



MYTHS, MORALS, AND RITUALS

FILM AS RELIGION

John C. Lyden



PART I

A Method for
Viewing Film as Religion

John C. Laiden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NY: New York University Press, 2003) ..
Existing Approaches
to Religion and Film

Some years ago I taught a class on ethics and society in which we discussed the impact of media, especially violent media, on our values. I invited students to bring in a videotape of a violent film to share with the class, and to perhaps speculate on the effect such violent films exert on viewers. I had expected class members to engage in ideological critiques of such films by looking at the ways they celebrate violence, in contrast to what most of us regard as an "ethical" framework. I was surprised, then, when a young woman—who had all semester clearly stated her morals were based on her Christian values—volunteered to show us part of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which she told us was her favorite film. At the time, I had not yet seen the movie, and I knew little about it except that it featured Anthony Hopkins as a cannibalistic serial killer in an Academy Award-winning role. My student proceeded to show to the class the scene in which Hopkins's character, Hannibal Lecter, escapes from the authorities through a combination of intelligence and brutal violence. I found it so graphic and horrifying that I had to urge her to turn it off. When I asked her why she liked this film, she seemed unable to offer an explanation; she also couldn't say how her enjoyment of such films could harmonize with her professed Christian values.

Faced with this puzzle, I might have concluded that the film was an unholy glorification of violence and that she had failed to see this because she believed it was "only a movie" and as such not a challenge to her values. This is often how students respond to such questions, by suggesting that movies are "not real" and so have nothing to do with the rest of life other than providing a meaningless escape from it. I might have agreed with her, or I might have insisted that the film was having a deleterious effect on her values whether she knew it or not. But I chose to see the film,

to see what the professed attraction to such films might be. By so doing, I came to believe not that the movie had no effect on viewers other than entertainment, nor that its effect was wholly negative. Instead, I speculated that the film was functioning as a way for her to deal with her fears and in some ways master them, as the heroine of the film does. I even came to appreciate the film as one that deals exceptionally well with the depiction of evil and its relationship to all of us. (My own analysis of the film is found later in this book.)

This experience and others like it have convinced me that, in order to understand how films function for audiences, I must be willing to broaden the ways in which I look at them as a religion scholar.

In order to attempt to give popular films this fair hearing, I have developed a method that views them as phenomena analogous to religions. This approach is certainly not the only way in which one might seek to get at the distinctive qualities of popular film or its functions in culture, but it has certain advantages in its ability to call attention to aspects of film that might otherwise be missed. Some religion scholars have already noted this approach, as when Darrol Bryant suggested that “as a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society.”¹ But he also seems suspicious of this popular religion, associating it with a “secular” culture that can be distinguished from traditional religion. “The difference between a ‘religious’ and a ‘secular’ culture is that a religious culture seeks to mediate a transcendent order, whereas a secular culture has no referent beyond itself and consequently worships itself.”² This definition seems an unsupported generalization, based in certain theological assumptions that may prejudice the study of film as religion before it ever begins. Conrad Ostwalt, on the other hand, avoids such pejorative conclusions when he suggests that “the movie theater has acted like some secular religion, complete with its sacred space and rituals that mediate an experience of otherness.”³ Rather than asserting that popular culture’s influence suggests a victory of secularization over religion, Ostwalt argues that religion is not fading away but “being popularized, scattered, and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions.”⁴ He seems more open to a positive assessment of this “secular religion,” though he has not developed the ramifications of this assessment in any great detail.

The majority of religion scholars writing about film, however, have not viewed film as analogous to an independent religious tradition so much as

they have viewed it as part of the nonreligious culture with which religion engages. They have taken two main approaches, the theological and the ideological, and each of these deserves brief consideration.

Approaches to Theology and Culture: Niebuhr and Tillich

Many of the attempts to relate religion and film have essentially sought to relate Christianity, and more specifically Christian theology, to popular film. Their approaches have been governed by theological attempts to define the relationship between Christianity and “culture,” where the latter term indicates the popular milieu in which religions find themselves in any particular place and time. Two theologians of the twentieth century stand out as perhaps the most influential among those who have sought to define the relationship between Christianity and culture, and their work on this point has also been most influential in religion and film studies: H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. As both of these men were (broadly considered) among the “neo-orthodox” theologians who sought to get beyond classic liberal and conservative positions of Protestant theology, they were seeking a new way to relate Christian concerns to those of the wider society. Each set forth a typology of ways in which theology can relate to culture.

In his book *Christ and Culture* (1951), H. Richard Niebuhr set forth a fivefold typology of ways in which Christians can choose to engage the larger culture. The five types are Christ rejecting Culture, the Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ Transforming Culture. The first describes those who have chosen to reject the wider culture in the name of their faith, essentially setting up a separate culture that largely ignores and does not interact with the larger society.⁵ This approach is often associated with members of the Anabaptist tradition, such as the Amish who do not even utilize much of modern technology. It could also apply to conservative Christians who believe one should not participate in popular culture, rejecting its media altogether. Most people, however, do not find this approach viable as it requires almost complete isolation from the larger society and disallows any possibility of finding value in films or any other aspect of popular culture.

The “Christ of Culture” approach goes to the opposite extreme, essentially appropriating the norms of the society and defining them as Christian. There is no problem relating one’s faith to the society in this view, as

the larger society is allowed to define how Christianity is to be understood. Niebuhr believed that late nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism fell into this category, and that this approach sacrifices what is distinctive to Christianity in its effort to accommodate itself to the larger culture. It is worth noting that Protestant liberals certainly did not see themselves as making such a sacrifice, and those who have been associated with this type would almost certainly see themselves in one of the other three categories.⁶

Niebuhr's last three approaches all seek a middle path between the two extremes of completely rejecting the wider culture or capitulating to it entirely, and, as such, they comprise for him the main alternatives for those who are seeking a way to relate their religious faith to the culture. The synthetic approach, also known as "Christ above Culture," Niebuhr associates with high medieval Roman Catholic thought such as that of Thomas Aquinas. This approach views culture as good and valuable, but incomplete. Christianity completes the fulfillment of culture through adding revelation to reason, grace to nature, church to secular society. There is a harmony between the two, such as was sought by medieval Christendom and the Roman Catholic Church at the height of its power.⁷ (It might be fair to say that most of those whom Niebuhr categorizes under the "Christ of Culture" position probably viewed themselves as holding this view of synthesis, as they would not have believed themselves to be capitulating to culture so much as seeking harmony with it.)

Fourth, the approach of "Christ and Culture in Paradox" is typified, in Niebuhr's view, by Martin Luther. Rebelling against the Catholic synthesis, Luther believed that the attempt to marry the "two kingdoms" of Christ and the world inevitably resulted in a corruption of both. The Church would become like the kingdoms of the world, focused on power rather than the Gospel, and the secular state would seek to control religion. Although Luther's view was not identical to that of the early American architects of the United States Constitution in arguing for a complete separation of church and state, he did believe that the state should not be in the business of religious coercion and that the freedom of the religious conscience must be respected. This "dualistic" approach, as Niebuhr calls it, puts forward two parallel moralities and systems of norms such that, for example, as a private citizen, the Christian must live a life of nonviolence, but as a public member of society he may take up arms to defend his country. These moral worlds should not interfere with each other but exist side by side as the two forms of our God-given lives.⁸

Finally, the "conversionist" view of "Christ Transforming Culture" suggests that the two realms can interact in such a way that the Christian tries to transform the larger culture to be more "Christian" in its values. This approach is more typical of the Reformed heritage of Calvin, and as such seems closest to the view of Niebuhr himself as he came out of that tradition. This approach differs from the classic "Catholic" model of synthesis in being more dynamic, not viewing the society as already in relation to Christ but as having the potential to become so. It is more suspicious of culture than the synthetic view, but it does not reject the culture or relate it to a realm unrelated to Christian values. It seeks a dynamic interaction of the two, but one governed by the norms of Christian faith rather than the society (thus avoiding the supposed mistake of Protestant liberalism).⁹ Parallels to each of these three types can be seen in some theological approaches to popular film, as will be seen below.

The other typology regarding Christianity and culture that has been highly influential in the field of religion and film is that of Paul Tillich. In a 1919 essay entitled "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," Tillich set forth his classic distinction between autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy in regards to the relation of faith to culture. Those aspects of culture (such as the arts) that do not see themselves as expressing a religious element view themselves as autonomous, responsible only to their own norms. If the Christian church accepts this view of them, it will leave them alone, and not seek to correct or guide them. (This resembles Niebuhr's "Christ of Culture" position in that it undertakes no criticism of the culture at all, and it also resembles "Christ and Culture in Paradox" in strictly separating church and world.) On the other hand, heteronomy seeks to impose an alien law on culture, such as when the Church tries to control what art is "acceptable" via censorship. (This might be akin to Niebuhr's "Christ Rejecting Culture," or perhaps even "Christ Transforming Culture.")

Tillich favors neither of these views, but rather argues for a third approach, which is a Hegelian-style synthesis of the other two: theonomy. If one focuses solely on the form of cultural functions, one will see them autonomously, but if one focuses on the content they express, one will understand them "theonomously."¹⁰ This is to say that art may appear to have nothing to do with religion, but in fact the content of great art is the same as the content of religion, here defined as "directness towards the Unconditional."¹¹ Tillich views the Unconditional not as a higher thing or being nor the sum of all beings, but as a "reality of meaning," the "ultimate

and deepest meaning" that "shakes the foundation of all things and builds them up anew."¹² The Unconditional is not a thing within the world, but the depth of meaning present for all things in the world. This depth of true meaning is the religious substance expressed in cultural/artistic forms, and it is the job of the theologian of culture to interpret these forms to find this substance—without, however, falling into either heteronomous or autonomous interpretation. The challenge for a theology of culture is to avoid condemning culture as "other" than religion (as it in fact has the same substance) and also to avoid severing the connection between culture and religion so as to miss the deeper significance of culture. (This view in some ways resembles what Niebuhr calls the "synthetic" approach of "Christ above Culture.")

We shall see both Tillich's and Niebuhr's typologies operative in the various approaches to religion and film which have been taken—and although they will be critiqued in that context as well, a few preliminary observations can be made. Both view the relation of religion to culture in the prophetic mode in which the primary task of a theologian of culture is to critique the culture in the light of one's own religious tradition. Religion (specifically, Christianity) is viewed as being in opposition to the culture, for even though it is part of culture it gives itself a privileged position as its critic. In Tillich's view, the theologian can decide what is good or bad art based on how well it conveys an iconoclastic sense of "horror," critiquing the culture that religion wishes to correct.¹³ In Niebuhr's view, "Christ" is defined as distinct from "culture" in all five types, even though he acknowledges separately that Christianity (and indeed all religion) is part of culture. By speaking of "Christ" rather than Christianity or religion, Niebuhr gives the impression that the theologian can gain the divine position of "Christ" outside of culture, and so observe and critique it. He admits the relativism of the theologian's position, and that we cannot know for certain where truth lies, but the structure of his typology belies this point; it appears that Christianity can distinguish itself sufficiently from its cultural matrix to make judgments on it.

