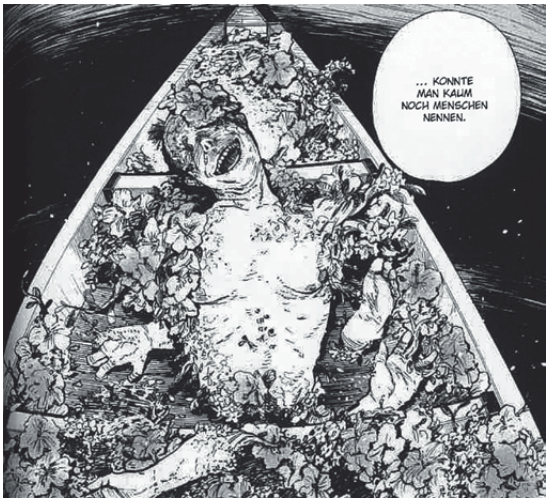

Fig. 1: A failed explorer returns in a boat. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 1, chap. 1, p. 58.

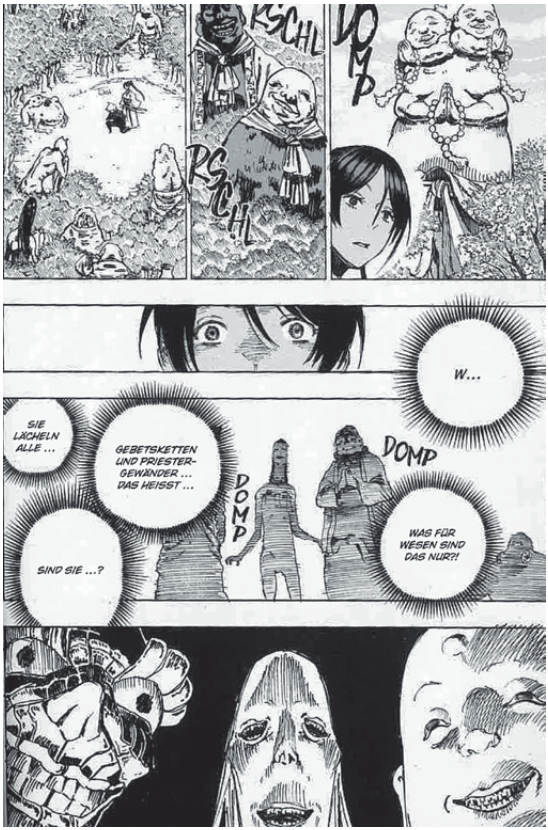

Fig. 2: Some of the monsters with prayer beads. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 2, chap. 7, p. 12.

Fig. 3: A supporting character captured to create Tan. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 3, chap. 19, p. 45.

Fig. 4: Gabimaru's wife urges him to pray to God. Yūji Kaku, *Hell's Paradise*, Lausanne: Kazé Manga, 2020, vol. 1, chap. 1, p. 17.

naturally adapts according to these needs. But this adaptation process is not unidirectional: through their enormous dissemination manga, and comics in general, can also become aids for religious and moral discernment.

Even though mangas were established in a particular cultural context, they can no longer be understood as "exclusively Japanese", due to their global distribution. In his work, Yūji Kaku masterfully deals with current social developments and issues that have significance far beyond the borders of Japan. Even more importantly, he deals with burning theological questions of human existence. Personally, I was very impressed by his work and would strongly recommend reading this powerful and thought-provoking manga.

Ferdinand Liefert

Film Festival Review 22nd Nippon Connection 2022

Embracing the Stories of Youth

After two years, Nippon Connection, the Japanese film festival, finally returned to theaters in Frankfurt am Main. The main focus of the 2022 edition, held 24–29 May, was "Stories of Youth – Coming of Age".

As in previous years, a wide spectrum of films – over 100 in total – were shown during the festival, from blockbusters to independent films, from animated films to documentaries, from films shot by veteran directors to films by newcomers, and including both feature-length and short films.

In addition, food stalls, Japanese craft stalls (such as origami), live performances, and other activities (e. g. Zen meditation) were also part of the event. While to some degree this additional programming contributed to broadening the audience's horizon, some of the events also seemed to feed clichés of what is supposedly a "typically Japanese" experience.

