1

Seeing the Unseen

Film as a Religious Experience

> Seeing is not natural, however much we might think it to be.
> —Marcus Banks, visual anthropologist

> The task I'm trying to achieve is, above all, to make you see.
> —D. W. Griffith, filmmaker

It was the summer of 1987. A group of rambunctious teenage boys in a conservative village in rural India decided to skip school, hop on a bus, and travel 20 miles east to the big city of Cochin. The boys were on a covert operation with one simple mission in mind: to watch a foreign film. An English flick, they were convinced, would deliver the enticing concoction of sex, drugs, and special effects that pushed far beyond the Bollywood boundaries.

To the boys' dismay, the only foreign film showing that day was from the equally conservative country of Japan. They were disappointed, but then they noticed the movie poster. It showed a seminude woman, pinned under a naked man with his hands cupping her breast. Another poster showed a woman shamelessly spreading her legs across the face of a man who appeared to be gaping into her groin. The boys silently agreed this was the film they would watch. They looked around and slowly snuck into the theater.

It only took a few minutes for the boys to realize that they had been taken for a ride. The film was about a primitive tribe in Japan. The suggestive posters were part of the tribe's attire. The alluded sex scenes were nothing but sporadic depictions of their tribal lifestyle. For the boys, the only good thing that came out of the experience was the fresh cold air of the air conditioner blowing in their jaded faces.

Within a few scenes, everyone was asleep. All except one—me. I could not sleep. The visuals were too captivating for me to look away. The scenes pulled me right into the middle of the exotic world that unfolded on the screen. Each frame had an emotional tone that resonated with the inherent connection between the animal world, the human world, and nature. The tribal life of the characters, often blurring the line between humans and beasts, made me laugh and cry simultaneously. This tribe was so distant yet so close; its people were right in front of me. Their world was strange yet familiar. Before I realized it, I had lost myself in their story. The film was a virtual vehicle into its diegetic world. For me, the film was a transcendent experience.

Little did I know that I was watching the masterpiece of a legendary filmmaker—Shohei Imamura, the only Japanese director to win the prestigious Palme d'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival two times. The film I saw was *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama-bushi kô*; 1983), now considered a modern classic by critics around the world.

The film tells the story of a tribal community in a remote Japanese island that exists under constant threat of famine and food deprivation. The villagers devise a strange custom to ensure their survival: everyone who turns seventy embraces voluntary death to make room for the next generation. This morbid custom is performed much like a sacred ritual. The elderly candidates leave their home on their seventieth birthday to climb the sacred mountains of Narayama, where they eventually starve themselves to death. The villagers understand life as a journey to the sacred mountains. The climb of Narayama is allegorical to a soul's ultimate ascent to its place of belonging.

The protagonist of the film is a family matriarch, Orin, who has just turned sixty-nine. The story revolves around her preparation for the sacred suicide. She sets the family affairs in order by arranging the marriage of her widower son, Tatsuhei, and disclosing the secret trout-fishing spot to her daughter-in-law, Tama. She even finds a temporary sexual partner for Risuke, whom all women in the village find repulsive.

The ritual is an act of sacrifice, but not all candidates are as calm

and consenting as Orin. Tatsuhei's neighbor, for instance, must tie his father's arms and legs and drag him to his death, mercilessly ignoring his cry to live. Orin's family is prepared to renounce the tradition to save her life, but her determination is unflinching. In the emotionally charged climax, a reluctant Tatsuhei carries Orin on his back and leads her on the fateful trek.

Suddenly, the snow begins to fall. As Orin staggers through the slippery trails of Narayama, we almost feel the biting cold of death. She is grateful for this unexpected outpouring of snow, because it ensures a faster death by freezing in lieu of starvation. In the end, out of the blinding mist hovering over the mountains, Orin's smiling face emerges. In Imamura's visual poetry, death suddenly becomes a graceful event of beauty and elegance.

