

# JRFM

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2023 FILM  
09/02 MEDIA





**JRFM**

JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

2023  
09/02

Christian Wessely, Franz Winter, and Yukihiro Yoshida (eds.)

**Here Be Dragons**  
**East Asian Film and Religion**

**SCHÜREN**

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# JRFM

## JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

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

**JRFM** publishes peer-reviewed articles in English that focus on visual and audiovisual media, feature film, documentary, advertising, interactive internet-based media and other forms of communication in their interdependencies with contemporary or historical forms of religion. It critically reflects on theories and methods, studies on intermediality, phenomenological and comparative approaches to media and religion across different cultures and periods. The main focus lies on contemporary phenomena, but diachronic analysis of the interaction between religion, film and media is also promoted as an essential facet of study.

**JRFM** is edited by a network of international film, media and religion experts from different countries and with professional experience in research, teaching and publishing in an interdisciplinary setting, linking perspectives from the study of religion and theology, film, media, visual and cultural studies, and sociology. It was founded in cooperation between different institutions in Europe, particularly the University of Graz and the University of Zurich, and is published in cooperation with Schüren publishing house, Marburg (Germany). It is an online, open-access publication with print-on-demand as an option. It appears twice a year in May and November and encompasses generally 4–6 articles.

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# Now, Where Exactly Are the Dragons?

## Editorial

Although film production started in China as early as 1905, with *DINGJUN SHAN* (*DINGJUN MOUNTAIN*, Ren Jingfeng, CN 1905), the East Asian media landscape largely remained *terra incognita* for Western audiences for almost five more decades. Little of the remarkable output of its film industry was acknowledged. 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 followed US-American standards, found their way into Western cinemas. During the 1960s, the dependency on Western cultural criteria began to loosen, and all over Asia a self-confident media industry delivered an astonishing independent output with regard to form and content. And since the 1990s, South Korea has entered the stage with an ever-growing and lively film industry that has gained international acclaim.

Nowadays, the film industry is a vibrant element of East Asian popular culture that in the last decades has become increasingly important on a global level. Japanese and recently also South Korean and Chinese films and TV series have a growing and worldwide audience, not least because of easier access through streaming services. The fact that in 2020 the Korean film *KISAENGCH'UNG* (*PARASITE*, Bong Jun-ho, 2019) became the first ever non-English language film to receive the prestigious Academy Award for Best Picture is a vibrant sign of the development of this film industry and its growing importance on a global level. The many film productions provide a multifaceted arena for 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.

When we wrote the call for papers for this issue, we set out boldly into seas that had not previously been sailed by this journal. On a basic level, we asked for contributions on aspects of the multifaceted relationship between

religion and movies or TV series in East Asia. We were interested in how religion and religious traditions are portrayed in East Asian films, in what way characters and plots are guided by religious patterns and ideas, how religious iconography is used and referred to in the films, and to what extent films mirror recent changes in the religious landscape of East Asia.

(Too) little did we think about the definition of “East Asia” in our context. Admittedly, this may have been due to our expecting to receive just a handful of submissions. Reality has taught us an important lesson: expect the unexpected. For the first time, the JRFM had almost 20 submissions of articles, most of which were absolutely worth publishing (after a minor or, in a few cases, major brush-ups in the review process). We therefore had to select carefully, given the limited number of pages in our journal (the determining factor being the print version). Selection criteria included academic quality, regional distribution, significance for contemporary culture and relevance to the theme of the call for papers. Finally, we ended up with six articles on the specific topic and two for the open section.

The major aim was to give a dynamic and broad picture of the manifold varieties of the topic at the center of this issue – religion and religious themes in East Asian film and media productions – in regard to the country of origin of productions, but also in relation to genre and quality. Consequently, this issue brings together contributions on Japanese, Chinese and Korean films and includes one additional peek into South Asia, thereby presenting independent filmmakers and highly renowned classics as well as specimens of manga and anime, the cyberpunk genre, or on highly successful streaming series. We are aware that this is only a limited sample, but it provides at least a taste of a vast array of topics awaiting scholarly investigation.

We decided to start this issue with a contribution by Teng-Kuan Ng, a scholar of Religious Studies at the Singapore Management University. He illustrates the correlations between religious themes in Japanese traditions and societal developments during the post-World War II era through two seminal Japanese films (*SANSHO DAYU*, Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954, and *ONIBABA*, Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964). In exploring the critical as well as the constructive potentials of cinematic folklore, Ng’s approach is positioned somewhat in contrast to the mainstream of previous analytical perspectives. In both films women play a central role. This unusual configuration for Japanese society in the 1950s and 1960s allows the directors to conceive transformative models. In the wake of the lost war, the collective pain of socio-cultural dislocation, atomic destruction and traumatic violence (e.g. among victims

of imperial militarism and sex slavery) generated existential strategies amongst which “religious idealism and earthy realism” (Ng) are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Myths are powerful imaginaries that can bring these options together.

The contribution by Malte Frey, expert on media-specific visual analysis of anime at the University of Fine Arts in Münster, Germany, stems from the context of Japanese culture as well, albeit with a completely different focus. In his article “Cyber-Transcendence and Immanence as a Religio-Spiritual Phenomenon in Cyberpunk Anime”, Frey approaches Japanese cyberpunk culture using the example of the anime *KŌKAKU KIDŌTAI* (*GHOST IN THE SHELL*, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995). Visual fiction rooted within the cultural environment of Japan is rich with cyberpunk narratives, especially within the medium of anime. Cyberpunk emerged within the Western culture of US-American literature and film with novels like William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and movies like *BLADE RUNNER* (Ridley Scott, US 1982). However, US-Cyberpunk had huge impact in Japan due to the genre’s japanoid imaginary. Since then and even before, a wide variety of visual cyberpunk narratives has been and continues to be published in Japan in the form of anime. This article argues that Japanese cyberpunk fictions contain religious elements and suggest a transcendent sphere invoked by technology, which the author labels “cyber-transcendence”.

The article by Rehuél Nikolai Soriano, scholar of myths and archetypes at Luzon University, Philippines, deals with a specimen of the manga and anime production which forms an influential layer of the popular publication market particularly in Japan. The *Baki* series, originating with the manga *Baki, the Grappler* (*Gurappurā Baki*, 1991–1999) by Keisuke Itagaki, developed into a major franchise and became a cultural phenomenon with a substantial global fan base. It is known for its intense and sometimes highly violent fight scenes and its focus on martial arts, but it also explores a wide range of themes related to spirituality, religion, culture and society, including topics such as the quest for enlightenment and deep reflections on the nature of the human being and the cause of its existence. All that is closely intertwined with the East Asian martial arts tradition that has always been entangled with various religious and spiritual features that derive mostly from a Buddhist, Daoist or Shinto background. The author diligently explains and explores some key themes of the *Baki* series (focusing on the anime version) such as the importance of some spiritual figures (the “mythical Oni” or the “monster Mara”), which he contextualizes in the wider religious tradition

of Japan. By doing so he is able to isolate telling aspects of the manga series that were previously unexplored.

Another giant in the East Asian and, proportionally, the global media market is South Korea. In his contribution, Franz Winter, professor for religious studies at the University of Graz, Austria, introduces a recent major Korean streaming series which immediately became an impressive international success on its release in November 2021 (continuing the phenomenal triumph of the series *SQUID GAME* in the same year). The series *JIOK* (*HELLBOUND*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021) – the Korean *jiok* means, literally, *hell* – offers an intense and provocative plot which revolves around the mysterious appearance of fierce monstrous creatures in contemporary South Korea who arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way. This unexplained supernatural act is linked to the misdeeds of those who are punished in this heinous manner and therefore connects to general topics such as guilt and sin (of individuals, but also within society in general). The contribution looks principally at the portrayal of a (new) religious movement which plays a crucial role in the series, seeking to interpret its description and the conduct of its main actors within the broader socio-religious and cultural history of East Asia.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, China was the home of East Asian film pioneers. This volume would therefore be incomplete without a comprehensive contribution on a specific topic from that area. Jing Li, doctoral candidate at Stony Brook University, USA, draws on the work of one of the most interesting younger directors of contemporary China, Gan Xiaō'er, whose films deal with Christianity and the daily lives of Christians, mainly in rural China. With this specific focus, Gan has produced a rather unique œuvre and gained an international reputation as an eminent independent filmmaker. He became known with his debut film, *SHANQING SHUOXIU* (*THE ONLY SONS*, 2002), which describes the desperate situation of poor rural farmers and their horrible living conditions caused by the current post-socialist economic situation. Against this background, the story of a Christian preacher unfolds, who, arriving in the small village, introduces a totally new mode of thinking to the protagonist (which eventually will prove not to have helped him). This particular focus on Christianity was even more important in Gan's next film, *JU ZI CHENTU* (*RAISED FROM DUST*, 2007), which presents an intimate portrayal of lives of Christians in rural China. As this film was made without official permits and has value, in fact, as a documentary, it provides unique insight. The rather positive evaluation of Christian-

ity is somewhat problematized with Gan's third feature film, ZAI QIDAI ZHI ZHONG (WAITING FOR GOD, 2012), where he draws on Simone Weil's critical stance towards the supposed "sense of coercion" in the Christian tradition. Altogether Gan is introduced as an engaged filmmaker highly interested in Christianity on an intellectual level, which is mirrored in aesthetic aspects of his films, as this contribution diligently explores.

In this section, the final article discusses a region where some of the religious traditions of East Asia have their historical roots: the Indian subcontinent, which boasts an impressive cultural, religious and social diversity. The primary mode of cinema as far as Europe (and likely beyond) is concerned remains the commercially influential "Bollywood". But other forms delve deeply into the tensions arising from diversity, particularly in relation to linguistic minorities and narratives in indigenous and regional cultures. Sreeram Gopalkrishnan and Lekshmi Sreeram demonstrate this in their analysis of the film THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965), exposing its linguistic underpinnings with respect to the Tamil language and Hindu gods. In the realm of Indian devotional cinema, a recurring template contains a fusion of theophanic interventions, bhakti (devotion) rituals and didactic storytelling. THIRUVILAYADAL, a Tamil-language film, has traditionally been lauded as a celebration of the deity Shiva. Yet the movie ingeniously challenges the darshan (act of viewing) principle inherent in Hindu devotional films. Despite the film's outward portrayal as a tribute to mythic Hindu gods, its subtext humbles celestial beings to a supplicative stance before a cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil state, namely the Tamil language. In the context of the growing rigidity within contemporary Hindu religious convictions in India, a nuanced comprehension of THIRUVILAYADAL assumes particular significance.

## Open Section

In the Open Section, we are happy to feature two scholars who offer unusual approaches to the religious dimensions of media that are a substantial part of our everyday: music and video games.

Fritz Treiber, musician and Senior Scientist at the University of Graz, Austria, has an admitted personal weakness for metal music. Observing that in public perceptions heavy metal music sometimes is connoted with satanism, Treiber analyzes two independent movies to show how their narratives

portray the devil utilizing rock music to manipulate people. He points out that the genre-specific exploration of topics such as evil, murder, suicide and so forth is a strategy for coping with everyday life. Interestingly, he concludes that although the devil is nowadays more or less obsolete in heavy metal music, he still plays a significant role in contemporary movies and series.

Frank Bosman, Senior Researcher at Tilburg University, the Netherlands, discusses four games which are based on a religious topic. Nowadays, computer games openly featuring a Christian, particularly biblical, setting are typically not what one would classify as blockbusters. Yet these games can grant deeper insight into the socio-religious contexts of the society they were created for and also shed light on changed perceptions of holy texts. Bosman discusses four games that are based on one of the most impressive biblical stories: the story of Noah and his Ark, also known as the Deluge, according to Genesis 6–8. The author provides an analysis and overall comparison of the four games in terms of theology and religious studies. His intriguing results suggest a certain timidity towards the role of God and also towards the “horror of the original story” (Bosman), which is one of the main points of the biblical account, thus changing (and maybe pruning back) its power significantly.

For the concluding review section, we have selected four intriguing contributions, authored by established scholars, each focusing on a media product that is both innovative and inspirational. For the first time, we include here a dance performance review, marking a stimulating expansion of our established perspective on the theme of media.

The process of creating this issue was not exactly relaxed. But this challenge is faced by every publication that tries to cover different cultures, different styles, different languages and, of course, different approaches to the topic of religion. The editors would like to express their gratitude to Br. Nikodemus Glöbl OFM, Martin Wildberger and, most of all, Natalie Fritz for their essential support. Rona Johnston has done an excellent job as always, even though the copyediting process was not only more challenging but also more voluminous than usual. It would be impossible to publish this journal without all this background work.

Please feel welcome to respond, provide comments and, naturally, craft articles regarding any aspects that you, our esteemed scholarly reader, believe to be crucial if we are to uncover those elusive dragons that we are only just beginning to glimpse.

## Filmography

BLADE RUNNER (Ridley Scott, US 1982).

DINGJUN SHAN (DINGJUN MOUNTAIN, Ren Jingfeng, CN 1905).

JIOK (HELLBOUND, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021).

JU ZI CHENTU (RAISED FROM DUST, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007).

KISAENGCH'UNG (PARASITE, Bong Jun-ho, 2019).

KŌKAKU KIDŌTAI (GHOST IN THE SHELL, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995).

OJING-ŏ GEIM (SQUID GAME, Hwang Tong-hyŏk, KR 2021).

ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964).

SANSHO DAYU (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954).

SHANQING SHUIXIU (THE ONLY SONS, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2002).

THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965).

ZAI QIDAI ZHI ZHONG (WAITING FOR GOD, Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012).



# After Great Pain

## The Uses of Religious Folklore in Kenji Mizoguchi's SANSHO THE BAILIFF (JP 1954) and Kaneto Shindo's ONIBABA (JP 1964)

### Abstract

This article studies the adaptations and applications of religious folklore in two masterworks of Japanese cinema: Kenji Mizoguchi's *SANSHO DAYU* (*SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, JP 1954) and Kaneto Shindo's *ONIBABA* (JP 1964). While academic approaches will often draw a strict line between narrative genres and discursive forms, these films, I argue, draw creatively from Japanese tradition for both critical and constructive purposes in the postwar context. Besides mounting trenchant criticisms of Japan's erstwhile militaristic violence and imperial ambitions, both filmmakers present their respective female protagonists as models for spiritual and sociocultural transformation in the face of anomie. Embodying humanistic compassion on the one hand and ontogenetic eros on the other, the two women compose complementary poles for reconstruction amidst the painful aftermath of war.

### Keywords

Buddhism and Film, Japanese Cinema, Kaneto Shindo, Kenji Mizoguchi, *ONIBABA*, Religious Folklore, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*

### Biography

Teng-Kuan Ng is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in the College of Integrative Studies, Singapore Management University. He received his Ph.D. in Theological and Religious Studies from Georgetown University. His research focuses on the interdisciplinary study of religion and film, particularly in East Asian contexts. He also works in the areas of Buddhist studies, Chinese and comparative philosophy, and World Christianity. He is currently working on a monograph that explores the ways that cinema mediates the diffusion and practice of Buddhist wisdom in contemporary China.

## Introduction

After great pain, how does one come to terms with the world again? In the wake of terrible trauma, where does a society turn for hope and healing? According to the cultural historian Yoshikuni Igarashi, after the Second World War Japan “desperately sought narratives of historical continuity that could encompass and transcend the loss it had endured”, narratives capable of reckoning with the past while providing direction for the future.<sup>1</sup> These narratives were often located in cultural productions such as film and literature, which, more than formal religion or partisan politics, provided a wide platform for critical and constructive discourses. Building on Igarashi’s identification of popular media as a site of crucial sociopolitical and existential import in postwar Japan, this article compares two retellings of religious folklore in Japanese cinema: *SANSHO DAYU* (*SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954) and *ONIBABA* (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964).

*SANSHO THE BAILIFF* is based on a Mori Ogai (1862–1922) short story from 1915, itself a variation of a legend that traces its roots to medieval Japan. *ONIBABA*, meanwhile, is adapted from *The Mask of Flesh*, an old Buddhist fable that belongs to a larger constellation of folktales centered on the figure of the onibaba, or “demon hag”.<sup>2</sup> While both films are commonly viewed in the West as works of rarefied art cinema, this image was relatively muted during their release and reception in postwar Japan. Like Kenji Mizoguchi’s two preceding films – *SAIKAKU ICHIDAI ONNA* (*THE LIFE OF OHARU*, JP 1952) and *UGETSU MONOGATARI* (*TALES OF THE MOON AND RAIN*, JP 1953) – *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* won a top prize at the prestigious Venice Film Festival. Even so, it was billed by Daiei Studios as a melodrama, conforming to what Japanese audiences had come to associate with Mizoguchi from his prewar movies. Likewise, though *ONIBABA* was an independent film made at the Kindai Eiga Kyokai (Modern Film Association), it was commercially distributed by Toho Studios and proved highly successful at the box office.

Some might hesitate to treat films’ texts as folklore due to their non-traditional mode of transmission. In Mikel J. Koven’s estimation, cinema remains “tangential and an adjunct to the main tenants of folkloristics”.<sup>3</sup> While there

1 Igarashi 2000, 12.

2 See Mayer 1986, 102–111.

3 Koven 2003, 190. Subsequent exceptions include Sherman/Koven 2007; Koven 2008; Greenhill 2012. In these works, however, the focus falls overwhelmingly on Western cinema and folklore, with scant attention paid to East Asian films and religion.

are often good methodological reasons for the way that disciplinary horizons are drawn, this article stresses instead the interdisciplinary interrelations between ancient folklore and modern cinema, especially in the ways that both forms of narrative converge in what Marilyn Ivy calls a “temporal structure of deferral, of loss and recovery”.<sup>4</sup> Rather than being beholden to a single definition of what folklore or religion should be, it would be more productive to consider how manifestations of religious folklore in popular media function like folklore and religion – and how they engage conventions and sensibilities that have been pre-shaped by the earlier narratives in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

Traditional stories like Momotaro (“The Peach Boy”) were used before and during the war to inculcate nationalism among the populace, but what do Mizoguchi’s and Shindo’s cinematic folktales reveal about the ideological and religious discourses animating postwar Japan?<sup>6</sup> Given that Shindo acknowledges his mentor Mizoguchi as his “principal influence”, what similarities and differences can we observe between these two films, perhaps in light of their philosophical worldviews or their attitudes toward Japanese history and tradition?<sup>7</sup> And while Durkheimian paradigms cast folklore and religion as essentially tools for maintaining social and cultural stability, to what extent does religious folklore actually play this role in a context of radical anomie?<sup>8</sup> Pursuing these lines of inquiry, this article argues that both *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* deploy the folkloric form to critique Japan’s erstwhile militarism as the cause of postwar trauma while simultaneously reinterpreting nostalgic ideals of Japaneseness for spiritual and cultural reconstruction.

The first section of this article discusses the provenance of the films’ folkloric narratives. I pay attention not only to the directors’ approaches to their sources, but also to the function and message of these sources in their original contexts. The second section analyzes the films’ critical functions, grounded in their subversion of key motifs in their sources to convey Japan’s

4 Ivy 1995, 67.

5 See Bird 1996, 346 for a similar argument. See also Plate 2017 and Lyden 2019 for broadly functionalist and pragmatic understandings of the interrelations between religion and cinema.

6 On the nativist and ethnocentric uses of the *Momotaro* tale to enshrine the heroic “Japanese spirit”, see Antoni 1991.

7 See Wakeman 1987, 1021.

8 See Bascom 1954; Durkheim 2001; Hausner 2013.

dual role as both perpetrator and victim of suffering. *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* suggests that Japan's cruelty toward conquered territories during the war led to the spiritual enslavement of its own citizens, while *ONIBABA* blames imperial ambition and arrogance as the root causes of Japan's atomic devastation. Finally, in the third section I examine the films' constructive functions through the lens of their female protagonists. For Mizoguchi, Anju – exemplifying his ideal of the virtuous, self-sacrificial woman – betokens the hope to be found in humanistic compassion. But for Shindo, it is a lusty, anti-heroic old woman who represents the indefatigable will to survive, however scarred or blighted the present may be.

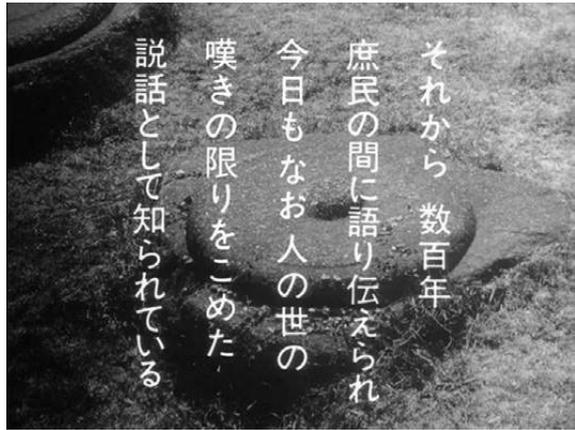
## Origins

*SANSHO THE BAILIFF* opens with two evocative shots of stony, grassy ruins. An intertitle frames its narrative as an ancient legend that “has been retold by the people for centuries, treasured today as one of the epic folktales of history” (see fig. 1). Variations of this tale, sometimes known as The Legend of Anju and Zushio, began circulating during the medieval and early Edo periods, such as in the form of “sermon-ballads” (*sekkyo bushi*) sung by itinerant priests and blind minstrels.<sup>9</sup> The narrative's basic structure revolves around the trials and tribulations of two siblings. Though they are from a noble family, Anju and Zushio become enslaved as children after a series of misfortunes. In the compound, the slaves suffer under a cruel bailiff named Sansho. After many years, and through courage and sacrifice, Zushio finally escapes. At the story's end, he is restored to nobility and assumes high office. In these incarnations, even as it entertained, the legend was a morality tale with didactic and hortatory functions. Besides upholding Buddhist teachings on karma and the importance of faith, the versions of this tale were also encouragements “meant for a dispossessed people who could identify with the characters or with their plight”.<sup>10</sup> A syncretistic variant of the tale, discovered in the region of Tsugaru in rural northeastern Japan, culminates in Anju's fantastical apotheosis and ends with this message: “Without undergoing so much suffering, one can't become a deity, and so, human

9 For detailed accounts of the *sekkyo bushi* genre and premodern versions of the legend, see Ishii 1989 and Matisoff 1992, from which the term “sermon ballad” comes.

10 Andrew 2000, 49.

Fig. 1: “It has been retold by the people for centuries, and it is treasured today as one of the epic folktales of history.” Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:02:35.



beings, that is why you should hold firm faith to the gods.”<sup>11</sup> In their original contexts, the premodern legends also served what William R. Bascom terms the projective and validatory functions of folklore in culture.<sup>12</sup> Through the gruesome retribution that Sansho receives – he is buried in sand for three days before being decapitated with a bamboo saw – wandering outcasts and indigents gave vent to resentment against feudal oppression.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the tale basically affirmed the prevailing social order of its day: Zushio is reinstated to nobility when he becomes a provincial governor at the end.

While Mizoguchi was probably familiar with famous medieval versions of the legend, his inspiration for *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* came from Ogai’s modern retelling. This brings a doubled complexity to the film’s provenance. In *Rekishi sono mama to rekishi banare* (*History as It Is and History Ignored*), an essay often read as an afterword to his short story, Ogai reveals that he wrote “without examining the legend in too much detail”, and instead allowed himself to be “taken by a dreamlike image of this story that seems

- 11 See Susan Matisoff and Jeffrey Angles’ translation of this tale – titled “An Account of the Life of the Deity of Mount Iwaki” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*.
- 12 Bascom 1954, 348. In this landmark study, Bascom delineates four essential functions of folklore. First, it serves as a “projective system”, allowing legitimate outlets for repressed desires and emotions. Second, it plays a key role in “validating culture”, legitimizing its social institutions and rituals. Third, it plays a pedagogical role. And fourth, it promotes and enforces conformity to established norms of behavior.
- 13 Matisoff 1992, 250; Barrett 1989, 144.

itself a dream”.<sup>14</sup> At first blush, the looseness of Ogai’s adaptation may seem to compromise the film’s folkloric vintage. Yet these concerns dissipate in view of the structure, function, and reception of Ogai’s story.

First, whether in terms of plot or character, his story is in fact largely faithful to the medieval legend. The differences (which I discuss later) lie in the details and underlying messages. Second, by exalting “lost virtues and values that depended on a rigid social hierarchy and conservative views of women” and presenting “correctives to the liberal excesses of his day”, Ogai’s tale – like its oral source – squarely performs the validatory, pedagogical, and disciplinary roles that Bascom observes in classic folklore.<sup>15</sup> And third, because of its literary success and widespread popularity, Ogai’s story is effectively the definitive version of the folktale, so much so that it is lauded as a “true, touching picture of ancient and modern Japan” and of “the native Japanese spirit at its best”.<sup>16</sup>

Mizoguchi got the idea of adapting Ogai’s short story from his friend the director Daisuke Ito. During the 1930s and wartime years, Mizoguchi made several propaganda films and even travelled to China with the army to work with the Shochiku-China Film Company. Noel Burch takes these films as signs of Mizoguchi’s “ideological plasticity”.<sup>17</sup> But Shindo’s interviews with Mizoguchi’s closest collaborators in *ARU EIGA KANTOKU NO SHOGAI: MIZOGUCHI KENJI NO KIROKU* (*KENJI MIZOGUCHI: THE LIFE OF A FILM DIRECTOR*, Kaneto Shindo, JP 1975) paint a nuanced portrait of him as torn between the need to survive as a filmmaker and the desire to maintain artistic and personal integrity in a difficult situation.<sup>18</sup> *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* screenwriter Yoshikata Yoda notes that after the war, Mizoguchi was not fully persuaded by the new democracy proclaimed by the American occupation. As Japan reeled from the economic, political, and cultural impacts of its defeat – a defeat still raw in the minds of its populace in the early 1950s – Mizoguchi felt that the way forward lay in the transformation and evolution of Japanese tradition. It was against this background that he decided to retell the *Sansho* legend.

Like *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, *ONIBABA* opens in a patently folkloric register. Before the title appears, the camera comes to rest on a hole in the middle of

14 Mori 1991a, 182.

15 Cavanaugh 2000, 19.

16 Mori 1970, v, ix.

17 Burch 1979, 276.

18 See also *TONY RAYNS ON SANSHO DAYU* (*Masters of Cinema*, GB 2007).



Fig. 2: “The hole ... Deep and dark... A dark passageway from ancient times to the present.” Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 00:01:05.

a patch of grass. An enigmatic pronouncement reads, “The hole ... Deep and dark ... A dark passageway from ancient times to the present” (see fig. 2). The sense of primeval mystery conveys the antique and legendary nature of the tale about to unfold. Shindo explains that the film was inspired by *The Mask of Flesh*, a fable derived from a compendium of medieval Buddhist tales titled *Ofumi*.<sup>19</sup> Written by Rennyo (1415–1499), the charismatic Shin Buddhist patriarch credited for the popularization of Jodo Shinshu, these tales taught Buddhist precepts to commoners in understandable terms. The moral of the story in *The Mask of Flesh* is simple. A crusty, elderly mother-in-law dons a demon mask to scare her pious, widowed daughter-in-law out of visiting the temple frequently. But the plan backfires. The mask magically sticks to the older woman’s face – and comes off only when she chants the *nembutsu* (an invocation of the Amida Buddha) in contrition.<sup>20</sup> In this fable, regular piety and faith in the Buddha are squarely commended.

Shindo’s deployment of the folktale lies at the intersection of two trajectories in his own artistic development and mirrors the evolving concerns of postwar Japanese society. On the one hand, *ONIBABA* belongs to a series of works that explore the aftermath of the 1945 atomic bombings. Starting with the screenplay he wrote for *NAGASAKI NO KANE* (*THE BELL OF NAGASA-*

19 See Shindo’s essay – titled “Waving Susuki Fields” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *ONIBABA*.

20 See Reina Higashitani and Moto Tohda’s translation of this tale – titled “A Mask with Flesh Scared a Wife” – in the booklet accompanying the Criterion release of *ONIBABA*.

KI, Hideo Oba, JP 1950), Shindo, who was born in Hiroshima in 1912, also directed films like *GENBAKU NO KO* (*CHILDREN OF HIROSHIMA*, JP 1952), *DAIGO FUKUYRU MARU* (*LUCKY DRAGON NO. 5*, JP 1958), and *HONNO* (*LOST SEX*, JP 1966). With *ONIBABA*, these films constitute what some film scholars view as “the most important and undervalued body of work dealing with the atomic bomb in Japanese cinema”.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the production of *ONIBABA* in 1964 falls near the beginning of Shindo’s turn to the theme of human sexuality, a theme that Japanese New Wave contemporaries like Nagisa Oshima, Yasuzo Masumura, and Shohei Imamura also unabashedly pursued. Where earlier works like *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* often wrestled with the war’s immediate consequences, New Wave works also grappled with fresh issues that had arisen from further processes of social differentiation and cultural transformation. After *HAHA* (*MOTHER*, JP 1963) and *ONIBABA* (1964), Shindo made *AKUTOU* (*SCOUNDREL*, JP 1965), *HONNO* (*LOST SEX*, JP 1966), *SEI NO KIGEN* (*LIBIDO*, JP 1967), and *YABU NO NAKA NO KURONEKO* (*A BLACK CAT IN A BAMBOO GROVE*, JP 1968). Based on Shindo’s confessed view that sex is the “very foundation of human life”, these films use human sexuality as a prism through which to view basic existential questions on “how human beings live”.<sup>22</sup> Driven by these two overarching trajectories at play in Japan’s postwar environment, Shindo turned to ancient folklore like *The Mask of Flesh* for illumination. As he explains in an interview with Joan Mellen, he sought in particular to adapt fables with “universal and modern implications” that could help with “reevaluating primitive man’s energy and identity”.<sup>23</sup>

## Critique

According to Bascom, classic folklore is characterized by a “basic paradox”: even while it provides cathartic relief for societal repressions, its ultimate function lies in “transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them”.<sup>24</sup> For Mizoguchi and Shin-

21. Lowenstein 2005, 83. For a succinct biography of Shindo’s life and career, see Bickerton 2012.

22. See *KANETO SHINDO ON ONIBABA* (The Criterion Collection, US 2003).

23. Mellen 1975, 91.

24. Bascom 1954, 349.

do, however, the key paradox no longer lies in the interplay between sublimated wishful thinking, cultural validation, and the disciplines of power. Instead, it lies in the ways that both filmmakers simultaneously recall and subvert traditional cultural paradigms for critical as well as constructive purposes. In this section, I focus on how their cinematic folktales critique Japan's twin role as perpetrator and victim of suffering.

*SANSHO THE BAILIFF* alters Ogai's folktale at key junctures to expose Japan's militaristic violence as the cause of its citizens' spiritual devastation both during and after the war. The opening intertitles state that the story is set in the late Heian period (794–1185), "an era when mankind had not yet awakened as human beings". Given that postwar films were almost always concerned with the transformation of Japan into a democratic society, audiences would have understood these words as an invitation to political allegoresis. Mark Le Fanu notes, as well, that *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* serves as an allegorical commentary on the war, with "the cruelties of the medieval slave compound interchanging metaphorically and seamlessly with the yet more terrible cruelties of the modern concentration camps".<sup>25</sup>

The film amplifies the family's suffering at points where Ogai's story feels muted. In earlier versions of the legend (including Ogai's), Tamaki, the children's mother, simply spends her days fending off birds from a field after being separated from her family. But in the film, she is first trafficked by slave traders to a brothel – mirroring the plight of countless "comfort women", both Japanese and non-Japanese, who were forced into sex slavery during the war. About midway through the film, when she is caught escaping to find her children, her tendons are severed to prevent her from escaping again. After protracted sequences of futile struggle and anguished cries for mercy, the vicious operation takes place off-screen, signaled by Tamaki's blood-curdling shriek and the other prostitutes' turning of their faces. The shot composition here can only gesture toward the unspeakable trauma suffered by victims of sex slavery.

The film is also unflinching in depicting the physical torture and spiritual degradation of the slave compounds. In the oldest versions of the folktale, slaves caught escaping are punished by branding.<sup>26</sup> In Ogai's version, though Anju and Zushio both have dreams of being branded, branding never actually takes place anywhere within the story; it is only proclaimed as a threat.

25 Le Fanu 2013.

26 Mori 1991a, 182.



Fig. 3: Sansho's son Taro refuses to brand a slave and withdraws into the background. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:32:48.



Fig. 4: Zushio, his heart now hardened and disenchanted, steps up to brand a slave under Sansho's approving eyes. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 00:44:10.

Mizoguchi retrieves the explicit depiction of torture present in oral variants of the tale. *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* uses off-screen diegesis again for two key shots of torture: when Sansho himself brands an old slave called Namiji early on, and when the grown-up Zushio brands another old slave caught escaping. The violence of slavery assumes spiritual proportions. In all other versions of the folktale the children maintain their childlike purity despite their vicissitudes. Only in Mizoguchi's film does Zushio fall from innocence. His heart gradually becomes callused from the injustice of their fate. By doing what Sansho's son Taro had refused (branding runaway slaves), Zushio performs and internalizes the cruel ideology of his captors. Via two parallel sequences that play on the positioning of Sansho/Taro and Zushio/Sansho within the frame (see fig. 3 and fig. 4), the cinematography casts Zushio

as Sansho's spiritual heir.<sup>27</sup> Even the womenfolk in the compound gossip, "He must be the son of a bandit." More than abandoning his noble origins, Zushio renounces the principle of compassion that his father, Masauji, had imparted: "A man is not a human being without mercy. Even if you are hard on yourself, be merciful to others. Men are created equal. Everyone is entitled to their happiness."

With these modifications, Mizoguchi imbues the original folktale with richer religious significance. The film now tells the journey of the fall and redemption of a human soul, in turn metonymic of the larger Japanese body politic. This politico-religious discourse is further evident in two other crucial modifications. The first detail concerns the culprit who sells Tamaki and her children into slavery. In Ogai's tale, they are tricked by a sailor named Yamaoka Tayu, who first appears holding a Buddhist rosary in his hands. But in Mizoguchi's film, the culprit is a Shinto priestess who cunningly invites them to spend the night at her shrine. Her identity as an icon of Shintoism is clear from her priestly garb, the background altar, and the shide, or paper streamers, adorning her quarters. Just as Shinto was disgraced after the war for its "legitimation of the prewar state and [...] state-sponsored myths of the cultural identity of the Japanese people", by making this modification Mizoguchi pointedly critiques the nation-state's abuse of religion for causing the pain and enslavement of many.<sup>28</sup>

Second, whereas in Ogai's tale Masauji gives his children a statue of the Jizo bodhisattva as a keepsake, in Mizoguchi's film it is a statue of Kannon – the bodhisattva of compassion – that is passed down. In the former, Jizo represents supernatural protection; in the latter, Kannon embodies the activist mercy that guides the family's destiny. When Zushio hurls the Kannon statue to the ground, decries its impotence, and declares that "it's better to be loyal to the bailiff and get on his good side", what we witness is a heart that has grown weary of virtue, that has renounced religious idealism for harsh realpolitik. Just as a disillusioned Zushio has strayed from his father's doctrine, militaristic Japan, too, has forsaken her forefathers' spiritual heritage.

Following in his mentor's footsteps, in *ONIBABA* Shindo transforms a straightforward folktale of Buddhist faith into a keen critique of Japan's militarist past. To begin with, whereas the widowed daughter-in-law and moth-

27 Carole Cavanaugh makes a similar observation; see Cavanaugh 2000, 22–23.

28 Hardacre 1991, 133.

er-in-law are named (Kiyō and Omoto) in *The Mask of Flesh*, they are conspicuously nameless in *ONIBABA*. Denying them proper names, Shindo casts them as archetypes of the countless common folk whose lives have been blighted by the war. Mirroring their lives amidst endless susuki fields – these fields of enormous reeds allow them to hide, kill, and survive – their anonymity reveals the film’s focus on those “totally abandoned, outside society’s political protection”. As Shindo explains, the “tall, dense, swaying reeds represent the world in which these commoners live and to which the eyes of lords and politicians do not reach. My eyes, or rather, the camera’s eye is fixed to view the world from the very lowest level of society, not from the top.”<sup>29</sup>

The mask in the mother-in-law’s ruse further advances the film’s politico-religious discourse. In the older fable, Omoto’s mask is a family heirloom that she already owns. It is simply a prop that she uses to frighten Kiyō and does not signify much else. In *ONIBABA*, however, the older woman comes to possess the demon mask via somewhat tortuous means. After orchestrating a masked samurai general’s plunge to death, she descends to the bottom of the pit – strewn with the remains of others whom she and her daughter-in-law plundered – to rip the mask from his face. The motivations behind this act are laden with allegorical import. The older woman’s decision to murder the samurai arises, for one, from her vengeful protest against the ruling classes and the suffering that their wars have brought to commoners. When pretending to lead him toward the path to Kyoto, she taunts, “Did you cause many soldiers to die? A cruel thing. The dead died in vain. The dead can never come back to life.” Within Japan’s postwar context, this is clearly an indictment of the ruling classes, whose imperialist ambitions caused the demise of troops and innocent civilians.

Moments later, watching the samurai fall into the abyss, she snarls, “Serves you right. Men like you killed my son!” Glaring down into the hole while making this pronouncement, she stares straight at the camera positioned for an extreme low angle shot (see fig. 5) – as if she were addressing, in a stark reversal of power dynamics, the disgraced militarists of wartime Japan.

Her decision to kill the samurai general also arises from an intense desire to see his face. As they walk through the susuki fields, he shares that his real reason for wearing a mask is not so that he can look fierce, but rather because he fears marring his face – “the most beautiful face in Kyoto” – in bat-

29 Mellen 1975, 80.



Fig. 5: In an extreme low angle shot, the old woman gazes down into the hole and snarls at the fallen samurai general, “Serves you right. Men like you killed my son!” Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:11:40.



Fig. 6: Unmasking the samurai general’s “most beautiful face”. Shindo used photographs of maimed hibakusha (survivors of atomic bombing) to design the disfigured faces of the samurai and the old woman at the film’s end. Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:15:59.

tle. He haughtily dismisses her repeated pleas to see his face, claiming that she would be unable to bear beholding his glorious countenance, that his is “not a face to show peasants”. This exchange constitutes a commentary on the prewar imperial cult. Were not the Japanese people, too, forbidden from seeing the face of the divine emperor? And were not countless soldiers sacrificed in the name of mythologized, nativist Beauty? The commentary climaxes when the older woman eventually pries the mask off the general’s corpse, only to reveal a face hideously disfigured by scars and boils (see fig. 6). After recovering from a moment of shock, she sarcastically remarks, “So this is the most beautiful face?” Arguably, this movement from denoue-

ment to surprise to scorn mirrors the psychic aftermath of the infamous *gyokuon hoso*, or “jewel voice broadcast”. This radio broadcast, declaring Japan’s surrender after the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, was the first time that the nation heard their emperor’s voice. Yet, due to Hirohito’s alien royal diction and circumlocutory message, it led not to awe but instead to confusion, bewilderment, and politico-religious disenchantment. Further, via the older woman’s final words to the general’s corpse (“You caused others to die. You deserve this punishment”), Shindo expresses his view – as he did in *CHILDREN OF HIROSHIMA* – that “Japan, who is guilty of her own share of wartime atrocities, bears equal responsibility for what happened at Hiroshima”.<sup>30</sup>

ONIBABA’S politico-religious critique emerges through a third crucial alteration: rather than regularly visiting the temple because she had “found meaning in her life” through Rennyō’s teachings,<sup>31</sup> the young woman in the film sneaks out at night for trysts with her lover, Hachi, a former neighbor who has returned from the same war that killed her husband. The symbolism of the susuki fields comes to the fore here. During the day, the three go through the motions of hunting, fishing, and washing by the grassy riverbanks, exchanging suggestive glances disclosing the triangular desire between them (the older woman lusts for Hachi herself). At night, the young woman races through the fields, now dark and foreboding, to Hachi’s hut for their regular romps. By day or by night, “whether moving like big waves, or slowly, or forcefully”, the ubiquitous swaying grass, Shindo explains, “symbolically represents sexual desires and emotions”. In this world, the mother-in-law is punished not for attempting to hinder religious piety, but rather for blocking the natural ebb and flow of eros, an “innate spiritual part of humanity”.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to *Omoto in The Mask of Flesh*, the older woman in *ONIBABA* is far more complex. She is, as Adam Lowenstein puts it, “the key that unlocks the film’s ambivalent presentation of victimization and war responsibility”.<sup>33</sup> By using the samurai’s mask to empower herself and restore the status quo (the younger woman’s affair with Hachi threatens her survival, for she is unable to kill and plunder alone), she has – like *Zushio* – internalized the meth-

30 Mellen 1976, 202.

31 See footnote 20.

32 See footnote 19.

33 Lowenstein 2005, 87.

ods of her oppressors. Though a widow acquainted with sexual frustration herself, she inflicts on her daughter-in-law the same crime of “reproductive oppression” that she has suffered under the ruling classes, whose war “destroys the masses in a way more sinister than outright killing: the sexual drive itself is perverted when families are torn apart”.<sup>34</sup> Her identification with the psychology of her oppressors is further seen in her abuse of religious rhetoric. Just as during the war “myth, legend, and fairy-tale materials that were once independent [...] were gathered together into a homogeneous whole to serve a political and legitimizing purpose”, the older woman exploits Buddhist doctrines of hell and moral injunctions against fornication (“a great priest said so”) to baptize her agenda with an aura of sanctity.<sup>35</sup> At work here, altogether, is a self-reflexive statement on the nature and function of the folkloric mode. Using photographs of maimed hibakusha (survivors of atomic bombing) to design the disfigured faces of the samurai and the older woman, Shindo hints at the catastrophic consequences that can arise when folklore’s validator powers are misused.<sup>36</sup>

## Reconstruction

Up till this point, I have shown how *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* adapt traditional folktales to mount penetrating critiques of postwar Japan’s physical and spiritual desolation. But as Dudley Andrew reminds us, folklore and legends also “store primitive power that can be called up as required but that no adaptation exhausts”.<sup>37</sup> This final section investigates the riches of “primitive power” harnessed in these two filmic folktales. Specifically, I examine the ways that they nostalgically depict, for the sake of spiritual reconstruction in the face of anomie, a “Japan as created by a ‘pre-existent people’ [that] challenges modern Japan to resemble their ancient ancestors”.<sup>38</sup>

Like the medieval legends that gave cheer and solace to the dispossessed, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*’s opening shots of ruined pillars adumbrate the hope that persists even in devastation. Though the structure that they once supported

34 McDonald 2006, 119.

35 Antoni 1991, 156.

36 Lowenstein 2005, 87.

37 Andrew 2000, 44.

38 Andrew 2000, 44.

is no longer present, there remain traces of its foundations, foundations that perchance provide a blueprint for rebuilding a blighted nation and its culture. The will to retrieve wisdom from the past is signaled by several recurrent motifs. In the opening scenes, as Tamaki travels with her brood to Tsukushi to reunite with their exiled father, Masauji, the editing uses many fades and dissolves. More than establishing background information for narrative coherence, the repeated flashbacks frame the film's spiritual vision in a mnemonic register. Consider the sequence where a past scene of Masauji's humiliation (for trying to protect the peasants despite having been stripped of his governorship) dissolves into a present shot of Tamaki by a stream. Here, her gentle scooping of water betokens the re-collection of old virtue from the recesses of time.

