> # FILM, SPIRITUALITY AND HEIROPHANY –
> # THE CONTEMPORARY SEARCH FOR MEANING

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Introduction

The satirical drama *American Beauty* (1999), winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in the year 2000 is not, at first sight, a film everyone would include in a grouping of spiritually significant movies. It is a tale of two families, the Burnhams and the Fitts, whose members, bored, depressed, angry and alienated, are set on a path of destruction from which they cannot seem to deviate.

The adulteries which Burnham and his wife Caroline pursue, rather than constituting an escape from their unsatisfying marriage, take them closer to disaster and in Burnham's case, death. On the way the film's narrative trajectory also embraces homosexuality and drug-dealing.

In my home country New Zealand, press coverage of *American Beauty* is generally both favourable and unperturbed by its subject matter, slotting it into the generic category of a "black comedy about a dysfunctional family" (*Sunday Star Times*, March 26 2000 p. F3), or "a populist take on the New American Nihilism" (*Sunday Star Times*, Feb.13 2000). The framework for most of these critiques is distinctly secular, as it is for the British film journal *Sight and Sound* which judges the film to be

> a wonderfully resourceful and sombre comedy … as much about the perennial themes of self-delusion, conceit and madness as it is about the ephemeral idiocies of the day (Feb. 2000 p.40)

However the reaction of some fundamentalist religious groups provides the first indication that the film might have particular resonance for viewers interested in religion. For instance a United States-based Christian organisation called The Childcare Action Project, seems to have decided that what the film presents it must also condone:

> Twenty uses of the most foul of the foul words. Teen arrogance against parent. Adult male masturbation (from the rear). Drunkenness, sexual innuendo, comments, insults and references to human sexual anatomy etc. (cited in *Empire* February 2000 p.82)

By any standard of interpretation *American Beauty* is undeniably both dark in atmosphere and coarse in tone at times – a work which explores the profane worlds of materialistic and sexual obsession. Nevertheless, if one listens to the dialogue closely a certain set of structuring concepts may begin to make itself evident. Lester Burnham hates his job selling advertising for a magazine and fantasizes "about a life that doesn't so closely resemble Hell". He asks his wife, a real estate agent, why they don't all "just work for Satan". His neighbour, an authoritarian ex-colonel, opines that the country as a whole is "going straight to Hell". These remarks may be little more than random figures of speech, and certainly the colonel's

comments, coming from someone who collects Nazi memorabilia, are redolent with ambiguity, but in tandem with a series of opposing and complementary references to God and Heaven a certain kind of viewer might begin to suspect that this film is examining degradation because it is also interested in imagining what a sense of spiritual wholeness and contentment might be like. As such, *American Beauty* is, in my opinion, representative of a type of contemporary film which is increasingly common; a film which can, if you wish, be claimed as *implicitly spiritual,* yet is definitely not overtly religious. In a climate where traditional discourses of religiosity are falling into disuse, indirect approaches to spirituality of this sort, through the media, may perhaps be creating a newly invigorated public space for discussion of concepts relating to the spiritual aspects of human life.

Cinema – The Judgements of History

When the various mechanical processes, which make the experience of movie-going possible, came together at the end of the nineteenth century they did so in a context, which was marked as commercial rather than artistic. The first moving pictures were produced by entrepreneurs such as the Lumière Brothers in France and Edison in the United States who wanted to sell cameras, film stock, projectors and admission-tickets to paying customers of various sorts. Owing to the cinematic technology's ability to reproduce the material appearance of whatever was before it part of its popular appeal was therefore the opportunities it provided for voyeurism – to view what one could not one's self visit nor possess. It is this potential for visual materialism which has been at the basis of some decisions to assign cinema firmly to the realm of the profane.[1]

On the other hand re-stagings of the life and death of Christ provided material for some very early films. A group of actors staging a passion play were filmed in Bohemia in 1897 and a similar production was exhibited in New York soon after (Telford, 1997). Generally however religion had no more claim on cinema than any other form of content, indeed it was sometimes argued that when Biblical material was employed it was largely because it was a rich source of violent or salacious story material with pre-existing cultural cachet and guaranteed audience appeal (Butler, 1969). So it was that within twenty years of the cinema's inception, the Church's attention, in America at least, was more firmly focused on the 'immoral' character of many screen-stories and the 'immoral' opportunities provided by darkened movie theatres than it was on any salvific potential of the technology (Black, 1994; Walsh, 1996). A similar wariness, rising occasionally to the level of denunciation of films judged particularly provocative, has remained a significant feature of religious reactions to the cinema ever since.[2] For instance Stout and Buddenbaum (1996) detail the furore in the late 1980s over Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), which was condemned as blasphemous by many because, amongst other infelicities it pictured Christ fantasizing about forgoing crucifixion in favour of a married life with Mary Magdalene.

Film is certainly a medium which can appear to revel in the vulgar and inconsequential, (Kracauer, 1960) but at its best, like music, it can guide the viewer by means of metaphor and emotion, past the meretricious, to the heart of something which really matters (Steiner, 1989) The question is – how might it do that? How can a technical medium which puts sounds and images on celluloid attempt to represent that which is unrepresentable by virtue of being both ineffable and invisible? (Schrader, 1972 p.6). What kind of relationship might the medium possibly have with the sacred, with that which is set aside and attributed with extraordinary value, or with the Transcendent, that which is beyond normal sense experience? (Schrader, 1972 p.5). Over the last century many people have addressed these queries. It seems pertinent to raise them again now since there has been a renaissance of

interest in both making films and writing about films which deal with matters of the spirit. At the same time there have been changes in the academic and cultural contexts in which film making is situated. This paper surveys the range of approaches that have been used to discuss religion and film in the past and asks which of them are still relevant today.

Religion gives way to Spirituality

The words 'religious' and 'spiritual' have always been interchangeable in certain contexts since each covers a range of phenomena which embraces 'everyday' beliefs and practices but can also include extreme states of mental and emotional exploration or fulfilment. Within a particular religious tradition 'spirituality' can be viewed as the realm of profound personal experience which makes that religion come alive for a practitioner (King, 1996). Conversely a religion provides the structure within which spirituality can flourish. In Ninian Smart's model of the elements which constitute a religious system for instance, (1987) 'religious experience' is one of the six 'dimensions' of religion, the others being doctrines, myths, ethics, rituals, and social institutions. Frank Whaling's alternative model (1995) includes spirituality among its complement of eight elements of religion.

Lately however, the divergence between the two terms has become more marked. Although 'religion' still has neutral, descriptive uses, it is, especially in the mass media, increasingly associated largely with specific, traditional, collective explanations of existence and forms of worship, that is religion in its institutional aspects. The term often has pejorative overtones, with the implication that church organisations, as sites of 'religion', are rigid, authoritarian and out-of-touch (Hoover, 1988; Morris, 1999). In New Zealand, a nationally distributed weekly magazine *The Listener*, of liberal to left-wing sympathies, has published feature articles discussing changing definitions of religion, in particular distinguishing it from spirituality, four times in the last twelve months (May 8, 1999; Dec 25, 1999, Jan 1, 2000, April 14, 2000). Elaborating on the views of religious studies scholar Lloyd Geering, who claims we are participating in the 'death of Christendom', journalist Philip Matthews asks:

> (Matthews, 1999 p.17)
> What are we witnessing? Not the death of spirituality, not the death of belief, not the death of meaning, but the death of religious institutions, the death of organised religion, the erosion of the Church's historical core, its hold on the heart of the West.

While the ambit of religion is shrinking, spirituality, in all its post-modern flexibility of definition, is on the advance. As academic Anna King notes:

> What spirituality means is very much bound up with who uses it. The word ... has acquired new associations from its use by New Age writers, by psychotherapists, by ecologists, by feminists, by gays, by black people. It has been linked with protest and with the creation of new paradigms. ... spirituality has become a term that firmly engages with the feminine, with green issues with ideas of wholeness, creativity and interdependence, with the interfusion of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the moral. (King, 1996 p.345)

Newspapers, magazines, radio and television talk-shows now contain frequent interviews with public figures who declare themselves to be spiritual but not religious. These spiritual individuals fit within a trend identified by American sociologists Bellah (1985), Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1993) as a "restructured mode of religiosity" that "speaks of an era where belief, faith and spirituality revolve around the self more than the group" (Hoover, 1998 p. 36). As the growth of businesses around spiritual advice and growth attest, part of the appeal of contemporary conceptions of spirituality is also that they can be discovered or cultivated in secular as well as sacred manifestations of culture (Peck 1993; Ferguson 1992)

so that one need not put aside an interest in material prosperity, for example, in order to develop one's spirituality. Although it seems likely that spirituality in such cases refers to a pleasing development of one's inner 'depth' and 'potential' which also aligns one harmoniously to both the social world and the cosmos, the very point of such a spirituality is that it cannot be completely accounted for by any one else.

New Age and neo-pagan practices claim to offer spirituality without a central church or organisation, without doctrines and creeds, a spirituality compatible with the radicalisation of individualism where the self is the ultimate locus for determining what is true. (Morris, 1999 p. 20)

The concerns of religion as traditionally conceived and of post-modern manifestations of spirituality are thus perhaps not so different after all. There are certainly differences in location (more private than public) and in manifestation (it is now less easy to mark off aspects of life as distinctly sacred and to label others as profane) but it is the flux and contestation of definition which is at issue, rather than the primary activities of thinking about the nature of existence and one's relationship to it. To use the term 'spirituality' in preference to religion can thus be seen as a way of referring to or evoking concepts from a 'religious' sphere of discourse in a context where traditional forms of religious expression are in decline.

