

# 2022 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND FILM

VISIONS OF A BETTER WORLD:  
FILM AND THE POLITICS OF  
LIVED RELIGION

AMSTERDAM, JUNE 8-10 2022



VRIJE  
UNIVERSITEIT  
AMSTERDAM

Faculty of Religion  
and Theology



## Welcome to Amsterdam

As aspiring film buff and dean of the Faculty of Religion and Theology, I am excited about the opportunity to host such a wonderful group of likeminded scholars.

When people ask me which movie has had the most impact on my life, I am always in doubt what to answer. Should I mention some highbrow arthouse title from Scandinavia or Japan, preferably unknown to most, to show my connoisseurship? Or should I go for Disney or Die Hard to position myself as fully in touch with the common viewer? My doubt, in fact, also stems from the fact that I like both. I enjoy the smart ways in which Hollywood captivates me as a viewer and navigates the cultural conflicts and contested values in our societies. But I can also be inspired by the poetic or even dark movies that leave me wondering what I have been watching. But then again, I am equally interested in the obscure phenomena of fringe spirituality as I am in the institutionalized shapes of mainstream religion.

This conference invites to explore the commonalities and interactions of these fascinating realms of religion and film. Both are about storytelling, exploring fundamental

values, mediating a sense of what is sacred to people. Both present us with a vision of the world *as is*, and the world *as if*. Both allow us to see ourselves through the mirror of the embodied story we see before us. Both can be comforting, unsettling, appealing, and so much more. Both can change us or bolster our identity. So just as religion can help us to understand how film works and impacts us, film can help us understand religion.

I hope this conference will foster our explorations of the many competing visions of a better world. And I hope that you will enjoy it to the max!

### **Ruard Ganzevoort**

Dean, Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam



## Practical information

Most information regarding travelling, public transport, restaurants, money exchange, COVID-19 etc. can be found on the conference's website:

<https://vu.nl/en/events/2022/2022-international-conference-on-religion-and-film>

### Assistance

Throughout the conference, members of the organizing team will be present at the registration table (see the section 'The conference's venue' below) to assist you. A moderator and a student attend each session to assist with the presentation and the technical equipment.

VU hosts are present in every university building, dressed in burgundy colored outfits. They can help you to find your way around the buildings and on campus.

For **urgent matters**, the organizing team can always be reached at:

**+31 (0)6 50 22 20 94** (Johan Roeland)

**+31 (0)6 29 06 29 80** (Miranda van Holland)

### Wi-fi

Wi-fi will be available free of charge throughout the conference venue. You will find a small card with the network name and a password in your gift bag.

### Technical equipment

All conference rooms have a desktop (with internet connection and PowerPoint) and video- and audio equipment. If needed, you can connect your own laptop by using a HDMI-cable which is also available. If you prefer to connect an Apple device, please bring your own adapter.

### Interfaith Prayer and Reflection Room

There is an interfaith prayer and reflection room available at the Main Building, A-wing, first floor. Ask the host at the main entrance of the building for directions.

### Social Media

We strongly encourage you to do some live coverage of the conference and to start and join the conversation on Twitter by using the hashtag #visionsofabetterworld.

### Lost property

Have you lost something? The Security Desk can help you. See: <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/lost-property>

### Meals and snacks

As indicated in the program, refreshments are provided at certain times: coffee, tea, water, and snacks. There are a number of options to buy snacks and beverages at the campus: the coffee corner and Bar Boele in the NU-building, and the Spar supermarket at the campus square. Bar Boele also serves lunch and dinner. Other lunch and dinner options at the campus are Restaurant Foodplaza in the Main Building and The Basket at the campus square. There are many restaurants on walking distance, especially at the Zuidas.

### Smoking policy

It is prohibited to smoke anywhere on the campus.

## Banking facilities

The nearest ATM can be found near to the entrance of the university's medical center, the VUMC hospital (De Boelelaan 1117). There are a number of ATMs at the nearby train station Amsterdam Zuid.

## Bookstore

There is a bookstore on the ground floor of the Main Building with a wide range of books in English and souvenirs.

## Pharmacy

There is a pharmacy in the university's medical center (De Boelelaan 1118).

## Emergency

The Vrije Universiteit has an open, welcoming and safe campus. In case of emergency, call the VU Amsterdam-emergency number:

**+31 (0)20 59 82 22 2.**

The Dutch national emergency number is **112**.

If there is no emergency but you are in need of police assistance, call **0900 8844**.

## Taxi

If you need a taxi, there are a couple of reliable options:

Amsterdam Taxi Centrale: +31 (0)6 85 67 22 63

Staxi: +31 (0)20 70 58 88 8

Taxi Centrale Amsterdam: +31 (0)20 77 77 77

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## Introducing the organizing team

The organizing team of the 2022 International Conference on Religion and Film welcomes you to Amsterdam! We consider it a special privilege to receive so many scholars from all over the world at our university. We have done our utmost to develop an exciting and attractive program for you. We hope you will enjoy the conference, our university and the city of Amsterdam!

### Johan Roeland

Johan is associate professor at the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit. He is specialized in media, popular culture and religion. As the director of valorization at this faculty, he connects students, researchers and societal partners in their contributions to the big social challenges of our time in which religion and spirituality play a role.



### Miranda van Holland

Miranda did her studies in art history and anthropology and after working in the media she returned to the university in 2015 for a master program in religion and media, in which she specialized in contemporary spirituality. She works as the coordinator of the debate center of the Vrije Universiteit. She also coordinates the



NEWConnective team that organizes events for students on personal development, wisdom and religion.

### Edwin Koster

Edwin is associate professor in philosophy of the sciences at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is Program Director of Philosophy and Director of the Educational Program of Philosophical Reflection for all students at the Vrije Universiteit. His research interests include philosophical questions regarding education, narratives, film, and religion.



### Peter Versteeg



Peter is assistant professor at the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit. His research interests include material religion, history and theory of anthropology, and interdisciplinary film studies.

### **Bilal Abou-Alanwar**

Bilal is a student of Theology and Religious Studies at the Vrije Universiteit. He is currently working as a student assistant at the Expertise Centre for Religion and Society at the Faculty of Religion and Theology.



### **Mikkie van der Mik**



Mikkie is a freelance educator, speaker, and coach, and master student in Theology and Religious Studies (media specialization) at the Vrije Universiteit. They are currently working on their first documentary about Christian Queer people in the Netherlands as part of their thesis.

### **Nathanael Korfker**



In his spare time he fulminates culture on Twitter.

Nathanael is a master student of Philosophy of Culture and Governance, combined with Theology and Religious Studies (media specialization). In his spare time he

### **Eva Tsoukala**

Eva studied Theology (BA) and Journalism (MA) in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Theology and Religious Studies (media specialization) at Vrije Universiteit (MA) as an Alexander S. Onassis Foundation Scholar. Her research interests focus on various aspects of religion in popular culture. She has worked in documentary research and production, and currently works as a Digital Communications Officer for a Video-on-Demand company in Hilversum.



### **Peter Victor**

Peter is currently a master's student of Theology and Religious Studies at the Vrije Universiteit. He is fascinated by the ways in which culture and religion interact with and influence each other. He believes that film and visual media adds a new, crucial dimension in reflecting and exploring these areas of interest.



## Our sponsors

The 2022 International Conference on Religion and Film is co-sponsored by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the *Journal of Religion and Film*, published by the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Since its founding in 1997 as one of the first academic peer-reviewed online journals, the *Journal of Religion & Film* has developed into one of the most highly regarded publications in the field. With over 160,000 downloads annually and readers from almost every country on Earth, the *Journal* has had an impact on international scholarship by providing free and open access to its articles and film reviews for scholars, students, and filmmakers.

[Journal of Religion and Film | University of Nebraska at Omaha \(unomaha.edu\)](https://www.ftrprf.com/)

Three other organizations have kindly agreed to contribute to this conference as well: FTRPRF, Het Filmgesprek and Clue+. We are very grateful for all financial and organizational support from our sponsors.

### FTRPRF



Futureproof is an international strategy consultancy, helping big organizations and

small organizations with big ambitions to create new perspectives, with the objective to change the world for the better.

<https://www.ftrprf.com/>

### Het Filmgesprek



Het Filmgesprek (litt. The Film Conversation) supports people and organizations that challenge film viewers with small-scale activities to investigate and deepen their experience of films through conversations about films and life questions. A good film conversation creates conditions for exchange and understanding between people of different faiths.

<https://hetfilmgesprek.nl/>

### Clue+

Clue+ is the VU Interfaculty Research Institute for Culture, Cognition, History and Heritage. Clue+ brings together researchers from a wide variety of academic disciplines, to work on joint projects, reflect upon societal challenges and formulate strategies for addressing those challenges.

<https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/research-institutes/clue>



## The conference's venue

All activities and sessions take place at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, in the **NU-building**, except for the welcome dinner and the first keynote which take place in **3D**. The NU-building offers not only lecture rooms, but also a cinema (Rialto) and an exhibit space. At the heart of the building is the atrium: a bustling space with a café and a coffee corner. The heart of the conference is the registration table and coffee corner on the second floor of the NU-building (at the entrance of Theater 3). When you enter the building through the main entrance, proceed to the escalator that will take you to the second floor. Look for the conference banner and you will find members of our team who will further assist you. Coffee, tea and refreshments will also be available here.

A route description to the Vrije Universiteit can be found here:

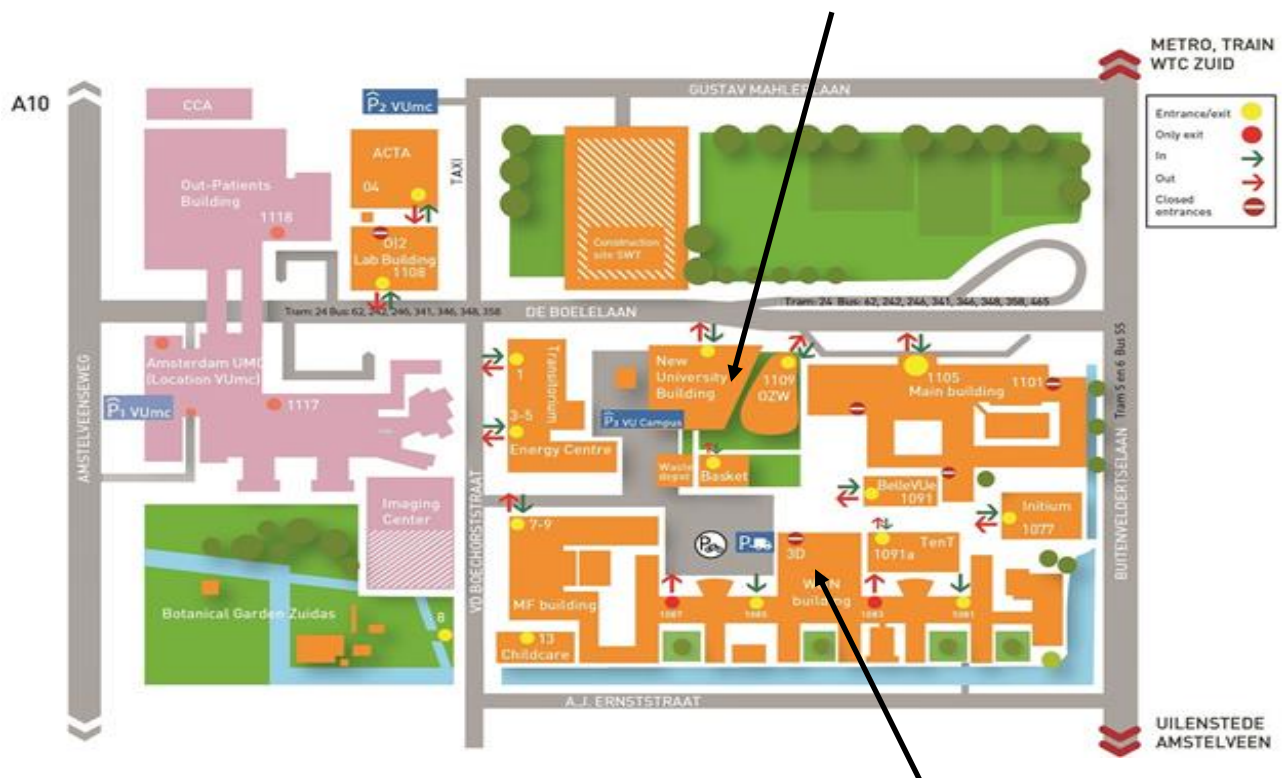
<https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/route-description>

The two conference locations, 3D and the NU-building, are both on the campus. 3D is situated at the campus square. The entrance can be found in the plinth of the W&N building, opposite the basketball court and to the right of the Spar supermarket.

