

The Soul and the Screen - 2013 Ferguson Lecture

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Good evening. Tena koutou katoa. Greetings and thanks especially to the Reverend Ferguson in whose honour this series is named and to the Reverend Doug Lendrum who has guided me through to the point where this evening could happen. I really appreciate the motivation that the prospect of this lecture has given me to sit down and think some issues through.

I am a media studies scholar who specializes in researching the relationships between religion, media and culture in today's world, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand. So, unlike several of the previous speakers in this series, I am not a theologian. Moreover, as a longstanding member of a Buddhist congregation I belong to a non-theist religion. So perhaps I am in completely the wrong place. I am also aware that one of the progenitors of Presbyterianism, the 16th century reformer John Calvin, provided a sustained argument against indulgence in the use of visual imagery in religious practice that has been influential for centuries (although it has obviously not prevented you from furnishing this church with these magnificent stained glass windows). Calvin declared, says the religious art historian David Morgan, that images can teach nothing about Christian truth, since they are the production of the human imagination and therefore inherently inaccurate on matters of divinity (2005;11-12). Only the biblical word is to be trusted as the proper image of the Holy Spirit, for, Calvin argued. "by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines and that we recognize him in his own image, namely in the Word" (12). In reference to the use of visual imagery, the human mind is, Calvin claimed, a factory of idols: it produces images or portrayals of the divine that primarily serve human needs and are unable to depict God in any useful or meaningful way (ibid).

As you will know, there has been a consequent preference in Protestant churches for simplicity in the worship environment and a prohibition on depictions of the divine. Moreover, while Calvin's arguments functioned at the level of theology, they were also the foundation for later arguments within religiously-affiliated moral discourse about the hazards of popular visual entertainments, especially cinema, in terms of their seductiveness, time-wasting propensities and the templates for immoral behaviour that their narratives and characterisations provided. So again, speaking in favour of audio-visual culture as I will do, perhaps I am also in the wrong place in regard to that matter. Still at least I hope I can persuade you that the media and communicative practices associated with them are so important and unavoidable today that it is beneficial for religious communities to think and talk in an explicit manner about them.

Two important moments in the histories of communication and religion

A key point to consider is the nature of the shifts in communication technologies that took place at the time of the Reformation and the shifts that are happening now, which I would argue bracket an era in which written literacy was the ideal – but may no longer be so crucial. Eighteen months ago I had the good fortune to visit the early Christian cave churches in Cappadocia and saw the paintings in which ideas about Christ, the saints and the significant events of the Christian mythos developed over time from the sketchy symbols of the years after Christ's

crucifixion were recorded in these elaborate painted tableaux, and made publically available. These visual images and their derivatives, such as sacred plays and stained glass windows, along with oral preaching, were the main media for the instruction of faith until the Reformation. While I am in no position intellectually or spiritually to critique the theological insights of Calvin, Zwingli and John Knox, I think it is fair enough to note that the particular forms and directions that their revelations and deliberations took as they were disseminated throughout the growing Protestant movements of the 16th century were also shaped by their historical contexts, in particular by the increasing availability of print technology, which made Bibles, testaments and tracts available to many of their followers. While the proceeding emphasis on orality in religious teaching and worship did not disappear with the advent of print their emphasis on the primacy of the Word coincided with a time when that Word became directly available to many more people. Literacy was also a valued tool to achieve progress and prosperity in the material world and therefore was linked with what became known as the Protestant work ethic. It was therefore a revolutionary time in both its religious and communicative aspects.

However, at the moment we are witnessing another revolution in forms of media and styles of communication. I am of course talking about Internet-based communication, where anyone can search for, and research with, any source of information – textual, visual, aural – primary source or secondary source – as long as it has been encoded in digital form and published on the web. This new revolution is still less than 2 decades old (the Internet really took off in public notice in 1995) but, to borrow a metaphor from *Star Trek*, it is gathering pace at warp-speed. This is particularly evident at universities where we now struggle to get students to read books, articles or even to watch a whole movie, but note that many are constantly engaged on their smartphones: sometimes searching for relevant information but also swapping photos and images, viewing YouTube clips, downloading apps and games, texting and tweeting. Spatially, the way the university functions is also changing as a result of these new media practices –it is our hallways and passages rather than classrooms that are the most intensely used spaces now as students prop themselves against the walls or sprawl on the floor to use their phones; usually not talking to the person next to them but nevertheless in a potentially non-stop flow of contact with others through social media. The key thing is that these new channels of communication are as much visual and aural as they are text-based: text is now only one of the components of digital communications and someone who wanted to send or receive spiritual messages for instance is just as likely to send a pictures, or a meme or a link to a short film, a music-tracks, or a web link as they are to send biblical passages or written prayers.

Another issue that I think is also determinative of the current changing communication environment is the large degree of intercultural, inter-country, movement of people that is going on around the world, so that knowledge and discourse need to be able to address people from different birth-cultures, creating a need for equivalency and translation, that also produces new communicative contents.

