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Spectacle of Redemption: Film as Religious Iconography¹

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It's a cold winter night and I am waiting in line to buy tickets to the movie, *Sideways*. The majority of the people in line are dressed in what I like to call "geek chic." Many sport dark-framed eyeglasses and fashionably mussed hair, paired with neatly fitted blue jeans and vintage-style sneakers. Their androgynous, age-less, urban style is the uniform of the new "intelligentsia" found in coffee shops, bookstores, and any other "artsy" locale. While these moviegoers resemble each other, they do not reflect the current "mainstream" fashion of Jacksonville. In fact, it is the disdain for popular, hackneyed fads that unites them and others like them, into their own "trendy" group. Before it was aggressively advertised and nominated for numerous awards, the movie *Sideways* attracted a devoted following in this "hep" group. As I file into an available row in the theater it occurs to me that the rows are like pews and we "chic geeks" are not an audience, but a congregation, engrossed by the "message" of the film.

The interaction between religion and pop culture has been documented at a frenzied pace in the last decade. The two fields are aspects of society which overlap; sometimes clashing, sometimes

fusing, but certainly engaging in dialogue. One finds oneself in the midst of a moral battle field where faith institutions and artists vie for control of the content of television shows, commercials, and films; where clothing, accessories, bumper stickers, and pop music display religious insignia, and a preacher's sermon may include allusions to *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dr. Phil*. Institutional religion is no longer considered the primary source of such a value system.

Religious studies scholars have noted this phenomenon, and as a result, the relationship between popular culture and religion has been the focus of much attention. In their book *Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium*, Richard Cimino and Don Lattin posit that "in the new millennium, there will be a growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions." They claim that while "religious beliefs and spirituality have traditionally been viewed as the province of churches, synagogues, and mosques, [faith is now] increasingly viewed as [an] individual, private matter with few connections to congregation and community²." Accordingly, displaced spiritual foragers must seek out new venues in which to encounter the "sacred." Cimino and Lattin point out that:

"As the entertainment media becomes the primary conveyor of common culture, it will compete with religious groups as the main bearer of spiritual and religious insight, no matter how mundane and homogenized those revelations may be³."

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² Cimino & Lattin 11

³ Ibid 39

Therefore, the study of media such as film can be a valuable tool for examining the way that religion functions in our society.

In his book, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*, John C. Lyden argues that the movie theater has become a surrogate sacred space, where film provides for its audiences a system of world-naming that contributes to the formation of morals, the establishment of ritual, and a manner of addressing matters of ultimate concern.

“Films can be taken as illusions in one sense, but can also have the force of reality by presenting a vision of how the world is as well as how it might be. In the ritual context of viewing a film, we ‘entertain’ the truth of its mythology and ethos as a subject of consciousness even as it entertains us⁴.”

If his assertion is reasonable, it leaves us to question the distinction between entertainment and religiosity. Lyden himself points to the limitations of existing scholarship on religion and film when he says that prior study has focused on exhibiting the films themselves as “texts” rather than exploring the experience of moviegoers. The goal of my research is to speak with audience members and discover what quality a film must possess if it is to transcend the ordinary and reasonably be considered religion.

Theoretical Model

Before we can analyze how film can be studied as a religion, it is necessary that we ask ourselves, “What is religion?” To most people the answer may seem obvious, but in truth, if you

were to ask a hundred people to define religion you would likely get a hundred different definitions. For instance, many people would define religion to be belief in a supernatural power. For some monotheistic traditions defining religion in this way may be accurate. However, many theistic traditions do not make belief central or even necessary. Orthodox Judaism, for example, makes room for doubt to the degree that God’s existence can be questioned. Furthermore, what about traditions that are not based on belief in a supernatural power? It may be impossible for a single definition to fully encapsulate what religion *is* to all people. Regardless of how carefully worded and painstakingly crafted a definition may be, it will always be the case that we can find a counter-example that does not quite fit the theoretical framework. What may be attainable, though, is a working definition of what religion *does*.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz developed this sort of functional definition in his essay *Religion as a Cultural System*. He defines religion as

“A set of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order and existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic⁵.”