<https://goo.gl/maps/d2cgT8XoCBiov82q7>

The main entrance of the NU-building is situated at De Boelelaan 1111. There is also an entrance on the campus square.

<https://goo.gl/maps/McGQxzdaDuchknUq9>



# Program

## WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8th

5:00 pm Conference Registration part 1 (3D)

6:30 pm Welcome Dinner (3D)

8:00 – 9:00 pm **Keynote: John Lyden (3D)**

### **Life in the Multiverse: Bringing Chaos Out of Order?**

## THURSDAY, JUNE 9<sup>TH</sup>

8:00 am Conference Registration part 2 (NU building, entrance Theater 3)

**9:00 – 10:30 am Presentations**

*Session 1* Representation and Liberation  
(room 3A47; moderator: Jeanette Solano)

Mughda Yeolekar - Tradition or Modernity? Reflections on Visions of a Better World for Hindu Women in *Kunku* (1937)

Diana Dimitrova - Visions of a Better World in Bollywood Films: Representations of Women in Hindu Traditions and in Popular Hindi Films

Krishnaja T S and Soumya José - Deconstructing Nunhood: Celebration of Female Spirituality and Autonomy in *Rebel Hearts*

*Session 2* Film Theologies of Love and Life  
(room 3A65; moderator: Edwin Koster)

Karli Brittz - Immanence and Transcendence in Disney/Pixar's *Soul*

Hyojin Yoon - A Theological Perspective and Moral Love in *24 Weeks*

Gabriel Estrada - Restoring Transgender Navajo Hózhó in *Drunktown's Finest*

Regan Hardeman - Beyond the OS: Love and Connection Through Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)

10:30 – 11:00	break: refreshments available (entrance Theater 3)
<b>11:00 - 12:30 am</b>	<b>Mixed session: Roundtable discussion and presentations</b>
	<i>Session 1</i> (room 3B19; moderator: Johan Roeland)
	“But it’s just about movies, right?” Preparing and Publishing Quality Scholarship on Religion and Film (with John Lyden and Jeanette Solano)
	<i>Session 2</i> (presentations) Critical Cinematic Voices (room 5A47; moderator: Srdjan Sremac)
	Sofia Sjö - Gender and the Messiah Myth Revisited: On Saviors of the Past, the Present and the Future
	Sharon Roubach - Light of the World: On the Issue of Jesus' Whiteness in Western Cinema
	Jon Pahl - <i>Summer of Soul</i> , or: Why the Revolution Will Include Music
	Richard Goodwin - Four Types of Religious Film: A Coordinate Graph Typology
12:30 – 2:00 pm	lunch: on your own
<b>2:00 - 3:00 pm</b>	<b>Keynote: Sheila Nayar</b> (room 2C33/Theater 3)
	<b>‘Characteristically Indian Secularism’: Its Politics and Practice in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Hindi Popular Cinema</b>
3:00 – 3:30 pm	break: refreshments available (entrance Theater 3)
<b>3:30 – 5:00 pm</b>	<b>Mixed session: Conversation and presentations</b>
	<i>Session 1</i> (room 4C47/Theater 8; moderator: Miranda van Holland)
	<i>How Theology Becomes Film: A Conversation on Theology as Film</i> with Robert Beckford, Peter Rollins and Mariecke van den Berg (open invitation)
	<i>Session 2</i> (presentations) Cinema, Aesthetics and Transcendence (room 3B05; moderator: Edwin Koster)
	Dan W. Wasserman and Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro - Did God Attend the Screenings of <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> ?
	Melissa Croteau - Framing Sacred Spaces in Japanese Cinema: Explorations of Space-Time and Expanded Approaches to Transcendental Aesthetics
	Jonas Simmerlein - Film and the Meaning of Life
5:00 – 7:00 pm	diner: on your own

7:00 - 9:00 pm

**Traces of the Sacred in Dutch Cinema: An Evening with the Dutch filmmakers Elsbeth Fraanje, Jaap van Heusden and Kees-Jan Mulder** (open invitation; Theater 9; moderator: Miranda van Holland)

FRIDAY, JUNE 10<sup>th</sup>

9:00 – 10:30 am

**Presentations**

*Session 1* Redemption

(room 3A47; moderator: Johan Roeland)

Joseph Kickasola - Raw Souls in the Church Basement: Fran Kranz's *Mass* and the Rhythms of Conflict and Forgiveness

Pablo Alzola - 'This House Has a Soul That Loves Us All': The Sacramental Value of Home According to Terrence Malick and Marilynne Robinson

Dagmara Jaszewska - Not Paradise, but a Hell of Modernity: The Theology of Suffering in Roy Andersson's Movies

*Session 2* On the Road

(room 3A65; moderators: Peter Versteeg and Edwin Koster)

William Skiles - Fight for Meaning: *Fury* (2014) and the Drive to Redemption

Peter Versteeg and Edwin Koster - It Becomes Your Dream Too: Three Perspectives on Jinpa

Sylvie Magerstaedt - Holding on to Hope: The Role of Hopefulness in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2021)

Javier Echague - Jonas Mekas and Spanish Mysticism

10:30 – 11:00 am

break: refreshments available (entrance Theater 3)

11:00 - 12:30 am

**Mixed Session**

*Session 1* (Presentations) Mediation and Idealization

(room 2B05; moderator: Edwin Koster)

Karl Martin - Confucian Principles in *Shang-Chi*

William Hong-xiao Wei - Candlelight, Shadows and Mist: Human Suffering and

Meditations on the Physical World's Illusions and Impermanency in *Oriental Elegy*

Jacob Cook - Between Don Quixote and Walter Mitty: Ideal Visions, Practical Problems, and Film in Moral Formation

Egor Korneev - Egyptian Religious Films and TV Series: Melodrama, Spirituality, and Entertainment

*Session 2 (Presentations) Watching Horror*  
(room 3B05; moderator: Peter Versteeg)

Bryan Stone and Rebekah Neuberger - The Real-World Impact of Horror Cinema

Mike Heyes - *House* but with Demons: Interpreting *The Exorcist* as Medical Drama

Jeremy Punt - Life, Reality and Recognition through the Eyes of a Child in *The Sixth Sense*

*Session 3 (room 3A06; moderator: Johan Roeland)*

*Film in Education: A Best, Bad and Everything-in-between Practices Conversation.*

With Eva van Roekel, Mikkie van der Mik and Johan Roeland (open invitation)

12:30 – 2:00 pm

lunch: on your own

**2:00 - 3:00 pm**

**Lecture: Jolyon Mitchell (room 4C51/Theater 9)**

**Searching for Peace in Russian and Ukrainian Film**

3:00 – 3:30 pm

break: refreshments available (entrance Theater 3)

**3:30 - 5:00 pm**

**Presentations**

*Session 1 Stories of Hope and Despair*

(room 3B05; moderator: Jeanette Solano)

Zachary Ingle - *Mother!* Nature: Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!*, the Anthropocene, and Ecotheology

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran - Adamic Myth and Symbols of Evil as Prophetic Voice in Lars von Trier's Cinema

Emily Pothast - The Filmic Spectacle and the Printed Apocalypse: Allegories of Media in *Metropolis*

Peter Ciaccio - The Incarnated Spirituality of Liliana Cavani

*Session 2* Moving Images in Christian Contexts  
(room 4B43; moderator: Peter Versteeg)

Dan B. Johnson, Jr. - *God's not Dead* and its Correlation to the Christian Persecution Complex

Wouter van Grootheest - Protestant Voices on Film: An Ongoing Tendency

Marcos Norris - *The Twilight Zone* as Religion: Rod Serling's Fight for Racial Justice

Barry Berko - *The Seventh Seal*: Bergman on Mortality

5:15 pm Introduction to the 2024 International Conference on Religion and Film to be held in Hollywood, CA, by Jeanette Solano; farewell drink (room 2C33/Theater 3)

6:00 – 8:00 pm diner: on your own

8:00 - 10:00 pm Evening session with Bert-Jan Lietaert Peerbolte and Jan Krans (open invitation; room 3B05)

**Apocalypse Now, Then or When?**

During a session, each contributor has 20 minutes: 15 minutes to present the paper, followed by 5 minutes for questions and discussion.

For the 'open invitation' sessions, participants other than the conference participants are also invited.

## Keynotes

### Sheila J. Nayar - 'Characteristically Indian Secularism': Its Politics and Practice in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Hindi Popular Cinema



If references to India's deep diversity are frequent, they are also well warranted—and not merely religiously, given that religion is always transected by geography, history, linguistics, ethnicity, politics, and socioeconomics. This presentation charts how one of the most robust and enduring industries in the subcontinent, that of Bollywood, has navigated the twenty-first century waters of its nation's "characteristically Indian secularism" (as one of the drafters of India's constitution referred to it). In exploring the major box-office successes of Hindi popular cinema, we will glean how and when the movies assert, convey, and package secularism in a manner sanctioned by spectators—even in this time of ideologically competing nationalisms—and witness, too, how India's onscreen secularism rarely exists *without* religion.

Sheila J. Nayar's research focuses primarily on the interplay of narrative, technology, and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. Her publications in that regard include *The Sacred and the Cinema, Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative*, and *Before Literature*, as well as articles in *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Nayar, who teaches in the department of Film and Media Arts at the University of Utah, has a Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an M.F.A. in film from Columbia University. Currently, she is completing a monograph on secularism and Hindi popular cinema and will be researching her next project in India as a 2022-2023 U.S. Fulbright Scholar.

### John Lyden - Life in the Multiverse: Bringing Chaos Out of Order



As we deal with chaos in the real world, fantasy films present a world in which multiple possible universes collide and battle for control. These films may be an expression of

our actual anxieties about loss of control as well as a representation of the lack of a master narrative to structure our lives. In addition, films may supply ideological ammunition for those who seek to order the chaos, including alternate versions of history that support their violent efforts to enforce a particular vision for societies. Faced with this, we have an obligation to create stories that support visions of better worlds, and to interpret films in ways that support our shared humanity.

John Lyden is Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He holds degrees from Wesleyan University, Yale University, and the University of Chicago. He has been the Editor of *the Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



## Special sessions

### **Lecture Jolyon Mitchell – Searching for Peace in Russian and Ukrainian Film**

In this illustrated presentation I analyze the complex and changing relations between film, religion and the search for peace in Russia and Ukraine. Investigating how both religion and different kinds of peace are depicted through a range of Russian and Ukrainian films provides a useful window onto the changing fortunes of various religious traditions, especially Russian Orthodoxy. To understand the relationship between religion, film and often conflicting visions and theologies of peace in Russia and Ukraine, it is helpful to take into account the changing political context in which the films have been produced. I therefore describe the interactions between religion and film in Tsarist Russia, then in Soviet Russia, and in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine.

Professor Jolyon Mitchell, PhD, FRSA, specializes in Religion, Violence and Peacebuilding, with particular reference to the arts and media, at the University of Edinburgh. Educated at the Universities of Cambridge, Durham and Edinburgh, Professor Mitchell worked as a Producer and Journalist with BBC World service before moving to Edinburgh. He has served as President of TRS-UK (the national association for Theology and Religious Studies in the UK, 2012-18) and is currently Director of CTPI (the Centre for Theology and Public Issues) at the University of Edinburgh. He is author of a wide range of books, chapters and articles, including *Promoting Peace and Inciting Violence: The Role of Religion and Media* (Routledge, 2012); *Martyrdom: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2012); *Religion and War* (OUP, 2021) and *Media Violence and Christian Ethics* (CUP, 2007). His co-edited books include *The Religion and Film Reader* (Routledge, 2007), *The Transformations of Tragedy* (Brill, 2019) and *Peacebuilding and the Arts* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020). He is currently

finishing books on *Religion and Peace* (Wiley Blackwell, 2022) and *Passion Play: The Mysterious Resurgence of Religious Drama* (OUP, 2023). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), and has worked with Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, as well as Palestinian and Israeli journalists, on peacebuilding projects in Jerusalem and beyond.