The salvific power of memory is most powerfully conveyed in the two parallel scenes where the siblings gather twigs. The first occurs during their childhood, when their hearts are still bright and upright. They are gathering straw and grass to spend the night, right before they are unwittingly delivered into slavery. The second unfolds when they are young adults. Zushio's heart has grown cold and hardened from years of slavery, and they are gathering twigs to keep the sick Namiji warm even as she is left to die in the mountains. The synchronistic recapitulation of this activity – on both occasions, they fall to the ground after breaking a branch together – triggers Zushio's repentance. His second fall reminds him of who he used to be and who he must again aspire to become. At the end of both sequences, Tamaki's heart-rending voice calls for their return; it is a “mother's cry [...] to reawaken in those who hearken to it a memory” of nobility and virtue.<sup>39</sup> In concert with the religious significance of names in traditional Japanese folktales,<sup>40</sup> Zushio's redemption is sealed when he receives a new name at the film's end: Masamichi, meaning “righteous path”.

Where does this “righteous path” lead? The answer – the core of the film's constructive spiritual power – lies in two characters who each represent a nostalgic nativist ideal. First there is Masauji, who embodies egalitarian, humane governance. In Ogai's source, he is exiled for committing an offense against a temple; in Ogai's own retelling, it is because he was “implicated in some misdemeanor”.<sup>41</sup> Both versions are vague on details, but a specter

39 Andrew 2000, 46.

40 Mayer 1974, 80.

41 Mori 1991a, 182, 176.

of ignominy nonetheless remains. Mizoguchi, however, turns Masauji into a political martyr who is exiled for resisting the injustices of medieval feudalism. While traveling to meet Masauji, Tamaki tells Zushio, “We are walking the same road that your father walked.” And when mother and son are finally reunited at the end, she tells him, “I know you have followed your father’s teachings. That’s why we can meet again.” Just as Tamaki shepherds and affirms Zushio’s path, the film beckons viewers to follow the footsteps of its moral exemplars.

Scholars point out that Masauji’s egalitarian ideals “do not exist in Japanese tradition”<sup>42</sup> and that they are actually modern projections reflecting Japan’s participation in the humanistic ethos of postwar global society.<sup>43</sup> While there is much historical validity to this reading, I argue that in Masauji, Mizoguchi draws out what he saw as latent in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. Rather than being entirely anachronistic, Masauji’s political humanism was a potential already present in his Buddhist faith, a seed that had yet to fully blossom during the time in which the folktale was set or arose. A few years before making *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, Mizoguchi embraced Nichiren Buddhism, a faith that, pregnantly enough, his own father also held.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Masauji’s Buddhist activism is in fact not alien to the religious milieu of Kamakura Japan (1185–1333), during which oral versions of the legend first circulated. Whether manifest in Shinran’s (1173–1262) Pure Land emphasis that Amida’s efficacious mercy is open to all, or in Nichiren’s (1222–1282) commitment to socio-religious reform, during the Kamakura period Buddhism became “democratized as a religion of faith” and elevated the inherent dignity of the individual with unprecedented force.<sup>45</sup> Mizoguchi’s folktale invites postwar viewers to aspire to a version of religious history as it could have been in the past – and as it could be in the future.

The second character at the heart of the film is none other than Anju, who, even more than her father, embodies the salvific power of compassionate self-donation. By casting her as the saintly heroine of the film, Mizoguchi is not unlike Ogai, who used folklore as “a vehicle of his hermeneutical discovery of ontological dimensions of personal and cultural experience – and as a

42 Cavanaugh 2000, 36.

43 Andrew 2000, 65–66. See also Chapman 1991 and Buruma 2003.

44 Shields 2011, 326.

45 Heinemann 1984, 265, 262.

vehicle of his literary typology of ideal human qualities”.<sup>46</sup> But the film’s idealization of Anju assumes devotional and religious dimensions absent in Ogai’s story. The film historian Tadao Sato observes that *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* belongs to a long list of Mizoguchi films featuring the “veneration of womanhood”, a theme linked to Mizoguchi’s own admiration of his elder sister, who became a geisha to support their impoverished family.<sup>47</sup> More specifically, Anju’s self-sacrifice – after Zushio and Namiji escape, she commits suicide so that she will not divulge their whereabouts under torture – parallels the other-oriented redemption accomplished through the suffering of virtuous women in Mizoguchi’s *TAKI NO SHIRAITO (THE WATER MAGICIAN, JP 1933)* and *ZANGIKU MONOGATARI (THE STORY OF THE LAST CHRYSANTHEMUM, JP 1939)*, prewar films marked by what Darrell William Davis calls the “monumental style”:

The appeal to the sacred is the work that films in the monumental style perform on the traditional forms they appropriate from the past and is also the quality that gives them a strong pull toward the mythic, the nativist, the ultranationalistic [...] [The monumental style] is a prewar cinema permeated by a hieratic, sacramental appropriation of a classical heritage in order to promote an apotheosis of Japanese national identity.<sup>48</sup>

Though Davis restricts the monumental style to prewar Japanese cinema, it provides a suitable assist for understanding *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*’s use of folklore, now channeled toward irenic ends and tempered by non-triumphalist forms of nationalism.

In Ogai’s source, Anju is brutally tortured and killed for helping Zushio escape. And in Ogai’s own version, Anju’s death is suggested when Sansho’s search party finds “a pair of small straw sandals at the edge of the swamp at the bottom of the hill”.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* draws on traditional Japanese aesthetics to depict Anju’s suicide with a “monumental” sensitivity. When shooting Anju’s slow walk into the river, the cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa took pains to compose shots in the manner of traditional sumi-e, or “black ink” brush painting (see fig. 7).<sup>50</sup> We also hear in the back-

46 Dilworth 1991, 39.

47 See TADAO SATO ON *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (The Criterion Collection, US 2007).

48 Davis 1996, 44–45.

49 Mori 1991b, 174.

50 See Jeffrey Angles’s commentary on this scene in the Criterion Collection edition of the film.

Fig. 7: Anju's suicide. Mizoguchi and his cinematographer, Kazuo Miyagawa, took pains to evoke the aesthetics of traditional sumi-e, or black ink brush painting, in this shot. Notice how the ripples in the pond resemble a nimbus. Film still *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* (Kenji Mizoguchi, JP 1954), 01:11:50.



ground Tamaki's plaintive song ("Zushio, how I long for you! Anju, how I long for you! Isn't life torture?"), accompanied by the faint cadences of the shamisen. Against the tremulous hues of light gray and white into which Anju gradually submerges, the music infuses the sequence with a sense of ethereality and transcendence. As Gregory Barrett observes, "on the religious level [Anju's] self-sacrifice represents the sacred aspect of overcoming selfishness", a veritable source of sin and delusion across time and place.<sup>51</sup> In this scene we witness nothing less than the visual transfiguration of Anju: giving herself for the liberation of many, she becomes a living avatar of Kannon. Drawing from wellsprings of Buddhist religiosity, Mizoguchi adapts the medieval legend and Ogai's tale to underscore the liberative powers of compassion, now embodied in a virtuous, self-sacrificial Japanese woman. If "without compassion man is not human", then as the personification of compassion Anju exemplifies how one becomes human again in the postwar world.

Like his mentor Mizoguchi, Shindo uses a feminine ideal for his vision of existential aspiration – albeit in a radically different way. In Sato's appraisal, while Shindo's cinematic feminism "blossomed under his master's encouragement", in contrast to Mizoguchi's heroines his are "neither naively beautiful nor awe-inspiring".<sup>52</sup> The eponymous character of *ONIBABA* harks back to something to be found in Japan's past, but not in the forms and

51 Barrett 1989, 155.

52 Wakeman 1987, 1023.

institutions of Japanese tradition per se. Borne by the countercultural New Wave that arose in the decade after the American occupation (1945–1952), in Shindo's filmic-folkloric world there are no formal paradigms of religiosity to venerate, no medieval models of humanism to emulate. In place of the ruined pillars at the start of *SANSHO THE BAILIFF*, the dark, grassy hole in *ONIBABA*'s opening shot – suggestive of the vagina – points to a primordial energy: the elemental drive for survival, vitality, and regeneration that pulses through sexual desire.

The devastation of war is a double-edged sword in *ONIBABA*. On the one hand, it has inflicted great suffering on the populace, not least on the two women. Having lost the only man in their family, they eke out a hand-to-mouth existence by murdering and plundering soldiers who end up in the susuki fields. After their first kill in the film, we see them in their hut, wolfing down food with their bare hands and falling asleep while chewing. The pulsating drumbeats and bestial cries in the background soundtrack highlight the savagery of their way of life. On the other hand, this mode of existence proves revelatory: by stripping away the adventitious trappings of civilization, war uncovers that which is most fundamental to human life. Besides the primary need for food and water, erotic desire – rather than religious piety per se – is the engine that drives the narrative. The older woman thwarts the younger's relationship with Hachi not only because she fears not having a means of subsistence, but also because she jealously covets a man herself. For instance, after spying on the couple's love-making, the old woman staggers deliriously through the susuki fields. The intensity of her pain is palpable as she groans while straddling a phallic tree trunk. The camera then slowly tilts upward to show a close-up of the tree's desiccated bark and branches, which symbolically lay bare the barrenness of her sexless life.

If sexual deprivation torments and dehumanizes, sexual intimacy becomes a fount of joy and vigor even in the middle of devastation. In one of the most kinetic sequences in the film, the couple run naked through the fields, their ecstatic merriment conveyed through rapid cross-cutting and echoes of laughter. The hardships of war dissolve as the couple recover, through sex, a moment of paradisaal bliss. Instead of serving as camouflage for killing and plundering, the susuki fields are now an Eden (or a Pure Land) where humanity is restored to sensuous harmony with nature. When curating the soundscape for these scenes with the composer Hikaru Hiyashi, Shindo deliberately included the cooing of pigeons, known for



Fig. 8: ONIBABA abruptly ends with a series of cuts replaying the old woman's jump over the hole. The indeterminacy and energy of these final shots convey hope and resilience. Film still ONIBABA (Kaneto Shindo, JP 1964), 01:42:30.

their fecundity and libido.<sup>53</sup> The younger woman's passion for Hachi even emboldens her to resist (what she thinks is) a demon. In these ways, Shindo exalts eros as the one force that can drive postwar reconstruction and rehumanization.

The full thrust of Shindo's discourse on human nature comes at the film's end. When the old woman realizes that the mask is glued to her face after the rain, she confesses her ploy to her daughter-in-law and asks for help. The young woman obliges on the condition that she be allowed to be with Hachi. When she finally pries the mask off, she is horrified to see her mother-in-law's disfigured face. Believing that the old woman has turned into a demon, she flees from their hut. Oblivious of her maimed features, the older woman gives chase. As she leaps over the hole, she cries, "I'm a human being!" The film abruptly ends here with a series of cuts replaying her jump and showing different aspects of her scarred face (see fig. 8). The indeterminacy and energy of these final shots evoke a sense of hope and possibility. As Shindo explains in his interview with Mellen, the old woman's punishment is essentially spiritual in nature, "so that through suffering [he] could reveal the soul" and courage that lies within: "the destroyed face is not the end of her world. This miserable face will dry later, and she will find the day to live again. She has to find it. By destroying her face, I said something about the beginning of a new life for people who are assaulted by unexpected social

53 See KANETO SHINDO ON ONIBABA.

events.”<sup>54</sup> Within the postwar context, the film challenges its viewers to find the same indomitable will to live within themselves, no matter how blighted circumstances might be.

The old woman’s role as existential exemplar reveals Shindo’s creative subversion of Japanese tradition. Displacing the pious daughter-in-law in *The Mask of Flesh* as the heroine and instead affirming the unlikely virtues of the mother-in-law, *ONIBABA* shows how folklore must be dynamically reinvented if it is to foster human well-being. Compared to Mizoguchi’s idealized women – who, like prewar paradigms of Japanese femininity, still embody desexualized beauty and motherly/sororal sacrifice – the anti-heroic old woman stands as a thoroughly flawed and earthy ideal.<sup>55</sup> As David Desser writes in a psychoanalytic vein: “*ONIBABA* reveals what [Mizoguchi] suppressed, namely, that women cling to life and survive by asserting their sexual essences, that women, more than men, can cope with times of terror.”<sup>56</sup> In contrast to Anju’s saintly perfection, Shindo’s “demon hag” stares straight into the eyes of postwar trauma and thus presents a realistic model for existential aspiration.

## Conclusion

Against hermeneutical frameworks that draw a sharp line between original narratives and their subsidiary expressions, the historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith argues that myths are best understood as strategies for responding to specific existential needs and situations: “There is no pristine myth; there is only application [...] That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power.”<sup>57</sup> In much the same way, *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *ONIBABA* demonstrate the critical and constructive deployments of religious folklore within the postwar Japanese context. Though the ideals that Anju and the old woman represent are almost diametrically opposed, they are not mutually exclusive. Viewed together, they offer a choice between religious idealism and earthy realism – between self-giving compassion and ontogenetic eros – which compose comple-

54 Mellen 1975, 81–82, 86.

55 Lowenstein 2005, 93

56 Desser 1988, 121.

57 Smith 1993, 299.

mentary poles for balanced reconstruction amidst socio-cultural anomie. And though the films are products of their particular time and place, their creative adaptation of traditional forms provides an instructive model for those among us who must continue to grapple with the reality of great pain.

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# Cyber-Transcendence and Immanence as a Religio-Spiritual Phenomenon in Cyberpunk Anime

## Abstract

This article argues that Western cyberpunk narratives often suggest a technologically invoked transcendence, a cyber-transcendence, which represents a new ontological sphere and offers catharsis in dystopian scenarios. While Japanese cyberpunk anime also explore the idea of cyber-transcendence, the clear distinction between immanence and transcendence often becomes blurred. Aesthetic concepts invoking transcendence can be linked to the awe-inspiring *kami* (deities) of Japanese Shinto, which are intertwined with the immanent sphere of reality rather than external to it. In Western cyberpunk, cyber-transcendence seems to provide the sense of depth that Paul Tillich labels the “dimension of religion”, in contrast to postmodernist meaninglessness. Cyberpunk anime provide an understanding of transcendence as a religious dimension that exists within reality.

## Keywords

Cyber Transcendence, Anime, Postmodernism, Dimension of Depth, Sublime, Japanese Shinto

## Biography

Malte Frey works and lives in Düsseldorf, Germany. He started his ongoing dissertation on societal structures and therein proclaimed concepts of subjectivity as depicted in the technologically organized societies of postcyberpunk anime, in 2020 at the University of Fine Arts Münster, Germany. In 2018, he graduated from University of Münster in protestant religious education and in fine arts from the University of Fine Arts Münster, followed by working as an artist and exhibiting his paintings in numerous exhibitions.

Since then, he mainly focuses on his scholarly work, specializing in media-specific visual analysis in anime on the one hand and posthuman studies within the framework of (post-)cyberpunk fiction on the other. He is driven by a profound interest in the culture surrounding anime and manga as well as concepts of non-Western traditions, starting from a semester at the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University in 2015/16.

Visual fiction rooted within the cultural environment of Japan is rich with cyberpunk narratives, particularly in the medium of anime (Japanese animation). The cyberpunk genre originally emerged within US-American literature and film with novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and movies like *BLADE RUNNER* (Ridley Scott, USA 1982). However, US-Cyberpunk had a significant impact on Japanese audiences due to its japanoid imaginary.<sup>1</sup> Since then, but even before, a wide variety of visual cyberpunk narratives in the form of anime have been published in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

This article argues that Japanese cyberpunk fictions incorporate religious elements and suggest the existence of a transcendent sphere invoked by technology, which I refer to as "cyber-transcendence". This sphere appears to exist beyond the immanent realm of the physical world and offers the promise of escape or even salvation from the often-dystopian settings depicted in cyberpunk fiction. In a book published in 2012, media scholar Jiré Emine Gözen, through an extensive study of Western cyberpunk literature, finds that a majority of US-cyberpunk fiction implies the presence of this type of transcendence:

Sometimes more, sometimes less strongly, the last pages often seem to suggest that the final frontier of human death will be overcome and life of the soul or the spirit beyond death is possible. This is often made possible by technological means in the form of digitizing of the consciousness, but other scenarios are proposed, portraying transcendence as the next step in humanity's evolution.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenon of cyber-transcendence can be regarded as a religious element that provides meaning in the otherwise meaningless postmodern societies of cyberpunk. Transcendence, religion and postmodernism are concepts rooted within the Western cultural environment, which has been shaped by the philosophical traditions of Platonism, Cartesianism, Christianity and the Enlightenment. Those concepts, however, only fully reached Japan after the country was forcefully opened in 1853, after roughly 250 years of isolation.<sup>4</sup> Cyberpunk anime may therefore provide a different take

1 Sato 2004, 339–341.

2 For example, see Brown 2010.

3 Gözen 2012, 208, translation mine.

4 Shimada 2000, 137–150.

on cyber-transcendence and, in turn, on the Western concept of religion itself, linked to transcendence and Christianity. This dual approach is especially interesting because of the long-established relationship between Western and Japanese cyberpunk.<sup>5</sup> The anime analyzed here suggest an understanding of transcendence as remaining connected to and entangled within the immanent sphere.

To support my argument, I will first consider the motives and concepts linked to cyberpunk's cyber-transcendence in the Western context of post-modernism. Building on this step, I then focus on three cyberpunk anime classics and on their religious references and visual concepts invoking cyber-transcendence. It will be apparent that the visual construction of cyber-transcendence is linked to concepts of Western aesthetics that can also be found, however, in religious concepts of Japanese Shinto.

## Western and Japanese Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk's incorporation of technology is one of the genre's main characteristics. Its origins can be traced back to the United States of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A new generation of sci-fi authors emerged, breaking away from stereotypes of classical sci-fi. The latter generally features expeditions into extraterrestrial areas where the spaceship functions as an enclave of humanism, with scientists exploring alien worlds using technology as a tool for their endeavors. In contrast, cyberpunk worlds are set on Earth in the not-so-distant future, and the protagonists are outsiders, criminals, and critics of the system. The world is controlled by hyper-capitalist conglomerates and human beings are altered as cyborgs through technological enhancements. Consequently, the concept of a specific human nature, which is often affirmed in classical sci-fi, is deconstructed in cyberpunk.

Classical sci-fi is rooted in humanism and its moral implications since the Enlightenment. Cyberpunk, however, questions these beliefs while deconstructing the notion of an unalterable human nature; humanist moralism, which views technology as a mere tool, cannot keep pace with the rapid technological changes in today's society and the individuals within them.<sup>6</sup>

5 For the relationship between Japanese and US-fiction see Sato 2004; Tatsumi 2006.

6 I borrow from Gözen's analysis (2012, 111-122) and also bring my own findings into this description.

I argue that uncertainty is the outcome of this rapid change. Therefore, a need for reassurance arises. This need, I believe, is met with the motive of cyber-transcendence.

Technology and its integration into society have played an important role in the Japanese cultural environment since 1945, leading to Japan becoming the third-largest economy in the world.<sup>7</sup> This could be one reason why US cyberpunk authors used japanoid images to depict a technological future in their narratives. Kumiko Sato analyzes how Japanese audiences suddenly found their country portrayed as the future in Western narratives of the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> It would be incorrect to assume, however, that US cyberpunk gave rise to Japanese cyberpunk. In fact, narratives involving the physical incorporation of technology have existed in Japan since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Saito (formerly Sato) argues that while US cyberpunk heroes tend to embody masculinity, representing the ideal Western male, Japanese cyberpunk often features female cyborg heroines.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, it is not straightforward to draw a clear distinction between Japanese and US cyberpunk in terms of definitions, as we find more an entanglement rather than a separation of two distinct genres.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, since Japanese cyberpunk is evidently created in a non-Western context, it offers a different perspective on cyberpunk themes compared to US cyberpunk or perhaps even expands on them. Anime is arguably the medium that provides the most diverse range of visual cyberpunk fiction. While the *MATRIX* movies by the Wachowskis (US, 1999–2003) may be seen as the pinnacle of cyberpunk in Western culture, there is still a plethora of ongoing cyberpunk fiction in Japan through anime. I will now develop

7 For further reading, I suggest Sato 2004; Tatsumi 2006, 155–170. Japan as an economy is only surpassed by the United States and China: Global PEO Services, *Top 15 Countries by GDP in 2022*, <https://tinyurl.com/mt9tcrtm> [accessed 20 November 2022].

8 Sato 2004, 339–341.

9 The most famous example would be the TV-series or anime *ASTRO BOY* (JP 1963–1966). After his untimely death, the boy Tenma is reborn as an android with extreme powers, granted by technology.

10 Saito 2020, 153.

11 Tatsumi contends that through the fusion of multiple Western concepts as well as an original philosophical and cultural tradition within Japan, the country within (US-)fiction has become an “globalist theme park” (2006, 177), a playground for things and concepts to collide, stripped of their cultural and historical context. While this might be true for at least US-cyberpunk fictions, one should be wary of making any essentialist claims over any cultural space.

my argument about religiously connoted cyber-transcendence in Western cyberpunk and postmodernist theory. Subsequently, I will analyze classic cyberpunk anime to explore how cyber-transcendence is visually portrayed and the implications that arise from Japan's non-Western context.

## **Transcendence in Western Cyberpunk: A Postmodern Necessity?**

Undoubtedly, elements of religion(s) or spiritual connotations exist in cyberpunk fiction. Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, considered one of cyberpunk's foundational texts alongside *BLADE RUNNER*, prominently features Japanese names, words, and corporate labels. The novel concludes its narrative with the merging of two immensely powerful AIs, *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute*, forming an entity or even deity that appears to be omnipresent and omnipotent within the virtual realm of the Internet, which is cyberspace. Gibson's subsequent novel *Count Zero* (1986) contains numerous godlike entities within cyberspace who seem to have followed the AIs' fusion and now spawn religious movements. They guide the technology-infused girl *Angie* towards a certain kind of fulfillment or even salvation. In the final novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), a new cyberspace emerges, not bound by earthly human technology but situated in an alien galaxy, presenting a new ontological sphere. In this sense, all three novels close with a notion of transcendence in relation to technology, creating a space that transcends and surpasses the familiar reality. However, the narratives do not provide definitive closure but rather evoke a sense of new endeavors that lead further away from the dystopian settings. In this sense, cyber-transcendence represents a realm that explicitly surpasses the dystopian world through technology, encouraging us to hope and wonder. I argue that this quality can also be found in religion, particularly in Christianity.

Accordingly, one of the most well-known cyberpunk movies, *THE MATRIX* (the Wachowskis, US 1999), contains a multitude of religious and spiritual connotations. Biblical names and terms like *Nebuchadnezzar*, *Trinity* or *Zion* permeate the narrative, which itself could be labelled as religious: *Neo* and his comrades often make a pilgrimage to the *Oracle*, who seems to possess insights into a particular kind of truth, despite being a machine and, therefore, an enemy to humans. Furthermore, scholars have identified traces of Buddhism and Japanese Shinto in the movie, which is not surprising consid-

ering the strong influence of the anime KŌKAKU KIDŌTAI (GHOST IN THE SHELL, Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995) on the Wachowskis' work.<sup>12</sup>

The main plot of THE MATRIX's revolves around the search for truth behind a seemingly false material reality, resonating with metaphysical concepts such as Plato's allegory of the cave and Cartesianism in general, emphasizing an ontological divide between here/there, I/you, inside/outside, and, of course, truth/appearance. Yet the narrative of the entire MATRIX trilogy does not reach a definite resolution but rather hints at a form of transcendence through the image of a metaphysical-seeming sunrise, which serves as the conclusion of the third movie, MATRIX REVOLUTIONS (the Wachowskis, USA 2003). This positively denoted image can be read as a metaphor for hope or a fresh start, suggesting that the war between humans and machines miraculously has come to an end. It possesses a transcendent quality because the sunrise seems to surpass the immanent struggles of war and alludes to a realm that lies beyond, albeit without any specific definition. Neo's role as a savior within the technological realm of the Matrix appears to form the foundation of this cyber-transcendence. Yet again, the open end suggests an ongoing endeavor. The catharsis appears to lie elsewhere, in a new story, in a new beginning.

Both narrative complexes mentioned here seem unable to find closure because the realm of transcendence is never explicitly defined. Gözen, drawing on the work of numerous scholars, argues that cyberpunk fiction is closely tied to postmodernism.<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Lyotard famously argued that the perhaps predominant feature of postmodernism is its loss of "grand narratives" like religion, which provide meaning or sense.<sup>14</sup> This loss is also apparent in the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, traces of which Gözen finds in cyberpunk fiction. Within the scope of this article, the theories can merely be briefly touched upon and extremely simplified:

McLuhan contends that media shape human conduct and, therefore, reality. Following the eras of oral transition, manuscripts, and then book printing, now the age of electricity arises. Electricity, along with the data transfer it enables, leads to the collapse of space and time. While humanity expanded rapidly in physical space, electricity creates a global network of data, resulting in the compression of the world into a "global village".

12 Gramatikov/Zimmermann 2013, 290–291.

13 Gözen 2012, 34–39, 267–269.

14 Lyotard 1985, 37.

Concepts such as nationalism and individualism subsequently fade. McLuhan argues that the restructuring of experience through this new medium inevitably engenders a certain conservatism, as old ways offer certainty amid the growing uncertainty of the new.<sup>15</sup> This supports my assertion that cyberpunkesque deconstruction and the erosion of established structures may prompt a need for (re-)affirmation in times of uncertainty.

According to Baudrillard, there has been a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution and finally to the age of simulation. In the Renaissance, nature served as a reference for signification. However, during the industrial era, production became the reference for new production, rendering nature unnecessary as a source of truth. In the age of simulation, information signs signify new signs without any connection to a reference. Instead, signs themselves construct reality, rather than representing it. As a result, there is no fixed form of reality.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as asserted by Gözen, “physical as well as metaphysical reference systems ultimately disappear. Signs do not refer to contents or reasons but rather to surfaces and to themselves. Meaning and differences, critique, reason and concepts like good and evil disappear.”<sup>17</sup>

The disappearing of meaning can also be observed in the theories of post-modernist philosopher Frederic Jameson, who considers “depthlessness” as one of the significant characteristics of postmodernism. In hyper-capitalist consumer society, everything becomes style and commodity, lacking historical roots and remaining superficial.<sup>18</sup> Jameson contends,

Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning – the signified – is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.<sup>19</sup>

15 McLuhan 2011; Gözen 2012, 220–223.

16 Baudrillard 1991, 77–120; Gözen 2012, 270–278.

17 Gözen 2012, 276, translation mine.

18 Jameson 1991, 6, 9, 12, 20.

19 Jameson 1991, 96.

Given the close connection between cyberpunk fiction and postmodernism, the absence of meaning in an uncertain reality can be considered a notable characteristic of the genre. As a result, the lack of meaning, stemming from capitalist superficiality and depthlessness, appears to be countered by a quest for something meaningful: a (cyber-)transcendent truth.

The renowned Protestant theologian Paul Tillich employed the term “depth” to counter a shallow and superficial way of life. According to Tillich, existential questions of meaning – concerning the origins and purpose of one’s existence, and how to negate the limited time given – are questions that delve into the dimension of depth. The loss of this depth leads to a superficiality that fails to address these profound questions about life. Tillich argues that the dimension of depth is a religious dimension, but not confined to a specific religion like Christianity. Rather, the nature of religion is “the being of the human, insofar as one considers the meaning of one’s life and existence in general”.<sup>20</sup> This dimension of depth can be considered a distinctive aspect of religion in itself. Therefore, the phenomenon of cyber-transcendence in cyberpunk can be seen as an expression of a religiously understood dimension of depth, countering a postmodernist loss of sense and meaning.

The soteriological quality attributed to technology might be traced back to the profound impact that the growing prominence of technology had on everyday life in the 1980s. In his *Time Magazine* article from 1983 “A New World Dawns”, Roger Rosenblatt credited the computer with liberating attributes, enabling a departure from the constraints of industrialization.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, it is reasonable that technology, both in science fiction as a whole and specifically in cyberpunk, is often linked to religious elements, offering the promise of catharsis and even salvation.

This aligns with the heterogeneous movement of transhumanism, which actively emphasizes the positive role of technology for humanity. Transhumanism seeks to enhance and augment the human body through practical applications of bio- and nanotechnology, envisioning a new level of humanity and even evolution. Some transhumanists aim to overcome mortality through concepts like mind uploading or at least extend a healthy existence to the greatest extent possible.<sup>22</sup> The themes of enhancement

20 Tillich 1962, 8, translation mine. See also Tillich 2015, 51–61.

21 Rosenblatt 1983.

22 Sorgner 2021, 9–12.

and altering human subjects through technology permeate cyberpunk narratives. Theologian Elaine L. Graham argues that transhumanism perceives “science as salvation”, leading to a “religion of technology”.<sup>23</sup> Cyberspace then becomes a “sacred place”, a “religious place”.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, theologian Mark Coeckelbergh suggests that transhumanism grapples with what Tillich referred to as the “ultimate concern”: the concepts of finality and death. In attempting to conquer death or at least extend human lifespan, transhumanism’s engagement with technology could be characterized as religious.<sup>25</sup> The presence of transhumanist themes in cyberpunk, therefore, may account for the phenomenon of cyber-transcendence.

However, in cyberpunk worlds, technological advancements often lead to postmodernist alienation instead of liberation within hyper-capitalist environments. In this regard, cyberpunk fiction aligns with the theoretical discourse of critical posthumanism, which challenges the humanist ideal of an autonomous and essentialist subject by examining humanity’s interactions with technology.<sup>26</sup> Critical posthumanism is an academic movement that deconstructs structures of discrimination. Transhumanism wants evolution, posthumanism aims to deconstruct. In cyberpunk’s hyper-capitalist worlds, technological deconstruction of the autonomous subject is accompanied by various socioeconomic dependencies, resulting in ongoing discrimination. Cyberpunk, in this sense, should be understood as a criticism of the system without providing solutions. As technology alone cannot bring about salvation within the immanent realm, another layer – the “dimension of religion” and transcendence – is attributed to technology.

Graham further argues that the worldview of transhumanism, which posits that technology brings progress and salvation, implies a kind of religion of technology and ascribes a sense of sublimity to technology.<sup>27</sup> Many theorists, according to Graham, claim that there is a “will for *transcendence* of the flesh as an innate and universal trait”.<sup>28</sup> This desire can be linked to the Platonic or Cartesian ideals of rationality. Consequently, this understanding leads to the notion of cyberspace as a realm of pure information devoid of

23 Graham 2002, 155.

24 Graham 2002, 169.

25 Coeckelbergh 2018, 83.

26 Ranisch/Sorgner 2014, 8.

27 Graham 2002, 155.

28 Graham 2002, 165, italics Graham’s.

the body. Therein Graham sees an affirmation of a “culture of death” that prevails in Western tradition.<sup>29</sup> The concept of the autonomous-essentialist subject, whose soul can transcend the physical body, is deeply rooted in Western culture and Christianity, but it may not hold the same sway in non-Western contexts.<sup>30</sup> While Japan is recognized as a technologically progressive cultural environment in everyday life, Japan scholar Jaqueline Berndt refers to the observations of Japanese literary critic Naoyo Fujitsu, who asserts that the discourse of Japanese science fiction, in comparison to the North American, does not share transhumanism’s techno-euphoria aiming for immortality.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is worth exploring how cyber-transcendence is constructed in non-Western cyberpunk anime narratives.

## Japanese Cyberpunk: Transcendence as the Collapse of Borders

If we consider that Japanese cyberpunk, including cyberpunk anime, is intertwined with the themes of US cyberpunk, it is reasonable to expect some traces of the Western postmodern condition and its lack of meaning in Japanese cyberpunk as well. This assumption is supported by Takayuki Tatsumi’s observation that the portrayal of Japan in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* may have been a misperception, but “it was this misperception that encouraged Japanese readers to correctly perceive the nature of postmodernist Japan”.<sup>32</sup> Tatsumi, in particular, has argued that the postmodern condition, as seen and developed within the Western cultural sphere and cyberpunk fiction, resonates with the cultural environment of Japan, which he describes as a “semiotic ghost country”.<sup>33</sup> This notion captures the condition of signifiers being detached from their original context, resulting in meaninglessness and depthlessness as described by Jameson.

I will now closely examine how cyber-transcendence, along with its religious dimension of depth, is visually portrayed in cyberpunk anime. To do so, I will focus on three classic cyberpunk anime: Mamoru Oshii’s famous GHOST

29 Graham 2002, 172, 231.

30 Sato 2004, 339.

31 Berndt 2020, 412.

32 Tatsumi 2006, 111.

33 Tatsumi 2006, 47.

IN THE SHELL, as it strongly influenced the Wachowskis' creation of THE MATRIX; Katsuhiro Otomo's AKIRA (JP 1988); and Ryūtarō Nakamura's series SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN (TV Tokyo, JP 1996). It will become evident that the Western aesthetic category of the sublime is employed to invoke a sense of transcendence, and this category appears to resonate with concepts within the Japanese cultural environment and religion. Notions of an immanent spirituality, distinct from Western traditions of transcendence, will become apparent.

## GHOST IN THE SHELL (1995)

The protagonist of the movie is Motoko Kusanagi, chief of police unit section 9. Only her brain remains organic, as the rest of her body has been completely cyberized, and even her brain has been technologically enhanced, making her a “full body cyborg”. This grants her superhuman abilities, but also increases her socio-economic dependencies, for example on her employer: if she were to quit her job, she would have to give back classified memories that are crucial for her sense of identity. The uncertainty regarding the composition of what she calls her “essential core” and the question of her humanity lead to an existential crisis.

An encounter with Puppetmaster, a weapons program that gained self-awareness in the Net, offers a solution. Through merging with Puppetmaster, Kusanagi undergoes a transformation, becoming a new being with seemingly limitless access to the Net, thereby liberating herself from bodily and socio-economic constraints. Thus, Kusanagi is technologically granted salvation.

The merger is accompanied by hovering helicopters appearing as angels in Kusanagi's vision, and Puppetmaster is depicted with a halo earlier in the movie (fig. 1).

Consequently, the character has been described as “a Divine Being”<sup>34</sup> or a “Sky God”,<sup>35</sup> alluding to the messianic qualities portrayed by Puppetmaster. This is further highlighted by Puppetmaster quoting from 1 Corinthians 13 to Kusanagi in the middle of the movie. For that matter, GHOST IN THE SHELL appears to draw from a Christian religious background and symbolism, which is not surprising considering that director Mamoru Oshii once considered joining a Christian seminary.<sup>36</sup> Unlike other anime that occasionally

34 Gardner 2009, 51.

35 Gardner 2009, 52.

36 Ruh 2004, 9, 134–137.



Fig. 1: Puppetmaster appearing as spiritual being through a halo-like lamp in behind, GHOST IN THE SHELL (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:47:36.

employ Christian references for exoticism or marketing purposes, Brian Ruh argues, Oshii utilizes Christian symbolism as a serious tool for exploring deeper character developments in his films.<sup>37</sup> The technological life form Puppetmaster is thus endowed with transcendent qualities connected to Christian concepts.

However, notions of Shinto can be found in the anime too. Shinto is widely recognized as the indigenous religion of Japan, characterized by animistic and de-anthropocentric concepts. However, it is important to note that the categorization of Shinto as a distinct religion emerged in the 19th century, primarily for the purpose of constructing a national identity, particularly in contrast to religious and philosophical concepts from the West. Prior to this categorization, the boundaries between Buddhism, Confucianism, and various Shinto practices were not always clearly delineated. In 1868, Shinto was politically institutionalized as the national religion. Today, concepts and practices of Shinto are not limited to Japan but have spread globally. Shinto is understood as a socio-religious framework within the Japanese cultural environment and has gained recognition in other parts of the world as well.<sup>38</sup>

37 Ruh 2004, 52–53.

38 Rots 2017, 29–45; Shimada 2000, 137–150.



Fig. 2: Kusanagi breaking the ocean's surface from below, GHOST IN THE SHELL (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:27:18.

The initial sequence of the movie incorporates a multitude of references to Shinto. As the construction of Kusanagi as a cyborg is depicted, the accompanying music includes elements reminiscent of traditional Shinto music with the instruments *kagura zuzu* and *wakaido*. The *kagura zuzu* is a short staff with twelve bells that is used at dances and with shrine music. *Wakaido* are traditional Japanese drums that in the movie prominently make their way into the acoustic foreground of the song. Both instruments are tied to “Shinto rituals used for spiritual worship”, and Andre Malhado argues that these instruments add a “mystic veil” to the construction of Kusanagi as a cyborg.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the lyrics describe a wedding in Old Japanese.<sup>40</sup> Other instances of Shinto symbolism are apparent throughout the movie: Kusanagi’s white bathing suit aligns with Shinto’s color symbol for purity (fig. 2).

The sequence can be seen as a *misogi*, “a water-purification ceremony, in which participants also wear traditional white under water”.<sup>41</sup> The most important substance in such a ceremony is salt, which can be found in the sea water Kusanagi bathes in. Her reaching the surface of the ocean from the

39 Malhado 2021, 177.

40 Drillmaster/Shindo 2017, 20.

41 Okuyama 2015, 78.

ocean's depth can be interpreted as a symbolic birth or even a baptism. This sequence is also connected to Kusanagi's being a cyborg, since diving puts her in mortal danger because of her weight. Without a certain device she would sink and drown. For that matter, this situation as well as the Shinto symbolism suggest a certain crossing of the border between the physical and transcendence (death). Kusanagi being a technologically altered cyborg is thereby linked to the spiritual and religious context of Shinto.

What makes this anime interesting in terms of cyber-transcendence is not only its clear references and religious symbols. Rather, the movie distinctively suggests a technologically rendered transcendental sphere. Following the analysis of Japan scholar William O. Gardner, the anime creates a "Cyber sublime".<sup>42</sup> The sublime, as an aesthetic category, can be traced back to Immanuel Kant, who described it as the experience of encountering something so vast and incomprehensible that it invokes awe and even terror. This may be a sight of nature that reminds individuals of their own limitations in the world, leading to both admiration and fear. Kant defines the sublime thus: "The feeling of it is sometimes accompanied with some dread or even melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet admiration and in yet others with a beauty spread over a sublime prospect."<sup>43</sup> In the anime, the otherwise invisible data stream that pervades the world is made visible, Gardner argues, by means of the city imagery, resembling Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Tokyo. Its details and vastness would hint at an even richer realm behind it – the data realm which is invoked by the category of the sublime.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, the predominant direction of view in the movie is from bottom to top. The characters, and viewers with them, stand on the ground, looking up to the sky and the somewhat fading skyscrapers, which seem strangely clean and futuristic in contrast to the detailed and somewhat dirty ground level (fig. 3).

The construction of those sequences inspires contemplation and awe for the upper sphere, which thus gains significance as a sphere of the *longed-for*, the *hoped-for*, the sphere one seeks to *escape to*. Often featuring a bright, sky and tiny figures shown from behind in front of the immense over-structures, the movie's aesthetics can be connected to those of 19th-century

42 Gardner 2009, 45.

43 Kant 2011, 16.

44 Gardner 2009, 45–50.



Fig. 3: The city's dirty and detailed ground level in front of futuristic skyscrapers, GHOST IN THE SHELL (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:33:54.

Romanticist paintings. In the era of industrialization, there was a desire for nature and for some mystic unification with the world in contrast to the rapidly growing rationalization of the emerging industrial production. After the Enlightenment, there was an absence of satisfying concepts of meaning outside of religion, and a longing for and mystification of nature seem to have emerged because of it. Many of Romanticism's paintings show depictions of nature, occasionally with human figures from the back, contemplating the overwhelming existence they find themselves in.<sup>45</sup> Most famous, perhaps, are the paintings of German painter Caspar David Friedrich like *Felsenriff am Meeresstrand* (1924, *Rocky Reef on the Beach*) or *Der Mönch am Meer* (1808–1810, *The Monk at the Sea*). Sometimes, even metaphysical beings like angels appear, as in Thomas Coles' *The Voyage of Life: Old Age* (1842). All of these paintings are united by a quality of the sublime as described by Kant. Through this aesthetic resemblance to Romanticist paintings, GHOST IN THE SHELL succeeds in creating a sublime experience, an awe- and terror-invoking feeling towards the sphere of the data realm that invisibly lies behind the detailed sceneries of the film's city, New Harbor.

This longing for something beyond the immanent can be connected to the Western notion of transcendence and is invoked by the category of the

45 Gorodeisky 2016.



Fig. 4: Kusanagi contemplating the high-rise city buildings, GHOST IN THE SHELL (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 00:07:22.

sublime. This is most strikingly visible in Kusanagi's blacked-out flat, where she contemplates the distant city and sky (fig.4).

Her silhouette enhances the sublimity of the cityscape, for, as media scholar Thomas Lamarre argues, silhouettes emphasize the background.<sup>46</sup> The upper city and the sky become the objects of Kusanagi's (and the viewer's) Romanticist longing. In this sense, I agree with Gardner's analysis. Furthermore, just as Romanticist paintings mystify and perhaps even deify nature by evoking experiences of the sublime, the aesthetic resemblance in GHOST IN THE SHELL allows for the assertion that the sphere of the data realm gains significance as a transcendent realm with even eschatological qualities. The data realm, visualized through the upper sphere of the city and its envoy Puppetmaster, thus become a religious space, a place of cyber-transcendence.

It must be stressed that the concept of the awe-inspiring sublime is something that can be found within the Japanese cultural environment as well, specifically in the Shinto concept of *kami* (deities). Thomas P. Kasulis observes that "the word *kami* refers to any wondrous, awe-inspiring presence in whatever form, regardless of whether it is beneficial or harmful to humans".<sup>47</sup> According to Kasulis, the concept of awe of the world remains at the very

46 Lamarre 2009, 18.

47 Kasulis 2018, 52, emphasis in the original.

core of Shinto and cannot be reduced by reason; instead “the awesome must be accepted as part of the world in which we live”.<sup>48</sup> As a result, *kami* are intertwined with the natural and spiritual world, making a clear distinction between these realms seemingly impossible.<sup>49</sup> It is also the reason why I argue that the awe-inspiring character of the *kami*, entangled with the entire world, resembles the Kantian concept of the sublime. Therefore, the notion of the sublime in Romanticism, and even the idea of transcendence evoked by the sublimity of nature, can be found in the beliefs of Shinto. In this regard, the existence of Japanese paintings from the 13th century that praise the spirituality of nature in accordance with Shinto beliefs does not come as a surprise.<sup>50</sup>

In *GHOST IN THE SHELL*, Shinto practices are connected to visible actions, such as Kusanagi’s diving or her initial construction, because Shinto focuses on awe *within* the world. By linking the protagonist to the realm of the spiritual, her longing to escape the immanent sphere becomes apparent. Shinto, however, does not provide a concept of surpassing the immanent world; instead, it emphasizes connection to it.<sup>51</sup> Christianity, by contrast, strongly proclaims a transcendent sphere that is superior to the immanent one. This may explain why Puppetmaster, as an envoy of the data realm that promises salvation from socio-economic dependencies, is attributed with references to Christianity. Transcendence, as clearly ontologically distinct from immanence, is not a concept upheld within Shinto.