> [Religion] seems to persist as an authentic and vital component of the contemporary scene and can be found expressing itself in social, cultural and political spheres. Thus, although religion is, on some level, personal and individual, it also finds expression outside the private sphere. It is no longer defined by the traditional institutional boundaries. It is now more diffuse perhaps but no less important ... our definitions will be stretched thin ... the definitional issue is thus becoming more significant all the time. (Hoover, 1998 p.35)

Religion, Film and Evangelism

The study of religion and film has been a slender strand of scholarship for many decades now, spanning the time over which the pace of secularisation has increased. While some of the writing on religion and film is clearly motivated mainly by curiosity as to the nature of possible links between the two fields of expression, there are also indications that some writers hope the cinema might provide a counter-force to the growing secularist momentum. A series of scholars, most of whom are American and many of whom are Catholic, have therefore written about the ways in which both thematic content and the structural aspects of film have the potential to communicate the workings of divine order to contemporary audiences. Publications by Wall (1971), Ferlita & May (1976), May & Bird (1982), May (1997), and Jewett (1993), show these authors harnessing their passion for film to a search for explanations of how the medium might function to demonstrate the continued relevance of the Christian analysis of existence. The introduction to the Marsh & Ortiz book *Explorations in Theology and Film* (1997) for instance sketches an argument representative of the reasons why Christians can't afford to ignore the cinema:

> Purpose: to address a lack of vitality in theological debate by lay people ... meanwhile millions of people watch films. ... The thinking of Christians is thus in part informed by their cinema going and video-viewing ... theological discussion is therefore stimulated by this worldly activity whether churches like it or not. (p. 1-2)

Since the audio-visual media arguably play a central role in providing information and shaping attitudes in contemporary societies (Hoover & Lundby, 1998) the cinema, with its ability to reach large audiences, is potentially an attractive teaching resource for scholars who wish to retain a distinct significance for religious and spiritual forms of thought. The

primary methodology employed in the field is therefore that of textual analysis or hermeneutics; the discovery and explication of the 'meanings' of a text by a skilled interpreter who is well educated in the cultural norms of a particular kind of representation. (Gripsrud, 1995; Eagleton, 1996; Bordwell & Carroll, 1996). The majority of approaches outlined in this article are hermeneutic approaches and my own analysis proves to be no exception. However textual analysis, undertaken by a single analyst consulting his or her own knowledge base, is a methodology which has been undermined by charges of solipsism in the last two decades, (Nightingale, 1996). As a result the religion and film area has been chided (Martin & Ostwald, 1995; Nolan, 1998) for being out of touch with the vanguard of academic work in film theory, a charge to which scholars have responded by attempting to develop broader and stronger methods of analysis (Martin & Ostwald, 1995; Miles, 1996; Lindvall et al., 1996). In so doing notice has been taken of parallel work being carried out in the areas of Communication and Cultural Studies.

Religion, Media and Culture

The conjunction of religion (or spirituality) and the media, including the cinema, has become increasingly fascinating to scholars beyond the confines of the religion and film field. Commentators on television (Silverstone, 1981, 1994; Goethals, 1981, 1990) have long noted that the television set and the domestic rituals involved in watching it play an analogous role in many households to that of a family altar or family worship. In Communication Studies there has been work undertaken since the 1980s on that mix of religion, commercialism and television which makes up the phenomenon of 'televangelism' (See for instance Frankl, 1986; Schultze, 1987; Hoover, 1984, 1988; Abelman & Hoover, 1990; Peck, 1993; Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996). Now however Communication scholars are developing comprehensive theories capable of describing the inter-relationship of the media and religion/spirituality in modern Western societies. Common to many of these endeavours is the figure of Stewart Hoover[3] who, with Shalini Venturelli, argues that the apparent secularisation of modern societies need not result in the redundancy of religious perception after all – rather they prefer to suggest that communal religiosity has taken up residence in locations additional to the Church, and including the media:

> The theoretical and historical proposition presents itself that the cultural space of the mass mediated world, the only real public space in contemporary experience, is really a sacred space (Hoover and Venturelli, 1996 p. 257)

The notion of mediated public space usually refers primarily to the operations and effects of the journalistic and electronic media rather than to the cinema. However if opinions like those of Hoover and Venturelli gain general credence, then all forms of mass public communication, including the movies, may soon be perceived differently, that is as having religious as well as ideological and commercial functions.[4]

Finally, the area of Cultural Studies, influenced as it was in the 1960s and 70s by a certain reading of Marxist analyses of social structures, has tended to relegate religion to a category of 'residual', ideologies, but it too is now showing an awareness that to ignore the topic is to overlook a strong strand of cultural vitality (Murdock, 1997; Frow, 1998).

As the amount of thinking and writing on religion and media in general increases one effect has been to promote a rejuvenation of work in the religion and film area by encouraging the reassessment of many of its assumptions about the forms that interaction between religion and the cinema can take (Nolan, 1998; May, 1996). What does it mean for a film to be considered 'religious' or 'spiritual'; are there forms of cinematic presentation which make it

more likely one will think or feel 'religiously' in reaction to them? Once the church is no longer the pre-eminent arbiter of truth who decides whether or not a film is religious?

A Quaternity of Approaches

In grappling with these questions one needs to engage with four dominant, frequently overlapping sets of ideas about relationships between religion/spirituality and cinematic representations. The first implies that a 'religious' or 'spiritual' film results from an interaction between the director or 'author' of a film and the materials with which she or he works, in the understanding that this relationship may be one of varying degrees of conscious intention, i.e. such criticism takes an approach that is both *textual* and *auteurist*. As a subset of this approach the film itself may be considered either in part or in whole, to be *explicitly* or *implicitly*, religious or spiritual. The second and third approaches propose that there is something about film which is *inherently* spiritual or religious; in one case that something is its technical ability to represent the material world in a particular manner, while in the other it is the patterning of narrative structures which is at issue. A fourth approach, currently popular across a range of media scholarship, minimizes the roles of both authorship and structure to suggest that, as in other matters, it is in the eye of the beholder or viewer that significance lies – hence the remark at the beginning of this paper that a 'certain kind of viewer' might discern spiritual meanings in a particular film.

Theology and Film

The most enthusiastic of such viewers, someone likely to see almost all films as a teaching about creation, is probably a person who is at once theological in orientation, an aficionado of the cinema, an advocate of techniques of textual analysis and a believer in the proposition that "the director is the individual creative genius behind a film text" (Gripsrud, 1995 p.28). While the first of these characteristics is the most determinative the others form a corpus of ideas about the cinema which first took shape in the 1920s and 30s.

At that time the cinema was commercially successful but, as has been suggested, somewhat lacking in moral and cultural status. For film to be recognised as an artform, it seemed necessary for its advocates, men such as Sergei Eisenstein (1948), Rudolf Arnheim (1958), and Ernest Lindgren (1963) to argue that it was not after all merely a vulgar form of recording of material reality. Rather, as is the case with other artistic disciplines, it was the fact that film was painstakingly shaped and formed by the creative imagination which gave it its value. Or as the Russian director Pudovkin asserted "Between the natural event and its transformation on the screen there is a marked difference. *It is exactly this difference that makes film an art*" (cited in Bird, 1982 p.11). It was therefore the effort and discrimination exerted by the cinematic artist in the process of transformation which could be said to endow a finely crafted film with high-art status. The audience in its turn, according to White "is assumed to be seeking to understand and re-experience as closely as possible what the author has experienced and 'written into' the text, and the text is the point at which the audience and author meet" (1997 p.197).

Once this basic position has been asserted it is a short step to argue that the character and beliefs of a film's 'author' influence the messages the text transmits (Caughie, 1988; Schatz, 1989). While some aspects of that influence might be the result of conscious effort on the director's part, it was just as likely (with a nod to Freud) that a film might 'say' more than its makers realized. The techniques of textual analysis, or close reading, became the means by which a film or body of work could be probed for signs of the cinematic author's conscious

or unconscious intentions and beliefs. Religion is of course not always a preferred category for such analyses since film is a medium which can be organized around any of a number of political and philosophical stances – but it was by no means excluded from this model. Successful 'discernment' of religious content (Gallagher, 1997) was, in relation to films made in the middle decades of last century, largely a matter of whether a filmmaker's work seemed to offer material that was readily responsive to analysis in religious terms.

The type of religion and film criticism which places emphasis on the shaping power of the author or director's own character and beliefs tends to pay attention to film directors situated within the 'high-culture' or élitist end of the modernist tradition. That is, it favours directors whose work has a grave dignity about it which suggests that they are using cinema to explore philosophical, political or ethical questions on behalf of the wider community. Moreover such directors seem to believe that finding an individual (innovative, poetic, disruptive) way to express oneself within the general 'language' of cinema is an essential part of the process of asking those questions. Bresson's *Diary of A Country Priest* (1950), Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943) and *The Word* (1955), and those directors' respective versions of the story of Joan of Arc have received much attention for instance, as have the dream-like works of the Russian director Tarkovsky, including *Andrei Rublev* (1969), *Stalker* (1979) and *The Sacrifice* (1986). For Tarkovsky the soul of the cinema is in movement, in rhythm, in the way that the flow of time is 'sculpted' by the filmmaker. This sculpture reveals not only the character of the filmmaker but, more importantly, the energy of existence itself, but in a form which can still only hint at the transcendent, and even then only for the few who are capable of understanding.