I would not deny that we can and should make judgments, or that the "postmodern turn" makes it impossible to do so. But, I would argue that as we make judgments we should be more honest about their sources and admit that we are creations of multiple cultural influences beyond what we explicitly identify as our religious backgrounds. Scholars of religion or theologians cannot pretend to the sort of Promethean theological vantage

point that Niebuhr and Tillich seemed still to believe was possible (even with their recognition of the nonabsolute and uncertain character of their own judgments).¹⁴ If there are judgments to be made about culture by those who study and/or profess religious viewpoints, they cannot be so monolithic as to suggest that there are entities corresponding to "religion" and to "culture" that can clearly be defined as distinct. The realms of religion and culture overlap to a much greater extent than many of the studies of religion and popular culture seem to admit, and theology cannot stand outside culture any more than any other aspect of human religion or culture can do so. It is for this reason, in part, that I would suggest the classic distinctions between "religion" and "culture" must be put aside for a more nuanced view that sees all features of culture as having religious aspects that cannot be separated from their nonreligious aspects. Although we can distinguish the religious aspects in all of culture to a certain extent, those aspects cannot be restricted to those portions that identify themselves as "religious"; they must instead be seen as echoed in most (if not all) portions of the culture. The dialogue between "religion" and "culture" is really a dialogue between various religious views expressed within culture, many of which we may share. No religion exists in a historical vacuum and each is shaped by its interaction with others.

In what follows, we will examine the ways in which various authors have conceived the relationship between religion and film. Some have intentionally made use of Tillich's or Niebuhr's categories regarding how religion (or Christianity, or theology) should relate to culture, and others can be defined as fitting within one or another of these categories even though they have not always identified their positions in this way. Not all the approaches fit within these categories, but most of them share with Tillich and Niebuhr the idea that culture and religion can be distinguished fairly clearly. Also, while it would certainly be possible to have a "theological" position based in almost any religious tradition, in practice most of the approaches have been explicitly Christian in basis.

Theological Approaches to Film

To consider Niebuhr's typology first: which of his five categories are found among approaches to popular film? The two extreme positions (Christ Rejecting Culture, and the Christ of Culture) seem the least viable to most

Christians today, because one disallows any contact with the culture, and the other sacrifices religion to the culture. This leaves the three intermediate positions. The conversionist approach (Christ Transforming Culture) can be seen in the creation of Christian popular media in recent years, including Christian rock, Christian movies, and Christian popular novels. Conservative evangelicals have shifted from a strategy of rejecting popular culture to remaking it in their own image; for example, rock 'n' roll is no longer "the devil's music," if it can be given lyrics focused on God rather than sex and drugs. This approach has been enormously successful for the subculture it addresses, and it has affected the larger culture as well. But while this approach can help in designing separate Christian popular media, it is not too often used as a method for interpreting existing popular media. This may be because it would require the interpreter to view non-Christian films as if they were Christian in content, which may wrongly assume that the content of popular culture is the same as that of Christian culture—much as the "Christ of Culture" position does. Niebuhr applauded this approach for its efforts to bring Christian values to bear on the culture, but as a method of interpreting preexisting cultural phenomena it seems to fall short.

The other two approaches have been the most accepted theological methods for interpreting popular culture. In general, and not surprisingly, the synthetic approach (Christ above, or Completing Culture) has been used more by Roman Catholics, and the dualistic approach (Christ and Culture in paradox) has been used more by Protestants. Let us consider the latter approach first.

The Protestant-Dialogical Approach to Theology and Film

The dualistic approach, also sometimes referred to as a dialogical or dialectical approach, assumes the independence of religion and culture and seeks to bring them into dialogue in order to gain from that interchange.

One of the first studies to attempt to find religious value in film in this way was *Celluloid and Symbols* (1970), edited by John Cooper and Carl Skrade. Changes in the culture at this time were taking the Christian churches by storm in the United States, and there was much discussion about how to make Christianity relevant to the younger generation. They propose a "dialogue" with modern film, but one that does not seek to

"baptize" the filmmaker or impose a theology on the film.¹⁵ In other words, one does not need to pretend that the film is more Christian than it is, but instead one should look both for points of contact and points of dissimilarity in vision. They invoke Tillich's method of correlation, in the idea that the culture asks questions that (we hope) Christianity can answer.¹⁶ In this way, popular media can express the search for meaning, and theology can point toward its resolution. James Wall, longtime editor in chief of *The Christian Century*, articulates a similarly dialogical view in *Church and Cinema* (1971). He realizes that we need to understand a film's vision of reality, whether or not we share it, and that we should not reject it without understanding it.¹⁷ He also points out that a filmmaker may not condone all that the characters in the story do, and so there may be an implicit moral criticism of the characters by the filmmaker at the "presentational" level beyond the merely "discursive."¹⁸ Christians should therefore not simply dismiss films because they are offended by the actions of the characters in them, for a deeper point may be made.

More recently, biblical scholar Robert Jewett has written two books initiating a "dialogue" between St. Paul and popular film. In *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (1993) he argues that, just as Paul engaged his culture in dialogue in order to "preach the Gospel" more effectively, so should modern Christians confront their culture with the biblical materials of their tradition.¹⁹ Jewett states that he wishes to let the films speak for themselves rather than force them into "ecclesial servitude" by reading theological meaning into films where it does not exist.²⁰ Paul's voice can be related to current cultural situations through an "interpretive arch" that links his time to ours.²¹ In all this, however, Jewett makes it clear that Paul's voice will speak (for the Christian) with a canonical authority that the film lacks, and so his view will be the most critical of those films that uphold the efficacy or redemptive power of violence (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Red Dawn*, *Pale Rider*), which fly in the face of Christian biblical ethics and their basic pacifism. In his second volume, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (1999), Jewett seeks to find a harmony with Christian beliefs and values.²² He analyzes films that make a more clear use of Christian themes, such as *Batman's Feast* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. He also likes the basic moralism of standard Hollywood films such as *Mr. Holland's Opus* or *Forrest Gump*, which show that good deeds are rewarded. But if one only looks for how a film differs from the Christian view, or how it is like it,

one may overemphasize either similarities or differences and fail to hear what the film itself has to say.

Bernard Brandon Scott, another biblical scholar, also seeks to construct a dialogue or "conversation" between biblical material and contemporary popular films, in his *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (1994).²⁴ Scott structures his remarks on popular films by viewing them as "myths," which he defines, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, as stories that "mediate the fundamental problems of life" in a hidden and unacknowledged manner. Myths seek to overcome the contradictions present in our experience and values, a task that is ultimately impossible. This does not stop myths from being effective, however, provided that their existence remains hidden. But to reflect on the presence of a myth is to cut off its power; one will see the illusion it presents and its inability to reconcile the tensions it seeks to resolve.²⁵ Scott acknowledges that not all films work as "myths," and that there are "antimythical" films that work to "subvert" the myths of society. He focuses on mythic films, claiming that if we do not gain some understanding of how these myths operate on us, religion will risk becoming a casualty of the electronic media that will govern how religion is conveyed and understood.²⁶

The dialogue, according to Scott, is not a neutral conversation but one that will expose the nature of myth so that it might lose its power. This does not completely mesh with what Scott says about the norms governing the "conversation," as when he quotes David Tracy's remark that conversation is "not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go."²⁷ Elaborating on this, Scott writes that "conversation allows a dialogue in which each is mutually enlightened by the other's horizon" and that "as part of the rules of conversation, we outlaw the Bible's standing in judgment on postmodern culture or our culture's standing in judgment on the Bible." Although Scott avoids heavyhanded heteronomous judgments on the culture, he clearly has an ax to grind in his analysis, in that he wants to show the often malevolent influence of popular culture in contrast with certain biblical ideals.

Still, Scott's analysis of the ideologies present in films is quite thorough, and it is generally not marred by the importation of Christian judgments into this analysis. He focuses especially on action movies, from westerns to *Dirty Harry* (1972), and deftly exposes the ethic of violent revenge that underlies them—contrasting it to the ethic of New Testament pacifism (as with Jewett's critique of similar films). Scott admits that the Bible has used

myth as well, and that it can sometimes be tarred with the same brush with which he wants to paint popular film. For example, in his chapter dealing with sexism in film, he points out that the Bible has been instrumental in supporting women's subordination, the same as the texts of popular culture. He comes closest to a genuine conversation here, where he admits that films have both perpetuated the myth of "female embeddedness" as well as critiqued it, and that biblical texts have done the same.²⁸ He also admits that the use of apocalyptic in both film and in the Bible has a negative effect in its tendency to separate humanity into the chosen and the rejected. This dualism is an option "we no longer can afford." We must see beyond the demonization of the other to a recognition of "love as the solution to chaos," which is also acknowledged by both biblical apocalyptic and films with apocalyptic themes.²⁹ In his willingness to see both good and bad in popular culture and in the Bible, Scott sometimes moves beyond a simple rejection of culture to a genuine dialogue with it.

The greatest limitation to Scott's method is his rather narrow definition of myth, which really only allows him to see the mythological power of film in a negative light. Insofar as films have good things to say, in his view, it is because they transcend the mythic structure and critique it. But myths need not only be viewed as fruitless attempts to reconcile opposites, which ultimately fail when exposed to analysis; one can define myth far less pejoratively, as we will discuss in a later chapter. It is also questionable whether a myth loses its power as soon as it is revealed as "myth" in Lévi-Strauss's sense. Although we may view the resolution of certain conflicts as historically impossible, an awareness of this may not cause us to give up the myth that promotes such resolution; it may be an eschatological ideal that we choose to follow and allow to govern how we live and see the world, even if it is not realizable in our current experience. The myths of male-female unity or peace on Earth need not only be seen as ideological constructions that obscure the true nature of our unjust world—they may be ideals we want to work toward. Slaves who sang Christian spirituals about "freedom" were not just singing about the next life, but were expressing the hope that things could change in this world, as impossible as the realization of that hope may have seemed at the time. They were certainly not simply singing the words to express an irresolvable tension between the ideal of freedom and the reality of slavery, nor did their hope disappear when confronted with the apparent impossibility of its actualization.