Further, Kusanagi herself does not achieve such liberation. Similar to *THE MATRIX* or *Neuromancer*, the anime offers an open end that suggests that in attaining the sphere of cyber-transcendence, Kusanagi has found a way out of her identity crisis. She is somehow liberated from socio-economic dependencies. Her new form is that of a child, with her brain containing the fused identity of Kusanagi and the Puppetmaster transferred into a new cybernetic body. The final sequence shows her standing over the vast expanse of the city, stating, “The Net is vast” (fig. 5).

Thus, in connection with the experience of the sublimity of its vastness and in contrast to the oppressive immanent sphere, the transcendent quality of the Net is ultimately established. It can be argued that access to the Net resembles an act of salvation, since it is provided by Puppetmaster and

48 Kasulis 2004, 12.

49 Kasulis 2018, 53.

50 Violet 1984, 119–120.

51 Kasulis 2004, 165–167.



Fig. 5: Kusanagi, as child, standing over the vast expanse of the city, *GHOST IN THE SHELL* (Mamoru Oshii, JP 1995), 01:14:21.

not achieved by Kusanagi herself. This contradicts the transhumanist pursuit of enhancement, as it is based on humanity's own capabilities. Kusanagi, however, is unable to overcome her identity crisis on her own.

Finally, this transcendence still appears to be grounded within the immanent realm. While Kusanagi/Puppetmaster is not transferred to a disembodied realm but remains in a corporeal form, overseeing the city from an elevated perspective yet still embedded within the urban structure, the notion of transcendence in *GHOST IN THE SHELL* seems to differ from that of Western cyberpunk. In contrast to *THE MATRIX* and *Neuromancer*, where transcendence appears to be detached from the immanent capitalist sphere, in *GHOST IN THE SHELL*, Kusanagi/Puppetmaster is thrown right back into it.

## **AKIRA (1988)**

*AKIRA* is widely regarded as the anime that paved the way for anime's global recognition as a medium, also for an adult audience. With its blatant violence and complex storyline, it opposes the traditional Western view of animation as media for children.<sup>52</sup> The story revolves around the teenage boys Kaneda and Tetsuo. The latter, through technological experiments, gains supernatu-

52 Napier 2005, 5; Furniss 2017, 393.



Fig. 6: Mother Miyako and her followers preaching in the streets, AKIRA (Katsuhiro Otomo, JP 1988), 00:42:58.

ral powers, which ultimately lead to an epic display of destruction. Religion also plays a role in the narrative. Most notably, the character Mother Miyako symbolizes Shinto practices in the movie, evident through her white Shinto priest attire (fig. 6). Her fellowship appears to be technophobic, advocating for a “back to the roots” approach to attain some form of salvation from the otherwise dystopian scenario portrayed in the film. Clearly, the religious followers perceive technological progress as a potential threat.

Tetsuo, along with the titular character Akira, gains his telekinetic powers through military technological experiments on children. However, the children become uncontrollable, and Tetsuo rebels against his former handlers in an anarchistic manner, as there seems to be no place in society for him or other teenagers. The movie culminates in ultimate destruction caused by Tetsuo and Akira, reminiscent of the atomic catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nevertheless, the ending is not devoid of hope, as a new world or universe emerges from the annihilation, promising a brighter future or, at the very least, a place for Tetsuo and others like him. In this sense, technology, even when beyond human control, appears to hold the potential for a new future and perhaps even salvation for the otherwise despairing society of young people.

Theologian Franz Winter argues that the manga *Akira*, with its similar story, captures the overall apocalyptic expectations of the 1980s while also



Fig. 7: Destruction caused by Tetsuo and Akira, resembling a nuclear catastrophe, AKIRA (Katsuhiro Otomo, JP 1988), 01:51:07.

offering salvation in the end.<sup>53</sup> Winter suggests that Japan's economic success can be attributed to the working ethic of the Japanese population, but comes at a cost. In the 1980s, a younger generation broke away from the work ethic of the older one.<sup>54</sup> Susan J. Napier contends that Japan's dominant economic rise in the 1980s and the significance of technology, which is connected to the postwar growth of the country, in AKIRA reflect a newfound self-confidence towards the formerly dominant Western world.<sup>55</sup> The techno-phobia of the traditional Shinto religion, as depicted in AKIRA, fails to provide a solution to the sense of the apocalyptic. Instead, technology presents a new world. Accordingly, as we see Mother Miyako and her followers sliding down to death as the city is destroyed by Tetsuo's superhuman powers, her claim dissipates with her.

It is the destruction that stands out the most in AKIRA (fig. 7). Its detailed animation has been the object of multiple inquires,<sup>56</sup> especially the richness of

53 Winter 2018, 204. Winter refers to Napier 2005, 39–48.

54 Winter 2018, 202.

55 Napier 1993, 336–351.

56 Most prominently, the anime has been analyzed by US-scholars Susan J. Napier and Christopher Bolton: Bolton 2014; Napier 1993; Napier 2005, 39–48.

details in the collapsing buildings and the multitude of figures moving through the frames, which is still astonishing. I argue that this richness of destruction functions in a similar manner to the detailed city in *GHOST IN THE SHELL*, as discussed by Gardner. Likewise, the sheer size of the falling buildings and the overwhelming apocalyptic scenario succeed in evoking the feeling of the sublime. It is a terror that one might feel, and it is awe-inspiring because of the detailed animation, which does not allow for one to grasp everything all at once.

In combination with the cathartic end of the movie, the destruction that has led to this outcome serves as a signifier for the disruptive potential of the new, which is technology. In *AKIRA*, technology is a tool owned and embraced by the younger generation, enabling them to escape the older, more static, and more rigid societal norms. The new, however, is not located within society. Rather, it is placed in a new ontological realm, which is cyber-transcendence, invoked through a sense of terror and awe. Drawing a connection to the concept of the awe-inspiring *kami*, as argued by Kasulis, both the destruction and the creation of the new universe are attributed godlike qualities.

### **SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN (1996)**

This moment of awe is explicit in the cyberpunk anime series *SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN* too. The narrative focuses on the ontological difference between the real world and the virtual world. A human man becomes the god of the latter by digitizing his consciousness. However, as the series later discloses, there seems to be a “real God”, portrayed as the father figure of the protagonist, a young girl called Lain (fig. 8). This God appears to be present not



Fig. 8: Lain together with her father (God) in a transcendent-seeming space, *SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN* (TV Tokyo, JP 1996), episode 13, 00:17:55.

only within the real or the virtual world but everywhere. It is this God who finally reassures Lain of her own existence, which she doubts as she appears to be merely a program.

The series delves into the complex interaction between the virtual and real world and explores the immersive influences the virtual has on the real. By questioning whether the real is only an instantiation of information already present in the Net, the series reverses the usually established hierarchy of the real over the virtual. This leads to a complete collapse of meaning, as Lain cannot be certain what it means to exist in the first place. Like Kusanagi in *GHOST IN THE SHELL*, Lain questions her own existence. However, the collapse of the virtual and the real further results in her questioning the very nature of reality itself. Nothing seems to be real anymore, as all foundations for certainty are lost. Yet again, assurance is provided by a deity: in the final episode, as Lain experiences her worst identity crisis, a voice reaches out to her and says, “Come to me!” Lain is then shown at the bottom of the frame, bathed in a bright orange light emanating from above (fig. 9).

She then encounters “God” in the form of her father. The sequence of Lain engulfed in light once again evokes the feeling of the sublime and awe, emphasized by the smallness of her figure in the frame. The light, resembling patterns of the Northern Lights, conjures associations to nature and the sense of something greater than oneself. This can be connected to compositions prevalent in Romanticism and the ever-present awe-inspiring *kami*.

However, it is one deity that ultimately leads Lain to salvation. *SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN*, in this sense, most strongly suggests a godly revelation in the Christian sense through the figure of the father and God’s invitation to come



Fig. 9: Lain being called upon from above, *SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN* (TV Tokyo, JP 1996), episode 13, 00:17:33.

to him. In an interview, screenwriter Chiaki J. Konaka stated that he was raised in an Anglican household but does not regard himself as a Christian.<sup>57</sup> Thus, it can be argued that the knowledge of Christian concepts Konaka supposedly possesses has had a strong impact on the conceptualization of the series' narrative. In the series, however, God transcends also the virtual, encompassing all, which includes Lain, who indeed appears to be a program. Her final position within the world remains unclear at the end of the series. Lain seems to exist neither within the physical nor in the transcendent realm. The boundaries have collapsed for her, suggesting a more immanent account.

## Concluding and Critical Remarks

All three anime offer different accounts of cyber-transcendence while employing the aesthetic category of the sublime, resembling 19th-century Romanticism and the *kami* of Shinto, to achieve this. Furthermore, notions of Christianity can also be found intertwined within the narratives. This may be related to the personal interests of Mamoru Ohsii and Chiaki J. Konaka, both of whom became acquainted with Christian concepts earlier in their lives. What all anime have in common is the goal of eluding the postmodernist society. All characters seem to strive for meaning and a dimension of depth which, according to Tillich, can be regarded as a sphere of religion. Cyber-transcendence, in this sense, seems to be something which can offer such meaning. The transhumanist endeavor to enhance humanity ultimately cannot offer salvation, as the protagonists cannot intentionally reach whatever they long for. Instead, technology gains self-awareness or autonomy, offering salvation and maybe even evolution, with humanity no longer at the center of things.

The narratives nonetheless differ in important ways: *GHOST IN THE SHELL* concludes with the protagonist reaching the seemingly transcendent realm, only to be reintegrated into society again, albeit in a different position. *AKIRA*'s transcendence, by contrast, exists outside of the old realm, signifying a process of growth and evolution. Further, while *GHOST IN THE SHELL* incorporates notions of Shinto, *AKIRA* explicitly abandons them. Therefore, *AKIRA*'s transcendence can be considered closely tied to a Western understanding of transcendence as something external. Like *GHOST IN THE SHELL* and *SERIAL*

57 Seraphita 2015.

EXPERIMENTS LAIN, clearly exhibiting notions of Christian transcendence, AKIRA also presents the idea of surpassing the immanent sphere. Apart from its potential exotic appeal to Japanese audiences, the Christian concept of surpassing the immanent sphere proves useful in countering the entanglement of immanent and transcendence as traditionally understood in Shinto. SERIAL EXPERIMENTS LAIN, similar to GHOST IN THE SHELL, focuses on the crisis of the individual in the postmodernist and technologized world. Still, the series does not recognize technology as the means to salvation and to transcendence. As Lain's whereabouts remain unclear, the series seems to favor an intertwining of transcendence and immanence, leading to a more relational ontology.

As Coeckelbergh suggests, an immanent spirituality may be better suited to addressing the problems that arise in an increasingly technologized world.<sup>58</sup> Simultaneously, Graham proposes that equating religion with transcendence presents a problem.<sup>59</sup> If the religious realm is solely one of transcendence, then religious immanent practices may seem insignificant. However, religion cannot be understood solely as something transcendent. We may think of rituals, of prayers, of going to a church or temple or shrine, of the feeling of the sublime when we walk within nature, or of the feeling of safety when we are near our loved ones.

In a certain sense, religiously connoted cyber-transcendence functions as a literal *deus ex machina*. Rather than solving or overcoming problems, it simply allows them to be cast aside, resembling escapism as seen in AKIRA. By completely abandoning the existing immanent sphere and linking salvation to a transcendent realm, struggles of alienation and shallowness cannot be truly resolved, but are merely set aside.

And yet, GHOST IN THE SHELL and SERIAL EXPERIMENT LAIN hint at a religious quality that is focused not entirely on a transcendent realm, but also on ongoing interaction and relations within the immanent sphere of society. The concept of the sublime, which can be understood as equivalent to the ever-present awe- and terror-invoking *kami*, portrays cyber-transcendence as a sphere that both humbles humanity's position and calls for an interactive engagement. Only then can a dimension of depth be attained, encompassing not only "the being of the human, insofar as one considers the meaning of one's life and existence in general",<sup>60</sup> but also "becoming" in general.

58 Coeckelbergh 2018, 88.

59 Graham 2002, 174.

60 Tillich 1962, 8, translation mine.

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# The Spiritual Quest in Keisuke Itagaki's Baki Series

## A Synthesis of Eastern Religious Figures, Aesthetics, and Martial Arts in a Japanese Anime

### Abstract

The Baki series, created by Keisuke Itagaki, is a globally popular anime and manga franchise that has captivated audiences with its striking visual aesthetic and depiction of martial arts. However, despite its widespread popularity, there is a notable lack of scholarly research on the series, particularly in relation to its spiritual and philosophical themes. This article addresses this gap by offering a contextualized analysis of Baki that explores the complex intersection of religion, aesthetics, and popular culture in Japanese society. Through an examination of the series' representation of Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, this study provides insights into broader cultural attitudes towards masculinity, violence, and martial arts in Japan and the global community. By shedding light on the spiritual themes present in the Baki series, it contributes to the global discourse on popular culture, martial arts, and spirituality, offering a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted nature of Japanese culture and its influence on the wider world.

### Keywords

Mythology, Japanese Anime, Archetypes, Subversion, Masculinity, Martial Arts, Religion

### Biography

Rehuel Nikolai B. Soriano has dedicated his career to the study of world myths. He is a faculty member of the Central Luzon State University, Philippines, where he teaches mythology, literature, and rhetoric. He recently presented his research paper "An Odyssey to the World of Myths" at the *VII International Conference on Myth Criticism* held at Complutense University of Madrid in October 2022. Nikolai Soriano's main research interests include archetypes, literature and religion, and world mythologies.

## Introduction

As one of the most culturally rich countries in the world, Japan has long been a subject of interest for scholars and enthusiasts alike. From its deeply rooted religious traditions to its strikingly beautiful aesthetic principles, Japan has left an indelible mark on the world. One of the most intriguing aspects of Japanese culture is its unique relationship with martial arts, embodied in Keisuke Itagaki's Baki series, a popular anime and manga franchise. In this article, we delve into religion, aesthetics, and popular culture to explore the ways in which these seemingly disparate elements intersect and shape our understanding of Eastern tradition. A contextualized analysis of Baki provides, as we shall see, insights into the complex spiritual, historical, and psychological factors that have contributed to the development and popularity of this iconic franchise. Moreover, it can shed light on how the series reflects and shapes broader cultural attitudes towards masculinity, violence, and martial arts, offering a window into the complex and multifaceted nature of Japanese culture.

This study redresses the lack of scholarly research on the spiritual themes present in the Baki series, particularly in relation to Eastern religious and philosophical traditions. While the series is widely popular, little attention has been paid to its deeper cultural and philosophical implications, particularly in terms of its representation of spirituality and its impact on the global discourse on martial arts and popular culture. This study will fill this gap by examining the spiritual themes present in the Baki series and their relationship to Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, as well as their significance in the broader context of Japanese society and the global community. Specifically, this research explores the ways in which the Baki series reflects and influences contemporary discourses on spirituality and martial arts and the potential implications of this discourse for broader questions of cultural identity and the human quest for meaning and purpose.

## Contextualization

Keisuke Itagaki's Baki series is a manga and anime that has become a cultural phenomenon and gained a substantial fan-base globally.<sup>1</sup> The series is renowned for its graphic depiction of martial arts, which includes violent

1 The BAKI series is currently available on Netflix.

and intense fight scenes that feature characters with extraordinary physical strength and mental resilience. Beyond the martial arts, it explores a wide range of themes related to spirituality, culture, and society, making it an intriguing subject for scholarly research. For instance, the series delves into the nature of existence, the pursuit of enlightenment, and the role of religion and spirituality in shaping human behavior. Moreover, it touches on issues related to gender, identity, and cultural values, all of which contribute to the complexity of the series and its cultural significance.

The significance of the Baki series is manifold. First, the placement of the series in its wider cultural and historical framework provides an understanding of the societal, political, and economic elements that may have impacted the growth and prominence of the franchise. Secondly, the series mirrors and influences broader cultural outlooks on masculinity, aggression, and martial arts. Lastly, ongoing discussions can draw on the series in exploring the impact of popular media in shaping our perceptions of the world and in reflecting on the fantasies, spiritualities, and social history of a changing Japan,<sup>2</sup> viewing it as a form of literature that blurs the line between high and mass cultures.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the Baki series lies Keisuke Itagaki's personal background, shaped by his experience as an amateur boxer and a practitioner of Shorinji Kempo, a Japanese martial art that places emphasis on both spiritual cultivation and physical training. While Itagaki's passion for martial arts and his support for Japanese nationalism and imperialism undoubtedly inform the series' martial prowess and nationalist themes, the Baki series should not be reduced to a mere account of Itagaki's personal views and experiences. Rather, it reflects and refracts the broader social, cultural, and historical context of Japan, particularly the country's history of trauma and defeat in World War II and its surrender to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The Baki series, which consists of five instalments, reflects hyper-Japanese machismo, likely due to Itagaki's fascination with martial arts. It draws inspiration from Japan's collective psyche during the Sengoku Jidai (1467–1615), a period of warring states that began with Nobunaga Oda's rise to power. The manga, *Grappler Baki*, was first serialized in *Weekly Shonen Champion*, a manga magazine published by Akita Shoten, from 1991 to 1999,

2 Drummond–Mathews 2010.

3 Treat 2020.

4 See Macwilliams 2014 on his view of manga and anime as open windows onto the Japanese id.

with a total of 42 Tankobon volumes. The second instalment, *New Grappler Baki: In Search of Our Strongest Hero*, has 31 volumes and was serialized in the same magazine. *Baki Hanma*, also known as *Baki: Son of Ogre*, was serialized from 2005 to 2012, with a total of 37 volumes. *Baki Dou* has 22 volumes and was serialized from 2014 to 2018. The latest instalment, also titled *Baki Dou* but written in Katakana, has an original video animation adaptation released in 1994 and is currently available on Netflix.

This article is based on the anime adaptations of the series. These are GRAPPLER BAKI: THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER; BAKI THE GRAPPLER: MAXIMUM TOURNAMENT; HANMA BAKI; BAKI 2018; BAKI 2020; and BAKI: SAIKYOU SHIKEISHUU-HEN SPECIAL ANIME. The setting is a world where underground fighting tournaments are prevalent. The protagonist of the series, Baki Hanma, is a martial artist who seeks to defeat his father, Yujiro Hanma, the strongest creature in the world. Furthermore, Baki faces off against several formidable opponents with their own unique styles and philosophies, including characters that resemble real-world martial artists, athletes, and historical figures. For its narrative, Baki delves beyond his physical battles as he deals with the psychological and philosophical aspects of combat, exploring the nature of strength, the pursuit of perfection, and the resolve to tap one's potential. It spans multiple story arcs, each providing new challenges and adversaries for Baki to overcome.

## Procedure

No artist works in isolation; artists always operate within the confines of their communities, with their own sets of precepts and biases.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when an artist creates a work, it becomes a mirror of their society's values, aspirations, and dreams. In this regard, it can be presumed that there are underlying sociocultural elements hidden in the narrative of Baki. A close reading of the text is implemented to extract these elements, seeking objective accuracy in interpretation. These extracted elements are then subjected to Myth Criticism, which asserts that works of art, literature, or media texts are fundamentally based on powerful social stories known as "myths".<sup>6</sup> Comparison with these myths establishes recurring parallels that are reflective of the most dominant mythological archetypes.

5 Escarpit 1971.

6 Kershaw 2007.

## Spiritual, Aesthetical, and Martial Elements

Japanese religious history spans thousands of years. It includes a diverse array of indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as significant influences from China and Korea, and later from the West. One of the earliest forms of religion in Japan was animism, which is the belief that everything in nature, including rocks, trees, and animals, has a spirit or soul. This belief system evolved into Shinto, which is the indigenous religion of Japan. Shinto emphasizes the importance of purity, nature, and ancestor worship and has had a profound impact on Japanese culture and identity. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century CE and quickly became one of the dominant religions in the country. It was brought over from China and Korea and was initially practiced only by the elite classes. However, it eventually spread to the general population and has since become deeply integrated into Japanese culture. Another major religion in Japan is Confucianism, which was also introduced from China. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of ethics, morality, and social order and has had a significant impact on Japanese society and government. During the Meiji period in the late nineteenth century, Japan underwent modernization and Westernization. This led to the introduction of Christianity, which has since become a minority religion in Japan. Today, Japan is a highly secular society, with many people practicing a blend of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and traditions. However, religion, which has had a profound impact on the country's history and development, continues to play an important role in Japanese culture and identity.

In addition, the Japanese hold a deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of their crafts and martial art forms.<sup>7</sup> This belief stems from several factors, including their cultural heritage, philosophy, and history. One reason why the Japanese view their crafts as superior is their adherence to the concept of *kaizen*,<sup>8</sup> which refers to the continuous improvement of their crafts. The Japanese believe in perfecting their craft through constant practice and refinement, resulting in a higher level of skill and quality. Furthermore, the Japanese also place a high value on aesthetics, which they see as an integral aspect of their craft. They believe in finding beauty in imperfections,

7 See Johnson 2012 for an exploration of Nihonjinron, an ideology that celebrates the perceived defining characteristics of Japanese culture, as envisioned by its advocates.

8 See MacPherson/Lockhart/Kavan/Iaquinto 2015 for a thorough discussion of Kaizen.

emphasizing minimalism and simplicity, and creating a harmonious balance between form and function. This attention to detail and focus on aesthetics has resulted in some of the most beautiful and intricate crafts in the world. The Japanese also take great pride in their culture and history, which has contributed to their belief in the superiority of their craft. The samurai tradition and its associated crafts, such as sword-making and martial arts, have played a particularly significant role in shaping this view. These crafts are seen as symbols of Japanese cultural identity and are deeply intertwined with the country's history and values. Finally, the Japanese hold a belief in the divine or spiritual aspects of their craft. For example, the specific type of steel called *tamahagane*, which is used to forge katanas, is considered a sacred material, imbued with spiritual energy.<sup>9</sup> This belief in the divine nature of their craft adds another layer of significance and reverence to the Japanese view of their craft.

The *Baki* series is heavily influenced by Japanese aesthetics. One of the key aesthetic principles in Japanese culture is the concept of *wabi-sabi*, which emphasizes the beauty of imperfection, transience, and the natural cycle of growth and decay. This principle can be seen throughout the series, from the physical appearance of the characters to the fighting styles they employ. For example, the characters in the *Baki* series often bear scars, wrinkles, and other imperfections that are seen as marks of their experiences and battles. The characters are also depicted in a highly stylized manner, with exaggerated features and proportions that emphasize their strength and power. In terms of fighting styles, the characters in the series often employ minimal and efficient movements. Also, the series often depicts a strong sense of honor and respect among its characters, particularly in the context of one-on-one fights. This reflects the Japanese valuing of honor and respect, as well as the importance placed on personal growth and development through challenging experiences. The martial art *Iaido*, which employs minimal movements to produce lethal outcomes, exemplifies this philosophy perfectly.

However, these views are not held by the entire Japanese population and they do not necessarily represent their attitudes toward other cultures. While some media may portray foreign martial artists in a negative light, Japan has a long history of cultural exchange and appreciation for other cultures. Overall, however, Japan continues to hold its culture in high esteem

9 See Ilundáin-Agurruza 2014 for a thorough discussion of the spiritual aspect of katana.

and values its unique contributions to the worlds of art, philosophy, and religion. Through the centuries, this appreciation for art and religion has led to a society that is both unique and intricate and that inspires and fascinates people around the globe.

## The Mythical Oni

The *Baki* series not only is influenced by Japanese culture and aesthetics but also incorporates elements of various Eastern religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. One of its notable aspects is the depiction of characters that embody spiritual entities found in these religions. These characters are often portrayed as possessing extraordinary abilities, physical prowess, and a profound understanding of the underlying principles of their respective traditions. They are also depicted as being deeply spiritual and often use their understanding of their respective religious principles to guide their actions and interactions with others. In this discussion, we will explore some of the *Baki* characters that embody spiritual entities from Eastern religions and the impact of their spiritual beliefs on their characterizations and actions in the series.

Yuichiro Hanma is the father of Yujiro Hanma. The first chapter of *Baki Gaiden: Kenjin*, depicts Yuichiro as a muscular man with large shoulders and a stocky body (fig. 1). He has a cauliflower ear – a deformity of the ear that can be caused by injuries that happen during a boxing or wrestling match. He is depicted as a calm person but ruthless when provoked and as a compassionate fighter but proud of his extra-human strength and fighting skill. In the fic-



Fig. 1: Film still, BAKI HANMA, S2 Ep 27 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:17:30.



Fig. 2: Katsushika Hokusai, Kobo Dashi (priest) practicing the Tantra, with an Oni before him, and wolf behind, ink and color on paper, 152.5x251.4 cm, Japan © Freer Gallery of Art Collection, public domain.

tional battle of Okinawa, Yuichiro defeated the 2,000–strong American forces, killing them in the most brutal way without using any weapons. Historically, in the the battle of Okinawa in World War II, the United States defeated the Japanese Imperial Army. The battle was dubbed *Tetsu no Bofu*, or “violent wind of steel”, a reference to the ferocity of the event and the intensity of the soldiers on both sides. Tragically more than 15,000 Okinawan civilians were killed in this invasion,<sup>10</sup> a number that exceeds the dead of Hiroshima. Yuichiro may be a refraction of this historical fact. He becomes a symbol of the collective dream of the Japanese psyche.<sup>11</sup> Since war is deeply embedded in their culture, losing to a supposedly inferior foreign power is very humiliating. Much as also happens to other Hanmas, Yuichiro’s back muscles become an abomination, morphing into a demon–like image that resembles that of an *Oni* (fig. 2).

The *Oni* is a fascinating creature in Buddhism, depicted as a brutish and muscular spirit with a menacing appearance. Its image has evolved over time, starting with its traditional depiction as a man–eating monster in ancient Buddhist texts. The *Oni* is often associated with death and destruction,

10 Feifer 2001.

11 See Brown 2012 on Manga’s ambiguity and escapism.



Fig. 3: Film still, BAKI HANMA, S2 Ep 25 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:06:56.

serving as a symbol of the darker aspects of human existence. The *Oni*'s origins can be traced back to a female deity named *Yomotsu-Shikome*, who was shamed by her husband.<sup>12</sup> This origin story reveals the *Oni*'s complexity, which includes female qualities in some versions. Interestingly, some traditions, such as Shintoism, view the *Oni* as a bringer of prosperity rather than destruction. This multidimensionality of the *Oni* makes it a symbol of both oppositions. Despite being a mythical creature, the *Oni* has managed to transcend time and space, relocating from its traditional dwelling in the spiritual realm to the world of media. This shift has allowed the *Oni* to remain a popular cultural icon in modern times, where it continues to fascinate through its ominous appearance and multifaceted nature.

Yujiro Hanma, one of the main characters in the Baki series, can be connected with the Buddhist demon *Oni* due to his physical attributes and his aggressive behavior (fig. 3). The *Oni* is depicted as a powerful, muscular creature that is often associated with violence and destruction, and similarly, Yujiro is known for his immense physical strength and combat prowess, as well as his brutal fighting style. Furthermore, the *Oni* is often associated

12 Reider 2010.

with negative emotions such as anger and hatred, which are also evident in Yujiro's character. He is shown to be ruthless and enjoys causing pain to others, often using excessive force in his fights. This violent and aggressive behavior is a common trait of the *Oni* in Buddhist mythology. In addition, the *Oni* is sometimes depicted as a symbol of opposition and challenge, which can also be seen in Yujiro's relationship with his son Baki. Yujiro sees Baki as a worthy opponent and often challenges him to fight in order to test his abilities and strength. This dynamic reflects the traditional role of the *Oni* in Buddhist mythology as a force that tests and challenges individuals. Yujiro's actions and personality are also reminiscent of the *Oni's* nature. The *Oni* is often viewed as a symbol of malevolence and benevolence. Yujiro is similarly depicted as a complex character, possessing both villainous and heroic qualities. His immense strength and fighting prowess make him a formidable opponent, and he often engages in brutal and violent battles. However, he also has a sense of honor and respect for his opponents, which are positive traits associated with the *Oni* in certain Buddhist traditions.

## The Monster Mara

In Buddhism, Mara is often depicted as a demonic figure with fearsome physical attributes (fig. 4), representing the temptations and illusions that hinder spiritual progress.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Yujiro Hanma is portrayed as a physically imposing and intimidating figure, with bulging muscles, sharp facial features, and a menacing gaze (fig. 5). Like Mara, Yujiro embodies a sense of danger and malevolence, capable of unleashing incredible destructive power upon his enemies. His physical prowess is unmatched, and he is often depicted as being in complete control of his body, effortlessly overpowering opponents with his strength and speed.

However, while Mara represents a force of temptation and illusion, Yujiro has a more complex and nuanced character. He is not simply a mindless monster but rather a highly intelligent and strategic fighter who understands the value of psychological warfare and manipulation. Certainly, Yujiro and Mara share a common trait – both are physically and mentally formidable opponents, capable of using their appearance and demeanor to intimidate and overpower their enemies. However, while Mara represents a purely negative force, Yujiro's character is more ambiguous, with shades of both darkness and light.

13 See Nichols 2010.



Fig. 4: Thangka of Mahakala, Tibet, 19th century, Wikimedia Commons, ©Hiart, CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.



Fig. 5: Film still, BAKI THE GREAT RAITAI TOURNAMENT Saga, Ep 1 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:03:33.

## The Demon Kensei

Another manifestation of the *Oni* can be seen in the recharacterization of one of Japan's national heroes. Miyamoto Musashi is known for his expertise in martial arts and his contributions to the development of Japanese swordsmanship. Musashi's life and legacy have been the subject of numerous books, films, and other works of art, and his philosophy and approach to combat continue to influence martial artists and enthusiasts to this day. Musashi was born in 1584, and as a young man he travelled to Japan, engaging in numerous duels and battles to prove his skill as a swordsman.<sup>14</sup> In his late twenties, he retired from active combat and began to devote himself to the study and teaching of martial arts. Over the course of his life, Musashi authored several works on strategy, including *The Book of Five Rings*, which is still widely read and studied today. Musashi's approach to martial arts emphasized simplicity and practicality over flashy techniques or showy displays of skill. He believed that the key to victory in combat was to maintain a clear mind and to be adaptable and flexible in one's approach. Musashi also emphasized the importance of continuous self-improvement and self-discipline, both in martial arts and in life more broadly. Despite his reputation as a skilled and deadly warrior, Musashi also had a reputation as a philosophical and spiritual thinker. He spent much of his later years as a hermit, living in a cave and contemplating the nature of existence and the human condition.

The Confucian elements in *The Book of Five Rings* may have been unconsciously influenced by Musashi's upbringing and the impact of Confucian ethics on his background and outlook on life. It is likely that other warriors of the time also drew on this tradition, even if it was not explicitly mentioned.<sup>15</sup> However, a note in the introduction to the book presents a problem, as it suggests that Musashi himself drew specifically on Confucian ethics. Some scholars believe that the introduction was written by one of Musashi's students, possibly his adopted son Iori.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, it is still plausible that Musashi incorporated Confucian ethics into his philosophy and that a follower provided this information in the introduction. Confucianism emphasized the importance of loyalty, filial piety, and self-discipline, which were also values that Musashi upheld in his teachings.

14 Ciecieląg 2014.

15 Ciecieląg 2014, 1–2.

16 Ciecieląg 2014, 3–4.

In the Baki franchise, Musashi is depicted in a very different light. Rather than as a spiritual philosopher or a master swordsman, he is portrayed as a bloodthirsty and sadistic warrior, willing to use any means necessary to defeat his opponents. He is narcissistic, with an alarming face and strange eyes. He uses his martial knowledge to abuse his opponents, going on a killing rampage and slicing them up with his sharp sword. The depiction of his victims' enlightenment and revitalization after being cut justifies and beautifies the act of cutting, making the violent nature of the series all the more disturbing. The total opposite of his actual characterization as a Kensei, a ronin-saint, Musashi is instead characterized as an *Oni* and bloodthirsty swordsman, indicative of the imperialist propaganda embedded in the series. Musashi's quest for enlightenment is reflected in his fighting style, which he views as a means to transcend the limitations of the physical world and achieve a higher level of consciousness. While the historical Musashi believed in the principles of *heijoshin*, a state of calmness and serenity in the face of danger, the Musashi in Baki is constantly seeking out strong opponents to satisfy his desire for battle. He is also portrayed as arrogant and narcissistic, often belittling his opponents and dismissing their abilities.

## The God of Fists

Doppo Orochi's fighting style in Baki, Shinshinkai Karate, is based on Kyokushin Karate and can be seen as a homage to Mas Oyama's influence on the martial arts world.<sup>17</sup> Orochi is a highly esteemed tenth dan grandmaster and serves as the director of the Shinshinkai Karate Dojo, a martial art style based on the real-life Kyokushin Karate. He is renowned for his various titles, such as the God Hand, Tiger Slayer, and Man Eater, and has held the championship title in the underground tournament organized by Mitsunari Tokugawa in the past. Doppo Orochi is recognized as the mentor of several accomplished fighters, including Baki Hanma, Katsumi Orochi, Kyosumi Kato, and Atasushi Suedo. Additionally, he is the devoted husband of Natsuki Orochi and lovingly adopted Katsumi Orochi as his own son. He stands at an average height and has a muscular build with two scars on his face, one on the right side and another on his left cheek, as a result of his brief encounter with Yujiro Hanma. In their rematch, Yujiro gouges out Doppo's right eye, leading him to wear an eye patch beneath his trademark sunglasses. He typ-

17 See Oyama 2005.

ically dons a light-colored green suit with a white dress shirt underneath, a black tie, and white shoes. However, in combat or training, he wears the traditional karate uniform, with a black belt and an off-white colored gi with the kanji *Shinshinkai* on the right side and *Director* on the back of his collar, signifying his role as the director of the *Shinshinkai-kan*. In the *Baki the Grappler: In Search of Our Strongest Hero* manga series, following his fight with American convict Dorian, Doppo sustains numerous small scars on his face. During their initial confrontation, Dorian employs a concealed steel wire within a lighter to slice off Doppo's hand, which is subsequently reattached. In his younger years, when participating in the underground tournament hosted by Mitsunari Tokugawa, Doppo is depicted wearing only his iconic shorts and belt, which were the same ones he wore when he fought and defeated a tiger, as told by Dorian in the "Tales of Doppo Orochi". He later wears them again during his second fight with Dorian.

As founder and high-level practitioner of Shinshinkai Karate, he exhibits a diverse set of skills in Budo-style karate techniques. His analytical and knowledgeable approach to fighting is demonstrated in his ability to quickly think of countermeasures and attacks against other fighting styles, such as Yujiro's *udonde*<sup>18</sup> technique, and his ability to break down and explain Kousho's *himokiri*<sup>19</sup> Karate technique to others. He practices the same techniques over a thousand times a day, every day, for over fifty years. He has shown great external strength, having fought and slain a tiger in his youth, and extreme pain tolerance and endurance, withstanding multiple barrage attacks from Yujiro, having his arm sliced off and face blown up by Dorian, and holding out against various head-on attacks by Amanai. Although he dies at the hands of Yujiro, he has shown a remarkable ability to recover quickly, even resuming demonstrations the very next day<sup>20</sup> by performing *tameshiwara*, or breaking techniques, to his class. Doppo's karate style

18 Udonde is a secret fighting move, taught exclusively to the Ryukyu royal family's eldest sons, involving appearing defenseless and then quickly advancing towards the opponent, relying on exceptional reflexes to counterattack upon the opponent's strike.

19 Himokiri Karate is a fictional martial art style that emphasizes attacking pressure points and vital areas of the body to inflict maximum damage on the opponent; its practitioners are known for their ruthless and merciless fighting techniques, including the use of any means necessary to win a fight. The style is primarily associated with the character Shinogi Kureha, who is a master of Himokiri Karate and one of the strongest fighters in the series.

20 Doppo is revived by Kureha Shinogi, another fighter in the series, who happens to be a doctor with an extraordinary knowledge of human anatomy.

is characterized by brute force, speed, stamina, and technique, which is evident in his varying stances and defensive/offensive techniques. He has demonstrated his physical prowess by breaking and destroying concrete pipes, chopping a piece of steel wire in half, and breaking several ice blocks with his fist.

## The Dragon Grappler

Hanma Baki is a driven young man who seeks to defeat his father, Yujiro Hanma, the strongest man on earth. Baki's motivation stems from a tragic event in his past – the death of his mother, who was killed by Yujiro during a brutal brawl. Despite harboring a deep hatred for his father, Baki realizes that his mother's death was a necessary part of his own journey as a fighter. The story centers on the martial arts themselves, more than the individual martial artists, making it a unique entry in its genre. The series explores the theme of fighting for fighting's sake, as Baki strives to become the world's best fighter by taking on his father. This pursuit is deeply rooted in Japan's cultural context, where martial arts have a rich history rooted in the samurai tradition. Practicing martial arts is seen as a means of achieving physical and mental excellence and transcending the limits of the human body to achieve a higher level of consciousness. As Baki trains and fights to achieve his goal, he also grapples with the idea of destiny and the role of violence in shaping one's fate. Over time, Baki comes to accept and even appreciate his father's violent and deadly acts as part of his own path.

As a character, Baki exhibits a complex personality, which is shaped by his upbringing, his motivations, and his experiences. Through a close reading of the manga, it is possible to identify several key traits that define Baki's character and contribute to his development throughout the series. One of the most prominent aspects of Baki's personality is his intense desire to become the strongest fighter in the world. This desire is fueled by his rivalry with his father. Baki's pursuit of strength is not simply a matter of ego or pride but is driven by a deep need to prove himself and fulfil his destiny as a fighter. This is evident in his willingness to undergo extreme training regimens, such as spending a year in isolation or fighting in underground arenas against dangerous opponents. Another notable aspect of Baki's character is his determination and perseverance. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks throughout the series, Baki never gives up or loses sight of his goal. He is willing to endure intense physical pain, emotional turmoil, and



Fig. 6: The Demon Back. Film still, BAKI THE GREAT RAITAI TOURNAMENT SAGA, Ep 8 (Keisuke Itagaki, Netflix 2023), 00:19:33.

even temporary defeat in order to become stronger and achieve his ultimate objective. This is exemplified in his battle with Pickle, a prehistoric man who is virtually invincible. Despite being severely injured, Baki continues to fight and eventually finds a way to defeat Pickle through sheer force of will. Baki's personality is also shaped by his upbringing, which was marked by physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father. This abuse is a key factor in Baki's motivation to become stronger, as well as in his complex relationship with Yujiro. Despite hating his father for the pain he inflicted on him and his mother, Baki also recognizes that his father's strength and ruthlessness are necessary traits for a fighter. This duality is reflected in Baki's own fighting style, which combines raw power with calculated strategy.

## The Demon Back

In the Baki series, the concept of the demon back plays a significant role in the characterization of several key characters (fig. 6). The demon back is a term used to describe the ridge of muscle and bone that runs down the back of a highly skilled fighter, giving the fighter an almost supernatural appearance. According to traditional Japanese beliefs, the back is the source of a person's power, and a well-developed demon back is a sign of exceptional physical ability.<sup>21</sup> This concept is reflected in the Baki series through the character of Yujiro Hanma, who is known to have the most prominent and well-developed demon back among all the characters. Yujiro's demon

21. See Reid 1991 for the concept of hara and the importance of the back in traditional training.

back is so powerful that it is capable of deflecting bullets and other threats, making him almost invincible in combat. The demon back also serves as a symbol of Yujiro's immense strength and fighting prowess. However, the demon back is not limited to Yujiro alone. Other characters in the series, such as Baki Hanma and his grandfather, have also been shown to possess well-developed demon backs, indicating their exceptional physical abilities and fighting skills. The demon back can be seen as a symbol of the character's inner strength and resilience. It represents their unwavering commitment to training and self-improvement and their willingness to endure intense physical and mental challenges in pursuit of their goals.

## The Bodhisattva Fist

*Bodhisattva* is a term used in Buddhism to refer to a person who has attained a high level of spiritual realization and has dedicated themselves to helping others achieve enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> The word *bodhisattva* is derived from two Sanskrit words: *bodhi*, meaning *enlightenment*, and *sattva*, meaning *being* or *existence*.<sup>23</sup> Together, they denote someone who is on the path to enlightenment and has committed themselves to aid others in their spiritual journeys.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of the bodhisattva is particularly important, as it emphasizes the altruistic ideal of seeking enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Bodhisattvas are spiritual leaders who embody compassion, wisdom, and the qualities of a true spiritual guide. They are viewed as having transcended the cycle of birth and death, and instead of seeking personal liberation they choose to remain in the world to help others achieve enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are often depicted in Buddhist art and literature as figures of great beauty, grace, and compassion. They may be shown wearing elegant robes and carrying a variety of symbolic objects, such as lotus flowers, jewels, and swords. The most famous bodhisattva is Avalokiteshvara, who is revered in both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism as the embodiment of compassion.

Doppo Orochi had a vivid dream in which he discovered the first form used by babies in the palms of their hands and realized it embodied the perfection of a punch. This vision, which resembled a Buddhist chant, sparked

22 See Chodron 2007.

23 See Leighton 2012.

Doppo's quest to uncover the origins of this ancient knowledge. Ultimately, he discovered the Bodhisattva Fist, a martial art founded on Buddhist principles of compassion and enlightenment. By mastering this art, Doppo achieved his goal of perfecting the punch and successfully delivered a fatal blow to Goki Shibukawa.