The ideal is concerned with things that do not exist in our own world as we know it, but it reminds us of what ought to exist on the spiritual plane. The work of art is a form given to this ideal which in the future must belong to mankind, but for the moment has to be for the few, and in the first instance for the genius who made it possible for human awareness, with all its limitations, to be in contact with the ideal incarnate in his art. In that sense art is by nature aristocratic; it differentiates between levels of potential, thus ensuring progress from the lower to the higher as the personality moves toward spiritual perfection (Tarkovsky, 1986 p.238)

The modernist paradigm, especially expressed with such a high degree of self-confidence, has lost force in recent decades, giving way to the playful, self-referential cynicism of post-modern approaches to art. However living directors whose work is still readily perceived in terms of spiritual profundity include the Greek director Theo Angelopoulous (Horton, 1997)[5], the Jewish American, Woody Allen (Pally, 1998) and the Catholic American Martin Scorsese (Durgnat, 1995)[6]. There are few females amongst this pantheon although the antipodean director Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1994), a film about the clash between duty and desire in colonial New Zealand, has already provided material for chapters in at least two volumes of religion and film criticism. (Marsh & Ortiz, 1997; Miles, 1996)

Explicit and Implicit Religious and Spiritual Content

At the other end of the scale of artistic reputation, is located the much-vilified 'biblical epic' (Babington & Evans, 1993) or 'Biblical spectacular' (Forshey, 1992) which employs religious motifs as a source of drama, visual spectacle or sentiment but has little of the reflective subtlety of a so-called 'genuinely' religious film. These films are ironically usually considered too literal to provoke a subtle response – everything is explained and demonstrated so there is no need for the viewer to ponder the great issues of life (Schrader, 1972; Martin, 1981;

Bird, 1984; Forshey, 1992; Telford, 1997). In the middle is any one of a number of films which might be considered either 'explicitly' or 'implicitly' religious in part or in whole yet have not been accorded the stature of cinematic masterworks. An example of an 'explicitly' religious middle-range film is *The Nun's Story*, directed by Zimmerman and released in 1959. A commercial and critical success in its day, it has since, according to Arthur Noletti (1994) who considers it a rare example of an American spiritual film, been shamefully overlooked. Starring Audrey Hepburn, the film covers several years in the life of a woman who loves God but can never really adapt to the strictures of convent life. It initially operates within a realistic, almost documentary mode as the routines of the convent are depicted in detail, but it also employs mainstream Hollywood codes of acting, filming, set design, music and editing which are designed to produce a sympathetic identification with the main character, Sister Luke. In the process of identifying with her the viewer is given an opportunity to form a negative evaluation of the convent system, which is portrayed as emotionally repressive. Where the text is dealing with explicit religion it is thus mildly anti-religious. However, in the final section, as Noletti explains, the style of the film shifts into a different register. Sister Luke decides to leave the convent. In a series of almost-silent shots lasting four minutes, which concentrate on images of enclosure and exit, she changes from religious to secular garb and slowly walks from the convent to disappear into the streets of the city. The measured, sparse and solemn tone of the sequence, along with a few well-placed sound effects give us to understand that this woman may be leaving a way of life but she is not deserting her own beliefs, to the contrary, the film is underlining the difference between collective religiosity and a personal, perhaps even more deeply held, spirituality.

A film which could be categorized as 'implicitly religious' will probably not make extensive obvious references to religious people, religious institutions or religious practices. However it may, when cogitated upon, reveal a consistently 'spiritual' approach to issues of life, which is 'translatable' in many respects into a religious template. Andrew Greeley, a Catholic writer on popular culture offers this definition:

> Implicitly religious films are those in which powerful religious symbols lurking in the unconscious or preconscious and prevalent in the world religions, abound and create an implicit or preconscious ambience of meaning. (Greeley, cited in May, 1997 p.31)

An 'ordinary' viewer may sense such powerful symbols at work. Indeed it is the hope of some theological critics that a "truly theological approach ... will show how the film communicates religious meanings even to viewers unfamiliar with specific religious texts and traditions". (Marsh & Ostwald, 1995 p.15) By this they mean that films can be capable of stimulating viewers, even those who operate according to secular world-views, "to think about profound religious themes such as the finality of death, the possibility of resurrection, the end of time, the experience of grace, and the meaning of sacrifice" (ibid). However it is frequently acknowledged that it can take a conscious and informed critical effort to discern the nature of implicitly religious material in film. (May, 1997) Much of the writing in the Religion and Film area so far has therefore involved analysing films which are 'implicitly religious' by detailing the results of exemplary critical endeavours.

Methods of Textual Analysis

When bringing to consciousness the contents of such an implicitly religious film Robert Jewett (1997) would try to create 'an interpretive arch' spanning two sets of texts, that is he would develop an analogical relationship between specific Biblical texts and the thematic concerns of a particular film. His analysis of *Groundhog Day* (1993) for instance juxtaposes this inventive comedy about an arrogant man who gets stuck in a repeating 24 hour period

of time, with the *Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians*. Galatians features the Greek phrase 'kairos idios' ('in its own time'), which suggests that "there are moments that are appropriate, distinctive and non-repetitive, designed by God for the harvest." Jewett argues that *Groundhog Day's* protagonist Phil Connors, cannot get out of repetitive time and into appropriate, distinctive time, until he learns to behave in a manner which is mature and compassionate and, by implication, pleasing in the eyes of God.

Rhoads and Roberts use a similar method, this time seen as an experiment in 'intertextuality', to find common interests in the historical romance *The Piano* (1994)*,* and the Biblical book, the Gospel of Mark*.*

Despite the great differences between the two, the juxtaposition of the film and the Gospel is illuminating of each. The dynamics of Mark's Gospel illuminates the transformation that takes place in the film and the film portrays a concrete illustration of the liberation from oppression called for in the Gospel. (1997 p.47)

The two examples just outlined are extracted from relatively brief discussions of particular films: they both posit the Bible as an unproblematically stable source of meaning which is not itself culturally contingent, a point of view which is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. (Cf. Crossan, 1994 and material from other scholars belonging to the Jesus Seminar) A more ambitious form of textual analysis attempts to synthesize individual explorations of a range of films into a model which is explanatory of all examples of a specific genre or genres. An undertaking of this sort addresses the question: given that everybody might have the resources to view a film in a religious or spiritual light, what specifically, apart from matters of explicit content, is the form of artifice which encourages viewers to mobilize that kind of perception?

Fraser and the Sacramental Mode in Film

One answer, which also illustrates some of the limitations of theological analysis, comes from Peter Fraser, in *Images of The Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film* (1998). Noting that 'religious' films are usually characterised by a shift away from a smooth and easy flow of imagery to a formalism which draws attention to itself, Fraser develops comparisons between the intricate formalism of this type of film and the movements of church liturgy. He feels that both are designed to evoke – in the case of film metaphorically, rather than literally – the sense of the intrusion of a divine presence: "the essence of the mode is an incarnational gesture at the film's centre, in which a primary narrative is disrupted and made 'holy'" (Fraser, p.2). The approach of divine presence is signalled by the increasing use of elaborate, or perhaps just exaggeratedly simple, devices which might involve:

> … character gesture (for example, facial or body gesture in Bresson, Dreyer or De Sica) or by cinematic gesture (juxtaposed stills of nature in Ford, Godard or Murnau; non-diegetic musical cues and artificial effects in the Hollywood epics; lighting effects in Lang, Dreyer or Borzage; narrative rhythm and symbolic compositions in Tarkovsky. (Fraser, 1998, p.3).

Since Fraser's model for a divine presence is that of the incarnation of Jesus Christ he calls this filmic mode "sacramental", proposing that, as well as involving 'cinematic gestures' of various sorts, it also tends to focus on the conversion of a central character within the film.

The conversion is synecdochic, since the complete text is also typically redeemed. The conversion marks the incarnational centre of the text and is conveyed through some cinematic metonym in which space and time converge symbolically – the freeze-frame; ten-

second delay; stylized background … space and time are isolated in an apostrophe … time is halted in the sequence or it is translated from the narrative's casual realm to the internal realm of X's soul where it becomes a signifier for spiritual communion. (p.8)

Once this moment is established the film then usually proceeds according to "the most recognisable of all Christian narrative patterns: the Passion" argues Fraser (p. 2) – it becomes a story of suffering and redemption whereby the protagonist takes on the unhappiness of the community, undergoing a "lengthy purgative ritual" of physical, emotional or spiritual suffering. (p.9.)