With his functional definition, Geertz has outlined the behavioral phenomenon we characterize as religion in a way that is both broad in its application and specific in its manifestation. In recent years, there has been an explosion of scholarly literature that explores popular

⁴ Lyden 55

⁵ Geertz 1

culture as religion⁶. A descriptive approach to religious behavior has aided academics in drawing such parallels. Accordingly, Geertz' definition is the cornerstone of Lyden's argument that film can function as religion.

In *Film as Religion*, Lyden asserts that "films are 'models of' and 'models for' reality... [In film] the world is claimed to be a certain way and it is simultaneously claimed that it should be that way⁷." A movie provides an alternative reality with a clearly differentiated ordering system that parallels the general order and existence to which Geertz refers regarding religion. Further, Lyden contends that:

"The power in a film is not in its ability to erase or displace our sense of the real world, but in its ability to provide a temporary escape from it. And yet, that escape is not simply a matter of illusion, but a construction that has the 'aura of factuality' about it that Geertz associates with religion⁸."

Rather than just providing a fantasy world to occupy our attention, Lyden's point is that film reflects our desire to change our world in the same way that religion strives to change it; to achieve some "higher purpose⁹."

⁶ Just a few examples are:

God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture, Mazur & McCarthy, eds
Religion and Popular Culture in America, Forbes & Mahon eds.

Sex, Religion and the Media, Dane Claussen
Religion and Wine, Robert Fuller
Judgment and Grace in Dixie, Charles Reagan Wilson

The Joy of Sports, Michael Novak
Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America, Stephen J. Fjellman

⁷ Lyden 45

⁸ Lyden 52

⁹ Ibid.

More recently, however, Geertz' work has come under criticism for the way in which it emphasizes the interiority of religion over the communal aspects and the way in which it artificially distinguishes "religion" from other aspects of culture¹⁰. In *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11*, Bruce Lincoln addresses these concerns and asserts that any effort at defining religion ought to "problematize, and not normalize," models which are found to be restrictive, noting the aspects of the model that are "heuristically useful also make it an extreme case¹¹." These insights add much to Lyden's study of film. In this paper I will look at the "moods and motivations" created by the film, the ways in which films develop significance communally, and the connections between "religion" and popular culture.

The Ethnographic Process

What is the difference between a film that entertains and a film that enlightens? I set out to answer this question by examining audience reactions to one film, Andrew Payne's *Sideways*. I hypothesized that *Sideways* would appeal to men in the same demographic group as the movie's lead characters: white, financially-average and approximately age forty. Furthermore, I anticipated enough people would enjoy the film that it would become a cultural phenomenon.

Sideways is a "buddy picture" that follows Miles (played by Paul Giamatti) and Jack (played by Thomas Hayden Church) on a weeklong trip

¹⁰ See Talal Asad's book, *Genealogies of Religion*

¹¹ Lincoln 3

through the California wine-country. Cynical and lonely Miles plans the trip as a wedding gift to Jack, who is more interested in having a final fling before taking the plunge than he is in cultivating his palette. While Miles and Jack are in their late thirties/early forties, each character is in a transitional stage in his life that is akin to a coming of age. Jack is about to marry, and is struggling to sort out his priorities as he transitions from a post-college party-boy to a committed husband. Miles is recently divorced and trying to publish a failing novel. As he struggles to come to peace over his ended marriage and to accept that his book may never be a success, Miles transitions from a state of reckless depression to peaceful maturity. The juxtaposition of the themes of “coming of age,” and “mid-life crisis” seemed to promise a wide range of audience reactions that would help me achieve my research goals. Since the study, *Sideways* has been nominated for seven Golden Globe awards and five Oscars - a fact that seems to confirm my initial suspicion that the film would become a cultural phenomenon.