Diversity

The title "Stories of Youth – Coming of Age" provided a broad thematic focus covering a range of aspects. Here I will focus on just three of them: issues of diversity, the struggles young people are facing, and their relationship to religious beliefs.

Many of the films shown this year deal with diversity in one respect or another. Several movies dealt with LGBTQ+ topics, others with disability, some with discrimination or racism. Ninja Girl (Shushushu no Musume, Irie Yû, JP 2021) is an unconventional example of the last of these. It is an interesting take to let a ninja – this icon of Japanese popular culture – tackle a racist ordinance. Ninja Girl's grandfather, who always opposed legislation that would exclude foreigners from the town, reveals to his granddaughter

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that they belong to a ninja family. He orders his granddaughter to fight against the lawmakers who introduced the legislation and reverse it. The soundtrack of the film is highly influenced by 1980s disco sounds. While the humorous film with its many surprising twists is surely remarkable, it also includes a romantic storyline, with the female ninja falling in love with a male character, a narrative that seems superfluous and undermines somewhat the strength of the female protagonist.

The Struggle of Young People

Youth can often be a time of overwhelming and sometimes diverging feelings. Furthermore, it is a time when people might start to ask themselves which life they want to live and what career they aim to pursue. Many of the films told such stories surrounding struggles faced by youth. In Small, Slow But Steady (Keiko, me wo sumasete, Shô Miyake, JP/FR 2022) the audience gets to know the professional boxer Keiko, who was born with a hearing impairment. After a particularly hard fight, she begins to develop doubts about her boxing career. At the same time, her long-time supporter and chief trainer decides to close down the boxing hall. Keiko is unsure if she should enter the ring again, before her trainer quits. It appears that making that decision is one of her hardest fights. The film is shot in a realistic fashion, with warm brown tones prominent throughout. The overall aesthetic adds to a certain vintage style. While the character of Keiko is complex, the depiction of others, for example her brother, comes closer to stereotype.

Struggling with Faith

"Youth" includes both young people who are already part of the work force *(shakai jin)* and adolescents still in school. The film Under the Stars (Hoshi no ko, Tatsushi Omori, JP 2020) tells the story of a schoolgirl in her teens whose parents are members of a fictive New Religious Movement. Fictive New Religious Movements have been depicted in Japanese films before, for example in Love Exposure (Ai no mukidashi, Sion Sono, JP 2008) and Special Actors (Shinichiro Ueda, JP 2019). The directors of these films express a critical view of those groups, using well-known clichés to portray them as caricatures, or proposing that they are a scam, or focusing on their authoritarian nature.

While the director of Under the Stars seems to share this critical perspective, this film is a more nuanced example of the reception of New Religious Movements in Japanese cinema. The film focuses on an aspect often connected with New Religious Movements, not only in Japan – health and healing. A couple does not know what to do after their daughter, Chihiro, becomes sick as a young child and ordinary medicine does not seem to work in her case. Instead, "Venus water", a product used by followers of a religious group, helps their daughter eventually recover. The family then become firm believers and practitioners. Later, Chihiro is largely able to live the life of a normal teenager. However, the people around her express scepticism about the religious group she belongs to. She begins to question the faith of her parents. The actors' performances make the film an absorbing experience. Flashbacks to early childhood memories are sometimes surprising, since they interrupt the linear plot, and during the last part the audience might not fully understand why a certain problem appears. Although a rather conventional technique, the non-linear structure adds an unusual note to the school drama that provides ample food for thought, even if the open ending may not be satisfactory for everyone.

Nippon Connection: A Glimpse into Japanese Cinema and Society

The festival provides a glimpse into the wide range of Japanese film productions. While some of the cultural activities that were part of the program may not have helped deconstruct clichés about Japan and what is considered "Japanese", the films allow viewers to see more aspects of life and culture in Japan. Unsurprisingly, the films also reflect current social discourses. Just before the Tokyo Olympics, discussions about LGBTQ+ rights and disability took off in Japan, and some of the films in this year's line-up reflected these debates in their stories. Others dealt with racism or corruption. In Japanese cinema, religion is often portrayed in terms of everyday religious practices like funeral ceremonies or memorial rites. Buddhism or Shintō are rarely dealt with in a discursive manner in Japanese cinema. At the same time New Religious Movements are often depicted as problematic in one way or another, as also became apparent in Under the Stars.