It is undoubtedly true that many films are structured around a figure who resembles Christ to a significant degree: that is that he or she is a virtuous hero who suffers, perhaps even dies, for the benefit of others. (See Baugh, 1997; Malone, 1997) This figure can be discerned in films from many genres including the fantasy films *Batman* (1989) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), science fiction movies *The Terminator* (1984), and its sequel *Terminator II: Judgement Day* (1991), and the western *Unforgiven* (1992). Referencing the figure of Christ and his violent death through crucifixion, also goes some way towards explaining the violent and dark nature of many films with religious content or religious tone. (Several of Martin Scorcese's films: *Taxi Driver*, 1976; *Raging Bull*, 1980; *Casino*, 1995 and *Bringing Out The Dead* 1999) are often cited in discussion of this genre of work, of the *via negativa*, of redemption through suffering).[7]

However in developing this model Fraser moves too rapidly from the general to the specific. The first part of the model delineates an intriguing pattern – of intrusion and presence – which might hold good for many films which deal with the metaphysical. But as a Christian Fraser closes in on a particular variation of that form, which accords with specific patterns of Christian worship, and tends, as he states himself, to be consciously 'evangelistic' (p.3). His model does not take full account of the ambivalence and doubt which suffuses many of the modernist films discussed above, nor it is it ultimately inclusive of other forms of appreciation of the sacred which might involve a gentler or less well-defined path than that of the 'passion' trajectory. Nor is his model particularly useful when approaching contemporary manifestations of spirituality embedded in secular contexts.

Film as Hierophany

In order to develop a more inclusive view of the spiritual potential of film it can be useful to return to a contrasting opinion as to where the value of the medium really lies. We have seen that it appeared necessary to one group of theoreticians and filmmakers to prove that film-making was an art and that directors were skilled, perhaps even inspired artists, in order for the cinema to improve its cultural status. On the other hand the propensity of the cinematic apparatus for 'shapeless reproduction' which those scholars disparaged was what appealed to another grouping of scholars two decades later. In an elegant essay entitled *Film as Hierophany* Michael Bird (1984) outlines how André Bazin, Henri Agel, and Amédée Afyre in France and Seigfried Kracauer in Germany were interested in precisely the characteristic of film which previous commentators had discounted: its ability to render realistically what was in front of the lens. Rather than deifying the skill of the film-maker these men thought that the cinema had the ability to set the human being to one side and that a minimum of human manipulation might yield an opportunity to scrutinize and appreciate the natural world with an intensity which is rare in everyday life. The cinema, instead of being considered a vulgar purveyor of luxurious images could then be viewed as the means of the "redemption of physical reality" (Kracauer, 1960) with all the spiritual

overtones which the word 'redemption' conveys. Elaborating this argument in his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) Kracauer demonstrates that he understands the line of reasoning which condemns the cinema as essentially trivial, although he doesn't agree with it.

> All this means that films cling to the surface of things. They seem to be the more cinematic the less they focus directly on inward life, ideology and spiritual concerns. This explains why many people with strong cultural leanings scorn the cinema. They are afraid lest its undeniable penchant for externals might tempt us to neglect our highest aspirations in the kaleidoscopic sights of ephemeral outward appearances. The cinema, says Valery, diverts the spectator from the core of his being. ... (Kracauer, 1960 p. x –xi)

Kracauer's answer to this charge is now many decades old yet it arrives in the present with considerable freshness. While his words are reminiscent of Tarkovsky's somewhat élitist model of an ascending process of spiritual development which is assisted by art, they are more properly relevant to a contemporary context (Geering, 1999) where spirituality is seen to be 'grounded' in the material sphere.

Plausible as this verdict sounds, it strikes me as unhistorical and superficial because it fails to do justice to the human condition in our time. Perhaps our condition is such that we cannot gain access to the elusive essentials of life unless we assimilate the seemingly non-essential? Perhaps the way today leads, from and through the corporeal to the spiritual? And perhaps the cinema helps us move from 'below' to 'above'? (Kracauer, 1960 p.xi)

Film lets us see the world 'below' in an enhanced manner because it can focus intently, in close-up or for a long duration, on objects or scenes over which our everyday eyes might normally skip (Martin, 1981). It can isolate objects and processes, or it can present them in their larger context and by so doing, let us see patterns in the flow of the life around us. In other words it can, if filmmakers and film-viewers have the patience to film and watch in that way, provide the conditions in which meditational, contemplative forms of consciousness can develop. By contemplating the world, by really *seeing* it, Kracauer suggests:

> We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavouring to experience it through the camera. ... Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life. (Kracauer, 1960 p. 300)

The screen-image can thus be imagined as a medium which has a certain inherent 'religiousness' about it. Or as Amédée Afyre proposed:

> ... "genuinely" religious films, by no means restricted to explicitly religious subjects, are those in which the cinematographer recording of reality does not exhaust reality but rather evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery. This cinematic realism confronts the spectator with a reality in which there is more than that of which it is the image (cited in Bird, 1982 p.14).

This type of argument, Bird notes, has much in common with Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophany – the act of the manifestation of the sacred within the material world.[8] Fraser's theory also spoke of the manifestation of the sacred but intrusion in that case was more specifically located with the human being as an analogue of Jesus. Eliade's conception is neither as limited nor as sectarian, since – "All nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany" (cited in Bird, 1982 p. 13) Drawing on Eliade, Bird suggests that film can use its special relationship with reality to show "the holy within reality", where the sacred is sought as "the depth in reality itself"(Bird, 1982

p. 15). The key point is that neither the form nor the meaning of the revelation, hierophany or epiphany is determined in advance, as it is when the framework of the enquiry is narrowly theological.

How does this concept work in practice? In what kinds of film might the principle of hierophany be discerned? First, it is important to acknowledge that it is rare, and perhaps not possible to find a complete film which operates in this mode, since films, being finite, are always actually extracted from their context, they are always re-presentations and compressions of reality. The French critic André Bazin, while not specifically employing the concept of hierophany, argued that a film which employs long, unbroken, shots or 'takes' is more likely to provide opportunities for a viewer to see beyond the surface of the entertainment. His translator Bert Cardullo, interprets his view in this way:

> The best director, then – Welles, Rossellini, Renoir, and Murnau rank high for Bazin – is the one who mediates least, the one who exercises selectivity just sufficiently to put us in much the same relation of regard and choice toward the narrative as we are toward reality in life: a director who thus imitates, within his scale, the divine disposition toward man.
> (Cardullo, 1997 p. xv)

Perhaps some avant-garde works such as the personal films of Stan Brakhage, the impersonal, lengthy film recordings by Andy Warhol, or some of the documentaries of Werner Herzog are the strongest candidates for being sustained manifestations of the presentation of the world as it is. It may even be the case that the many 'nature' documentaries which examine a species community in minute detail, or the workings of an aspect of the human body, are our most frequent opportunities as television viewers for perceiving the depth in the ordinary. If it were to be labelled, the cinematic form which sets out to elicit such perception might be known as 'meditative style'. It is a form of enhanced realism which lovingly represents the details of everyday life, usually at a slow pace, with a minimal use of enhancements such as elaborate lighting and camera movement or illusionistic acting. The New Zealand film-director, Vincent Ward, has made an observational documentary with these characteristics about the daily life of an elderly Maori woman for whom ancestral spirits were a constant presence (*In Spring One Plants Alone*, 1977). Otherwise films linked to a Buddhist worldview, such as the later works of Yasujiro Ozu, or *Why Bodhi Dharma Left For The East* (Yong-Kung Bae, 1989) which is specifically concerned with meditation as a spiritual practice, are more reliable places to find the sustained use of these somewhat austere techniques. Martin Scorcese also seems to have been experimenting with aspects of this aesthetic in some scenes in *Kundun* (1997), his film about the childhood and youth of the 14th Dalai Lama.

Narrative, Myth and Religion

The reason that moments of pure contemplation are rare in film is that they operate in tension with another of its elements – the use of narrative structures which are forward moving and specifically shaped to maximize dramatic impact. It was noted previously that there are two aspects of film, which can be considered inherently 'religious' or 'spiritual'. The first, visual representation, as we have seen, by providing opportunities for intense or contemplative perception, can lead in the direction of the spiritual, the mystical. The second, narrative, usually has more in common with those contemporary understandings of 'religion' where the term indicates a form of institutional organization which structures communal belief and thought. Although the first mode often deals in familiar forms of iconography, it does have the potential, especially when images are presented in an unusual manner, by being slowed down or given heavy emphasis, to allow diffuse, personal interpretations of

individual images or sequences. The second mode is more reliably a form of organizing both the minds and behaviour of groups of people to move in a relationship of collectivity. It is possible therefore to draw an analogy between the operations of narrative and the pathways of a particular religious tradition similarity since both religion and narrative are typically involved with limiting or guaranteeing meaning rather than challenging meaning or innovating upon it.

Narratives are stories about the world and human, or sometimes godly, behaviour. (Kozloff, 1992) They occur in all forms of communication: oral, written, audio-visual, computer-based, but they always involve processes of selection and shaping. In constructing a narrative some pieces of information are left out, others are emphasized by various techniques, but the narrative as a whole will have a structure which progresses through time in a five-stage process (Berger, 1997) which moves from equilibrium through conflict back to equilibrium again. This narrative schema is so familiar to us as a method of processing information that we commonly deploy it without really being aware that we are doing so (Bordwell &Thompson, 1997; Branigan, 1992). Consequently it can take an effort of cognition to stand back and consider that 'everyday life' can be seen as either successively, or simultaneously, more complex, tedious, and unresolved than the neat packages of narrative construction would lead us to believe. (Kozloff, 1997)

When narrative is linked with religious understanding the religious and the spiritual are understood primarily as activities of meaning-construction which set boundaries for what can be believed, said and done in a particular culture (Berger, 1967; Geertz, 1973; Peck, 1993). Narratives of religion are said to encompass as much of the environment as they can, seen and unseen, in order to give structure to a world which otherwise could be viewed as chaotic and meaningless (Silverstone, 1994). For most humans chaos is glimpsed lurking behind the perception that our personal existence will end, that we will die, or as Berger puts it:

> Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. … The symbolic universe shelters the individual from ultimate terror by bestowing ultimate legitimation upon the protective schemes of the institutional order.
> (Berger. cited in Morgan, 1998, p.10).