What do these changes mean for religion, especially religious traditions founded on a veneration of the Word? Before addressing that point, we also need to take into account the changes that secularization has wrought on religious participation since the middle of last century. I know that it is easy nowadays to be gloomy about the low level of adherence to mainstream denominations, and the consequent restriction of the status and public influence of the religious traditions that

have been developed with such care and faith over previous centuries. Looking through texts of some of the previous lectures I can see that the idea that we live in a society defined by secularist concepts is not new to you; that, as theorists such as Ronald Inglehart (2004) and Charles Taylor (2008) have observed, even our religiosity nowadays needs to be defined, and often practised, in relation to secularist protocols and norms.

The Subjective Turn in Contemporary Life

This subsumption of religion to secular frameworks is due to something perhaps as inexorable, pervasive as global warming: what Taylor has called ‘the massive subjective turn’ of contemporary life. This subjective turn affects most areas of personal and public life and involves people shifting from considering their lives as something that ought to be conducted according to pre-set communal rules and patterns, to something that ought to be lived according to their own unfolding sense of appropriateness.

In the words of British sociologist of religion Paul Heelas, there has been a turn away from ‘life-as’ – that is, lived for instance as a dutiful wife, father, daughter, strong leader, self-made man and so on, towards a life lived subjectively. The subjectively-validated life, says Heelas, has to do with states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments - including moral sentiments like compassion (2005). Under this subjective paradigm, which may not be your personal paradigm, but is for a large number of religiously-unaffiliated people, ‘the good life’ consists in living one’s life in full awareness of one’s state of being; in enriching one’s experiences; in finding ways of handling negative emotions; in becoming sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one’s life - alone or in relation- may be improved. The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one’s own authority. (4) This change does not mean that religion completely disappears but that there are strong pressures for it to change forms, so that society experiences *both* secularization (with regards to a decrease in life-as religion) *and* sacralization (with regard to subjective-life forms of spirituality). It is not a matter of one trouncing the other, says Heelas, but of coexistence with the subjectivization thesis as the key to explaining both decline in some forms of religious expression and a growth in others (10).

At this point I should say that like, Paul Heelas and his colleague Linda Woodhead (2000), I tend to use the word ‘religiosity’ in preference to religion, as part of a phenomenological approach in order to be able to talk about a range of institutions and behaviours on what they have called ‘the spectrum of religiosity’. This is a term which covers a range of religious and spiritual forms from the highly differentiated, often hierarchical systems they call Religions of Difference, -where there is a gap between human beings and God and clergy are needed to bridge the gap between them, through the more democratic (in terms of there being a more direct relationship between God and Humankind) forms categorized as Religions of Humanity, and then through to less-differentiated, often pantheistic, forms of belief and practices called Spiritualities of Life in which divinity is to be found both within humankind and nature. At this far end of the spectrum, Spiritualities of Life are the manifestations of the kind of informal religiosity that the subjective turn I have just been talking about produces. Spiritualities of Life include a range of activities whereby people seek ‘rare, significant and personally transformative experiences’ (Taira, 2012: 390) which enable them to construct satisfying interpretations of the significance of life for

themselves. You may not like this term ‘spirituality’, whether it be called ‘holistic’, ‘expressive’, ‘reflexive’, or ‘New Age’ spirituality, nevertheless, this informal, non-institutionally religious area is where I see a significant amount of the activity in contemporary religiosity as taking place. It is a very active and interesting space which in its fluidity matches the networked nature of contemporary communication technologies.

Now, having set the background in place, my central message to you today as people who cherish a religious view of life, is to be of good cheer, for like the sociologist of religion, Thomas Luckmann who in 1990 wrote an article entitled ‘Shrinking Transcendence, Expanding Religion?’ I see evidence of religious attitudes and behaviours all around me. I follow Luckmann in asserting that while our aspirations for transcendence may be shrinking, that is, while fewer people may seek an encounter with the power of the presence of God, the number of activities, relationships and things by which people can feel inspired and sustained, albeit at a lesser level of intensity and commitment, is actually increasing. So that, as long as we are prepared to see value in communicative forms in addition to the written word, there are increased opportunities today to encounter deep meaning, and many occasions available for self-reflection, self-improvement and morally-guided interactions with others. Luckmann identifies the development of a diverse market in media products that disseminate spiritual concepts as a major driver in the increasing availability of those spiritual and religious concepts outside the boundaries of conventional religious organizations. In particular the growth in interest in spirituality as a somewhat muted and unambitious form of religious seeking is facilitated and resourced by media forms: by books, by magazines, by films, television, video, music, and increasingly by websites, social media and online streamed media also. These media provide people with information about their own and others religious and spiritual interests - increasingly today that information may be sought in a visual form, as much as a textual form, for searching, for channels of communication, for objects of pleasure and inspiration .