Clive Marsh has also defended the dialogical approach in *Explorations of Theology and Film* (1997). Marsh invokes Niebuhr's typology but simplifies it into a threefold structure of Christ in opposition to culture, in agreement with culture, and in dialectical relationship with culture.³⁰ Marsh clearly prefers the latter, and also connects it with Tillich's theology of correlation. Marsh does find three problems with Tillich's approach, however: Tillich did not always listen to the voice of the arts themselves, he read culture as homogeneous, and his judgments on culture betray an elitist bias.³¹ In contrast, Marsh believes that theology should seek a dialogue with all aspects of culture, high and low, hearing all voices, and that the dialogue should not seek to impose a theological interpretation on culture in the process. Marsh's own work tends to follow this approach by frankly admitting both the similarities and the differences between a Christian worldview and the worldview of a particular film. His stated purpose is to find ways in which "church" and "world" may relate, making Christianity more "relevant" to modern people.³²

Most recently, Robert K. Johnston has defended a dialogical approach in *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2000). He offers a five-fold typology of ways in which Christians can engage popular culture that differs somewhat from the typology of Niebuhr: avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation, and divine encounter.³³ Johnston believes that Christian approaches to film have generally progressed through these stages to increased engagement with popular culture, and an ability to see God at work in it. This view is actually closer to the classic Roman Catholic view of synthesis with culture than the Protestant view of distinction and dialectic.³⁴

Roman Catholic–Synthetic Approaches to Theology and Film

Roman Catholic approaches to popular film have not always been open to seeing a harmony between the values of movies and those of Christianity. Even before the advent of sound films, Roman Catholic leaders had been among the most vocal in the denunciation of popular films. They had a crucial role in the founding of The Legion of Decency, which policed cinema, and they aided in its censorship during the decades when the Hays Code ruled. In the 1960s, however, the Roman Catholic Church realized that the days were past when it could or should try to engage in this sort of heteronomous critique. After the Second Vatican Council, there was a new

openness to culture that, in part, helped to open up possibilities for seeing the cinema in a fresh light.

Neil P. Hurley, S.J., developed an approach that could be seen to fit Niebuhr's model of "Christ above Culture" according to which culture is affirmed in the values it conveys, but these values ultimately need Christianity to fulfill and complete them. This "synthetic" approach of classical Catholicism usually supports a kind of "natural theology" that looks for a generalized sort of religiosity in all cultures and religions. In *Theology through Film* (1970) Hurley expressed his belief that "religious transcendence" is a universal constant in human culture.³⁵ As a part of culture, films can express this "humanistic" form of general revelation, even if they do not speak of specifically Christian themes. In *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (1978) Hurley developed this view by asserting that film is "the new humanism . . . [that] can tease out of us a sense of greater possibilities, alternate selves, and new horizons."³⁶ Film has a positive benefit, then, in that it forms a kind of natural theology or "humanism" that proposes values according to which we can live. These are not a substitute for Christian values, but rather a preparation for them; Christian beliefs and values can complete the process of moral development begun by humanism. There is thus no need to reject the values as "unChristian" (as with "Christ Rejecting Culture") nor to transform them (as with "Christ Transforming Culture") before we can consider them value. The values of film have been defined as preparatory to Christian revelation, and not in conflict with it, as they speak of general "humanistic" values of which all religions and philosophies can approve.

Hurley avoids demonizing popular cinema, seeing its value, even when this "value" is not the same as Christian "values." Hurley may overrate the potential of popular films to make significant moral statements, but he certainly is willing to look for and hear such statements when they are made. Where his approach may fall short is in its reduction of the significant moral messages of a certain sort. He is interested in films that convey the type of messages he is looking for, and does not look at the sort of films that might convey messages he could not see as preparatory to Christian revelation.

We can also question whether there actually is such a thing as a generalized sense of transcendence that can be conveyed without reference to a particular religion. Today, theologians are more suspicious of the whole notion of a "natural theology" that allegedly exists apart from particular

religious traditions. There is no such thing as a universal understanding of reason, or morality, unconditioned by a cultural perspective, as traditional “natural theology” would have us believe. If film helps connect us with what it means to be “human,” it will always be in specific ways, not a generic way that exists apart from particular religions. This is one reason why I maintain that films should be examined as expressing a religion in their own right, rather than as a generic form of “religiosity” that does not as such exist. Christians, for example, who claim that a cultural phenomenon represents a generic religiosity often seem to view it as a veiled form of their own religion, and so covertly “baptize” it as Christian after all. Hurley himself seems to engage in this Christianization of film in his analysis of *On the Waterfront*, the story of one man’s stand against union domination by criminals. Because Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando’s character) fights for what he believes and is beaten up and bloody before the triumphant ending, Hurley sees him as a Christ-figure enacting a crucifixion and resurrection motif. In addition, the character of his girlfriend Edie “will complement him, refurbishing the faded image of God latent within his boorish personality.”³⁷ If every bloodied hero becomes a Christ figure and every female lead a symbol of Eve, it will seem that we can find Christianity in every action film—but this may stretch the interpretation of such films to the breaking point and do an injustice both to Christianity and to the films in question.

Probably the most significant Roman Catholic writer on religion and film is John May, who has edited or coedited a number of volumes on the subject. In *Religion and Film* (1982), May’s own essay, “Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film,” presents his approach. Evoking Tillich’s categories of autonomy, heteronomy, and theonomy, he criticizes heteronomous approaches for their tendency to either condemn films for the apparent absence of religious themes in them, or to read religious themes into a film.³⁸ In either case, May claims, the film is not allowed to speak its own message, and we fail to hear what it has to say. May holds up a form of interpretation that respects the autonomy of the art. Rather than insisting on reading a meaning into it, one can see that “certain films are open or not to a religious world view.” One can then look at “those dimensions of the formal structure of the film that represent the visual analogue of religious or sectarian questions.” For a list of basic religious questions, May paraphrases the three basic ones outlined by Huston Smith in *The Religions of Man*: Is the universe indifferent or friendly, are humans independent or interdependent, and does liberation come via wisdom or com-

passion?³⁹ By allowing it to speak its own message before we look for connections to Christianity this approach seems to avoid imposing a Christian view on the film to a greater extent than Hurley’s view. But May is still primarily interested in such connections, and so may read Christian themes into the films he is analyzing in spite of his stated principle to avoid doing so.

May also draws on the work of biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan in making a distinction between “myth” and “parable” as types of religious stories. According to this typology, myth “establishes” world, and parable “subverts” it. Myth seeks to resolve tensions, but parable emphasizes the absence of resolution. Whereas myths satisfy their hearers through visions of vindication and wholeness, parables convey a challenging vision of the world that stresses risk-not-security, weakness-not-strength, and death-not-life.⁴⁰ May shows that both myth and parable are found in films and gives examples of each, although he seems to have a preference for the filmic parables insofar as they parallel the form of Jesus’ teachings as he resented in the New Testament.

In the same volume, Michael Bird’s essay on “Film as Hierophany” takes a basically Tillichian view that film, as an aspect of culture, can point beyond itself “toward the transcendental dimension.”⁴¹ The experience of anxiety and emptiness drives culture to this beyond, placing us in a “condition of openness” to the Unconditioned. Bird accepts Tillich’s concept of a “belief-ful realism” that looks for the ultimate in the concrete, in distinction from all forms of idealism that try to escape the real world via fantasy.⁴² He connects this concept with the filmic realism of scholars Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer insofar as they viewed the real world via fan-the disclosure of “reality” rather than the creation of an alternate world of fantasy to which the viewer retreats to escape the real. They eschewed the excessive artistry of the formalists, who would call attention to the artificial nature of film, for an understanding of film as the medium that most directly records the nature of reality.⁴³ This school of filmic realism, then, has affinities with Tillich’s notion that art should not create an artificial view of reality but instead provide an opening to seeing the depth of reality, especially through focusing on the negative, the void and emptiness of our experience. Films can provide a “spiritual realism” not by attempting to directly portray the holy (which cannot be portrayed) but by a simple realistic style that conveys the real emotions of characters in all their anxieties. This realistic style serves to point up genuine questions about meaning and purpose, or their loss, and so encourages the viewer to look at a

deeper level of reality and meaning. The infinite cannot be filmed, but the finite can be, and when portrayed realistically it will express its true longing, in all its misery and imperfection, for the infinite.⁴⁴

Bird's approach is strikingly similar to that developed by Paul Schrader in *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972). Schrader, who later went on to be a well-known screenwriter and director of feature films himself, came from a rigid Calvinist religious background that he later rejected. The book develops the thesis that a certain style of film, notably the realistic style of directors Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer, creates a sense of "absence" through a sparse technique that limits editing, camera movement, and plot action to a minimum. In this way, according to Schrader, these films evoke a sense of "transcendence" by pointing beyond the emptiness of the "everyday" to a higher reality. In fact, this style is not properly speaking "realistic" in that its ultimate purpose is to "knock down" the everyday sense of reality through a technique that shocks the viewer into stasis.⁴⁵ Although Schrader suggests some parallels between this notion and Zen Buddhist philosophy, he admitted he found it in his own Calvinistic background. In particular, Schrader suggests that the goal of Calvin's theology was, like that of filmic transcendental style, to ascetically deprive one sensually in order to make the window to the transcendent so narrow that the light of faith becomes "blinding."⁴⁶ Calvinist theology, which has insisted that "the finite cannot contain the infinite," has long been suspicious of arts that claim to "capture" the transcendent—but Schrader uses the Calvinist insight to develop an aesthetic theory of sparseness, according to which the infinite is never "in" the arts, but the arts can point beyond themselves to the infinite by indicating their own lack. This has clear connections to Tillich's view, as well as Bird's appropriation of it.⁴⁷

Ernest Ferlita, who has also worked with May,⁴⁸ expresses similar views. Quoting William F. Lynch, he goes so far as to suggest that by a "descent" into the depths of reality, expressing all its pain and suffering, film ultimately can "ascend" to God. As an example, he discusses how Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties* (1976) provides a story about how one man sacrifices all his values to save his own life during the Second World War, even to the point of killing his own friend, effectively losing his soul in the process. As a story of the loss of self, according to Ferlita, it points beyond itself to its converse, that to save one's soul one must be ready to sacrifice one's own life.⁴⁹ In this sense, it does not matter if directors like Wertmüller or Ingmar Bergman claim to reject religion, because their films fi-

nally make religious points. When Wertmüller says she hopes to express her "great faith in the possibility of man becoming human," she is really expressing a religious hope for the transformation of humans.⁵⁰ Films can express a "search for meaning" that characters may find through deeds, suffering, the experience of being loved, or all three.⁵¹ In this way, films can encourage us to hope in the face of suffering—for without hope, we lose faith, religion, and all ability to find meaning.⁵² Quoting Mircea Eliade, Ferlita states that all filmic quests for meaning point us toward the quest for God.⁵³

Roman Catholic approaches like those of May, Bird, and Ferlita find religious themes "in" film not explicitly, but implicitly in that the negative images of human life expressed in film point beyond themselves to a divine resolution. Theology is invoked as the meaning-making activity to be annexed to film narrative in order to interpret the "theonomy" it expresses. This meaning may not be intended by the filmmaker, but that is not so important as long as the work can inspire a religious vision. In fact, this method does not exactly read religious themes "into" films so much as it reads them "onto" films—in other words, the religious interpretation how this accords with Niebuhr's model of synthesis insofar as religion is here viewed as the completion of culture that discloses its content. This approach thus does risk falling into heteronomy, in spite of its concerted efforts to avoid it, by only seeing the significance of films through the ways they prepare the audience for the Christian message of grace and hope. And although May, Bird, and Ferlita prefer challenging "parabolic" narratives to simply "mythic" ones, the parables seem to serve only as prolegomena for a Christian myth of reassurance that may supplant the challenge the filmmaker wished to make. Undermining the autonomy of the film risks losing its voice, as May himself asserted.