Optimistic narratives which dramatize human problems and conflicts, showing how they can be conquered, are one wall of the shelter 'meaning' provides for human beings, while tragic outcomes remind us of the limits of our powers. Since stories are a means of simultaneously reconciling ourselves to the human condition and trying to reach beyond it, it can therefore be argued that all texts, including films and television programmes are 'religious' to the degree that they are 'narrative' (Schultze, 1990; Greeley, 1988).

We have already seen the terms 'myth' and 'mythological' being used to indicate the presence of archetypal patterns and figures which are generically 'religious' in the sense of providing a focus for powerful, perhaps unconscious, energies (Martin & Ostwald, 1995). Fraser's model of the 'sacramental' or 'Passion' schema is a good example of a form which is at once narrative and mythological. It centres around the complex figure of Jesus Christ, a human being accredited with divine energies who is also the quintessential literary figure – another manifestation, as Joseph Campbell would put it, of the timeless *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1975). The narrative of his victory over death is also a representation of our hope that the chaotic flow of suffering and joy on earth has some point to it after all.[9]

In the field of Religion and Film analysis, labelling a particular narrative configuration a 'myth' can merely be a neutral way of saying that it is part of the ideological underpinning of a particular religious institution. On other occasions however, the word is used judgmentally to indicate a reductive narrative pattern of conflict and resolution which rather than challenging worldly or complacent views ultimately serves to reinforce them (Crossan, 1975; Peck, 1993). For instance a feature that many mainstream products and some religious narratives have in common is the proposition that 'good', or the concern of a benign deity, will prevail in the end (Scott, 1994). This preference for positive closure is recognized in the use of a third sense of the words 'myth' and 'mythological' which refers to myth's ability to provide:

> … a resolution to unresolved or irresolvable conflicts in the audience's experience … our fear of death leads us to prefer happy endings so we are assured in myth, if not in reality of our immortality. (Scott, 1994 p.5)

Therefore, depending on the kind of definition of religion or spirituality which one is content to adopt, we are left again with only a partial answer to a very large question. It seems that a characteristic of film which ensures that most films can be considered religious by virtue of their structure, is reassuring for those who want to find epistemological comfort in everyday forms of communication. That same characteristic is found delusional, wanting, however by those who consider that an encounter with the nature of 'ultimate' reality, no matter how destabilizing that encounter might be, is the proper goal of any spiritual quest.

Parables and Transcendence

Scholars who take an interest in the links between cultural phenomena and mystical spirituality therefore consider it necessary to emphasize that religious narratives often do their best work "in the limit areas of human consciousness", that is in the areas where we can no longer be confident of what we know and understand (White, 1997 p.210). As the ability to convincingly structure chunks of information into resolved, mythological narratives becomes increasingly tenuous, a different kind of structural presentation may result. This is what John Dominic Crossan (1975), Robert White (1997), Bernard Brandon Scott (1994) and others call 'parable': a form of story-telling which, they argue, is more effectively religious (spiritual) than the triumphalism of mainstream narrative structure because it cannot find satisfaction within human behaviour alone. According to White parable works 'non-mythically' to expose the genuine and irresolvable conflicts in our world and hence implies the existence of a larger explanatory framework, which some choose to imagine as the patterns of a more complex reality, or even as God.

This is the area where cultural myth is confronted with cultural paradox and parable, where we experience the inability of the myth to comprehend and express the transcendent. Paradox affirms that all of the human cultural aspirations to find ultimate meaning are quite moral and justifiable, but denies that meaning will be found within the limits of the cultural construction, especially in the rational construction of myth. (White, 1997 p.210)

Crossan's description of the nature of parable as an extreme, almost failed form of narrative, suggests that, in trying to determine what kind of reading a film is inviting, one might need to take into account the specific nature of its narrative form. If its narrative trajectory is restorative and 'mythological' it may be relevant to the everyday kind of religion which provides comfort and a feeling of accommodation to the world of human society. If the form is instead non-mythical and in the nature of parable, it might point towards another type of experience – what Engnell (1995) calls 'the encounter with otherness' or the mystical experience of living with paradox.

Transcendental Style and Schrader

In order to find a specifically cinematic theoretical model which makes (implicit) use of the concept of paradox and the narrative model of parable one needs to go back three decades to the writings of the American critic and filmmaker Paul Schrader (*Transcendental Style in Film,* 1972). Rather than drawing distinctions between uses of the terms spiritual and religious Schrader opts to explore the concept of the transcendental – "that which is beyond normal sense experience ... [that which] transcends the immanent" (p. 5). In other words his area of exploration is at the mystical end of the continuum of spiritual experience. Having studied films by several modernist spiritual film makers, specifically Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer, Schrader postulates that there is a particular style used by filmmakers who want either to express the Transcendent, or to depict the human experience of transcendence. This 'transcendental style' is a combination of visual and narrative strategies which changes in nature as the film progresses. Specifically, he sees the spirituality of a film as expressed in terms of a balance between 'abundant means', that is, the seductive paraphernalia of mainstream entertainment and storytelling methods, which are what connects with us as social individuals, and a contrasting notion of 'sparse means'. The employment of sparse means involves using techniques of increasing austerity which gradually strip away the initial richness of context, eventually leaving the viewer in a confrontation with the most difficult conditions of perception and understanding.

Transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence; it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psychologism, romanticism, impressionism, and finally, rationalism ... To the transcendental artist these conventional interpretations of reality are emotional and rational constructs devised by man to dilute or explain away the transcendental. (Schrader, 1972 p. 10-11)

The style is 'transcendental' insofar as it brings both the characters and the viewers of the film to a point where they must accept their own lack of understanding and mastery over their lives and make a leap of faith and submission in response to that experience. Schrader uses the word 'stasis' to describe the moment when the narrative, already under great tension, yields to the unknowingness of parable. The concept of stasis indicates both a moment of frozen motion (that is, stasis is represented visually) and the maximum of disparity between a human being, his or her desires and the apparent opposition of the surrounding environment.

Disparity is the paradox of the spiritual existing within the physical and it cannot be "resolved" by an earthly logic or human emotions. It must, as the decisive action makes inescapably clear, be accepted or rejected. If the viewer accepts the decisive action (and disparity), he accepts through his mental construct a view of life which can encompass both. On screen this is represented by stasis. (p. 82)

Schrader's model is capacious enough to accept films which move through a Passion trajectory (e.g. *Diary of a Country Priest*) but as his appreciation of Ozu's gentler, non-Christian, works shows it is not limited to movies which are structured according to that formulation. His concept of a changing balance between abundant and sparse means is satisfying in that it places emphasis on the all-important visual specificity of cinema at the same time as it makes possible a compromise between the two poles, previously outlined, of inspired authorial artifice and minimally mediated representation – although the notion of stasis in practice often produces a moment where the camera does little more than observe

and record in the Kracauerian sense. In writing about hierophany, Bird had suggested that the depth in reality was not passive, that in some sense it *expected* to be made known: "In this capacity cinema becomes not so much a voice of the artist but rather a diaphragm which is sensitive to the speech of the cosmos waiting to be heard" (Bird, 1982 p.20). In Schrader's model the artist is placed in a broadly analogous, receptive, position as a kind of helpmate to the Transcendent, since the 'transcendental style' arises "out of two universal contingencies: the desire to express the Transcendent in art and the nature of the film medium " (p.3). And as far as the issue of narrative structure goes, in Schrader's model a film might or might not *begin* in the mythological mode, but it certainly moves out of it and into parable by the film's end. The transcendental style is therefore one which, in the last instance, deals with issues of religion in terms of spirituality, but the kind of spirituality which is not so much the support and comfort of the everyday as its critic and nemesis.

When Schrader began to develop his own career as a scriptwriter and film maker the movies he produced were not always as low-key or as restrained as his theoretical writing might predispose one to imagine. He has made a speciality, often in collaboration with Martin Scorcese, of scripts which plunge into sexualized, violent, masculine underworlds (*Taxi Driver*, 1976; *Hardcore*, 1978; *American Gigolo*, 1980; *Mishima*, 1981). It was his script of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Scorcese, which proved so controversial. However his work almost always includes a moment of submission or clarity or a leap of faith which approximates that movement towards stasis which he wrote about in *Transcendental Style*. His most recent scripts (*Touch*, 1998; *Bringing out The Dead*, 1999 [with Scorcese]) have moved back towards a more explicit engagement with spiritual, and in the case of *Touch* – the story of a young ex-monk who tries to find a line between employing his healing abilities while avoiding being exploited by fundamentalist and commercial interests – religious themes.

