Transcending Cinematic Readings: History, Film, Religion and the Mentality of Cultures

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This modest collection of papers was refined from a one-day symposium, held at the University of Sydney in September 2006 entitled 'Eternal Sunshine of the Academic Mind,' hosted by the Society for the Study of Religion, Literature and the Arts. The reference to a Charlie Kaufman scripted film in the title of the symposium was delightfully intentional. His 2004 *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, although not referenced too heavily at the symposium itself, nevertheless represented a style of film that took the construction and reconstruction of realities, both personal and social, quite seriously amidst its entertaining exploration of Joel and Clementine's loving relationship. The question of the construction of reality remains provocatively in the background of the following papers, for each of these articles makes for another small step in outlining the approach to moving pictures taken by students of religion and of mentalities. As Berger and Luckmann discussed in 1966, there is an element of social construction to reality, but in what follows we look at a more intimate relationship: how moving pictures are engineered by religious and social assumptions and how these works of culture in turn reconfirm various understandings of the world that are, in part conditioned by religious cosmologies.[1]

This alternative approach to the study of cultural products such as motion pictures by those interested in religion takes a methodological turn away from other, more standard, approaches to film. Here the reader will not find a close engagement with the construction of the mechanics of the film, which is the focus of much work in Film Studies; rather here our authors are interested in the wider conceptual framework within which story and plot strive to make sense. In a century in which nationalism did so much to steal away the feeling of corporate emotions inspired by religion in the West, the ongoing secularisation of the twentieth century replaces our enchantment with life in a far more cultural and community context.[2] This meaning making is, at a very basic level, religious for the examples contained herein confirm, and sometimes deeply challenge the societal assumptions under which we operate. In this modern, secular world popular culture often takes on roles once reserved for religious ritual, myth and scripture. The models of life presented to us in story allow us to contemplate our own sense of existence and, indeed, some moving pictures do this much more profoundly than others and it is in the following pages that some of these works have been singled out.

It is appropriate that the following scholarly adventure in to moving pictures starts with Arash Chehelnabi's examination of expressionistic films during the Weimar years in Germany. We meet a powerful interaction between the pure ideal of the constitution of the German nation and the place film can have in problematising that ideal. Here we see how a matrix of concerns, divided between occult figures of those like Rotwang in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and outsiders such as Nosferatu in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), plug into German concerns with the spiritually *other* as a manifestation of forces outside of, and threatening to, the concept of the literal German *home*land. Freud's 1901 essay on *das unheimliche* or the un-homely comes into play, mixed, as it is in German with the national ideal of a nation based on blood ties rather than geographical habitation (in fact, up until the end of the twentieth century, the German nation was technically a blood-lineage of peoples rather than a modern multicultural/multi-ethnic state as is the case with other Western nations). Those un-German looking outsiders who threatened this blood-linked polity were seen as both religiously unnatural and the site of horror in these early films. Thus, the similarity between these figures in the rise of Expressionist German films and the place of European Jewry as not-completely German (despite their often millennia-long existence in Germany) develops a connection that makes films like Lang's and Murnau's strange precursors

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[1] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann: *The Social Construction of Reality*, New York, Anchor, 1967.
[2] See, Robert N. Bellah and Philip E. Hammond: *Varieties of Civil Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 1980.

to the anti-Semitic rage that engulfs Germany in the 1940s. In his essay Chehelnabi gives a sophisticated approach to aspects of this phenomenon.

This first article makes a bold comparison with the ability of Terrence Malick to take what is supposedly one of the great historical stories of the century – how the West defeated the combined forces of 'evil' in 1945 – and turn it into a grim meditation on the nature of war. Eric Repphun's reading of Malick's re-enchantment, with its special focus on *The Thin Red Line* (1989), introduces not only themes of transcendence into a film that seems, at first glance, decidedly unreligious, but also presents us with a style of film making that suggests a move away from accepted Western narratives as the assumed basis for film making (even though that move is made in relation to Western theorising such as the work of Paul Schrader).[3] Here I refer to the almost Buddhist style of transcendentalism that Malick is able to capture, where the beauty of the image is juxtapositioned with the almost disjointed nature of the narration. Martin Heidegger's meditations (some of which Malick worked on as a translator) seem to have had their influence, but Heidegger himself was strongly influenced by Buddhist explanations of being and it is not strange to see influences on from this Eastern religion working, through Malick's influence, to strongly challenge western film construction.[4] At around the time that *The Thin Red Line* appears in the late 1980s, a new kind of hero seems to be forming in the western aesthetic of the hero – one who is salvational, not because of the Christ-like sacrifice they make in a world of linear time and for the goal of general human improvement, but because of the bodhisattva-like ability they have to exchange their existence for the enlightenment of small groups of others, in this case the platoon fighting at Guadalcanal. In this, as Repphun suggests, Malick does much to reconfigure ideas of American cinematic story telling and in so doing can also reconfigure paths to the spiritual for those who partake of such experiences.