With its wide range of films and activities, the festival again offered visitors the opportunity to gain a sense of current trends in Japanese cinema

as well as current debates in Japanese society. The main focus, "Stories of Youth – Coming of Age", introduced viewers to the diversity of young people in Japan and their hopes and struggles, and also to their search for meaning in life by relating to religious issues, although – more often – not explicitly in a religious manner.

Filmography

Love Exposure (Ai no mukidashi, Sion Sono, JP 2008).
Ninja Girl (Shushushu no Musume, Irie Yû, JP 2021).
Small, Slow but Steady (Keiko, me wo sumasete, Shô Miyake, JP/FR 2022).
Special Actors (Shinichiro Ueda, JP 2019).
Under the Stars (Hoshi no ko, Tatsushi Omori, JP 2020).

Katharina Luise Merkert

Music Review
Billie Eilish, *Happier Than Ever*

Darkroom / Interscope Records, US 2021

"Everybody dies and when will I?",[1] asks Billie Eilish in her song "Everybody Dies". The inevitability of one's own death is one of the existential questions that the young artist explores in her new album *Happier Than Ever*. Eilish (full name Billie Eilish Pirate Baird O'Connell, born in 2001) is a US-American singer-songwriter who has taken the music world by storm in the last six years. She started her musical career with the digital mini-album *Don't Smile at Me*, which was released in 2017, when she was just 15 years old. The EP featured songs she wrote and recorded with her older brother, Finneas O'Connell. Mostly for fun, the duo released them on Soundcloud, quickly gaining them a fan base. Her second album, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*,[2] was released two years later and became a great success, reaching No. 1 on the Billboard charts. *Happier Than Ever* is her latest album, released in 2021. It includes 16 songs totaling 56 minutes and 17 seconds and mixes musical elements of jazz, techno, and pop with either synthesizer beats or calm acoustic melodies.

On the album, Eilish reflects on a variety of topics including growing up, the inevitability of death, and past relationships and heartbreak, as well as sexism in the music industry. She states that she wanted listeners to be able to identify with her music and its themes and to feel addressed emotionally. She describes how the production process involved reflecting on her inner state and own experiences: "There was so much self-reflection in the making of this album that I think really comes through in the songs."[3] In light of

1 See lyrics at https://is.gd/Xz3fzp [accessed 23 May 2022].

2 The album title is all capitalized; see the music video at https://is.gd/hprAGL [accessed 23 May 2022].

3 "Official Vevo Interview", https://is.gd/Niyo7i [accessed 12 May 2022].

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Eilish's earlier albums, one cannot expect the new songs to be overly joyful or optimistic, but the album covers a range of moods and musical styles. As is typical for her music, the album touches on numerous problems of human life and does not omit darker topics such as suicide or depression.

Religious references, such as to the Devil or God, appear repeatedly in her songs. For example, the 13th track, titled "NDA" (short for non-disclosure agreement), deals with Eilish's music career and the associated downsides, including not being able to lead a self-determined life or always feeling lonely. In the lyrics, she compares her situation to entering into a contract with "Satan", and she uses this metaphor of dependence on an evil power to express her feelings of being imprisoned and under great pressure. Her vocals are accompanied by an electronic pulse that draws attention to the lyrics and allows listeners to empathize with her stress as they seem to listen to her heartbeat.

The theme of emotional and physical dependence also becomes evident in the track "Your Power". In this soft, romantic song, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, she accuses her ex-partner of being the Devil and illustrates how she suffered from his/her/their "toxic behavior", which presumably references an abuse of trust and emotional dependence.[4] Her emotions further become apparent in the corresponding music video, where Eilish is slowly being strangled by a snake. In contrast, the song the album is named after, "Happier Than Ever", shows Eilish's emancipation from these oppressing powers. The process of self-liberation is visualized in the music video as she ends up dancing on the roof of a flooded house, a moment that represents a kind of emotional reboot. Musically, this idea becomes evident when the quiet acoustic guitar turns into a loud electric guitar and the initially soft song becomes a rock ballad.

The 5th track of the album, "Oxytocin", addresses a subject very different from "Happier Than Ever", "Your Power", or "NDA"; it is a song about sexual desire, a topic that is still taboo. The lyrics refer to religious practices such as prayer or going to church, to create a contrast between unconventional sexual practices and a "religious" lifestyle, and they also show that even God – who is depicted as a woman – cannot resist feelings of lust and desire:

> If you only pray on sunday,
> could you come my way on monday?