### **Traces of the Sacred in Dutch Cinema: An Evening with the Dutch Film Makers Elsbeth Fraanje, Jaap van Heusden and Kees-Jan Mulder**

Cinema has always been interested in the sacred: both as manifested and represented on screen and as experienced by the viewer in whom film evokes feelings of awe, horror, redemption, transcendence and beauty. In this session, three Dutch film makers are looking for traces of the sacred in each other's movies. All three are reluctant to describe their own work as religious and they are very hesitant to use the word 'theology' in their reflections on their work. In their movies, however, religion is always there: sometimes explicit, sometimes hidden. During this evening short film fragments alternate with good conversations in which film makers share a glimpse into the process of film making and the sometimes inimitable and accidental ways in which the sacred sneaks into the movie.

Elsbeth Fraanje is a creative documentary director, researcher and programmer. In her author driven, often stylistic films she shows compelling stories of 'ordinary' people and how these reflect on daily society. Indirectly and mildly comical, she puts down serious questions about our own life's struggles. Her work is shown at international festivals (Hotdocs, IDFA, CPH Dox, Jihlava, Krakow, Docville) and on TV. The documentary *Highway Confessions* (2017) won the Dutch Academy Award. In addition to her work as a director, Elsbeth is a curator and programme maker at European Short Film Festival Go Short. She is an alumnus of the IDFA Academy and Kids & Docs Workshop. Elsbeth likes to make films that

scour and reveal and she tries to portray unexpected stories in an appealing way. With her films she wants the audience to reflect on 'big questions' with a lighthearted approach.

Jaap van Heusden writes and directs films that resonate the great themes of our time (immigration, mental health and the implosion of the great institutions) by telling deeply personal stories that are delivered by exceptional actors. His films were in competition at Tribeca, Cannes, AFI Fest, Rome, IDFA, SXSW, Melbourne, Tehran, Rotterdam, the Student Academy Awards and many other festivals worldwide, picking up prizes along the way. Feature films: WIN / WIN (Prix Europe Best Screenplay 2010), THE NEW WORLD (Signis Award, Emmy Award Best Actress 2014), IN BLUE (winner Dutch Academy Awards Best Director / Best Screenplay / Best Actress 2018). THE MAN FROM ROME is currently in post-production and will be released fall 2022.

Kees-Jan Mulder (screenplay & direction) studied Theology in Utrecht and Amsterdam and Directing Fiction at the HKU (cum laude). His graduation film Gods Lam (21min, 2013, HKU Award and Winner Youth Award ŽUBROFFKA Film Fest) about a boy who accidentally becomes attached to the lamb that is intended for the Feast of the Sacrifice ended up internationally at film festivals and in museums (including MAXXI National Museum of the XXI Century Arts, Rome). With Dos Santos (20 min, 2015, BIND, with Maarten van Voornveld, Golden Calf selection) he again researched what surrender may cost. He made dozens of films in Africa and Asia, moving from documentary to participatory video and more hybrid forms of filmmaking; several of his found footage video columns for Dag6 and NieuwLicht went viral. In CineSud's script lab he is now working on Saint Europe, his first feature length fiction film.

## **How Theology Becomes Film: A Conversation on Theology as Film with Robert Beckford, Peter Rollins and Mariecke van den Berg**

Theology has always been a very text-based discipline. In recent years, however, theologians have discovered film, not only as an object of study, but also as a way of doing theology. In this session, Mariecke van den Berg talks with two film making theologians. Robert Beckford presented numerous documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4 and developed an approach to documentary making as exorcism: a means of casting out the 'demons' of colonial Christianity in black Pentecostalism. Peter Rollins is an author, storyteller and public theologian known for his orthodox heretic approach of theology, also called pyrotheology. Why do these two theologians prefer film over text? What makes film so suitable for doing theology? What exactly is theology and what makes a film theological? Of course, this session offers more than (spoken) word alone and screens work by both Robert Beckford and Peter Rollins.

Robert Beckford PhD is professor of Black Theology at The Queen's Foundation Birmingham and professor at the Faculty of Religion and Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is a scholar-activist researching the intersections of faith and racial justice in and through diverse media texts. He has written a dozen books which triangulate the fields of theology, cultural studies and politics. Beckford is a BAFTA award winning documentary filmmaker. He has written and presented over twenty films for the BBC, Channel 4 and Discovery USA. His films explore a range of themes including political critiques of the British Empire, biblical history and popular culture. Robert's creative reach extends into drama and black British urban music production. In 2017, his debut radio drama was

broadcast on the BBC Regions. 'Jesus Piece' is a fictional account of a reformed gang member turned Pentecostal preacher-detective. Beckford's current research is a practical theo-musicological project 'The Jamaican Bible Remix Project'. Taking the form of a studio album, the project inscribes black liberation theology in urban music (grime, drum and bass, and UK Soul).

Peter Rollins is an author, philosopher, storyteller, producer and public speaker who has gained an international reputation for overturning traditional notions of religion and forming "churches" that preach the Good News that we can't be satisfied, that life is difficult, and that we don't know the secret.

Challenging the idea that faith concerns questions relating to belief; attacking the distinction between the sacred and the secular. It critiques theism and it sets aside questions regarding life after death to explore the possibility of life before death.

Peter gained his higher education from Queens University, Belfast where he earned degrees (with distinction) in Scholastic Philosophy (BA Hons), Political Theory and Social Criticism (MA) and Post-Structural thought (PhD). He's the author of numerous books, including *Insurrection*, *The Idolatry of God*, and *The Divine Magician*. He was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, currently lives in Los Angeles and will die somewhere as yet not known.

Mariecke van den Berg is endowed Professor of Feminism and Christianity at Radboud University in Nijmegen (Catharina Halkes Chair) and Assistant Professor of interreligious studies at VU University Amsterdam. She is an editor of the international journal *Religion and Gender* and board member of the Dutch Society for Queer Theologians.

## **Film in Education: A Best, Bad and Everything-in-Between Conversation**

In recent years, two scholars from the Vrije Universiteit, Eva van Roekel and Johan Roeland, have experimented with film in educational contexts. In the course *Multimedia Ethnography*, Eva has trained students to use the camera as a research tool

and to apply visual methods to the study of culture. In a course entitled *Reframing Religion: The Practice of Media in Times of Polarization*, Johan invites students to make a short documentary as a critical counterbalance to the often spectacular and stereotyped representations of religion in contemporary visual media. In this session, Eva en Johan, together with Mikkie van de Mik who followed the *Reframing Religion* course last year, will discuss their didactic approaches and share their experiences with film in education. Colleague teachers are invited to share their questions and experiences. Moreover, participants will be challenged to practice with visual media during the session.

Eva van Roekel is cultural anthropologist and independent filmmaker. Her topics of interests are violence, human rights, and natural resources in Latin America. She has published numerous articles, short stories and the awarded monograph *Phenomenal Justice Violence and Morality in Argentina*. She has made three films and is currently working on a new film project about silence and an Argentinian war criminal.

## **"But it's just about movies, right?" Preparing and Publishing Quality Scholarship on Religion and Film**

Articles on religion and film tend to be viewed as superficial or non-scholarly by many academics who fail to take this field seriously. At the same time, interest in this area continues to grow as the influence of popular culture is increasingly recognized as important to any evaluation of societal values and worldviews. For those of us who write in this area, how do we ensure our work contributes to scholarship and is not viewed simply as cheerleading for the entertainment

industry? How do we walk the line between being either the fan(atic) or the cultured despiser of popular culture? Editors of the Journal of Religion & Film, John Lyden and Jeanette Solano, will discuss the mission and history of the Journal, how it has changed, and the criteria for evaluation and acceptance. This will include discussion on how to write articles that contribute to the field and improve our understanding of it. All conference participants are welcome, but we encourage especially early career scholars and students to participate!

### **Apocalypse Now, Then or When?**

In apocalyptic writings throughout history turmoil, chaos, and violence are depicted as ushering in a new age of a better life. In this sessions, organized by New Testament scholars Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte and Jan Krans, the participants discuss how the dynamics of apocalyptic literature are transformed in movies, usually with a strong focus on dystopia.

Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (1963) studied theology in Groningen and Leiden. After his PhD in Leiden (1995) he held various positions at the universities of Utrecht, Kampen and Yale. He has been a professor at the Vrije Universiteit since 2008. He specializes in the history of early Christianity and Judaism of the same period, but also the rise of Islam is one of his areas of interest. As a guest teacher he has given lessons in Cameroon, South Africa, Zambia, Ecuador, Germany, England and America. He is also chairman of the national research school for Theology and Religious Studies (NOSTER). He is also a radio commentator as a member of the Dutch news forum of *Langs de Lijn en Omstreken* and has provided various other radio programs.

Jan Krans is assistant professor in New Testament studies at the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit

Amsterdam. His research interests include the transmission of the New Testament and Jesus Movies.

## Abstracts

Thursday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 9:00 am, session 1, room 3A47

### **Tradition or Modernity? Reflections on Visions of a Better World for Hindu Women in *Kunku* (1937)**

Mughda Yeolekar

#### **Abstract**

In addition to being a pure source of entertainment, Indian films, just like films in general, have also acted as a mediation ground for understanding, critiquing, and imagining social life. One can see two types of mediation in recent Indian films concerning social norms about women. On the one hand, films such as *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gum* (2001) reinforce patriarchal foundations through their depictions of women as home-based, strictly male-conforming objects. On the other hand, films such as *Pink* (2016) present women as strong, powerful, and self-reliant beings.

Although we come across much research on women in Indian films from the post-independence times, the research about films in the pre-independence era is limited. As I show in this paper, films in the pre-independence period need special attention from scholars, as they provide important insights about evolving visions of womanhood in modern India among commoners.

The film *Kunku* (1937) is a domestic melodrama about the custom of forcing women to marry much older men. As depicted in the movie, the central problem of these

marriages was lack of consent of brides. What stance does *Kunku* take about this social issue? What role does *Kunku* play concerning the construction of religious discourse about womanhood in modern India?

In this paper, I will analyze how the protagonist of *Kunku* negotiates her gender role and feminist identity in the backdrop of more significant socio-religious-political processes of nation building. Drawing on theoretical insights from film studies, feminist studies, religious studies, feminist film studies, and cultural studies, this paper analyzes what *Kunku* offers in relation to the ideas of modern India, women's agency, and tensions between tradition and modernity at a critical time in Indian history. I argue that in the course of fighting against the injustice that resulted from a forced marriage, Neera offers a vision of a better world that integrates modern humanistic values of liberty and equality and traditional Hindu notion of pativrata (a devoted wife) in a creative way. Ultimately, *Kunku* urges its viewers to embrace the liberal humanist views without compromising traditional, religious norms of wifehood.

### **Visions of a Better World in Bollywood Films: Representations of Women in Hindu Traditions and in Popular Hindi Films**

Diana Dimitrova

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the intersections of religion and film and discusses interpretations of gender and Hinduism in Bollywood films of the 2000s. I examine the films *Dil chahta hai*

(*The Heart Wants*; 2001), *Devdas* (*Devdas*; 2002), and *Ham Dil De Cuke sanam (I Have Already Given My Heart Away*; 1999), from the perspectives of mythological and ideological criticism. It is characteristic of those films that no matter how modern the subject matter may be, for example arranged marriage versus love marriage, the ideal of women living according to *strīdharma* ("traditional norms, duties, rules, roles of womanhood") versus the ideal of woman aspiring for human happiness, the notion of the feminine is mostly conservative and traditional. How can we explain this fascination for traditional archetypes of the feminine?