Seeing *The Ballad of Narayama* was, as far as I can remember, my first introduction to "world cinema." It was also the day I realized film's unmitigated power to transcend time and space and serve as a virtual portal into an unknown world. Watching this film was nothing less than a profound spiritual experience. The emotive power of the story instantly connected me to the life of "the other" and inspired a longing deep within me to rediscover the story of my own life.

Film as a Religious Encounter

Growing up in India, I was accustomed to the idiosyncratic relationship Indian viewers have with cinema. Unlike Western audiences, who tend to watch films in contemplative silence, the viewers in India are inclined to respond emotionally, instantly, and spontaneously to the film. The viewers in India tend to interact with the filmic world through a vicarious identification with the actors, often by singing and dancing along or whistling or booing at the actors. It is quite common to see the audience shouting or screaming at the screen when the plight of the protagonist seems to go awry. This interactive nature of film viewership makes it a participatory experience, enabling the audience to engage with the boisterous world projected on the screen.[1]

Film is an ordinary people's art form. It tells the stories of their life—triumphs, tragedies, and everything in between. Like religion,

1. "It would appear that the spectator subject of the Hindi cinema is positioned rather differently from that of much western cinema. In fact, even [at] the most overt level, Indian cinema audience behavior is distinctive: involvement in the film is intense, and audience [sic] clap, sing, recite familiar dialogue with the actors, throw coins at the screen (in appreciation of the spectacle) 'tut-tut' at emotionally moving scenes, cry openly and laugh and jeer knowingly" (Thomas 1985: 116).

film teaches us to respond to various life events and shows how to attribute meaning to these experiences. "Movies function as a primary source of power and meaning for people throughout the world," argues film professor Robert Johnston. "Along with the church, the synagogue, the mosque and the temple, they often provide people stories through which they can understand their lives" (2006: 13).

Of course, there are some films that portray stereotypical characters performing clichéd (im)moral tales. But today film has become a soul-searching medium, shaping the religious ethos of our postmodern mind. The infinite chasm between "secular" and "sacred" has collapsed in our world, allowing religion to reposition itself and reemerge in new shapes and forms—a process Christopher Deacy describes as "religious mutation" (2005: 27). While institutional religion is declining on a steep curve, "spirituality" is climbing up the same curve, becoming a compelling sociocultural phenomenon. "It is not the case that religion is fading with the secularization of society," say Martin and Ostwalt. "Rather religion is being popularized, scattered and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions. We find ourselves in a contradictory age in which secularity and religious images coexist" (Martin and Ostwalt 1995: 157).

Also, the very act of going to the movies has become much like a religious ritual in our society today. Christopher Deacy observes, "In a matter analogous to traditional institutions such as the church, groups of people file into a theater at a specified time, choose a seat, and prepare with others for what could be said to amount to a religious experience" (2001: 4). Plate also notes how film viewing becomes "a social activity that alerts our interactions in the world. . . . Even if viewers do not know the people next to them in the movie house, their outlooks on the world, and thus also their social interactions, have been changed because of the film they have seen" (2003: 5). It is this opportunity to partake in a shared experience that brings people together into a movie theater and worship hall irrespective of their age, education, or social status. This is perhaps why we still patronize theaters even though movies are readily available from the comfort of our homes.

It is also believed that film creates "a cinematic experience that is said to be felt long before it is understood" (Deacy and Ortiz 2008: 201). The success of a film depends on viewers' identification with characters. As we see a reflection of our own selves in the characters of a film, we participate in their lives and even reinvent our own life story.

Therefore, a good film has transitive meanings, which can take the viewers beyond what it has intended, enabling them to discover their own meanings.

Film, like religion, functions as a narrative of culture. "Religion is (among other things) a narrative-producing mechanism," argues Melanie Wright. "And in this respect can be likened to both literature and the cinema" (2007: 4). In the same vein, Andrew Greeley also notes, "Religion is story before it is anything else and after it is everything else, as hope-renewing experiences are captured in symbols and woven into stories that are told and retold" (Bergesen and Greeley 2000: 15). Humanity has always engaged in storytelling. We make sense of the world around us in the form of stories. We write biography to share our own personal story, history to narrate the story of our society, and mythology to describe the story of the cosmos. Religion finds resonance with these cosmic narratives that we often call "myths."