## Reflection, Refraction, and Subversion

Reflection, refraction, and subversion are important concepts in the Baki series, seen particularly in relation to its characters. Baki himself can be understood as a reflection of raging testosterone, with his intense drive to be the strongest and his constant pursuit of challenges and battles. His journey to become the strongest martial artist reflects the idea that physical strength and power are highly valued in many cultures, particularly those with a strong emphasis on martial arts. Similarly, all the martial artists who have taught Baki can be seen as forms of the old wise man archetype. In many cultures, martial arts are seen as a form of wisdom where the master-student relationship is highly respected. Baki's journey to learn from various martial arts masters is indicative of this idea, as well as of the philosophy of "learn all that is useful, disregard the useless". The Baki series also disrupts some traditional Asian characters, such as Genji in the novel *A Tale of Genji* and Jia Baoyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.<sup>24</sup> While these characters are often portrayed with feminine features, Baki subverts these ideas by portraying its characters in a hypermasculine manner. However, amidst the brute strength and fighting skills, there are still elements of femininity. For example, Baki is shown to be in touch with his emotions and often engages in introspection and self-reflection. He is also portrayed as having strong empathy and compassion with others, particularly those who are weaker or less fortunate than he is. This can be seen in his interactions with characters such as Kozue Matsumoto, whom he cares for deeply, even going as far as to risk his life to protect her. Furthermore, Baki's physical appearance also exhibits feminine features. His facial features are relatively soft and delicate, with large eyes and a small nose. His hair is also styled in a manner that can

24 "Male characters with feminine traits" is a common theme in Japanese and Chinese literature, such as Genji in *The Tale of Genji* and Jia Baoyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a part of the long tradition of androgynous beauty in both cultures.

be considered more effeminate than masculine, with long, flowing locks that often fall in his face during fights. The inclusion of feminine elements in Baki's character does not diminish his masculinity or physical strength in any way. Instead, it adds a layer of complexity and depth to his character, making him more relatable and well-rounded. Baki's incorporation of feminine traits serves as a reminder that strength and power can coexist with empathy and emotional intelligence. Finally, Yujiro, Baki's father, upends the benevolent father archetype. In many traditional stories, the father is a figure of authority and wisdom who guides his children along the right path. However, in the Baki series, Yujiro is portrayed as a brutal and violent figure who is more interested in his own power and status than in his son's well-being. This subversion reflects changing attitudes towards authority figures and the traditional family structure in contemporary society.

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# Sin and Divine Punishment

## The Korean Series JIOK (HELLBOUND, KR 2021–), New Religious Movements, and a World Full of Guilt

### Abstract

The TV series JIOK (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021–), internationally known as HELLBOUND, is a recent and highly successful series that has been available on the streaming platform Netflix since November 2021. It is usually described as a “dark mystery thriller” or “dark fantasy film”, which points to the general tone but also to its constant interplay with the “mysterious”. The plot revolves around the appearance of monstrous creatures who suddenly arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way. All of those who are killed in this heinous manner have received a warning beforehand, delivered by “angels” foretelling their fate and their imminent death and introducing crucial topics such as “guilt” and “sin” as a reason for the whole procedure. The article introduces major topics of this series and focusses on the prominent role of a new religious movement that is intimately linked to major trajectories of the plot.

### Keywords

South Korea, TV Series, New Religious Movements, Christianity in East Asia, HELLBOUND

### Biography

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## Introductory Remarks: A New Korean Hit

The TV series *JIOK* (*HELLBOUND*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021–) – the Korean *jiok* means *hell* – is a recent and highly successful streaming series that has been available on Netflix since November 2021.<sup>1</sup> Its pilot episode premiered in September 2021 as the first Korean drama to be part of the Toronto International Film Festival, which proved to be the starting point for an impressive international reception. The series even surpassed the phenomenal success of the better-known Korean series *OJING-ŏ GEIM* (*SQUID GAME*, Hwang Tong-hyŏk, KR 2021), which had been released only two months earlier, and even crushed the 10-year reign of *GAME OF THRONES* (HBO, USA 2011–2019) as the most watched video content on the YouTube platform.<sup>2</sup> *HELLBOUND* became the world's most-watched Netflix series only one day after its release,<sup>3</sup> which was probably intrinsically connected to the preceding *SQUID GAME* craze<sup>4</sup> and the general interest in the Korean film and series industry that had grown substantially and on a global level at least since the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

The series' origins are in a popular webtoon (a specifically Korean way of publishing comics, or *manhwa*, on the Internet and not in a printed form that has become extremely popular)<sup>6</sup> by Yŏn Sang-ho (b. 1978), who is also responsible for the streaming version. Yŏn is a well-known figure in the Korean entertainment industry<sup>7</sup> and responsible for some internationally acclaimed works, such as the animated films *TWAEJIŬI WANG* (*KING OF PIGS*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2012), the first Korean film ever screened at the Cannes Festival, and *SAIBI* (*THE FAKE*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2013), which made it to the Toronto International Film Festival, and above all for the zombie horror thriller *PUSAN HAENG* (*TRAIN TO BUSAN*, Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2016), which was an immensely popular and commercial hit in South Korea and beyond.<sup>8</sup>

1 See <https://www.netflix.com/at/title/81256675> [accessed 6 July 2023].

2 See the overview in Kim/Park 2023, 455–456; on the relation of the South Korean film industry to the Netflix company see Kasten 2021.

3 Noh 2022.

4 See early reviews in Burke 2021; Ishak 2021.

5 Chua/Iwabuchi 2008; Jin 2016; Yecies/Shim 2021.

6 For an introduction and the history of the webtoon genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 1–48; see also Jin 2023. On the original *Hellbound* webtoon see <https://koreanwebtoons.fandom.com/wiki/Hellbound> [accessed 6 July 2023].

7 For Yŏn Sang-ho's importance in the creation and popularization of the webtoon genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 122–123.

8 Gardener 2021; Austin 2020, 9–12. The most recent production by Yŏn is the science-fiction

Major characteristics of Yŏn’s earlier films, which all have a certain darkness and an obvious penchant for the catastrophic, are also relevant for HELLBOUND. It is usually introduced as a “dark mystery thriller” or “dark fantasy film”,<sup>9</sup> which points not only to its general tone, but also to its constant interplay with the “mysterious”. This description stems from aspects of the plot and the content often remaining largely unexplained. This is certainly the case, at least in the episodes of the first season available so far.

This article interprets aspects of the series within a wider cultural and religious context by focussing on the role of religion. One of the most interesting aspects of this series is that a recently established religious community plays a crucial role. New religious movements are a major characteristic of the East Asian religious landscape, for they have developed in great number since the nineteenth century. This topic has been picked up by the film industry, not least on account of its often spectacular implications for both society and the individual. As will be shown, the portrayal of the new religious scenery in HELLBOUND has parallels with some recently released Japanese films, but it also bears striking differences.

## Encountering Creatures from Hell: Characteristics of the Plot

The starting point of the series and the trigger for all the events is the mysterious appearance of fierce monstrous creatures (fig. 1) who arrive out of nowhere and kill people in a most brutal and bloody way, literally annihilating them at the end of the “demonstration” (as the ruthless slaughter is called). All of those who are killed in this heinous manner have received prior warning. This notice is delivered by “angels” who foretell their fate and their imminent death, introducing crucial topics such as “guilt” and “sin” as reasons for the whole procedure.

This all takes place in Seoul in 2022, and these breath-taking happenings are intrinsically connected to a new religious movement that profits from these events. The movement is called New Truth (*saejilli*) and had been founded 10 years earlier but remained rather unsuccessful as nobody was

film JUNG\_E (KR 2023), which received mixed or average reviews but initially was also a major Netflix hit.

9 Such characterizations are found in newspaper and Internet reviews; see, for instance, Burke 2021; Ishak 2021; or entries in web encyclopaedias such as [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellbound\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellbound_(TV_series)) [accessed 6 July 2023].



Fig. 1: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:03:08): One of the monstrous creatures appearing out of nowhere in full combat mode.

interested in the founder’s prophecies. With these recent events his message is noted and appreciated by a growing number of people: the emergence of the monsters, referred to as “executors”, is part of God’s plan to make humanity responsible for its misdeeds. The growing success of the movement is also a result of its innovative advertising and strategy for growth: New Truth’s main representative appears on the Internet in a flashy environment where he presents his message in a seemingly infuriated, highly aggressive manner (fig. 2). He interacts intensively and professionally with his audience via various social media platforms. Eventually, after a long period of unsuccessful proselytization attempts, he becomes the centre of attention because his earlier predictions have been fulfilled.

The New Truth movement, though, is not the sole actor in this regard. An additional group, called “arrowheads” (*hwasalch’ok*), a kind of elite split-off within New Truth, takes radical measures and physically attacks everyone who dares criticize New Truth. Naturally, the state authorities are also part of the story. One of the police inspectors is soon involved on a personal level, as he comes to realize that his daughter is part of, or at least highly attracted to, the movement. This element is linked to an additional subplot,



Fig. 2: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 2 (00:18:28): the head of the new religious movement in his flashy online appearance and in full social-media interaction with his audience.

as the inspector's wife had been killed years earlier, and the daughter is able to identify and kill her mother's murderer with the help of the founder of New Truth.

After describing the foundational events of 2022, the series' plot makes a leap into 2027. As a result of the developments described above, i.e. the "demonstrations" that took place, New Truth has become more and more popular and has gained a substantial membership. Its "priests" are important figures in society and highly active in publicly denouncing the "sinners" who are bound for their final punishment. The current first season of the series ends with another plot evolving in this disastrous environment, which includes groups that try to oppose the growing importance and influence of the New Truth organization. In addition, a couple of figures from the first part are still active, which points to major plot trajectories that might evolve in the next season, announced for 2023.<sup>10</sup>

As this outline of the plot shows, the series has a rather elaborate structure, with various layers of time and figures who change as events evolve. The leap from 2022 to 2027 gives an opportunity to increase the tension, as the new period introduces a totally new structure related to the rise of the New Truth movement. It also raises questions about what happened to characters from the first period and how their fates are interwoven. The leitmotifs are guilt and sin, which are at the centre of both the plot and major dialogues. The theological stance of New Truth suggests sin is a general problem that affects all human beings but is focused on individuals who sinned "evidently". In honing in on certain figures, the series opens up opportunities to explore the nuances of entanglements with guilt on an individual level. We see this clearly in the case of the inspector (officially responsible for the detention of those guilty under the law and for ensuring they are punished) and his daughter: both struggle with the murder of their wife/mother and become involved in a labyrinthine relationship with the head of the mysterious religious movement, who deems himself responsible for "sin" in the religious and theological sense of the word. Some of the aspects, namely of the plot, though, tend to overstress the topic of sin.

Later episodes of this series may resolve these many tensions and intricate twists. In comparable cases, extremely convoluted plots like that in *HELLBOUND* have become a burden, with series having to end with "mysteri-

10 See the announcement on <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/hellbound-season-two-announcement> [accessed 7 July 2023].

ous” or deus-ex-machina finales (as was the case in the US-American series *THE LEFTOVERS* [Mimi Leder, US 2014–2017]) or be suspended (as was the case with the series *MESSIAH* [Michael Petroni, US 2020]).

Many parallels are evident in a comparison with the plot of *SQUID GAME*, including the rather critical stance towards popular Christianity-related issues<sup>11</sup> such as the Prosperity Gospel, so important in South Korea.<sup>12</sup> *HELLBOUND* similarly describes an apocalyptic environment and deals with issues usually related to the final days of humanity, which is threatened by previously unimagined powers. In this regard, the series also has parallels with the already mentioned series *THE LEFTOVERS*, since the latter is also about how to cope with an unforeseen and unexpected “divine” (or at least super-human) intervention<sup>13</sup> that forces a confrontation with crucial human questions such as mortality, sin, and justice.<sup>14</sup> The same also applies – although on a different level – to the film adaptations of the highly successful *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye (1926–2016) and Jerry B. Jenkins (born 1949), where the New Testament’s *Apocalypse of John* is used as a script for a meticulously drafted and detailed description of the end of the world in modern times (*LEFT BEHIND: THE MOVIE*, Vic Sarin, CA 2000/2001; *LEFT BEHIND: THE TRIBULATION FORCE*, Bill Corcoran, US/CA 2002; *LEFT BEHIND: WORLD AT WAR*, Craig R. Baixley, US/CA 2005).<sup>15</sup>

All these philosophical and religious “big” questions contrast with the dazzling media environment, which drives forward the series and links back to its origins in a webtoon.<sup>16</sup> One of the “demonstrations” becomes the centre of an enormous media craze that is intensively promoted by the new religious movement: a person who has received a prophecy is paid an immense sum of money for giving media representatives an opportunity to watch its fulfilment live (fig. 3).

11 On the references to and the implicit criticism of some aspects of Korean Christianity see Bosman 2022.

12 Suh 2019, 564–569; for a portrayal of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, an important Christian movement with this agenda that was founded in 1958 by Cho (David) Yong-gi (born 1936), developed into the biggest Pentecostal church in South Korea, and also has a worldwide presence, see Kim, Hui-yeon 2018, and also, more critical, Anderson 2003.

13 Northover 2021.

14 Front 2021; Dulong 2020.

15 On this series and its importance for contemporary religious culture in the United States see Frykholm 2004; Forbes/Kilde 2004; Standaert 2006. In spite of the overall success of the book series, the film versions were rather disappointing, which led to reboots in the 2010s.

16 On the innovative aspects of this specific genre see Yecies/Shim 2021, 129–150.

Fig. 3: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yön Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:02:00): Park Jungja who has received a “warning” awaits her punishment in public and in front of an expectant audience after being paid an immense sum by New Truth.



Fig. 4: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yön Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 3 (00:04:40): the three monstrous figures in action, brutally burning down and literally annihilating their victim, while the media watch and film the scene openly.



The resultant shockwave enhances the importance of the event on a national level and beyond. Thus, intimate experiences become the object of sensationalist media coverage (fig. 4). This portrayal encourages reflection on current social questions and the contribution of religious issues to them (as was also the case in the SQUID GAME series).

## The Role of New Religious Movements

One of the most fascinating aspects of the series is the specific role it attributes to a new religious movement. Doing so gives reason for a thread that deals with intriguing and popular issues such as secret organizations and their alleged influence in all layers of society. The specific emphasis has much to do with aspects of the East Asian religious landscape, where the emergence of new religious movements and their societal influence – when compared, for instance, to the European context – is an important feature (with Japan and Korea as the most obvious examples).<sup>17</sup> This aspect often

17 For an overview of the situation in East Asia see Pokorny/Winter 2018; Staemmler/Dehn

comes as a surprise to a European audience, but it is part of various East Asian media productions. In Japan the importance and influence of new religious movements is a constant reason for critical reflection, particularly since the terrorist attack of the neo-Buddhist movement Aum Shinrikyō in the Tokyo metro system in 1995.<sup>18</sup> Well-known examples of Japanese productions that take up this theme include the live-action film trilogy *NIJUSSEIKI SHŌNEN* (20TH CENTURY BOYS, Tsutsumi Yukihiko, JP 2008–2009), based on the Japanese manga series of the same name by Urasawa Naoki, published 1999–2006, or the critically acclaimed four-hour movie *AI NO MUKIDASHI* (LOVE EXPOSURE, Sono Shion, JP 2008). In these films, new religious movements are generally portrayed as highly problematic developments, with a sole focus on their harmful influence within and on society, which differs from the plot in *HELLBOUND*. Other important parallel examples are provided by a couple of popular Japanese manga series that came out in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyō incident.<sup>19</sup> They draw on expectable topics such as brainwashing and abduction, but also on sexual misconduct and violence, thereby sensationalizing the character of the fraudulent and evil “cult” leader so popular in media representations (as in the manga series *Charisma* by Shindō Fuyuki, published 2004–2005).<sup>20</sup> Other examples intimately explore the motivations of those who join such movements, with a critical position on problematic (economic and social) developments in Japanese society since the 1990s (such as in the challenging manga series *Believers* by Yamamoto Naoki, 1999).<sup>21</sup>

However, *20TH CENTURY BOYS* has the most parallels to *HELLBOUND*, particularly because of its impressive focus on apocalyptic topics: in both series a future end-of-the-world scenario that poses an immediate threat to humankind (either on a more individual level as in *HELLBOUND* or on an all-encompassing level with worldwide floodings and the outbreak of epidemics

2011 (particularly for the situation in Japan); for Korea specifically see Pokorny 2018; Buswell 2018, 449–513.

18 Winter 2016; Repp 1999; Reader 1996; for the impact of this disastrous event and also its relation to the Japanese manga and film industry see Winter 2012, 66–70. The founder of Aum Shinrikyō, Asahara Shōkō (1955–2018), was deeply inspired by manga culture and by specific traits within it, such as the focus on apocalyptic and science-fiction scenarios, which became popular in the 1980s (with the series *Akira* by Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1982–1990, as the best-known example, even on a global level). See also Gardner 2001 and Gardner 2008 for the debate on the alleged harmful influence of manga culture in Japan after 1995.

19 See Thomas 2014, 137–153, for the bigger context.

20 Thomas 2014, 137–139.

21 Thomas 2014, 140–142.

Fig. 5: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 4 (00:03:06): the “second chairman” of New Truth in an Internet clip filmed on the “memorial site” of the “demonstration” of Park Jungja, reminding the audience of the need to repent for their sins.



in 20TH CENTURY BOYS) is the starting point, and a new religious movement profits from the fears triggered by these developments. In the Korean series the emergence of the apocalyptic developments is never explained (and has, so to say, a “divine” origin), while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS it is intrinsically related to the foundation of the new religious movement, whose origins are closely linked to a group of former young friends and the fantastic stories they told each as entertainment.<sup>22</sup>

In both cases, the movements are portrayed as problematic, as they are clandestine organizations that develop their own agendas within society by trying to influence political and economic stakeholders (or even by establishing their own political parties). The apocalyptic events serve as a trigger, particularly their flashy and spectacular aspects: in HELLBOUND the public display of a “demonstration” for a victim of the heavenly condemnation is a highlight of the first season, while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS the literal “resurrection” of the supposedly murdered founder of the new movement in a public stadium and in the presence of the global political elite, including the pope (!), is a peak in the plot, as it demonstrates the global importance of the recently emerged movement.

Another contrast can also be noted: in HELLBOUND the plot is complicated by the evolution of a subgroup within the bigger New Truth organization and its setting of an own agenda, distancing itself from the mother group, while in 20TH CENTURY BOYS the group around the mysterious figure referred to as “friend” (*tomodachi*), the search of whose identity is a vital aspect of the series’ plot, remains a unified block.

22 More detailed information on the highly sophisticated plot and its interpretation against the background of major societal changes in Japan from the 1980s onwards is provided in Winter 2018, 208–211.



Fig. 6: Film still, HELLBOUND (Yŏn Sang-ho, KR 2021), Episode 5 (00:07:43): Public exposure and condemnation of a sinner (who was a gambler) by New Truth.

Also relatively typical, however, is the sensationalist media coverage (figs. 5 and 6). The rather aggressive and intense instrumentalization of all kinds of media in HELLBOUND, in particular the internet and social media, not only by the movement but also by other stakeholders and influential figures in society, is obviously meant as a fierce criticism of contemporary religious phenomena in East Asia. In this regard, once again comparisons can be drawn with 20TH CENTURY BOYS, where the media are implicitly criticized for their sensation-seeking.<sup>23</sup>

The aggressive use of a variety of media that is prominently exposed in HELLBOUND is found in Christian churches in South Korea: mega-churches, styled according to their US-American models, actively (and even aggressively) deploy media to proselytize and to gain influence in society.<sup>24</sup> Many have been involved in scandals, often the object of sensationalist media coverage in turn, the flip-side of their own aggressive use of the media.<sup>25</sup>

## To Be Continued ...

Due to the success of its first season, HELLBOUND was extended for a second season, due for release in 2023. The project contains material and content that is ripe for further exploration: questions remain unanswered, threads of the plot are still running, and the series ended with a cliff-hanger. But as the series is deemed “mysterious”, perhaps such questions will not yet be answered.

23 Thomas 2014, 144–145, 147, for the plot of the manga series.

24 Kim 2007, 208–213.

25 Lee 2019.

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# The Representation of Rural Christianity in the Films of Gan Xiao'er

## Abstract

The religious dimension of Chinese cinema is, it has been observed, a “triple lacuna” in contemporary scholarship: in research on religion in China, in research on Chinese cinema, and in interdisciplinary research on film and religion. From 2002 to 2012, independent filmmaker Gan Xiao'er directed three low-budget features that portrayed rural Christianity in China, a subject almost entirely absent from both Chinese mainstream media and independent films. In this article, I analyze Gan's films by locating them in their social, political, and religious contexts, by comparing them with other Chinese films, and by linking them to the tradition of Western films that portray spirituality. I observe a progression in themes and style from Gan's first feature, *山清水秀* (THE ONLY SONS, CN 2002), to his third, *在期待之中* (WAITING FOR GOD, CN 2012). I seek to show that Gan developed a restrained directorial style in order to connect with the spirituality of Chinese peasants. Although he had to grope in the dark on many aspects, his engagement with Christian themes has greatly expanded the narrative space of Chinese cinema.

## Keywords

Christianity, Chinese Cinema, Gan Xiao'er, Chinese Peasants

## Biography

Jing Li is a PhD candidate in cultural studies at Stony Brook University. Her research focuses on the representation of rural China in Chinese cinema. Specifically, her dissertation, entitled *Filming Villages: The Representation of Rural China in Chinese Independent Cinema since 2000*, examines how independent cinema opens up an aesthetic space to village experience and helps us to explore the issues of rural culture. Prior to her doctoral training in the U.S., she received her MA degree in Art Theory at Nanjing University and worked as an editor for the publishing press and art museum in Shanghai, China.

There are 80 million Christians in China, where are they in Chinese cinema?  
—Gan Xiao'er, 2015

The epigraph for this article, a question posed by Chinese independent-filmmaker Gan Xiao'er, highlights three themes: Christianity in China, Chinese cinema, and the intersection of the two. Christianity has a long history in China that can be traced back more than a millennium,<sup>1</sup> and Chinese cinema has existed for more than 100 years. The times they have intersected, however, can be counted on one's fingers. To address the paucity of cinematic representations of Chinese Christians, between 2002 and 2012 Gan directed three low-budget independent features that portray rural Chinese Christianity, a topic almost entirely absent from both Chinese mainstream media and independent feature films.

Before I delve into Gan's background and the aims of current research on Chinese film and religion, a brief overview of Christianity in China will be helpful. According to historian Lian Xi, the journey taken by Chinese Christianity started in 635 CE, but it was not until the first Opium War (1839–1842) that Christian evangelism began to be officially tolerated and Western missionaries were granted broad access to the Middle Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> From 1860 to 1949, Christianity in China experienced times of popularity and growth, but it also faced political and social challenges.<sup>3</sup> Soon after China entered the communist era, in 1949, all Western missionaries were expelled,<sup>4</sup> and the Chinese Protestant church began to move toward “self-government, self-support, and self-propagation”(自治, 自养, 自传).<sup>5</sup> Political persecution and fierce restrictions on religious activity drove Christianity underground during the 1960s and 1970s.

Since the opening of China in 1979, Christianity has grown at a staggering speed.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, official data suggested the number of Christian believers in China, both Catholic and Protestant, was about 44 million.<sup>7</sup> However, this figure includes only believers who attend officially approved churches. Ad-

1 Lian 2010, 3.

2 Lian 2010, 3–6.

3 Lutz 2001, 184–189.

4 Stark/Wang 2015.

5 Lian 2010, 197.

6 Lian 2010, 205; Aikman 2003, 7.

7 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 4 March 2018, 中國保障宗教信仰自由的政策和實踐》白皮書 (White Paper on Policies and Practices for Ensuring Freedom of Religious Belief in China), <http://tinyurl.com/4xetjbt> [accessed 30 March 2023].

ditional Christians attend the unofficial and unregistered gatherings called “house churches” (家庭教會). Such churches are the target of discrimination and persecution and are typically secretive about their membership and operations. Consequently, how many Christians there are in China cannot be stated with any certainty – in recent years, wildly divergent figures have been published, ranging from 80 million to 230 million.<sup>8</sup>

Born in a village in Henan province, where more than 15 percent of the population is Christian,<sup>9</sup> Gan grew up in a family in which both parents were devout Christians. He attended the Beijing Film Academy, graduating in 1998, and now teaches at South China Normal University in Guangzhou. Born in 1970, he is of the same generation as Jia Zhangke.<sup>10</sup> While he acknowledges that Jia is one of few Chinese directors who can probe the spiritual world of Chinese people, he is still unsatisfied, “because these films are replete with stories about relationships among people [...] but none about humanity’s relationship with deity”.<sup>11</sup> He has observed precisely that absence is prevalent in Chinese films, noting, “The problem is not whether the film involves faith or religious elements, but that it is completely unaware of the absence of man’s relationship with god. This god, for different individuals, can be Jehovah, Allah, or an impersonalized absolute thing, such as heaven, earth and the universe.”<sup>12</sup> For Gan himself, this god is the Christian Trinity, which exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In 2000, Gan created the Seventh Seal Film Workshop with his friends in Guangzhou, paying tribute to his religion<sup>13</sup> and to the Swedish director

8 Hattaway 2021, 309.

9 According to Paul Hattaway, Henan province, home to more than 17 million Christians, which is the largest number in any province, has seen both the most powerful Christian revival and the most intense religious persecution in China (Hattaway 2021, 305).

10 Jia Zhangke (b. 1970) is regarded as one of the leading filmmakers of China’s “Sixth Generation”, which includes Zhang Yuan (b. 1963), Lou Ye (b. 1965), Wang Xiaoshuai (b. 1966), and Guan Hu (b. 1968). Coming from a small provincial town in Shanxi province, Jia is widely known for his portrayal of a raw underlying reality that is “repressed both by officially sanctioned media representations and by mainstream entertainment cinema” (McGrath 2007, 85). Influenced by the traditions of neorealist and documentary expression, Jia uses non-professional actors, local dialects, long shots, and other non-fiction techniques to depict his subjects with minimal distortion. Since his first feature film, *XIAO WU* (CN 1997), Jia’s works have attracted substantial scholarly attention; see, for example, M. Berry 2009 and C. Berry 2008.

11 Gan 2007a, 83–84.

12 Gan 2007a, 84.

13 It can easily be recognized from Gan’s own descriptions and films that he is a Protestant.

Ingmar Bergman.<sup>14</sup> Gan intended to direct seven feature films, forming a set of “Seven Seals”,<sup>15</sup> all dealing with the spiritual life of Chinese people. He stated that these films “are not to spread the Gospel, but to depict the state of the Gospel in China. [I intend to] use feature films to do what documentaries do, i. e. these feature films will function like documentary, recording the spiritual life of Chinese people and the status of Christianity in China.”<sup>16</sup> Gan’s personal religiosity ensures that his films are noticeably different from those of other independent filmmakers.

In line with Gan’s own inquiry in the epigraph, Hong Kong scholar Yam Chi-Keung has remarked that the religious dimension of Chinese cinema is a “triple lacuna” in contemporary scholarship on religion in China, on Chinese cinema, and on the interdisciplinary study of film and religion.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars suggest the explanation lies in the lack of religious content in contemporary Chinese films.<sup>18</sup> Yam argues that the lack of research reflects the lack of experts who can work with religion and Chinese films. He has made pioneering efforts to address this problem. In “Contemporary Christianity and the Religiosity of Popular Chinese Cinema”, published in 2013, Yam explored religious sensibilities in Chinese popular cinema and compared them to the representation of Chinese Christians in Gan’s *舉自塵土* (RAISED FROM DUST, CN 2007). In the same year, Lai Yunghang wrote a master’s thesis on Gan’s three features, exploring their generation of a particular religious approach in cultural critique, with reference to both Western cultural theories and Chinese feminist studies. Albeit wide-ranging, the thesis is short on detailed analysis of the films’ aesthetic style and the link to other cultural texts that have inspired Gan. Lastly, an essay contributed by New York-based scholar

14 Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007), Swedish screenwriter and film and theater director. Throughout his life, Bergman made dozens of films that grappled with religion, such as *THE SEVENTH SEAL* (SE 1957) and *THE VIRGIN SPRING* (SE 1960). After his “Trilogy of Faith” – *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY* (SE 1961), *WINTER LIGHT* (SE 1962), and *THE SILENCE* (SE 1963), Bergman shifted his focus from questioning God’s existence to a dystopic world of humanity abandoned by God. Articles on Bergman authored by Gan Xiao’er include Gan 2002 and Gan 2007a; he has also taught an undergraduate course on Bergman’s films.

15 In the Bible, the opening of the seven seals (Revelation 6 and 8) marks the beginning of God’s judgement in the end-times. In naming his film series “Seven Seals”, Gan indicates that he regards his filmmaking not only as a personal ministry but also as a process of his own life being judged by God.

16 Gan 2015, 16.

17 Yam 2013, 91.

18 Mitchell/Plate 2007, 71–72.

Angela Zito to the collection *DV-Made China* (2015), discusses the “aesthetic particulars”<sup>19</sup> of *RAISED FROM DUST* and its accompanying documentary, 教堂電影院 (CHURCH CINEMA, CN 2008), focusing on how Gan successfully challenges the boundary between documentary and fiction narratives.

The richness of Gan’s films still leaves much for us to explore. In what follows, I integrate formal and narrative analysis of Gan’s three feature films by situating them in social, political, and religious contexts, comparing them to other Chinese independent films, and linking them to the tradition of Western films that portray spirituality. I contend that from his first feature, 山清水秀 (THE ONLY SONS, CN 2002), via *RAISED FROM DUST* (2007), and on to his third feature, 在期待之中 (WAITING FOR GOD, CN 2012), there is a progression in theme and style. In terms of theme, while in the first of these features Gan is beginning to deal with religion, the second and third dive more deeply into the details of religious experience, documenting and criticizing Christianity in rural China. In terms of style, Gan continues along the line of post-socialist realism<sup>20</sup> but differentiates himself by striving to represent the interiority of characters, for example through the use of silence, flashbacks, monochrome, and surreal elements. From the first to the third, the films become increasingly internalized, with increasingly fewer social issues involved.

## Redeemed from Suffering in a Post-Socialist Village

THE ONLY SONS, Gan’s debut feature, is about poverty and spiritual salvation in a farming village in Guangdong. It was shot on miniDV, and most of the crew were Gan’s students. This story about peasants was inspired by a news report that appeared in the *Southern Weekly* (南方週末).<sup>21</sup> Its Chinese title translates literally as “Green Hills and Clear Waters”. The scenery is picturesque, poetic, and peaceful, but the people are extremely poor and are experiencing violent changes in their lives.

19 Zito 2015, 237.

20 When analyzing the independent cinema of Jia Zhangke, McGrath gives an overview of the indigenous movement of post-socialist realism in China, defining it as “a realism of the postsocialist condition” (McGrath 2007, 83). Unlike socialist realism, which claims to “show an ideological truth that underlies apparent reality”, post-socialist realism “seeks to reveal a raw, underlying reality by stripping away the ideological representations that distort it” (84).

21 Gan 2008.

The beginning sequences relate that the male protagonist, Ah Shui, is the backbone of his family and must support his younger brother, Ah Chong, and sister, Ah Mei, since their parents died early. He sells his blood but still cannot pay off Ah Mei's tuition. Ah Chong is sentenced to death for the double crime of breaking out of prison and robbery. In order to save Ah Chong's life, they need 20,000 yuan to bribe the judge. Ah Shui and his wife, Qiu Yue, decide to sell their not-yet-born baby and to rent Qiu Yue's womb for a year to a business owner from the city. They would then have sufficient money to save Ah Chong from the death penalty. Tragically, not long after they send off the baby, a prison guard informs them that Ah Chong has been executed. The stony-faced prison guard is accompanied by a man from the Municipal People's Hospital who asks Ah Shui if he would like to sell his brother's organs, telling him in a disinterested and unsympathetic tone that the hospital is offering 2,000 yuan for a cornea, 3,000 for a kidney, 2,000 for a heart, and 3,000 for a spinal cord, and so on. This brutal plot element about organ harvesting,<sup>22</sup> a topic almost never seen on the big screen in China, is presented in this film without any fanfare.

In front of the prison guard and hospital representative (two members of the state apparatus), Ah Shui silently endures the double loss of his brother and his son. We only hear a little cry when he burns paper on his brother's grave. Neither by farming nor by selling blood was Ah Shui able to afford his sister's school tuition or save his brother from the death penalty, let alone raise his son and give his wife a complete home. In the end, he contracts AIDS as a result of selling his blood.<sup>23</sup> His condition deteriorates so fast that he is left only able to lie on his bed waiting to die. Qiu Yue drowns herself in despair. It seems that all suffering is concentrated within this film; Cui Zi'en comments, "The Chinese countryside in *THE ONLY SONS* may be crueler than any ordeal (考驗) in the Old Testament era."<sup>24</sup> Whether by selling blood or children or by renting out a womb, the body has become the last available tool for peasants like Ah Shui to use to earn a livelihood.

22 Organ transplants have become a lucrative industry in China. In 1984, China permitted the use of organs from executed criminals, with the operations to be kept strictly confidential. It claims the practice ended in 2015; see Elliott 2019.

23 The increasing commodification of blood during the late 1980s and 1990s led to the rapid growth of HIV infection rates among rural villages in Henan province, as Gan, a Henan native, would have known. In the early 2000s, at the time the film was made, the government still sought to keep the issue of AIDS hidden from the public.

24 Cui 2022. Cui, Zi'en (b. 1958) is a film director, producer, scholar, screenwriter, outspoken LGBT activist, and associate professor at Beijing Film Academy. Cui was born into a Catholic family. Christianity functions as a cultural reference in his queer cinema.

As in the film, in reality too local governmental officials not only refuse to take responsibility for the catastrophic spread of HIV, but also punish Chinese HIV activists and health professionals who have struggled to bring the epidemic to international attention.<sup>25</sup> The situation for peasants infected with AIDS as a result of selling blood is also portrayed in independent documentaries such as *好死不如赖活著* (TO LIVE IS BETTER THAN TO DIE, Chen Weijun, CN 2003), *中原紀事* (EPIC OF THE CENTRAL PLAINS, Ai Xiaoming and Hu Jie, CN 2006), and *喜梅* (STAY HOME, Ai Weiwei, CN 2013). While the first gives a harrowing depiction of the Ma family's life over the course of a year in a small village after infection with AIDS, the latter two portray AIDS villages not as isolated places of private suffering but as connected spaces for political mobilization.

By contrast, however, in his feature film Gan Xiao'er uses the character of Ah Shui to highlight neither suffering through illness nor the fight for political rights, but rather to express the spiritual needs of a suffering peasant. Gan responds to the suffering "by suggesting the possibility of redemption".<sup>26</sup> Christian elements appear as early as the very beginning of the film, in the form of a solo flute playing *Amazing Grace*. During the film, a missionary preaches twice in the village. After discovering that Ah Shui is infected with HIV, the villagers shy away from him, and the government is always absent. Only the missionary couple come, to say their prayers, and they adopt his returned son (the baby is brought back by the police near the end of the film, and an official ceremony is held at the village square to praise "the true love between the police and the people"). Throughout Ah Shui's life, all he has experienced, like many other peasants, is indifference and ruthlessness from the government and discrimination and ridicule from society.<sup>27</sup> The idea that God loves him unconditionally therefore sounds novel to Ah Shui and gives him spiritual solace in the final moments of his life. When death

25 Watts 2003.

26 Lai 2013, 50.

27 Peasants like Ah Shui are not only discriminated against structurally but also ridiculed by their peers. As the countryside has become a wasteland in which young people can no longer imagine a future, many of them look for alternatives. Ah Mei drops out of school and goes to work with her classmate Ah Fang in Shenzhen. Ah Fang's revealing clothing and vulgar language tell that they have actually become prostitutes. Even so, Ah Shui, who remained in the village, is ridiculed by Ah Fang as a good-for-nothing loser because he is so poor. For young villagers like Ah Fang, this village with its pastoral scenery is simply "barren hills and turbulent rivers" (窮山惡水), and it is better to be like Ah Chong and "rob the bank and kill the people" than to stay in the village.

comes, Ah Shui calmly accepts final consolation from the preacher. Instead of leaving the world with deep regrets, Ah Shui raises his head to receive the prayer, as if filled with the preacher's words. He is able to let go of the toil and worries of this world and move closer to consummation. As the inverse of Ah Shui's sin and pain, the preacher epitomizes grace and relief.

Despite all the suffering, the director's way of telling is slow and calm. Gan's film language makes *THE ONLY SONS* a thought-provoking movie, rather than a tearful tragedy. In interviews Gan has expressed his distrust of the dramatic treatment of emotions: "I have always believed in implicit handling and dreaded the moment of emotional apex, and the moment when the truth comes to light. It's not that I dare not face the so-called 'bleak life', but I don't trust that kind of treatment."<sup>28</sup> As a result, cinematic means of expressing emotion – camera movements, close-up shots, the music score, the dialogue, for example – are all reduced to a minimum in this film.

Throughout the film, the camera is mostly fixed, and the shots are long distance. Except for the fast-panning scene with Qiu Yue's suicide, *THE ONLY SONS* is basically composed of static long shots. Gan abandons the advantages of DV's lightness, handling all motions by remaining motionless. With regard to the use of camera in this film, film director Cui Zi'en insightfully commented,

The camera lies in the position of an "angel", caring but not pushing, comforting but not sentimental. It maintains the speed and distance between God and man, love and being loved, keeps the position of watching rather than standing by, and does not encourage the characters to give full vent to the tragedy and tragic scenes. It goes through the test of suffering together with the characters, endures without trembling or collapse. The reason why Gan Xiao'er's camera doesn't move is here.<sup>29</sup>

In an interview Gan confirmed his preference for a static camera: "I think camera movement needs strong reasons. Otherwise, just leave it there and don't move. This is also a question of sensibility regarding film language."<sup>30</sup> That preference extends to his subsequent films.

28 Zhang 2003. I thank Gan Xiao'er for providing me with this source.

29 Cui 2022.

30 Huang 2003. I thank Gan Xiao'er for providing me with this source.



Fig. 1: In a long shot, the camera captures the parents Ah Shui and Qiu Yue accompanying the departing purchasers of their child. *THE ONLY SONS* (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2002), 01:18:58.



Fig. 2: From a distance the viewer sees the parents take leave of their child and the buyers. *THE ONLY SONS* (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2002), 01:20:00.

While a long shot is often used to create a relaxing, poetic feeling and a close-up shot to create a shocking, striking effect, in some key sequences in the family's demise, the more intense the emotional pain, the farther away the camera. For example, when the baby is taken away, Ah Shui and Qiu Yue follow the buyers. A long shot depicts this scene as if it is a common event, simply hosts seeing their guests out (figs. 1 and 2). Qiu Yue neither cries nor acts hysterically. Her sad face appears behind the bushes for only a moment, and then it disappears. There is little rendering or camera movement. The rhythm is slow, and the soundstage is clean. The camera calmly outlines the characters' actions. No matter how important the scene or

how emotionally turbulent it is, there is always silence – even if the audience’s heart has already been filled with cries. Where this film marks the beginning of Gan’s introduction of Christian discourse into the spiritual world of Chinese peasants, in his next, he dives into the life of rural Christians in more detail.

## Documenting Christian Life

Five years after *THE ONLY SONS, RAISED FROM DUST*, produced by Zhang Xianmin<sup>31</sup> and written and directed by Gan Xiao’er, provided an unprecedented intimate portrait of the lives of Christians in rural China. It is an underground film, made without permits from the Central Film Bureau, and was shot in the director’s home village in Henan.

One of China’s most populous provinces, Henan “has the largest number of Christians and is the center of the greatest and most sustained revival of Christianity, which has lasted more than 30 years”.<sup>32</sup> The majority of believers come from farming backgrounds, are poor, and have received little education – Xiaoli, the female protagonist in *RAISED FROM DUST*, played by Hu Shuli, is one of them. She is a dedicated housewife and devout member of a local church. Her husband, Xiaolin, is hospitalized with silicosis, a respiratory illness caused by poor mining conditions. The incurable and chronic disease has placed a serious financial burden on their household. Xiaoli is urged by the hospital staff to pay her husband’s medical bills and by the teachers to pay her daughter’s tuition.

In his director’s statement, Gan notes, “This feature film plays a strong documentary role, recording the life of Chinese peasants today and the spiritual life of Chinese rural Christians.”<sup>33</sup> With this goal in mind, he shot this fiction feature “deliberately in an improvised documentary style, sweeping up commentary on details of Christian life”.<sup>34</sup> Except for the heroine and Zhang Xianmin, who has the role of her paralyzed, bed-bound husband, all the characters are played by non-professional actors. Many villagers even

31 Zhang Xianmin is a professor in the Literature Department of Beijing Film Academy, an independent film critic and curator. Before *RAISED FROM DUST*, he also acted in *RAIN CLOUDS OVER WUSHAN* (Zhang Ming, CN 1996) and *SUMMER PALACE* (Lou Ye, CN 2006).

32 Hattaway 2009, 1.

33 Gan 2007b.

34 Zito 2015, 244.

Fig. 3: Xiaoli rides her tricycle, entering the village. RAISED FROM DUST (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007), 00:05:00.



Fig. 4: Xiaoli rides her tricycle through the village. RAISED FROM DUST (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007), 00:05:39.



keep their real names in the film and act out their actual lives. Moreover, Gan continues his preference for a static camera, combining long takes with deep-focus cinematography. With these choices Gan is following the line of the post-socialist realism found in China in the early 1990s in both documentaries and fiction films.<sup>35</sup>

In the beginning sequences, two shots with deep-space composition show Xiaoli riding her tricycle in the village, giving the viewer a first impression of how an ordinary village in rural Henan looks (figs. 3 and 4). After finishing her morning work, Xiaoli rides to the church. Before going into the sanctuary for prayer, she first enters a shabby kitchen, located on the edge of the church yard, to wash and dust herself down. A 1-minute-long sequence records the micro-actions of Xiaoli's daily life (figs. 5 and 6).

Likewise, long takes are used twice in depicting Xiaoli having dinner with her daughter, Shengyue. The first lasts 2 minutes and 30 seconds – we see mother and daughter cooperate well as they prepare the meal. Before they start eating, Shengyue sings an English song, giving thanks for the meal. The

35 McGrath 2007, 82.



Fig. 5: Xiaoli in the shabby kitchen at the church. RAISED FROM DUST (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007), 00:07:27.



Fig. 6: Xiaoli washes in the kitchen before entering the sanctuary. RAISED FROM DUST (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2007), 00:07:59.

second long take of a dining scene, lasting 1 minute and 12 seconds, is at the end of the film and basically repeats the procedure. These minutiae of daily practices do little to develop the narrative, but they provide a sense of realism, creating a space for the viewer to observe the daily life of Xiaoli and her daughter and to meditate on their relationship with their circumstances.

In addition, the film provides much detailed information about the church community, both visually and verbally. The external signs of the Sinicization of Christianity, such as the uniform attire of the choir (to symbolize the elite soldiers of Jesus Christ), the cross baton (a stick with a cross at the top), and the decorations in the church hall,<sup>36</sup> give an indigenous texture to the depiction of the rural Protestant community through social and historical cues.

36 From its appearance, the church Xiaoli attends is evidently one of the officially accepted state-sanctioned Three-Self Protestant Churches (三自教會). Three-Self Churches are all organized according to the guidelines prescribed by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC), and their pastors are selected and approved according to these standards before being ordained. TSPM was established in the 1950s to ensure that all the activities of China's officially approved Protestant churches conformed to the Communist Party's political and social objectives. CCC, the only Protestant Chinese

Before a choir practice, the camera uses a take that is 1 minute and 28 seconds long to record the female conductor's prayer:

Our Father in heaven, please be gracious to China our country. Be gracious to those who are in charge of this nation. Because the Lord told us that blessed is the nation which fears the Lord, blessed is the people who fears the Lord. Please bless our China's leaders. Please bless them with wisdom and insight. Let them lead us by Your will to a more prosperous and powerful China. Amen!