It is also the case that Schrader's *Transcendental Style* has taken on a new lease of life as a reference point for a contemporary generation of critics. Fraser writes on Schrader, but tends to conflate his theoretical work with his actual film-making, and finding the latter wanting, characterizes his position as one of 'religious materialism' where "all natural and supernatural occurrences" are placed "within a rational system" (Fraser, 1998 p. 126). On the other hand the emotion produced by the use of transcendental style Engnell proposes, expresses a 'quasi-mystical spirituality' which he discerns at work in the American domestic drama *Places in the Heart* (1984). Schraderian analyses have been produced by Desser, writing on *Tender Mercies* (1985)[10], and Hardy writing on *Heavenly Creatures* (1994). Not all visitors to Schrader accept his formulation uncritically since, as has been noted, it privileges a form of spirituality which can be considered excessively élitist. Nevertheless his work does help to lay the groundwork for 'spiritual' interpretations of films which seem to be 'about' and immersed in a secular environment. Films of this type may not make any specific reference to religion, but gradually move, through disparity between the protagonists and that environment, to a crisis of motivation and understanding.

Since it seems that mainstream films are becoming technically ever more 'abundant' some of the most interesting work which responds to Schrader is that which asks, what it would be for the cinema to represent, in an abundant manner, spiritualities which are embedded in everyday social contexts. Contributions to this debate include the discussions by Lindvall et al. (1996) of representations of African American Christianity, and by Engnell (1995) of American melodrama.

Contemporary Film-making and Spirituality

Near the beginning of this paper it was noted that many of the authors who write on religion and film have a missiological purpose – they somehow hope that the strong, emotionally-involving experiences which cinema can provide will remind Western audiences of the value of their Christian heritage. In a sense, it is immediately clear that this potential is illusory or inconsequential. There is no evidence that numbers of cinema-goers translate into numbers of church-goers, while on the other hand the forces which move people away from organized religion towards secularism are strong and patently successful. The World Christian Encyclopaedia for instance estimated that in the 1980s the number of white Westerners who were practising Christians was dropping at a rate of more than 7,000 a day (cited in Geering, 1999 p.65). In a country such as New Zealand the overall decline in church attendance is so constant (even when increases in the numbers of fundamentalist Christians have been accounted for) that it is predicted that there will be "whole areas of the country without a significant Christian presence" by 2010 (Morris, 1999 p.19). It is difficult to envisage how any number of movies could arrest cultural change on that kind of scale.

Nevertheless, if religion is not defined predominantly in terms of Christianity, or indeed in terms of traditional forms of religious organization, if it is seen more frequently in the light of concepts of spirituality, it *can* be argued that some of the promise that religion and film scholars see in the cinema is actually being mobilized. Since the middle of the 1990s 'religion' in its widest sense, that is conceived of as a resource base of particular themes, situations, epistemological problems and characters, has again become popular as a source of cinematic narratives. For the last few years now our cinema screens (and television screens too, although that's another topic) have been alive with angels, demons, and avatars of Christ and Satan. These supernatural beings, who enter the human realm in order to challenge and re-adjust mortal perceptions, populate such films as *Terminator* (1984), *City of Angels* (1997), *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997), *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), *Fallen* (1998), *The Book Of Life* (1999), *Stigmata* (1999), *End of Days* (1999) and *Dogma* (1999). In the case of *Defending Your Life* (1991), *The Rapture* (1991), *What Dreams May Come* (1998) and *After Life* (1999) the journey takes place in reverse as human characters find themselves evaluating their time on Earth from the perspective of the Hereafter. Clashes between the extremes of good and evil, embodied in flamboyant characterisations have always been a mainstay of cinematic action but now more finely nuanced moral dilemmas are being explored. In the materialistic climate of the 1980s for example the dramas *Wall Street* (1987) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987) were unusual in regard to proposing that there might be values more worthy than those of commercial and sexual opportunism respectively and they subjected their characters to strong violence in order to make that point. Nowadays however it is quite common for characters to struggle, consciously, to live in a manner which acknowledges material, non-material and moral facets of existence. *Priest* (1994), *The New Age* (1994), *Contact* (1997) *Breaking The Waves* (1997), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Kundun* (1997), *Touch* (1997), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), *After Life* (1998), *Fight Club* (1999), *Holy Smoke* (1999), *Joan of Arc* (1999) and *American Beauty* (1999) are some of the many recent films which have addressed that moral and spiritual nexus with varying degrees of specific 'religious' reference.

This renewed interest in metaphysical matters has sometimes been attributed to the 'millennial' moment, which is associated with threats of negative apocalyptic outcomes (and hence apocalyptic films) as much as with commemoration of the birth of Christ (Martin & Ostwalt, 1995; Robins and Palmer, 1997). However, to tie it merely to that moment would surely be to miss a series of reactions to, and developments of, previous cultural conditions. This is not the place to engage too deeply with the sociology of religion but commentators

have been suggesting for some time (Marcuse, 1972; Lefebvre, 1978; Peck, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998) that decades of emphasis on rationality and rationalisms, whether they be scientific, philosophical or economic, have failed to deliver the satisfaction they seemed to promise. There may currently be a renewed appeal therefore, in investigating other ways of accounting for existence, which while apparently less rational, less 'scientific', place emotional and spiritual well-being at their centre. The myriad of ways in which 'religion' and 'spirituality' are currently being constructed and de-constructed for the cinema might be part of that search.

Just as 'spirituality' has come to be preferred over 'religiosity' to refer to an interest in the metaphysical, among contemporary filmmakers it is rare to find some one who professes to be directing a film out of a positive sense of commitment to a particular religious tradition. As Hasenberg points out in *The New Image of Religious Film* (May, 1997) it is common for directors to make public statements implying some distance between themselves and their material, even if their films deal overtly with religious people or institutions. Alain Cavalier, Denys Arcand and Krzyszstof Kieslowski are all directors who, Hasenberg notes, were raised as Catholics but later gave up formal allegiance to the Church. They have made films about St Thérèse of Lisieux, (*Thérèse* 1986), an updating of the Passion of Christ (*Jesus of Montreal*, Arcand 1989*)* and the Ten Commandments (*Dekalog*, Kieslowski 1988). Yet, analysing their public statements Hasenberg states that they:

> typically like to be thought of as non-believers or agnostics. It is futile to discuss whether they are not in one sense or another religious: they prefer the point of view of observer of, not the participant in, religious culture (1997, p.45).

With much religious or spiritual content presented from an ostensibly uncommitted, observational standpoint such as the one Hasenberg describes certain patterns in treating the material are nevertheless emerging.

In the case of forms of Christianity religiously-inflected material is often presented at least in part as a critique of the shortcomings of a religious tradition. (e.g. *Priest* 1994, *Breaking the Waves* 1997; *The Book of Life* 1999; *Stigmata* 1999; *The Messenger: Joan of Arc* 1999). Sometimes however (*Armageddon* 1998; *Se7en* 1995; *End of Days* 1999) tropes taken from the eschatological extremes of Christian mythology seem to be drawn on largely to guarantee dramatic, exciting narratives, or specialised information from Christianity's past is rediscovered and displayed as esoteric knowledge. In the case of 'other' religions the stance is often one of a sympathetic 'exploration' of an exotic set of beliefs – Tibetan Buddhism for instance has been the inspiration for several films in recent years – including *Little Buddha* (1993); *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Kundun* (1997), *Windhorse* (1998), and *Phorpa* (1999). Or, in accordance with what has been identified as a larger societal trend, films can be classified as belonging to the context of an investigation into the 'spiritual'. That may result in a fairly explicit engagement with energies which are not normally represented on the physical plane (*After Life* 1998; *City of Angels* 1997; *Contact* 1997; *What Dreams May Come* 1998) or it may take the form of an emphasis on the sacredness of values of relationship and community (*Angels in the Outfield* 1994; *Holy Man* 1998; *Holy Smoke* 1999). It may also include that growing genre of films in which the cultivation of a sense of spirituality or adherence to an ethical code is proposed or implied as an antidote to what is presented as the spiritually bankrupt materialism of contemporary urban life (*The New Age* (1994); *The Ice Storm* (1997); *The Opposite of Sex* (1998); *Happiness* (1998); *Fight Club* (1999); *American Beauty* (1999).

Hierophany in *American Beauty*

I have suggested that *American Beauty* is a film which fits a template of *implicit* spirituality and have made this suggestion because it is clear that to interpret the film *primarily* as a tale of spiritual despair and redemption is not a preferred or dominant reading (Hall, 1973) in most forums of public debate. For, as I have argued, spirituality is a word the usage of which is on the increase in everyday life but which still remains marginal or unacceptable in some contexts. In the terms of the readership of this paper however, which I imagine to consist of an audience familiar with many forms of spiritual expression, to refer to the film as only 'implicitly' spiritual is probably disingenuous, since *American Beauty* makes explicit reference not only to concepts of spiritual growth, but also to the mechanisms by which 'deep' perception can be elicited.

