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# Salvation: An Exploration

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**CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE**

**SALVATION: AN EXPLORATION**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR GASTÓN ESPINOSA

AND

PROFESSOR JAMES MORRISON

AND

DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY

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FOR

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: <i>What the h#! is Salvation?</i> .....	5
CHAPTER II: <i>What the f*#@# is Experimental Film</i> .....	24
CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	41

“I’m the hero of this story, I don’t need to be saved”

-Regina Spektor

## INTRODUCTION

To introduce this thesis I need to go back a year to give context to what inspired such a non-traditional Claremont McKenna College thesis. I've grown up in Los Angeles since I was eight years old, thus inevitably growing up amidst the film industry. Whether it was my friends parents or my own family's involvement, film has been apart of me and the fabric of my life for many years. However, it was not until my junior year of college that I solidified this interest as much more than just a hobby; I realized film was something I could devote my life to and that the energy I put in it would payoff. In the spring of 2012, I studied abroad in Prague, Czech Republic at the prestigious and renown Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU, for short). While it sounds like a cliché to attribute my enlightenment in the arts to spending six months in Prague, it was in this city that I realized the artist I wanted to become. Although people spend years attempting to find themselves as creative souls, slowly understanding what mediums attract them and which techniques to master, it took me only six months. Six months to know that the type of art that attracted me and pulled me in was experimental cinema. Grasping what experimental film *is* can be just as difficult as grasping how to *make* experimental film. It is a learning process and this thesis is a culmination of what I have learned so far.

Fast forward to September of my senior year in college. While it was filled with excitement, I was already busy brainstorming what my thesis would be. I wanted to do

something innovative and ambitious because that is who I am as a student and as a person and my fascination for film led to the idea of shooting a film for my thesis that encompassed both of my majors: Religion and Film.

When people learn I am a Religious Studies major and a Film major, the questions never end and I usually reply with: “Well, if you have an answer for me on how this came to be, I’d love to know.” How I came to be both could be its own thesis or reality show. Both manifested in different ways: Gastón Espinosa taught my Freshman Humanities Seminar, “Mystics, Prophets, and Social Change,” and after reading sacred texts in class, I was hooked. I went to the registrar the next day and registered as a Religious Studies major. Film came second, surprisingly, because I wasn’t sure if it was what I wanted to do since I’d only seen it before as a hobby. However, as much as I tried to pull myself away from my creativity, I was drawn more to film and started making my own short films (as a hobby...of course). By my sophomore year, I knew I wasn’t fooling myself and that is when I officially became a Film major. For my senior thesis, I knew I wanted to unite these two majors and thus decided to create an experimental film exploring the concept of “Salvation” in women’s lives in Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam.

This thesis project is a collaborative project. I believe art should not be limited to individuals but rather an exploration among several people; a community of perspectives that gather to flourish and learn and discover and create. This project has allowed me to collaborate with some of the most effortlessly brilliant students, teachers, mentors, and innocent spectators. My thesis doesn’t aim to provide answers but rather explore a concept that is rarely discussed but profound in its context. My thesis film project



showcases a network of artists that are truly talented and devoted to their craft, who saw an opportunity to unite and took it. While this is technically *my* thesis, it is not just my voice speaking, but many.

This thesis is divided into two sections: the religious component and the film component. I chose to focus on Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam because I grew up Christian and wanted to look into something different, something I knew little about. While I had studied each of these religions during my time at CMC as a religious studies major, it was always in a generalized lens and I wanted to get more specific answers. While all four religions are different, they are all similar in unexpected ways, which I sought to explore. As I reflected back on the themes in my religion courses, the role of women had been defined but not discussed in depth. The more I researched and spoke to people about my topic, the easier it was to narrow it down.

The next steps were to figure out how to translate this to film – I wanted to push boundaries and stay away from documentary style or a narrative plot. With experimental film, you can push boundaries and express emotions through avenues that are not commonly explored in mainstream media. I divided the religions into their own “chapters” and decided that each “chapter” would utilize a different film technique (sound, movement, color, ect...). Instead of using symbols that were clearly religious, I wanted to invent ones like fragmented editing, molded light, colored smoke, human movement, and other techniques to push a viewer to see religion when it is not blatantly stated. Instead of telling people what women experience with Salvation, I chose to explore and embody it, and not necessarily answer it.

This thesis discusses two components: the religious background of the four religions as well as a brief analysis of experimental film. The religious backgrounds of each religion are discussed both in a historical context, the way salvation is viewed in liturgy and in practice, and how these religious ideologies apply to women. My film focuses on females and their experience with the concept of Salvation, thus clear sexual themes are present. The analysis of film theory showcases the different techniques used to achieve the imagery in each section and the influences that helped this imagery manifest itself.