It is this idea that the cinema represents some haven of enchantment that we can see in operation behind Johanna Petsche's reading of Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989)*.* In essence Allen tries to produce a film that presents us with the proposition that God does not exist and so moral turpitude, even to the point of murder, will go unpunished if unnoticed by the law. This indeed is what seems to happen. Although Judah Rosenthal is guilty of the murder of his mistress, the film ends with him in the process of forgetting his crime and returning to his usual contented existence. In this way, as Petche points out, the film stands in stark contrast to the moral concerns over guilt admitted to by the murderous main character of Dostoyevsky's famous novel *Crime and Punishment.* Nevertheless something subtler is also taking place. The theme of enchantment arises in a number of papers and, it seems artistic manifestations allow us into a world of unreason where we can share in the illogical matrix of belief, even if it is little more in the belief we surrender to the story's premise. Just as Kant "…rejects all philosophical arguments for God's existence based on reason…" as Petsche writes, then it is to culture, popular culture in particular and story to where we run to escape that reason, be enchanted for a wet afternoon in the cinema, where the story itself touches, in some way on eternal concerns of human existence (as Allen's films often do), but then return to our daily, mostly rational existence and let the memory of that wet afternoon slowly fade. This is what is what takes place in Allen's masterpiece *Hannah and Her Sisters* where the comedian's own character Mickey Sachs, after a long process of trying out other people's religions, stumbles into a theatre to find that, after his long fruitless hunt for spiritual fulfilment, nothing seems more satisfying than an old Marx Brother's film and the absurdities that play themselves out on the screen.

From the cinema as a liminal space for absurdities, Suzanne Langford's paper takes us into land, which demands to be read through a spiritual paradigm. A significant amount of work has been done on the sacredness of the inner heart of Australia. Roslynn Haynes' *Seeking the Centre* (1999) illustrated the deep spiritual themes that emerge from the image of the Australian outback

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[3] Paul Schrader: *Transcendental Style in Film*, New York, De Capo Press 1988.
[4] For Buddhist influences on Heidegger see, Peter Oldmeadow: 'Approaches to the Problem of Dualism in Heidegger and Indian Yogacara Buddhism,' in Carole M. Cusack and Christopher Hartney (eds.), *Religion and Retributive Logic: Essays in Honour of Professor Garry W. Trompf*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, in press.

and dessert. More recently Felicity Collins and Therese Davis in *Australian Cinema After Mabo* (2004) highlight how new interest in the authenticity of Aboriginal spirituality has changed the way we make and see films that address the inner core of our nation. Langford's two chosen films, *Japanese Story* (2003) and *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), speak of the Outback as a powerfully transformative space where hatreds and misunderstandings can be addressed if not always resolved. Part of this transformative power comes, as Langford argues, through the ability of the Japanese character, Hiro, in *Japanese Story* to act as the 'other' through which we can see our own nation more clearly and reconsider the spiritual heart of our island, certainly in the face of unexpected death. Similarly one might argue that the brilliant, unexpected casting of Kenneth Branagh as A.O. Neville takes the culture debate to an additional level. The arrival of overseas 'stars' to enliven our stories is here overturned as the exquisite Britishness of Branagh's performance emphasises the mis-cast and mis-conceived policy of native child relocation for most of our twentieth century history. And indeed the matter of this film seems, at first glance, one that is particularly historical, but of course, neither film could succeed in the way they do without an effective, though discreet, connection to the spirituality of the land.

The spirituality of place, in this instance the Gallipoli peninsula, serves as one of the most sacred fields in the Australian psyche and now a site of annual pilgrimage for thousands of Australians. Bellah's theories of civil religion, although generated in relation to the United States, are most applicable here. As debates rage in the editorial columns of our newspapers with increasing fury each ANZAC day, we find many Australians are beginning to doubt the relevance of rituals of war-remembrance in a modern multi-cultural state where more of the population lacks any significant relationship to the war dead of our land. The dedication, however, with which young Australians pick up an enthusiasm for the ANZAC spirit and the pilgrimage to Gallipoli, is partly explained by the myth-making attached to these events. As Trevor Melksham explains, Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* addresses civil actions as decidedly sacred. It is interesting that Weir comes to make his film after his own pilgrimage to the peninsula, and at a time when the ANZAC spirit was dying with those soldiers who had fought there. Weir's film itself becomes a part of the sacred transmission of this myth and is aware of framing it with some of the deepest possible links to the heart of Western civilization, '…drawing on Classical mythology to root the ANZAC myth [inside] classical myth by creating an immortal hero upon whom to centre a cult.'