A Range of Approaches to Visual Media

So, what I want to do this evening is to give a brief account of the ways that media and religiosity can interact, with the implication that you might want to explore and use some of these approaches if they are not already a part of the church’s practice. I will progress through 3 main areas - the main focus in the first area is historical and the main medium is film. That is because arguments about whether or not film can offer an opportunity for spiritual experience and if so, in what ways does it function underlie many more recent debates about the relationships between forms of media and religiosity. I include an outline of a certain style of filmmaking that has been seen as supportive of spiritual inclinations both for those who adhere to religious traditions and for those who are numbered amongst proponents of the more secular, informal Spiritualities of Life.

Secondly, as digital technologies move people back towards a situation where the written word does not necessarily have a sacred character in itself, I want to look at some non-Christian approaches to the place of vision and imagery in religious and spiritual practices, specifically in Buddhist and Hindu models of religious perception and to see how they might offer some insights into the new multimedia communicative environments. These include an argument for the appreciation of the value of less ascetic, less restrained forms of communication.

Thirdly, I want to look at a theory developed by Stewart Hoover & Shalini Venturelli (1996) which proposes that the mass media may be a site of sacrality in themselves and are certainly a site of what the modern world evidentially, if controversially, considers sacred, which is the marketplace of commodities. Finally, I want to consider how a combination of all the factors identified in this talk might be playing out here in Aotearoa New Zealand with reference to the example of Maori spirituality and its increasing visibility in public space, especially through the development of the commemoration of Matariki, the Maori New Year.

It is necessary to say of course that media and religion have always been associated with one another. Since I was a child whenever I have encountered religion, it has also been associated with forms of media. I went to the Anglican Sunday School in Hoon Hay, Christchurch, where the medium I remember most vividly is hymn-singing from both hymnbooks and from hymns handwritten on white newsprint. I also attended an after-school Bible Class run by a young Dutch couple where we did frequent drills in locating Bible verses and were taught to think of our Bibles as a 'sword'. In my teen years I became an Anglican Sunday school teacher and loved telling Bible stories with the aid of a board covered with a flannel nappy and little pictures of people, animals and Biblical symbols that you could stick on and move around the board: a *pre-cinematic device*, we would call it in media studies terms.

These activities: hymns, Bibles, the use of illustrations, along with parish newsletters, were the typical low-technology media aids of congregations until the 3rd quarter of the 20th century. They were also supplemented by hymn broadcasts and the occasional church service on the radio, as well as the occasional religious programme on television: Television New Zealand actually had a Religious Programmes Unit until the early 1990s when the neo-liberal reforms began to strip the public service character from television. For the most part such forms of media were clearly associated with mainstream religions and were manifestly respectful of them: their use was generally uncontroversial. One way we can connect media and religion is to insist that our public media do not abandon these formats that provide religious information and opportunities for virtual fellowship.

However, there has always been more controversy as to the relationship between film and religion: a relationship that is also a rich source of community-making as well as providing exemplars and experiences that can form the basis for theological discussions. In this part of the world one of the first makers and distributors of cinema was the Salvation Army: its Limelight Division, based in Australia, made short newsreels and religious tableau, in the 1890s and early 1900s that were part of the mixed entertainment and preaching show with which the Army attracted audiences and hopefully converts. In those first few decades stories from the Bible were part of common collective knowledge in European-derived cultures and were made and re-made repeatedly, although the depiction of Christ had to be handled carefully, since materialism of the Almighty was grounds for a blasphemy prosecution in Britain. Production and distribution rapidly became more secular as the studio system of film production developed but right up until the mid-1960s the Catholic Church and the Presbyterian sensibility had considerable censorship control over what could be portrayed in films, in the form of the Catholic League of Decency and the Hays Office, run by the Presbyterian Will Hays. They had lists of actions and scenes that were not permitted in films. Producers submitted their films to these offices for their certification

if they wanted them to have an accredited public realisation; these offices frequently demanded the excision of material they perceived to be immoral.

However, while films, and later television, have always been seen as morally dangerous, by and large sense films have been considered as concomitant with a religious history where images have been used both to teach and to strengthen belief. And indeed, there has also been a strong lobby of opinion which argues that there are ways in which films can enhance spiritual experience and belief.

In brief, the *styles* with which religious or spiritual content are handled are considered extremely important, in as much as they are considered to be revealing of the spiritual quality of the filmmaker's character and belief. Examples of different styles

Theological – films which are about religious topics and made in a way that treats that belief seriously and positively (even if they often look at those moments when belief is very difficult)

Mythological – films which tell stories that embody and present deep cultural/religious values.