4 See lyrics at https://is.gd/7fxAx0 [accessed 23 May 2022].

Cause I like to do things God doesn't approve of
if she saw us
she couldn't look away,
she'd wanna get involved.[5]

But the religious references Eilish uses are not limited to Christianity. In an innovative song, "Goldwing", she quotes in a high, soft singing voice the classical composer Gustav Holst, who in 1907 published translations of various hymns from the Rigveda, one of the oldest scriptures in the Hindu tradition. The excerpt from the hymn describes the appearance of a female goddess who seems to take care of a male person and leads him to heaven:

He hath come to the bosom of his beloved
Smiling on him
She beareth him to highest heav'n
With yearning heart
On thee we gaze
O gold-wing'd messenger of mighty gods.[6]

Eilish's voice is calm and accompanied only by background vocals reminiscent of church choirs. There is no background music, which sets this part apart from the rest of the song. Following this quiet section is a dark, pop-style episode in which she sings about a "gold-winged angel" that is "sacred" and needs to hide and keep its head down for "them" not to tear it apart. She combines the image of a "holy" or "sacred" female figure with the state of vulnerability, which addresses the topic of being exploited, possibly in another reference to the difficulties of young women in the music industry.

"My Future", the 4th song on *Happier Than Ever*, adds a more optimistic note. It deals with growing up and imagining one's future life. The animated music video illustrates this theme visually: an animated Billie Eilish walks through a magically appearing forest during a rainy night, accompanied by a slow and calm melody. She looks up to the moon, which is reflected in her eyes (fig. 1). As the music becomes more lively, plants and flowers grow out of her footprints, and she slowly seems to merge with them. In the end, a tendril of plants lifts her up to the sky towards the sun (fig. 2).

5 See lyrics at https://is.gd/C04LME [accessed 16 May 2022].
6 See lyrics at https://is.gd/tBJbG2 [accessed 16 May 2022].

Fig. 1: Music video still, My Future (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), 00:01:18.

Fig. 2: Music video still, My Future (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), 00:03:49.

The video evokes the idea of paradise and a magical view of the world. At first gloomy and rainy, the night transforms into a sparkling, colorful day. In the video, Eilish creates this transformation by herself, exemplifying the creative power of her mind. This is underpinned by the lyrics of the song, which describe learning to be happy all by oneself:

> Know I'm supposed to be unhappy
> Without someone (Someone)

But aren't I someone?
[…]
But I (I), I'm in love (Love, love, love, love)
With my future.[7]

Nature is like a romantic version of her life, in which she grows and blossoms. Looking towards the sun, her future seems to transform from a dark and unknown part of her life into a paradise full of surprises that she is ready to receive.

While the album focuses on a wide range of topics, they all reflect Eilish's previous experiences as a young woman who tries to orient herself in life. The songs deal with questions that individuals face, such as loneliness or separation, and issues of social relevance, for example the patriarchal oppression of women or their sexualization. By referring to religious figures such as angels or the Devil, which are already associated with values such as morality or sin, Eilish creates a visual image of her feelings and inner life. The listeners immediately get an idea of how her diabolic ex-partner must have treated her and how she must have felt in that situation. Through this reference, then, the song draws on knowledge and discourses about religion that are embedded in society. The album also plays with stereotypical ideas associated with religion. "Oxytocin" not only challenges the traditional image of God the Father by using female pronouns for God, but also reflects how conservative religious ideas of sexual morality still fit into today's society. Therefore, for religious studies it is interesting to examine how religious narratives and symbols are used and transformed in Eilish's music, for example, to figuratively represent certain personality features or to create contrasting ideas, such as that of a secular, liberal modernity and conservative religion.

The combination of world-weariness, self-discovery, and attempting to find one's way in a world full of norms that dictate how to live one's life does not appeal only to young adolescents. The album deals with various problems of human nature with which almost everyone can identify. Eilish fascinates the recipients with an artful examination of the dark sides of our existence. By offering varied entertainment both in terms of music and content, she remains true to her own style. At her young age, she has already rightfully earned her place in the music world of our time.