Ideological Approaches to the Study of Religion and Film

Many religion scholars do not study film in order to establish a connection to a theological agenda. Instead, they analyze its ideological content, and in this way they mirror many of the approaches used within film studies generally speaking. Their religious training is chiefly relevant insofar as it gives them the ability to recognize when and how religious themes are used in the service of ideological purposes.⁵⁴

The most significant effort by a religion scholar to develop an ideological method may be Margaret Miles's *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (1996). She utilizes a cultural studies approach, drawn from film studies, which focuses on the "social, political, and cultural matrix in which the film was produced and distributed."⁵⁵ She intends this approach to reduce the emphasis on "text" associated with approaches that arose out of literary studies. She suggests that this focus will allow the interpreter to be more aware of the ideological dimension of films, and the ways they perpetuate conventional notions of race and gender in particular. This approach is used by Miles to examine, first, films that have represented western religious traditions, and second, how values related to race, gender, and class are portrayed in popular films.⁵⁶

Miles's approach is intended to reveal how films are actually understood by viewers, by paying attention to how a viewer's social situation within a group determines what one "sees" in the film. "Social location, race, class, sexual orientation, gender, education, age" are among the sociological variables that exist in the viewer and may affect his or her perceptions. Oddly enough, however, most of Miles's conclusions about the ways viewers perceive films are not based on any actual studies of different groups but instead are based on a priori assumptions about how certain groups will perceive a film. This is a problem endemic to cultural studies' film analyses, as they have tended to neglect audience reaction and ethnographic study in their focus on the processes that produce the films as cultural products—in particular, how they are marketed.⁵⁷ But the factors that govern a film's production do not completely determine viewer reaction; for example, a film that is intentionally designed to conform to conventional notions of race and gender (out of the financial concerns of its backers) may still be perceived as challenging those conventions by its viewers. In contrast to the view of Miles, feminist scholar Lisa Taylor has argued that we cannot assume that cultural products that appear to reinforce women's servitude actually have such an effect on them. She points to evidence that suggests that women's reading of romance novels and even viewing pornography can be used by them as activities that liberate rather than enslave. Conclusions about the effects of cultural products on a group must be based on studies of how they are used and perceived, not on the untested assumptions of the researcher.⁵⁸

Miles's analyses of individual films also tend to be based on her own assumptions about audience reactions rather than any study of such reactions. When she reviews *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) and *The Last Temptation*

of *Christ* (1988), she concludes that these films raise religious issues but fail to "act religiously" because "both films fail to inspire imitation of their protagonist, or even to communicate clearly what such imitation might look like or feel like."⁵⁹ Although they failed to create such inspiration in all viewers. Again, ethnographic study is needed to support such assertions. My own showing of *Jesus of Montreal* to a class of traditional college-age students affected some of them rather deeply, especially women who were also committed Christians, apparently to a greater extent than the average church service. The film concerns a man who begins to act like Jesus after playing him in a passion play, so that his story becomes similar to the one he performs—complete with persecution by the religious authorities, in this case the Roman Catholic Church. It raised a number of questions about the extent to which Christianity has fallen away from its original religious vision, none of which are taken very seriously by Miles. She does admit that these films could be read "against the grain" so as "to do with the spectator than the films."⁶⁰ This remark seems to imply, against Miles's own cultural studies assumptions, that meaning rests first of all in the film rather than in the spectator—but that some spectators may effectively misread the film and so come up with subversive understandings that are not "there" in the text of the film. Not only does Miles thus assume without evidence that her reading represents the experience of most spectators, but she claims that spectators who would disagree have not really understood the film. This stance seems to be a return to those forms of ideological criticism that believe that the critic can find the "meaning" of the film apart from any real analysis of what viewers themselves say they found in the film.

Many of Miles's other analyses also make assumptions about films that seem ill-warranted. *The Mission* (1986), made with the participation of radical Roman Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan, purports to tell the story of the Jesuit mission to the Guarani tribes of Paraguay, though it distorts the facts of history in a number of ways (as Miles correctly observes). The contemporary debates between the Vatican and Central American churches involved in political struggles of liberation. But Miles believes that the film actually neutralizes social protest, rather than encouraging it, because it identifies social protest with gifted and unique individuals rather than collective action. "Ironically, films that may be intended as

radical protest become conformist by representing collective action as individual rebellion."⁶¹ Again, she has no real evidence for this claim but simply asserts it; it would seem in her estimation that every film with *characters* (who are by nature individuals) is doomed to be socially regressive. Myles makes the same claim about *Romero* (1989), the first film to be made in the United States by a Roman Catholic organization (Paulist Pictures). Ultimately, this account of Bishop Romero's life and martyrdom in El Salvador, she claims, is merely "a cautionary tale about the futility of protest" because "heroic individual struggle is presented as the only model of social protest." Myles also calls attention to the political murder of the character of Lucia in the film, after which the camera "lingeringly retreats from her body with a long tracking shot of her crotch and leg." This she views as exemplifying a "titillating emphasis on women's bodies" that is out of place in a film that claims to "sensitize and inform." Despite the noble intentions of the filmmakers, *Romero* cannot overcome its use of "Hollywood conventions that fetishize women's bodies and display violence and suffering for pleasure." In Myles's view, "a film that employs an adventure film's scenes of sex and violence cannot communicate anything but voyeuristic exploitation of suffering people. The pain of the oppressed is ultimately used for the entertainment of comfortable spectators."⁶²

This interpretation exemplifies Myles's willingness to draw strong conclusions based on little or no evidence outside her own viewing experience. It seems almost bizarre to suggest that a viewer of *Romero* could come away from the film with the same sense of voyeuristic pleasure as someone who just saw a James Bond movie. Viewers obviously make distinctions among films and the ways they represent sex and violence, which is why viewers were more disturbed by *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* than *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Jaws*, even though all these films were made by the same director. Steven Spielberg utilized different techniques, including more handheld camera and a more realistic depiction of violence, in his "serious" films in order to unnerve and disturb the viewer rather than indulge the viewer's sense of pleasure in the images. Filmmakers and audiences are well aware of the differences between films made for "fun" and those made to "enlighten," though Myles does not seem to acknowledge this distinction. In any case, there is no reason to automatically assume that films designed to challenge people normally fail in their aim simply because most people do not make radical, life-changing decisions after viewing them. One might just as well assume that the Bible cannot be challenging because most people who go to church and hear the Sermon

on the Mount being read do not become pacifists or give all their money to the poor afterwards.

Myles's approach differs from many of the others we have examined in that she has more thoroughly appropriated the methods and ideological assumptions of much of contemporary film theory and criticism. It is no coincidence if it seems that this has made her ultracritical of popular film. Many approaches within the field of film studies continue to be governed by the assumption that popular films represent conservative ideology and little else. This idea can be traced to the influence of "mass culture" theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who believed that the American film industry offered one of the primary ways for capitalism to propagandize the masses with its values. There can be no such thing as a "good" popular film, in their view, as popular cinema is packaged so as to make a profit and therefore is "already implicated in the maintenance of ideological and economic domination."⁶³ Although later film theory departed from many of their beliefs, such as the notion that audiences are entirely passive and will receive whatever "message" the filmmakers wish to convey, the idea that popular films function primarily as ideology continues to be the dominant paradigm for feminist film theory, leftist political film theory, psychoanalytic film theory, screen theory, genre studies, and cultural studies.⁶⁴

Ideological criticism of popular film is essential because one of the major ways in which cultural hegemonies involving gender, race, or class are promoted and perpetuated is through the images of popular media, including film. To conclude, however, that films can function only in this way is to neglect other ways in which films can be analyzed, including aspects of the films as "texts" and the ways in which these texts are read by audiences. Many, perhaps most, popular films perpetuate stereotypes about race and gender, but this is not all they do. Similarly, one can (and should) engage in ideological critiques of literature or religion, but it would surely impoverish the study of those fields if ideological critique were the only sort of analysis utilized. If popular films do function as religion, as this study claims, then it is critical that approaches beyond the ideological be developed.

The suspicion with which popular film is viewed by those within the field of film studies has rubbed off on those religion scholars, like Myles, who have made use of the methods of film studies. Yet the same cultural critics who practice film studies would probably include religion (and many other cultural activities) within the range of those phenomena that

they consider primarily as purveyors of ideology. If religion scholars are to bring the insights of film studies into their own filmic analyses, they should realize that the field of film studies may represent a Trojan horse out of which could pour an army of hostile soldiers who are just as happy to reduce religion to ideology as to view film in this way. While ideological analysis of film and of religions is an essential tool for understanding certain aspects of these cultural phenomena, we must be aware of and make use of other approaches as well.

It is ironic that leftist critics of culture may find themselves in harmony with right-wing conservatives in their wholesale denunciation of popular culture. Both sides seem to believe that nothing good can come out of Hollywood. Yet, to make assumptions about the evils of popular film without looking at the details of the films or their audience reception is to draw conclusions based on ideological bias rather than sound analysis. This approach also ignores the specifics of individual genres or films, which is akin to generalizing about "all religions" and what they believe. Local knowledge of individual phenomena must precede any attempt at generalizations, which must in any case be offered tentatively and with the understanding that our conclusions are scholarly constructions rather than statements about the nature of reality. Postmodern thought has certainly indicated the need for such suspicion of generalizations and greater caution about globalizing conclusions.

An Alternative to Theological and Ideological Approaches

Both theological and ideological approaches to the study of film are very valuable, but each has blindspots in regards to what they are able to see in films. If we only see ideology, or materials for our own religious tradition's theology, we may be missing a great deal that is in films—especially in regard to how they may function religiously for their viewers. The rest of this book is an attempt to develop a method for viewing film as in some ways being like a religion in its own right.