A myth is essentially a story that "functions symbolically for a community to provide it with meaning and identity," and therefore "even films, can function as myths" (Lyden 2008: 212). Religion and film have similar goals in the sense that "both endeavor to make manifest the otherwise unpresentable" (Wright 2007: x). Just as religion creates mythologies to verbalize abstract truths, film creates "live myths" to visualize the intangible expressions that embody the norms and values that shape our culture. According to John Lyden, "The success or failure of a film largely correlates with whether it connects with viewers, that is, whether it is a 'live' myth that can speak to the worldview and values of a particular audience. In this way films can operate like religions for them" (2008: 217).

Film ensures not only the continuation of older myths but also the creation of new ones. The religious significance of film, according to Plate, lies in the fact that it has the power to change "the beliefs and practices, the myths and rituals, the symbolism and structures, of religion" (2003: 8). This change takes place through a "world-making process," which uses time and space as raw materials to build bridges between the world "out there" and the world "in here." We can see how film finds religious resonance in popular culture by participating in this myth-making process through film series such as Matrix trilogy (Neo, "the One," who escapes from the virtual prison created by artificial intelligence and comes back to save the rest of the world) and the Star Wars franchise (Luke Skywalker's journey in search of his identity guided by the "force").

In this way, according to Bryant, "movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely that they provide us with archetypical forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society" (Bryant 1982: 106). The heroic figure of a myth is on a journey, which dramatizes the conflicts we all face in life: choosing the right over the wrong. The hero teaches us how we should act when adversity strikes in the course of our lives, much in the same way we look up to heroes in television and film, hoping that their journey will help us overcome the obstacles we face in our own life journey toward purpose and meaning. The journey of the hero may be depicted on the screen as an adventurous trip to outer space, but in reality, it reflects our own journey to self-discovery.

Francis Cho, for example, talks about how certain films address the religious phenomena of attention and contemplation by imparting "a non-cognitive way of seeing" (2003: 78). The stylistic innovation of filmmakers such as Terrence Malik in *Tree of Life* (2001) and Bae Yong-kyun in *Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?* (1989) makes each of their films a visual meditation, where the viewers are invited to live in the "present" of their characters. Francis Cho considers this to be "a real-time experience, in which the camera holds our attention on an object for a duration of its (rather than our) choosing." (2003: 118). These types of films act as meditative and contemplative channels that expose the deep-rooted longings hidden in the dark recesses of our subconscious. Consider the following testimonial from experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky:

> I began to notice that moments of revelation or aliveness came to me from the way a filmmaker used film itself. Shifts of light from shot to shot, for instance, could be very visceral and effective. I began to observe that there was a concordance between film and our human metabolism, and to see that this concordance was fertile ground for expression. . . . I felt that the film itself had the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of spirit, and to become a form of devotion. (Bandy and Monda 2003: 261)

Such esoteric encounters are also reflected in the theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich's autobiographical account of a serendipitous encounter he had with Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels* is often used as an illustration of the revelatory nature of (fine) art.[2] He described

2. "Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself," Tillich wrote. "As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken" (Tillich 1987: 234).

this experience as a "revelation in the language of religion." "That moment has affected my whole life," says Tillich, "giving me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth" (1987: xix). As Paul Tillich suggests, "the experience is cultural in form and religious in substance. . . . It is cultural because it is not attached to a specific ritual act, but it is religious because it touches on the question of the Absolute and the limits of human existence" (2011: 68).