Firstly, I deal with Hindu images of the feminine and myth-models for women and explore the ways, in which Bollywood films have represented gender and translated Hindu myth-models into social role-models for women. We may wonder about the ways, in which the world of myth and religion relates to the world of real women, i.e. what is the connection between symbolic reality and social reality, and most relevant to this study, what is the role that the media play in connecting these realities. The question arises about the links that exist between myth-models and social role models for women and the importance of commercial mainstream Bollywood film in this process. In what ways has Bollywood film reworked the myth-models and projected them as desirable or undesirable social models for women to emulate or reject?

Secondly, I examine the ideological implications of representations of gender and the ensuing conservative re-mythologizing of contemporary Indian culture by the media. Throughout the paper, I raise questions about the power of films to change reality and to

shape our hopes, fears, and desires. Should we accept the visions of the beautifully mythologized Hindu world, which those films present, at face value, or should we continue dreaming and imagining visions of a better world, which entails gender equality and social justice, not presented in those films?

## **Deconstructing Nunhood: Celebration of Female Spirituality and Autonomy in *Rebel Hearts***

Krishnaya T S and Soumya José

### **Abstract**

Governed by patriarchal religious structures, Christianity constantly suppresses the intrinsic spiritual and personal autonomy of religious women. The male-dominated church maintains regular surveillance over nuns' everyday routines and rituals, inflicting its routinized rules and regulations on them. Convents have always been a locus for molding fervent obedience in nuns through the systematic infusion of silence, right from postulancy. The introduction of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican recommended the reformation of strict religious codes, shattering the indefensible confinement of nuns and paving the way for their acquisition of consciousness and agency. The present study focuses on delineating the rebel nuns in the American documentary film *Rebel Hearts* (2021), directed by Pedro Kos. In its attempt to unravel the Second Vatican Council's influence on debunking the codes of medieval nunhood, the study fathoms out the essentiality of catholic feminism in liberalizing conventual lives. The study upholds the new-nun imagery that

questions the religious gender stereotypes denouncing the restrictive domains of patriarchal religion. The rebel nuns in the film uphold the significance of autonomy, an essential requirement to detach oneself from the clutches of patriarchal hegemony, motivating even the gen Z-novitiates and postulants to embrace nunhood. The study also analyses the representation of the lived experience of women religious through the lens of catholic feminist theology, deciphering nuns' new lifestyle as a celebration of their calling. The new/rebel nuns' overcoming the restrictions over their freedom and choice indicates an egalitarian religious order wherein women enjoy economic autonomy and decision-making powers, felicitating equality of gender in religious institutions.

Thursday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 9:00 am, session 2, room 3A65

## **Immanence and Transcendence in Disney/Pixar's *Soul***

Karli Brittz

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I will argue that Disney/Pixar's 2020 animated film, *Soul*, exemplifies a complex relation between an immanent and transcendent worldview. The film simultaneously portrays the notion of a disembodied soul that transcends to a 'Great Beyond', while also emphasizing the embodied, immanent soul that finds meaning and purpose through emerging properties of the human body, such as sensory experience. Additionally, through the medium of

animation, the aesthetic of digital technology, and use of jazz music, the film provides a soulful experience for movie-goers: allowing them to transcend beyond their surroundings, while becoming aware of the experiences of their intrinsic environment. By illustrating both an immanent and transcendent view of the soul, the film shows the value of a conversation between the concepts that can influence our understanding and experience of the world. The paper will contend that *Soul* intertwines religion and culture, while unraveling physicalism in a constructive manner – arguing that there is room for transcending and immanent perspectives of the soul in contemporary society, both on screen and off.

In William Carroll's essay *Does a biologist need a soul?* (2015), the historian provides a critique of physicalism. For Carroll (2015:22) the rejection of the soul is a "naive" perception, since it is required to explain that which exists beyond scientific theory. Although *Soul* does not give a direct theistic depiction of the soul, it exemplifies Carroll's argument by opening a space for consideration of spiritualism even within a secular, physicalist worldview. Drawing on Carroll's argument, the paper will provide an in-depth analysis of *Soul*. I will firstly explain how *Soul* showcases both immanence and transcendence. Thereafter, my analysis will show how this duality is also mirrored in the medium of the animated film and the movie-goers experience. Finally, the paper will conclude that *Soul* cultivates an understanding of (and need for) the human soul that allows for a conversation between a theodicy and secularity, immanence and transcendence, as well as religion and culture,

which shapes our unfolding of ourselves in the world.

## **A Theological Perspective and Moral Love in *24 Weeks***

Hyojin Yoon

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I investigate the theological perspective manifested in German director Anne Zohra Berrached's 2016 film, *24 Weeks*, drawing on the Kantian concept of love. *24 Weeks* is a film that addresses the issue of late-term abortion. It follows the protagonist's journey towards making a decision to terminate her pregnancy. The images in the film created by the camera that oscillates between the modes of a distanced observation and immersion in the protagonist's memories and sensations raise the question of the relationship between beauty and morality. According to Immanuel Kant, the beautiful, an object of the pure aesthetic judgement, arouses the subject's love which is a moral feeling. The moral implication of the beautiful indicates that the aesthetic experience prepares the subject for practical love which involves acting under obligation instead of inclination.

Multiple scholars have observed the legacy of theology and Christianity in Kant's account of the relationship between the aesthetic experience and moral agency. M. H. Abrams locates the origin of the idea of aesthetic experience used by eighteenth-century theorists in medieval theology. According to him, the contemplation and appreciation of "the highest good" in theology are adopted by Kant, who suggests the concept of pure

aesthetic judgement as a disinterested enjoyment of nature or artworks. Similarly, in his study of the concept of love in Kantian moral philosophy, Pärttyli Rinne touches upon the influence of the biblical commandments on Kantian love.

In *24 Weeks*, the protagonist does not embody Christian values. However, the director's curiosity about the transcendental is manifested in the film with visual and narrative elements such as the repetitive presentation of the images of the sun, the protagonist's visit to a church, and montage sequences that indicate shared perceptions of the beautiful between the mother and her unborn child.

The topic addressed in this paper suggests a possibility of further studies of how moral love can contribute to dealing with other female-specific issues or how love can be useful in social and political spheres.

## **Restoring Transgender Navajo Hózhó in *Drunktown's Finest***

Gabriel Estrada

### **Abstract**

Transgender Navajo (Diné) director Sydney Freeland's *Drunktown's Finest* not only achieves visual, erotic, and spiritual sovereignty, she makes real life impact as understood through Diné-language philosophy. This real-life impact is important to note and it is a departure from the majority of Indigenous film analysis such as that of visual sovereignty that usually does not account for the spiritual impact of a film upon its audiences. Watchman's Diné-language film interpretation also contrasts with religious



studies religion and film analysis that often focuses on non-Native directed film, avoidance of spirituality in Native-directed film, and non-Nation specific theory. In contrast, Watchman establishes that *Drunktown's Finest* restores *hózhó*, sometimes translated as beauty, to its transgender Navajo protagonist and its audiences. Citing the Navajo Nation's national poet laureate Luci Tapahonso, Watchman explains *hózhó* as a central concept in Diné philosophy, gender, and language that is 'best translated as to be in a state of wellness, balance, peace, and harmony, culminating in beauty' (2020: 43). In difference with the Western-origin political concept of sovereignty that is historically and politically contingent, *hózhó* is potentially present in all Diné activities and is part of the all-encompassing creative force of *Sq'ah Naghai Bik'eh Hozho* in the Diné world. Freeland expresses *hózhó* by drawing upon sacred creation narratives to establish an honored place for transgender Diné in her film. In the feature, the trans femme protagonist Felixia completes the *kinaaldá* coming-of-age ceremony with her family and foregoes a reliance on sex work to satisfy her need for affection and money. Through scenes of the mixed-gender *nádleehí* oral tradition, Diné language, ceremonial food preparation, and the eastward facing *kinaaldá* coming-of-age ceremonial run, Freeland restores *hózhó* to Felixia. Watchman also affirms that watching the film itself restores *hózhó* to the audience. *Drunktown's Finest* not only demonstrates a marked restoration of transgender Indigenous spiritual images from a century of transphobic and racist Hollywood tropes by exemplifying Navajo Nation's spirituality, it offers a vision of *hózhó* to impact its viewers.

## Beyond the OS: Love and Connection Through Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)

Regan Hardeman

### Abstract

The continued advancement and increasing accessibility of technology has profound implications for how we understand our relationships to each other and to the creations that we believe are meant to connect us to each other more conveniently. Because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, many social interactions, including religious services, are becoming increasingly mediated through video conferencing software such as Zoom. Through these experiences, questions of human connection, social life, intimacy, and the impact of technology on life experiences have been given a renewed importance. The film *Her* (2013) is set in an unnamed future city where many dimensions of human life have been relegated to technology. It tells a story about love and humanity centered around a remarkably unconventional pair, and the film leaves its viewers both heartbroken and uplifted. Between the main character's divorce, friendships, and unlikely love interest - an operating system (OS) named Samantha - audiences are left wondering what it means to be human, to love, and to lose relationships that we find meaningful. The film provides a lens to understand a theological anthropology of love and connection that has a profound impact in light of the current pandemic. This article will explore the relationship between theological anthropology, mediation of social experiences through technology, and love through the narrative of *Her*. While technology does have the ability to create

temporary connections to others across the constraints of physical space, this article will contend that *Her* teaches us that our understanding of our own humanity is most fully realized in the presence of other humans. Technology is a useful tool in removing barriers for human interaction, however the use of technology to create connection, either between humans or technology itself and humans as in *Her*, is ultimately unsatisfactory because it does not allow for the full realization of humanity. Technology should be understood as an aid rather than a meaningful source of connection between humans. In the end, when the mediation of technology is removed, humans are left only with each other, and that is enough.

Thursday, June 9 <sup>th</sup> , 11:00 am, session 2, room 5A47
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### **Gender and the Messiah Myth Revisited: On Saviors of the Past, the Present and the Future**

Sofia Sjö

#### **Abstract**

In a study published in 2007, it was argued that gender plays an obvious, but also complex part in who gets to save the world. The analysis of prominent science fiction films from the late 1970s to the first years of the new millennia, showed a gradual change with more and more female helpers, heroes and saviors, but also a tendency to control and restrict female power and, not least, keep religious power in the hands of men, even when women were allowed to take on the role of the messiah. This paper returns to the main

findings of this earlier study and looks at how well the results hold up today. It highlights a continued development – not just regarding the prevalence of female heroes and saviors, but ideas about who can be a savior more generally – but also stagnations and backlashes: saviors are still mostly male and mostly white, and challenges of the traditional story is more and more often met with severe reactions and criticism. The paper presents a many-faceted picture and varied views on contemporary messiahs and concludes with some thoughts on possible future developments and why it matters who gets to save the world.

### **Light of the World: On the Issue of Jesus' Whiteness in Western Cinema**

Sharon Roubach

#### **Abstract**

In his 1997 book *White*, Richard Dyer deals with the racial imagery of white people, claiming that "as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they function as a human norm". Dyer traces the evolution of the notion of whiteness and shows the importance of the image of Jesus in this notion. With the spread of European imperialism, claims Dyer, the white Jesus became the paradigm of Europe, bringing light to the world.

In this paper I will examine the issue of Jesus' whiteness in Western cinema. I will show that all Jesus' cinematographic biographies produced in Hollywood presented Jesus as a white male. His whiteness was accentuated not only by his blond hair and blue eyes, and

by the use of lighting and costume, but mainly by emphasizing the orientalist characteristics of his surroundings, creating a clear distinction between Jesus and the people around him. Thus Jesus is presented as the white redeemer who has come to save the Orient.

In the second part of the paper I will present three films which I will claim challenge Jesus' whiteness: Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Monty Python's 1979 *The Life of Brian* and Mel Gibson's 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*. None of these films presents a dark skinned Jesus, and yet Jesus' whiteness is challenged by the fact that no distinction is made between him and his surroundings. What these films have in common is not only that they were not produced in Hollywood, but that each of them sought to underline different hegemonies related to the image of Christ. Pasolini sought to condemn the hegemony of Italian bourgeoisie, Monty Python sought to mock the Hollywoodian hegemony, and Gibson sought to reverse the hegemony of the post Vatican II Catholic Church. Just as Jesus' skin color was used to legitimize imperialist colonialism and the hierarchic relations between the races, so it became, by few cinematographers a subversive tool.