## CHAPTER I

### WHAT THE H#! IS SALVATION?

Religion is woven deep into the fabric of people's lives. It is a foundation that shape's peoples moral compasses and allows their religious beliefs to transcend their everyday lives. It defines who they are, what they want to be, and ways to achieve these goals, all within a religious framework that ultimately guides a person's choices. As Martin Riesebrodt of the University of Chicago history of religions program notes in his important study on the concept of Salvation, "Like other social phenomenon, religion cannot be satisfactorily explained without its meaning being understood... This specific meaning lies in its relation to personal or impersonal superhuman powers, that is, to powers that control or influence what escapes human control."<sup>1</sup> These superhuman powers affect simple things such as marriage, careers, and politics and all of these are affected by a person's religious foundation. A more daunting question is what will happen after they die? Will they go to heaven or hell? The afterlife has been an important component in religious communities and guides people's creed, code and cultus. "Religion is a complex of meaningful practices—that is, of actions—that are situated in a relatively systematic web of meaning."<sup>2</sup> Finding meaning in one's own life is a complicated task when situated under the constraints of certain religious practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 71.

<sup>2</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 72.

While not all religions share the same perspective on the afterlife, they do share the same fundamental belief that *something* happens after somebody dies. Whether that *something* is the entrance to heaven or hell or reaching spiritual enlightenment, most religions of Semitic origin hold similar attitudes about what happens once we leave the physical world, though religions of Indian origin hold to different views – some, like Theravada Buddhism, do not even promote the notion of heaven like in the West.

This paper complements the film I shot for my CMC creative thesis project. It is intended to be a supplement and give those with or without a religious background some limited insights into what the film is attempting to convey. It should also act as a guide that gives a historical and scriptural background to some of the ideas expressed in the film.

This paper and film focus on the theme of women and salvation in four religions: Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. In each film segment, I render my own artistic interpretation of salvation in each of these traditions. What sets them apart is how they understand salvation (or its equivalent), how one obtains or reaches it, and the role of god(s) and/or the ultimate realities that guide them in the process. In this film, this distinction is displayed through the religious liturgies each religion employs. As one scholar wrote, “all religious liturgies contain promises regarding what religions are capable of doing”<sup>3</sup> and one capability people take notice of is the capability to ensure a peaceful departure from the physical world to the spiritual world. People practice religious liturgies in hopes of having a successful relationship with a god or divine spirit.

A.S. Woodburne notes in his article on “The Idea of God in Hinduism, “The idea of God

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<sup>3</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 72.

is the pivotal doctrine in any religion.”<sup>4</sup> Whether through prayer or attending religious services, “all religions contain a complex repertoire of practices in which the meaning of religion, beyond subjective idiosyncrasies or theological speculation, is liturgically inscribed, whether transmitted orally or in writing.”<sup>5</sup> People seek to perform these practices because they provide answers when answers are not known. As Martin Riesebrodt wrote, “all these practices relate to superhuman powers, which are believed to have influence on those dimensions of human life that escape direct human control.”<sup>6</sup> While these practices may vary between religions, many seek to understand the dimensions of salvation.

### **Salvation in Judaism**

The Abrahamic Faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, share similar language when referring to the concept of salvation. The parallels exist but are framed differently, “even when heavenly salvation is not described with much precision, there is usually no lack of detailed and often crude descriptions and pictorial representations of the suffering in hell that awaits those who fail to subject themselves to supernatural powers.”<sup>7</sup> For the Abrahamic Faiths, the “supernatural powers” are granted to God (Yahweh, Allah), one singular divine being, making it a monocratic system. Thus, salvation depends entirely on God and the lives of followers are defined by the power God has. “All forms of religious practices . . . consist of cultivating this relation to power, and the way the

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<sup>4</sup> Woodburne, A.S. "The Idea Of God In Hinduism." *The Journal of Religion* 5, no. 1 (1925): 52.

<sup>5</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 93.

<sup>6</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 94-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship is imagined may be influenced by familial and political structures of power that have been actually experience or merely desired.”<sup>8</sup>

In Judaism, the illustration of salvation is collective and is obtained through people’s actions towards Yahweh. The historical context of Judaism, and the other Abrahamic faiths, plays an important role in the religious practices of Jews and thus their understanding of Salvation. As the shift from polytheism to monotheism became solidified in Ancient times, the Jewish People were instructed to worship only Yahweh and his 613 commandments listed in the Torah. The “Chosen People” were also given a collective identity through the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenant. God promised Abraham that he will be the father of a great Nation and have long lineage while he promised David that the Israelites will be the Chosen People and that the Messiah will come from David’s line. This showcases the important role of the patriarchs in the Jewish faith: “Abraham has a personal relationship with a God who makes promises to him and protects him...The protection of this God follows the patriarchs wherever they go”<sup>9</sup>. This is also important because the role of the patriarchs demonstrates the role of gender when Jewish history is contextualized. However, the collective attitude shifted people’s perspectives from reaching salvation individually to reaching salvation collectively, despite the clear gender binary, which has only been a topic with the rise of feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The shift has unified the Jewish community and also differentiated them from the other two Abrahamic faiths, though there are religious family resemblences.