The macroscopic perspective and the concern for the state, nation, and politics seem out of step with the status of rural women. As Gan comments, "Speaking not what peasants 'should' say is a phenomenon of Christianity in China."<sup>37</sup> When they are asked to pray for teacher Du's son, a brother tells the child's mother, "Just believe in Jesus. If anything comes up, just call Jesus. Jesus' telephone is never engaged nor does it charge you a cent. The line is always open. Whether it's morning or evening, Jesus will put you through at any time!" His way of speaking is very different from that of non-believers, who often intersperse vulgar words. When analyzing the rhetorical use of local languages in recent Chinese underground and independent films, Jin Liu observed that underprivileged and marginalized groups in these films "remain silent most of the time. When they do speak, the dialogue is usually laconic."<sup>38</sup> However, this is not the case for these peasant Christians. They are not aphasic, but instead have their own system of discourse, with unique grammar, vocabulary, authority and a distinctive regional color.

Yet the protagonist Xiaoli has only a few lines. She seldom expresses herself to others and never mentions to others the difficulties facing her family. Even though her husband is very sick and not doing well at all, Xiaoli, when asked, always describes her husband's condition as "fine" (中). She is calm and reserved, choosing to absorb all the stress and take the entire burden on herself. Her silence means that we have no access to her inner being, to how she processes what she is going through, for example, or how she negotiates with God about her husband's death.

organization permitted by the Party to function openly, was formed in 1980 to cooperate with and assist TSPM in carrying out various ministries related to Christianity in China.

37 Zhang 2003.

38 Liu 2006, 190.

This arrangement has been designed by Gan deliberately. He intentionally lets the supporting characters provide all the information, while the protagonist does not have many words.<sup>39</sup> For him, silence is better than speech. In an article commemorating Ingmar Bergman, Gan emphasizes the importance of sound and identifies his main difference from Jia Zhangke:

I want to get rid of those unnecessary sounds. I will not be like Jia Zhangke, who almost endlessly loves and devours all reasonable aural resources such as radio, television, video studios, karaoke, tractors, factories, crowd, etc. [...] The soundscape is the most important thing for the atmosphere of a film, and I hope this one is adequately simple and pure.<sup>40</sup>

The use of sound is an evident feature of almost all of Jia's films<sup>41</sup>. Some of his films are titled with the names of popular songs, chosen because they capture the spirit of the times.<sup>42</sup> But some of the best directors in history, including Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Ingmar Bergman, have placed silence in their films. For them, "silence is both aural and visual – not merely the absence of talk but the presentation of persons who fill our imaginations with what they are not saying".<sup>43</sup> In other words, silence gives audiences opportunity to think about what they are viewing and imprint their own interpretations onto the image. Bergman, a director with great influence on Gan, often responds to questions about spirituality, faith, and mortality with lengthened moments of poignant silence, used to an extreme in *TYSTNADEN* (*THE SILENCE*, SE 1963). Hungering to find a way to represent spirituality, Gan similarly intentionally uses silence in creating some of his films' most profound moments.

In *RAISED FROM DUST*, the noiseless nothingness begins in the long first sequence. Except for the occasional train whistle in the distance, ambient

39 Gan 2007a, 83.

40 Gan 2007a, 83.

41 Speaking about Jia's *STILL LIFE* (CN 2006), Chinese film critic Li Tuo gave high praise to Jia's use of sound: "Perhaps Jia Zhangke's deployment of sound elements has formed a sound aesthetics in his movies, through which he effectively emphasizes the tension that exists in the filmic world he constructs. And this tension runs through every scene and detail in his films, forming a prominent feature of Jia Zhangke's realism" (Jia 2020).

42 Mello 2019.

43 Cardullo 2002, 473.

noise is kept to a minimum throughout the movie. The first noticeable use of silence in the midst of the film is when Xiaoli accompanies and attends to her husband, Xiaolin, in the hospital at night. Xiaolin suddenly becomes short of breath. Xiaoli is at a loss what to do, then runs to the doctor. The whole take lasts 2 minutes and 40 seconds, and the camera keeps still outside the window, watching closely what is happening inside. During the first two minutes, we principally hear Xiaolin's heavy gasping. The static long take forces us to endure the anguished breathing, just as if we were standing in front of the hospital bed, so that we feel his struggle. "Such a shot would have been unthinkable in the context of Mao-era socialist realism, which both moves the plot along much more efficiently and emphasizes clear acts of heroism or villainy, not brute struggles for existence", Jason McGrath proposes.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Gan himself commented that "his [Zhang Xianmin's] gasping that rips through the air is the best performance in the film".<sup>45</sup>

Another active use of silence happens in the sequence in which Xiaoli chooses to end treatment for her husband. After Xiaoli makes the decision, the medical staff remove Xiaolin's ventilator and help Xiaoli move him to the tricycle. As she sets off to bring her dying husband home, the soundstage immediately changes from heavy breathing to silence. The silent image slowly transitions from the barren land to the green fields, then close-up shots show Xiaoli smiling happily on the back seat of a bicycle, with a flower on her hair, while Xiaolin is riding in front. We cannot hear their laughter or conversation, but this flashback tells us they once had time together that was happy and easy. At the darkest moment of the film, the director chooses to shift the viewer's attention, to elaborate on Xiaoli's inner activity by portraying bright memories. As cultural critic Rey Chow points out,

In the context of modern Chinese culture, cinematic flashbacks have provided one of the most productive methods for elaborating women's psychic interiority [...] Flashbacks allow for a specific kind of cognitive and epistemic shift, whereby the world becomes comprehensible not so much through direct sensory-motor movements as through temporally mediated events such as memories, retellings, and juxtapositions of disparate images.<sup>46</sup>

44 McGrath 2022, 271.

45 Gan 2022.

46 Chow 2007, 91.

When the sound of the wheels drags us back to reality, the color returns to the yellow of dust. This 1 minute and 15 seconds silent flashback underscores the cruelty of reality and Xiaoli's heavy heart in this moment.

While in *RAISED FROM DUST* the church appears to be a source of hope and comfort for Xiaoli, in *WAITING FOR GOD* Christianity is a source of perplexity and vexation for the female protagonist, Xiaoyang. In 2012 Gan made this third feature film to express his observations and critique of rural Christianity.

## Criticizing Christianity

The title of Gan's third film is derived from the book *Waiting for God* (1950) by French philosopher Simone Weil, one of Gan's spiritual mentors. Weil's hesitation concerning baptism and her reticence about entering fully into formal relations with the Catholic Church inspired Gan. Weil seeks direct contact with God as an individual and fears that the church as a social structure might negatively influence her through dubious collective emotions. Similarly, Gan also does not like "the sense of coercion" (脅迫感) in Christianity: "Weil's thinking on religion makes me reflect on my own relationship with religion. Individuals are easily coerced in a powerful religion, and it is necessary to keep a certain distance from it and soberly watch it."<sup>47</sup>

In his director's statement, Gan called this film "Diary of a Chinese Female Country Pastor", referring to Robert Bresson's 1951 classic film *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*<sup>48</sup>. Like Bresson's masterpiece, *WAITING FOR GOD* is a black-and-white film that eliminates the interference of noise and variegated colors and highlights the mental state of the protagonist.

The film starts with morning prayer in a village church, led by a young woman, Xiaoyang. After the morning prayer, Xiaoyang and other believers write their Christian names on a blackboard. A sister named Miriam invites Xiaoyang to her house during the day, to pray together and cast out demons. The next sequence has Xiaoyang coming to a temple where her newlywed husband, Guo Ling, is making woodcut tablets. They have just registered their marriage, but because Guo has not fully converted to

47 Tan 2019.

48 The director's statement is unpublished and was provided to the author by the director.

the Lord, their wedding ceremony cannot be held in the church. Xiaoyang has been waiting for her husband's baptism. Coming to Miriam's house, Xiaoyang encounters a "sermon". A 2-minute-long take records their conversation:

MIRIAM: Xiaoyang, I don't know if I should tell you ...

XIAOYANG: Tell me.

MIRIAM: God pardon us. How desolate is our church now! You're God's maid, you should lead all the folks in our church to God. You should do what is right. On some things, don't be too weak. Is Guo Ling still carving idols? The idols he carved – do you know how many people have been misled, and how many souls have been lost! The Bible said, "The devil, walks about, seeking whom he may devour." If God blames us, can you accept the responsibility?

XIAOYANG: God has already been blaming me.

MIRIAM: God will chasten you, I fear! Without Guo Ling's conversion, your marriage cannot be held in the sanctuary. And God will not recognize it!

After this conversation, Xiaoyang walks outside, showing symptoms of morning sickness. Miriam quickly catches up and asks, "Are you pregnant?", then passes judgement: "It's promiscuity [淫亂]!" Miriam's accusation in the name of the Lord leaves Xiaoyang unhappy and burdened.<sup>49</sup>

Leaving Miriam's house, Xiaoyang refuses to ride with Guo Ling, who has come to pick her up. She is walking alone on a path through the field with a grave expression, and finally stops by a tree and weeps. A medium shot cuts to a Buddhist nun who is passing by. The nun's eyes are full of compassion. After the nun leaves, Xiaoyang calms down and begins to pray. This meeting contrasts with the previous one not only in narrative but also in style. The meeting with her Christian sister has distressed Xiaoyang, while the meeting with a Buddhist nun soothes her. The former takes place in a dimly lit room, the latter on a brightly lit country road. In terms of composition,

49 This plot parallels the biblical account of the character Miriam. Miriam rose up against her brother, Moses, because she did not like that he had married a foreigner; she also began to find his leadership objectionable and to doubt that God had chosen him to be the leader of the Israelites (Numbers 12:1). Thus, the name *Miriam* came to connote rebellion and bitterness. In this film, Miriam questions Xiaoyang's leadership because she has married a non-believer.



Fig. 7: Miriam, in the center of the frame, chides Xiaoyang, who is at its edge. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 00:11:58.



Fig. 8: On a country road, Xiaoyang and the Buddhist nun meet each other as equals. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 00:20:36.

when Xiaoyang is talking to Miriam, she seems pushed to a corner in the frame (fig. 7), whereas in her meeting with the nun, the two figures are in a symmetrical position on the screen (fig. 8). This brief encounter suggests Gan's openness to comparative religion and his interest in interreligious dialogue.

The next sequence is of Xiaoyang coming to the town church to visit Pastor Wang. The choir of the village church has just been established, and Xiaoyang plans to invite her high school classmate Xu Feng to be the music teacher. Pastor Wang readily agrees with Xiaoyang at first, but on hearing Xu is not a Christian, he immediately refuses: "The church choir is the chosen people by Christ. How can a non-Christian lead the chosen people of Jehovah?" and rebukes Xiaoyang: "Muddleheaded!" (fig. 9) As Pastor Wang leaves to answer the phone, a 45-seconds-long take shows Xiaoyang lingering in the lobby as if digesting what the pastor has said. Then it cuts to Xiaoyang walking out of the sanctuary. A reverse shot shows us what she is viewing: a man is creating a mural of the magi worshipping Jesus. As the camera pans slowly from right to left to scan the mural from Xiaoyang's point of view, the film transitions from monochrome to color, creating the

Fig. 9: Standing in the sanctuary, Pastor Wang rebukes Xiaoyang. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 00:24:58.



Fig. 10: Framing hierarchies: Pastor Wang is in the center of the frame while Xiaoyang, who is reading the Bible, is to one side. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 00:32:22.



only colorful part of the film. In the Bible, the magi ignored the views of the laymen, coming to Jerusalem from the East and offering the baby Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts (Matthew 2:11). At the end of this film, Gan creates a scene corresponding to this story and brings forth the theme of the film.

Pastor Wang comes to talk with Xiaoyang. When he says, “The true core of our faith is the word ‘Love’”, Xiaoyang opens herself to seek the pastor’s guidance, “Guo Ling hasn’t repented and is still carving idols, and we cannot hold the wedding in the church.” Wang: “Of course!” Xiaoyang: “But, I can’t let go of this love.” The pastor asks her to read a passage from 2 Corinthians: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? [...] Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (6:14–15 NIV). The “love” mentioned by the pastor is limited to believers. Similar to the dialogue between Xiaoyang and Miriam, in her dialogue with Pastor Wang, the two are also in an asymmetrical position: the pastor occupies the center of the frame, while Xiaoyang is relegated to the left side, indicating the oppressive nature of dogmatism (fig. 10).

Afterwards, Pastor Wang walks Xiaoyang to the door of the church. When Xiaoyang asks when her salary will be paid, Wang expresses his admiration for the salaries of the clergy in Wenzhou church: “In Wenzhou, civil servants on earth get 5,000 yuan per month, civil servants of heaven get 6,000,<sup>50</sup> just more than the ones on earth! When Elder Luo in Wenzhou preaches, he travels by air, with a laptop, and lives in star-rated hotels! How he glorifies God!” While they are talking, the nun appears again. She greets Pastor Wang. It turns out that both are members of the district’s Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which suggests they are close to the government and that Pastor Wang is leading a Three-Self church.

When the nun walks away, Pastor Wang looks at her back and says to Xiaoyang, “You see: she is young, female, with a master’s degree. Very promising! Alas, what a pity that she didn’t find the real God!” Whether in his envy of the high salaries of Wenzhou church or his comments on the nun, the standards used by Pastor Wang to evaluate people do not appear to be much different from the secular world, other than that he uses God to justify his envy and pride. His dogmatism and materialism can easily be detected from his speech. All these details demonstrate the director’s criticism of the status quo of some rural churches: as Gan has commented, “There is faith, but there is neither hope nor love.”<sup>51</sup>

On her way back to the village, Xiaoyang meets three preachers, who are walking from the East and are going to preach in villages in the West. The preachers stop to greet Xiaoyang and notice that the cross in Xiaoyang’s hand is twinkling like a star. They care about the baby in her womb. When they learn that Xiaoyang’s husband has not been baptized, the elder says, “Oh, what good homework God has given you! You must be kind to him and let him feel God’s love” (fig. 12). The elder also suggests that after Guo Ling is baptized, he could be given the Christian name *Joseph*.<sup>52</sup> The blessings from the three preachers relieve Xiaoyang greatly. This scene parallels the colorful mural depicting the three wise men visiting Jesus. To symbolize Xiaoyang’s similarity to Mary, Gan not only inserts a visual hint in previous scenes (fig. 11), but also employs a surreal device: Xiaoyang’s belly grows quickly

50 The economic resources for preachers in Three-Self Churches include government subsidies, believers’ offerings, family support, income from preaching and writing, and assistance from evangelical institutions, see Yao 2018.

51 Gan 2015, 17.

52 In the Bible (Luke 2:48), Joseph, the husband of Mary, is identified as the father of Jesus.

Fig. 11: As Xiaoyang contemplates the mural, her figure is lower than but aligned with the Virgin Mary's; the composition emphasizes their marked resemblance. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 00:28:52.



Fig. 12: The three preachers stop to talk to Xiaoyang as they come from the East; they stand opposite Xiaoyang, balancing her figure within the frame. WAITING FOR GOD (Gan Xiao'er, CN 2012), 01:10:13.



from morning to dawn, and the fetus is almost full term when Xiaoyang meets the preachers.

The film ends with the following scene: Xiaoyang is sitting behind Guo on the motorcycle with her arms around Guo's waist, showing a sweet and peaceful smile. She finally dares to love her husband and fully accepts her baby. This is the theme of the entire film: love – "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Throughout the film, Xiaoyang encounters spiritual pressure from her fellow believers and her church leader. She has been struggling to reconcile with the reality that her husband is a non-believer. Her rapidly advancing pregnancy is commensurate with her growing anxiety until she meets the three preachers, who give her a non-oppressive, non-dogmatic, open and loving interpretation of her conundrum. Through his character, we see the director's own confusion, perplexity, and distress in his religious life.

## Conclusion

In the course of 10 years, Gan made three feature films portraying Christianity in rural China. Dissatisfied with what he saw in films that represent peasants as either simple country bumpkins or cunning tricksters,<sup>53</sup> Gan sought to portray the Christian lives of Chinese peasants and thus introduce a Christian discourse into Chinese (independent) cinema. Because of the religious element, Gan's films stand at a distance from popular Chinese films and other independent films both thematically and stylistically.

Gan is both the director and screenwriter of all three films. To preserve his budget, he played the male protagonist in the first film and acts in the last two. His worldview, moral values, and cinematic knowledge mean that his films are quiet and restrained. And this restrained directorial style is exerted to an extreme in the third film, which is close to Gan's ideal of a good movie.<sup>54</sup> While Jia Zhangke's films are full of a marketplace atmosphere and have a strong sense of history, Gan's films are about the present and about the current inner struggles of the individual in particular. In Bergman's cinema, this individual is a knight, a priest, or an artist. In Gan's films, this individual is a peasant man or woman.

Among the various difficulties faced during the filming process, such as shortage of funds or lack of actors, Gan admits, the biggest problem is his own "inner strength".<sup>55</sup> He strives to find a way to portray spirituality but finds himself on unfamiliar ground. While he may still be groping for many aspects, he portrays the world he sees with a strong sense of social and cultural mission, and his attempt to grasp rural Christian themes has greatly expanded the narrative space of Chinese cinema. Certainly, anyone who wants to understand the conditions of Chinese Christians in the early 21st century must not bypass Gan's works.

53 國內有神論導演甘小二訪問 (Interview with the Theistic Director Gan Xiao'er), 10 April 2007, <https://is.gd/QqpXE2> [accessed 1 February 2023].

54 When asked what kind of film is a good one, Gan answers: "[A film that can] clearly express and present people's spiritual and emotional world, which is difficult to articulate and present. WAITING FOR GOD is close to my ideal of a good movie. It's just that it is a very, very lonely movie. There is no story, and the characters in the film don't have much catharsis, and don't look like those passionate characters [in other films]." 甘小二: 拍非常寂寞的中国电影 (Gan Xiao'er: Makes Very Lonely Chinese Films). 阳光时务周刊 (iSun Affairs Weekly), 2012. I thank Gan Xiao'er for providing me with this source.

55 Cui 2022.

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# The Tamil Language as More Central than Even the Gods

## The Movie THIRUVILAYADAL (IN 1965) Is an Outlier as a Devotional Film

### Abstract

The narrow genre of devotional films in India follows a regular template – a combination of theophanic interventions, bhakti (devotional) worship and didactic narratives. THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965), a film in Tamil (a language spoken across South and East Asia by a large diaspora), was long considered a devotional movie that celebrated the God Shiva. However, a close analysis shows that the movie subverts the darshan concept (viewing) in a Hindu devotional film. Though it may appear to be a film about Puranic (mythic) Hindu gods, the subtle subtext reduces heavenly entities to supplicatory positions in relation to a cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil State – Tamil language. This understanding of THIRUVILAYADAL is all the more relevant in light of the increasing rigidity of Hindu religious beliefs in contemporary India.

### Keywords

Religious Films, Tamil Language, Hindu Puranic, Dravidianism, THIRUVILAYADAL

### Biographies

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## THIRUVILAYADAL –

# The Tamil Project in Indian Devotional Films

Prominent global media voices have reported that contemporary politics in India are defined by a Hindu religious-right movement,<sup>1</sup> also known as *Hindutva*.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Hinduism, with six significant schools of mostly non-theistic philosophies, can even be called a religion is a paradox.<sup>3</sup> For a nuanced alternative perspective, there is the recently influential scholarly work of Wendy Doniger.<sup>4</sup> The Dravidian movement in the south is prominent among the many regional political ideologies in India. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party in Tamilnadu adhered to this ideology and positioned itself as Dravidianist.<sup>5</sup> It defined Dravidianism as a rationalist, anti-Brahminic (against Hindu caste practices), anti-North Indian and anti-Hindi, all woven around Tamil sub-nationalism. It is in this context that we review the Tamil devotional film THIRUVILAYADAL (THE DIVINE PLAY, Akkamappettai Paramasivan Nagarajan, IN 1965).

Intermittently, mainstream Indian cinema has produced devotional films based on Hindu Puranic stories. These revolved around avatars (divine terrestrial renditions) of the supreme Puranic Hindu trinity,<sup>6</sup> though mostly Vishnu.<sup>7</sup> The first Indian-made film, PUNDALIK (N. G. Chitre / P. R. Tipnis /

1 Reynolds 2022.

2 Sharma 1982

3 Sharma 1982.

4 Wendy Doniger, University of Chicago, Divinity School, <https://is.gd/oUvXww> [accessed 12 July 2023].

5 Dravid means “land surrounded by water on three sides”, i. e. South India. Dravidianism or Dravidian ideology promotes the concept of a separate identity for southern Indian ethno-linguistic races, distinct from the dominant North Indians. First popular in the 1930s, the movement claimed that Brahmin and upper-caste Hindus had Aryan origins and imposed their hierarchical, non-inclusive Vedic and Puranic Hindu culture, language and exploitative caste beliefs on the egalitarian Dravidians.

6 Parrinder 1997.

7 The Hindu trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer) of Puranic Hinduism. Hindu gods evolved from the Vedic era (3rd century BCE) to the 17th century CE and have many different traditions. The Hindu concept of god also varies from a personal god (Hindu philosophy) to several major deities (as in the Vedic tradition) and on to several thousand (as in the Puranic tradition). Present-day Hindu religious practices largely revolve around Puranic gods, mostly Vishnu, Lakshmi, Shiva, Parvati, Brahma and Saraswathi. Of these, Vishnu inspires the Vaishnavism stream, while Shiva inspires the

Ramchandra Gopal Torney, 1912),<sup>8</sup> had a devotional theme, though it is not easily categorised.<sup>9</sup> Indian religious films can be identified as “histo-mythological”<sup>10</sup> and “bhakti” (devotional) oriented.<sup>11</sup> Bhakti films have a more contemporary impact with a god, goddess or saint<sup>12</sup> and are characterised by a *deus ex machina*, where divine entities come down to earth to resolve human issues.<sup>13</sup>

While research has identified a regular template for devotional films,<sup>14</sup> THIRUVILAYADAL diverges from this template in significant ways. Although apparently a film about gods, the nuanced narrative in this movie reduces astral entities to being subsidiary to a sacred cornerstone of identity in the post-independence Dravidianist Tamil State – Tamil language.<sup>15</sup> The thespian Sivaji Ganesan, selected to play the role of the God Shiva, had been acclaimed since the early 1960s for *ucharippu* (pronunciation) and was known as *Nadigar Thilagam* (Doyen of Actors)<sup>16</sup> in light of his formidable reputation for cinematic histrionics and exceptional oratory (*vasanam*) in the Tamil language<sup>17</sup>.

During the 1960s, the DMK used its Dravidianist plank to defeat the north-based national party the Indian National Congress in Tamilnadu state. The DMK framed the ability to speak in pure Tamil as a part of the people’s identity by co-opting the pure Tamil movement (*tanit tamiR iyakkam*).<sup>18</sup> The

Shaivite stream. The Puranas developed around extensive and richly varying mythologies associated primarily with Hindu deities like Vishnu, Shiva and Devi.

8 Rajadhyaksha/Willemen 1999.

9 Dwyer 2006.

10 SAMPOORNA RAMAYAN (THE COMPLETE RAMAYANA, Babubhai Mistry, IN 1961); KARNAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1964).

11 JAI SANTOSHI MA (Vijay Sharma, IN 1975); BHAKTA KUMBHARA (DEVOTEE KUMBARA, Hunsur Krishnamurthy, IN 1974).

12 SHIRDI KE SAI BABA (Ashok V. Bhushan, IN 1977); JAI BABA AMARNATH (B. R. Ishara, IN 1983); MERE GHARIB NAWAZ (G. Ishwar, IN 1973).

13 Ramnath 2015.

14 Madhava Prasad, Philip Lutgendorf, Rachel Dwyer and Usha Brugabandhu have written extensively on Indian devotional films and the concept of darshan.

15 Tamil is pronounced as *Tamizh*.

16 Tamil film journal *Paesum Padam* (Talking Picture) was the first magazine to mention this.

17 Shivaji is famous for his oratory in films like MANOHARA (L. V. Prasad, IN 1954), VEERAPANDIYA KATTABOMAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1959), KAPALOTTIYA THAMIZHAN (B. R. Panthulu, IN 1961), THIRUCHERUVAR (A. P. Nagarajan, IN 1967) and RAJARAJA CHOLAN (A. P. Nagarajan, IN 1973).

18 Although Maraimalai Adigal is credited, U. V. Caminataiyar is equally responsible for the rediscovery of the Tamil classics and *Cangam* literature, in 1881.

DMK's "contestatory" strategy required a visible enemy,<sup>19</sup> and this association positioned the movement as a southern Tamil revival against dominant Hindi "northerners".<sup>20</sup>

THIRUVILAYADAL, widely popular on platforms like YouTube,<sup>21</sup> is based on the 64 stories featuring the God Shiva<sup>22</sup> from the *ThiruAlavAykantam*,<sup>23</sup> as well as texts from the thirteenth century CE.<sup>24</sup> The movie was directed by A. P. Nagarajan – who also wrote the script and played Nakkirar's role – famous for making Tamil films based on myths and social themes<sup>25</sup> and for contributing to the resurgence of devotional films in the state.<sup>26</sup> Little else is known about Nagarajan beyond that his movie THIRUVILAYADAL (produced by a Muslim, Shahul Hameed) can be seen as a symbol for the dilution of northern Puranic Hindu divinity.<sup>27</sup>

In Puranic myths, the God Shiva resides in the Himalayas with his wife, the Goddess Parvathi, and sons Vinayaka (Ganesha) and Murugan (Karthikeya). The movie removes Lord Shiva and Murugan from the Puranic Hindu pantheon in the Himalayas and places them in the real Tamil world, in the city of Madurai in the state of Tamilnadu – something of an ethnocultural appropriation of religious symbols for the Tamil project.

By bringing the gods from the North to real towns in Tamilnadu, Nagarajan was only following the concept of a demarcated sacred space,<sup>28</sup> a Tamil tradition evident in the ancient *Cangam* era.<sup>29</sup> It also links to the ancient Tamil belief that the God Murugan, unlike in Puranic lore, originated in the

19 Schiffman 1996.

20 Zvelebil/Gonda 1974.

21 See e. g. <https://is.gd/a9GJcY> [accessed 12 July 2023].

22 Masalaaddict 2012.

23 The narratives can be traced to the 6th century CE (Thirunavukkarasar, Thiruganyana-sambandar, Paranjothi Munivar), see Aravind 2017.

24 *Tiruttondar Tiruvandhadhi* was written by Perumparapuliur Nampi in the 17th century CE court of Thirumala Nayak, it showcases the "playful actions" (*Vilayadal*) taken by Shiva to test the devotion of his devotees, see Fisher 2017. There is a version also attributed to Paranjothi Munivar (Bala 2010).

25 Thiruvilayadal, Kudalkantam, <https://shaivam.org/scripture/English-Translation/1477/thiruvilaiyadal-puranam-the-sacred-sports-of-siva> [accessed 12 July 2023].

26 Raman 2012.

27 Nainar 2018.

28 Temples in pockets of South India have a geographically demarcated *kodi maram* (flagpost). Unlike Vedic gods, who live in the sky (heavens), the gods for Tamils are on *terra firma*.

29 Shrikumar 2015. *Cangams* were scholarly meetings which, according to traditional Tamil literary accounts, were held from 200 BCE onwards. Though there is limited evidence of

*Kurunji* (hills) as a tribal god. The Dravidianist contention was that Murugan was appropriated and added to the Vedic Hindu pantheon as the son of Shiva during the Bhakti movement, just as Parvati was syncretised from the *Tamil Atha* or *Mari* into *Durga* and *Kali*.<sup>30</sup> Nagarajan was recapturing Murugan and Shiva for the Tamils.

This argument is supported by sources in the *Cangam* texts (200 CE), where Sudalai Madan (literally “cremation ground chief”) was worshipped in Tamilnadu and later co-opted as the son of Shiva and Parvati.<sup>31</sup> Even Mayon (the dark one), seen as the supreme deity who creates, sustain and destroys the universe, was worshipped during the *Cangam* period, before becoming an amalgamation of Shiva and Murugan.<sup>32</sup>

THIRUVILAYADAL was a commercial success, running for over 25 weeks, and received widespread critical acclaim, being recognised with a Certificate of Merit at the 13th National Film Awards in India.

## The Temple and the Theatre: Darshana in Context

The typical Hindu devotional bhakti film is constructed around a vicarious faith-based experience in which the “performing devotee” is divinely rewarded after several trials and much tribulation. Such celestially induced cinema, with special effects, offers awe-inspiring experiences to the devout against the background of bhakti *bhajans* (religious songs). Gods’ theophanic appearances are the next best thing to the temple deities’ physical darshan, or divine gaze which is represented by the large and elongated eyes of the idol.<sup>33</sup> This “exchange through eyes” that devotees attempt in the Hindu temple is an essence of worship<sup>34</sup> and is more accessible in a movie

earlier meetings, there is some proof of later *Cangam* conferences, discovered by Kamil Zvelebil.

30 Xavier 2009. Mentioned in *Cangam* literature poems in Paripāṭal and the Pattuppattu anthologies are said to be between 300 BCE to 300 CE, as well as mentioned in the ancient Tamil literary work *Silappadikaram* (c. 200 CE).

31 Mahalakshmi 2011.

32 Zvelebil/Gonda 1974.

33 Lutgendorf states that this “is similar to being seeing or meeting powerful people, like royalty and god men”. Cinema superstars Amitabh Bachan and Shah Rukh Khan, even today, make appearances in front of fans on their birthdays. They are often called out by name, to seek their attention, to “see and be seen”; see Prideaux 2022. Lutgendorf, 2006, 227

34 Lutgendorf 2006.

theatre, where access is not restricted as it is for a temple,<sup>35</sup> prioritising the experience.<sup>36</sup>

The significance of the divine gaze is why devotional films present the deity frontally on the screen, replicating the Darshan gaze with the help of the shot-reverse-shot. Here, a shot of the deity is followed by a shot of the ecstatic devotee who is being “seen”, before returning to a shot of the deity.<sup>37</sup> Another shot is the “human avatar emerging from the deity”,<sup>38</sup> which in a song sequence in *JAI SANTOSHI MAA* (Vijay Sharma, IN 1975) and in a hand reappearance sequence in *BHAKTA KUMBHARA* (DEVOTEE KUMBHARA, Hunsur Krishnamurthy, IN 1974) is centrally framed within a static tableau.<sup>39</sup> There is a reciprocity where the “look” from the god is captured by the camera’s looking as if from the deity’s eyes at the devotee,<sup>40</sup> a deployment of film techniques in the micro-narration of a scene.<sup>41</sup>

This aim is further supported by the “fetish of cinematic eyes” in repeated facial zoom shots (popular in films of the 1980s and indeed in TV serials today) for dynamic effect and to stretch time.<sup>42</sup> The viewer is assured of the “look many times over”, which is a difficult task in an actual temple. In fact, the viewer-devotee can experience long and arduous queues in prominent temples in order to catch just a brief glimpse of the deity, which Madhava Prasad terms a feudal tradition with hierarchical criteria.<sup>43</sup> This designation is supported by the actual experience of the devotee, who receives, through the priest, the *prasad* (offering), *aarti* (fire worship) or a *teertha* (*tulsi*-soaked holy water) even as the Brahmin priest adheres to “caste purity” when interacting with the devotee.

In contrast, devotees-in-the-theatre are released from such restrictions of access to the deity. They engage as a social group, cheering on or even praying aloud when noble deeds are performed.<sup>44</sup> The Darshan experience

35 Prasad 2021.

36 Shaikh 2017.

37 Prasad 2021.

38 Lutgendorf 2006. A popular theme involves the god emerging from the temple and taking human form.

39 Kapur 1987, 80.

40 Prasad 2009. See, for example, the first song sequence in *JAI SANTOSHI MAA* (IN 1975).

41 Vasudevan 2011.

42 Kapur 1987.79

43 Prasad 2009.

44 Lutgendorf 2006.

in the theatre removes devotees from the physical and sacred rigidity of the temple and makes them a part of a more secular group. THIRUVILAYADAL further shapes the narrative by “Tamilising” this secular audience by making Tamil language a common thread. THIRUVILAYADAL was therefore neither a histo-mythological nor a bhakti devotional film in the pure senses of these terms. It had other cinematic agendas to pursue.

## Divine Play: Tamil Language versus the God Shiva

THIRUVILAYADAL opens with a 1960s-style studio setting in mythical Mount Kailasha (the Himalayan abode of the God Shiva). Narada, often an instigator for Puranic stories, walks in to offer the “fruit of knowledge”. Shiva mischievously declares that the fruit will go to the son who is the first to circumnavigate the three worlds. Murugan promptly sets off on his travels, but his brother Vinayaka just goes around his parents and says, “My parents are my world.”<sup>45</sup> He receives the fruit! A livid Murugan leaves Kailasha. On his way to the Palani hills, Avvaiyar, the legendary woman devotee (played by the veteran singer K. P. Sundarambal), stops the tantrum-throwing young Murugan.

Here, Avvaiyar appears to be a stand-in for the Goddess Tamil Tai, a symbol for the atheistic Dravidianists that parallels the Puranic Hindu Goddess Saraswathi of knowledge. Unlike the Hindu goddess, the matronly Tamil Tai has “only two arms”,<sup>46</sup> convenient for the motherly Sundarambal to play as a real-life proxy.<sup>47</sup> Avvaiyar implores the young Murugan not to leave his home. She first sings in praise of the warrior god of the Hindus and the adopted god of the Tamil language (due to the belief that he headed a *Cangam*), before giving him a stentorian dressing down,

You have a Mother and Father who love you. My Tamil has the right to tell you ... your logic is wrong!

Let your anger go; **this is Tamil asking**. Don't you know, young man

45 *Mata, Pitha, Guru, Deivam* (Mother, Father, Teacher and God) is widely mentioned as a popular adage in sacred texts. Vinayaka's action justifies this in the “Fruit of Knowledge” episode, see Sadhguru 2017.

46 Ramaswamy 1998.

47 Sundarambal was an elderly and devout singer of devotional songs with a real-life reputation for social and cultural work.

When your anger dissipates, the race is united, don't you know that,  
Muruga?

Get up on your peacock and go to Shiva; you will have to accept; I will  
take you, come running to me.

The scene of Avvaiyar's demand that Murugan *listen to Tamil* (to a personification of the language and to the Tamils, as a people) while the principal gods of the Hindu pantheon watch from high up in the clouds is striking. All are watching: Shiva/Parvathi, Vishnu/Lakshmi, Brahma/Saraswathi (the Puranic holy trinity of the Hindus). They watch in disbelief as a human being gives a disciplinary scolding to one of their own. The incredulity is captured by quick mid-close-up zoom-in shots of each god pair. In the Indian devotional film world, gods are not told off!

The chiding Avvaiyar, not part of the original story in *ThiruAlavAykantam*, is referred to historically as an "old wise woman",<sup>48</sup> and in THIRUVILAYADAL she emerges as a contemporary palimpsest.<sup>49</sup> When she says "this is Tamil asking", she is referring to the Tamil language as both a pronoun and noun (*Tamizikku, Tamizh*) superior even to the gods. This is a concept similar to the Tamil *Vituthuhtu* (Messenger) poems of the post-*Cankam* period<sup>50</sup> that were discovered by Swaminatha Aiyar in 1900:

O pre-eminent Tamil! I exist because of you!

Even the ambrosia of the celestials, I do not desire!

— *Madurai Chokkanathar, Tamil Vituthuthu, 151*<sup>51</sup>

The three parts of a *Vituthuthu* poem – the dispatcher, the addressee and the messenger – are all persons. The messenger is Tamil, the language; the addressee is always Shiva.<sup>52</sup> The messenger is pristine and of superior character – *cankatamil* (Tamil of the *Cangam*).<sup>53</sup> The *Vituthoothu* placed Tamil language at the centre of the known universe, of the political, economic and moral order. It is superior to the king, almost an ethnolinguistic challenge

48 Ramadevi 2016.

49 For Tamil audiences who have read about Avvaiyar since childhood, the character in the film would have been closest to the real thing.

50 Jayaraman 1965; Varadarajan 1988.

51 Ramaswamy 1998.

52 Peterson 1989.

53 Krishnan 1984, 136.

to the royal economy of that time – that of the Telugu-speaking Nayaka kings of Madurai.<sup>54</sup> Tamil is the absolute sovereign of the land of the Tamils (*tamilakam*) and the world of Tamil (*tamilulakam*).<sup>55</sup> It had suzerainty over the *muventar* (the three Tamil-speaking kingdoms Chola, Chera and Pandya), bowing to no one as a true emperor of the Hindu-Indic-Tamil world.<sup>56</sup> Tamil bows to none, king or god!

## ***Kutram Kutrame* – A Mistake Is a Mistake**

The second and more dramatic episode contains the face-off between the poet Nakkirar and the God Shiva, from which the line *Kutram Kutrame* (a mistake is a mistake) became popular.<sup>57</sup> Here the Tamil language and caste<sup>58</sup> move centre stage. The story is set in Madurai city, where King Shembaga Pandiyan offers a reward to anyone who could answer his query – *Does a woman's hair have a natural fragrance?* The God Shiva, playfully testing, gives a poor poet, Dharumi, a poem that answers the query. But when Dharumi goes to present the poem in the king's court and is about to win the reward, the court poet, Nakkirar, steps in to find a *kutram* (mistake) in the poem. When informed, Shiva is clearly incensed, but even when confronted with the divine form Nakkirar stands his ground. Shiva responds by burning Nakkirar with his third eye. There are various versions of the narrative, most notably Nīlakanṭha Dikshitar's, in which Nakkirar even claims superiority over the almighty.<sup>59</sup>

In THIRUVILAYADAL, the narrative is nuanced at multiple levels. There are incendiary back-and-forths between man and god. In the court, the God Shiva glowers contemptuously at Nakkirar and demands to know the mistake in the poem. The exchange is as follows:

54 Ramaswamy 1998.

55 Sanjeevi 1972, 2–3.

56 Ramaswamy 1998, 75.

57 Luqman 2017.

58 The exploitative concept of *varna* in the Hindu caste system places the Brahmin as the superior among men and the subjugated Sudras/Ati Sudras at the very bottom.

59 Nilakantha's version has Nakkirar claiming that the god is famous because of poets. In it Nakkirar says to the God Shiva: "your work has attained the greatness of being a 'scripture'... only because we describe another intentionality, apply suppletion, inversion, contextualiaation, extraction, and conjunction, keep this in mind... don't look to find fault with my poems, O Paśupati!"

NAKKIRAR: There was no issue in the Chol; it is the Porul that has a problem.<sup>60</sup> Why did you write the poem and send it through someone? Poets should not lie.

SHIVA: Talk about the present and not the past. I know about comprehensible, incomprehensible; known, unknown; delivered, undelivered; I know all and do not need your advice. I know everything.

NAKKIRAR: The meaning of your poem? What does it claim? What is the message?

SHIVA: O bee, with your hidden wings: you have lived a life searching for honey. So tell me honestly from what you have seen: among all the flowers you know, is there one that smells sweeter than the hair of this woman, with her peacock gait, close-set teeth, and ancient eternal love?<sup>61</sup>

When the God Shiva explains that it means that a woman's hair has a natural fragrance, Nakkirar rejects that claim.

NAKKIRAR: That can never be. Use of perfumes and continuously sporting flowers causes the fragrance in the hair. I can never accept that woman's hair has a natural fragrance from birth. Even the purest of all women will have only artificial and not natural fragrances in her hair.

SHIVA: What about women of higher birth and celestial goddesses? How about Goddess Bharathi, who resides in your tongue and helps you write poems?

NAKKIRAR: Even the entire women folk in all the fourteen realms of the world do not have it. Not only Goddess Bharathi, but this also holds good for the consort of my Lord of the Lords Shiva.

SHIVA: Really? With certainty? Can you swear on your Tamil?

NAKEERAR: Sure, certainly, and I swear on my Tamil.

SHIVA warns: Nakkera [a less respectful form of address] – carefully look at me. Is the poem I wrote wrong?

60 In a Tamil tradition of peer review, the *Pulavan* (poet, philosopher) had to defend his work in the presence of an assembly of experts presided over by the king. Review parameters were (a) சொல்லு (Sol), for structure, grammar and context and (b) பொருள் (Porul), for meaning, metaphors and rationale.

61 Ludden/Pillai 1976.

When Shiva says this, the screen turns red and his third eye appears to twitch in rage.<sup>62</sup> Nakkirar recognises the God Shiva and bows to pay obeisance. Then he looks up and stares at Shiva and says,

Oh, poet, even though you reveal who you are... and I can see your third eye... and even if you burn me... a mistake is a mistake. **Even if you open your forehead eye a mistake is a mistake** (*Netrikaan therandalum Kutram Kutrame*).

The scene becomes grimmer when a furious Shiva uses a slur that belittles Nakkirar's low-born caste, the Vellap Parppars:

SHIVA: Someone who survives through cutting [*kir kir*] is finding fault in my poem [*kir kir endru saivano kutram solvadu*].

Here Nakkirar is being referred to as a low caste person, typically employed in making bangles with a saw (hence the term *kir kir* in the slur, to denote the cutting action).<sup>63</sup> Precisely at this moment the narrative turns to a sensitive topic. Does God sanction the *varna* system, which makes Hinduism unjustly hierarchical? If God created all life equal, would he differentiate between higher and lower human beings? This point is an apt placement for the DMK's atheistic and its anti-Brahminic ideology.

Then comes what is clearly the denouement of this stand-off between human and god – the riposte by Nakkirar, looking back at the god in anger and contempt, mocking the god:

NAKKIRAR: At least we live through such proud work. We do not survive through alms as you do [Nakkirar mimics a begging Shiva].<sup>64</sup>

Understandably, the God Shiva burns him down. But soon all is well again, as Nakkirar is brought back to life, and another episode of the divine play is added to the list of myths. However, after the event it is clear that Nakkirar, the man, had come out looking better than Shiva, the god.

62 The God Shiva's destructive third eye on the forehead is part of his role as a Destroyer in the Puranic Hindu holy trinity.

63 Hanumanthan 1977. Nakkirar's low caste Vellap-Parppar profession was to saw/cut conch shells/leather to make bangles/ornaments. The word *kir* also means "cut/saw" in Tamil, see <https://www.ilkogretim-online.org/fulltext/218-1647498435.pdf>, page 13.

64 Shiva has also been known as *Bhikshatana* ("wandering about for alms, mendicancy") in the Shaivaite tradition and is depicted in literary sources as a nude, four-armed man adorned with ornaments and a begging bowl and followed by demonic attendants; see Sivaramamurti 2004.

## The Tamil agenda in THIRUVILAYADAL

THIRUVILAYADAL contains a subtle and yet impactful reinterpretation of the relationship between the Tamil people, their language and Puranic gods. With Avvaiyar, there is a personification of the Tamil language as an entity that is above even Hindu divinity. With Nakkirar, there is a validation of Tamil scholarship that cannot be compromised even in the presence of the supreme god. THIRUVILAYADAL dismantles what we know of the bhakti film, weaponising a social perch for the audience-devotee in the cinema hall where a Tamil agenda can be constructed. Also, the movie does not have the typical trappings of an Indian devotional film. There is an absence of frontality, miracles, rituals and group bhajans. The devotee does not undergo any trials and tribulations before being rescued by a *deus ex machina*.