7 See lyrics at https://is.gd/w11pcx [accessed 16 May 2022].

Filmography (Music Videos)

Happier Than Ever (Billie Eilish, US 2021), https://is.gd/L3tvis [accessed 23 May 2022].
My Future (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), https://is.gd/YsyQs2 [accessed 23 May 2022].
Your Power (Billie Eilish, US 2021), https://is.gd/hoYmPU [accessed 23 May 2022].

Discography

WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO? (Billie Eilish, US 2019, Darkroom / Interscope Records).
Don't Smile at Me (Billie Eilish, US 2017, Darkroom / Interscope Records).

Christopher Neyhart

Book Review
Giulia Isetti / Elisa Innerhofer / Harald Pechlaner / Michael de Rachewiltz (eds.), Religion in the Age of Digitalization

From New Media to Spiritual Machines

London: Routledge, 2021, 195 pages,
ISBN: 978-0-367-40819-0

Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines, edited by Giulia Isetti, Elisa Innerhofer, Harald Pechlaner, and Michael de Rachewiltz, is the newest addition to the Media, Religion and Culture series from Routledge. Functioning as a capstone to two conferences at the Center for Advanced Studies at Eurac Research in Bolzano, Italy, the volume gathers together contributions by scholars from many countries and disciplines, which are grouped here into two sections: the first is a collection of case studies which observe how Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam engage with a trend that this book will call "digitalization", and the second includes more theoretical engagements with this trend and suggestions about what we might expect to see at the border between religion and technology moving forward.

Even though this book's chapters almost never reference each other, the book's insights shine most clearly when it is read all the way through, including the introduction: whether or not the reader is interested in the particularities of each chapter's topic, the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts in this case. While each chapter explicates its own definitions for terms like "digitalization", "religion", and "spirituality" as needed, the introduction from the editors is most helpful for clarifying the book's object. It effectively sets the stage by invoking the work of well-known scholars in

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the emerging interdisciplinary field of "digital religion", as well as the recent development of this field towards regionally specific explorations of the topic. This book intends to advance this scholarly conversation by providing "a panorama of the latest developments taking place in five major world religions and their engagement with digitalization, more specifically new media and artificial intelligence" (2), as well as some more speculative perspectives about what is possible at the border between technology and spirituality.

The decision to present the case studies of religions engaging positively and negatively with digitalization before presenting the more theoretical perspectives on the future landscape of digital religion contributes to the book's success in two main ways. The first is the demarcation of what is meant by the term "digitalization": on the one hand, quite a bit happens underneath this theoretical umbrella, and on the other hand, this book offers something specific and different from the previous installments of the Media, Religion and Culture series. In this book, the term refers to the process of making social phenomena (religious practices, modes of communication, etc.) digital as experienced by individuals and groups. Given the fluidity of language around contemporary technology and the dynamism of religion's interactions with it, the meaning of "digitalization" is a matter of "show, don't tell", which the case studies do very effectively. Second, the positioning of the case studies before the more theoretical chapters allows the book to demonstrate the importance of its topic in stride, such that by the time the reader has arrived at the contributors' suggestions about what we might expect to see on the horizon of this digital age, a sense that these issues are immanent, not distant, has already been built up.

The case studies offer a balanced depiction of religious engagements with digitalization, ranging from examples of religious motivations to avoid the use of new technology, such as abstinence from the Internet in French monasteries (chap. 5, by Isabelle Jonveaux); to the creation of software programs for facilitating a user's religious practice, such as the app "buddhify" (chap. 3, by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger); to robots and AI programs, like Mindar the scripture-proclaiming, sermon-preaching, humanoid robot, which actually engage in religious activities such as evangelizing and serving as priests in religious rituals (chap. 7, by Pauline Hope Cheong). These examples color in a spectrum of stances towards technology: they range from a techno-negative attitude that sees digitalization as pulling individuals away from the sacred into the profane, to an instrumentalist attitude that sees digitalization as simply offering new tools for the lived performance of religion, to a techno-positive attitude that sees digitalization as expanding the

realm of the sacred to include new spiritualize-able places and beings. When read in series, these accounts leave the reader with the sense that religion in the age of digitalization is undecided – a fruitful set-up for the second section of the book. As stand-alone explorations, the case study chapters generally do a good job of responsibly pointing out how specific their scopes are, highlighting the unexplored plurality contained within each religion studied. In light of this and the diversity of perspectives displayed across the case studies, there are many trajectories for future research to be found here.