## ***Summer of Soul, or: Why the Revolution Will Include Music***

Jon Pahl

### **Abstract**

Music is omnipresent in religion, and in film, but not carefully studied at their intersection. This paper will suggest that Questlove's 2020 documentary recalling the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, *Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* points precisely to an exciting and promising intersection of religion, film, music, and a vision of a better world, especially in relation to racial justice.

The paper will have three parts: The first will be a close reading of *Summer of Soul*, including both the arrangements of the discrete musical selections, particular montages accompanying those selections, and the commentary in selected interviews. This section will articulate Questlove's argument that music can be a liturgical force for both justice and peace, especially in relationship to race, when engaged intentionally as a spiritual force, and when depicted accurately and with integrity on film. The second part will engage a comparison of this argument to similar films depicting music (and especially jazz and blues) in relationship to religion and social change, such as *The Jazz Singer* (1928); *Jazz on a Summer's Day* (1960); *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972); *Malcolm X* (1988); *Selma* (2014); and *Amazing Grace* (2018), among others. Part three will draw from these films and from ritual studies to suggest a contextualized theory of the role of music and drama in relation to social change, drawing on a "long history" of music in liturgy - literally

“the work of the people,” from Greek tragedy to the present. In short, this theory will seek to explain why the revolution will include music, and it will be dramatized in film.

## Four Types of Religious Film: A Coordinate Graph Typology

Richard Goodwin

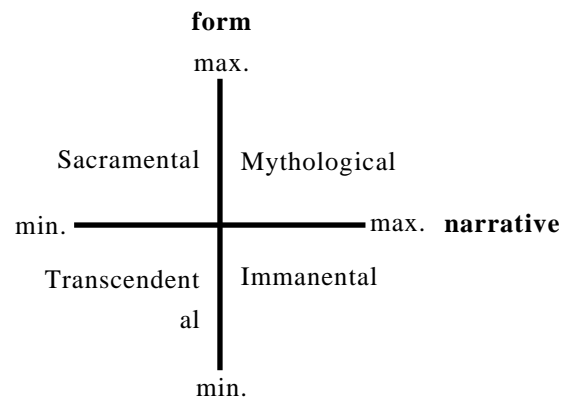
### Abstract

While Paul Schrader famously championed transcendental style as *the* universal form of religious cinema, others (e.g., Sheila J. Nayar) have demonstrated that there are in fact multiple styles of religious cinema. This paper outlines a typology organizing religious films into four categories. This approach acts as a way of describing religious films themselves and the types of experiences they invite from the audience.

The typology rests on two variables: form and narrative. In terms of form, this typology employs Schrader’s categories of “sparse means” and “abundant means”. In terms of narrative, on the other hand, the typology employs categories advanced by John Dominic Crossan, namely “parable” and “myth”. Sparse means and parable are both characterized by restraint, while both abundance and myth are characterized by decadence. As such, each of these variables, form and narrative, may be envisaged as a continuum.

Richard A. Engnell, drawing on the work of John R. May, wove these two approaches to form and narrative together. I take Engnell’s work a step further by suggesting that these variables may be fruitfully mapped as a coordinate graph, with sparse and abundant means at opposite poles of the formal

spectrum (*y*-axis), and parable and myth at opposite poles of the narrative spectrum (*x*-axis). Diagramming this approach this way suggests four different types of religious film, each occupying a different quadrant: transcendental style, sacramental style, mythological style, and immanental style.



Conceptualizing religious cinema this way is *not* meant to imply that a quasi-mathematical approach to classifying religious films ought to be taken or even that such an approach is possible. Rather, it simply opens up a way of conceiving of religious cinema that takes us towards a multi-faceted approach that recognizes and names various religious styles. This, in turn, assists us in considering a wider range of viewer experiences under the rubric of religious cinema.

Thursday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 3:30 pm, session 2, room 3B05

## **Did God Attend the Screenings of 2001: A Space Odyssey?**

Dan W. Wasserman and Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro

### **Abstract**

"The God concept is at the heart of the film [...] If the film stirs the emotions and penetrates the subconscious of the viewer, if it stimulates, however inchoately, his mythological and religious yearning and impulse, then it has succeeded..." (Stanley Kubrick).

Although it has been over 50 years since the film was released, endless articles have been written in an attempt to solve the mystery of Stanley Kubrick's cinematic masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Our study deals with a yet unexplored aspect – Kubrick's massive use of hypnotic techniques to create or induce in his viewers mystical/spiritual trance experiences. Many viewers reported such uplifting and life-altering experiences, which were sometimes even described in terms of rebirth, while others reported horrible tedium, cinematic sloppiness, and incoherence.

Kubrick himself did not hide his spiritual motivations in the creation of the film, addressing his desire to alter viewer consciousness. However, he never unearthed the methods he used during the creation of the movie to induce in the viewer a trance or mystical experience. Our study reveals a variety of techniques imbedded in the film,

while focusing on three mystical methods known to disrupt the neurological habitus: anesthetic trance, ecstatic trance, and a manipulation of the Phenomenal Self Model (PSM).

Thus, we present Kubrick's cinematic techniques in scientific terms, combining neuro-cinema, comparative religion studies, neuro-theology, and hypnosis techniques. While cinema aims to provide the viewers with a stirring experience that encourages them to immerse themselves in it, we maintain that *2001: A Space Odyssey* transcends the normative cinematic experience with the hypnotic techniques it intentionally uses on its viewers. This may also explain why some audiences, who did not surrender to these techniques, were not mesmerized by the film, and reported a negative experience. Kubrick, therefore, is a pioneer in the development and conscious use of a "cinematic mystical model" that combines cinematic perceptions with neuro-mystical techniques.

## **Framing Sacred Spaces in Japanese Cinema: Explorations of Space-Time and Expanded Approaches to Transcendental Aesthetics**

Melissa Croteau

### **Abstract**

Japan has an extraordinary history of aesthetics connected to its religious traditions, and its influential cinema has used religio-aesthetics related to Shinto and Buddhism in diverse ways. This paper presents a fresh approach to sacred space, symbols, and concepts embedded in the secular framework of Japanese films aimed at general

audiences in Japan and globally. These perspectives reveal how cinematic texts operate as expressions of and, potentially, catalysts for transcendence of various kinds in Japan, moving away from Paul Schrader's generalized notions regarding the concept that appeared 1972 and 2018. This paper presents multivalent approaches to *transcendence*, establishing key connections to Japanese aesthetics, religion, and history, including the contemporary context of the rise, fall, and aftermath of Japan's Economic Bubble. The paper provides pathways to circumvent reductive discourses of Japaneseness, as these pertain to aesthetics and film, by elucidating the dynamic and multidimensional nature of key religio-aesthetic concepts as they change over time and are applied to diverse disciplines: *ma* (structuring intervals), *kū* (emptiness; sky), and *mono no aware* (compassionate sensibility; resigned sadness). Finally, the paper will explicate one prominent example of these principles used in a crucial scene of Hayao Miyazaki's anime blockbuster *Spirited Away* (2001). The film's rich *mise-en-scène* and cinematography mark this world as sacred space in multifarious significant ways explored in this scene, including a particular focus on the aesthetics of *ma* and *kū* and their connections to Shinto and Buddhism. The film is structured as a physical journey through a spiritual world made up of "natural" deities, who are, by definition, immanent transcendent beings both very much of this world and yet supernatural. In this way, Miyazaki communicates his key theme of environmental stewardship and the interdependence of humanity and the natural world. In this and many other Japanese films, *ma* is used as an aesthetic and philosophical

signifier, but films themselves also are *ma*—framed spaces of flickering, ephemeral light—in which senses of connection can be awakened and interdependence can be apprehended.

## Film and the Meaning of Life

Jonas Simmerlein

### Abstract

When people turn to both film and religion, they are looking for alternatives and visions of a possible future. We expect them to critique the status quo and to give a different account of reality and the ways life could or should look like. They shape our understanding of right and wrong and what a good life looks like. In the most existential way of speaking, we want them to help us to understand or to contemplate what this life is about or what its meaning is. But what is the meaning of life and how can we find it? Religion and philosophy have brought forth several modes of answering this essential question. To lead a discussion about how film is constructing meaning we need to establish a solid ground first on which we can base our search for answers.

This paper analyses several dozens of different philosophical and theological approaches to the question: "What is the meaning of life and how do we find it?" From nihilistic accounts of Albert Camus or Alfred Ayer to constructivists like Harry Frankfurt or religious accounts like the ones Miroslav Volf or Dorothee Sölle present. Based on these different perspectives I want to explore what possible role film could play in their argument to provide to the construction or finding of

meaning in our lives. By giving a comprehensive outlook on the complex discourse about the meaning of life while focusing on a theory of film as a supportive medium therein, I aim to assist other researchers as well as movie makers and educators with understanding the underlying concepts that make something relevant to our life's search for meaning.

Friday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 9:00 am, session 1, room 3A47

## **Raw Souls in the Church Basement: Fran Kranz's *Mass* and the Rhythms of Conflict and Forgiveness**

Joseph Kickasola

### **Abstract**

Fran Kranz's film 2021 film *Mass* is a long, nearly real-time conversation between the parents of a school shooting victim and the parents of the killer, hosted in a church basement. In this liminal, "not fully sacred" space, evil is acknowledged squarely to the very end, never dismissed (even, we note, evil within the Christian church). Yet, healing emerges as a possibility for at least some of the participants, and the hope for a better world has been seeded here.

This essay focuses upon the flow of the film, the way its aesthetic forces are temporally shaped and managed. Despite being his first major directing project, Kranz demonstrates tremendous command of dramatic pacing, but also fully understands how camera movement, framing, sound design, and editing techniques shape and augment natural

rhythms of tension and release present in the drama.

Everyday rhythms and temporal shapes, theologian Lexi Eikelboom argues, reflect a larger "rhythmic" profile in theology, liturgy, and some secular philosophical systems (e.g., Nietzsche's Eternal Return, Gilles Deleuze's cycle of difference, etc.). In application of Eikelboom's ideas, combined with contemporary film theorists of flow (e.g., Deleuze, Karen Pearlman), I propose that the rhythms in *Mass* are not merely ornaments or vehicles for the content of the film, but carry in themselves religious import, shaping and expressing a lived theology through film. They form aggregate force with the dynamics of conflict and forgiveness in the script and performances. For the viewer, the rhythms, create channels and openings for necessary affectual flow, that the goals of this very difficult conversation may be realized: evil named, wounds exposed, healing enacted.

In addition, Jean-Luc Marion's commentary on Augustine's *Confessions* provides insight into the many ways that our experience of time reveals the fragile, relational nature of self (self to self, self to other, and self to God). In this light, the rhythms of the filmmaking amplify the stages of losing and regaining selfhood these four damaged souls undergo in the wake of unimaginable tragedy.

This paper will be accompanied by a short video interview I performed with director Fran Kranz and actor Ann Dowd.

## **‘This House Has a Soul That Loves Us All’: The Sacramental Value of Home According to Terrence Malick and Marilynne Robinson**

Pablo Alzola

### **Abstract**

Houses play a prominent role in the films of Terrence Malick. As Steven Rybin points out, Malick conveys the house as “a place of dwelling and being that draws upon our own internal powers of signification” (2012, 180). This feature of Malick’s cinema is rooted in a spiritual tradition which also nurtures Marilynne Robinson’s literary work, mainly her Gilead series. Both Malick and Robinson portray the family household as a place that becomes crucial for the self-discovery of each character as well as for her moral and religious education; in their works the house is not just a physical space, but rather a milieu where people build bonds of affection that can ultimately transcend the sphere of the everydayness and help each other to feel the loving presence of God. “I think of the acts of comfort offered and received within a household as precisely sacramental,” Robinson (1993) writes drawing upon the Christian notion of sacrament, namely an outward visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, to use the definition indebted to Augustine. In *The Tree of Life*, the mother’s words to her sons express this notion in connection with the home environment, “Help each other. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light. Forgive.” Similarly, we find this idea in Robinson’s *Home*, when the mother tries to restore domestic peace: “... she would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell

of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings, and it would mean, this house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what” (2008, 263). Hence, I aim to study a selection of Malick’s recent filmography - consisting of *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012) and *A Hidden Life* (2019) - with special focus on some dramatic and aesthetic elements that build up the aforesaid notion of sacrament, trying to establish a fruitful dialogue between these elements and Robinson’s narrative. In the end, the image of home shown by these films and novels leads both viewers and readers to reflect upon the mysterious presence of God’s grace amid family life.