There has been some effort to develop such a method in the recognition that films have a "mythology" all their own. In Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (1995), Martin proposes a threefold typology to describe the study of religion, which can then be applied to the study of religion and film as well. The three approaches he identifies are the theological, the

ideological, and the mythological. His definitions of the first two are similar to mine. Theology, he states, studies religious texts and thinkers, especially those of Western religions (in particular Christianity); "theological scholars tend to equate religion with Judaism and Christianity." Theological focus is therefore limited, but valuable to the discussion of these traditions. Second, ideological criticism of religion focuses on "religious historical, social, and political contexts," especially in relation to "how religion legitimates or challenges dominant visions of the social order." Third, Martin uses the term "mythological" study to refer to comparative religion studies and the history of religions approach, which asserts that "religion manifests itself through cross-cultural forms" including myth and ritual. This approach views religion "as a universal and ubiquitous human activity."⁶⁵

Martin holds that all three forms of religious analysis are legitimate and necessary, and so are also useful when applied to the study of religion and film. Each approach, however, has its limitations. Theological approaches may be ill-equipped to understand or recognize religious beliefs outside the Western paradigm, and so may fall into ethnocentric conclusions; ideological critics may view religion only as "the opiate of the people" that reinforces regressive politics; and mythological approaches tend to ignore religious ideas as ahistorical archetypes universally present in the human and not rest content with one, avoiding to some extent the dangers of reductionism.⁶⁶

I would agree with Martin's basic summary of the advantages and limitations of theological and ideological approaches. In his summary of the mythological approach, however, I believe he has reduced much of the study of non-Christian religions (e.g., the fields of the history, sociology, and anthropology of religions) to the study of mythology, and a rather restrictive understanding of it. His conflation of comparative religious studies with the mythological studies of Jung, Campbell, and Eliade makes it seem as if all comparative studies assume that religion is made up of universal archetypes that make details of difference unimportant. Such approaches have been superseded by those that stress the importance of difference in religion and seek to avoid reductionistic simplifications about its nature: for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, Clifford Geertz, and Wendy Doniger (whose views will be discussed in later chapters). In developing my own approach, I take into account a wider range of ideas about myth,

as well as theories regarding other aspects of religion such as ritual that can also be profitably applied to the study of film.

In sum, there are a number of ideas that have been advanced in the discussion of religion and film that point toward an understanding of how film itself functions as a religion, but there has been little attempt to develop this understanding and all its ramifications. If such an approach is to be developed, it will provide an alternative to both theological and ideological interpretation of film, which have been the two dominant approaches in religion and film studies. If the religious dimensions of film were better understood, we might see both how film's views may parallel those of various religions and how film functions religiously in its own right. Like any religion, the "religion of film" will borrow from other religions as it develops its own distinctive forms of myths, morals, and rituals, and so attention to the use of materials from various religions will remain appropriate. At the same time, we need to transcend the tendency to limit the discussion of religion and film to the connections with the history of religion that we notice. Instead, we need to see how this new religion operates on its own terms. Only then can we really understand the religious power and dynamics present within it.

Such an approach might also provide an alternative to some of the tendencies toward eisegesis and heteronomy present in both the theological and the ideological interpretations of film we have examined. If we may pose our own theological or ideological framework on the film we may fail to understand how it conveys its message to its viewers and how it functions religiously or filmically. Whether past approaches have applauded or critiqued particular films, they have often looked only for what they wanted to see, and so found only what fits with their views or what can provide a convenient straw man to oppose. In neither case is the film properly understood. My own approach cannot claim to be free of bias or error, but in attempting to find the religious voice of the film itself, it seeks to free the interpretation of film (from a religious studies vantage point) from some of the conditions that have been imposed on it such as limiting the dialogue of film and religion to dialogue with a *particular* religious tradition.

Seeking to find the "religious" voice of the film before critiquing it does not preclude judgment of the film; I am not arguing that complete "objectivity" that would allow us to analyze films without importing our prejudices is possible. In this respect, I agree with Marsh in his recognition that we must admit the ideological and theological biases that affect our inter-

pretation.⁶⁷ This recognition, however, should not prevent us from seeking a method of dialogue that allows the voice of the other to be better heard. Interreligious dialogue and study have progressed to the point that scholars seek to understand the other religion as it understands itself, even though they know they cannot fully achieve this goal. They seek to overcome narrow types of interpretation that have imposed alien understandings on religious traditions. I will argue that this same approach needs to be taken in regard to popular-culture studies. We must seek to understand the message of popular-culture products before we can identify areas of agreement or disagreement with them. First, however, we need to analyze further the ways in which film might be defined as a religion, and to begin that task by defining what we mean by "religion."

2

The Definition of Religion

Limitations of Theological and Social-Scientific Definitions

Religion is not an easy thing to define. It is hard to list the requisite characteristics of any cultural phenomenon, given the diversity of cultures and the inevitable variations in their expressions. Defining religion offers basic challenges, however, in that it is an area of culture that involves basic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose in the world, and how we find meaning in it. Thus the scholar's own subjective religious worldview affects the study of the subject matter from the outset, and the judgments imported into our analyses will unavoidably influence how we define "religion."

Moreover, as Jonathan Z. Smith has pointed out, "There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study."¹ By this he means that the scholar chooses what to call religion, and that it therefore "exists" only as the product of the scholar's effort. Smith reminds us that the "map is not territory," that our understanding of religion is not equivalent to the actual cultural phenomena described. "Religion" is a construct we have invented as a label for certain sorts of activities that we classify under this rubric. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as the subject matter we classify as religion, or that we cannot say anything about those things we call religions—it is simply a recognition that whatever definitions we favor, they represent an interpretation from a particular viewpoint.

In the last chapter, I suggested that viewing film as religion would provide an alternative to both theological and ideological approaches and their tendency to narrowly interpret film only through its connections with Christian thought or in its ideological functions. Definitions of religion have suffered from similar problems in being too closely identified

either with theological or ideological agendas. Christian theologians who have offered definitions of religion have tended to use Christian theological concepts as the basis for their views, and so have sometimes limited what can be called religion to that which echoes Christian ideas. Social scientists, on the other hand, have often identified religion with ideology, or have held that religion can be fully explained by reference to the psychosocial processes that are its causes. Each of these problems should be briefly examined in order to point us toward the definition that best avoids them.

Early attempts by Christian thinkers to define the essence of religion unwittingly imported Christian categories into the definition, often assuming that all religions focus on a transcendent being such as the Christian God. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) defined religion as "the feeling of absolute dependence" on that which the Christian calls God, so that "to feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing."² Although Schleiermacher's definition was broader than that of most Western thinkers before him in that he did not equate religion with belief in God as such, the general feeling he postulates still has as its referent the Western or even the Christian concept of God. A century later, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), on the basis of more study of world religions than Schleiermacher had undertaken, asserted that religion is the feeling that arises when we encounter the "holy" or "numinous," that which transcends us so totally that it inspires a mixture of fascination and fear. It evokes an experience of being a creature "submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."³ Otto claimed to have found this experience of radical transcendence in all the world religions he encountered in his travels, but he seems to have neglected those aspects of religions that would not fit his view—for example, the radical this-worldliness of certain forms of Chinese religions or Buddhism.⁴ In spite of a genuine effort to understand other religions on their own terms, Otto still based his analysis on a concept of divine transcendence based in a particular Western theological understanding of God. Otto influenced other thinkers in turn; Mircea Eliade defined religion by its relation to "the sacred" in distinction from "the profane," and although he defined sacrality more broadly than Otto (as religions may have numerous sacred realities, not just one), he still understood religion as always entailing relationship to a transcendent reality that is radically distinguished from empirical reality.⁵ Among philosophers of religion, John Hick has made the same claim that religion is defined by a relationship with a transcendent reality.⁶

The definition of religion offered by Paul Tillich in his later theology sought to overcome many of the shortcomings of previous theological definitions, and his view has probably been the most significant one for modern theology. As we have seen, Tillich's thought also has had a very significant effect on theological approaches to film and culture, so his definition warrants somewhat closer consideration. Tillich defined religion as "ultimate concern," meaning that each of us has something that receives our highest devotion and from which we expect fulfillment. It demands the total surrender of all other concerns to it as the primary concern of our being.⁷ Even if one denies the existence of any transcendent reality, one will still hold something as being of greatest concern for one's being, that which one finally values more highly than anything else. Even the cynic takes his cynicism with "ultimate seriousness," and so his cynical philosophy becomes his ultimate concern.⁸

But Tillich also insisted that there is a criterion that can be used to evaluate the validity of the various ultimate concerns one might have, and so to arrive at some judgments about the relative "truth" of religions. If one takes something that is nonultimate (finite or nontranscendent) as being of ultimate significance, one is guilty of idolatrous faith, or of attributing ultimacy to that which is not ultimate. The consequences of this include radical "existential disappointment" because the finite object cannot fulfill the promise of ultimate satisfaction that the believer expects it to fulfill. This does not prevent people from viewing finite things as ultimate, but in such a case they have made a grave error in falsely viewing the finite as the infinite. A truer faith is one that remains focused on the ultimate itself, rather than on any finite reality. The difficulty with achieving this goal, Tillich explains, is that we can never apprehend the ultimate in itself but only through symbols. The trick of avoiding idolatry is then to look beyond the symbol and to see it as a medium for the ultimate rather than the ultimate itself. If we fail in this and view the symbol as itself being the ultimate, we have given our ultimate devotion to that which is not really ultimate. We can never know for certain whether we have given our devotion to the true ultimate or to a penultimate form of it, and so faith requires commitment and courage in the face of this uncertainty.⁹

Tillich's definition is more comprehensive than many others, in that through it he can view as "religious" a wide range of phenomena, even some not normally considered religious, which have the element of intense devotion involved with them. It is not coincidental that many of the theological approaches to film examined in the last chapter made use of

Tillich, for his definition does not narrowly exclude the religious significance of apparently secular phenomena (such as politics or the arts). But one may still ask whether he has isolated the actual feature shared by all religions, or whether he has imported a Western bias into his definition. He considers it axiomatic that everyone must have some ultimate concern to which all other concerns are subordinate, but this may not be the case. In practice, we all have many shifting areas of concern. Although one or another of these may take precedence at a particular moment that does not mean that it is that which we take with "ultimate seriousness," that which promises "total fulfillment" or demands our complete obedience. These terms are relevant to biblical monotheism, as Tillich shows, but they may not illustrate the religious character of polytheists, who turn to different gods for different purposes, or for that matter religions like Confucianism or Taoism, which rarely speak of subjecting all principles to one. Taoists go so far as to say that there is no right or wrong, good or bad, but that each thing has value when its proper use is found. It's questionable whether there is one "ultimate concern" in this sort of system.