Ideological – films that use religious concepts to critique either or both other aspects of life, or religion that doesn't live up to its own ideals (ref)

Clip - Example of theological film – *Joan of Arc* (Dreyer, 1928)

Transcendental Style

The director of that film Carl Theodore Dreyer is one of several 20th century directors whose films have been considered as significantly spiritual by many of those who have watched them: in the sense of giving rise to feelings of appreciation and awe for either God's creation or for the depiction of the struggle and failure, of human beings to understand the mystery and suffering of life. Other directors discussed in terms of the spiritual impact of their films include the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, the French director, Robert Bresson, *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (*Tokyo Story*, 1953) and the American director Martin Scorsese, who notably trained to become a priest before shifting vocation to the movies (*Goodfellas*, 1990, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988, *Kundun*, 1997,). Two New Zealanders, Jane Campion, director of *The Piano* (1993), *Bright Star* (2009) and Vincent Ward, director of *Vigil*, (1984), *The Navigator* (1988), *Rain of the Children* (2008), feature among those directors whose work is written about in books on theology and film.

From watching and categorizing the features of this kind of film-making an American Calvinist Paul Schrader, prohibited from viewing movies as a child but who grew up to be fascinated by them and to work as a writer and director (1972) came up with a renowned theory about what gave a film, what he called 'transcendental style'. Of course it is impossible to represent the divine itself but Schrader thought this type of style was human activity which managed to express something of the transcendent: an expression of something of the Holy itself a process which has also been called 'hierophany' or showing forth of the sacred

The style of film-making characterized as transcendental, exhibits, says Sheila Nayar (2013): a lack of external ostentation (no visual miracles, no orgiastic celebrations), a general non-expressiveness in the characters, and a shunning of clues that tell the viewers what they ought to think and feel (allowing freedom for viewer's own interpretation and judgement. There is also an emphasis on stillness and silence even though the characters in these films are typically under duress and having to make tough moral choices of leaps of faith. Transcendental style intentionally makes itself banal, spare and ordinary while avoiding the easy and cheap arousal of holy feelings. One does not mistake holy feelings for the Holy itself, said the director Robert Bresson, 'The more life is what it is – ordinary, simple, without pronouncing the word of God – the more I see the presence of God in that (in Nayar: 24)

Clip – *In Spring One Plants Alone*, (Vincent Ward, 1980)

In Spring One Plants Alone also shows the observance of the beauty of the natural world, which is another of the gifts that filming techniques have given us. Close-ups and slow motion are techniques that help to focus our attention on to the marvellously intricate patterns and variations of nature.

By contrast explicit films about religion that do try and give an externalized expression or illustration of *holy feelings*, which are over-abundant in the piling up of manipulative filming and editing techniques sometimes in the service of staging artificial moments of incarnation, are usually considered to be incapable of providing moments of transcendence for the viewer. In other words 'authentic' hierophany is never presumed to arise from a spectator's engagement with burning bushes or through watching onscreen disciples gazing rapturously at their god (Nayar, 2013, 21).

So, films that use mythological and melodramatic techniques are usually considered antithetical to spiritual experience. The paradigmatic example of a non-religious film about religion is often said to be Cecil B De Mille's film *The Ten Commandments* (1956). However, I have a couple of examples here: one which shows a melodramatic treatment of religion in the film of Bruce Mason's play *The End of The Golden Weather* (Mune, 1991) and another from *The Quiet Earth* (Murphy, 1987), a film which shows the late Bruno Lawrence as a scientist who is the last man alive after some kind of scientific disaster. These clips serve double duty: they show this abundant style in action but also demonstrate a strong trend in films made by European New Zealanders about religion in the 20th century: that is they show a secularizing movement away from religious belief.

Clips – *End of the Golden Weather*, *The Quiet Earth*

Much of television is mythological in style and therefore considered of little significance spiritually – however there is an argument to be made that a series such as *Coronation Street* represents a sustained examination of appropriate and inappropriate choices around moral issues, while only sporadically discussing religion in an explicit manner.

To summarize this section of my presentation. Western religious traditions have been wary of film and have tried to control it but some types and styles of filmmaking have been endorsed for

their ability to heighten spiritual perception. The style of filmmaking considered to have some spiritual presence has generally had Protestant characteristics: that is it is sparse, restrained, intellectual and has represented individual struggles for Faith: it is a model of film-making that has kinship with reliance on the written and spoken Word; you could say, a literary version of filmmaking. As such, if resources for theological study in a conventional sense are needed, then certain films provide a useful set of such resources. The popularity of two documentaries about nuns from the order of the Sisters of Compassion - *How Far Is Heaven?* (Pryor & Smith, 2012) and *Gardening with Soul* (Feast, 2013) - is a recent example of the appeal of films that take a respectful approach to religion.

To move on to my second substantive topic; what is the relationship between visual culture, including film-making, and forms of religion that are *not* sparse, restrained and intellectual, that have less of an abhorrence of idolatry? What about religious systems that are more collective, spectacular, effervescent, that work in a more engaged way with the senses, including vision and touch? We are all coming into contact more frequently with these other religious styles due to the intensifying of flows of peoples and cultures around the world; for instance the growth of Pentecostal styles of Christianity in Africa and Latin America, or the increase in Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic forms of religion in New Zealand.