## **Not Paradise, but a Hell of Modernity: The Theology of Suffering in Roy Andersson’s Movies**

Dagmara Jaszewska

### **Abstract**

From the very beginning of his work, Roy Andersson insists on portraying contemporary Western culture as a hell on earth, while exposing in his films the false paradise of the rich land of consumption, which is modern Sweden, with its accompanying "religion of being happy".

With the help of various artistic means, Andersson reveals the evil hidden under the aesthetic charm of modernity. The director deconstructs and undermines the beauty of museums and tableware, the elegance and seriousness of architecture and suits, the order and transparency of modern institutions. In his films "Brave New World" has turned out to be "the hell of modernity", both in the individual dimension (alienation,



loneliness, lack of interpersonal relationships) and social (Nazism, war, colonialism, ecological destruction). Because what is hidden beneath the smooth and shiny surface of modernity is the suffering of the individual and of society as a whole.

The film director tracks, exposes and contemplates this suffering with passion. It seems that he cannot do it other than by referring it to religious (Christian) symbols. Using them, whether he wants to or not, Andersson "makes theology" of today's secularized society. In this way, in Roy Andersson's films the suffering - which is a scandal in the rational world - evokes religion. However, it is no longer a set of ordered truths. The New Gospel comes through with difficulty; for now, it can only be heard in psychiatric hospitals (mentally ill people take a special place among suffering people). It sounds: "Jesus was not God, but a good man" or "Blessed are those who will sit down".

Religious symbols in Andersson's films, though they are often confused and ambiguous, can be read as *loci theologici*. If they are not places of God's revelation, then at least they are a manifestation of a meaningful void after God in contemporary Western culture. And as Andersson shows, they say a lot about this culture. Thus, theology and cultural studies can meet while analyzing Andersson's art in order to better understand modernity, its social and political reality, as well as sensitize people to the problems of this world and encourage them to change it for the better.

Friday, June 10 <sup>th</sup> , 9:00 am, session 2, room 3A65
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## **Fight for Meaning: *Fury* (2014) and the Drive to Redemption**

William Skiles

### **Abstract**

The film *Fury* (2014) tells the story of a tank unit driving deep into Nazi Germany at the end of the Second World War, in April 1945. *Fury* depicts the inevitable result of a morally bankrupt National Socialist ideology, a worldview inspired by aggressive militarism and fanatical racism. The filmmakers show that the fruits of National Socialism are meaningless destruction, death, and the loss of meaning. And yet, the film presents hints of a vision for a better world in religious and symbolic language. The tank unit, nicknamed *Fury*, steadily drives through the devastation, struggling to hold on to meaning, in completing its mission to save American soldiers caught in the crosshairs of the Waffen SS. The filmmakers carefully use language to reveal despair, such as the use of vulgarity to reveal the struggle of expressing oneself amid apparent meaninglessness, and the use of Scripture recitation to reveal the grasping for hope and redemption. Moreover, the filmmakers thoughtfully integrate the imagery of crosses and crucifixes throughout the film to highlight the sacred nature of the unit's sacrifice in blood, sweat, and tears, which comes to evocative fruition in the final scene of the film. Lastly, the filmmakers used characterization—particularly in figures of Boyd "Bible" Swan, Grady "Coon-Ass" Travis, and the leader of the group, Don "Wardaddy"

Collier—to explore the struggle for meaning and hope in an emotionally and spiritually devastating circumstance. The vision for a brighter future is expressed in religious language and imagery. But this vision presents sacrifice as the way to a brighter future, the only way forward for the benefit of all, and not just a few. And yet for these men, they sacrifice together, bearing each other's burden to the very end. The film *Fury* honestly depicts the Christian view of the fallen world, a world formed and fashioned by man's sinful nature, broken by a corrupt ideology, and yet it reveals the hope of redemption through the cross.

### **It Becomes Your Dream Too: Three Perspectives on *Jinpa***

Peter Versteeg and Edwin Koster

#### **Abstract**

In the film *Jinpa*, situated in Tibet, a truckdriver named Jinpa picks up a hitchhiker carrying the same name. The hitchhiker is on his way to kill a man who killed his father. When they part, the truckdriver feels confused and starts looking for the other Jinpa, perhaps to prevent him from killing his father's murderer. The two Jinpa's have a mysterious, almost surreal connection, which is not clarified in the film. Are they versions of each other? Or does the one inhabit the other's dream?

Existential themes such as revenge, guilt, and atonement appear in *Jinpa* in a fascinating form. We are foremost intrigued by the fact that the narrative does not spell out how these themes are resolved or even structured. As viewers we must become involved and

make sense of the story, which is also alluded to at the end of the film. We will address the question of experiencing the existential dimension of *Jinpa* by referring to three different perspectives: a narratological, a philosophical and a religious studies approach. Peter Verstraten lays bare the (hidden) structure of the film as story (*Film Narratology*). In turn, Irving Singer writes in *Cinematic Mythmaking* how film viewers relate in a personal way to the film's meaning. On a similar note, John Lyden shows how a film can be seen as a religious worldview (*Film as Religion*).

Situated in Tibet, Buddhist practices form a rather self-evident colour locale of this motion picture. But does this mean that we must adopt a religious studies approach to interpret what is going on? The three mentioned authors suggest that film studies perspectives could bring us closer to such an understanding, i.e., our own existential experience of the film narrative. In our contribution, we wish to explore how different analytical perspectives help us to understand our experience of *Jinpa*, and how these views possibly relate to each other.

### **Holding on to Hope: The Role of Hopefulness in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2021)**

Sylvie Magerstaedt

#### **Abstract**

This proposal is part of a project exploring how film and television can enhance our understanding of virtues. One aspect looks at the theological virtues and the proposed paper will explore hope and its power of

inspiring positive visions of the future, especially in situations where these might be hard to find. In his treatise on hope in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas defined hope as something good and future-related, but also difficult (although possible) to obtain (II-II, q. 17, a. 1). *Nomadland*, the film I propose to examine, illustrates how holding on to hope counteracts both fear and despair despite the challenges of the situation, thus promoting virtuous hope in Aquinas' sense. Moreover, the notion of hope as a lived experience, in line with the conference theme, also points to some recent philosophical literature on the topic that moves from episodic hope related to specific goals to the notion of 'hopefulness' as a character trait or virtue. This, I argue, has much in common with a more traditional theological understanding of hope. For example, Shade (135) describes hopefulness as 'an attitude of energetic openness and readiness', while Van Hooft (65) calls it 'an unarticulated but reasonable way of being in which we acknowledge ... vulnerability of our existence and yet commit ourselves joyfully to the living of our lives.' As I will argue, these aspects are not only reflected in the characters encountered in *Nomadland*, but also the style of the film itself. Williams suggests that having stories that are hopeful rather than despairing is 'likely to serve us better' (266). That does not mean that these stories should be mere fantasy or that we should avoid real life experiences, but rather that stories can be both hopeful and truthful. His point is that what matters for hope is the 'How' of the story not the 'What', and I will argue that Zhao's caring, compassionate framing and telling of the story in *Nomadland* provides us with hopefulness, enabling us to envision a future that allows for a flourishing

of human virtues, even in times of socio-political and economic crisis.

## Jonas Mekas and Spanish Mysticism

Javier Echague

### Abstract

In 1967, the filmmaker Jonas Mekas (1922-2019) travelled to Ávila to visit the places where Saint Teresa lived, as recounted in his short film *Song of Avila*. Mekas was an experimental filmmaker of Lithuanian origin, based in the United States since 1949, and one of the main promoters of New York underground cinema through the magazine *Film Culture* and the activities of the Filmmakers' Cooperative (later renamed Anthology Film Archives). As a filmmaker, he is known for his film diaries, which constitute a personal journey through his daily life, full of memories and literary or poetic references. The first of them is *Walden* (1969), followed by *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), and *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally, I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000). In Mekas's films, the search for beauty in everyday life is recurrent. He speaks of his findings as "fragments of Paradise". In studies about his work, this approach is most often explained by his relationship with the American transcendentalists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman). This paper aims to recall other sources, and specifically his constant reference to Spanish mysticism. Santa Teresa is the main topic in *Song of Avila*, but there are many other mentions: the writings of Santa Teresa and St. John of the Cross are referenced in *Walden*, and in the Mekas' own writing about cinema

(collected in *Movie Journal. The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959-1971*, 1972), and in his personal diaries (*I Had Nowhere to Go*, 1991). In these books and films, the Spanish mystics appear in a recurrent way, not only as a literary reference, but also as a model for establishing a contemplative gaze on reality.

Friday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 11:00 am, session 1, room 2B05

## **Confucian Principles in *Shang-Chi***

Karl Martin

### **Abstract**

In "Come all Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," published in *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), Frank Chin calls for Chinese American cultural expressions rooted in Chinese folk culture and embodying Confucian principles. Chin objects to writers whose narratives are too influenced by Christian conversion stories and represent Chinese folk culture as something the protagonists must escape to find meaning and fulfillment. Co-screenwriters Dave Callaham, Andrew Lanham, and Destin Daniel Cretton (who directed the film), answer Chin's call in Marvel's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.

In the film, both Shang-Chi and Katy embrace their Chinese culture as an integral part of their identity rather than something they must discard to embrace an American identity. Furthermore, as represented by the village of Ta Lo, Chinese folk traditions are presented as a precious resource that must be protected. Shang-Chi and Katy do not deliver Ta Lo from

danger but rather take their place in the traditional army defending the village. Additionally, the legend of the ten rings itself is presented in the form of a Chinese folk tale. Even more significantly, the filmmakers answer Chin's call by embracing Confucian principles in the film's narrative structure. Chin argues that an ethic of private revenge and the related ethic of "popular revenge against a corrupt state" (35) are central principles in the Confucian tradition. When Wenwu stages an attack on Ta Lo, he brings his private desire for revenge into the public realm. Warped by his grief-driven desire to be reunited with his deceased wife, Wenwu's corrupt military campaign must be stopped. Shang-Chi, alongside the defenders of Ta Lo, keep their desire to protect Ta Lo firmly within the Confucian tradition.

The film's rootedness in Chinese folk and Confucian traditions is surprising given the hurdles the creators had to overcome regarding Shang-Chi's history as a Marvel character. The presentation will trace the development of Shang-Chi in Marvel comics to demonstrate how far the character travels from his earliest incarnation as the son of Fu Manchu.

## **Candlelight, Shadows and Mist: Human Suffering and Meditations on the Physical World's Illusions and Impermanency in *Oriental Elegy***

William Hong-xiao Wei

### **Abstract**

*Oriental Elegy* (Alexander Sokurov, 1996) revolves around a mediative journey of Sokurov himself as a traveler to a village in

Japan where a group of old people are presented as ghosts who have experienced human suffering in their past lives. This article examines the visual motif of candles and oil lamps in Sokurov's film, which are also religious objects in ancient China related to the Buddhist teachings of perception, illusion and contemplation, as well as such concepts as *prajñā* (wisdom), *vipaśyanā* (concentration), *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth) and nirvana. The article argues that the close-ups of candlelight in the film are suggestive of the act of quiet meditation and earmark the ubiquitous presence of acute perception throughout the film. On the one hand, Sokurov's employment of candlelight imagery accentuates the everyday experience of meditative contemplation but is also conducive to his thematic preoccupations with the evanescence and impermanence of the physical world, in which the loss of life and the transient moment of ordinary everyday existence stand in contrast to an endless succession of living organisms. On the other hand, the imagery of burning flame framed by these close-up shots in the film, calling forth great concentration of the consciousness on a particular object's minute details, implies that Sokurov's visual perception directed toward the real world conforms to his own inner vision. In addition, the film's presentation of the ubiquity of mists and clouds that nullifies the illusionary existence of this unearthly world, from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese poetics, manifests a heightened awareness that such a world perceived is illusionary, evanescent and ever-changing. Drawing on Charles Hartman's object-oriented ontology, the article further claims that Sokurov's visual manipulation of the real world's natural scene reinforces a very

personal impression, or imagination, of an unearthly island, pinpointing the ineffaceable rift between the withdrawn real and the sensuous. The audience, through the aesthetic experience of the film's defamiliarized appearance, are thus encouraged to engage with the inscrutable and inaccessible reality in the film of human sufferings, the death, reincarnation and afterlife.