I went to 20 showings of *Sideways* and gathered 25 interviews with audience members after these shows. I asked respondents a few demographic questions such as; their age, financial status, gender, and race. Then, I asked them their opinion about the movie. If they liked the film, I asked them about their favorite characters, and what made the characters enjoyable. If audience members disliked the film, I asked them what turned them off. Next, I asked them how they had heard about *Sideways* and whether the film had been what they expected. Finally, I asked respondents what characteristics they thought made a movie “good,” and

whether *Sideways* possessed any of these characteristics. These questions elicited a broad range of viewer responses that lead me to arrive at a conclusion about how a film can be transformed from entertainment to religion

Feeling Turned Around: “Moods and Motivations” Created by Sideways

From my study of Lyden’s work, I theorized that when people view movies they are developing and testing their moral framework. As the lead character in a film faces obstacles on his or her path to righteousness or downfall, the audience is vicariously taken along on the journey. An audience member may agree with the actions of the character and then process those behaviors in such a way that they become engrained in the viewers’ behavior. Consider, for example, the reaction of one audience member to Maya, Virginia Madsen’s character in *Sideways*. Maya was this viewer’s favorite character “because [Maya] is into literature. She really appreciated [literature] and she’s very intellectual. I would like to be seen that way.” As this viewer observed Maya, she validated the quality of Maya’s behavior and consequently wished to incorporate some of Maya’s behavior into her own.

Conversely, the audience member may disagree with certain actions of the character (or things that happen to the character) and incorporate *those* behaviors into the set of actions they would like to avoid. For example, when asked about Stephanie, the character in *Sideways* played by Sandra Oh, one woman replied,

“She was pretty horrible. She was *made* to be horrible. I mean, they portrayed her as being a fairly uninterested mother.

She was really shallow.”

This woman’s interpretation of what it means to be a “good” mother was tested and developed by her reaction to Stephanie as a “bad” mother. Thus, viewers set their moral compasses as they watch a movie.

This process reveals one way the audience connects the reality of the movie and their everyday reality. I hoped that investigating deeper into the relationship between the establishment of this connection and why people liked *Sideways* would provide insight into how a film is transformed from entertainment to religion.

Since each person’s opinion is an individual formulation, I found it helpful to study the common trends in viewers’ attitudes that would suggest how the audience formulates a shared experience. Matt Soergel, film critic for the Florida Times Union, has reviewed countless films in an effort to decipher how an audience will respond to a given movie. He suggests that “people want to see heroes” when they go to see a movie.

“We want to see ourselves, but a better version of ourselves on the screen. We would like to think that if we were ever in the situation this person is in, that we would act as they did. We look at them as role models, or sort of idealized versions of ourselves. That’s why to me the most interesting characters are the ones who are flawed- or not perfect. They do the right thing- or sometimes the wrong thing, but they realize it afterwards. I think we’re willing to accept that.”

The lead character in *Sideways*, Miles, offers viewers this sort of flawed hero. As a result, he was a very sympathetic character. In fact, nearly everyone I interviewed who liked the film felt they could relate to Miles. One man said he related to Miles because he is “kind of a middle age guy who is not sure where he is in life, or where he is with other people all the time.” It was not difficult for me to imagine this gentleman related with Miles- he was 42, white, and self described as “struggling to become ‘financially stable’,” just like Miles.

A result of my research that I found surprising was the way that people outside of Miles’ demographic group responded to his character. I asked one woman if she related to either Maya or to Stephanie. She said “Yes and no. I mean, there are certain general characteristics that are the same, but on the specifics, not so much.” However, she later said, “There were a lot of characteristics I could relate to in Miles. I mean, he’s kind of a screwed up guy and I understand that because I’m kind of a screwed up person.” Furthermore, this viewer said that being able to relate to Miles in this way was what she liked best about the film. “I liked that it was fairly realistic. I mean, the things that happened [to Miles] could really happen, albeit [they were] a little weird.” So, there was a *woman* who related to Miles- but this woman was around Miles’ age and financially similar.

The range of people who found parallels between Miles’ life and their own was wide. I interviewed a sixteen-year-old girl who said that she related to Miles because:

“He was kind of apathetic towards a lot of things, and that’s how I feel a lot of times. And, I think cause’ he’s going

through a lot of struggles in his life, and he's kind of- even though I'm at a different point where I'm kind of finding who I am- he's at a different point as in who he was kind of had to be changed and so now he's finding a new person."