Nagarajan felt Nakkirar important enough<sup>65</sup> for him to play the role himself, but he also sets up Dharumi's character as an alter ego of the audience, especially in the scene where Dharumi is venting his frustration about his humiliation at the royal court. There is no one around except the audience and the God Shiva. Dharumi does not know that the rich poet who gave him the poem to present at the royal court was the God Shiva. With only the audience at hand, Shiva would be expected to be the all-knowing divine entity that he is. After all, the god would know how this "divine play" will play out. The audience would expect him to treat the situation patronisingly. The god would know there was a fault in the poem and that Dharumi would come back humiliated. Instead, the God Shiva is furious and red-faced.

This is a defining moment because the god should be aware of the complete arc of the narrative. After all, that is the essence of the devotional film. In that scene, not only does Shiva get angry, but he also takes Dharumi and walks furiously through the real Madurai temple corridors to confront Nakkirar, his hands clasped behind his back to control his rage. He walks for a full 32-second three-shot sequence. He does not disappear and then reappear in the court as gods are supposed to do in devotional films.

When the poor poet Dharumi first meets Lord Shiva to receive the poem, he perceives him as a rich poet, not a god. Dharumi is in awe of the rich man before him, admires his majestic personality and even touches his *pattu* (silk) garments in wonder. Then Dharumi observes Shiva closely and actually goes down on his knees. The viewers may at this point expect that Dharumi,

65 Raghavan 2015.

even if has not recognised the god, would appreciate that this charismatic person was special. Someone to be respect or worshipped. That is the initial impression. Instead, Dharumi looks Shiva up and down, as if sizing him up. He then lets out what we recognise as steam vapour from his mouth in *vayiru erichal*, or burning stomach, a Tamil metaphor for jealousy.<sup>66</sup> Dharumi then sarcastically states, “You seem to be a prosperous poet.” When Shiva laughs, Dharumi responds, “You must have had a stomach full of food; that is why you are laughing.” Dharumi treats the god like a wealthy village landlord, displaying the “sizing-up gaze” of a rebellious *serf* (Dharumi) to the *feudal master* (God Shiva).

For Nakkirar’s encounter with the God Shiva at the Pandiyan court, Nagarajan constructs a fascinating *mise-en-scène*. At the point when Nakkirar realises Shiva’s identity, he joins his palms in a *namaste*<sup>67</sup> and bows like a blessed devotee deeply grateful for the divine revelation. But when he lifts his head to behold the God Shiva’s gaze, his eyes are steady and firm. He is not in a temple in front of an almighty. He is now a Tamil scholar representing a language bigger than the biggest god in the universe. He actually turns his back on Shiva with a dismissive wave, making a point to an increasingly incensed Shiva (all captured in a three part tracking shot without any frontality). It is a shocking act in a devotional film.

The profoundly passionate Tamil scholar with pride in his language is juxtaposed with a rather peevish almighty who is framed in profile, looking sideways at the human character. Such irreverence towards a god cannot be in a devotional film. Even in other moments when human characters return the gaze, they do not always look the gods (Shiva with Dharumi and Murugan with Avvaiyar) in the face. Instead, their gaze is directed towards the camera or at a corner, as if they had a point to make to the audience or expected a better experience with gods than they had just encountered.

In THIRUVILAYADAL, Nagarajan presents mythical gods as petulant. They are bothered about “knowledge fruits” (in Murugan’s case) or “entitled scholarship” (in Shiva’s case) and exhibit an upper caste bias in relation to scholarly lower castes (in Nakkirar’s case). The film is worth revisiting today, given the current socio-political climate in India’s Tamilnadu state. The Bharatiya Janata Party, a largely North India-based, Hindi-language biased

66 There are even 1960s-style special effects showing smoke emanating from Dharumi’s mouth.

67 *Namaste* is used both as a greeting and in paying obeisance before a deity in a temple.

and rightist Hindu political party, has started challenging the Dravidianist parties in the state. What stands in their way is the emotive role that the Tamil language plays in the life of an average Tamilian. THIRUVILAYADAL is located in a Tamil space, interpreting Puranic Hindu divinity through the spectrum of its language. It explores the duel between the Tamil language and the gods in such intricate detail that the *porul* (meanings of the dialogues) reverberate long after the movie ends. *Kutram Kutrame!* A mistake is a mistake whoever makes it, and “Tamil” knows best. *Tamil Vituthootu!*

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**Open Section**



# When the Devil Plays the Guitar and the Preacher Prays for Mercy

## An Exploration of Two Filmic Portrayals of the Occult and Satanism in Rock Music

### Abstract

“The devil is a catchy lyric.” This quote comes from the movie *AMERICAN SATAN* (Ash Avildsen, US 2017), when Mr. Capricorn (the devil) promises international success to a young heavy-metal band in Los Angeles and its singer, Johnny Faust. The pact must be sealed with a human sacrifice. Linking rock or heavy metal with the devil or demonic powers is a theme that has been used repeatedly in music and film. In this article, two films from independent productions are analyzed to study how the devil reaches people through rock music and ultimately influences their actions. In addition, the temporal context and the events that affected the content of the screenplays are discussed.

### Keywords

Devil, Satan, Church of Satan, Satanism, Heavy Metal, Black Metal, Rock, Movie, Film, Antichrist, Evil Spirit, Occultism, LaVey

### Biography

Fritz Treiber is a microbiologist and molecular biologist specializing in nutrition and nutritional myths. As part of his work in science communication at the University of Graz, he established the Science & Cinema format, where scientists from various fields give their expertise on films understandable for a broad audience. He is the author of various screenplays including “Des Teufels Meisterkoch” and “Heiliger Horstl.” One of his screenplays has been successfully made into an independent film, *DAS KÜSTENMAMMUTBÄUMCHEN* (Fritz Treiber, AT 2013).

## Introduction

Rock music is a common theme in feature films, but the influence of the devil or demonic powers through this kind of music is found in only a few films. And a distinction must be made between horror films, comedies, and

films with realistic character. In this article, two films, *AMERICAN SATAN* (Ash Avildsen, US 2017) and *MÁLMHAUS* (METALHEAD, Ragnar Bragason, IS 2013), are explored. Both have a certain grounding in reality. In *AMERICAN SATAN*, the devil often appears in human form and other supernatural effects are not used. In *MÁLMHAUS*, the focus is on the music, which already contains the devil and in one form or another turns the listener against Christianity. This source selection and the juxtaposition of these two movies allows us to examine from different perspectives the phenomenon of the devil in rock music in films. In *AMERICAN SATAN*, the classic pact with the devil is in the foreground. A young heavy-metal band finds worldwide fame and impressive sales of its album but only at a high price. In *MÁLMHAUS*, a priest who in his younger years devoted himself body and soul to rock music now seeks to bring a young metal musician back onto the right path. The film is set at the time of the emergence of black metal in Norway in the early 1990s and of the associated church fires. The very different perspectives make it possible to condense the complex and vast topic of the devil in rock music without only scratching the surface of the subject.

Manuel Trummer provided a helpful definition of the devil in his book *Sympathy for the Devil* (2011):<sup>1</sup>

- (1)The devil stands against the divine order. He is outside social norms and culturally sanctioned values.
- (2)Satan tries to destroy order and overthrow values. He is thus hostile to God and the human community in principle.
- (3)The devil acts in different forms and under different names. He does battle as both a radiant Lucifer and a destructive dragon.
- (4)Satan remains a singular figure but appears embedded in a large court of demonic forces that feeds popular-cultural conceptions of the devil, from the early modern belief in witches to the occultism of the period from the 19th to the 21st century.

The following questions frame this article. How does the devil appear in the films and where can this image of the devil be located in the history of religion and culture? What weight is to put on references in the films to Satanism or occult practices? How does the reaction of believers or representatives of Christian churches to “satanic” rock music differ between films and reality?

1 Trummer 2011, 61.

## The Devil and the Music: A Short Summary

Analysis of rock music of the 20th and 21st centuries can usefully return to the roots of this style, found in the Blues. We have no documented founding moment for the Blues. Around 1910, the word appeared in relation to music in the Mississippi Delta. The themes of the music, its basic tendencies, were sadness, hardship, and powerlessness that often beset the lifeworld of African Americans. It also, however, could entertain: when bluesmen played their songs, everyday life was interrupted by their performance.<sup>2</sup>

Two features of music from this period will later appear in rock music in reference to the devil. First, it was said that bluesmen were tempted by the devil on their travels or might make a pact with him. In exchange for their soul, they would have success in music, master their instrument, or be sexually attractive to women. The life of musician Robert Johnson (1911–1938) was surrounded by this myth. He was said to have begun as a not particularly gifted guitar player, but to have disappeared and then returned a true virtuoso, surely the result of an alliance with the devil. His death at the young age of just 27 led to legend-making, including that he was poisoned by a jealous husband.<sup>3</sup>

The lives of many early blues musicians were characterized by violence, alcohol, licentious sexuality, and a certain restlessness. This lifestyle ran counter to the message of African American churches, which often set the norms for society. The second interesting devil-related feature from this period is thus that the Blues served as an outlet for people who did not feel comfortable in this society and thus came to be seen as the devil's music. The bluesmen were the devil's henchmen and were called to repentance by preachers, while parents and their children were warned against the Blues.<sup>4</sup>

The spiritual turning point of the hippie era in the 1960s brought a growing interest in occult symbolism and ideologies. The writings of Aleister Crowley were rediscovered and reinterpreted, with an image of the self-proclaimed sorcerer and occultist used on the cover of the 1967 Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.<sup>5</sup> The same year the Rolling Stones published their album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, and one year later their next album contained the song "Sympathy for the Devil". We should note, how-

2 Middleton 1972, 144.

3 Davis 1997, 5.

4 Oakley 1981, 66; Patterson 2004, 172–173.

5 Trummer 2011, 101–105.

ever, that their apparent interest in the occult did not manifest itself in their music; more decisive here was its marketing in relation to the zeitgeist.<sup>6</sup>

The band Black Sabbath, however, often referred to as the first heavy-metal band in music history, was a pioneer in moving in a new direction. It was formed in Birmingham, England, in 1968 by guitarist and main songwriter Tony Iommi, bassist and main lyricist Geezer Butler, drummer Bill Ward, and singer Ozzy Osbourne.<sup>7</sup> Alice Cooper, the son of a preacher, was one of the first heavy-metal musicians, a shock-rocker who believed in God and the devil. Fusing elements of hard rock and psychedelic rock, these bands were heavily influenced by the Blues, as numerous interviews confirmed.<sup>8</sup> They also led a counterculture in relation to the hippie movement. Love and peace seemed deeply unrealistic in a world divided into West and East, a rupture that threatened nuclear war. The sound of the music became heavier and darker; a large drum kit with heavy drums, a bass, one or two guitars, one being the rhythm guitar and the other the lead guitar. The lead guitar was used for virtuoso solos, singers were characterized by strong voices, and screams were part of the songs. The dark sound needed dark lyrics, and demons and the devil provided them.<sup>9</sup>

The period from the mid-1970s and into the 1980s saw the emergence of the new wave in British heavy metal, with bands such as Black Sabbath, Def Leppard, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Motörhead, and Saxon and also Ozzy Osbourne as a solo artist. The most extreme form of metal, black metal, followed. The name of this genre comes from the band Venom's second album, titled *Black Metal*, released by Neat Records in 1982. The band was characterized by anti-Christian and satanic lyrics and symbolism.

Bands in other countries also turned to dark subjects, with some part of the first wave of black metal, such as Denmark's Mercyful Fate, formed in 1981. The Swedish band Bathory, formed in 1984, named themselves after the legendary Hungarian countess who is said to have bathed in virgin blood to preserve her youth. Celtic Frost from Switzerland released their first full-length studio album, titled *To Mega Therion*, in 1985, with a cover designed by Swiss artist HR Giger.<sup>10</sup>

6 Trummer 2011, 115–116.

7 Conte 2000, 8.

8 Rensen 2009, 46–47.

9 Granholm 2013, 5–33.

10 Mørk 2009, 171–198.

The second wave of black metal ensured this genre was better known by a broader public. The Norwegian scene of the early 1990s led the charge, and a change in musical style was associated with it. The singing became shrill, there was occasional roaring, and the lyrics were sometimes incomprehensible. The so-called blast beat was supposed to be reminiscent of machine-gun fire. Another change was the intentionally low quality of the productions. The best-known of these Norwegian bands from this period were Mayhem (1984), Dark Throne (1986), Immortal (1990), Satyricon (1990), Varg Vikernes's one-man band called Burzum (1991), Emperor (1991), and Gorgoroth (1992).<sup>11</sup>

## Film Analysis

The title of the film *AMERICAN SATAN* promises much. The comparison to other productions with similar names is compelling. *AMERICAN PIE* (Paul Weitz, US 1999), *AMERICAN BEAUTY* (Sam Mendes, US 1999), *AMERICAN SNIPER* (Clint Eastwood, US 2014), and *AMERICAN GANGSTER* (Ridley Scott, US 2007) were all lucrative blockbusters. *AMERICAN SATAN* however, failed to achieve this commercial success.

The plot of the film revolves around a heavy-metal band that seeks to break-out in Los Angeles. The devil offers to make them known worldwide but, of course, there is a price to pay. The devil first appears in the film as an old white man, with a worn jacket and a sailor's cap, who drives a small, dilapidated tourist tour bus (fig. 1). He drives at walking pace next to Johnny Faust, the



Fig. 1: Johnny Faust meets the devil for the first time. Film still, *AMERICAN SATAN* (Ash Avildsen, US 2017), 00:07:55.

11 Moberg 2012, 113–130.

singer of the band The Relentless – and the main character in the film – and the guitarist Vic Lacota and tries to persuade them to take a ride. The young lads refuse, and the devil stops, gets out of the car, and quotes the biblical passage John 7:24: “Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly” (AMERICAN SATAN [2017], 00:07:50). The two young men take him for a madman and move on. The devil again drives alongside them, taunting them as just another band trying their luck in the city who will surely be disappointed.

A few scenes later the devil appears again, as a homeless man. He asks Johnny for a cigarette and complains to the band that he is stuck in this “vessel” (body) waiting for them to show up. Johnny recognizes him as the man who rode in the tourist bus on their first night in town and calls him a religious nutcase (00:15:40). After the band has had to cancel their first big gig as a result of sabotage by a competitor, Damien, ex-boyfriend of Lily Mayflower, they again meet the devil, who this time is wearing a designer suit and driving an expensive sports car. He approaches the band members and invites them for a drink (fig. 2), revealing himself to the band manager by laying his hands on him. The representation of the devil has changed. Here he is a successful businessman, a man of wealth and taste. After the devil offers the band a pact that will make them successful, the singer and band manager Ricky Rollins asks him why they have been chosen.

RICKY ROLLINS: Why exactly a band like us?

DEVIL: Rock’n’roll, heavy metal. You’re so loyal to me. You wear me on your sleeve. But your fans are dangerous, and your fans are full of passion. (00:28:25)



Fig. 2: The devil offers a pact to the band. Film still, AMERICAN SATAN (Ash Avildsen, US 2017), 00:27:27.

DEVIL: Have you ever seen Iron Maiden? They filled stadiums full of their fans. Singing along to songs like “The Number of the Beast.” Or what about Van Halen? “Running with the Devil.” The Stones, “Sympathy for the Devil.” I mean, on and on and on and on it goes. I’m not saying I’m Satan. I’m just saying the devil is a catchy lyric. (00:28:44)

In exchange for a human sacrifice, they will become famous worldwide and accordingly rich. The sacrifice will be the revenge murder of Damien, the competitor who sabotaged their first gig. At the last moment Johnny lets Damien out of the burning tour bus. Damien runs but dies moments later on an electric fence. The next day comes the call from a record company and shortly thereafter the first record contract. Months later, the band visits a strip club where Lily Mayflower, their bassist, once worked. There, the devil again talks about his activities in the music industry.

DEVIL: You know, in 1967, we put Aleister Crowley on the front of Sgt. Pepper’s. We wrote underneath it, “Welcome The Rolling Stones!?” Ha! Aleister Crowley! The old sorcerer himself. Back then, that was beyond fucking insane! And then six months later, The Stones put out their album. Their Satanic Majesties Request. And on it, on the front cover, they had hidden The Beatles faces. (01:13:10)

In addition, the devil takes Ricky Rollins, who dies from a cocaine overdose. He had run away during the human sacrifice and now must pay the price.

Later in the film, full of alcohol and drugs Johnny sits in the very bar where they once made their pact with the devil. The devil seeks to convince Johnny to shoot a confused man on stage and then continue playing. Johnny does not want to act; he had not taken up music in order to kill.

DEVIL: You know, it’s religion that separates humanity, but it’s music that brings us all together. You know, more people are killed through religious conflict than any other reason. We are all our own gods. If you want to find the answers, you have to look inside yourself. Not up to the sky. Our carnal desires are not to be suppressed. They are to be liberated. And sin? Sin is simply a matter of opinion. (01:32:38)

At the end of AMERICAN SATAN, an interview by Larry King (playing himself), with band members Leo and Lily, highlights the role of the devil in rock music.

LARRY KING: [...] First question, your singer Johnny keeps mentioning the devil. Is this just sensationalism?

LEO: Everything Johnny has said is true, but we can't exactly sit here and talk about a physical version of the devil, can we, Larry? People will think we've gone crazy. In music, the devil you see on album covers and T-shirts, it's symbolism for the counterculture.

KING: So, then what's the real devil?

LILY: The voice inside our head that makes us do bad things without remorse. Says whatever it takes to get what it wants.

KING: And the man who was supposedly shot on stage, what was that?

LEO: That was a great way to sell records. (01:44:36)

In *MÁLMHAUS*, the second film we are looking at here, the trigger for the entire story is the tragic accidental death of 16-year-old Baldur, a heavy-metal fan who played the guitar himself. Hera struggles to cope with her brother's death. She seeks solace in Baldur's favorite music, to which she dedicates her life. Hera helps on her parents' farm, has no life goals, and works briefly at a slaughterhouse, where she plays heavy metal over the company sound system, used strictly for announcements, and is fired. She spends her days at home, composing and playing her own music. One evening as she lies sleepily on the couch, a news broadcast reports arson on a church in Norway:

REPORTER (*off*): The music is called black metal.

WOMAN: Personally, I think this kind of music should be banned. It must go away and everyone responsible for this music should be locked up forever.

REPORTER (*off*): This is how groups like Chaos, Hades or Dark Throne name themselves. The texts are mostly incomprehensible, but often contain negative messages. Pastor Sven Ole Christensen, who has been preaching about the dangers of hard rock for years, has now founded an organization that wants to work to ban this special kind of music. (*MÁLMHAUS* [2013], 00:42:52)

TV images and interviews relating to black metal and church fires in Norway in the early 1990s show a Christian cleric preaching against heavy metal. But in *MÁLMHAUS* we find a Protestant pastor who is a metal fan (fig. 3). He is called Janus, the name of a two-faced Roman god who represents the beginning and the end.



Fig. 3: To build trust with Hera, Pastor Janus takes off his shirt and shows her his Iron Maiden tattoo. Film still, *MÁLMHAUS* (Ragnar Bragason, IS 2013), 00:54:40.

HERA: Which bands do you like?

JANUS: Iron Maiden, the early Leppard, Diamond Head, Celtic Frost. I really like Venom, especially when they play live, they're really great. And Kronos, they have the best frontman ever. ... God also exists in darkness. Jesus was not afraid of outcasts, after all he was an outcast himself. That's why he was crucified. They couldn't understand what he was saying. Take people as they are.

HERA: He owes me one thing. (00:50:19)

A few days later, as Hera is riding with Janus in his car, they listen to a mix-tape of Baldur's favorite Judas Priest song, "Victim of Changes".

JANUS: They accompanied me through school, with a few other groups of course. There really hasn't been a day that I haven't listened to Judas Priest. (00:54:40)

Hera not only falls in love with Pastor Janus, but also feels that he is her soulmate. He rejects her because he has no feelings for her and had only sought to help her as part of his pastoral work in his new community. Hera responds to this rejection by setting the church on fire. The fire can also be interpreted as an act of revenge in relation to the accidental death of her brother (01:02:00). During his first visit to Hera's family, Pastor Janus mentions Baldur's death and asks her parents whether they have taken advantage of grief counseling. In a parish meeting in the presence of Pastor Janus,

it is decided that the church fire should be deemed an accident, and that all should come together to rebuild it. The pastor also indirectly represents the guilt or bad conscience of the parishioners who emotionally abandoned the family after the loss of Baldur.<sup>12</sup> This again shows the close interdependence of churches and communities or church and state in the Nordic countries, which many supporters of black metal rebelled against. Janus does not comment on the church fires in Norway in the film, even after the church he works at is burned down. Ultimately, Hera finds her way as a musician and thus her place in society, supported by a priest who loves black metal.

In the two films described here, the devil's salute occurs with varying frequency. In *MÁLMHAUS*, it is repeatedly used in different ways, depending on the story. Baldur shows the devil's horns to his sister, who is calling him to dinner. Here it is a gesture of kindness. Hera uses this greeting after being thrown out of the meat factory by holding out the devil's horns to her fore-



Fig. 4: Upper left: Baldur greets his sister, Film still, *MÁLMHAUS* (Ragnar Bragason, IS 2013), 00:02:10, Upper middle: Hera shows the devil's horns to a foreman at work, Film still, *MÁLMHAUS*, 00:29:04, Upper right: Boy with Metallica T-Shirt and Horns Up, Film still, *MÁLMHAUS*, 01:16:15, Bottom left: Hera salutes Jesus, Film still, *MÁLMHAUS*, 01:02:45, Bottom right: Girl salutes The Relentless on TV, Film still, *AMERICAN SATAN* (Ash Avildsen, US 2017), 00:49:07.

12 This is a key scene where the pastor notes in conversation that after Baldur's accidental death, the congregation's support was lacking to help the family come to terms with the loss. The joint building of the church by the congregation, can be interpreted as a kind of reparation to Baldur's family – although Hera set the church on fire! *MÁLMHAUS* (Ragnar Bragason, IS 2013), 01:12:40.

man, but it is not meant as a good message. When Hera tries to lead a middle-class life after the church fire she caused, she meets a little boy in the supermarket wearing a Metallica T-shirt who greets her with the horns up. When Hera sets the church on fire, she directs the salute towards the image of Jesus in the church. In *AMERICAN SATAN*, as a form of youthful rebellion, a teenager uses the salute in front of the camera, thereby demonstrating loyalty to the band The Relentless (fig. 4).

## Discussion

The devil appears in several forms in the film *AMERICAN SATAN*. As an old man and homeless, as a rich and renowned businessman, as the band member Lily Mayflower and as a successful lawyer. The image of the devil that seduced the band members corresponds to that of a social critic with a pinch of diabolical rhetoric of the late 1960s.<sup>13</sup> He is a man of wealth and taste. His philosophy is rendered in simplified form as he talks to the heavily drug-addicted Johnny in the bar. Religion divides people and causes wars, we are all our own gods, we should look inside ourselves and not up to heaven. Free will is emphasized, but also that a junkie has lost his, his will weakened by addiction.

However, the devil as a liberator from social constraints is only one side of the character depicted in the film. Following Johnny's acquittal after the bar brawl with a fatal outcome, violent episodes rapidly increase worldwide. Victims, mostly teenagers, resist their oppressors with deadly force. The devil wants to see these acts spread and increase, but that goal is not attained in the film in the end. The devil is the creator of chaos, thus plunging the world into misfortune. At the same time, the oppressed can escape their oppressors by force. This motif appears in some black-metal groups again and again, where the warriors of Satan go into the final battle against the good.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Lily, the band's bass player and also the devil, lives up to the role attributed to her. She sexually seduces the main character of the film, Johnny. His relationship with his girlfriend Gretchen breaks up as a result. The depiction of the devil as a seductive woman has been a theme in music

13 Trummer 2011, 115.

14 Trummer 2011, 258–260.

history, especially with blues bands or rock'n'roll bands in the second half of the 1950s. A woman through whose sexual power a man is plunged into misfortune can only be based on satanic forces. The devil thus appears in the film *AMERICAN SATAN* in the form of a demonized woman, described by a concerned mother from the Bible Belt as a “lesbian Satan woman”.<sup>15</sup>

In the film *MÁLMHAUS*, however, the personified devil does not appear at all. The main actress is admittedly called a Satanist by two work colleagues as she stands in line in the cafeteria. During the film, she uses the sign of the devil's horns in various situations. But the devilishness in this film is mainly in the music itself. Demon summoning and a devil's pact were indeed at the heart of music such as Black Widow's song “Come to the Sabbat” (1972).<sup>16</sup>

It is not just the devil who is personified in *AMERICAN SATAN*. When Johnny Faust collapses after an overdose of heroin and suffers a cardiac arrest, he is revived by a paramedic who is actually the Archangel Gabriel, who appears again and again in the film. During the resuscitation, the devil stands next to Gabriel. Their roles can be interpreted in line with the wager between God and the devil made in the book of Job (1:6–12; 2:1–7). At the beginning of the film, both Gabriel and the devil are homeless and meet Johnny and his bandmates. At the end of the film, a lawyer who got Johnny out of jail on a technicality knocks four times with his ring on the release papers. This is exactly the gesture the devil has made again and again in the film. Did the devil, who is also the lawyer, sacrifice his own son, Damien?

The film *AMERICAN SATAN* is full of allusions to Satanism and occult practices, always associated with rock music.<sup>17</sup> Satanic themes and various allusions to Goethe's *Faust* are scattered throughout the film. The intention of the film is to make viewers believe that the devil is everywhere in the music business. One of the last scenes in *AMERICAN SATAN* sums up what brings the devil and rock music together – provocation and the resulting marketing that sells records. The greater the outcry in the media, the more the free advertising.

At the end of the film, another exciting question arises?

Priests or other representatives of Christian churches who point out the dangers of satanic heavy metal are not to be found in supporting roles in *AMERICAN SATAN*. The only suggestions that Christians feel disturbed by what they consider a satanic band are provided by a protest by Christians in the

15 Trummer 2011, 93.

16 Trummer 2011, 124–126.

17 Schmidt 1992, 130–138.

Bible Belt before a concert by The Relentless and the insulting of band members in the same area. And indeed, at the end of the film, another intriguing question arises. In a rehabilitation clinic, Johnny practices mediation under the guidance of a Hindu guru. So, is Hinduism the only way to salvation?

By contrast, in *MÁLMHAUS*, a pastor becomes the devil's advocate, for in his youth, he listened to numerous bands with a clear Satanist background. Perhaps the character of Pastor Janus is meant to serve as a role model. The idea of his listening to bands from the first wave of black metal like Venom and Celtic Frost is remarkable, and in addition, he has three black-metal musicians from Norway help rebuild the church that Hera burned down.

The film is set in the early 1990s, and at that time such bands were clearly deemed Satanic.<sup>18</sup>

It remains an open question here whether the scriptwriter therefore put these sentences into the mouth of the character of Pastor Janus about his band preferences as a youth and now as a clergyman. Hera also mentions, providing an almost scientific approach, that heavy metal illuminates the darker side of life, an interpretation that cultural scientists can give only now, looking back on this youth or subculture of the 1980s. Female black-metal musicians in the early 1990s, women like Hera herself, are also absent from the research literature. The development of black metal was virtually created in *MÁLMHAUS* by the screenwriter.

The representatives of the second wave of Black Metal in the first half of the 1990s were very anti-Christian. Hera's setting fire to the church, however, has only personal motives, as a response to the loss of her brother, rejection by the village community and the church, rebuff from the pastor. Hatred of Christianity, often present in early black-metal philosophy, is not associated with her character in the film.<sup>19</sup>

Clergy repeatedly warned about the dangers of heavy metal (fig. 5). Konrad Sterninger (1948–2022),<sup>20</sup> for example, was a passionate preacher against

18 Research has proposed that these devil images were mainly chosen to boost record sales through provocation. The musicians had no detailed interest in the philosophy behind them, let alone in a religious grouping like the Church of Satan. One exception is King Diamond of Mercyful Fate, who privately professes the Satanism of LaVey, in which he has a genuine interest. But this Satanism does not influence the band's lyrics. The images of the devil that are conveyed come rather from the medieval imagination or horror films. See Trummer 2011, 234–235.

19 Mørk 2009, 171–198.

20 Noé 2022.

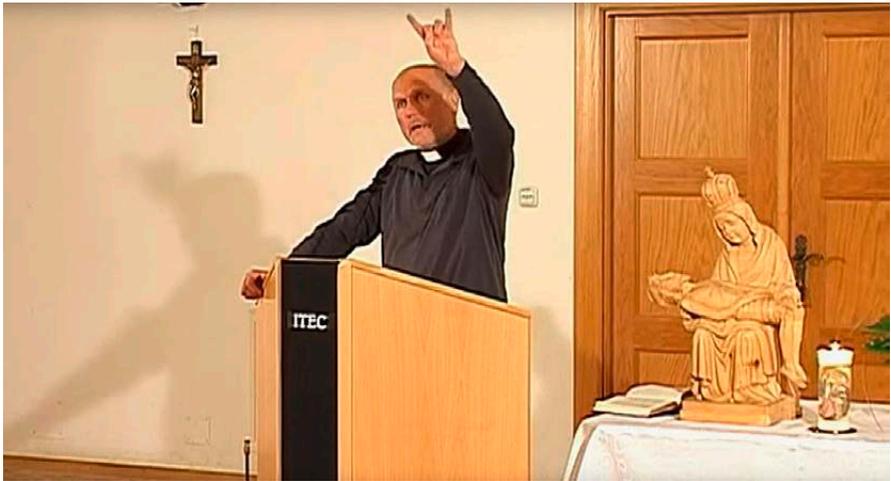


Fig. 5: Pastor Sterninger demonizes the concert of the rock band AC/DC on Ascension Day 2015 in Spielberg, Austria. During his sermon he makes the gesture “horns up” with one hand. Film Still, Konrad Sterninger, Das Gleichnis vom Unkraut unter dem Weizen, Folge 6, YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/m54kuw8m>, 00:14:37.

heavy metal, leading the fight against satanic music in Austria<sup>21</sup> from the early 1980s:

Can you see it? That was pure homage to Satan. The musicians with their satanic horns. [...] Do you know what that means? On Ascension Day, was this a deliberate choice? With the sign – Satan.<sup>22</sup>

Sterninger was not only a man of words; he was also a man of action. In the early 1980s, he organized a burning of youth magazines, books, and records as part of a prayer group.

Then I said, do you have stuff like that at home too, trashy books and things like that? Bring them, bring them with you. The next Saturday in the prayer group they came, with trolleys, I really tell you. [...] They brought *Bravo* [youth magazine] and all the stuff and it burned, wonderful.<sup>23</sup>

21 Tartarotti 2015, *Kurier online*, <https://tinyurl.com/2w5uj6ph> [accessed 26 September 2022].

22 Konrad Sterninger, Das Gleichnis vom Unkraut unter dem Weizen, Folge 6, <https://tinyurl.com/m54kuw8m>, 00:13:47–00:15:04.

23 Konrad Sterninger, Offenbarung des Hl. Johannes Kateches, Teil 1, <https://tinyurl.com/4dtm3pz4>, 00:00:00–00:01:10.

At the beginning of this speech, Pastor Sterninger refers to the place in the Acts of the Apostles that recounts how magicians burned their pagan books after their conversion by the Apostle Paul in Ephesus (19:19). According to a contemporary witness, records by the bands Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne were also burned at a bonfire near the church.

In 1982 Mercyful Fate released their EP *Mercyful Fate*, which included the song “Nuns Have No Fun”. The band’s singer, King Diamond, has described reactions to the release:

At that time there was a priest in Denmark who really persecuted us and defamed us everywhere. [...] He went to the newspapers, to the radio stations and told everywhere about our atrocities, and at some point these media people also approached us to hear our opinion – and that was the best promotion a young band could get at that time. The plan had worked.<sup>24</sup>

The devil’s sign of the horned one – a fist with index finger and little finger outstretched – rarely appears in *AMERICAN SATAN*, because by 2017, the time the film is set, this gesture was already part of the heritage of popular culture as far as the public was concerned. In the film *MÁLMHAUS*, by contrast, set in the early 1990s, this gesture is used deliberately, reserved for a small circle of initiates who know what to do with it. The devil’s sign was used for the first time by the band Coven on the cover of their album *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*, released in 1969. On the back of the sleeve, the musicians are seen behind a ceremonially decorated altar, with inverted crosses, a kind of missal, skulls, chalices, and black candles, alongside hands forming the devil’s sign. This gesture was widely used by the musician Ronnie James Dio, a pioneer of heavy-metal music. Dio was the lead singer with Black Sabbath for three albums and continued performing in other bands, including his eponymous band.<sup>25</sup> Dio recalled walking as a young boy with his grandmother, who had immigrated to the United States from Italy – if something didn’t seem right to her, she made this gesture with her fingers. He incorporated this sign, supposed to ward off the evil of this world, into his stage shows.<sup>26</sup>

24 Albrecht 2002, 128–129.

25 Spracklen 2018, 407–423.

26 METAL: A HEADBANGER’S JOURNEY (Sam Dunn, CA 2005), 00:37:58.

In MÁLMHAUS the names of the three musicians (Øystein, Pål Ole and Yngve) who visit Hera refer to deceased band members of the Norwegian black metal band Mayhem, Øystein “Euronymous” Aarseth and Per Yngve “Dead” Ohlin. Øystein Aarseth, the founding member of Mayhem, chose Euronymous, a lowly demon, as his stage name because he was inspired by Anton LaVey’s *Satanic Bible*. Aarseth called for an active Satanism, saying, “If a band cultivates and worships Satan, it’s black metal ... it can be ordinary heavy metal or just noise. What’s important is that it’s satanic; that’s what makes it black metal.”<sup>27</sup> He was not referencing LaVey specifically, for, he noted, “LaVey admitted several times that he generally had no fondness for rock music or metal, and he tended to see the kind of ‘Satanism’ promoted in, for instance, black metal lyrics as misunderstood and reversed Christianity.”<sup>28</sup> True Norwegian black metal had a militant, anti-Christian, anti-society attitude. Charismatic Christianity preachers believed their longstanding and emphatic warnings confirmed. The research community continues to explore why this specific form of Satanism was able to establish itself in the Nordic countries and especially in Norway.<sup>29</sup>

Metal music is entertainment, as its concerts demonstrate, but images of death, destruction, and suffering are a norm in this genre of music. Murder and suicide are part of its imagery.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Hera overcame her trauma through music, an approach that has been shown to be scientifically valid. And studies have shown that people who deal directly and openly with death can handle it better and can also cope better with their own mortality.<sup>31</sup> The devil as a shocking factor, but also as a cash cow, has become obsolete in rock music. Yet the classic devil, the adversary of God, still thrives at the box office, as evinced by *THE POPE’S EXORCIST* (Julius Avery, US 2023) with Russell Crowe, a success that is surely likely to be repeated by *CONSTANTINE 2*, with Keanu Reeves, in 2024.

27 Introvigne 2017.

28 Dyrendal 2008, 68–98.

29 Soderlind/Drydendal 2009, 153–170; Hjelm/Bogdan/Dyrendal/Jesper 2009, 515–529; Zuckermann 2008, 57–76.

30 Hjelm 2012, 1–2; 5–18.

31 Quinn/Glaves 2022, 376; Recours/Aussaguel/Trujillo 2009, 473–488.

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## Filmography

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- AMERICAN GANGSTER (Ridley Scott, US 2007).
- AMERICAN PIE (Paul Weitz, US 1999).
- AMERICAN SATAN (Ash Avildsen, US 2017).
- AMERICAN SNIPER (Clint Eastwood, US 2014).
- CONSTANTINE 2 (Francis Lawrence, US 2024).
- MÁLMHAUS (METALHEAD, Ragnar Bragason, IS 2013).
- METAL: A HEADBANGER'S JOURNEY (Sam Dunn, CA 2005).
- THE POPE'S EXORCIST (Julius Avery, US 2023).

## Discography

- Black Metal* (Venom, UK/US 1982, Neat Records/Combat).
- “Come to Sabbat”, *Sacrifice* (Black Widow, UK 1970, CBS).
- Nuns Have No Fun* (Mercyful Fate, Mercyful Fate, NL 1982, Rave-On Records).
- Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (The Beatles, UK 1967, Parlophone/EMI).
- “Sympathy for the Devil”, *Beggar's Banquet* (The Rolling Stones, UK 1968, Decca).
- Their Satanic Majesty Request* (The Rolling Stones, UK 1967, Decca).
- To Mega Therion* (Celtic Frost, DE 1985, Noise).
- Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls* (Coven, US 1969, Mercury).

# Playing with Noah's Animals

## A Theological Analysis of Four Retro Video Games Called NOAH'S ARK

### Abstract

A special genre has emerged in video games – Bible games. As a subset of the broader genre of Christian games – aimed at providing age- and faith-appropriate content for religious audiences and/or proselytizing non-believers to the Christian faith – the Bible games gamify their inspirational source material. Frequently, these games are considered inferior (“bad”) games, usually because of the ludonarrative dissonance in terms of gameplay and narrative. This article discusses four of these supposedly bad Bible games, all from the 1980s and 1990s and all using the biblical story of Noah's ark as source material: NOAH'S ARK by Enter-Tech (1982), the NES games NOAH'S ARK (as a part of BIBLE ADVENTURES) by Wisdom Tree and NOAH'S ARK by Konami (1992), and finally the SNES game SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D by Wisdom Tree again. The article provides an overall comparison and analysis of the four in theological terms.

### Keywords

Bible, Noah's Ark, Bible Games, Christian Games, Ludonarrative Dissonance

### Biography

Frank G. Bosman is a theologian of culture and a senior researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He is the author of many articles and books on the relation between culture, theology, and faith, and focuses on the role of religion and religious themes in video games. In 2019, he published a synthesis of his previous research on religion and digital games in *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (Routledge). In 2022, he published – together with his colleague Archibald van Wieringen – the monograph *Video Games as Art. A Communication-oriented Perspective on the Relationship between Gaming and Art* (De Gruyter).

Well, there's Noah. He moves pretty fast for an old guy. The object's to get the animals in the ark. (*Noah picks up an animal*) Holy shit! You just pick them up? Is that how Noah did it? He did it all by himself by picking the animals up and carrying them in the ark? Well, according to *Bible Ad-*

*ventures*, that's how it happened. So there's where you drop those fuckers off. You just bring them to the door, and let those bastards run in there. You get a checklist of all the animals you need, so it's pretty simple. Go find some more, bring them back. Fun, huh?<sup>1</sup>

Thus spoke James Rolfe, better known as the Angry Video Game Nerd, creator and host of an American retro gaming review-cum-comedy website series on YouTube.<sup>2</sup> His channel *Cinemassacre* with 3.77 million subscribers as of August 2023, and Rolfe himself is hailed for having invented his own genre.<sup>3</sup> With his typical style of an angry, foul-mouthed and beer-drinking sailor, he comments on “bad” video games from the 1980s and 1990s while trying to play them with very varying results.

In 2006, 2009, and 2012, “The Nerd” dedicated three episodes to different “Bible games”, which are – not so surprisingly – games based on biblical stories.<sup>4</sup> During the first of the three episodes, Rolfe discussed a very peculiar game from 1991 called BIBLE ADVENTURES (made by Wisdom Tree). It gave rise to the colourful criticism quoted above. The game actually consisted of three independent games, called NOAH'S ARK, BABY MOSES, and DAVID AND GOLIATH.

While commenting, the Nerd controls a white-clad, older man – apparently Noah – who runs up and down a forest surrounding his ark in order to collect more or less cooperative animals by literally stacking them above his head, up to four animals in total at once. When they have been brought into the ark, Noah checks his list to see what still he has to collect and then off he goes.

The Bible games genre, of which BIBLE ADVENTURES is part, is associated with very low quality *and* game nostalgia, and not only by The Nerd.<sup>5</sup> Bible games like BIBLE ADVENTURES OR EXODUS. JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND (Wisdom Tree, US 1991) are a natural match for The Nerd's show. However, being “bad” and/or “nostalgic” does not prevent Bible games from that era from lacking any and all relevance to history, theology, or game studies. On the contrary. Similar games have been around for a long time: from the

1 AVGN fandom, <https://tinyurl.com/yn5s5am5> [accessed 5 September 2023].

2 Navarro-Remesal 2017, 135–136; Lizardi 2017, 42–43.

3 Carlson 2014.

4 See AVGN on YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/46kk5jpy>, <https://tinyurl.com/bd44t3ee> and <https://tinyurl.com/3atumh8b>.

5 Iannone 2017; Makuch 2014; Brown 2007.

1980s with games like DANIEL & THE LION’S DEN (BibleByte Software, US 1982) on the TRS-80 and RED SEA CROSSING (Inspirational Video Concepts, US 1983) on the Atari 2600 VCS, through notorious Wisdom Tree games like BIBLE ADVENTURES on NES and SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D (1994) on SNES, to modern interpretations like the ADAM’S VENTURE series (Vertigo Digital Entertainment, NL 2009–2016) for PC, PlayStation 3 and 4, Xbox One, and Switch, and LOGOS BIBLE VIDEO GAME (TeComprendo, MX 2020) for PC, macOS, and Linux. The genre provides us with examples of and insight into a new stage in the cultural appropriation of the Bible. We can also identify the development of (parts of) Christendom that want to integrate the possibilities of the new medium while negotiating its supposedly problematic characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I explore four retro-cum-Bible games, three of which were discussed in The Nerd’s Bible shows (see table 1). They feature as *pars pro toto* for the whole development of Bible games in the last decades, including their theological significance. For the purpose of comparison, I have chosen four games with the same name but developed by three different companies: the arcade game called NOAH’S ARK by Enter-Tech (1982), the NES games NOAH’S ARK (as a part of BIBLE ADVENTURES) by Wisdom Tree and NOAH’S ARK by Konami (1992), and finally the SNES game SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D by Wisdom Tree again.

Game	Platform	Release	Developer	Publisher
NOAH’S ARK	Arcade	1982	Enter-Tech	Moppet Video
NOAH’S ARK (part of BIBLE ADVENTURES)	NES	1991	Wisdom Tree	Wisdom Tree
NOAH’S ARK	NES	1992	Konami	Konami
SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D	SNES	1994	Wisdom Tree	Wisdom Tree

Table 1: An overview of the games discussed in this article.