Of course, Tillich might regard this sort of relativism as itself a kind of ultimate concern, which subjugates absolutist systems of value to its own relativizing framework. The relativist who says there is no ultimate has made relativism his ultimate; the skeptic who says there is no truth has made skepticism his truth; the nihilist who rejects the task of finding a concern has made lack of concern into his concern. But one has to suspect a linguistic sleight of hand here on Tillich's part. If we are to say that anything one might believe—even a failure to take the question of the meaning of life seriously—has been taken with "ultimate seriousness" simply because there is nothing one takes more seriously, we may be misdefining "ultimate concern" by effectively reducing it to whatever the content of consciousness is, even if it seems to lack any concern or direction toward ultimacy. If any belief at all is an "ultimate concern" simply because there is nothing higher believed in, this usage would seem to distort the normal sense of the term and the meaning implied by it. It effectively negates the difference between the person who is truly devoted to something as an ultimate and the person who has no such devotion, so that it appears they are equally religious when in fact they are not.

In addition, in distinguishing between types of ultimate concerns, Tillich sneaks value judgments on some ultimate concerns into an apparently value-free definition. He claims that one who is devoted to the nonultimate as if it were an ultimate has committed idolatry by giving

ultimate status to that which he should not. In this way a judgment is implied upon those religions that do not focus on a single ultimate concern, as they commit idolatry in their failure to properly conceptualize their ultimate. The insistence upon a transcendent is still present here, albeit in veiled form.

In spite of the Christian biases present in his definition, Tillich made it clear toward the end of his life that Christianity is not to be viewed as the “absolute” religion that effectively discredits the validity of others. No religion can fully express the ultimate, as all must use symbols, and there is always a gap between the symbol and that which it symbolizes. The best symbols are those that point beyond themselves, like the cross—but this is not the only valid symbol of the ultimate, even though it provides the criterion for Christians.¹⁰ Still, his view defines religion in such a way as to make it seem that all valid religion must have a relationship with a unitary transcendent principle, defined according to the norms of the biblical understanding of covenant (“demand and promise”). Those that lack this focus on the transcendent (or its unity) are viewed as less adequate forms of religion.

Just as such theological definitions have narrowed the understanding of religion by their use of Christian categories, so also the ideological definitions of social-scientific approaches have tended to reduce religion to its psychological or sociological function. Most famously, Karl Marx reduced religion to a by-product of social oppression, the “opiate of the people” which they use to cope with intolerable economic conditions; Freud, on the other hand, reduced religion to a by-product of our neurotic attempts to deal with the absence of an omnipotent father. In both cases, religion is viewed as harmful and unnecessary, as well as explicable wholly through the categories of either sociological or psychological analysis based on an examination of its empirical nature. Although the pejorative and simplifying definitions of Marx or Freud are not used as widely as they once were, many social scientists still believe that in their efforts to “explain” the causes of religion in observable social forces they effectively preclude the truth of religion. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, for example, write that religion is “a purely human phenomenon, the causes of which are to be found entirely in the natural world. Such an approach is obviously incompatible with faith in revelation and miracles.”¹¹ The transcendent or other-worldly referents of religion cannot be real on such a view, as religion is merely a product of this-worldly forces that can be examined and understood by social science. Such reductionism commits the so-

called “genetic fallacy” of believing that a this-worldly explanation for the cause of religion discredits any other-worldly explanation, and hence transcendent referent, for religion. In opposition to this view, I would claim that it is possible to believe that religion(s) might be true, even when we believe we have adequately explained their “causes” naturalistically. After all, a believer can hold that God works through natural processes such as evolution, so why can’t one also allow that God creates faith and religion through sociopsychological processes? Even if people can be said to believe in God “because” of such processes, that does not negate the possibility that God “exists.” Nonetheless, it has been widely held that religion must have either a theological (i.e., belief-based) or a psychosocial “explanation,” as these two approaches are held to be incompatible.¹²

In contrast, I would argue that social-scientific approaches do not need to accept the reductionist view that religion can be fully explained naturalistically or that such explanation necessarily discredits the beliefs of religious people. Similarly, religion need not be viewed solely as an ideological construct that supports cultural hegemonies, as the social-scientific study of religion has sometimes held.¹³ Although religion is this, it is not only this—just as I have argued that film may be ideology, but not only that. We need to be able to understand the workings of religion in ways that transcend the purely ideological. Luckily, many social scientists working in fields such as anthropology and sociology have recognized that their analysis of religion does not require them to adopt reductionist views of religious behavior that suggest it can be fully understood solely as a product of societal or cultural forces. Religion may be seen not merely as a by-product of society, a sort of cultural dross thrown off by social forces, but as a cultural force in its own right that contributes to and shapes society.

Clifford Geertz's Definition of Religion and Its Application to Film

I have found the definition of religion put forward by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz to be the most helpful and comprehensive one for analyzing religious phenomena. Geertz defines religion by its function in human society, rather than by theological content (e.g., belief in a transcendent being), but he also avoids the reductionism of many social-scientific definitions. Part of the reason for this is that he views anthropology as essentially an interpretive science rather than an explanatory one. Geertz believes that we should attempt to “describe” rather than “explain” religion,

as one cannot fully analyze the causes of human cultural activities in the same way that the natural sciences examine physical phenomena. One cannot assert "scientifically tested and approved" hypotheses about religion in general; the diversity and particularity of human experience and culture make it impossible to come to general conclusions about the nature of religion in the same way that one might about chemistry or physics.¹⁴ Although his views are firmly based in the observation of actual religions, Geertz does not reduce the data of religion to the mere recording of religious behavior, as he believes some social-scientific accounts have attempted to do. Rather, utilizing a semiotic approach, he insists that one must understand the meaning intended by a religious behavior in order to understand its function in a religion. A nervous twitch and a wink may look the same, but one has no intended meaning while the other does—a meaning, furthermore, defined by its context and the set of assumptions that accompany it.¹⁵ Geertz is interested in the set of meanings implied in religion, and his definition of religion reflects this.

Geertz's definition of religion is found in his 1966 essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," which defines it as consisting of five aspects: "1) a set of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."¹⁶ He then unpacks each of these five aspects to spell out his conception of religion and how it functions.

First, as a set of symbols, religions provide both models "of" reality and models "for" reality. The difference is reflective of that between worldview and ethos, that is, the way the world is believed to be and the way it is believed the world ought to be. Models "of" reality describe how we would think the world really is, while models "for" reality describe how we would like it to be. We might also say that religions provide both beliefs and ethical values.¹⁷

Second, these symbol systems establish both moods and motivations in us. Motivations incline us to doing certain things in certain situations, and so are a cause of our actions, while moods do not incline us to act so much as indicate our emotional reactions to certain situations.¹⁸

Third, these moods and motivations are based in "conceptions of a general order of existence." Here Geertz specifies how religious feelings or inclinations differ from other sorts of feelings and inclinations: they are "directed toward the achievement of an unconditioned end" and are

"symbolic of some transcendent truths." By this he does not seem to mean that a "belief in spiritual beings" is the central characteristic of religion, but that something greater than the ordinary is referenced. (Note that he also does not assume that there ought to be a single transcendent referent, as Tillich does.) Religion involves conceptions of the "all-pervading" that affects all of life and not just a part of it. Geertz even whimsically allows that golf might be a religion to some, but only if it points to some higher truths for the player and not merely because he is passionate about it.¹⁹ It is not then that religion is simply one's highest concern, but that it relates to one's view of life's purpose and meaning grounded in a general concept of reality.

In elucidation of this point, Geertz suggests that the primary purpose of religious symbols is to deal with the encroachment of chaos on our lives and to offer a sense that life is meaningful and orderly in spite of the challenge of chaos. In three fundamental areas are we threatened by chaos: at the limits of what we can explain intellectually; at the limits of what we can endure in suffering; and at the limits of morality, with the need to deal with the injustice of life.²⁰ Although all three may be related to what is sometimes called the "problem of evil," they are distinct in that they deal with different mental faculties and the different challenges posed to each by chaos. It is worth noting that, in Geertz's view, religion does not "explain away" the problems of life as if they did not exist; rather, in response to the very natural suspicion that the world has no order or coherence, religion offers

the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. The effort is not to deny the undeniable—that there are unexplained events, that life hurts, or that rain falls upon the just—but to deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is a mirage.²¹

Religion then recognizes "the inescapability of ignorance, pain, and injustice on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole."

Fourth, religion also clothes these conceptions with an "aura of factuality." This means that religion deals with the "really real" in asserting that its conceptions are not fictions but are descriptive of (or, in the case of

ethics, normative for) the actual nature of the world. This assertion of reality is not achieved simply by an act of faith, but is expressed in religious life through ritual—the third key component of religious experience, alongside worldview and ethos. Rituals unite the conception of how the world is with the conception of how it ought to be, for “in ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.”²² For religious people, rituals are “not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it.”²³

Geertz gives an example of this in the Balinese ritual dramatization of the mythic battle between the evil witch, Rangda, and the benevolent and comical monster, Barong. Members of the audience participate in the drama by attempts to restrain Rangda or (sometimes) through being possessed by demons and actually entering into the performance. The ritual is therefore “not merely a spectacle to be watched but a ritual to be enacted. There is no aesthetic distance here separating actors from audience and placing the depicted events in an unenterable world of illusion.”²⁴ In this way, the enacted myth becomes real to the participants; as Geertz observes, “To ask, as I once did, a man who has *been* Rangda whether he thinks she is real is to leave oneself open to the suspicion of idiocy.”²⁵

Fifth, this aura of factuality makes the “moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” This point actually explicates the previous one, noting that religious assertions utilize a different set of assumptions from the commonsensical perspective, effectively introducing a new “language game” (in the Wittgensteinian sense).²⁶ Having moved into the ritual context and then back to the commonsensical again, there is a slippage from one context to the other so that the ordinary world is now seen “as but the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it.”²⁷ The man who played the part of Rangda, for example, realizes he is no longer she after the ritual, but having played that part and having felt the reality of it affects how he sees himself and the world, for example, involved in the struggle between good and evil in the world, or in himself.

Can each of these aspects of Geertz’s definition be found in the religion of film? First of all, films do provide a set of symbols, both visual and narrative, which act to mediate worldviews as well as systems of values—and in accordance with Geertz’s second point, these establish both certain moods (e.g., of reassurance or hope) as well as motivations (to “do the right thing,” for example, to be true to yourself, or to love your family).

When films are called modern “myths,” I take this (in part) to refer to a set of stories that represent the two functions Geertz calls “models of” and “models for” reality. (In the following chapter, the concept of myth and its applicability to film will be examined in greater detail.) That film narratives act this way should be clear; the world is claimed to be a certain way, and it is simultaneously claimed that it should be that way. The world is believed to be a place where good conquers evil, for example, as it tends to in all but the darkest of motion pictures (at least, those made in Hollywood). And if films do diverge from this convention, audiences may find themselves annoyed and even upset.

