Films, Frames and Video Games: Religious Insights into Media

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In today’s society, popular culture is increasingly transmitted by the mass media. Newspapers, comic books, books, television, films, art, radio, popular music, video games—each of these not only brings the participant some form of fun, enjoyment or pleasure but also instils in us, or encourages us towards, a sense of self-understanding.

Religion also provides an important sense of self-understanding: Julia M. Corbett has defined it as “an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities and institutions by which individuals give meaning to their lives by orientating themselves to what they take to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value” (Forbes and Mahan, 2005, 9). The topic of this issue is the interaction of these two major influences on individual and collective human nature: popular culture and religion.

It is obvious that popular culture reflects society: attitudes towards gender, race and sex, the cult of youth, beauty, success, the experiences of parenthood and ageing. In so doing it will frequently reflect our own individual opinions and feelings about these things. But such is the persuasive power of this culture, and of the media that disseminate it, that we are not merely informed, but shaped by it. Our values and beliefs may be reinforced in some cases, but in others they will be transformed, or new ones created. For example, the fashion industry may inform us of the latest trends but the glorification of very thin, waif-like models has undoubtedly instilled in some the desire to lose weight to the point where such a desire induces a psychological disorder. Recognizing the power of the media to affect human behaviour, the modelling industry is apparently trying to rectify this by placing the emphasis on looking healthy.

How does popular culture reflect and influence religious beliefs and practices—and vice-versa? There are at least four basic kinds of relationship, and the following articles explore each of them in turn. The first comprises religious themes, language, or imagery, within a particular cultural activity: “Religion in Popular Culture.” But conversely, religion can adopt or adapt the techniques of the mass media and elements of popular culture in order to promote itself; “Popular Culture in Religion.” In a third kind of relationship a cultural activity takes on the form and purpose of religion: “Popular Cul-
ture as Religion.” Finally, one can also identify values, perspectives or ethical issues that happen to be present in both but may work out in similar or different ways: “Popular Culture and Religion in Dialogue.” Often, of course, it is hard to disentangle these various aspects, because they overlap.

Erin Runions offers her readers a different interpretive gaze on the two films she chooses to evaluate. “Tolerating Babel: the Bible, Film and the Family in U.S. Biopolitics,” critically analyzes D.W. Griffiths’s 1916 film Intolerance: Love’s Struggle through the Ages and Iñárritu’s 2006 film Babel against the backdrop of Genesis 11, incorporating the framework of biopolitics as defined by Michel Foucault. In Genesis 11 God stops the people who are building the Tower of Babel up to the heavens by multiplying their languages and thus dividing them. Both films wish to bring unity to Babel through the universal language of cinema. Runions argues that the metaphors of the biblical symbols Babylon/Babel often associated with Hollywood and cinema exhibit ambivalence towards the social/political unity and diversity of an empire. However it is this very ambivalence that allows biopolitics to emerge. Healing of the intolerant empire comes through one cultural form: the nuclear family.

Runions takes the reader though the ebb and flow of the ambivalence presented by both films in the motifs of unity and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. These films themselves represent a kind of universal language and are meant to emphasis unity, tolerance, peacefulness; they are to meant to mend empires. Yet at the same time by its very nature the art of film simply can be seen as a form of imperialism, intolerance and as an act of suppression of certain populations. These films are also the sites of different modes of vacillating power within political and cultural domain that, according to Foucault allow populations to be produced, regularized and classified. The success of the hegemonic power of the U.S. empire depends on the use of film, film techniques, views of family and norms of gender, sexuality and tolerances. While both films critique empire they nevertheless continue to normalize the values, attitudes and practices of the U.S. empire. Since it is the imperializing ambition of U.S. empire that prioritizes white heteronormativity, Runions focuses on the nuclear family, detailing the tensions within family units displayed within the films: white versus non-white, normative sexuality versus non-normative sexuality, female gender independence versus female gender suppression.