As in the opening story about the teenage boys in India, a film's ability to provide the viewers an experience of transcendence induces spiritual experiences in viewers' mind. In Johnston's view, the religious experience created by film is better understood in terms of transcendence—its ability to transport the viewers beyond themselves into authentic human condition or into the holy other. Johnston further argues that film has the power to provide the viewer with an experience of transcendence into authentic human condition (which he calls appropriation) or into the holy other (which he calls divine encounter). As Ken Gire notes, "What they [movies] do on a fairly consistent basis is give you an experience of transcendence. They let you lose yourself in somebody else's story" (1996: 120). Film, just like religion, can take a person beyond oneself in time and space and create "a sense of transcendence by pointing beyond the austerity and barrenness of the everyday world toward a higher, transcendent reality" (Deacy and Ortiz 2008, 43). Paul Schrader explores a specific style in certain films, which induces an experience of transcendence by gradually replacing the "abundant" cinematic means, which maintains viewer's voyeuristic interest, with "sparse" means, ultimately elevating the viewer's soul. Schrader analyzes the cinematic style of Yasujirô Ozu (1903–1963), Robert Bresson (1901–1999), and Carl Dryer (1889–1968) to observe how the monotony of the everyday world in their films signals to a transcendent reality capable of representing the invisible, the holy.[3] This transcendental style portrays "that invisible image in

3. Schrader (1988) proposes a fourfold step toward depicting transcendence in film. At first the film portrays "every day" in its coldness, with bland expressions and static composition. The notion of disparity constitutes the second step in transcendence, a potential disunity between man and his environment, which eventually culminates in a decisive action. What follows is a "decisive action," which is basically an incredible event happening within the banal reality of the everyday. It confronts the ineffable where the viewer realizes that there exists a transcendental realm of compassion to which man and nature reach out intermittently. The fourth and final stage is stasis, a static, quiescent, and organized scene, which underlines the newly derived idea of life at transcendence. The contradictory emotion is transformed to a unified and permanent expression in which man becomes one with nature again. Viewers accept this "irrationality" and thus transcend themselves to a "secondary reality."

which the parallel lines of religion and art meet and interpenetrate" (Schrader 1988: 169).

Religious Criticism of Film

Religious criticism of film strives to understand the subtle role religion plays in a film's meaning-making process. Film provides religious encounters for the postmodern mind. It reflects the ways in which we connect with transcendent realities outside the material realm. A film's interpretation of the religious dynamics of its context therefore plays a significant role in unpacking its meaning.

Film also provides insights into the dominant concerns in the society that religion needs to address. In other words, it is a way of watching a film with a lens crafted by the interpretive framework of religion. Film gradually moves from being an entertainment medium to becoming an exploratory medium, ideally serving both functions at the same time.

Gregory Watkins (2008) identifies four ways in which film becomes helpful in religious studies: First, film can communicate theological frameworks for understanding our religious experiences. Second, religious theories can be used to understand the meaning of a film. Third, film serves as "a window to another culture." And finally, film itself becomes a religious experience with its own sacramental qualities.

The methodology for cultural exegesis explained in chapter 4 focuses primarily on the third approach in Watkins's list, where film provides insights into the religious subsystem of its cultural matrix. Theological criticism falls into the remaining three categories in the list, depending on the approach adopted by the critic. This book provides a particular emphasis on the dialogical approach, where the theological framework for unpacking the meaning of the film will be borrowed from the film itself.

Martin and Ostwalt's (1995) *Screening the Sacred* classified the religious criticism of film in three basic categories: (1) theological criticism, which interprets the film in the context of traditional religious and theological categories; (2) mythological criticism, which illustrates the religious functioning of film in terms of universal archetypes; and (3) ideological criticism, which unpacks the meaning of film in relation to sociocultural ideologies.

Critiquing film from the perspective of religion involves a complex process riddled with many theoretical and methodological hurdles. There is an inherent skepticism in academia toward the discipline,

because most critics in the field are Christian theologians with an overt agenda. Malory Nye voices this concern as she observes, "It seems that the majority of those working in cultural studies have yet to be convinced that religious studies scholars are not closet theologians" (2003: 17). Wright criticizes the "theologically driven instrumentalism" of the critics, which denigrates the film to an instrument to project theological themes of a particular faith tradition. She argues their selection of films is inconsistent, the interpretation is solipsistic, and the criticism is "confined to their own personal musings."[4] Others, such as David Jasper, Brent Plate, and Steve Nolan, seem to agree with Wright while also accusing them of focusing too much on narrative and literary methods, leaving hardly any room for interdisciplinary dialogues.