Moreover, the last 15 years since the development of explicit theorizing around the interactions of religiosity and media have also seen a shift towards understanding the *material* practices of religion – what people do with objects, and with their bodies, in expressing their beliefs. A lot of work on what is known as ‘material religion’ is coming from scholars based in the Netherlands but working world-wide, the most eminent of these being Birgit Meyer at the University of Utrecht. To cite Meyer (2009), both on the importance of looking at what people do in religious activity, and on the importance of taking into account the political, economic and ideological contexts which are shaping collective activities such as religion:

(Benedict) Anderson’s remark ... that communities are to be distinguished “by the *style* in which they are imagined, hints at the importance of scrutinizing how the binding of people into imagined communities actually occurs and is realized in a material sense. Indeed, in order to grasp the particular modes through which imaginations materialize through media and become manifest in public space, generating sensorial sensibilities and aptitudes that vest these imaginations with a sense of truth, we need to move into the broader sphere of what I call *aesthetic formations*. (6) [we need to take] into account the role of bodies, the senses, media, and things in the making of religious subjects and communities (2)

So, Meyer writes of the importance of looking at those aesthetic formations, the styles of expression of religious communities: their buildings, their music, their images, their clothing, their dancing, or not dancing, in order to understand their beliefs. The art historian David Morgan has a similar emphasis.

Belief happens in what people say but also in what they do. It is embodied in various practices and actions, in the stories and testaments people tell, in their uses of buildings, pictures, in the taste of food and the smell of fragrances, in the way people treat children,

one another and strangers [...] Belief happens in and through things and what people do with them. Theistic belief is grounded in the assumption that what one says or does in the manner of prayer, worship, or moral effort penetrates to the heart and mind of the deity. The deity sees what the believer sees, gazes into the believer's very heart. While many Christian theologians are predisposed to stress the presence of words and concepts in delineating belief, I argue that one gets much further in understanding religion by examining how people combine what they say with what they do and see. (2005, 8)

A material approach to religion is also supported by the relatively new science of neurobiology, which can track the processes that take place at a micro-physical level in people's brains and nervous systems as they engage in worship, in ritual and in meditation. Emboldened by this new emphasis on the material practices of religions I would like to consider two examples: a Hindu view of religious practice through visuality, and the Tantric Buddhist use of visual imagery for meditation, the tradition to which I am myself affiliated.

Hinduism is not afraid of investing statues and images of the gods with divine power. Reporting on Sikh communities in England and New Zealand Martin Wood noted that food offerings left on the altar for the divinities depicted there in statue form were often thought by believers to have been partially consumed by the gods overnight. An important part of Hindu practice is *Darshan* – a Hindu term that describes the reciprocal act of seeing and being seen by the divine – a mutual holy gaze that is heightened through physical, visible and material expressions of acclaim and appreciation (Nayar, 2013, 25).

Clip - *Holy Smoke* (Campion, 1999) for a representation of the process of *darshan*

Sophisticated literacy is still not a feature of all Hindu lives and in watching her illiterate grandmother watching a film about the gods and praying constantly, Indian academic Sheila Nayar came to the conclusion that the prevailing model of spiritually significant filmmaking, the European 'transcendental model' was inadequate to deal with her grandmother's ecstatic response to a film that would be seen as overly mythological and melodramatic according to that model,

These films of the Indian religious culture are what Nayar calls 'orally inflected': they include high repetition and the recycling of information; the privileging of narrative and emotional formula, an agonistic tone (including high levels of violence and melodrama) and a preference for spectacle. [There is also] a tendency towards clichés and unambiguous surface-only meaning (23), Nayar asserts that the very manipulative techniques that Bresson derided – "the clichéd zoom-ins that tell us a character is being communicated to by a goddess; the bright white light and voice of God – are present for good reason in orally inflected narrative" (24). And that reason is to do not just with a lack of written literacy but also with the status of a particular form of religion as a collective possession: the creation and treasure of a group of people with a shared history. "Without these familiar clichés and tropes", says Nayar, "a story can no longer function as a vehicle for the transmission of a social memory. We might even propose that without them, [these clichés and emotional cues] one is left with an absence rather than a heightened presence of the divine" (24).

I would like to problematize the notion, she concludes, “that stillness and silence are the legitimate route to hierophany at least when it comes to visual narrative”. In fact, [the transcendental style] of movie-making may well appear highly anti-social to the orally-inflected viewer. If the viewer is both abandoned and abandoning her group – including her ancestors and her people’s gods – how could this lead to any meaningful or worthwhile experience of the sacred?” (26)

An emphasis on emotional response in the viewer, in the context of re-staging cultural memory, is therefore one alternative to the Protestant model that a restrained and controlled aesthetic formation is the only appropriate one for worship. It comes from a different culture, with a different understanding of where divinity resides and an orientation that is at once oral, visual and collective. Why do I think it has any relevance to us here today? Because, referring back to my introductory comments about changing models of communication, I think the communication culture of the current generation is also becoming more oriented to oral and visual styles of communication and that this reorientation may be changing their experience of what they would find religiously, spirituality persuasive. Whether they are also more collective or individualistic I cannot currently say, although I would note that the metaphor of social networks is at the heart of the most popular forms of digital communication.