Siphiwe Dube introduces us to the world of hip-hop culture and rap music, in particular “gangsta” rap. He examines the music of NAS aka Nazrin Jones, a self proclaimed prophet and Messiah whose music focuses on sociopolitical and religious values of American society but more specifically on the marginalization of African Americans. He first introduces the correlation
between hip-hop and religion by examining Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” rap. West confesses to his faith in Jesus in the popular medium of “holy hip-hop”. Dube continues to examine the purpose of rap music in the eighties and nineties where the central issue was the inability of the black church to confront the white power structure within Christianity. Then the concept of using the bible for the purpose of Black liberation became prevalent. In order to put NAS into some historical context, Dube discusses how rap artists can be perceived: some critique Christian institutions and their failure to address the ills people are suffering; some artists can be perceived as self-proclaimed prophets serving as the moral conscience of the nation, while others use rap to critique society in general and also the hip-hop community in particular; yet others use it as a form of black self expression. But not all hip-hop rap is critical, and some use it to promote and endorse American values.

“Hate Me Now: An Instance of NAS as Hip-Hop’s Self proclaimed Prophet and Messiah” shows how NAS is critical of religion for not delivering the poor from suffering and critical of hip-hop rap music for not living up to its call of liberation. Dube uses the concept of metonymy to show that rap music and religion can be related; also as a tool to better understand the rap “Hate Me Now.” He exposes the symbolic imagery in the rap video, not only in the lyrics of the music, but in the visual presentation as well. The concept of the crucifixion or the Cross and the Messiah are the first symbols to command attention. But what Dube weaves from these symbols is at the core of African American society: those that are suppressed look to religious traditions and/or the “high life” of the hip-hop culture while experiencing no change in their own lives. The irony Dube points out is that NAS uses religious imagery in a multitude of layers to deliver specific messages against both religious traditions and also hip-hop culture.

The last two articles deal with video games specifically but their focuses vary greatly.

“Not-So-Sacred Quests: Religion, Intertextuality, and Ethics in Video-games” by Mark Love focuses first on the predominance of religious imagery and motifs in video games in general but more specifically in a game entitled Oblivion. Secondly he raises the question of popular culture as a religion, but in order to assert that the idea of video games acting as a religion has been overstated. Why is religion so common in video games? Love suggests that religion is used in video games as a tool, one with many functions. It can be used to accomplish another goal, or it can act as a form of manipulation, or criticize or endorse real world religions. He describes how Oblivion relies heavily on intertextuality. It is a fantasy and role playing game (RPG) for a single player who takes on quests or missions in a mythical world that is full of intertextual connections not only to religion but to popular cul-
ture at large. Love examines what understandings players derive from being exposed to these religious references and how they are affected by them. Drawing on the views of Fielding, Krzywinska, and Greenblatt he elicits various answers. He points out that intertextuality functions across a whole spectrum of meaning from the significant to the banal. Nevertheless religion has relevance in modern society, whether it is identified with being geeky and cool as a form of cultural capital or represents social energy or forces a game player to reflect on his/her own ethics. Love therefore demonstrates that video games are important to players in many different ways.

The final article offers a fresh critical theory of religion by focusing on religious activity as a form of game playing and ritual game playing as a form of religion. S Brent Plate’s article “Religion is Playing Games: Playing Video Gods, Playing to Play” starts with a theoretical examination of anthropologist Johan Huizinga’s correlation of play and religious rituals. However Huizinga does not correlate the concepts of “play” and “game” and the philosopher Roger Callois’s theories are used to draw certain important distinctions. Callois comes up with four game varieties: competition, chance, simulation, and disorder. He also introduces a spectrum in the “ways of playing.” Plate then finds similarities or parallels between the space and time in the world of religion and in the world of playing games.

Plate continues to describe the link between violence in video games and aggressive behaviour generally. However while studying the case of Charles Whitman, a violent mass killer, he concludes that lack of play can just as easily lead to aggressive behaviour. He emphasizes the importance of play in everyone’s life, using the example of violence to show that the world of play or “other world” and “this world” merge with and influence each other. From this he moves to describing another parallel: the Sabbath as a form of ritual play. According to Plate we are built to play and built through play. He outlines the similarities between the Sabbath and its game-like qualities. Finally, having linked rituals, games and play, Plate presents two types of video games that may have implications for the study of religion: god games and purposeless games. By examining the dialectical relationship between religion and play, Plate proposes a way of accounting for change and movement in religious traditions.

In conclusion, many a discussion should ensue from the previous readings; perhaps too, a sense of self-understanding.