One of *American Beauty*'s secondary characters is an apparently serene young man, Ricky Fitts, who spends most of his time (when not at school or dealing in marijuana) making video recordings of people and objects. Initially the movie itself views Ricky from a distance, presenting him as a voyeur, with the implication that he may develop in to one of the most unpleasant of the modern gallery of media villains – the sexual psychopath. However, as he develops a friendship with Jane, the Burnham's daughter, Ricky begins to talk about the motivations behind his own filming. He claims that viewing the world through a lens helps him to see aspects of it more fully and deeply, to the extent that sometimes he is overwhelmed by what he sees: "There's so much beauty in the world – I feel like I can't take it and my heart is going to cave in". Specifically, he says, "sometimes it's like God is looking right at you for a second and if you're careful, you can look right back". "What do you see?" Jane asks. "Beauty". Ricky is a complicated character since rather too many of the things he finds sublimely beautiful are dead, but at this moment he is speaking I think, not just for himself but for the 'author' of the film, and even more than that, for the aesthetic attitude towards film making which, in the manner of Kracauer, Bazin and Bird sees film as capable of effects which are heirophanous in nature. On the other hand the circular form of verbal reference, which moves from beauty to God and on to Beauty again, is indicative of the contemporary manoeuvre in which the concept of God is evoked but soon relegated to the background in favour of a discourse which is suitably vague and spiritual.

Some minutes later Ricky (and the film makers) attempt to create a moment of hierophany for us, as his favourite sequence of video footage is screened. At a literal level what we are being shown is a shot of a white plastic bag, probably a piece of supermarket-rubbish, blowing about on a piece of pavement in front of a brick wall. It is a shot of nothing, nothing most of us would normally bother to watch. But because the shot is held for more than a minute and (perhaps) because a voice speaks over it, interpreting it for us, the opportunity is there to see a different interaction between the breeze and the bag, which now may seem to exhibit an animating consciousness. This is how Ricky interprets the shot:

> This bag was just dancing with me, like a little kid, begging me to play … That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to be aware that there was no need to be afraid, ever.

Of course, it *is* just a shot of a plastic bag in a feature film, and if one is not repelled by the possibilities for bathos, the thought remains that its graceful movements will, at the very least, have been encouraged; there are almost always several layers of calculation in a film designed for the commercial circuit. Nevertheless as an explicit demonstration of the potential of the cinema for revealing the depth in 'reality', for making possible moments of hierophany for those who wish to see them, this scene, which makes an object as trivial as a plastic bag into an emblem of divinity, is an indication that the line of argument pursued by Bazin, Kracauer and others still has considerable validity.

The film incorporates these discussions of the sacred into a larger melodramatic narrative which is predominantly mythological, arguably even Passion-based, in structure but does exhibit moments of transcendental style. The most obvious of these occurs at the end of the film. In a scene where Lester Burnham is finally given the chance to consummate his desire for his daughter's friend, the pace of the filming slows right down, gravid with significance. By the time that Lester discovers his fantasy-lover is actually both virgin and terrified, the gap between his own feelings and the reality of his environment are at a high pitch of disparity and the film is almost at a standstill. The pace recovers as Burnham takes pity on his victim, but it sinks back into stasis as he sits at the kitchen table, reviewing his life in what will prove to be its final moments. As his voice-over notes "That one second isn't a second at all – it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time … " The visual echo of this summation occurs when Ricky bends to examine Lester's body, the camera fixated on his quizzical, rapt expression as he is reflected in the shiny pool of Lester's blood. Death and Beauty – the richness of life and the starkness of death – are simultaneously in a state of confrontation and unity. For me the ambiguous resonance of this sequence suggests that Schrader's theory of transcendental style, as a description of the means by which hierophany can be melded with a parable-like form of narrative, retains considerable explanatory power. But at the same time, the fact that *American Beauty*'s form of stasis is relatively speaking, embedded in abundance and irony, reinforces claims that there is more work to be done on examining the nature of representations of transcendence in popular, post-modern, as opposed to élitist and modernist film.

Spirituality, Film and Audiences

The approaches which have been considered in this paper have all come under the broad category of 'textual' or semiotic, approaches to the interpretation of film, even when it is underlying structural features which are being read out from the works. The previous section constituted an extended example of textual analysis in which I have aimed to persuade you that my interpretation of *American Beauty*'s significance is reasonable by virtue of being grounded in the actual words and images which occur in the film. Like all textual analysts my analysis is motivated by a particular agenda, in this case my desire that some sort of distinct space and language be maintained for the discussion of spirituality (and religion) in audio-visual culture.

The problem is, that according to some theorists, this project, and any other which engages in textual analysis, has serious problems with validity and generalisability. Chief among the problems are questions of the nature of authorship (or directorship) and of the status of the text (or film) itself. The notion that a text has an author (singular or collective) who is capable of implanting messages within an art work or commercial entertainment product was dispatched with some ferocity in the 1970s (Foucault, 1979; Barthes, 1982; Gripsrud, 1995) to be revived but fragmented into the much more diffuse concept that communications are at some point 'encoded' with meanings (Hall, 1973). Similarly the notion of the text itself as a site of reliable meaning has been debunked, most notably by the literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) who claimed:

> … meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable nor of free and independent readers but of interpretive communities that are responsible both for the shape of reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce (p. 322)

Under this rubric the text is envisaged as a chimera, which can yield, within broad limits, whatever members of such an interpretive community are determined to extract from it. If a textual analyst attempts to conceal the partiality and contingency of his or her analysis, by hiding behind a stance of objective authority, the charge can then be brought that their

findings are largely uninformative, since what has been sought is what has been found (Nolan, 1998). Or, as Deacon et al. (1999) put it, unanchored forms of textual analysis are "always in danger of being blown hither and thither by the winds of conjecture and surmise" (p.181). The examples of textual analysis authored by Jewett (1997) and Rhoads and Roberts (1997) definitely fall within these unstable parameters, especially since they engage with the films at the broad level of thematic concern rather than with the analysis of the formal characteristics of specific shots and sequences.

At the same time as textual analysis began to loose its dominance in film theory there was a shift in interest towards the empirical or 'ethnographic' study of interpretive communities in the form of audiences, mostly television audiences (Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Fiske 1987). Much of this early work explored how viewers might make meaning from the programmes they watched; was their class position a determining factor in their interpretations for instance? (Morley, 1980), how might gender affect viewing experiences? (Ang, 1985) and how did the actual environment of viewing interact with audience members' understandings of programmes? (Morley, 1986; Fiske, 1987). This methodological approach, often known as 'reception study' has been popular for two decades in the wider realm of media and television studies, but it has rarely, to my knowledge, been applied to the study of film and television programmes with religious content. (Sonia Livingstone's work with *Coronation Street* viewers (1990) did note that the nature and degree of a character's moral orientation [good or bad, very moral or not moral] was a factor viewers used to produce programme interpretations, but morality is linked to religion only by implication in this case). Stewart Hoover published a study in 1988 *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church,* which reported on research with a series of individuals who were viewers of televangelist Pat Robertson's *700 Club* programme. Hoover's mapping of the variables which comprised their backgrounds, faith experiences, viewing habits and responses to the programme, showed just how comprehensive this type of investigation needs to be if it is to yield persuasive results. Margaret Miles in *Seeing and Believing* (1996) has also undertaken a rudimentary form of reception analysis by reporting on box office takings, newspaper articles and critical reviews of a number of films which she deemed to be religious or spiritual, but her approach is too patchy to be fully satisfying.

Otherwise however there is undoubtedly scope for research into the reception of the types of film which have been discussed in this paper. For example how many people and from what interpretive communities, might find the 'plastic bag' sequence in *American Beauty* persuasively 'spiritual', or experience a hint of 'the transcendent' when they watch one of the films analysed by Schrader? What kinds of language from what realms of knowledge would they draw upon when describing such films? To illustrate how complex such an undertaking would be I include a series of evaluations of *American Beauty* from two interpretive communities in the form of Christian websites. They demonstrate that even amongst people with shared interests there can be significantly divergent interpretations of the same material.

The first (www.christiancritic.com/movies/amerbeau.htm) offers a review with the tagline:

> Watching this movie is like reading an encyclopaedia of devil spirits" … On the ride home from the theatre, my wife and I were able to catalogue sixteen distinctly different devil spirits which would have been involved in the influencing of these characters' decisions. Among them: a spirit of envy, a sullen spirit, a spirit of error, a spirit of depression, a spirit of obsession, a sensual spirit and a spirit of murder … *American Beauty* makes dark but perfect sense" (Michael Elliott).

Elliott has access to a pre-modern discourse of devilish causality which few 'secular' viewers would be able to deploy, or might replace with explanations about economic or psychological causation, categories which are not nowadays routinely perceived as 'spiritual' in nature. By contrast the language of the review from the second website (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/i-american beauty. html. March 8, 2000) is initially situated closer to media theory as it speculates on the likely nature of other audience interpretations. It then moves to employ an admixture of psychological and moral concepts with Christian overtones.

> While many audience members will never be able to see past the film's content, there is an incredible core to the film's message – though it isn't found until the film's final scenes and, even then, the director doesn't beat you over the head with it ... He trusts that his audience is going to see the answer to the question he puts forth in the film's opening. How can we move past the emotional deadness of our lives and restore the joy we once had? By learning to stop living a 'me' centered life and start living a life of care and concern for others. (Joshua Hornbook)

After these formal reviews the site 'christiananswers' features a series of quick comments from viewers who have felt moved to respond to the reviewer's opinions.