Tibetan or Tantric Buddhism is another tradition that engages as a matter of course and as a matter of practice with visual imagery. There is a focus in Buddhism on how the contents of consciousness are created and so attention is paid to the various sensory capacities of the human body – how the senses receive and categorize incoming information, gradually turning it into thoughts, which the mind then reacts to with emotion, as if they were real. To those outside the tradition the images of deities painted in the portable format of *thangkas*, which are used for meditation and teaching may indeed look like products from a factory of idol-worship, but in practice the images of deities are understood to be symbols, to be representations of propensities in human nature. They are depicted in their ideal forms: they are not understood as existing in any solid sense. They are visualized in the imagination, their helpful qualities envisaged as being incorporated into the meditator and then are explicitly dissolved into a state of formlessness, with moreover, the proviso that whatever enhancement of the meditator’s capacities that might result from this process of visualization and introjection, is to be used for the benefit of others, not just for one’s self.

In *The Sacred Gaze* (2005) Morgan provides his evaluation of this process of visual meditation,

If consciousness is a shifting fabric of representations, an image used in meditation may serve to stabilize it at least temporarily – calming the eddies that disturb the surface of the mind, displacing the distractions with a single object of attention. [...] filling up the consciousness with the presence of the pictured place or person [...] Whether the absorption is contemplative, bringing the mind into a deeper experience of itself, or is a mind-numbing distraction that passes time (which can have its own regenerative effect), seeing is the medium that occupies the viewer in some manner of attention. (2)

There is another, slightly different use of such visual objects, which is not interested in their contents but instead in the fact of their existence as material objects, in the sense of thinking

about why something exists rather than nothing. To attempt to look directly at such an object and to see it as it is also provides an opportunity to reflect on our own desire to fix on images, our greedy determination to receive pleasure from looking. This quote from the late Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa speaks of the difficult simplicity of looking:

When you see a *thangka* you could just look – not in terms of it being a fantastic work of art, but as a simple visual object. Just look at it. Feel the difference between seeing a *thangka* and seeing someone have a car crash. This is not regarded as a fantastic contrast of metaphysical worlds but as a simple visual perception. You can actually look at it, you can see it. If you look too long you will get bored because you would like to see the next goodie: at this point it would be better to go very slowly.

Usually we are restless with our visual perception” says Trungpa. “Even when we see something very beautiful we are shy in actually relating with. This shyness is connected with aggression. We are unable to see things as they really are. If we see beautiful things, we are so fascinated and interested: we would like to touch and handle them: we would like to smell them and hear them. On the other hand, if we see something ugly or terrible, ...we don’t want to touch it, we don’t want to see it and we try and avoid the whole thing – ‘Yuck’. The problem comes from not being able to look at things as they are, directly, properly, clearly ... It is a question of reality, of how we view reality ...ultimate reality may be more painful than any pain you experience in your life (Trungpa, 1996, 50-51)

So again, an engagement with images need not be thought of primarily within frameworks of distraction, or of avoidance of the true nature of life or the true source of life. Noticing the way we look, our ability, or inability to look, both engages us with our perceptual processing which is a key part of our cognitive functioning and also lets us see how our natures, especially the grasping and acquisitive aspects of our selves, are constantly in operation , even when we think we are merely neutral observers. Yesterday I was looking at the pages of spiritual memes on the internet – pages where people have combined images that they feel strongly about, positively or negatively – with brief texts, analyses or exhortations. They are there in their thousands, and while some of them are merely silly or offensive they also represent many hours of reflection on processes of looking, of thinking and deciding; many of them are acts of informal, self-published theology and fellowship in themselves.

After suggesting that a move back towards visuality and orality does not entirely equate with the abandonment of religious discernment, I want to move on and look at my third main topic: this is the idea that the mass mediated world may have something of a sacred character in itself. My guides here are Stewart Hoover, a senior figure in the Religion, Media and Culture field, and his early collaborator Shalini Venturelli – their 1996 article entitled – “Religion, the Blindspot of Contemporary Media theory?” has set the theoretical framework for most subsequent research in this field. Until then religion had been ignored in studies of media because most academics had accepted certain versions of the theories of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, which were thought to pronounce that the extinction of religion and the triumph of secularization were inevitable. Hoover and Venturelli reexamined what these architects of modernism had actually said and decided that their theories entailed was not so much the death of religion, as changes in its location in culture and many of the ways it is expressed: in brief they identify the shift towards

informal types of spirituality which overlap with both capitalism and popular culture, as outlined at the beginning of this lecture.

The Only Real Sacred Space in the Contemporary World?