In fact since Melksham's paper was written, Richard Leonard has released his study of the mystical dimensions of Weir's cinema making.[5] Here, the way the camera captures the sacred nature of place is compared dexterously with Weir's other films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Both films tap deep into the Australian psyche, but as Melksham concludes, whose psyche is it? With over forty percent of our present population as new or second-generation Australians, that is, citizens who have settled after World War II, how will the Australian cinema's potential for revivifying and transmitting our national myths change and develop?

Perhaps the answer partly lay in cinema's ability to reduce the world to a single set of globally conditioned eyes. Mark Seton picks up on this possibility in his paper 'Cinematic Leaps of Faith.' Here in Seton's description of the Anglican Church's *CineDialogue* project, story comes alive again within religious communities, but received not by passive eyes like those at the commercial cinema, but as an almost sacramental focus for communities to meditate on and discuss. In these groups the sharing of meaning that comes from experiencing a film is extrapolated into broader concerns for human existence. Moreover, with cinema as often the site of multiple readings of narration, a need to explain character and motivation combined with the powerful manipulation of our sensory input, film does indeed make a site for deep reflection on life. Perhaps too deep. Seton's comments at the end of his paper on why the project, in the end, was closed down, say something quite interesting about the irresolvable nature of organised religion that cannot organise itself *around* the often disorganised paths of reception we have come to expect from the nature of film in particular and popular culture in general.

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[5] Richard Leonard: *The Mystical Gaze of the Cinema: The Films of Peter Weir*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2009.

There are a few common points between organised old religions and often overly organised new religions, but one thing that sociologists focus on as the most significant difference is the role of the leader. An Archbishop of Sydney, no matter how radical, must nevertheless stay, though he might fight against them, within the boundaries set by the institution on his office and his duties. If there is a charisma about him it is often derived not only from his own personality, but also from the status that radiates from his position, his robes, his title, his throne in the cathedral. A new religious group, on the other hand, most often looks to the vitality of the leader as he or she creates their own place within the group. This was very much the case with David Koresh, as he led a breakaway movement from the Branch Davidians, a group that was itself a break away from the Seventh-Day Adventists. The relevance of this group to our collection is the fact that a powerful Oscar-nominated documentary was made on this group in 1997 by William Gazecki and Dan Gifford called *Waco: Rules of Engagement*.

Many films on new religious movements (NRMs) tend to be made with a certain ignorance when religious material is being dealt with. Clear in our minds are such seeming abominations against humanity as Jonestown. The images of dead bodies strewing the Guyana compound of this Christian break-away movement led by the Reverend Jim Jones are hard to put aside once they have been seen (but even here the question remains, how many of the 900-odd dead actually wanted to die? Was this mass suicide or mass murder – it is not a simple question to answer). When *Waco* appeared I was fascinated by a film that did not rush to the standard media response when such incidents occur which is to call the group and anyone associated with it a 'crazy cult.' In fact the documentary seems most concerned with demonstrating how inept were those government forces, the ATF and the FBI in approaching this movement. When I came out of the cinema I was, like those around me, aghast at the incompetence of law-enforcement officials, as beguiled by the stumbling and contradictory answers delivered at the Congressional enquiry as I was by the burning compound. It seemed clear that, at certain levels, the U.S. government was not simply ignorant of fringe religious activity and ways of dealing with it sensitively, but was actually evil in dealing with non-standard religions.

In light of this, Tim Goldsmith's article shows how ignorant of religion the filmmakers actually were. Instead of siding with the media hysteria, they took a different route, which was to do all they could to exonerate this small religious group from any culpability in the conflagration that saw ninety men, women and children dead in the 1993 showdown. Goldsmith goes deeply into the end-time theology of David Koresh (born Vernon Howell) and concludes that, believing the final show down between the righteous and the fallen world to be taken place, the Davidians set fire to themselves. It is a proposition that the film flatly denies in order to excoriate government authorities in America. Recent expanded scholarship on the Branch Davidians by Kenneth Newport, backs up Goldsmith's conclusions[6] that the Davidians probably burnt themselves to death. Unlike Newport, however, Goldsmith explains how the reality of this situation is overridden by the power of modern cinema to present opinions as fact. It is a lesson for us all, myself in particular, to be more cautious in treating image as analogous to fact when it comes to understanding issues of faith and the actions of the faithful.