As one example of this, when I showed Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) to one of my classes, most of the students seemed to think that Allen was somehow saying that Dr. Judah Rosenthal (played by Martin Landau) deserves to get away with murder because he is never caught and even overcomes the tortures of his own conscience for having arranged the death of his mistress. They were incensed that Allen should make a film showing the wicked going unpunished, even though Allen’s point was not that this is the way things should be but rather that this is the way things are. Allen wanted audiences to reflect on the lack of justice in the world and how this creates an existential situation in which people must choose good or evil even though it appears that good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. I was surprised that my class seemed so reluctant to accept this viewpoint. The worldview they expect to see in films, however, is one that reassures them that justice will be served—even if life experience contradicts this. The model of and for reality that Allen proposed was not one they were accustomed to see in films, nor one they particularly wanted to see.

This clearly relates also to the third aspect of Geertz’s definition: that religions formulate conceptions of a general order of existence that include the attempt to deal with experiences of chaos—the uncanny, pain and suffering, and injustice or evil. Most people go to the movies claiming the need to “escape” from their daily lives, but to what do they escape? The world presented by films tends to be neater, more orderly, and has satisfactory endings (usually) in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, families are reunited, and lovers mate for life. Although the narratives can introduce considerable conflict and tension, it tends to be resolved within the time limit prescribed by the film-going experience. However bad the situation of the characters may be at various points in the story, by the end all will be tidy and we will be reassured that all is well with the world. This

does not mean that every film invokes a banal “happy ending,” as not everything may work out perfectly for all the characters in every respect. But, as Geertz said about religion, it can provide a sense that justice and order exist, even though particular events remain unexplained or seem unfair. There are films that are exceptions to this (such as some of Woody Allen’s work), but they tend not to represent the norm, nor do they do as well at the box office. At the same time, such films could still be considered “religious” for the intelligentsia that enjoys them in the same way that atheistic existentialism can be said to be a “religion”—it simply offers a rather different way of dealing with chaos. In this way, even “alternative” or “art” films might be viewed as having a religious function for those who like and watch them, and we should realize that to speak of the “religious” qualities of film is not simply a way of issuing ideological judgments on “popular” cinema and its audiences.

This brings us to the fourth aspect of Geertz’s definition of religion: the aura of factuality provided through the ritualization of the mythic worldview and its values. Although the worldview and ethics of films have been examined by some scholars, there has been almost no examination of the rituals of filmgoing by which the worldview and ethos of films are religiously appropriated by the viewer. It might even be alleged that there is no real religious ritual involved in film viewing, as it need not be communal and does not require the viewer to participate in the same way as in a religious service. However, I would claim that this view of filmgoers as passive receptacles, doing nothing but imbibing the film’s values in isolation from one another, is a remnant of the discredited “hypodermic needle” model of cinema propounded by the Mass Culture theorists—according to which filmgoers were “injected” with the ideology of the film-makers in the theater, and their response could only be that of unquestioning acceptance.²⁸ In fact, filmgoers are very involved in their own appropriation of a film, and they do not passively accept whatever it says. They are often highly critical and spend much time discussing films before, during, and after the viewing. People are involved in the film especially while viewing it, whether they are screaming in a horror movie, laughing in a comedy, or applauding the hero at a key moment. This is one reason why people still go to the movies instead of just renting a movie at home; it creates an “aura of factuality,” to use Geertz’s term, a sense of reality in a darkened room with an enlarged screen that encompasses all attention. Furthermore, a good audience can make a difference

in how well one likes the movie—whether they laugh, cry, scream, or applaud enough to invite one to join in the communal experience of enjoying the film.

Geertz himself does not seem to see how Western popular cultural experiences might have the sort of ritual dimension he depicts as part of Balinese religion. He notes that the Balinese drama, because of its participatory aspect, is more “like a high mass, not like a presentation of *Murder in the Cathedral*,” which presumably does not invite the audience to join in.²⁹ But popular films do often invite audience participation—more than live theatrical performances like *Murder in the Cathedral* in some ways, though (oddly enough) the film actors are not “there” to appreciate it. (Perhaps films even invite more audience participation precisely because audiences don’t need to fear upsetting the actors by their heckling!) Had Geertz done an ethnographic study of a midnight showing of the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, for example, he might have had some appreciation for the ways in which Western popular culture creates the sort of ritual experience that the Balinese have in their religious drama. As the audience flicks their lighters on, throw toast at the screen, or respond verbally to the cues in the film, they become part of the story. This no doubt explains also why people would go to the film over and over again, as if to a church service, for this ritual experience. In fact, filmgoers routinely go multiple times to a film they like, and then buy the film on video so that they can watch it over and over again.³⁰ And the experience of watching the film on video is often communal, too, as friends are invited over, popcorn is made, and a discussion of the film surrounds its viewing. Many people memorize dialogue from movies that they can repeat with their friends as a sort of “in joke” that defines their own groups. Clearly, the communal nature of film viewing and its ritual aspects are linked.

Much more ethnographic study needs to be done on the ways films are experienced, as the tendency has been to treat the film as a “text” in need of interpretation rather than describing the event of film viewing and its attendant symbolisms. Films are understood and interpreted only in the context of their actual viewing, a point that has been almost entirely missed in the analysis of the religious import of popular films. Instead of pretending we “understand” the meaning of a film because we have watched it ourselves and intellectually analyzed its meaning for us, we need to allow for the possibility that to “understand” the “meaning” of the film involves understanding how the average viewer sees it, what she liked

about it, where she saw it, why, and with whom. Only by answering these sorts of questions can we have any idea what the film might represent to those who have seen it. Within the field of film studies, some scholars are beginning to move in this direction, but scholars of religion who write about film have not yet really picked up on this trend.

Geertz's fifth point reinforces the idea that religious rituals create a sense of reality that points to a different way of viewing the world from that provided by ordinary experience. Although people clearly know that films are not "real" in the commonsensical sense of the term, the films take on the dimension of reality within the context of the viewing. Geertz himself seemed unwilling to admit the extent to which works of art can create this alternate sense of reality. In distinguishing art from religion, he accepts Suzanne Langer's view that art deals with illusion and appearance, imagining how the world could be, whereas religion claims to represent the world as it really is.³¹ But religion also imagines how the world might be, and as Geertz's own theory indicates, religion links together what "is" and what "ought" to be in its ritual structure. Religion does not simply describe the world, and art does not simply provide imaginary illusions—both are involved in the complex relationship between the ideal and the real, in that both offer a worldview as well as an ethos. The way in which films, and religion, represent a version of "reality" has been a point of much debate that deserves further attention.

Film (and Religion) as Illusion or Reality

From the beginning of cinema in the late nineteenth century, it was already clear that film had a dual nature in its ability to "reproduce" reality but also to distort it. Louis Lumière made films that depicted events in ordinary life, such as *Baby's Breakfast* and *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, and he did not intend to create art so much as to capture events on film that could then be reproduced for an audience. *Teasing the Gardener*, in which a boy turns on the hose just as the gardener examines it, featured a point-of-view shot that caused viewers to jump with the expectation that they, too, would be hit by the water. *Arrival of a Train* is a more familiar example of a film said to have provoked some shock, as the train appears to be heading into the audience. Lumière's popularity waned quickly as the novelty of his method wore off, because he was not very interested

in story development or artistic details—but he had established the ability of the moving picture to film a "real" scene, or at least one that appeared to be real.

On the other hand, George Méliès made films that were clearly fantastic in both theme and appearance, such as *A Trip to the Moon*, which features the moon as a "man" hit in the eye with a rocket ship. He was the first to utilize "special effects" which could seem to make objects appear or disappear (by stopping the camera at key moments), and he also discovered multiple exposure and superimposition of images. People enjoyed the obvious lack of realism in his films, as they were designed to entertain through the evocation of an imaginary world that no one could mistake for reality.³²

A debate soon began among filmmakers and theorists as to whether films should seek simply to reproduce what lies before the camera, or attempt to alter reality through the filmmaker's artistry. The formalists, who dominated during the silent era, took the latter view. Theorists such as Sergei Eisenstein and V. I. Pudovkin defended the art of film against those who defamed it by arguing that the filmmaker made decisions about how to depict reality and did not simply set up a camera in front of an event. In particular, editing (or "montage") provides the means whereby distinct images filmed at separate times can be joined together so as to appear connected. The filmmaker can manipulate images through editing so that the viewer will link the images in his mind, creating the sense of meaning desired by the filmmaker. In this way, he can create the desired emotional or intellectual response in the viewer, and so the filmmaker is a genuine artist.

When sound pictures were developed, many (including the formalist Rudolf Arnheim) thought that now the medium would become too "realistic" in its depiction of action and that it would lose the artistic, visual qualities that had dominated silent films. Realists such as Andre Bazin, however, celebrated the new use of sound and its ability to capture a better sense of reality on film. He argued that films should use less editing and more long shots that allow the viewer the freedom to see the scene as it is, rather than as cut up by the filmmakers. He did not completely eschew editing, however, as he liked the "invisible" editing technique of popular Hollywood films that gave an appearance of reality without calling excessive attention to the technique. Siegfried Kracauer took realism further than Bazin in his rejection of the unrealistic details of Hollywood films; he

avored the Italian neorealist films (such as *The Bicycle Thief*) that sought to depict ordinary people in ordinary situations.³³

In spite of their differences, formalists and realists shared the notion that films are artistic insofar as they prompt viewers to reflect on reality in new ways. In this sense, neither school embraced the idea that films are primarily escapist entertainment. But even escapist films, we might note, give the viewer some kind of sense of reality, albeit a reality that differs from his own. One escapes to the world of film in order to return better equipped to this world, and so even the “idealist” aspect of film serves a “realist” function. In addition, even the most “realistic” films do not simply reproduce reality as they involve the filmmaker in the decision of what to film and how to film it. Even documentaries or films such as those of Lumière involve choices that are designed to elicit certain responses in the viewer—as indeed Italian neorealism also intended a certain effect on the audience through its attempt at verisimilitude. There is no pure realism possible in film, due to the fact that an artist is involved who processes reality through his or her own subjectivity. Likewise, no art form (including film) can be completely devoid of relationship with reality; not even surrealism or abstract art, as these too represent the artist’s response to the reality he or she lives in. Film is both realistic and artistic at the same time, and so involves the elements both formalists and realists attributed to it.³⁴