The second section of the book contains theoretical perspectives on what we might expect on the horizon of this age of digitalization. Several of these chapters discuss a theme that did not appear substantively among the case studies: post- and transhumanism. Next to the perspectives presented in the case studies, the discussion of post- and transhumanism is awkward to situate, since (as Boris Rähme's chapter explains) these movements sometimes appear to be a total merger of religion and technology, but also sometimes appear to be a replacement of religion by technology, depending on how the definitional lines are drawn. Rähme is quick to point out that most transhumanists do not consider their movement to be a religion, and the issue is probably best explored when framed within his and Georg Gasser's critical treatment of the secularization hypothesis. Perspectives which might be better described as "techno-cautious", rather than "techno-negative", are offered by Harald Walach and Bishop Ivo Muser. The latter's contribution is found in chapter 9, a short conversation between Bishop Muser and Harald Pechlaner on the occasion of Roland Benedikter's presentation at the "Digital Religion" conference at Eurac Research in 2018. This conversation is indispensable to the book, as it begins to uncover the human reality of the engagement between religion and digitalization: Bishop Muser shares his pastoral concerns about what might be lost in a radically digitized future and his feeling of "rebellion" (115) towards that possible loss functions as a necessary interpersonal moment amidst the rest of the scholarly text.

The perspectives in the second section of the book also include explorations of how questions in ethics (chap. 14, by Peter Kirchschlaeger) and ontology (chap. 11, by Michael de Rachewiltz) are illuminated from the digitalization angle. Once again, these chapters are valuable as stand-alone pieces, but they are best read in the context of the whole book. The ethics chapter from Peter Kirchschläger highlights how the relationship between tech and ethics is not one of proposition and response, but rather an ongoing conversation in which technology and ethics offer opportunities to each

other. While the other chapters are not explicitly cited here, Kirchschläger's position is clearly applicable to the case studies from earlier in the book. De Rachewiltz begins from the promises of transhumanism and asks more ontological questions about the theoretical limits of a synthesis of technology and spirituality, concluding that spirituality is probably dependent on structures of human experiences that might not be replicable by technology.

I hesitate to suggest the inclusion of another interdisciplinary perspective to an already interdisciplinary work, but one note that seemed to be missing from this book about possible futures was a technology-oriented account of the horizon of possibilities for digital technology. While some contemporary pieces of computer software and hardware were described in the case studies, the lack of a voice representing computer science and engineering leaves the reader with a quite foggy and uncertain view of where the tech industry believes itself to be going. Given the prospects of neural interfaces, more advanced machine learning, and gene-editing biotech on the not-so-distant horizon, an account of current technical challenges to those pursuits would have been a welcome addition to this book. In particular, the technological promises of transhumanism (see especially chap. 11) could have been more properly analyzed had they been situated next to a technical description of the actual gap between current tech and those hypothetical advancements by a qualified voice. The absence of such an account inadvertently pushes the reader toward the assumption that technology is literally limitless – that time is the only constraint on technical progress, ignoring issues such as the availability of resources or the bounds of physics.

That said, *Religion in the Age of Digitalization* is still a very valuable contribution to the expanding field of digital religion, especially as it brings together insightful analysis of organic engagements between lived religion and new technologies, speculative discussion about the theoretical possibilities of technology today and in the future, and expressions of fear and excitement about what will happen on the border of religion and tech in the near future. The book is well-balanced in its presentation of the varied positions on new technology from religious perspectives. In their own words, the editors set out to present a "panorama" of the current landscape alongside an interdisciplinary investigation of possible futures. The panorama is clear, wide, and deep, and the speculative work is insightful and conducive to further research in the future. *Religion in the Age of Digitalization* makes for a worthy addition to the literature and would also be a fruitful starting point for scholars taking their first look at these thought-provoking topics.

