

Introduction

Film plays a pivotal role in facilitating intercultural dialogue in our global village. The cinema of the world helps us understand and appreciate each other's cultural identity and promote harmony across the different cultures in our society. Film introduces us to the life of "the other" in an entertaining yet engaging fashion, creating cultural bridges that foster a sense of unity among our diversity.

Film is popularly described as a mirror of culture. But what is culture anyway? It is one of the multifaceted descriptors scholars have coined to categorize a number of interrelated observable phenomena in a society. Whichever way we choose to define culture, one of its primary components is religion—a belief and worldview system, which manifests itself in variety of forms such as mythology, rituals, symbols, and so on.

According to traditional views of (Western) academia, religious beliefs in a society are shaped by its cultural presuppositions. But in most parts of the world, cultural phenomena are filtered through the spectacles of religion. To do authentic religious criticism of film, therefore, one must interlace the methodologies of theological criticism with critical methods borrowed from the field of culture studies.

In this book, I posit that cultural anthropology and theology offer two distinct yet intrinsically connected theoretical frameworks to formulate a more holistic reading of religion from world cinema. I will propose an integrated methodology for religious criticism of film in which we look at religion as a subsystem of culture and observe how religious experiences depicted on the screen are mediated through the personal bias of the auteur and the context in which the film is produced.

We will consider Bollywood, the largest film industry in the world,

as a test case for the study of world cinema. To test the authenticity of the methodology, we will perform a case study on the Elements Trilogy—*Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1999), and *Water* (2005), an acclaimed film series from “diasporic” Bollywood. The study consists of field research conducted in India using multiple methods such as participant observation, focus groups, and ethnographic interviews with local experts, including the writer/director of the trilogy, Ms. Deepa Mehta. The case study illustrates the workings of the proposed method in critiquing a film from the perspective of religion.

In the first chapter, we will examine religions’ resemblance to film, as a narrative of culture. We will observe how film contributes to the religious sensibilities of the postmodern mind and establish the need for a new methodology for religious criticism of film, combining both cultural (functional) and theological (substantive) aspects of religion.

In the second chapter, we will establish a framework for theological criticism of film based on the many existing methodologies in this field. We will see that even a film with no explicit religious content can provide religion-like experiences for its viewers and initiate meaningful conversation between film and theology.

In the third chapter, I will propose a methodology for cultural exegesis of film, which decodes ethnographic data from the diegetic world of a film. The methodology uses an interlacing of (a) virtual participant observation, which assumes viewers’ virtual interaction with the filmic world; (b) auteur criticism, which explores the subjectivity and reflectivity of the filmmaker; and (c) context criticism, which examines various cultural concerns within the context in which the film is produced, distributed, and consumed.

In the fourth chapter, I will define world cinema as a global process and present Bollywood as a test case to examine the re-presentation of religion in world cinema. We will also take a brief look at critical methods applied specifically to Bollywood films and industry practices characteristic of Indian film industry.

In the fifth chapter, I will introduce the Elements Trilogy as a case study. In the words of Deepa Mehta, the auteur of the film series, “The trilogy is about politics. *Fire* is about the politics of sexuality, *Earth* is about the politics of nationalism, and *Water* is about the politics of religion.” Based on auteur criticism of the trilogy and my personal interview with Mehta, we will make a case for “diasporic Bollywood,” a cultural space from which we can observe both etic and emic perspectives on religion in Bollywood film.

In the sixth chapter, we will analyze field research conducted in India using multiple methods, such as participant observation, focus groups, and ethnographic interviews. Comparing the ethnographic data gathered from the diegetic world of the film against the data collected from the actual field, we will examine how the depiction of the “religious” in film is influenced by the reflexivity of the filmmaker and the driving concerns of the filmmaking context.

In the seventh chapter, we will conduct a religious reading of the Elements Trilogy, examining its portrayal of religion from both “functional” and “substantive” perspectives. We will observe how cultural and theological themes are emerging from the film, demonstrating the efficacy of the new methodology in doing religious criticism of film.

India is a complex country, which consists of diverse people groups with different aesthetic, linguistic, and cultural identities. It is divided geographically into different states, all of which claim their own distinctive cultural heritage in the areas of art, dance, theater, music, language, and social customs. As Roy and Jhala observe, “These traditions have local, regional, national and international orbits. They work sometimes in concert and at other times in opposition to each other. This then is the rich Indian heritage which awaits systematic and concerted address by [visual] anthropologists” (1992: 20). Needless to mention, a comprehensive study of culture is practically impossible on account of the sheer volume of customs, traditions and varied forms of their practice in a country like India. Therefore in my case study, I will only discuss the themes emerging from the trilogy, which are considered representative of the totality of the contemporary Indian culture.

Although India is considered a pluralistic country from a religious perspective, Hindus form the majority population, and Hinduism shapes the primary worldview of the society. Hinduism itself is a pluralistic conglomerate of eclectic customs, traditions, and belief systems practiced across the country. However, we can identify certain pervading belief systems that are common to all sects of Hinduism, such as the belief in a universal spirit, reincarnation, and karmic worldview. For the purpose of this book, I consider “Indian culture” as a derivative of “Hindu culture” and treat these terms somewhat as analogues. As Dwyer puts it, “Hinduism is the invisible norm, the standard default position” (2006: 136).

The terms *cinema*, *film*, *movie*, and *motion picture* have been used interchangeably throughout this book in order to represent a full-length

narrative motion picture that enacts a story, produced for the purpose of entertainment and distributed for the viewing of general public.

Even though all three films of the Elements Trilogy are considered in the case study, the research is limited to *Water* in order to avoid the field data being too exhaustive and cumbersome. This selection was made based on the fact that *Water* (a) is the final film of the series; (b) took more years to research and produce; (c) won more critical acclaim, including an Academy Award nomination; and (d) in Mehta's own words, deals with the politics of religion, which happens to be the focus of the book.

Thanks to the emergence of online social networks and Internet-based distribution companies, the exotic has arrived at our neighborhood, and the cinemas of the world are waiting at our fingertips. Although I believe that the methodology for cultural exegesis proposed in this book can be applied to films of all cultures, its validity and reliability have been tested only with one case study. I am confident that the methodology can be customized to fit films of other cultures, which I hope will be confirmed by future research involving more case studies from other cinemas of the world.