This girl is about 25 years younger than Miles, is supported by her parents, and lives in a home of above-median income. Regardless of the disparity between their backgrounds and the specific issues they are confronting, the girl was able to relate to Miles's character.

What my research revealed is that the main reason the viewers I interviewed liked the film *Sideways* was that they felt they could relate to the "flawed hero," Miles. Rather than relating to his demographic characteristics, the audience related to themes in Miles' life, and to his existential plight. Conversely, the few viewers that reportedly disliked the film did not feel like they could relate to the characters at all. One married couple agreed that "the film was vulgar." They felt that "the characters were probably like some people, but not like people [they] know." In fact, the wife said that "Miles should be ashamed to have a friend like Jack, but instead he seemed to look up to him." When a teenaged female viewer said she "wasn't really in to [the movie]," I asked her if she felt like she related to the characters. She said

"I could find ways I related to sideways, but I think with teenagers, it's kind of hard to find that relation because, um, things are really kind of starting with life and this is kind of about something completely different that we've never experienced. Maybe that's why I didn't

really bond with the characters in *Sideways*. You never really saw how things turn out. It's kind of sad. I mean, maybe because I couldn't really relate with the characters, I could never really love them."

This viewer articulated the relationship between "liking" a character and relating to a character. Her statement suggested that if she *had* related to the characters, she *would* have loved them.

Of the twenty-five people I interviewed, only four did not care for *Sideways*. While these audience members did not enjoy the movie, their responses are valuable for considering why other audience members *did* enjoy it. Three of the four viewers who were dissatisfied felt they could not relate to the characters or themes of the film, as we saw reflected in their statements above¹². Soergel argued that when we go to the movies, "we want to see ourselves, but a better version of ourselves on the screen." None of these viewers related to the characters in the film, so none of them saw "themselves" on the screen.

There was not one viewer who enjoyed the movie that did not also claim to relate to Miles, our "flawed hero." Though, this does not imply that everyone admired him. I spoke with one 19 year old male who said that

"I wouldn't want to be forty years old and single- stealing from my mother and still trying to find that 'right person', but his fear- the fear of life; living it or living it too much- I think that anyone can identify with that."

¹² The fourth respondent said "there wasn't enough action. I came to the movies to see some action."

This respondent did not admire Miles, but he related to him. “That’s what makes the movie so interesting,” he went on to say. “You think, wow, that could be me in twenty years- it’s kind of fascinating and horrible.” This viewer’s input on the film further illuminates the idea that “liking” the movie *Sideways* goes hand in hand with relating to the characters in the movie. It is this quality that stands out as the distinguishing factor between the experiences audience members who enjoyed *Sideways* and the experiences of those who did not.

From Audience to Congregation: The Communal Significance of Film

There are many reasons people went to see *Sideways*. “The critics ate it up. Every review I read was excellent, so I wanted to see it for my self,” said one man. A female respondent went to see the movie after reviewing the screenplay.

“I write movies, and because of the Writers Guild of America Awards, all of the studios are sending out screenplays and some DVD’s. I read the screenplay for *Sideways* but I didn’t get a DVD, so I wanted to come check it out.”

Most people I spoke with, however, saw the film because their friends recommended it. “A lot of my friends loved it, so I thought I’d come to see it,” one man replied, “after seeing [*Sideways*] I understand why they kept saying it was so funny.” A twenty two year old woman told me she heard about *Sideways* from her friend in Seattle.

“It opened there before it opened here, so I was, like, waiting and waiting for it to be released in Jacksonville. [This

theater] is the only one playing it around here, which is kind of cool. It’s not like your everyday kind of movie. It actually made me feel like I live in some big city with little independent theaters.”

In fact, this woman was not alone in noticing the urban feel of the movie experience. One couple noticed that “there was a very different crowd here than you usually see in Jacksonville- very New York or LA... The audience seemed more artsy or *intelligent*.”