This criticism seems to be valid prima facie, since the scholars who dominate the field of religious criticism of film are predominantly Western theologians. The interpretive lens immediately available to them is shaped by Judeo-Christian theology. However, it should be remembered that the films they usually work with are from Hollywood or Europe, where the underlying worldview assumptions are also shaped by the same theology. Therefore, as Sheila Nayar suggests, "we should not be too hasty . . . in interpreting this as a signal of imperialistic drives or of the analysts' inherent discriminatory nature" (2012: 36). The so-called theological baggage works to their advantage and contributes to the process of unpacking the meaning of each film.

What if we consider theology itself as another method in religious criticism of film? Even Wright, who is a strong critic of theologians, admits that any theological assumptions of the critic should not be "the starting point of theory, but . . . must not be neglected" (2007: 12). All critics have their own closet ideologies, be they theistic, nontheistic, or atheistic. In that sense, a critic's "theological baggage" is an inevitable hurdle, which can only be overcome by incorporating corrective measures into the methodology. In traditional film criticism, a movie is understood based on a specific interpretive framework, such as the author's intentions (auteur criticism), text of the movie (narrative criticism), or ideological context (feminist, Marxian, postcolonial, queer theory, etc.). In the same way, religious criticism as a theological approach can function as a critical framework with its own specific methodologies.

4. As observed by Jonathan Brant (2012: 22).

What Does Theology Have to Do with Religion?

Religious scholarship has a spectrum of vantage points. An anthropologist, for instance, might consider religion a cultural category, while a theologian might consider religion a revelation of a supranatural agent. The former is a functional approach to religion, which categorizes it as a cultural phenomenon that influences social norms, values, and worldview assumptions. The latter focuses on the substantive aspect, dealing with the belief systems and doctrinal assertions of religion.

Broadly speaking, academia in the Western world is confined to the parameters of the naturalistic precepts of the social sciences, which has no categories to conceptualize the supranatural manifestation of religion. It tries to understand religion merely from a functional perspective—perhaps the psychological experiences of individuals or cultural expressions of a community. It assumes that any substantive truth about religion is shaped entirely by cultural evolution. There are no absolute truths against which religious experiences can be evaluated or validated.

This is a biased assumption, of course, albeit a necessary one, if one needs to indulge the naturalistic precepts of scientific methodologies. However, in reality, we find ourselves living in a world where the opposite is equally true. In a post-9/11 world, truth-claims of religious groups dictate cultural behavior, challenge social structures, and even threaten social order. We witness the substantive assertions of religion shaping its cultural manifestation as much as they are also being shaped in the process of cultural evolution.

As a whole, we must come to terms with the fact that the ethical and moral codes devised by people are integrally connected to their substantive understanding of religion (or lack thereof). A person's perception of the cosmos and supranatural realities influences social values and behaviors. For example, belief in reincarnation is a substantive proposition based on the sacred texts of Hinduism, according to which human beings are caught in a cycle of births and rebirths controlled by their actions or karma. Since Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, this dogma affects the social and cultural landscapes. In the same way, many political issues that polarize the Western world today derive from the substantive claims of Judaism and Christianity.

Every religion claims to have its own established a priori theological assumptions, and determining these assumptions is crucial to under-

standing any religion. Theology deals with the substantive truths of religion and defines the cosmic relationships between human beings and transcendent entities, often in the form of personal devotion to God (or gods). Theology influences culture as much as culture influences theology. Therefore, this symbiotic relationship between theology and culture can be represented as a transactional process; figure 1.1 illustrates the relationship between the functional and substantive dimensions of religion.