This is what Hoover and Venturelli remind us about the attitude of Marx to religion; it is not so much that he saw religion as unnecessary and outdated (rather he wished that the world was improved to the point that the compensations of religion were unnecessary) but that he foresaw the role that the logic of capitalism would play in deciding what the majority of people would experience as sacred:

In describing the awe-inspiring power of the secular capitalist world Marx in effect has identified the religious consciousness of modernity. In many ways it is the distinctive form of contemporary religiosity. The modern commodity world, like the sphere of orthodox, transcendent religion, confronts the human subject as a detached realm responding to its own inner necessity and shaped by its own laws. Thus for the first time in history [...], capitalism has supplanted religious consciousness with a world of objects (Hoover & Venturelli, 1996: 256)

We have become, as this analysis of Marx's argument implies, and with the assistance of the mass media, which enable us to imagine ourselves as citizens of the world, a huge transnational community made up of many people performing individual acts of consumption: of houses and the things we put in them, of food, of cars, of travel and experiences that money can buy. These are the things many of us strive to have, that we value highly and, as a result, argue Hoover and Venturelli, there has been a shift of religious participation from the village level to the level of the free global market. It is not that we do not find anything sacred anymore, it is that many of us have gradually, transferred our capacity for worship from the sacred figures of the great religious traditions, to the pleasures and products of everyday life, to that reduced level of transcendence that Luckmann write about.

The theoretical and hypothetical proposition presents itself, Hoover and Venturelli assert, that the cultural space of the mass-mediated world, the only real public space in contemporary experience, is really a sacred space. [...that] it is possible to conceive of the media as actually "religious" in some fundamental ways. It is possible that the media are an organic site of contemporary religious practice. ... To reduce a long and complex argument to one proposition, that is because "the media are the site of ritual celebration of the commodities which define and are in a sense coextensive with, contemporary consciousness" (258).

This ritual celebration is seen most evidently in our everyday lives in commercials which stage elaborate over-valuations of objects and services in order to persuade us to consume them, but it is also experienced in a more general, diffuse manner in our dispersed but still collective viewing of the programme genres of commercial television (although again, this set of viewing practices is being modified by the affordances of the internet).

Clip- *Samsara* (Fricke, 2011) for an example of a film within the context of globalisation that takes spiritually resonant images from many cultures and tries to work them into a unified spiritual template

So, how does all that work in practice in Aotearoa? How can we take the elements I have been describing and see them working in the world around us? By this I mean gaining the ability to discern when the offerings of the media are merely indeed trashy and distracting, when they might be offering us a genuine source of inspiration in relation to fairly traditional concepts of sacredness and value, and when instead, or as well, they are offering us the chance to see our capitalist system of goods and services as a source of strong value and significance. Moreover, how are these configurations of ‘transcendence’ offered to people positioned at different places on the spectrum of religiosity – those who identify with Religions of Difference and of Humanity, as well as those who seem more secular - who are associated with Spiritualities of Life or who profess to not need religion or spirituality?

Well, this is where the title of my lecture becomes pertinent. It is an echo of an article entitled *The Soul and the Image* written in 1997 by Merata Mita, a film director and activist, who proposed that the Maori relationship with images was intrinsically spiritual but that Pakeha society lacked such a sensibility and that our film-making showed us to be neurotics adrift and out of tune with a strange land. I do not think Mita was correct in asserting that Pakeha lack spirituality, but 20th century Pakeha filmmaking certainly does show strong signs of insecurity and unhappiness (cf. Hardy, 2011). Nevertheless Merata Mita’s challenge is thought-provoking and I want to suggest to her memory that the situation is changing, and as would doubtless be to her satisfaction, some aspects of that change are being led by Maori.

The commemoration of Matariki as a multi-media spiritual phenomenon

For the last few years I have been studying the development of the commemoration of the Māori season of Matariki as a festival and a set of concepts being offered to all New Zealanders. Matariki is particularly strong here in Auckland where there is a large programme of public events. The festival of Matariki takes place across June and July when the constellation of the same name rises above the horizon, marking the time when crops are supposed to be harvested and stored and when next year’s kumara for example are planted with the blessing of *karakia* and invocations to the gods of agriculture and food-gathering. This is not the only example I could give of a constellation of phenomena involving ‘religion’ and media but it is the one in which I am most well-versed.

The entity known as Maori spirituality is nowadays not a pure entity: it has been hybridized over 200 years with the tenets of various forms of Christianity. Nevertheless, representations of Māori spirituality have made up most of the positive representations of religiosity in New Zealand film. Films such as *Mauri*, *Ngati*, *Whale Rider*, *In Spring One Plants Alone*, *The Strength of Water*, *The Rain of the Children* and *Boy* all embody the assumption that a film about Māori will also depict the ways in which social and private behaviours are shaped by religious concepts (cf. Hardy, 2012a). As such Māori films have come to represent the ‘heart’ of New Zealand cinema for many viewers both here and overseas playing the role of the most consistent guardians of a spiritual dimension to our national filmmaking.