Debates have continued, however, as to whether this combination of realism and artistry is properly understood by the viewers. Ideological critics such as Colin McCabe have argued that the ostensible “realism” of film causes viewers to overlook the fact that it is a constructed work, and so to take it as a representation of reality rather than an ideologically motivated artifact.³⁵ The appearance of reality depicted in the film is actually a cover for its ideology, as what it presents is not reality but an illusion. Only films that discomfort or alienate the viewer, or which radically challenge the normal structure of narrative, can hope to make an effective attempt to bring reality to him or her. Other theorists have similarly claimed that film viewers cannot distinguish the illusion of film from reality. Jean-Louis Baudry has argued that film viewing is akin to dreaming in providing an experience of regression (psychoanalytically understood) in which the viewer finds the self reflected rather than an outside reality, as there is no distinction between reality and self in the primitive, infantile state. In Baudry’s view, viewers believe they are experiencing an outside reality even though they are merely having an experience of self, like the poor prisoners in Plato’s cave, film viewers see only shadows but take them for

the real thing.³⁶ Jean Baudrillard has gone even farther than Baudry in asserting that reality does not exist anymore in postmodern society, as we have been entirely absorbed into the “hyperreality” created out of pop culture and media images that permit no perspective on a world outside themselves.³⁷

Not all film theorists, however, have accepted these dire pronouncements. Tom Gunning has pointed out that the often-told anecdote about viewers screaming and running for the exit during the first showing of Lumière’s *Arrival of a Train* is itself a “myth” without historical basis. Film theorists continue to tell this myth, he suggests, as it supports their own agenda according to which audiences cannot tell a film from the real thing—even if we have become more sophisticated in our reactions. Gunning suggests that film viewers were never that naïve, and are not so now. Rather, their delight at the illusion of the train’s motion was based in a reaction of astonishment at the ability of the apparatus to produce such an illusion—which was never mistaken for reality. At this time in the early 1900s, as the new creations of technology provoked both fear and confidence, audiences reacted with both fascination and horror at the abilities of these technologies. Amusement parks began to feature roller-coasters with simulated collisions that were averted at the last possible moment. Audiences sought new thrills even as they quickly tired of them and had to seek new experiences to shock and amaze them. The excess of special effects and horror movie “shockers” today should show that we are still in quest of such experiences in film, not to mention the new fascination with virtual reality technology. In all of this, however, Gunning contends that audiences maintain their sense of the illusion of the media being exploited for emotional affect.³⁸

Noel Carroll has also critiqued the idea that film viewers cannot separate film from reality and, more specifically, Baudry’s thesis that film viewers experience regression and a dreamlike state in the cinema. Viewing a film is not like dreaming, Carroll points out, in that we are well aware of where we are and can move or even get up and leave at will; to be more obvious still, we are not asleep when we are watching a film. Although Baudry admits this difference, Carroll believes he has made too much of the analogy between film viewing and dreaming in order to establish a psychoanalytic model for understanding the film-viewing experience. After all, films are not private like dreams, as they can be experienced and discussed with others, even during the viewing; I can also go back to see the same film again, and I cannot control my dreams in this way. Nor is

the film the product of my own mind, like dreams are, but a product of the filmmakers' efforts—and these may produce a vision in harmony with my own, or not. The film need not affect me as powerfully as my own dreams do.³⁹

Richard Allen concurs with Carroll's view that film viewers are well aware of the unreality of cinema, but differs from him in choosing to revise rather than discard the psychoanalytic account of the nature of film viewing. He describes the experience of seeing a film as an experience of "projective illusion" that we enter into willingly and knowingly, not unconsciously, but which still affects us powerfully in its impression of reality. Like a conscious fantasy into which we willingly place ourselves, films offer a "fully realized world" we can accept via a certain suspension of disbelief.⁴⁰ We can be aware at the same time of the fictitious nature of the film, and our desire to believe in it. Allen offers an analogous experience: one can look at a drawing that presents an image of a duck when viewed one way and a rabbit when viewed in another way, and even cause oneself to see one and then the other, but not both at the same time.⁴¹ In the same way, we can be drawn into a film such that we "forget" its unreality, but as soon as our attention is diverted we recall its illusionary nature. We are never really fooled, but we do not constantly reflect on the fact of its unreality while we are entertaining a fictitious piece of work—like a daydream. Allen argues that we are much more in control of our filmic experience than most psychoanalytic theories would allow; for example, he rejects what he sees as the overemphasis such theories place on the voyeuristic aspects of film, in that we can choose to identify with the characters portrayed and not only the perspective of the camera that views them.⁴²

If film viewers do have some sense of the unreality of cinema, as these latter theorists propose, the power of film is not in its ability to erase or displace our sense of the real world but in its ability to provide a temporary escape from it. And yet that escape is not simply a matter of illusion, but a construction that has the "aura of factuality" about it that Geertz associates with religious ritual. We willingly enter another world in the cinema, one that we realize is not the empirical world, but one that has power over us nonetheless. It may be argued that the spiritual world referenced by religions is believed to be more "real" than the imaginary world enter in films; but in both cases, the participant enters into such ritual space in order to experience an alternate reality. The man who played Rangda had no problem distinguishing himself from Rangda once he was outside the ritual; but in the ritual space and time, that distinction was not

observed. In a similar way, a viewer who entertains the fictitious world of the film as "real" during its viewing does not lose connection with the fact that she is in a theater viewing a constructed work, but she will not dwell on this fact if she is enjoying the film and is sufficiently absorbed in it.

Sometimes a film will even remind the viewers of its artificiality. In *E.T., The Extraterrestrial* (1982), there is a moment when Elliot's brother's friends first see the alien that they have thought to be a figment of Elliot's imagination. As Elliot matter-of-factly tells them, "He's a man from outer space, and we're taking him to his spaceship," one of the boys asks, "But can't he just beam up?" Elliot answers with exasperation (and somewhat condescendingly), "This is reality, Greg." Audiences laughed at that line because they realized that the film is not our reality, but it is for the characters in the film, and for that reason we can enter its world temporarily in order to discover a reality different from our own which is somehow connected to us as well. It is not less "relevant" to us for being recognized as imaginary.

It is also the case that film viewing, like religion, affords a link between the alternate world it imagines and the empirical world of everyday life. Were there not such a connection, the illusion would not be powerful or relevant—or even desired. We desire alternate worlds because we find our own imperfect, but such desires to flee also entail a desire to return, renewed and refreshed, to the everyday. One who wishes only to live in ritual time, or in the virtual reality of a film or computer game, has fallen into pathology in his preference of the imaginary world over the empirical world—and will soon have difficulties living in the empirical world, as he may begin to neglect duties and relationships that are necessary for survival. Modern technology has spawned this sort of obsessive behavior, such as that found in the person who surfs the Internet nonstop, but this is not the norm for all experience of the alternate realities offered by religion or modern media. Those who are less pathological will find a way to relate the two worlds more effectively, so that "real" life may be enriched rather than impoverished by media consumption. Some may find this hope overly optimistic, but we have no reason at the outset to conclude that it is impossible to go back and forth between the two worlds without ultimately losing the distinction between them (as Baudrillard insists).

If film does operate as a religion according to Geertz's definition, as I contend, then like religion it offers a connection between this world and the "other" world imagined in offering both models of and models for reality. These two aspects—worldview or mythology, and ethos—together

express a vision of what the world really is, and what it should be. There is some confusion between these two, in that the ideal world imagined by religion is represented as the goal toward which empirical reality should reach, but it is also taken as a description of the way “true” reality really is. The imagined world is taken not as an invention of our minds, but as a true representation of reality precisely because it depicts the way things really should be. In the same way, films offer near-perfect worlds that do not correspond exactly to reality as we experience it, but we often believe they are models of (and not only models for) reality as we would like it to be so. This need not be taken simply as wishful thinking, as the desire to view models for and models of as identical is based in our desire to realize a unity of the two, to cause utopia to come to pass. This is not mere escapism, but a real desire to change the world to be more like the way that the “religion” in question thinks it already is, at a “higher” level.

In addition, the fact that a cultural phenomenon—like religion or film—is humanly constructed does not take away from its power to express another reality, even when people are aware of the constructed, “imaginary” nature of the phenomenon. Just as people can be affected by stories that they know are fictitious and even change their views of the world as a result, so also constructed religious artifacts can connect people with other realities even when they know that they are human “inventions.” Sam Gill, for example, has argued that the masks used in Native American religious rituals are not disguises but are symbolic re-presentations of spiritual realities. Those who wear them are not “masquerading” as deities to fool the audience, but are portraying in dramatic form beings that they believe to be real. Like Geertz, Gill argues that the performer who wears the mask takes on the identity of the character he portrays. Even when children are initiated into the masking process, so that they realize it is their own relatives who wear the masks, this does not mean the gods portrayed are now recognized as unreal or that the ritual is viewed as a sham. Rather, Gill suggests that the new knowledge of the initiate is that gained by looking through the mask from the inside, to realize not its falsity as a way of portraying the spiritual, but rather its truth. The performer who looks out of the mask to see reality through it identifies with the character portrayed and so “knows” its reality in a clearer sense even than the audience that sees him. The mask does not hide truth; it reveals it.⁴³ Filmmakers, too, know that films are not “real,” but the imaginary constructions within them can still serve to convey real truths about the nature of reality and how it is believed to be.

The question may still arise as to whether or not there “really” is a referent for religious beliefs, or whether the religious person only thinks that the world imagined by religion is real. Some of those who define religion by its function in human life have been reductionist in claiming that it has no referent beyond its cultural function, that its referential claims are illusory. This is not my view, or that of Geertz, who, as we have seen, avoids reductionism. Questions about the “truth” of religious beliefs must be bracketed by the religion scholar as they can never be definitively answered. This does not, however, prohibit religious people, including some scholars of religion, from believing particular truth-claims of particular religions, or from making such claims; it simply means that it is impossible to prove whether such claims have an external reality referent or not. What we can do is examine the faith of those who hold to such claims to see the differences it makes for them in terms of worldview and ethos. Thus we can seek to understand the beliefs of Christians, which have a meaning whether or not God or Jesus really exists, and we can seek to understand the filmic religion whether or not the visions of reality it presents are “true.” Even if good guys don’t always win and not all romances are happy, those who enjoy films may believe justice and love will ultimately triumph, in part because this is presented as the nature of reality in many movies. And, as such claims are not subject to definitive verification or falsification, filmmakers may choose to believe such things even when some evidence seems to count against them—for example, it is believed that in the end justice will be served, even though we do not always see this happen.

Films, then, can be taken as illusions in one sense, but can also have the force of reality by presenting a vision of how the world is as well as how it might be. In the ritual context of viewing a film, we “entertain” the truth of its mythology and ethos as a subject of consciousness even as its “entertains” us. It presents a reality that differs from that experienced in ordinary profane time and space as the reality depicted in religious myth and ritual differs from the empirical world of our everyday lives—and yet, that alternative reality is still integrally connected with the world of the everyday, and hence its vision is relevant to it. To understand this more fully, we will examine how the notions of myth, ethos, and ritual apply to film.