Mirna Vohnsen

Book Review
Stephanie Pridgeon, Revolutionary Visions

Jewish Life and Politics in Latin American Film

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, 194 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-4875-0814-2

Stephanie Pridgeon's *Revolutionary Visions*, a book that deals with the intersection of Jews and revolutionary politics in films from Latin America, is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Latin American Jewish studies. As the author herself notes, the cinematic depiction of Jewish experiences with revolutionary movements in Latin America has not received, until now, the scholarly attention it deserves, a neglect that Pridgeon has set out to remedy in her volume. The book brings to our attention the significance of the Latin American revolutionary culture of the 1960s and 1970s not only to Jewish life in the region but also to Latin American cinema from the 1990s onwards. Grounded on the detailed analyses of eight films (both documentary and fictional) released between 1993 and 2013, the author convincingly makes the argument that participation in revolutionary politics is depicted as vital but, at the same time, as an incomplete process for Jews in 20th-century Latin America. Pridgeon expands on this point when she explains that, on the one hand, "Jewish identification with leftist revolutionary movements in Latin America is represented as being, to some extent, a natural progression of the political affinities long understood to be part and parcel of Jewishness, such as responses to Zionism, the Russian Revolution, and the Holocaust" (153). On the other hand, she holds that "the extreme nature of many of these activist groups (particularly the armed movements), the embrace of Palestine, and the heavily Catholic concepts of martyrdom and the New Man created a conflict for some Jews and thus a barrier to their full identification with revolutionary politics" (153).

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Organised into four chapters, the book begins with a comprehensive introduction that provides a critical contextualisation of the approach used to study the cinematic representation of Jews in Latin American revolutionary movements. Emmanuel Levinas's essay "Being Jewish",[1] the concepts of assimilation and hegemony, and critical studies on memory all serve to frame the analyses of the films. In the introduction, the author stresses her interest in examining Jewish filmmakers' own representations of their experiences with revolutionary politics. However, chapter one, "Saintly Politics: Christianity, Revolution, and Jews", takes a different approach by discussing the role of religion in Argentina's Third Cinema, Brazil's Cinema Novo, and Cuba's revolutionary cinema during the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, the introduction of these film movements coupled with the analyses of more recent works, such as White Elephant (Elefante blanco, Pablo Trapero, AR 2012), Machuca (Andrés Wood, CL 2004), and San Ernesto nace en la higuera (Isabel Santos / Rafael Solís, CU/BO 2007), leads Pridgeon to demonstrate that while religion informs revolutionary politics in Latin America, its paradoxical role both impedes and facilitates Jewish identification with revolutionary culture in the region. Of great significance here is her discussion of how Christian beliefs and culture are linked to Judaism. As Pridgeon astutely notes, "the points of contact between Jewish, Christian, and the secular are constantly in flux and come to bear on political practices in different ways" (35). As such, the first chapter serves as a starting point to ignite her discussion on how Jewish self-representations in Latin American cinema can convey the Jews' place in the revolutionary politics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter two, "Here We Are to Build a Nation: Jewish Immigrants to Early Twentieth-Century Latin America", explores Jewish self-representations through three documentaries, To Build a Homeland (Hacer patria, David Blaustein, AR 2007), Here We Are (Danken Got / Estamos aqui, Cintia Chamecki, BR 2013), and The Jewish Neighbourhood (El barrio de los Judíos, Gonzalo Rodríguez Fábregas, UY 2011), as well as a surrealist film, The Dance of Reality (La danza de la realidad, Alejandro Jodorowsky, CL 2013). Pridgeon contends that these films both facilitate Jews' participation in national projects and negotiate their belonging to their respective nations. In analysing Blaustein's documentary, a film that features mainly interviews with the filmmaker's family members, Pridgeon stresses two elements that shape

1 Levinas 2007.

the Blausteins' identity, namely citizenship and participation in the political sphere. It is through political participation, she explains, that the Blausteins can be seen as nation builders and claim their place in Argentina. Whereas her analysis of Chamecki's documentary centres on how Jewish immigrants made the city of Curitiba in Brazil their home through participation in politics, her reading of Rodríguez Fábregas's film points out the memories of the Jewish immigrants who settled in the Reus neighbourhood in Montevideo, Uruguay, and the interviewees' divergent views on Zionism. Pridgeon links the analyses of the documentaries by centring chiefly on the role of postmemory (the mediated transmission of memory between generations),[2] but her approach shifts slightly when analysing Jodorowsky's film, because she focuses on the theme of intergenerational tensions instead. Her reading of Jodorowsky's film is an illuminating discussion on Jewish citizenship in Chilean society. To conclude the chapter, Pridgeon underscores that all these films "represent Latin America's Jews as full-fledged citizens who do not live on the margins of society, but rather form part of the backbone of their nations" (85).