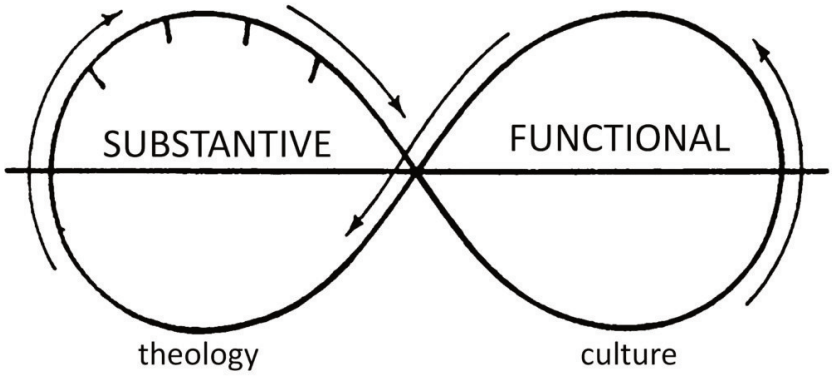

Fig. 1.1. *Functional and Substantive Dimensions of Religion*

This symbiotic figure is a dynamic system of interdependence where substantive and functional dimensions of religion both borrow from and contribute to each other through an incessant transactional process. Both theological and cultural rhetoric feed into each other through this oscillatory process.

The system loses its balance, however, when one side of the cycle overtakes the other. In a religiously conservative society, theology dominates culture. In a secularized society, in contrast, culture overpowers and shapes theology.

A religious critic of film, therefore, should wear spectacles with a theological lens on one eye and a cultural lens on the other (see table 1.1). Theological criticism will look at film "from above," observing the transcendental meanings embedded within it, while a cultural exegesis of the film will look at it "from below," paying attention to the cultural perceptions of religion within its diegetic world. An interlacing of both methodologies establishes a more holistic interpretation of the religious in film. Experience of the transcendent invoked by the film

draws attention to theological themes, while the human response to the transcendent sheds light on cultural themes.

Table 1.1

Two Lenses for Religious Interpretation of Film

Theological Lens	**Cultural Lens**
God is central to film criticism.	Humanity/culture is the focus of the criticism.
Film itself can become a religious experience.	Film is an instrument for observing religious experience or religious phenomenology.
What is God saying to us through the film?	How does culture perceive the supernatural?
Focus is on what God reveals to humanity.	Focus is on human search for the supernatural.
Downward direction: from God to human	Upward direction: from human to cosmos
The Spirit of God reveals eternal truths.	The human spirit explores the meaning of life.
Realm of thoughts	Realm of practices: myth, ritual, folklore, etc.

Theologies of religions may be otherworldly for academia, but they have significant consequences in shaping our worldviews and social behavior. Any attempt to consider religion merely as a social system (the functional dimension of religion) with no reference to its theology (the substantive dimension of religion) is nothing but a mockery of the discipline itself. An integration of the functional aspects of religion emerging from the exegetical process, and the substantive aspect of religion discovered through theological criticism, will facilitate a religious reading of the film. Therefore, in religious criticism of film, we perform methodologies from both fields in tandem, exploring God's revelation to culture as well as the cultural perception of God.

Summary

Film has grown into an authentic mode of self-expression in our postmodern world, delving deeper into human condition its abstract experiences. The recent shift in film production from studio to indie projects has accoutered filmmakers with the capacity to deal with themes that are closer to their heart, with little interference from outside agencies. As more and more films are setting out to explore existential themes and transcendent realities, film is becoming a "naked portrait of human essence" that reflects "our quest for human meaning and fulfillment" (Deacy and Ortiz 2008).

Religion is both a cultural enterprise performed by humans and a revelatory expression initiated by God. A critic should therefore combine both cultural and theological methods and consider religion an "interplay between revelation of the transcendent and the response of the human" (Turner 1981: 35). A separation between the functional and the substantive is virtually impossible in most parts of the world, where cultural phenomena are filtered through a theological lens. Both the cultural perceptions of God (religion) and God's revelation to culture (theology) in a given context can thus be explored through films.