## **Between Don Quixote and Walter Mitty: Ideal Visions, Practical Problems, and Film in Moral Formation**

Jacob Cook

### **Abstract**

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns that serious Christians who carry their idealized visions of church into real communities risk destroying the real as they anxiously try realizing their dreams. As a creative layer for visualizing this possibility and the difference a focus on the concrete can make, this paper will explore the stories of two beloved, head-in-the-clouds characters in literature and film: Don Quixote and Walter Mitty. Quixote's mind is so filled with an ideal vision of chivalry that he sees and interacts with the real world and its people through those ideals, to comedic but sometimes devastating effect. Film adaptations or variations on this theme, from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) to *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* (2018), have added layers to this cautionary tale of idealism and its misplaced concreteness. Mitty's stories center on the humorous real-world effects of his escapist daydreaming. But the 2013 film adaption moves from this more traditional

rendition of the character into a stirring account of a man who quits escaping his real life, challenging as his situation is, and freely embraces the real world and its people, with all the tension, beauty, and adventure this entails. This paper will interpret these recent film adaptations through Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality as the basis for a moral critique of idealistic world visions, both in film and in religion. And it will argue that moral idealists who want to make the world better—always at risk for misplacing the concreteness of their wish-dream visions—would do well to step back into reality for a while, discover inchoate crises and practical problems, and explore whether and how their visionary religious resources can creatively engage real-world troubles. To this end, this paper will engage Willis Jenkins's account of the relationship between religious cosmological visions and practical problems.

## **Egyptian Religious Films and TV Series: Melodrama, Spirituality, and Entertainment**

Egor Korneev

### **Abstract**

Between the 1950s and 2000s, Egyptian filmmakers produced many historical feature films and TV series dedicated to Prophet Muhammad, his closest associates, and other prominent figures of the Islamic "medieval" history. Many of them became famous in Egypt and other Arab countries and formed a distinctive genre of *aflam diniya* (religious films) and *musalsalat diniya* (religious TV series) – works that interestingly combined Islamic religiosity with melodramatic

storylines and entertaining episodes (belly dancing, singing).

The 1950s – 1970s are often considered "the golden age" of Egyptian religious films when directors were addressing Islamic history to forge the Arab national identity. During this formative period, Egyptian directors came up with a distinctive attitude to depicting Islam, historical events, and personalities that later became the foundation of a broader tradition of Arab historical cinema. This genre became even more appealing in the late 1990s – early 2000s, a period that in Egypt was marked by unprecedented Islamization of the mediascape.

In the following presentation, I would like to trace the transformation of this cinematic genre in the second half of the 20th century and stress its unique traits. Also, I will investigate how the imagery and content of *aflam* and *musalsalat diniya* were changing in relation to the social and political situation in Egypt and beyond. Thus, I will pay attention to how these movies combined religious and secular discourses, addressed political problems in the country, and reacted to the Islamization of society. In addition, I will shed light on the representation of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) within *aflam* and *musalsalat diniya*, as it is the only Egyptian cinematic genre with a predominantly positive representation of this religious stream especially before the 2010s.

Some of the prominent scholars of Egyptian film and television (Lila Abu Lughod, Joel Gordon, Hatsuki Aishima) touched upon the genre of religious films and TV series in their works, but mainly in a critical and critical genre concise way. Therefore, the research aims to fill this historiographical gap and

explore the representations of Islam within *aflam* and *musalsalat diniya*.

Friday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 11:00 am, session 2, room 3B05

## **The Real-World Impact of Horror Cinema**

Bryan Stone and Rebekah Neuberger

### **Abstract**

Movies entertain and provide an escapist diversion; they also have an incredible power to shape behavior, inspire social change, and influence reality by helping us imagine (and seek) alternative worlds. Some psychologists and psychotherapists have even incorporated forms of “cinematherapy” into their clinical practice. This form of therapy builds on the emotional connections we experience with cinematic images, music, characters, and situations to inspire resilience, healing, and growth. These emotional connections, moreover, can be powerful in the case of movies that have compelling religious or spiritual dimensions.

The life-changing impact of cinema on attitudes and behavior is no less true in the case of horror movies. Consider those persons who, having seen *Jaws* (1975), are still afraid to wade out into the ocean years later. While some horror movies indeed exacerbate anxieties, cause us to lose sleep, or occasion anti-social behavior, others provide influential social commentary, caution us about the potential devastation caused by climate change, or help us contemplate questions of death, guilt, or the possibility of an afterlife.

Recent studies have shown that watching horror movies produces physiological and psychological responses that can help some persons manage their fears, cope with stress and anxiety, or even build up distress tolerance through repeated interactions with the very objects, images, or situations that provoke their fear. Our paper explores some of the primary ways that the cinema of horror has a real-world impact, with a focus on the benefits of that impact and the potential for religious and theological engagement.

Our paper also considers the religious significance of psychoanalytic and philosophical perspectives on the personal and cultural impact of horror movies—for example, Robin Wood’s argument (1979) that horror movies produce on screen a “return” of repressed values, ideals, and desires. Our paper asks how religious elements contribute to the restoration of repression by decisively defeating evil and achieving a “happy ending,” on one hand, or to the more revolutionary potential of horror films, on the other—especially insofar as the monstrous is ambiguous or even sympathetic, thereby destabilizing oppressive moral conditioning.

## ***House but with Demons: Interpreting The Exorcist as Medical Drama***

Mike Heyes

### **Abstracts**

Authors such as Michael Cuneo (*American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty*) and Philip C. Almond (*The Devil: A New Biography*), have contended that the return of exorcism to the United States is due largely to the success of *The Exorcist* (1974). This return

had several ramifications upon the US, from the personal (individuals requesting exorcisms) to the epistemological (the address of exorcistic practices among professionals in the field of psychology) to the socio-political (the rise of spiritual warfare ideas that influenced – and continue to influence – political elections). However, scholarly critiques of *The Exorcist* have tended to appeal to the *zeitgeist* of the period for its influence or to assume the presence of such influence and focus on other elements of the film (e.g., the child-villain, reading tortured and contorted bodies, critiquing gendered relationships, etc.).

All of these critiques are valuable and informative, but I will argue that they miss the genre-bending properties of the film. Rather it is only by contemplating the film not as a horror movie but rather as a medical drama that we can begin to understand the effect which *The Exorcist* had upon its viewers. By adopting a structure not dissimilar to that of popular medical dramas like *House, M.D.* (2004-2012), *The Exorcist* presents a series of symptoms followed by several faulty diagnoses which eventually lead to correctly identifying the malady (in this case, possession). However, whereas medical dramas tend to depict their doctoral protagonists as the sleuths who reveal the cause of someone's suffering, *The Exorcist* depicts medical doctors as bumbling, testing processes as painful and unnecessary, and medical practitioners as willfully ignorant of the "obvious" supernatural cause of Regan's disease. In so doing, the film makes modern medicine monstrous and misinformed, gives the demonic an authoritative voice, and opens an intellectual space for the audience to view the practice of exorcism as a valuable

alternative to medical and psychological treatment.

## **Life, Reality and Recognition through the Eyes of a Child in *The Sixth Sense***

Jeremy Punt

### **Abstract**

*The Sixth Sense* is a gripping film that interacts with various religious notions and theological sentiments, which probably contributed to its success and popularity. A 1999 Hollywood Pictures and Spyglass Entertainment release, the movie explores the relationship between a child psychologist, haunted by a painful memory and a frightened, confused young 8-year-old boy enduring unwanted visits from the restless inhabitants of the spirit world. Besides explicit themes such as experiences of life after death, eternal rest or other related themes, the movie also draws the supernatural into everyday reality by highlighting the key role of recognition in people's lives, as well as the significance of coming to terms with one's reality, and especially the role of children in this regard. The purpose of the presentation is to explore these three components, in particular, by showing how the film portrays a deeper reality by using notions and ideas that feature prominently in Christian religion and theology. More particularly, the film's emphasis on the key notions of awareness and recognition, or their absence in human lives, resonates with biblical sentiments of understanding and even conversion. The film's grounding of awareness and recognition in a small child is important for the child's role, and perhaps unwittingly invokes biblical notions such as Jesus'



preferential treatment of children in the New Testament. Deeper dimensions is to be found in the subtle twists and turns and ambiguities in the film, which are not unlike similar textual moves in the New Testament when it comes to cognition, often at once simple yet complex, at least for different people. Ambiguity remains also in the overarching setting as well as genre of film, which has been promoted as a thriller, building suspense related to awareness of events rather than the events themselves, and in the end projects an interesting yet complex understanding of human life informed by religious notions which has to be unlocked by a child.

Friday, June 10 <sup>th</sup> , 3:30 pm, session 1, room 3B05
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### ***Mother!* Nature: Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!*, the Anthropocene, and Ecotheology**

Zachary Ingle

#### **Abstract**

Few films this century have been as divisive as Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!* (2017). Numerous critics included the film in their "top ten of the year" lists, despite its infamy as one of the few films to receive the dreaded "F" Cinema score rating from exit audiences, who reportedly expected a more traditional star-driven, horror film, not an art film with overt biblical allegories and graphic violence (particularly the infamous infanticide). *Mother!* is one of several major American films in the last decade that heavily featured themes of creation (*The Tree of Life* [2011], Aronofsky's previous film, *Noah* [2014])

and/or theocentric environmental activism (*First Reformed* [2017]). Aronofsky has proved himself as invested in religious themes as much as almost any major contemporary filmmaker, perhaps reaching its furthest extent thus far with *Mother!* While a whirlwind of Hebrew Bible and New Testament references (with Aronofsky's interest in extrabiblical Jewish and Gnostic traditions also on display) abound, the film also becomes a sermon on environmental destruction and an indictment of the Anthropocene (as evident also in *Noah*, cf. Handley, Moore/Shapiro). In this presentation, I address the film's biblical and ecological motifs in light of ecotheology. *Mother!* also speaks to the culture wars, especially in how religious communities battle over issues like climate change and "creation care" in some Christian circle (particularly among US evangelicals).

### **Adamic Myth and Symbols of Evil as Prophetic Voice in Lars von Trier's Cinema**

Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran

#### **Abstract**

The films of Lars von Trier are notorious for being disturbing and even traumatizing. Although considered extreme cinema they are ironic, and even humorous, belying the centrality of evil in the films. Yet von Trier's palette is evil with each film painting a different facet of evil. The deadly seriousness with which the films excavate evil is further obscured by the fact that their perspective is antithetical to pervasive beliefs about evil which minimize or abandon the concept of

evil. I contend that von Trier's films are always confrontational, exposing not only external evil but the complicity of the spectator in personal and structural evil. To accomplish this, the films are sourced in myth and symbol, assembling a vast network of evil in his films through image, sound, style, and narrative, all reaching back to the Adamic myth to excavate evil. Some of the films reflect this myth through a Gospel lens of the Christian tradition (*Images of a Relief, Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark*). Others are additionally layered with ancient, literary, or new myths, founded on a denial of the sacred and elevation of secular humanism. Each myth illumines and judges the tension between evil and good and the consequences of our actions, whether fruitful or futile. These myths and their ensuing symbols embodied in image, sound, and style in the films, are analyzed in this paper through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's view of the Adamic myth and symbols of evil, expressed in multiform ways and means, including provocative subjects, violence, sexuality, image against content, and sound against image. The unseen spiritual conflict generated by such evil acts as a centrifugal force exploding outward, not merely to traumatize the spectator but to irreparably shake their paradigm of evil and rob them of any shred of denial of their complicity in it. This, I suggest, is the films' prophetic voice in the tradition of the biblical prophets. The spectator is forced to struggle with and decipher the truth that remains.