In addition to the input of their friends, many of the people I interviewed seemed to be drawn to the movie by its “artsy” feel. Not one interviewee reported coming to the film because they had seen a trailer for *Sideways* that caught their eye, or because they had seen an advertisement that attracted them. Regardless of the age and gender of the respondents, they seemed to be reflecting a similar style in appearance: they were mostly decked out in the “geek chic” fashion I observed on my first night of interviewing. One viewer commented that “the plot was very character-based and that worked. Usually you go to a movie and see cookie-cutter stars performing action-based roles- and it’s just nothing new.” This attitude indicates a disdain for mainstream entertainment that is consistent with the attraction to an “artsy” film.

One motivation for coming to see *Sideways* that was not readily articulated - though easily observed, was that it was considered a “cool” movie. Many people came because the people they admired, film critics and their friends, approved of the film. By viewing the film, they became part of “the group.” This feeling was what prompted one male in his early twenties to say, “at least now I get why

my buddy told me to never carry a wallet [on a date].” If you don’t understand the reference, go see the film and you can be part of “the group,” too.

It is impossible to consider the viewing of film as if it occurs in a vacuum: our conception of a movie is affected by its advertising and by the opinions of critics, our friends, and our families. At the time I conducted my research, the nominations for the Golden Globe Awards and the Academy Awards had not yet been announced and the film was receiving little to no advertising on television. In the weekend before the award nominations were made, that is the weekend of January 21 – January 23, the film, *Sideways*, grossed roughly \$3,500,000. The weekend after the Academy, (i.e. “the group”) endorsed the film, people flocked to see it: the film grossed over \$6,500,000¹³. Furthermore, advertisements for the film began appearing regularly on network television. The fact that nearly twice as many people went to see *Sideways* immediately after the respected authorities ratified its merit make clear that the influence of “the group” is significant.

Becoming part of a group is a substantial factor affecting whether or not people “like” a movie. Therefore, there is a communal aspect of film that unites individual audience member reaction with the reaction of the audience as a whole. While it is not possible to draw broad conclusions about all of society based on the study of a single film, I believe that the research I’ve conducted supports conclusions about how “audiences” reacted to *Sideways*, not just concerning how individuals responded.

Conclusion

The 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was the subject of heated controversy prior to, up to, and following its release. Critics and supporters rallied with such fervor that the movie grew to be a true cultural phenomenon. The film's particular interpretation of Christ's last hours was so widely received it has come to be the version accepted by a multitude of Christian churches. For many viewers, this film *was* Religion. In the course of my research, I sought to discover whether other films might have a similar effect on audiences.

Lyden’s work is very thorough in describing why film can be viewed as a religion, but as he points out in his book, there has not been sufficient ethnographic research done to formulate conclusions about *how* film is transformed from entertainment into religion. My research of the film *Sideways* allowed me to take a closer look at this process. Firstly, audience responses indicated that as people viewed the movie they were adjusting their moral compasses. That is, the audience did not just passively watch the film. They became engaged with the lives on screen to the point that viewers made value judgments about the characters behaviors, then processed those behaviors into their own behavioral repertoire- either as actions they would like to cultivate, or actions they would like to avoid. In this way, audience members connected the reality on screen to their everyday realities.

Secondly, audience responses suggested that people enjoyed the film if they could relate the themes of the movie or life of a character to their own lives. Conversely, I found that if people

¹³ <http://weekendboxoffice.com>

did not find such a relation, they did not enjoy the movie. In this way, the moods and motivations inspired by the film were made to seem uniquely realistic—the lives of the characters became real to the audience because the audience could picture themselves as the characters.

Finally, the audience responses lead me to conclude that another primary reason people enjoyed the movie *Sideways* was the communal aspect of film. When an audience member came to see the film on the advice of a respected party, they were more likely to enjoy the movie, thus becoming part of a group. This effect was so widespread that after it was announced *Sideways* was nominated for numerous awards, the movie nearly doubled its gross box-office earnings. As a result, I argue that the film has become part of our cultural identity.

I observed throughout the course of my research that the film *Sideways* functioned as a religion for many of the audience members with whom I spoke. This result calls us question the historically Western notion that distinguishes “religion” from secular phenomena that we may better understand the nature of how religion functions in society.

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