Clip – *Boy* (Waititi, 2010) Despite its director specifically wanting to eschew a view of Māori as ‘a spiritual people’, the film in fact makes the recognition of loss and redemption key to its narrative structure. It also demonstrates an abundant, popular style of depicting spiritual energy, not dissimilar to the kind of style Nayar advocates

Until recently the traditional observances of Matariki were preserved mainly by some members of central North Island tribes in rural areas. For instance, Tuhoe and Tainui both have Matariki traditions, but for the majority of even their tribal members, the concepts around Matariki have had to be re-learned and in some cases, re-invented. My research suggests that Matariki celebrations were consciously redeveloped and publicly practiced by groups in Wellington around the turn of the millennium and had their epicentre in a pan-tribal group of Maori working at the national museum Te Papa Tongarewa (Hardy, 2012b) The motivations behind the revival of the commemorations were to reclaim and extend a certain Māori view of life: a lifeworld where spiritual energies are seen as pervasive, and also to provide a platform for the revival of te reo Māori, the language that is also seen as constituting the heart, the spirit of Māori culture. There is also perhaps an implicit criticism of the more commercial aspects of Pakeha culture embodied in the values presented in Matariki materials. So, it is a phenomenon that is ideological, mythological and implicitly, discreetly, theological as well.

Some Matariki celebrations are public, embodied activities such as the wonderful kaumatua kapa haka performances that take place at Te Papa, musical and theatre performances nationwide, art exhibitions and displays at places like the Carter Observatory, or Auckland Museum here, the kite day at Bastion point. However for the most part, because the resources supporting Matariki are not large, for most people, their knowledge of Matariki comes from the media: from newspapers, television, brochures, calendars, images of artworks, websites, social media and Twitter feeds, and even two years ago, from big posters advertising Matariki specials at New World supermarkets. The physical kapa haka performances I mentioned for instance are also streamed live on the Te Papa website and you can receive tweets on your Smartphone reminding you to come along to the next event. There is even a rather good film about the spiritual struggles of a group of young people in South Auckland that is called and is also about, a re-orientation around the idea of Matariki.

Clip – *Matariki* (Bennett, 2010)

These mediations of Matariki bring together traditional Māori religious ideas with a contemporary Spirituality of Life sensibility which is about valuing and protecting nature, about caring for family and remembering those who have passed on and significantly about taking care of yourself, of putting aside time to reflect on what you have achieved in the last year and what you want to achieve in the next. So, it is quite an effective blend of low-key religious ideas and the secular spirituality that is so wide-spread across today's population in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is also non-political and therefore, for many people non-threatening. With its emphasis on the provision of food and sharing of resources it can be positioned in counterbalance to capitalism, as an antidote to heartless capitalism, yet at the same time, because like almost everything else, it is dependent on money, on funding, to function, and because most of us Māori and Pākeha alike, buy rather than grow our own food, it is of course, it is still within the capitalist economy.

Each year Te Papa produces a key image which symbolizes Matariki: it must contain certain components – an aspirational figure, usually female, dressed in Maori-designed fashion, an item from Te Papa's collection, and a representation of the seven stars of Matariki. For me these images are fascinating – they have a sacred air about them, but it is coded in the visual

vernacular of new Age spirituality, they are created by Māori designers adapting an approach taken by the fine-artist Lisa Reihana in an acclaimed set of images remaking the Māori gods for a new age (2001). And yet, at the same time this imagery is very similar to full-on commercial imagery for the television series of a few years back, *'Sex In the City'*, as one wit has pointed out. Do the commercial, kitsch associations of this imagery cancel out the opportunity it is providing for the recognition of the value of spiritual perception in everyday life? I would think not – this is the kind of imagery that fits with where many people are situated and how they gain knowledge in the contemporary communication environment. Just as Sheila Nayar saw the value of melodramatic films about the Indian gods for her pious grandmother, so these are images for a post-literate culture which does not value the Word over other forms of communication.

There are other examples of the bustling rough life of contemporary audio-visual culture that I might point to as relevant to this search for spiritual reference points in an environment that at once seems trashy and yet is full of treasures. For instance the series *The Almighty Johnsons*, (South Pacific Pictures, 2011-2013) which is about a group of Kiwi brothers who find that they are also avatars of the Norse gods, has been a very interesting exploration of issues about masculinity, sexuality, and our European cultural inheritance. Time and again it has engaged in discussions about the place of religion in contemporary identity but has then backed off again, into the joking, boozy, hyper-sexualized culture that, along with sport, is promoted as a desirable arena of self-transcendence for New Zealand men. But at least it is one of the few cultural products that actually links men and religion in the same frame and might provoke useful discussion if one can see past its surface sleaziness.

I am going to have to stop there, although I could discuss many more examples of the presence of religious ideas and energies in New Zealand audio-visual media. We are a long way from Calvin and the avoidance of images and many of you may have found it sad that I have to sift through popular culture to find examples of religious and spiritual discourse to discuss. However, my message is that the search for sources of deep meaning and significance is still widespread among the populace. You probably have your own style of material religion, your own aesthetic formulation that you are happy continuing with but I hope this lecture will have given you more options to think about when considering how the religious impulse can be nurtured in an intensely visual world.

Thank you,

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