## **The Filmic Spectacle and the Printed Apocalypse: Allegories of Media in *Metropolis***

Emily Pothast

### **Abstract**

At the heart of Fritz Lang and Thea Von Harbou's futuristic fantasy *Metropolis* (1927) is the *Maschinenmensch*, a robotic replica of a human woman crafted by the scientist Rotwang and employed as an apparatus to manipulate and incite the laborers whose work provides the foundation for a highly stratified social and economic system. As Rotwang gives his creation the visage of the saintly Maria, Freder, the son of the wealthy industrialist who owns the city, enters a cathedral and sees a monk preaching from the Book of Revelation. An image of a page of text from Revelation appears on the screen. It is set in a Blackletter typeface and illustrated with a woodcut of the Whore of Babylon. Later in the film, Rotwang has his *Maschinenmensch* give a performance for an audience of wealthy men in which she recapitulates the pose depicted in the woodcut.

The inclusion of this image in *Metropolis* calls for a reading of the *Maschinenmensch's* performance in the context of the history of printing in Germany—particularly the central importance of illustrations of the Apocalypse during the first century of what Benedict Anderson has termed “print capitalism” (c. 1440-1540). Through this pairing, the social and technological power of the filmic spectacle is associated with the society-wide transformations afforded by the printing press in the 15th and 16th centuries, as well as the

use of media to interpret history through an apocalyptic lens.

This paper considers the parallel between early printing and early film, which is suggested by the presence of this image, reading *Metropolis* as an allegory of the power of media to ideologically and spiritually shape society. It considers the role of religion, economics, race, and gender in the spectacle of the *Maschinenmensch*, using this powerful discursive image to pose open questions about the ongoing roles played by film and media in a capitalist society.

## **The Incarnated Spirituality of Liliana Cavani**

Peter Ciaccio

### **Abstract**

One of the earliest women directors to gain wide attention in European Cinema, Liliana Cavani (b.1933) comes from a rural milieu in Northern Italy and began her career in RAI, the heart of mainstream Italian culture production, first as a documentarist. She directed groundbreaking tv productions (1961-1965), such as *History of the Third Reich*, *The Stalin Years*, *Women in the Resistance*, and *Philippe Pétain - Vichy on Trial*.

Her gentle shift towards fictional production came with *Francis of Assisi* (1966), a non-hagiographical bio-pic, that offered a new look on the saint. Francis is portrayed as a European youth leader showing the way towards a new society, thus anticipating the 1968 student movements.

Spirituality in Cavani's movies is tied to an earthly dimension: Heaven lives on Earth, the

divine lives in the human. It is a hidden tie, just as in St.Paul's, St.Augustine's, and Martin Luther's theology the Glory of Christ is hidden in His shameful death on the Cross.

Francis dies invoking the earth, and his last wish is to touch the ground: it is a kind of *sub contraria specie* spirituality. For Cavani's Francis, Heaven *is* the earth, and the last ones *are* the first ones, in a strikingly faithful interpretation of Christ's life as presented by the Gospels. Francis is a key figure for Cavani, who directed no less than two remakes of her own 1966 film, one in 1989 and the other in 2014, her last movie so far.

For Cavani Francis' spirituality exposes the sinful violence of political and religious power, like in other movies, such as *Galileo* (1968), *The Cannibals* (1970), and *The Night Porter* (1974).

Even in telling a story about Tibetan yogi *Milarepa* (1973), Cavani's eye looks for a spiritual meaning that can only be reached by falling on the ground or even *underground*.

Like Jesus, Francis, Galileo, Antigone, and others, in her works she chooses the point of view of the powerless margin. Only if we acknowledge it, the margin can become a new centre, only if we accept earthly and bodily heaviness, we can elevate spiritually.

Friday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 3:30 pm, session 2, room 4B43

## ***God's not Dead* and its Correlation to the Christian Persecution Complex**

Dan B. Johnson, Jr.

### **Abstract**

This article engages in close analysis of how the *God's Not Dead* series mirrors an evangelical perspective of religious liberty within United States higher education and the public school system. Specifically, the seminal film addresses the narrative of Christian privilege and social status ambiguity and their correlation to the prevailing norms on secular universities. It also reflects the way evangelical students encounter and wrestle with spiritual struggles and how these students resolve their spiritual struggles. The sequel, *God's Not Dead 2* (2016), reflects the evangelical perspective on the separation of church and state and how it correlates with proselytism and the United States public school system. Microaggressions and macroaggressions that occur amidst adverse campus climates is also reflected. The third installment, *God's Not Dead: A Light in Darkness* (2018), emphasizes the institutional betrayal that evangelicals may feel on secular college campuses. It also sheds light on how evangelicals navigate religious pluralism and feelings of religiocentrism and insularity. The latest installment, *God's Not Dead: We the People* (2021), showcase scenarios in which the Common Core State Standards Initiative undermine individuals who support a biblical worldview. Negative reviews of the *God's Not Dead* series claim that each of the installments

bolster a type of persecution complex in which protagonists cling to grandiose delusions of injustice. This stance reflects a popular notion that Evangelicals' claims of silencing, injustice, and discrimination are invalid and does not compare to the injustices that other targeted religious and social minorities face on college campuses. Positive reviews of the series insist that the installments accurately depict an environment in which some non-Christian instructors and students generally have a lack of concern for anti-Christian incidents occurring on secular universities and public-school campuses and are particularly biased against students from Christian backgrounds. This stance reflects a popular notion that social status ambiguity shapes the perception of Evangelicals into believing that the prevailing campus norms are hostile towards them and their values.

## **Protestant Voices on Film: An Ongoing Tendency**

Wouter van Grootheest

### **Abstract**

This paper makes an ongoing exploration of existing views and visions on film, cinema and leisure time in the group of specific traditional and orthodox Protestant churches (the so-called pietistic believers, puritans, Hes 1972), in the Netherlands during the period from 1930 to 1970. Thissen (2019) quotes Dibbets (2006) that cinema in the Netherlands from around the Second World War has never become pillarized like radio and television. Pillarization is a typical Dutch phenomenon that organizes activities along ideological lines

in the political, social and cultural field, in the form of practices.

The Dutch Protestants were neutral towards the emerging film until the rise of the narrative film, and ignored it after WWII, out of a wider social unease about the experience of leisure.

One source central to Thissen's argument is the report of the General Synod of the Reformed Churches (GKN, 1950-1952). However, this sociological characterization, together with the data on cinema visits, by reformed young people according to CBS (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1957), says little about the deeper convictions of (smaller) orthodox protestant denominations. In fact: they seem to be absent in these figures and data from CBS. The category 'Gereformeerden' (reformed) is possible too broad and need specification.

Based on the use of an environmental concept within cinema historiography, as argued by Thissen/Van der Velden (2018), one of the five perspectives mentioned can be explored in more detail. This concerns the stories within a certain population that were given a certain authority through magazines by formal and informal leaders (church elites).

This paper aims to provide a first step in this direction. By making a quantitative analysis of articles on film, cinema and leisure time, in a database with four (strict) orthodox Protestant magazines (1930-1970), it may provide a detailed supplement to the (Dutch) studies mentioned.

Zooming in may reveal more data and discussion that will enrich the earlier findings within the research upon Protestants, Film and The Netherlands.

## ***The Twilight Zone* as Religion: Rod Serling's Fight for Racial Justice**

Marcos Norris

### **Abstract**

In September of 1955, an all-white jury acquitted the two men accused of murdering Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy of color who was abducted, brutalized, and sunk into the Tallahatchie River after a white woman accused Till of propositioning her. Soon after the trial concluded, film and television writer Rod Serling was inspired to write a teleplay about the trial, but networks captive to the demands of advertising agencies censored the story beyond recognition, excising all evidence of racial conflict from the script. When Serling produced season one of *The Twilight Zone* in 1959, critics and fellow auteurs were surprised that Serling, who already had three Emmys under his belt, would write science fiction, which many considered to be a lesser genre. For Serling, however, science fiction was a kind of trojan horse; after all, a show about alien spaceships, far-away galaxies, and technologically advanced future societies posed little threat to advertising agencies, who failed to see through the show's thinly veiled analogies; Serling took advantage of the fact, disguising hard-hitting social critique as mere fantasy. Moreover, as executive producer of *The Twilight Zone*, Serling had unprecedented control over the final product, and in the show's fifth season he aired "I Am the Night-Color Me Black," an episode about a white man, Jagger, who, in defense of a black man, kills a white supremacist. Jagger is executed for the crime, and the town is shrouded in

literal darkness. When pressed for a theological explanation of the phenomenon, Reverend Anderson, the town's black minister, says that the darkness is due to their hatred—the white person's hatred of black people, certainly, but also Jagger's hatred of the racist. Many *Twilight Zone* episodes are "religious" in nature, building fictional worlds around morally charged issues, but "I Am the Night—Color Me Black" is the most religious episode by far, urging its viewers, no matter their race or the extent to which they have been persecuted, to love their enemies as themselves. Overcoming the censors, Serling transformed television into a religious vehicle for racial justice and social good.

## **The Seventh Seal: Bergman on Mortality**

Barry Berko

### **Abstract**

*The Seventh Seal* directed by Ingmar Bergman addressed complex issues of evading death from a Christian perspective with his depiction of a Crusader knight returning from a ten-year sojourn to conquer the Holy Land, returning home to find it enmeshed in the Black Death. The film is one of the only visual montages showing the plague that swept across Europe during the Dark Ages. Religious, social, and political upheaval are depicted throughout the film, examining how a Christian society responds to a sharpening awareness of mortality and the simultaneous collapse of society. This presentation will analyze how Bergman represents the crisis facing European Christian society, and shows how when confronted with crisis, the dogma that informs

religious life attempts to make sense of catastrophe.

Throughout *The Seventh Seal*, the victory over Death is a battle that is being waged against the consolations of Christianity. The Seventh Seal opens on a rocky overlook of a beach with the sun barely rising in the distance, and it is a scene that portrays an earth before any hint of humanity. Bergman is pointing out how nature had its own existence before human conceptions and realities of mortality entered the picture. By encountering the plague sent by God, it is forcing the protagonists to reckon with their conceptions of God. In this way, Bergman foreshadows the modern mind, and is a precursor of the skepticism that enveloped Europe in the second half of the millenia.

Bergman's ability to portray the great questions of man's mortality, whether as merely a part of nature, or with religious belief positing a life above and beyond nature is the masterful predicament that he elicits with the iconic image of Death himself hovering like a specter throughout the film. This grand symbolism juxtaposed with beautiful natural imagery heralded a new phase in world cinema, in which major themes could be examined as they had been throughout the ages in different art forms. The age-old questions of the meaning of life and faith versus doubt under examination from the perspective of Christian medieval thought, gets some airing out with the skeptical stance of this 20<sup>th</sup> Century filmmaker, transplanting the existential dilemma to medieval times. The sunny Swedish disposition of the family that survives, carrying on during pale, dark times, gives voice to the simple faith of the peasant who persists even though the religion

that they had put faith in has seemingly failed them.

## The 2024 International Conference on Religion and Film

Friday afternoon at 5:15, there will be a short introduction to the next International Conference on Religion and Film by Jeanette Solano. Dr. Jeanette Reedy Solano was born in Hollywood, CA. and has always loved film but didn't start making her own films till 2010. She earned her Masters and Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and is presently an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She served on the Steering Committee and later as Co-Chair of The American Academy of Religion's Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group from 2008-2020. Her new book, *Religion and Film: The Basics* (Routledge Press, 2022) is hot off the presses. Dr. Solano is co-chairing of the committee hosting and planning the next International Conference of Religion and Film to be held in the Hollywood-Pasadena area (Southern California, USA) in the Summer 2024 and hopes to see you there!





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