All games featured in this article have been played on an Arcade, NES or SNES emulator. Not included are later (post-1999) Noah-themed games like THE STORY OF NOAH’S ARK (Razorback, UK 2011), NOAH’S BUNNY PROBLEM (Salvation’s Story, US 2015), ALL ABOARD THE ARK (Popsicle Games, PH 2015), NOAH’S ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM (Salvation’s Story, US 2017), and THE CHRONICLES OF NOAH’S ARK (e-FunSoft Games, ID 2018), because their relatively young age means they do not yet qualify as “nostalgic”. Games that appropriate

6 Copier/Kooijman/Vander Stichele 2010.

the theme of the Deluge more indirectly, like BRINK (Splash Damage, UK 2011), MUTANT YEAR ZERO. ROAD TO EDEN (The Bearded Ladies, NO 2018), and METRO. EXODUS (4A Games/Deep Silver, AT 2019), are also excluded from this research.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I pose the question, What is the “theology” of those four games in comparison to one another? To answer this question, I first discuss briefly some preliminary notions and concepts, like the method used to analyse these video games, the genre of the Christian/Bible Games, and the biblical flood narrative itself. Next, I discuss the case studies, the four games called NOAH’S ARK, in light of their theological traits, and finally I provide an overall analysis of and comparison between the games. This analysis will show the slow secularization of Noah’s story through the games, with growing emphasis on the friendly interaction with various animals and the loss of the darker undertones of the biblical source material.

## Some Preliminary Remarks

### Communication-oriented Methodology

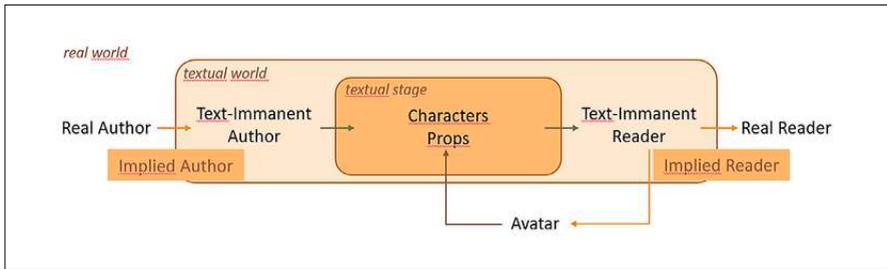
To analyse these video games, I make use of Communication-Oriented Analysis (see scheme 1), differentiating between the real world *outside* the video game text and the world *inside* the game.<sup>8</sup> Outside the textual world of the game, we find the “real author”, the actual developer(s) who made the game in question, including his/her/their creative intentions and religious motivations. In the case of this article we ask, What were the intentions of developers of the games in question?

Another possibility outside the game text is the “real reader” – either historical, from the time the game was released, or contemporary – where we can consider how playing these games influences the individual’s thoughts, emotions, and opinions about the Bible and/or Christianity. In the case of this article we ask, What emotions were/are attached to playing the game by the actual players both earlier and now?

Inside the textual world of the game, we find the game-immanent communication between the “text-immanent author” and “text-immanent

7 Bosman 2022.

8 Bosman/Wieringen 2022.



Scheme 1: The unique property of video games in terms of their communication: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader and its in-game character (avatar).

reader”. This communication, and its interpretation, is somewhat related to, but certainly not confined by, the developers’ intentions or the actual players’ appreciation of the game.<sup>9</sup> In the case of this article we ask, What is the theological meaning of the discussed Bible games *in and of themselves*?

And last but not least, one can focus on the games’ characters, especially the protagonists, with some characters seeming more in demand than others: Noah, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus himself are very popular as titular characters. In this case, all four games focus on the character/avatar Noah.

This last observation is important in the context of video games because of their unique communicative property: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader/player with its in-game character/avatar. The text-immanent player is the one the story is told *to* (by the text-immanent author), the one the story is – partially – told *by* (as far as allowed by the text-immanent author), and the one the story is told *about* (the text-immanent reader’s in-game character/avatar).

## Christian Games versus Bible Games

Christian games are commercially released video games explicitly appropriating the (Western) Christian tradition, including the Bible and its reception, usually (but not exclusively) for the purposes of providing faith-appropriate content for children and young adults and/or proselytizing non-believers. Examples include *SPIRITUAL WARFARE* (Wisdom Tree, US 1992), *DANCE PRAISE*

9 Kristeva 1980.

(Digital Praise, US 2005), or *LEFT BEHIND. ETERNAL FORCES* (Inspired Media Entertainment, US 2006).

Self-proclaimed Christian gamer Zachery Oliver identifies four problems with the genre's popularity.<sup>10</sup> First, games for the faithful have suffered from Wisdom Tree's legendary bad games, riddled with "blatant plagiarism of established game ideas [...] [and] illegal cartridge production/lockout overrides", setting a poor reputation for the whole genre. Secondly, Christian games tend to focus almost exclusively on their narrative dimension at the cost of their ludic quality, often resulting in a ludo-narrative dissonance.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, Christian games appear to "exist purely for the purpose of evangelizing", sacrificing all subtlety in the zealous effort accompanying this. And fourthly, the explicit religious self-identification of Christian games paradoxically scares away precisely the non-believers it seeks to engage.

The Bible game forms is a subgenre of Christian games. Bible games do share the Christian games' purposes and target audiences, but the latter take their inspiration from the Christian tradition in general (including its reception of the Bible), while the first draw specifically and/or exclusively from the Bible alone (again, as received in Western Christendom). Examples include *EXODUS. JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND* (Wisdom Tree, US 1991), *THE BIBLE GAME* (Mass Media, US 2005), or *NOAH'S ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM* (Salvation's Story, US 2017).

The two genres – Christian and Bible – are conceptually distinct: they are defined by their content (narrative-focused classification) rather than by traditional ludic characteristics, like the action/adventure, side-scroller or puzzle-game genres (ludic or game-mechanics-based classification).

Furthermore, this definition of the Bible game genre excludes (1) games that have not been officially released; (2) games that feature biblical themes, notions, or quotations only as part of their larger narrative and/or world building, like the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* series (Ubisoft, CA 2007–2020), the *METRO* series (Deep Silver, AT 2010–2019), or *THE TALOS PRINCIPLE* (Devolver Digital, US 2014); and (3) games based on apocryphal biblical literature, like *EL SHADDAI. ASCENSION OF THE METATRON* (Ignition Tokyo, UK 2011).<sup>12</sup>

We should note that the terms "Christian games" and "Bible games" tend to be used interchangeably within popular discourse, especially within the (professional) gamer community online.

10 Oliver 2016; cf. Thompson 2009.

11 Cf. Cogburn/Silcox 2009, 76–77.

12 Bosman 2019.

## The Genesis Narrative

The biblical story of Noah's Ark – in the English world also known by its older name, the Deluge – is found in Genesis 6:1–9:17, and probably consists of two narratives woven into one, causing all kinds of repetitions, interference to the logical order of events, internal contradictions, and the like.<sup>13</sup> In the story – we will take it as one here, as it has been in Christian tradition – God decides to flood the world with water to “reboot” his creation.<sup>14</sup> There are two reasons for God's decision: one mythological, concerning the problematic existence of the Nephilim (6:1–4), and one ethical, concerning the wickedness of humankind (6:5–8).<sup>15</sup> God instructs Noah to build a giant ship, or rather a “box” to be closed from the outside by God himself, in order to save himself and his family together with seven pairs of every clean animal and one pair of unclean ones (6:19–21 and 7:2–3).<sup>16</sup>

After the rains have stopped, Noah sends out a dove to check for dry land (8:8–12): once it returns to the Ark having looked in vain, once it returns with an olive branch, and finally it fails to return. Both the dove and the olive branch have developed into autonomous symbols of peace in the Western world.<sup>17</sup> When Noah, his family, and the animals have set foot on dry land again, God and Noah enter into a covenant with one another. To mark this occasion and stress God's promise never to destroy the world again, God places a “bow in the cloud”, traditionally interpreted as a rainbow (9:13).<sup>18</sup>

Noah and his Ark have become part of Western popular culture, featuring considerably in Western cinema with films like *EVAN ALMIGHTY* (Tom Shydac, US 2007), *40 DAYS AND NIGHTS* (Michael Lehmann, US/GB/FR 2002), and *NOAH* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2014), (satirically) in adult animated sitcoms like *FAMILY GUY*'s episode “Holly Bible” (created by: Seth MacFarlane, US 2020), *AMERICAN DAD*'s “Daesong Heavy Industries” (created by: Seth MacFarlane, Mike Barker and Matt Weitzman, US 2016), *THE SIMPSONS*' “Das Bus” (created by: Matt Groening, US 1998), and (somewhat more seriously) in animated films and cartoons like *OOOPS! NOAH IS GONE...* (Toby Genkel and Sean

13 Finkel 2014, chap. 9.

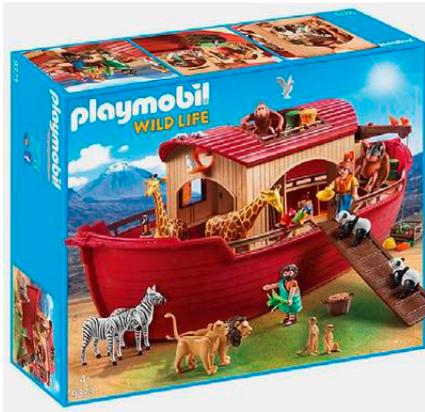
14 Wieringen 2022.

15 Bosman/Poorthuis 2015, 17–40.

16 Good 2011, 78.

17 Werness 2006, 143.

18 Thiselton 2018, chap. 5.



Figs. 1a–c: Playmobil's nameless toy, part of the Wild Life series (above left, fig. 1a), Fisher-Price's "Noah's Ark" (below left, fig. 1b), and Lemax's "Noah's Ark Toys" (right, fig. 1c).

Mccormack, US/GB/IE 2015), CATS DON'T DANCE (Mark Dindal, US 1997), and Disney's Silly Symphonies' FATHER NOAH'S ARK (Wilfred Jackson, US 1933).<sup>19</sup>

Noah's Ark has long been an inspiration for children's toys. The quantity of story books, cartoons, toys, and other Noah-themed entertainment especially aimed at children is significant. Playmobil, Fisher-Price, and Lemax, for example (see figs. 1a–c), have devoted high-quality toys to the Deluge, albeit almost exclusively aimed at children and focussing primarily on the animals within the story, even though this excludes or seriously plays down the story's religious overtones or the horror of an almost total extinction of all human and animal life on earth.

19 Kozlovic 2016, chap. 2.

# Four Times NOAH'S ARK

In this section, I discuss the four case studies: four games called NOAH'S ARK.

## NOAH'S ARK by Enter-Tech

NOAH'S ARK is a 1983 arcade game developed by Enter-Tech and distributed by Moppet Video. Moppet Video released five arcade machine games, all in 1982: DESERT RACE, LEPRECHAUN, PIRATE TREASURE, TUG BOAT, and NOAH'S ARK, with the last being one of the very few religion-themed arcade games.<sup>20</sup> Moppet sold their arcade machines – especially developed for young children both in cabinet size and game content – exclusively to Chuck E. Cheese, an American family entertainment centre and restaurant pizza chain founded in 1977 by Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell.

An 1983 advertisement for NOAH'S ARK (fig. 2a) tries to nudge parents into allowing their children to play Moppet games:

**NOAH'S ARK™**

NOAH'S ARK™ is a game designed especially for youngsters based on the familiar Biblical theme. The child controls NOAH'S every movement with the 8-way joy stick as NOAH attempts to save as many pairs of animals as possible by directing them on to the Ark before the rising water swallows them up.

The player earns points for each set of animals NOAH saves. The player must save a required number of sets on each level to avoid losing a NOAH. The requirements on each level increase so NOAH must move faster and faster as the game progresses.

The player receives 3 NOAH'S per coin. After saving as many animals as possible on each level, NOAH secures up the ramp and into the Ark. The ramp drops in the water level reaches the Ark, signaling the end of each level of play.

**Dimensions**  
 Height: 48 1/2" x 114 3/4" on wheels  
 Width: 11 3/4" x 44 1/4" on wheels  
 Depth: 29 1/2" x 48 1/2" on wheels  
 Weight: 169 lbs. / 143 lbs. Cased

**ENTER-TECH**  
 Enter-Tech Ltd.  
 1724 W. 4th St., Tempe, AZ 85281  
 (602) 968-8181 / (602) 968-7400 / (800) 528-1909

**MOPPET VIDEO** introduces games just for the 3 to 8 year old. These youngsters represent a key potential for new earnings and image building in the coin amusement industry.

*Mommy, Mommy! They have a video game just for me!!*

**CREATE A KIDDIE VIDEO AREA**  
 Place all four Moppet Videos™ "Pirate Treasure™", "Leprechaun™", "Tug Boat™" and "Desert Race™" together in a special game area for youngsters. Each Moppet Video™ game is geared toward the 3 to 8 year old level of complexity. They are all non-violent themes that the young players can identify with. The games are simple and yet offer rewards for employing skill levels to encourage repeated play. The average young player will enjoy 3 to 5 minutes of entertainment on a Moppet Video™.

**OPEN NEW LOCATIONS**  
 Moppet Video™ games for 3 to 8 year olds offer a way to entertain younger children when their parents are out on appointments or shopping. This gives a selling benefit to many new types of locations such as medical offices, bank lobbies, restaurants or retail stores. Because Moppet Video™ are small, they are more convenient to place in the location. They will generate income from a minimal floor space requirement.

**PROFIT FROM LONGER EARNING LIFE**  
 Moppet Video™ will earn operational income over a long time. They will be comparable to a kiddie ride in earning life because they are not subject to the same "hit and run" as the games for teens and adults.

**BUILD A POSITIVE IMAGE**  
 Parents and their children appreciate the Moppet Video™ games. Moppet Video™ create a positive reinforcement as the young players play these games that are developed to meet their level of complexity as well as size. Remembering the younger children marks a positive image in the community and, therefore, helps to build a better image for your business and the industry.

**Moppet Videos™ are just for You Too.**

To learn more about how these games can work for you, call today!

**ENTER-TECH**  
 Moppet Marketing Ltd.  
 4991 El Camino Real, Suite 217  
 Los Altos, CA 94022  
 (800) 877-7200 (415) 964-0943

**ENTER-TECH**  
 Enter-Tech Ltd.  
 1724 W. 4th Street  
 Tempe, AZ 85281  
 (800) 528-1909 (602) 968-7404

Figs. 2a–b: Two 1983 advertisements, one for NOAH'S ARK specifically (fig. 2a) and one for Moppet Videos more broadly (fig. 2b).

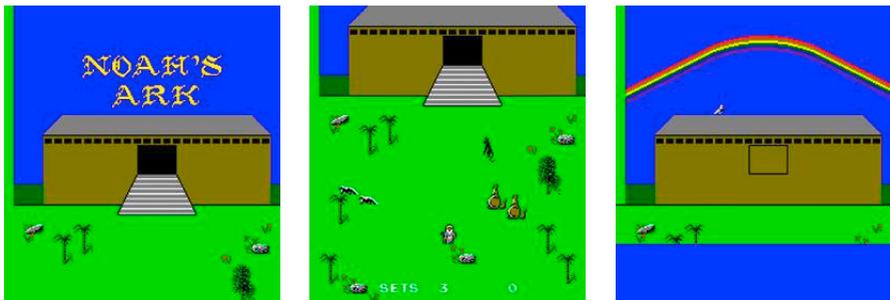
20 Gonzalez 2019.

NOAH'S ARK™ is a game designed especially for youngsters based on the familiar Biblical theme. The child controls NOAH's every movement with the 8-way joy stick as NOAH attempts to save as many pairs of animals as possible by directing them on to the Ark before the rising water swallows them up.

Moppet Video tries to negotiate prejudices against arcade machines and arcades in general by offering child-friendly, and therefore parent-friendly, video entertainment, as another advertisement shows (fig. 2b):

Moppet Video™ introduces games just for the 3 to 8 years old. These youngsters represent key potential for new earnings and image building in the coin amusement industry. [...] They are all non-violent themes that the young players can identify with. The games are simple and yet offer rewards for improving skill levels to encourage repeat play. The averaged young player will enjoy 3 to 5 minutes of entertainment on a Moppet Video™ [...] Remembering the younger children marks a positive image in the community and, therefore, helps to build a better image for your business and the industry.

The game itself is pretty simple (fig. 3a), mainly due to the technological restrictions of the 1980s. The player controls Noah, clothed in a grey robe with a white belt, holding a black staff suggesting a relative high age, and sporting white hair and beard. On the top of each level a crude image of the ark is seen: a brown structure with a grey roof over it. In its side is a black hole that allows the animals to enter the ark via a ramp (fig. 3b). As Noah, the player has to gather pairs of animals and lead them back to the ark:



Figs. 3a–c: Screen shots of Enter-tech's NOAH'S ARK: the title screen (left, fig. 3a), some gameplay (middle, fig. 3b), and the level's end screen (right, fig. 3c).

monkeys, giraffes, elephants, camels, lions, deer, and so forth. Eventually, the waters on the bottom of each level will rise, forcing Noah to retreat to his ark.

If Noah fails to bring enough animals to the ark, the player will lose a life. If Noah succeeds before the water reaches him, the ark closes behind him and the whole level will be flooded. A white dove flies from the ark to the right of the screen, only to return quickly at the left side, holding an olive branch in its beak. As soon as the dove lands on the ark, a rainbow appears over it (fig. 3c). Then, the water retreats, the ark opens, and Noah is tasked with collecting another set of animals in time. When all lives have been depleted, the player can enter his/her/their three initials in the top-scorers list, called “Noah’s friends”.

## NOAH’S ARK by Wisdom Tree

It is surely impossible to draw up a list of Bible games without at least one entry from the Wisdom Tree franchise.<sup>21</sup> The history of the company is bizarre but well-documented.<sup>22</sup> In 1989, American game developer Color Dream succeeded in by-passing Nintendo’s “lock out” chip, by means of which the Japanese company could control the international market for their console: only officially licensed third-party games could be played on the Nintendo Entertainment Set (NES). Color Dreams’ solution was technically impressive, but in practical terms somewhat disappointing, in the sense that its cartridges were known to malfunction randomly and the overall quality of the unlicensed games, such as KING NEPTUNE’S ADVENTURE (1990), PESTERMINATOR (1989), METAL FIGHTER (1991), CRYSTAL MINES (1989), and MENACE BEACH (1990), was suboptimal, to say the least.

In 1991, Color Dream reinvented itself as Wisdom Tree, focussing exclusively on Christianity-related games. This move was partially intended to avoid Nintendo’s wrath: even though the Japanese company had not sued Color Dreams – a claim that would likely have eventually failed – Nintendo forced its retailers into selling only licensed products. Wisdom Tree was a means to wiggle the company’s unlicensed products into a brand new mar-

21 See, for example, Hill 2014; Iannone 2017; Geek History, *The History of Christian Video Games* [show], 18 September 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxsfuhp> [accessed 27 December 2021]; Monastery Studios, *Evolution of Christian Video Games (1982–2021)*, 21 September 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/49tv373b> [accessed 27 December 2021].

22 Durham 2017; Gard/Gard 2017, 10–12; Kent 2001, 399–400.

BC-3  
16315 22001

# Bible Adventures



Be a part of Bible stories as exciting characters come to life. Help Noah bring the animals into the ark before the big storm; pretend you are David battling the giant Goliath; and help save baby Moses from the Pharaoh's overwhelming forces. Assisted by scores of direct quotes from the Bible, your adventures is going to be fun and educational.

**NOAH'S ARK**  
Noah is feverently preparing for the long journey. To complete the quota of animals and food for the ark you must search through multiple worlds of forest, caverns and mountainous terrains. Interesting and unique behaviors challenge you to find a different solution to capture each type of animal.

**SAVE BABY MOSES**  
The Pharaoh's soldiers are out in full force with orders to find and kill baby Moses. You must outsmart their persistent search and rescue Moses. As you progress through each level there are more and more soldiers and obstacles to test your determination and will.

**DAVID AND GOLIATH**  
As a shepherd, young David has to keep and defend his family's flock. After you are successful in rounding up the scattered sheep, you will then face Goliath and his shield bearer. Be bold, for God is with you.

**3 ADVENTURES  
IN  
1 CARTRIDGE**



1999 WISDOM TREE  
Brea, California, U.S.A.

**A GAME THAT EXCITES THE MIND**



9 789901 630004  
SPCN-9-9016-3000-2

## Noah's Ark

**Story**  
God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt. So God asked Noah to make an ark of cypress wood and bring into the ark two of every living thing of all flesh; they shall be male and female. Help Noah gather animals and food for his long journey before the flood arrives.



**Object**  
The idea behind this wonderful adventure is simple. As Noah, it is your duty to make sure the ark is filled with animals and food. The animals have already found their way into the general area of the ark, and now it is time to start gathering. In each level, Noah must complete a checklist of animals which calls for a pair of every unclean animal, and seven pairs of every clean animal. Once the check list is complete, you advance to the next level. After all four levels are completed, a reward screen shows you the flood.

Every level's layout is similar. The ark is in the middle of forest. In the middle of the ark, near the top, is where you'll find the door (look for the flashing arrow). This door is where you want to bring the checklist's requirements of animals and food. When you reach the door, simply press UP to enter the ark.

**Stone Tablets and Strength**  
When you first start the game, Noah's current strength is shown in the upper left of the screen. Every time Noah gets hurt or bumped he loses some of his strength. To replenish his strength, pick up Stone Bible Tablets found scattered among the levels. Each tablet contains either a quotation from the Bible or a game hint. If you pick up enough tablets to make your Strength Status Bar reach five, all additional tablets will be stored in memory, even though you can only see five at a time.

Figs. 4a–c: From left to right: the reverse side of Wisdom Tree's NOAH'S ARK's box (fig. 4a), a page from the game's manual (fig. 4b), and a still from the game's commercial (below right, fig. 4c).



ket: Christian (book) stores. This approach had two advantages: Christian retailers would not sell official games anyway, and legal or public backlash from Nintendo against a Christianity- and Bible-focused publisher would make for very bad publicity.<sup>23</sup> This tactic, motivated by religious and/or commercial motives, resulted in a number of commercial (but univocally unlicensed) releases by Wisdom Tree.

In 1991, Wisdom Tree released one of its first unlicensed NES Bible games, called BIBLE ADVENTURES.<sup>24</sup> It actually consisted of three separate games – a feat that Wisdom Tree would repeat with THE EARLY YEARS OF THE KING OF KINGS (also released in 1991) – namely, NOAH'S ARK, SAVE BABY MOSES, and DAVID AND GOLIATH. On the reverse of the box (fig. 4a), the games are introduced as follows:

23 Gard/Gard 2017, 12.

24 Scullion 2019, 221; Weiss 2011, 56; Steffen 2017, 69.

Be a part of Bible stories as exciting characters come to life. Help Noah bring the animals into the ark before a big storm; pretend you are David battling the giant Goliath; and help save baby Moses from Pharaoh's overwhelming forces. Assisted by scores of direct quotes from the Bible, your adventures is [sic] going to be fun and educational [sic].

Below, the introduction for NOAH'S ARK reads as follows (including some major spelling and grammatical errors):

Noah is feverently preparing for the long journey. To complete the quata of animals and food for the ark you must search through mulitple worlds of foresr, caverns and mountainous terrains. Interesting and unique behaviors challenge you to find a different solution to capture each type of animal.

If one thinks that God is absent from the game, look again. In the accompanying manual (fig. 4b), the game is introduced as follows:

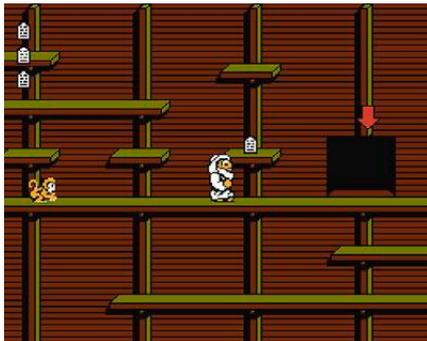
God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt. So God asked Noah to make an ark of cypress wood and bring into the ark two of every living thing of all flesh; they shall be male and female. Help Noah gather animals and food for his long journey before the flood arrives.<sup>25</sup>

For the release of the game, a commercial was created stressing its child-friendly nature (fig. 4c). We see children playing with a Nintendo. Two women, clearly two mothers, discuss their children's game behaviour. The first says, "Do you ever worry that they play too much Nintendo?" To which the other replies, "Oh, not anymore. See, Matt has BIBLE ADVENTURES. They are actually learning Bible stories while they're playing Nintendo." One of the children reacts to his friend, without appearing to be responding to his mother's conversation, "Quick, get that Bible quote!" A voice-over closes the sell: "BIBLE ADVENTURE features three games [...] a must for every family with Nintendo."<sup>26</sup>

The game itself (fig. 5a) revolves around, as the introductions have suggested, Noah being tasked to bring missing animals to the Ark, which is situated

25 See manual at <https://tinyurl.com/rmt46a5t>.

26 Courtesy of Pat the NES Punk, <https://tinyurl.com/496wckxu>.



Figs. 5a–c: Screen shots of Wisdom Tree's NOAH'S ARK: the title screen (left, fig. 5a), gameplay outside the Ark (right, fig. 5b, fig. 5b), and gameplay inside the Ark (below left, fig. 5c).

in the middle of a forest (fig. 5b). During a total of four stages, Noah has to look to the right and left of the Ark to find supplies (bananas, pears, grapes, coconuts, bales of hay, and wheat), and pairs of animals (horses, monkeys, snakes, pigs, oxen, turtles, pandas, raccoons, blue jays, black birds, eagles, toucans, tigers, panthers, lions, leopards, koalas, coyotes, owls, and ducks) to bring them safely inside (fig 5c). Cows are the exception: Noah has to catch not one but seven pairs of them, a reference to the division between “clean” and “unclean” animals in Genesis 7:1–5. The game’s manual confirms this designation: “In each level, Noah must complete a checklist of animals which calls for a pair of every unclean animal, and seven pairs of every clean animal.”

Other animals – very confusing for the uninitiated player, since they are partially the same as the ones the player is trying to catch – try to hinder Noah: those opponents are tree snakes, parrots, swooping eagles, hungry pigs, woodpeckers, and some large cats. The fourth level is severely darkened, lit only by lightning – foretelling the immanent deluge – or by a firefly in a jar Noah can carry (fig. 6a). When all animals have been collected, the



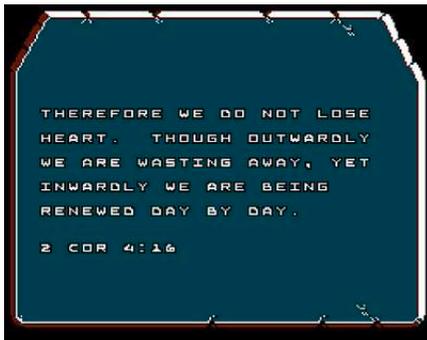
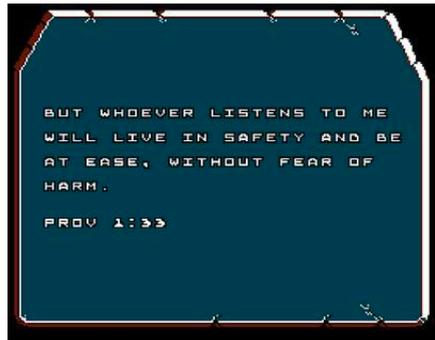
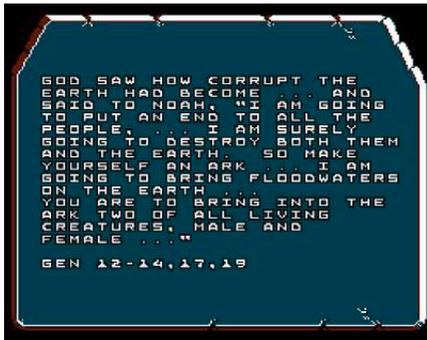
Figs. 6a–c: Screen shots of Wisdom Tree’s NOAH’S ARK: gameplay from level 4 (left, fig. 6a), the end, part one (above right, fig. 6b), and the end, part two (below right, fig. 6c).

rain and floods set in (fig. 6b), only to deposit the Ark on the peak of a mountain (fig. 6c). In contrast to Enter-Tech’s earlier rendering of the story, no doves or rainbows are shown.

After the title screen, the player is provided with a quotation from the New International English translation of Genesis 6:12–14, 17, 19 (although the game omits the chapter number), apparently and suggestively carved into a stone tablet (fig. 7a):

God saw how corrupt the earth had become... and said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all the people, ... I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark... I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth... You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female...”

The idea of the stone tablets also plays a role when Noah is hurt: he loses some of his “strength”, measured in stone tablets (as the manual explicitly



Figs. 7a–c: Screen shots of Wisdom Tree's NOAH'S ARK: introduction of the game quoting Genesis 6:12–14, 17, 19 (left, fig. 7a), and two examples of other inspirational quotations, Proverbs 1:33 (right, fig. 7b), and 2 Corinthians 4:16 (below left, fig. 7c).

identifies). To get strength back, the player has to find other tablets scattered through the world. When picked up, the tablets provide tips (the first couple of times) and inspirational quotes from the Bible (see figs. 7b and 7c as examples). The stone tablets seem to be a reference to the Ten Commandments, which were also carved on stone tablets, to the Mosaic Law (the first five books of the Torah), and/or to the Old Testament in general. This identification has old roots within Christianity; see for example Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:1–18.<sup>27</sup>

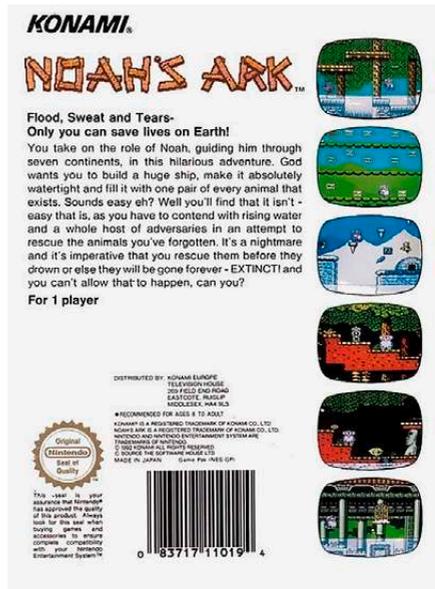
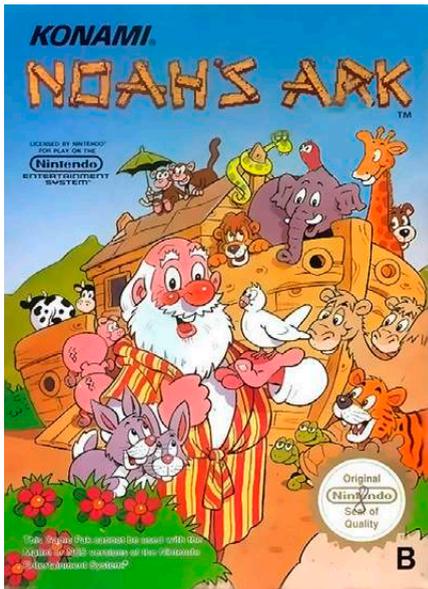
The tablets provide inspirational quotes from Genesis (6:21, 7:2), Proverbs (1:33, 8:18–19, 13:25, and 15:15), Ecclesiastes (3:13), Psalms (147:14, 111:15, and 31:24), Job (5:22), 2 Corinthians (4:16), and Hebrews (10:36). The majority of the quotes proclaim the reward that awaits the righteous, that is, those who stay loyal to the Lord. The evocation of these “faithful” texts in the context of Noah's actions and also the unique communicative property of video games mean that the text-immanent player of the game is bestowed

27 Thielman 2005, 335–336.

with this righteousness: if the (immanent) player acts as Noah did, the player is the righteous one to whom the Bible promises wealth and happiness.

## NOAH'S ARK by Konami

In 1992, the Japan-based game company Konami released NOAH'S ARK for the NES.<sup>28</sup> The game is a one-of-a-kind within the history of gaming. It was only released in Europe (not in Japan or the USA) *and* it was the only explicitly religion-themed, officially licensed NES game.<sup>29</sup> Nintendo has very strict guidelines governing in-game depictions of religious iconography, sex, nudity-



Figs. 8a–c. The front of the box (above left, fig. 8a), the back of the box (above right, fig. 8b) for Konami's NOAH'S ARK, and the title screen (below right, fig. 8c).



28 Scullion 2019, 139.

29 Gard/Gard 2017, chap. 2; Prescott 2021.



Figs. 9a–c: Screen shots of Konami’s NOAH’S ARK: the starts to the North American (left, fig. 9a), Oceanian (right, fig. 9b), and Asian (below left, fig. 9c) levels.

ty, racial stereotypes, controlled substances, profanity, violence, and political incendiary content, especially for its North American products.<sup>30</sup> However, this policy has not been enforced completely, since there are examples of games featuring religious imagery, like, for example, the cross painted on Link’s shield in THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986) and the use of holy water from a bottle with a cross on its lid in CASTLEVANIA (1986) and SIMON’S QUEST (1987).

NOAH’S ARK seems to be a double exception. First, there are references to religion in the game’s name, its obvious source material, and the description on the box’s reverse, which explicitly mentions “God” (figs. 8a–8c):

Flood, sweat and tears – Only you can save lives on Earth! You take on the role of Noah, guiding him through seven continents, in this hilarious adventure. God wants you to build a huge ship, make it absolutely watertight and fill it with one pair of every animal that exists. [...] It’s a

30 Altice 2015, 110; Fahey 2010.



Figs. 10a–c: Screen shots of Konami’s NOAH’S ARK: the two rabbits symbolizing Europe (level 1) are in love (left, fig. 10a), when one of them is killed, in this case by a Roman soldier (above right, fig. 10b), and the other is imprisoned (below right, fig. 10c).

nightmare and it’s imperative that you rescue them before they drown or else they will be gone forever – EXTINCT! and you can’t allow that to happen, can you?

Secondly, there are multiple racial stereotypes within the game itself. For example, the depiction of indigenous peoples from North America, Oceania, and Asia is problematic (figs. 9a–c). Besides the stereotypes, the use of indigenous people trying to stop Noah from fulfilling the commandment of the Lord suggests that they – as heathens – are the enemies of God and are deserving of their untimely death. Noah’s aesthetic on the game’s box is heavily Westernized: he looks like a combination between your favourite grandpa in his pyjamas and an incognito Santa Claus (fig. 8b).

The inclusion of ancient Egyptian and Roman soldiers (fig. 10b), representing Africa and Europe, contributes to this idea, since Egypt and Rome are prime enemies of the Israelites in the Old and New Testaments, at least in Christian reception (although Egypt is also portrayed in the Bible as a



Figs. 11a–c: Screen shots of Konami's Noah's Ark: the "normal" stage boss, a giant plug (left, fig. 11a), Noah's escape with the animal connected to that specific level (right, fig. 11b), and Noah arriving at the Ark (below, fig. 11c).

place of refuge).<sup>31</sup> This kind of stereotyping could lead to antisemitic imagery, as is the case in another Wisdom Tree game, *THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT* (part of the game set *THE EARLY YEARS OF THE KING OF KINGS*, also from 1991), where Joseph, Mary, and Baby Jesus are hindered as they flee from King Herod (Matthew 2:13–23) by – among others – rabbis.

The game is divided into seven continents, each consisting of three levels, making a total of 21 stages to beat. All stages begin with a pair of animals, clearly in love; one is killed by a native of each continent and the other is imprisoned (see, for example, figs. 10a–c). Noah has to mow down countless numbers of hostile animals in order to free the one he needs and evacuate it to the Ark. (What Noah is going to do with only half of each pair of animals to repopulate the earth is a question the game seems to overlook.)

In every stage the water is slowly rising, suggesting an imminent flood, but also hindering the player significantly, since manoeuvring in the water is

31 Green 2010; Beale 2008; Galvin 2011.



Figs. 12a–c: Screen shots of Konami’s NOAH’S ARK: the Inca sun god who is the level 3 end boss (left, fig. 12a), a devilish version of Noah, the level 7 end boss (right above, fig. 12b), and the game’s end screen (below right, fig. 12c).

much harder than on dry land. To add to the sense of imminent danger, the screen moves sideways even if Noah is standing still, forcing the player to keep going, without the possibility of a moment of rest. (The real player can pause the game anytime he/she/they want, but the text-immanent player cannot.)

At the end of every stage, there is a giant animated plug (fig. 11a), which has to be defeated in order to lower the water level and proceed to the next stage. At the end of every third stage, so the end of each level, Noah also has to fight against an end boss. The boss is usually a giant animal (fish, spider, lobster or wasp), but it is also a floating image of an Inca sun god (level 3, fig. 12a), a giant snowman (level 5) and even a giant, demonic version of Noah himself (level 7, fig. 12b).

The idea of the game’s protagonist having to face its negative counterpart is also found in other NES games, as for example at the end of ZELDA II. THE ADVENTURE OF LINK (1987). The level boss has to be fought either in the air (Noah gets wings) or in the water (Noah is changed into a fish). During

Noah's fight with the sun god, if he is touched by it, he loses his wings and thus the ability to fly. While this happens in the whole game – if touched, Noah loses his special ability – this instance evokes a probable reference to the Greek legend of Icarus's deadly flight too close to the sun.

When the level's end boss has been defeated, Noah and the rescued animal in question quickly travel by motorboat (speaking of anachronisms...) over the now rapidly falling water level to the Ark (figs. 11b–c). After defeating the last level boss – the devilish version of Noah – the hero returns to his Ark together with the panda, representing Asia. Then, a last screen is shown (fig. 12c): Noah smiles and waves to the camera, while in the background the Ark is seen in silhouette resting on a mountain top, while a rainbow shines over it. Left of the Ark, a small silhouette of a dove holding an olive branch is seen. The screen congratulates the player with “great!” and a score is shown.

## **SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D by Wisdom Tree**

SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D (SNES and DOS 1994), alternatively SUPER 3D NOAH'S ARK due to the design of the game's cartridge, is a clear conversion of WOLFENSTEIN 3D (id Software, US 1992) (see figs. 13a–c).<sup>32</sup> The story of this perhaps best-known Wisdom Tree game – the only unlicensed game for the SNES ever – starts with the game company's founder, Dan Lawton, and his appreciation of the 1987 supernatural horror film HELLRAISER (Clive Barker, GB 1987).<sup>33</sup>

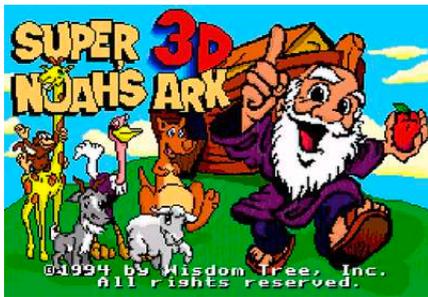
After Lawton saw “kabbalistic implications” in the film, Color Dream acquired both the license for a NES HELLRAISER game for €50,000 and the WOLFENSTEIN source code for an unspecified amount of money. According to a now-debunked Internet myth, id Software handed Wisdom Tree their source code for free because of their supposed anger with Nintendo, which forced id Software to censor the SNES version of their game heavily in order to get the Japanese seal of approval.<sup>34</sup>

The HELLRAISER NES game was never released because Color Dream failed to engineer their “super cart”, with whose help the older console would be able to run far superior games, because id Software published their next

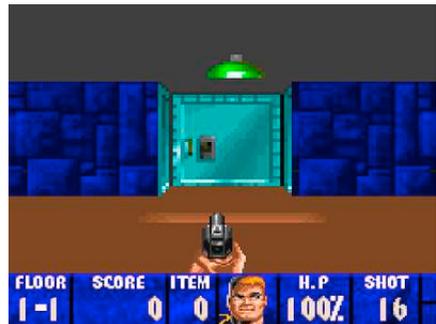
32 Scullion 2020, 187.

33 Nutt 2015; Durham 2017.

34 Matulef 2014.



Figs. 13a–c: Screen shots of SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D's title screen (left, fig. 13a) and beginning of level 1 (right, fig. 13b), which can be compared WOLFENSTEIN 3D (below right, fig. 13c).

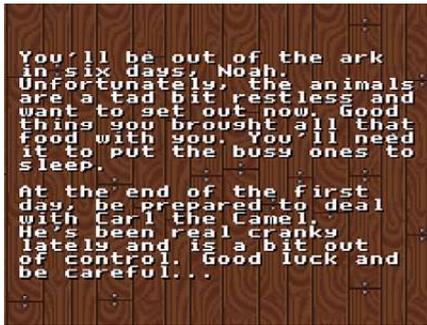


mega hit DOOM (id Software, US 1993), and because the whole HELLRAISER idea would conflict with the company's new family-friendly and Christian image. What Wisdom Tree produced instead was not an original HELLRAISER NES game but a Christian conversion of WOLFENSTEIN 3D for SNES.

At the beginning of the game, the player is briefed (fig. 14a):

You'll be out of the ark in six days, Noah. Unfortunately, the animals are a tad bit restless and want to get out now. Good thing you brought all that food with you. You'll need it to put the busy ones to sleep. At the end of the first day, be prepared to deal with Carl the Camel. He's been real cranky lately and is a bit out of control. Good luck and be careful ...

It is unclear who is talking here to Noah (as a character) and/or the player (as the immanent reader of the game). It could be an anonymous voice-over (as the text-immanent author), nudging Noah and the player into doing what the game wants them to do, or it could be God, who is instructing Noah/the player how to fulfil God's divine commandment. The same idea



Figs. 14a–c: Screen shots of SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D: briefing (left, fig. 14a), putting goats to sleep (right, fig. 14b), and level 1's end boss, Carl the Camel (below left, fig. 14c).

could be found in the case of the stone tablets of Wisdom Tree's NOAH'S ARK. In both instances the game seems to suggest that the player plays the Bible itself, instead of a paraphrase of it.

Noah has to maintain order on board amongst the gradually rampaging animals. Apparently all the animals have lost their marbles, and they run around the maze the ark is made from, trying to kick Noah in the face as soon as they see him. To soothe the animals, Noah shoots fruit to them, which immediately, if inexplicably, puts them in a deep sleep (fig. 14b). The "normal" animals include goats, sheep, antelopes, ostriches, and oxen – of which more than one or even seven pairs are on board apparently – and six larger ones, acting as level bosses: Carl the cranky Camel (fig. 14c), irritable Ginny the Giraffe, Melvin the tricky Monkey, Kerry the Kangaroo, Ernie the Elephant, and finally Burt the Bear. When all have been put to sleep – putting aside the association with euthanasia – the end screen just shows all the bosses in chronological order, without any narrative conclusion.

## Being Noah. An Analysis

Now the four games called NOAH’S ARK have been described, we can compare them (see Table 2). For the sake of convenience, I have divided the comparisons over five categories: the aesthetics of the Ark, the animals aboard the Ark, the threatening and/or repeating nature of the Deluge, the post-Deluge appearance of the rainbow and the dove, and the positioning of God within the games.