The cinematic image, however, retains its power today almost unchanged from its origins. It is a power that saw, for example, the Salvation Army almost single-handedly introduce cinema into Australia at the turn of the century as a tool of missionary activity and conversion. More recently, film as a technology itself has gone by the wayside in religious propaganda activities, and it is to the glory of dedicated souls such as Jamie and Aspasia Leonarder who run the Mu Meson film archive in Sydney, that a good deal of this heritage is preserved (for at least for as long as the film stock remains stable). Their archive is a sprawling private collection of Christian propaganda

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[6] Kenneth G. C. Newport: *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 307, "Precisely who was involved in settling the fire(s) cannot be established with complete certainty, but it seems reasonably clear that the fire was started by the Branch Davidians themselves and not by persons external to Mt Carmel (the religion's compound)."

films once shown in scripture classes, scout halls and to church groups all over Australia from the end of World War II through to the early 1980s when video took over. Thanks to the Leonarders' generosity, these museum pieces in the quest to convert and spiritually revivify the English-speaking world remain available to scholars and the public. Presently the Christian religious propaganda industry does their shooting straight to video, and vast Christian bookshops such as the Koorong chain, make these videos and DVDs available to groups but also individual Christians hoping to temper the secular assumptions of general popular culture with moving pictures that are decidedly Christian in intent.

In her paper, Elisha McIntyre remains dogged in her pursuit of themes and styles in this realm. In *Can True Love Wait* she pulls apart the operation of several films dealing with teenage sex. Here, as she shows, the issues of confirming Christian attitudes to sex does not always sail smoothly and films that spend too much time addressing the complexities of this difficult issue can lose their power in transmitting values to young Christians. Similarly there are indicators that the wider secular state impinges on the nature of these films – if only to act as a glass against which ideals of religious sexuality and morality can be reflected. Moreover, McIntyre finds that the films she examines show that Christians themselves do not have a singular response to the issue thus making the idea of the 'Christian Film' a far more nebulous phenomenon.

Our collection ends with the net-based research of Zoe Alderton. Alderton's work more generally with outsider art led her to the on-line manifestations of Christian and mystic Norbert Kox. At one level there is a theme in his expressions that plug into the Armageddon-laced discourses that David Koresh used in order to hold his small group in thrall. Kox, on the other hand, does not work intimately with a small group of Christians, but broadcasts his feelings of spirituality, and his visions, originally inspired by drug use, to the world via the internet and YouTube in particular. A reader looking at a volume on film may wonder why a study on Kox's Internet manifestations is appropriate here. I would suggest Alderton's article is the most appropriate form of study for a volume such as this because it reminds us of the possible future of the moving image. Kox's Youtube visions and lectures can be easily spread around cyberspace and his work invokes a future where a convergence of sources will take place through technology to change how we perceive of both media and popular culture. The convergence I speak of will see the television, the computer screen, the laptop and the phone screen all meld into a similar technology one day very soon. High art films will find themselves embedded in YouTube rants together with television programs streamed in real time from any part of the world (that is, if television stations continue to exist in their current form). In a way Kox's modes of religious dissemination are already in the vanguard of what is to happen. In nature of his productions, Kox melds religiosity and image so closely that he arrives at theology that cannot be separated from image. In this his taking Western spirituality to new dimensions and Alderton captures this move carefully, particularly the aesthetics of Kox's 'apocalyptic anxiety.'

As I noted at this start, these articles form themselves into a very modest step towards examining the moving image on religious studies grounds. In the end they add up to an abiding question that sits at the heart of the study of faith, that is, how far are we willing to take our working definitions of what is religious? In East Asia, for example, or the sub-continent for that matter, finding and appropriate dividing line between the religious and the secular or the generally social is in no way a simple matter. We assume, however, that in the west, this line is much more clearly demarcated. The essays in this book show how this is not the case. We have here examples of modern religiosity that is discrete, and other examples that are clearly religious by anyone's definition of what comprises faith. The study of popular culture, in this case film, from a religious studies perspective keeps this central question alive in our minds and keeps our focus on what we see on our daily lives, with we are being entertained any while we think we are tuning off. An answer to where to draw this great line will not come soon, perhaps never, but I like to think it is one of the rays of eternal sunshine that keep alight our academic minds.