> I thought it was an excellent movie for the following reasons: it shows how easily our lives are diverted from what is true, good and pure when our lives are not Christ-centered ...

> It's debased and utterly anti-Christian ... The review was entirely too sympathetic to the director's intentions. He wasn't relying on the audience's intelligence, he was relying on their willingness to leave God outside the theatre and indulge their worst inclinations.

> It recalls Solomon's search in *Ecclesiastes* to find something fulfilling in life ... Through it all, the message to cherish the time we have on earth is a very strong one, However it's also sad that the characters in the movies can't see past the beauty in the world to the creator of said beauty (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/i-american beauty. html. March 8, 2000 pp. 3-5)

As even such a brief survey may indicate, the material on which audience research is based, that is, reports of what people say about films and television programmes, is not so much an avoidance of textual analysis as a proliferation of it. Each of these statements is simply a less formal version of the pattern of personal assertion, backed up by evidence and example, of the sort offered by many religion and film scholars. As Livingstone (1998) states, audience research has produced several insights which cannot be rescinded: "It has been established that audiences are plural in their readings, that their cultural context matters and that they do not always agree with textual analysis" (p.195). But two decades of audience work has already produced a re-evaluation of its capabilities, to the extent that some scholars who were previously enthusiastic about the approach have suggested, as Livingstone reports (1998 p.194) "That the concept of audience itself is no longer coherent or useful [Ang, 1990; Fiske, 1992]". Instead some of the most interesting work currently being done in media studies aims to investigate as many stages of the life of a media 'message' as possible, tracking its changing meanings through different moments of time (cf. Thompson, 1990; Corner, 1991; Gripsrud, 1995; Deacon et al. 1999). For a film like *American Beauty* this might mean interviewing the various people involved in producing the film and then studying what the finished product means to audiences in different communities, in addition to making one's own interpretations of the text. My own research undertakes such a task by looking at the production, text and reception of a New Zealand-made feature film and television programme which contain explicit religious references, but have been made by production teams whose members describe themselves as atheistic, or agnostic, yet sometimes also as 'spiritual' (Hardy, forthcoming).

Throughout this paper I have proposed that it is useful to make a distinction between 'everyday' and 'mystical' forms of religion and spirituality, (D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999) while acknowledging that both in practice and representation, it can be difficult to keep them apart. Because of their engagement with wide social processes and large groups of people the research methods which I have been describing latterly are generally productive of observations about 'everyday' forms of interaction between religion, the media and audiences. They answer the fundamental question which this paper addresses (e.g. "What form can the relationship between film and religion take?") by eschewing questions of hierophany or transcendence in favour of assuming that the media help make peoples' lives bearable and satisfying by providing them with the opportunity to find meanings in representations of phenomena, events and emotions. It seems clear that the media (along with other societal institutions) do in fact perform such a 'religious' task, although the exact mechanisms of how this is achieved remain undefined. Paradoxically, it seems likely that it is difficult to use film in a premeditated fashion as a tool for religious didacticism for instance, because as we have seen, audiences are capable of developing quite different evaluations of and responses to, the same material.

The mystical experience it seems is at all stages more personal. It takes place in a human body and mind predisposed for it to occur (D'Aquili and Newberg, 1999). Once such a pre-disposition exists, as Bird (1982) suggests, almost anything can provide the occasion for the perception of 'divine' presence. As others remind us (Goethals, 1990; Irigaray 1999) visual imagery has long been conceived of as an aid to the development of spiritual perception – "a bridge between the universe and the 'soul', between the soul and the world" (Irigaray, p.326). We have considered several specific characteristics of cinematic form that might encourage the deployment of meditative perception, the recognition of heirophany, or provoke an experience of cognitive dissonance that seeks resolution in a larger framework of unity. It has been claimed that such characteristics are still in evidence in contemporary films that operate within a social environment predominantly defined as 'secular'. Concomitantly it has also been acknowledged that the ability to 'see' and to speak about films in a manner which mobilizes these characteristics may be dependent on having access to particular cultural resources of historical reference and to specific forms of language.

The primary means by which people report on and attempt to share their 'spiritual' reactions to film has been identified as 'textual analysis', a rhetorical process by which one selectively re-describes parts of a text, incorporating one's own reactions into the re-description. This approach has been criticized because of the pitfalls of the subjectivity which it entails, these being especially evident when a subject as contentious as religion is under discussion in an environment where Christianity is only one of a number of possible forms of spiritual reference. The input of empirical social science methods into the religion and film field has suggested that this approach, which can seem like an attempt to pre-determine what other viewers should 'make' of texts, is both coercive and insufficiently informative. However in the light of the distinctions drawn between forms of religion and spirituality there is a more generous way of looking at the issue. In reporting on an experience that is arguably less strongly marked by collective norms – one's personal 'spiritual' response to a film – there is probably no more honest method than textual analysis for expressing reactions of enthusiasm, appreciation or distaste. In the case of writing by professional critics there are obviously extra layers of knowledge which can be called upon to bulwark one's own opinion, but, at base the professional and the amateur approach are very similar. Re-describing something that one has found moving or significant, is a method by which one can hope, but not guarantee, to share the experience with others, possibly encouraging them to avail themselves of a similar opportunity by seeing the film for

themselves. A problem certainly arises if the material is presented in such a tone that it lays claim to unique authority, but on the other hand personal report is the only method which can persuasively answer the question of whether or not an *individual* viewer finds that a particular film is capable of representing or engendering a relationship with the transcendent.

Personal questions and personal answers seem particularly appropriate at the moment in relation to this topic since it has been noted that while spirituality is currently a rich field of exploration for the cinema there is little consensus as to what it means or how it is best represented. In the space of a generation or two of increasing secularism there may have been sufficient distance developed for the symbols and practices of institutional religion to become objects of fascination once again for some younger film-makers – perhaps with something of the spirit of enquiry that one would bring to an intriguing historical investigation. Where those symbols and practices are not overtly present or discussed however the intensity of spiritual motivation may be even stronger, as writers and directors return to basic source material – that is representations of everyday life and its problems – in order to ask why disorder and suffering persist in the face of material prosperity. These questions may not necessarily be conceived of as being spiritual in nature but it has always been in the disparity between human desire and the constrictions of physical, social existence that the search for a transcendental source of solace arises.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the history of the ambivalence of Church officials and scholars towards visual imagery see Goethals, (1990) *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion and the Making of Meaning*.

2. It should be noted however that several contemporary Catholic scholars are well-disposed toward the audio-visual media: in 1995 to mark the centenary of cinema The Pontifical Council for Social Communications sent a package of media education material to every Catholic Bishops Conference worldwide (see Malone, 1996).

3. After working on the Annenberg/Gallup study of viewers of religious television in the early 1980s Hoover developed his own qualitative methodology for investigating the backgrounds and beliefs of viewers of televangelist Pat Robertson's programme the *700 Club* (*Mass Media Religion*, 1988). Recently, with Knut Lundby, he has edited a landmark collection of essays entitled *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (1997).

4. The term 'religious' is used here in preference to spiritual, largely because Hoover chooses to employ it in his own work, but also because he is interested for the most part in the social and collective end of the religious – spiritual continuum. As he states in his introduction to *Mass Media Religion* (1988) he does not wish to make any judgements for example about the 'true' nature of religious experience.

5. Angelopoulous's earlier films dealt with Greek history, interpreted through a left-wing viewpoint but since *Voyage to Cythera* in 1986, his films, although definitely not 'religious' in a conventional sense, have been interpreted as playing out, through a journey motif, an understanding of human frailty and a search for transcendance. See for instance articles by Williamson, Biro and Horton in Horton (1997) ed. *The Last Modernist: the Films of Theo Angelopoulos*. Praeger Publishers.

6. Since Scorcese originally intended to be a priest and speaks of being a movie director as a vocational equivalent, it is not difficult to find religious references in his films. See for instance Durgnat's article on Scorcese in *Sight and Sound*, June 1995 entitled "Between God and the Goodfellas" or Smith's on the film Casino "Two Thousand Light Years from Home" in *Film Comment*, Jan-Feb 1996. Accrediting Allen as a spiritual film maker is to draw a slightly longer bow – he calls himself an agnostic - but Marcia Pally's article in *Cineaste* (no 3, 1998) "The Cinema as Secular Religion" is persuasive in arguing that Allen's later films treat other people's religious beliefs and the artistic process with a similar degree of respect as palliatives for the human condition.

7. Cf. Paul Giles' *American Catholic Arts and Fiction* (?) (Taubin, 1998?)

8. Mircea Eliade *The Sacred and The Profane* (1961). Cited in John May & Michael Bird, eds. *Religion in Film*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1982).

9. Campbell's concept of the 'monomyth' or 'Hero's Journey' has been commodified for use by filmmakers and scriptwriters who wish to strengthen the structure of their films and broaden their appeal. (Vogler, 1992). A pattern which combines an unspecific spirituality with the model of healthy (masculine) psychological growth, the hero myth is readily discerned at work in the *Star Wars* films (The director George Lucas has acknowledged his debt to Campbell), and was also deliberately employed by George Miller the Australian director of the successful fable *Babe: The Gallant Pig* (1995).

10. Desser, D. (1985) 'Transcendental Style in *Tender Mercies*'. Cited in Engnell (1995).

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