Game	Ark	Animals	Deluge		Post Deluge		God
			<i>threatening</i>	<i>repeating</i>	<i>rainbow</i>	<i>dove</i>	
NOAH’S ARK (Enter-Tech)	brown box	African	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
NOAH’S ARK (Wisdom Tree)	wooden boat / interieur	Mixed	no (yes)	no	no	no	yes (quotes)
NOAH’S ARK (Konami)	wooden boat	Mixed	yes	yes/no	yes	yes	yes (box)
SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D (Wisdom Tree)	interieur only	Mixed	no	no	no	no	no

Table 2: Comparison of narrative elements in Enter-Tech’s, Wisdom Tree’s, and Konami’s NOAH’S ARKS and in SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D.

Wisdom Tree’s and Konami’s NOAH’S ARKS both feature a “traditional” Ark, that is, a round ship for the animals with some sort of house on top for the humans. Enter-Tech’s version of the Ark is square, almost like a brown wooden box. Probably as a result of the technical limitations of the Arcade machines, the form of this Ark is more like the “coffin” of the Genesis narrative: “The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the LORD shut him in” (Genesis 7:16).<sup>35</sup> The other games’ Arks look less like coffins and more like cosy ships drawn by children. SUPER NOAH’S ARK does not show the outside of the Ark, only the inside, a feature only the first Wisdom Tree game shares. In both cases the Ark is rather empty, with large wooden walls and pens to place the animals in.

35 Wieringen 2022.

The animals aboard the four Arks are at the centre of the four games, both in terms of gameplay and narrative. In the first three games, the player, as Noah, has to collect animals for the Ark, while in the last one, the animals are already there but have to be tended during the 40-day trip of the Ark. Except for the Enter-Tech game, the animals are from “mixed” origins, that is, they are from different parts of the world. Konami’s version, in particular, deliberately portrays the animals as native to all the continents of the world. Enter-Tech’s NOAH’S ARK is the only one to draw its animals exclusively from the African continent. Only Wisdom Tree’s NOAH’S ARK negotiates the differentiation of clean and unclean animals ludologically. There is one more (narratological) exception, found in later versions of SUPER NOAH’S ARK 3D: the elaborate in-game manual speaks of both categories.

The fixation on the collection of the animals before the Flood and their governance during it, an element left blank by the Bible’s narrator, ties in with the traditional juvenile context of these early video games. In the early days, games were primarily thought of as entertainment or toys for children, as the Moppet Video’s and Wisdom Tree’s commercials aptly testify.

The reasons for this fixation are many: (1) the fact that the Genesis text is silent about these elements allows “others” to fill in the blanks themselves, whether with video games or with physical toys like those of Playmobil or Fisher-Price; (2) the animal scenes in the Noah narrative are highly ludic-adaptable; and (3) these scenes have a certain religion-neutral quality that makes them acceptable for a wide variety of children and parents. One can enjoy Noah’s animal-catching and animal-caring without having to negotiate the religious system they are traditionally a part of.

The Fisher-Price, Playmobile, and Lemax’s toys have no reference to God or any divine reality, which makes them attractive to so many consumers, atheist, agnostics, and theists alike. The Bible games by Wisdom Tree do mention God explicitly. Enter-Tech’s game refrains from doing so, while Konami’s version only mentions God once, and on the box, not inside the actual game.

When it comes to the Deluge, the four games differ from one another in terms of whether they depict the Deluge as an imminent threat and in the uniqueness of the Deluge event. In Enter-Tech’s NOAH’S ARK, the Deluge is both threatening and repeating in the sense that in every level the water levels slowly rise again, putting Noah/the player under time pressure. In Wisdom Tree’s version, the Deluge is a one-time event, only visible as impending in the fourth level of the game, when the world turns ominously dark.

In Konami's NOAH'S ARK, the Deluge is both threatening and repeated throughout the stages and the levels. Noah is constantly hindered by the slowly rising waters in the levels, which can be stopped, even though only temporarily, by battling smaller and larger living plugs and end bosses. After the conclusion of every level, it is flooded: Noah could only postpone the inevitable, and after the last level, the Deluge is complete. In SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D the Deluge is neither threatening or repeating: it is ignored completely.

All four games connect the symbols of the dove-cum-olive and the sign in the sky-cum-rainbow: if you have one, you have the other too. Enter-Tech and Konami feature both in their end screens, while the two by Wisdom Tree lack both. The two games by Wisdom Tree, however, make a very interesting communicative point: both games suggest that God is talking to the player, or in more technical terms, that God is the text-immanent author of the game's narrative.

God's communication becomes especially visible in NOAH'S ARK, through the use of the stone tablets. The "whoever listens to me will live in safety" (Proverbs 1:33) and the "we" that "do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:16) are both applicable to the figure of Noah – who is righteous in God's eyes – and to the (immanent) player of the game, who is called to identify with Noah. Playing the game becomes a way in which the player acts "divinely". The communicative entanglement between the avatar character and the immanent player results in an identification between the blessed and righteous one from the inspirational quotes and the player. Playing the game makes the player righteous.<sup>36</sup>

In SUPER NOAH'S ARK 3D this suggestion is even stronger, since the "voice-over" at the beginning of every level explicitly addresses Noah, and therefore the text-immanent player. Since God is the only one directly addressing Noah in the biblical story about the building and oversight of the Ark, the suggestion is that the text-immanent author of both voice-over and the rest of the game is God too. So, again, if the text-immanent player plays the game as the text-immanent author intends, the player is doing God's will. Ironically, this may be best voiced by Konami's game, where its box tells the player: "only you can save lives on Earth! You take on the role of Noah [...] God wants you to build a huge ship [...] it's imperative that you rescue them."

Perhaps the most interesting result of the analysis of these four Bible games concerns the position of God: his presence is not univocally ac-

36 Bosman 2019, 76–100.

counted for. God is mentioned in NOAH'S ARK (Wisdom Tree) and NOAH'S ARK (Konami), but not in the other two games. And even then, NOAH'S ARK (Wisdom Tree) only mentions God in the form of in-game biblical quotations, while Konami's only speaks about God outside of the game: on the back of the box. None of the games feature God as a visible character.

One could argue that this omission is a result of religious considerations (concerning the monotheistic sensitivity about depicting the supreme being), commercial concerns (hoping to avoid offending anyone with such a depiction), or the more general rise of secularism in Western society in combination with the cultural persistence of the Christian narrative complex, although in deinstitutionalized, non-dogmatic forms. The old stories of the Hebrew Bible (in its Christian reception), including the Noah narrative, are still culturally relevant but, they are usually stripped of any explicit form of or reference to a transcendent reality or entity.

Within the four games, a secularization process seem to be taking place. The biblical story from Genesis about God's wrath killing every living being on the face of the Earth with only a handful of exceptions, the coffin ship in which Noah and his crew have to survive, and God's solemn promise never to do so again stands in sharp contrast to the rather innocent contextualization in the four games (with the possible exception of Konami's game, which features terrible creatures to fight against). Noah-cum-the-player is occupying himself primarily with collecting and caring for the animals (again with Konami's game as an exception).

Paradoxically, the only game maintaining some of the horror of the original story is the only one not produced within a Christian context, while the Christian ones forsake this aspect of the biblical story entirely. In a (post) Christian context, there is a certain effort to take the sting out of the harsher parts of the biblical narrative, especially of the Old Testament, in order to make it more appealing to both modern Christians and their criticasters. Modern Christian missionaries of all forms are sensitive to the occurrence of death and destruction in the Bible, often divinely provoked or inspired, and as a result tend to focus on the more spiritual and pacifist biblical stories.

As a result of the lack of a Christian presence historically and therefore culturally, the Japanese context does not have to negotiate these sensitivities. In a contemporary Western context that is culturally (still) a Christian one, "playing" with the Bible is surrounded by religious taboos, even though this hesitation is rapidly declining in the West because of secularization and deinstitutionalization. Konami's rendering of Noah's story is less constrict-

ed by its source than the Western ones (to say the least), and the Japanese game does not have to sweeten the original's horror.

In line with the aforementioned children's toys by PlayMobil, Fisher-Price, and Lemax, the four video games discussed are clearly marketed towards and designed for either children themselves or their parents, suggesting a suitable and safe entertainment. For the three Christian Bible games (Konami being the exception again), such appropriateness requires the games to be acceptable not only socially but also from a religious point of view. In all cases it is understandable why the producers decided to "go easy" on the darker elements of the Genesis narrative while focussing on the more light-hearted element of collecting and tending animals in a big boat, ready to set sail. In the end, the four games are primarily about playing with Noah's animals.

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# Reviews



Hannah Griese

## Book Review

# Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*

## Contexts and Practices

New York: New York University Press, 2021, 257 pages, ISBN: 9781479804337

Religion can be found anywhere, according to the sociologist of religion Nancy Tatom Ammerman; in every street and at every corner one can encounter everyday religious practices. In her most recent book, *Studying Lived Religion. Contexts and Practices*, the author elaborates how we might identify and research these practices. This introduction to the field of “lived religion” provides the reader with theoretical insights, many examples from around the world and useful suggestions for further studies.

Building on critique of the secularization thesis and a rather narrow sociological understanding of religion, equating it with belief in God, the author claims that religion exists in the contemporary world in various forms and at manifold occasions, naming examples such as religious gatherings and organizations, humanitarian aid and civil protests. In the form of what she terms “spiritual practices”, religion *happens* in everyday life, on both private and public levels. “Lived religious practices” are considered dynamic and creative and turn the focus of research to “normal” people as well as “unofficial” places. Understood as an integral part of societal life, they shift the focus to women and children, poor people and people of color, and to material religion, and urge to re-evaluate the priority of mind over body. In Ammerman’s eyes, however, a one-sided avoidance of matters of belief, doctrine, organizations and elites can produce a drift towards an individualistic approach, which is equally undesirable.

Religious practices, according to Ammerman, are multidimensional, for they embrace spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgement and narrative. Furthermore, practices must always be considered in context, as both personal and social at the same time.

The book is structured in two parts, comprising a total of nine chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. We turn now to the contents of these two parts.

Part I begins with an introduction to practice theory, employing authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Theodore Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz, and Ann Swidler. In this chapter, Ammerman outlines practice as something in between structure and habitus, on the one hand, and in between agency and creativity, on the other hand, and thus concerned with both routine and improvisation.

The author then elaborates on her understanding of “religion”, defining “religious practices” as social practices with a “spiritual” dimension. By “spiritual” she means the inclusion of an alternative sphere, a reality “beyond the ordinary” (p. 20):

This reality is something distinctive but not separate. We can speak of it as “sacralized” or “transcendent” or even “otherworldly”, but it is important not to assume that those characteristics set religious realities utterly apart from everyday life. The consciousness we will be looking for is more both/and than either/or. Religious practice involves consciousness of and acting with multiple layers of reality at once, recognizing the “more than” while not necessarily losing touch with the ordinary. (p. 21)

With this broad definition, Ammerman seeks to enable research into subjects not considered “religion” from an emic perspective. In the end, however, she herself restricts this ambition, stating that she aims mostly at researching practices already understood as religion.

Part II is concerned with the seven key dimensions of lived religion, namely spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, morality and narrative. I will discuss here the chapters on embodiment, morality and narrative as examples.

In chapter 4, on embodiment, Ammerman states the importance of the physical body and all its senses for (religious) practices. Understanding lived religion as “shared *embodied* know-how” (p.75), she advocates that while

not ignoring the mind, we should acknowledge that it cannot be separated from the body. At the same time, for her, the body is deeply social:

Bodies are the site where “nature” and culture meet. Biological systems and processes are at work, to be sure, but they are not just neutral receptors or stimuli from the environment. We actively sense and make sense simultaneously, and that happens in interaction with others, using the categories and filters our culture has provided us. (p. 78)

For Ammerman, bodily practices play an active part in the construction of societies. She then illustrates her argument with various examples of religious practices, showing how physical signs create religious identities. Her examples range from food through clothing, tattoos and acts of healing to matters of gender, race and sexuality.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to the dimension of morality, as every practice is considered to contain some kind of moral judgement, either consciously or unconsciously. According to Ammerman, our actions are guided by deeply internalized intuitions about good and evil, right or wrong. Thus, individuals and groups *understand* which ways to act are better than others or which aims are worthy of pursuit. Morality, then, is situated on various levels, as moral frameworks are being produced in our minds, bodies, emotions and cultures at the same time. The values are not external to practices but contained within them. On the one hand, the moral dimension of lived religion concerns the moral rules of religious communities, but on the other hand, that moral dimension is also more dynamic, for, as research can show, moral implications are performed and morality is lived.

Chapter 9, on narratives, is concerned with communication as an important part of religious practice. Ammerman uses the metaphor of “narrative” to consider this dimension, paying attention to both practices of storytelling and the inherent narrativity of all practices. For the author, practices are shaped by implicit stories. Narratives influence our actions by enabling or constraining them, in what is effectively a shared practical understanding. As little attention has been paid to matters of belief and meaning systems up to this point in the book, Ammerman focuses on this aspect in this chapter. She states,

As we look at the narrative dimension of lived religious practice, the role of beliefs and meanings will come more directly into view. We will see

that people use words and stories to construct the meanings that guide their actions. We will see that they talk about beliefs, and in doing so, they are saying something about who they are and where they belong. (p. 179)

In the conclusion, Ammerman provides methodological suggestions for how to start one's own research, roughly outlining possible methods such as participant observation and interviewing. Above all, the author stresses the importance of hermeneutical reflection, especially on the researcher's standpoint within a study and how it influences its results.

A minor point of criticism relates to the definition of religion and the choice of terminology. Although Ammerman explicitly embraces a wide definition that expands beyond institutional settings, she mostly focusses on such contexts, as her choice of examples throughout the book reflects. It would have been interesting to see her include religious motives, symbols or narratives from other areas of society, for example from politics, economics or the arts. Additionally, the term "spiritual" seems slightly problematic. As Ammerman points out herself, it is a popular emic category widely used, often to distinguish oneself from religion. It is not entirely clear from her explanations why she chose it instead of alternatives such as "transcendent" or "meta-empirical", which may have been less ambiguous. Also, the term "spiritual" implies a connection to the spirit and to belief – a link the author explicitly seeks to avoid.

Overall, *Studying Lived Religion* is a dense, rich and comprehensive introduction to the field of everyday religious practices. The theoretical explanations are accessible but not at the cost of differentiation or complexity, and the various examples make the book a vivid and enjoyable work that will stimulate the reader's own thinking. It will not only motivate researchers, but also facilitate them, above all through the valuable suggestions of further reading. Therefore, I commend the book in particular to students and newcomers to the field; established researchers in this subject area may already be acquainted with most of the theories explained.

# Song Review

## Stromae, “Fils de joie”

Mosaert/Darkroom/Interscope Records, BE 2022

J’suis un fils de pute, comme ils disent	I’m a son of a whore, as they say
Après tout c’qu’elle a fait pour eux	After everything she’s done for them
Pardonne leur bêtise	Forgive them, they’re dumb
Ô chère mère!	Oh, dear mom! <sup>1</sup>

“Fils de joie” (Son of Joy) tells the story of a disappeared sex worker from a variety of perspectives. The themes of “Fils de joie” make it one of the more socially critical and emotional songs that the Belgian singer and artist Stromae – whose actual name is Paul van Haver – presents in his third and most recent album, *Multitude* (2022). “Fils de joie” is the third single on the album and blends perfectly within a very diverse mix of tracks, which allows hearers to lose themselves in a wide range of moods while listening. The song features a mixture of baroque sounds and melodies – Stromae says he was mainly inspired by a teaser for the Netflix show *BRIDGERTON* (US 2020–) – as well as rhythms of Brazilian funk music.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the album stands out for its thoughtful and harmonious composition of different musical styles. It thus serves as a testament to Stromae’s indisputable sensitivity in bringing together different musical elements, as he also exhibited in his previous albums *Cheese* (2010) and *Racine carrée* (2013). Other topics addressed in *Multitude* include depression and suicidal thoughts, as in the slow and melancholic song “L’enfer” (The Hell). However, he also sings about the positive

- 1 The lyrics, as well as the translation given here, are available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvb3bcdd>; <https://tinyurl.com/2fuv8juv> [accessed 7 June 2023].
- 2 *BRIDGERTON* is a Netflix series about the life of a fictive noble family in early nineteenth-century England. <https://tinyurl.com/bddhd9yh> [accessed 7 June 2023].

things in life, such as becoming a parent in “C’est que du bonheur” (It’s Nothing but Happiness).

The following review focuses on the lyrics of “Fils de joie” and on the music video, which was released a few days after the album. Lyrics and video highlight the opposing sides of the missing sex worker’s life. While the lyrics focus on the people who were part of her life – in a negative or positive way – the video shows her funeral, giving away the end of the story by revealing that she has died.

The song lyrics begin by describing what it is to be lonely: “being alone is not easy”.<sup>3</sup> As we continue to listen, it turns out that the protagonist of the first verse is a client of the sex worker. He defends himself for seeking her services: “I’m not against a little tenderness from time to time”,<sup>4</sup> but at the same time he exposes his power over her, showing that his money allows him to treat her as badly as he wants: “Maybe this time around we can do it with me insulting her. Yeah, everything is negotiable in life, if you got the money.”<sup>5</sup> In the following chorus the sex worker’s son vehemently defends his mother, calling her a heroine:

Mais OH!	But HEY! (But HEY!)
Laissez donc ma maman	Leave my mom alone
Oui je sais. C’est vrai qu’elle n’est pas parfaite	Yes, I know, she’s not perfect, it’s true
C’est un héros	She’s a hero (Hero)
Et ce sera toujours fièremment que j’en parlerai	And I will always speak of her with pride
Que j’en parlerai	I’ll speak of her with pride

The second verse contains the viewpoint of a pimp. It becomes clear that he does not see his position as problematic in any way; he is, after all, ensuring the well-being of the women: “I’m the one feeding them.”<sup>6</sup> He claims that what he does is not illegal, because the women receive money for their work. Further on, he tries to justify his exploitation of the sex workers by

3 “Être seul c’est difficile.”

4 “C’est vrai, j’suis pas contre un peu d’tendresse de temps en temps.”

5 “Et puis cette fois-ci, ben, j’pourrais l’faire en l’insultant. Oui tout est négociable dans la vie, moyennant paiement.”

6 “Alors qu’c’est moi qui les nourrit.”

arguing that they are “hookers” and not models: “They say I’m guilty of human trafficking. But 50, 40, 30 or 20% is not nothing. They better not delude themselves and think they’re models. Ladies – or should I say: hookers!”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in the third verse, the opinion of a police officer is made known. At first, he concedes that he and the sex worker are both just doing their jobs. However, this assessment is followed by a devaluation of her work, for he claims that at least he has paid his taxes. Furthermore, he humiliates the sex worker by denouncing her work as undignified: “Take back your ID and what’s left of your dignity. You’re pathetic, pfft. Find yourself a real job!”<sup>8</sup> Between the verses, as well as at the end of the song, the chorus plays. Its second part, especially towards the end, makes a clear statement:

J’suis un fils de pute, comme ils dissent	I’m a son of a whore, as they say
Après tout c’qu’elle a fait pour eux	After everything she’s done for them
Pardonne leur bêtise	Forgive them, they’re dumb
Ô chère mère!	Oh, dear mom!
Ils te déshumanisent	They dehumanize you
C’est plus facile	It’s easier for them
Les mêmes te courtisent	But they also court you
Et tout l’monde ferme les yeux	And everybody looks the other way

Stromae clearly portrays here the injustice of a sex worker’s circumstances: although as a mother and worker she is an important part of society, she is judged, dehumanized, and degraded because of the type of work she does. The double standard the artist highlights is that while society accepts and even benefits from the services of sex workers, they receive no support or protection and continue to face guilt and shame. The problems and dangers inherent to sex work are being ignored, while the responsibility is placed entirely on those offering sex. Because she is missing/dead, her son, now tied up in her affairs, is bound to experience the same discrimination, and he fiercely defends his mother with all his heart.

The music video breaks with the portrayal of this unjust discrimination by showing a fictional world in which the sex worker receives the respect

7 “On m’accuse de faire de la traite d’êtres humains. Mais 50, 40, 30 ou 20%, c’est déjà bien. Faudrait pas qu’elles se prennent un peu trop pour des mannequins. Mesdames, ou devrais-je dire putains!”

8 “Reprends tes papiers et c’qu’il te reste de dignité. Pauvre femme, pffff. Trouve-toi un vrai métier!”



Fig. 1: Stromae, as the president, is holding a speech in front of other authorities. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:01:44.

she deserves in a national tribute. At the same time, the scene of a pomp-filled funeral highlights the dangers of life as a sex worker. In just under four minutes, Stromae delivers a remarkable variety of imagery with “Fils de joie”. At the center of the video is the sex worker’s son, embodied by Stromae himself. He acts as the president of a fictitious state, delivering a eulogy to his mother. The ceremony contains numerous elements that are well-known to the viewer from great political or religious rituals. Important authorities from different countries are shown behind a grieving Stromae, different military troops perform an impressive choreography, and a column of black cars and motorcycles with mourning guests makes its way to the monumental location where the national tribute is to take place. And, of course, not to be missed from a ceremony of this kind: a grieving audience.

The burial ceremony is staged at the Parc du Cinquantenaire in Brussels, Belgium, which has been digitally edited to make it look even more monumental and to add a fictional character. Among other things, an immense sculpture of two women holding a torch has been added. One of the highlights of the video is the moment a group of women appear. They approach the coffin and slowly carry it towards the sculpture, dancing all the while. What makes them stand out is their clothing: while wearing black, as expected at a funeral, they are not dressed as decorously as the others in attendance. The dancing women wear short dresses, lingerie, and lace

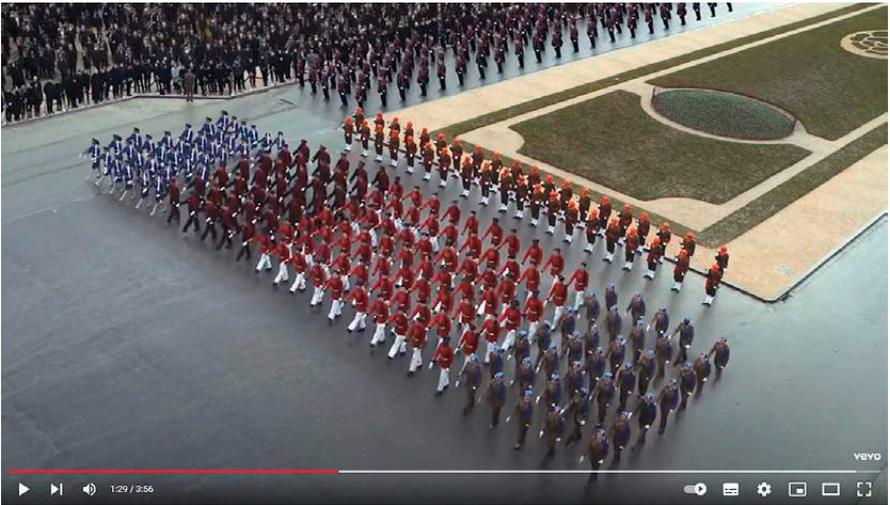


Fig 2: Different military troops doing a choreography. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:01:29.

stockings. These women are not just attending the funeral to grieve or to be part of a “show”. They are sex workers who are having to bury one of their colleagues, knowing all too well how much injustice this life brings with it. At the end, the coffin is covered with the fictional country’s national flag to



Fig 3: The group of sex workers carrying the coffin of her colleague. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:03:01.



Fig. 4: The coffin is brought to the monument and covered with the national flag. Music video still, Stromae, FILS DE JOIE (Official Video, Mosaert/Spotify, BE 2022), 00:03:29.

pay last respects to the sex worker. The ceremony and the video close with military planes flying over the memorial.

The staging of this great national tribute reminds us of other religious and political spectacles that are broadcast in the media, such as the funeral of a queen. Stromae takes this image and adapts it for a tribute to a profession that in his eyes deserves this level of attention and respect. An extravagant funeral service like this is usually only granted to people who rank highly in the hierarchy of our society. In “Fils de joie” the artist criticizes this unfair distribution of respect by underlining the discrimination that sex workers face, as do other people who work in professions that are not deemed socially acceptable. He also illustrates the normalization of dehumanizing living conditions faced by people in these professions. Stromae stated in an interview, “I wanted to take everyone’s point of view since everyone has an opinion on her, but unfortunately we don’t often ask her for hers.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, “Fils de joie” can also be seen as a spark of hope: in a fictional country, a fictional state, sometime in the future, sex workers may receive the kind of respect they deserve without being dehumanized, judged, or harmed.

9 Zemler, 2022.

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## Film Review

# AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER (James Cameron, US 2022)

For more than 10 years, fans and critics waited for the sequel to AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009) to be released. In 2009 James Cameron had produced the most successful film of all time, not least thanks to his use of the latest 3D technology and special effects.<sup>1</sup> The sequel, AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER (James Cameron, US 2022), was awaited with great excitement, but also with some apprehension.

The second part of the series begins 10 years after the events of AVATAR. Jack Sully, who was transformed from a human into a Pandora inhabitant after the first film, lives as a leader of the indigenous tribe of the Omatikaya in the forests of Pandora, a moon in the Alpha Centauri system. Sully raises a family with his wife, Neytiri, and lives according to Na'vi ideas and customs in a peaceful and harmonious coexistence with the animals and plants of the ecosystem on Pandora.

The film presents an idealised view of family embedded in a world view that is characterised by the symbiotic coexistence of bluish humanoids and their environment. The cinematic dramaturgy begins with the return of humans to Pandora. They intend to colonise the moon with settlers from earth, but merely their arrival causes devastation and destruction of flora and fauna. Sully becomes the leader of the resistance against the human colonial powers until his own family is targeted by the occupiers. Driven by a desire for revenge on Sully and his family, the deceased mercenary Miles Quaritch returns to Pandora with his team as a transformed Avatar. Unlike in the first film in the Avatar series, the digitised human consciousness is transferred to the avatar body rather than linking the human body to the avatar. Sully and his family leave their friends and family and flee to the seashores of Pandora. There they find protection with the Metkayinaers,

1 Kirsner 2012, 169–179.

another tribe of the Na'vi, who have adapted to the conditions of the sea and live in symbiosis with the animals and plants there. The Sully family must now adjust to the local living conditions and traditions. The film represents a differentiated confrontation between Sully's children and the young Metkayinaers, in which social roles are negotiated. As newcomers to the peer group, the Sully children must establish their position among the humanoid sea creatures. The vengeful Quaritch finds the Sully family in the remote settlements on the beaches of Pandora. The climax of the film is the battle between Jack Sully and Quaritch on a ship used to hunt Pandora's whales.

The main narrative of the film is a classic showdown between good and evil, between Jack Sully as the now-indigenous resident of Pandora and Quaritch as the diabolical representative of humanity. The motif of this dualistic struggle frames the various narratives and developments for the individual actors in the Sully family. A tense relationship is staged between Jack Sully and his two sons. In essence, one's role in one's own family and peer group is portrayed as a negotiation of identity that is characterised by concurrent closeness and distance to family members. This transitory process entails loneliness and loss, first romantic attractions and the children's longing for unconditional recognition by their father. These patterns are experienced by Sully's adopted children, Spider and Kiri. The human orphan Spider is confronted with the transformed father figure Quaritch and experiences the enmity between his two father figures as an emotional conflict. Kiri, the virgin-born daughter of the avatar of Dr Grace Augustine experiences herself as abnormal because of her special connection to Eywa, Pandora's neural consciousness. Her perception of Eywa and the associated abilities are pathologised as an illness within the film. Kiri feels alien in the Na'vi community and becomes an outsider. She is also the protector of Jack Sully's youngest daughter. At the climax of the film, her special bond with Eywa saves her parents, while the family's eldest son is mortally wounded.

AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER reiterates classic motifs from science fiction. The figure of Quaritch, transformed and returned as an avatar, can be understood as a reference to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein motif, modified here with the digitising of human consciousness and its transfer into a new body.<sup>2</sup> The depiction of the water world in AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER is

2 For this motif see, for example, TRANSCENDENCE (Wally Pfister, US 2014).

clearly reminiscent of Jules Verne's novel *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1871).<sup>3</sup> Scientific and technical explanations, a typical stylistic device, are also used in the interpretation of Kiri's conscious experiences and discussed as part of a deterministic perspective. Another motif from science fiction can be found in the utopian city of the future, which in *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* represents the starting point for the colonisation of Pandora.<sup>4</sup> Also typical of science fiction is the positive humanisation of the extraterrestrial actors, while humanity itself is staged as a capitalist destroyer.

The adaption of religious symbols in *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* is interesting. As in Cameron's first *Avatar* film, the central element in the second *Avatar* movie is the connection between the indigenous inhabitants of Pandora and Eywa, the divine pantheistic consciousness of the moon. The physical connection with the consciousness of the plants and animals of Pandora is diegetically embedded in rituals and traditions in the film. The birth and death of the Na'vi in particular are staged through prayers and specific practices. In the encounter of the Sullys with the sea people of the Na'vi, cultural characteristics of these practices become apparent. *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* specifically stages culturally distinctive religious practices. It is intriguing that these practices are associated with the visible potency and connection with Eywa. Here the film establishes a broad spectrum of theological reflection on the relationship between rituals, tradition and the visibility of divine work.

On the narrative level, *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* adapts concepts from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The relationship between Jake Sully and his sons contains references to the story of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. The brothers' struggle for recognition by their father alludes to the story of Jacob and Esau and at the same time resembles the parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of Luke in the Christian Bible. Most striking is the messianic staging of Kiri. The virgin birth and the connection to Eywa allude to biblical stories about the figure of Jesus. On the visual level, Kiri's special connection with all creatures of Pandora is emphasised. Unsurprisingly, Kiri ends up being the saviour of her parents and siblings, and she seems very likely to play a key role in the planned sequels.

*AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* reflects on contemporary issues associated with the climate crisis. From a political perspective, the film criticises the

3 For a historical classification of the motifs and forms of staging of science fiction see Spiegel 2007, 71–100.

4 See *METROPOLIS* (Fritz Lang, DE 1925/26).

social dominance of capitalist systems and attitudes. With few exceptions, humanity is portrayed as a colonising and destructive species, while the inhabitants of Pandora have the protection of life and preservation of nature in mind. The Na'vi's visual appearance resembles demons, while their actions are marked by empathy and compassion for all living beings. The "heavenly people" appear technically more advanced but actually represent, through their will to destroy, a morally decayed society. From this perspective, the collision of ethical ideas in dealing with Pandora's creation is staged as referencing current debates about the climate crisis.

The use of the latest special effects and staging techniques makes AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER aesthetically convincing. Even if the film has a complex interweaving of different storylines, these often reiterate stereotypical images of family and simplified depictions of a dualistic conflict between good and evil. Even if AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER suggests a strong identification with the Na'vi as the real human actors, it romanticizes indigenous society. This romanticization recapitulates a problematic colonialist view that is closely linked to the history of science fiction.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual challenge of the film lies less in its fundamental understanding than in keeping a reflective distance from its greatly simplified images. And so we are curious to see how the story continues in the third film in the series, which has already been announced.

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5 See Rieder 2008.

## Dance and Video Review

# Jonas Mekas, Virginie Marchand and Kazuo Ohno

Yukihiko Yoshida met Virginie Marchand and the filmmaker Jonas Mekas at the club SuperDeluxe in Roppongi, Tokyo, Japan, on 24 October 2006, at a viewing of Virginie Marchand's Video Installation and Dance Performance in Tribute to Kazuo Ohno, filmed by Jonas Mekas and Zoltan Hauville.

Kazuo Ohno (1906–2010) was a legendary dancer who created Butoh, a form of Japanese dance theater, with Tatsumi Hijikata. His most famous works include “La Argentina”, “My Mother”, “Dead Sea”, and “Water Lilies”. His continuing vigor even as he grew older was astonishing. When Ohno was aged between 99 and 101, Virginie Marchand visited the Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute six times to dance with him. Marchand, an up-and-coming poet and filmmaker, danced and sometimes also recorded the dances with Ohno. She seeks to depict in a very personal way the layers of the human spirit in different parts of the world. Her works use a language without rules; she is not a follower of other artists or of history. She has screened some of her movies at the Anthology Film Archives in New York City, a non-profit organization that aims to preserve, store, and screen experimental films, and in a number of art galleries, and she shows extracts from them on Instagram and YouTube. Her reading of the avant-garde writer and director Antonin Artaud influences her work, which includes *BROOKLYN SALVADOR* (FR/US/SV 2011), *ECUADOR DECEMBER* (2014), *EPILEPTIC OPERA BUTOH* (2022), and *FOUR ROADS TO THE LIGHT KAZUO OHNO TRILOGY* (2020).

Marchand grew up in Japan and moved to France at the age of six. There she stopped speaking Japanese and started dancing. A friend who was a cameraman and had worked in Japan later told Marchand her dance looked like Butoh, although she knew nothing of the dance form at the time. She learned about Butoh, and Kazuo Ohno, later, through Mekas, and felt a desire to study the style.

Fig. 1: Virginie Marchand dancing with a tree, Brooklyn, Jonas Mekas's house. Image from OPERA EPILEPTIC BUTOH, 2022. © Virginie Marchand



Marchand met Mekas in Paris in 2004. They shared a passion for film, poetry, and nature. An immigrant poet, Mekas made full use of the non-verbal expression of video. Marchand has in turn used poetry in creating her videos. Mekas, who started to film with a Bolex camera to show the energy in the trees, told her that trees represented the symbolic roots he lacked, and she felt the same way. Marchand gave to Mekas half of a piece of tree bark that she always carried with her. Mekas and Marchand would later make a video in which she dances with the trees in a park in the hours from before sunrise to noon.

Marchand had been instructed in video at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris before she met Mekas. Working with Mekas, living movie history himself, built naturally on what she had learned. They were business partners until 2008, living in the same house in Brooklyn for a few years (fig. 1). They kept in contact to screen the projects they had made together, and Mekas continued to advise Marchand on her film projects until the final years of his life.

Their collaboration was introduced in Japan in the February 2006 Japanese issue of *Esquire* magazine, in a special feature entitled “Quality of Romance Movies”. It was also portrayed in magazines in the United States and Canada. Mekas’s video journal *365 DAYS PROJECT* (2007) includes Marchand for 5 August.

Mekas had deep insight into movies, literature, and art. As a resident of New York, he experienced an era of rich dance culture in that city. Fred Astaire, known for musical masterpieces such as *TOP HAT* (Mark Sandrich, US 1935), danced with him. In the documentary film *IMAGINE* (US 1972) by

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Mekas appears in a scene with Astaire, Ono, Lennon, and George Harrison. Drawing on his theater experience as a young man, Mekas did not rehearse. In *A Dance with Fred Astaire* (2017), he recalled with humor that this was his first, last, and best performance in his career as a dancer.

Mekas loved New York artists, who were a source of his poetic footage. As others have pointed out, Mekas read *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854) by the American poet Henry David Thoreau from a young age. A new momentum arose with the sound of revolution and independence sung by Lithuania and the Baltic States in 1990. *Letters from Nowhere* (1994/95) contains a theory of civilization by Mekas, who was born the child of a peasant. He wrote of the world as a large farm and of living in earth and nature; he valued not only new thoughts but also ancient wisdom. In addition to his love for nature, trees, and peasants, Mekas often said that he trusted in his “angels” and encouraged everyone to trust in their own angels in turn.

Mekas, Marchand, and cinematographer Zoltan Hauville shot the footage of Marchand dancing with Ohno, who was confined to a wheelchair in his last years. They had been invited to Ohno’s 99th and 100th birthday celebrations. Ohno, who had Alzheimer’s disease, struggled to communicate with those around him. However, the video records that when Marchand faced the artist and moved to lead, Ohno sometimes reacted by moving his hands in a clearly intentional manner. Marchand has stated that she was surprised and moved by Ohno’s reaction. When she lacked focus, Ohno stopped the dance until she found it again. Marchand felt the light beyond Ohno’s expression and existence.

Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute members thought that Mekas, his reputation already secure, could not be considered avant-garde. But Mekas responded by noting that the avant-garde is always criticised. The video of Ohno was made without worrying about what it might represent; Mekas simply asked the Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute to watch the video when it was released. When the movie came out, the conservative institute was concerned, for as Butoh had spread in Japan and become internationally recognized, the definition of the dance form had become rigid. But the dance form was created more than 50 years ago, and there is space today for reconsideration and innovation.

In the dance scenes where Marchand actively interacts with Ohno, their movements form a continuous flow (figs. 2 and 3). Mekas wrote of the dance between Marchand and Ohno as a dialogue about love and of the movie itself as a song sung by one poet to another poet. The film director Martin Scorsese

Fig. 2: Virginie Marchand dances with Kazuo Ohno, 2008. © Virginie Marchand



Fig. 3: Kazuo Ohno and Virginie Marchand with claw, 2008. © Virginie Marchand



wrote to Marchand praising the film and its editing. Even though the event now lies somewhat in the past, many dancers and those connected to video-making and video-showing still wish to use Marchand's footage or ask her to perform.

Footage of Butoh has been around for a long time. The work of filmmaker Takahiko Imura (1937–2022), a friend of Mezas, is known to the Japanese, but overseas film directors also recorded Butoh, for example in *THE WRITTEN FACE* (Daniel Schmid, CH/JP 1995). Well-known filmings include those of Peter Sempel, who worked with Kazuo Ohno and produced not only documentary footage of Butoh but also depictions of Mezas. Koshiro Otsu also recorded Ohno. Otsu teamed up with Shinsuke Ogawa and Noriaki Tsuchimoto and is very well acquainted with documentary history. He noted the importance

of location in *THE SCENE OF THE SOUL* (Katsumi Hirano, JP 1991). He directed *KAZUO OHNO BUTOH DANCER* (JP 2007), which was shot not on film but on video, and edited the dance without scissors. Donald Richie, director of works such as *GISEI (HUMAN SACRIFICE)*, (JP 1959), who filmed the performing arts of that era, including artists such as Tatsumi Hijikata, stated that in the film *Butoh* is a pure dance.

When the movie of Marchand was screened at the Anthology Film Archives, Mekas wrote on Facebook: “I urge you not to miss this film because Kazuo Ohno was one of the great dancers of the XXth Century. Even at 99 and 101, against everything that seems to go against it, he dances. He dances as a manifesto, as a testimonial that art, via *Butoh* dance, has a dominion over the old age.”<sup>1</sup>

The movie shot by Mekas, Hauville and Marchand, and directed by Marchand, is similar to Jonas Mekas’s vision in his personal work, but it was shot using more modern equipment than the Bolex camera. Marchand’s editing is dynamic, portraying a dismantled dance work that is reminiscent of Artaud and of the external gaze. The senses of both performers are perfectly synchronized. This progressive work has a profound message based on the distinctive personality of Kazuo Ohno in the footage.

The focus on the thrill of dancing and on the great existence of Kazuo Ohno in his final years draws a line between the person taking the picture and its subject. However, in Marchand’s work, the focus is not always on the beautiful aspects of her subject. In addition, it does not create a strong distinction between photographer and subject. The distance between them is close to zero, so to speak, for the photographer is integrated with the subject. This feature is also found in the work of Mekas and Imura, who photographed *Butoh* even as they participated, using hand-held video cameras. Marchand films as she dances, her eyes closed, for she believes that the authenticity needed to dance *Butoh* will drive her hand and provide perfect footage without her needing to watch through the camera lens.

Although it is a three-part movie, each part can be understood as a cohesive work. It begins with a video of Kazuo Ohno at the age of 99, shot in 2005 during his birthday celebration and in the days afterwards. Ohno is on a chair or in a bed, and Marchand dances with him. She has stated that she felt a strong light from the great dancer. Ohno bears a simple and expansive expression. Seeing the great artist celebrate his birthday with his

1 Jonas Mekas, Facebook post, 25 October 2014.

son, Yoshito Ohno, who dances with roses, is beautiful and moving. Eventually the scenery is of India. Marchand travels and films the vast land while remembering the recent memory of Ohno. People from this country also appear, along with the claw of a Himalayan bear. Back in Japan, she dances with the claw and with Kazuo Ohno, who has reached the age of 100. A bear is part of the dance of Kazuo Ohno, a performer of Butoh from Hokkaido, but Marchand appears to have found the bear in her own work process. The film culminates in her performance in New York.

Alongside works such as *REMINISCENCES OF A JOURNEY TO LITHUANIA* (Jonas Mekas, UK/DE 1972), Mekas has used textual messages and mysterious sounds, often in video diaries, to launch new meanings that go beyond the immediate content of the video. He has used this video-diary style to produce works about Fluxus members, for example, or about New York theater or dancers. In this work, however, the live feeling of the location is strongly emphasized.

Ohno taught at Kanto Gakuin University and Soshin Jogakuin. He was influenced by the Christian teacher Yu Sakata and was baptized as a Christian himself. Many of his works, such as “The Dead Sea”, are evidently influenced by Christianity. Marchand has stated that the light from Ohno that is seen in this video can be thought of as the light of God. Jonas Mekas said that when he passed away he would simply return to the Light. That Light can also be thought of as God. In the video, in his last years Kazuo Ohno dances toward the Light and at the same time shows his own brilliance before returning to the Light.

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## **Escaping the Moment**

### **Time Travel as a Negotiation of Transcendence**

Time travel is transcendent per se, as it goes beyond physical boundaries and exceeds what is empirically observable. However, the idea of traveling through time is possible as a thought experiment in different media representations. Time travel represents a significant theme in the fantasy and science fiction genre. For example, in films, adapted everyday objects (such as cars) may serve as time machines and enable encounters with the future. In novels, protagonists intervene in their own past and cause chaos. In computer games, people experience adventures by virtually diving into other eras. Thus, time travel is a central motif in popular culture that is dealt with in various media and several forms. Different media encourage us to think about our own temporal boundaries and conceptualizations of time according to their respective logic. The motif of time travel connects trust in technology with normative guidelines and processes of identity formation. Power over time is also associated with power over bodies and spaces, and with ideas about right and wrong as well as good and evil. In this respect, time travel is a mirror of cultural desires and expectations.

In this issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, we will reflect on different media representations of time travel and their connection to transcendence.

We invite authors to focus in their contributions on questions such as:

- How is time travel represented in media?
- What concept of time underlies time travel?
- How are time and space interconnected?
- How are the different eras and places that are visited during travel through time represented?

- What role do bodies, memory, and artefacts (such as machines) play in the concept of time travel?
- Who are the protagonists of time travel (people, machines, rituals, places...)?
- What concept of society does time travel imply?
- How does a trip through time change worlds, ideas, and persons?
- How is the time travel motif connected to norms and values?
- What identity processes are thereby formed?

We invite scholars from a range of relevant fields, such as literature, film and media studies, theology, and the study of religion, as well as of sociology or political sciences, 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 10 February 2024. The publication is scheduled for November 2024. Contributions of 5,000 to 6,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal website at [www.jrfm.eu](http://www.jrfm.eu). We kindly ask authors to register and to follow the instructions for submitting contributions, especially the style guide. For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Verena Marie Eberhardt ([verena.eberhardt@lmu.de](mailto:verena.eberhardt@lmu.de)) and Anna-Katharina Höpflinger ([a.hoepflinger@lmu.de](mailto:a.hoepflinger@lmu.de)).