Chapter three, "*Poner el cuerpo femenino judío*: Jewish Women's Bodies and Revolutionary Movements", is devoted to the study of depictions of female Jews and their involvement in leftist politics in two fictional films, Like a Bride (Novia que te vea, Guita Schyfter, MX 1993) and My German Friend (El amigo alemán, Jeanine Meerapfel, AR 2012). Early in the chapter, Pridgeon makes it clear that Jewish women in these films do not place their bodies on the line for the causes in which they believe in the same way as their non-Jewish male partners do. Yet, as the author argues, cinematic representations emphasise that revolutionary and student movements were instrumental not only in negotiating these women's citizenship and belonging in the 1960s and 1970s but also in shaping their lives. Because the chapter examines only two films, more detailed discussions are provided than in the previous chapters. In Schyfter's film, Pridgeon's reading unveils issues related to Doris Sommer's foundational myth (the mixing of races and ethnicities through love relationships)[3] and José Vasconcelos's concept of *raza cósmica* (cosmic race),[4] two theories that have played a significant role in the discourse of Latin American cultural identity. In analysing Meerapfel's

2 Hirsch 2012.

3 Sommer 1993.

4 Vasconcelos 2003.

film, Pridgeon touches on the thorny issue of the coexistence of Nazis and Jews in 20th-century Argentina, showing how the Jewish female protagonist puts her body on the line for fighting against Nazism and anti-Semitism. The protagonist is in fact beaten for publishing a piece on the capture of Adolf Eichmann in the school newspaper. Pridgeon provides a convincing analysis of Meerapfel's film by mapping how the female lead at times puts and at other times avoids putting her body on the line for social and revolutionary movements that span two continents – the Latin American and the European – throughout the second half of the 20th century. The gender perspective that this chapter offers reveals the importance Jewish Latin American women are currently gaining in front of and behind the camera.

Chapter four, "Lost Embraces: Jewish Parent-Child Relationships and 1970s Politics", explores the films of a younger generation of Jewish filmmakers whose attention is also drawn to the political conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and Israel. As in her previous chapter, Pridgeon examines two films here, Lost Embrace (El abrazo partido, Daniel Burman, AR 2004) and The Year My Parents Went on Vacation (O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias, Cao Hamburger, BR 2006), both of which centre on childhood memories. Arguing that in these coming-of-age stories childhood is portrayed as an arena of political identification, the author sets out to explore "the ways in which Jewish parent-child relationships facilitate the transfer of memory and political affinities" (124). Although in Burman's film the protagonist is a young man in his twenties and in Hamburger's film the main character is a 12-year-old boy, Pridgeon skilfully demonstrates how the political involvement of the fathers – one in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the other in the fight against the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985) – has a direct impact not only on the childhood of both leads but also on the children's self-identification as a Jewish Argentine and a Jewish Brazilian, respectively.

The question of Jews' belonging and citizenship in Latin America has long preoccupied scholars of Jewish Latin American studies. By putting revolutionary politics and political identification at the centre of her study, Pridgeon opens up a new avenue to scrutinise cinematic representations of the Jews' place in Latin American societies. This well-researched volume is indeed a timely contribution that will be equally relevant for specialists and newcomers to the field.

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White Elephant (Elefante blanco, Pablo Trapero, AR 2012).

JRFM 2023, 9/2
CALL FOR PAPERS

Here Be Dragons

East Asian Film and Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is 15 February 2023. Contributions of 6,000-8,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register and consider the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the stylesheet. Publication is scheduled for November 2023. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Prof. Christian Wessely (christian.wessely@uni-graz.at), Prof. Franz Winter (franz.winter@uni-graz.at) or Prof. Yoshida Yukihiko (yukihiko.yoshida@keio.jp).

JRFM 2024, 10/1
CALL FOR PAPERS

The Handmaid's Tale

Connecting Literature, Film, Politics, and Religion

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

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

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

it is a source of hope and motivation for subverting the whole system. The Bible is also used in controversial ways, as a means of subjugation and as a text that enables resistance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

WWW.JRFM.EU
ISSN 2414-0201
c/o Institute for Fundamental Theology
Heinrichstrasse 78/B/1
A-8010 Graz – Austria

jrfm@uni-graz.at

SCHÜREN