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<sup>8</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 96.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, Thomas Patrick. *The Major Religions: An Introduction With Texts*. 2. ed. Malden, MA [u.a.: Blackwell, 2004. Page 46.

In Judaism, there are three factors that are foundational to a person's relationship with Yahweh: *teshuva*, the act of repentance, *tzedakah/mitzvot*, good deeds resulting from repentance, and *kavanah/tefilah*, living a life of devotion. The Book of Exodus is key in understanding the way Yahweh's word became authoritative. "There are two major themes in the story of the exodus: the revelation of YHWH and the liberation from slavery."<sup>10</sup> Moses was able to free the Israelites from Pharaoh's reign with Yahweh's help and when Moses parts the Red Sea, saving the Israelites and destroying Pharaoh, it is the moment that the Israelites put their trust in Moses and Yahweh as their leaders: "And Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever'" (Exodus 14:13).<sup>11</sup> Once Moses liberated the Israelites from Pharaoh's reign, they wandered towards the Promise Land, but became irritable about this nameless God who took them into the desert to die. In an act of defiance against Moses, the Israelites melted gold to create a false idol of a calf, which caused Yahweh to be upset. Moses had to remind the Israelites of the importance of obeying Yahweh and the consequences of disobeying Yahweh's direction: "If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God" (Deut. 28:1-2).<sup>12</sup> The consequences of Yahweh are described in the following verses: "However, if you do not

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<sup>10</sup> Burke, Thomas Patrick. *The Major Religions: An Introduction With Texts*. 2. ed. Malden, MA [u.a.: Blackwell, 2004. Page 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Holy Bible: The New King James Version, Containing the Old and New Testament*. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1982. Print.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you” (Deut. 28:15).<sup>13</sup>

The rest of Deuteronomy 28 explains that disobeying Yahweh will bring bondage amongst the nation and immense suffering, even though they are the chosen People. After the revelation of Yahweh is determined, it is made clear that the Israelites must obey Yahweh and his word in order to reach salvation and eventually reach the Promised Land through action and faith.

Recognizing Yahweh is not enough; one must also take part in rituals according to Yahweh’s word--the Torah. Atoning for one’s sins is a huge component to salvation and Jews are able to do this during Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement in which Jew’s take part in repentance, prayer, and the merits of the Patriarchs. Alongside Yom Kippur is Passover, a celebration which commemorates the story of Exodus and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. Jews are expected to partake in these celebrations as part of their pathway to salvation as well as pray to Yahweh to ensure they follow Yahweh’s commandments. While some rituals have become a thing of the past, Jewish communities in contemporary America still continue many traditions as their way of repenting and showing their devotion to Yahweh. On the Judgment Day, a devout Jew will reach salvation if he has followed Yahweh’s commands while those who sin and disobey will not. This is an example of how people’s actions are the basis for obtaining salvation in Judaism.

### **Salvation in Islam**

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



In Islam, Salvation is obtained through action and faith, which is displayed through adherence to the Five Pillars of Faith. The Five Pillars of Faith are *Shahadah*, *Salah* (also known as *Salat*), *Zakat*, *Sawm* and *Hajj*. They are a mixture between action and faith, which distinguishes Islam from both Christianity and Judaism. *Shahadah* is the profession of faith and, arguably, the most important pillar:

Allah—there is no deity except Him, the Ever-living, the Sustainer of existence/He has sent down upon you, [O, Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel/ Before, as guidance for the people. And He revealed the Qur'an. Indeed, those who disbelieve in the verses of Allah will have a severe punishment, and Allah is exalted in Might, the Owner of Retribution. (Surah 3:2-4)<sup>14</sup>

In Islam, people are born without sin but to continue this state, they must worship in order to live a righteous life. Another important pillar is *salah*, or prayer. Muslims are instructed to pray five times a day, facing Mecca, as a sign of their devotion to Allah and as a time to speak to Allah intimately. *Zakat*, another pillar, is almsgiving and having a social responsibility to unite the Muslim community and help keep the community prosperous and in good faith: “And establish prayer and give zakat, and whatever good you put forward for yourselves—you will find it with Allah. Indeed, Allah of what you do, is Seeing” (Q 2:110).<sup>15</sup> *Salah* and *Zakat* are examples of actions that help Muslims achieve salvation. The other pillars, *Sawm* and *Hajj*, are also important in that they are also actions. *Sawm* is fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and is an example of self-discipline and awareness of suffering. The *Hajj* is one of the most known pillars because it is the pilgrimage to Mecca every able-bodied Muslim is expected to make

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<sup>14</sup> Khalidi, Tarif. *The Qur'an*. Deluxe ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

during their life. The pilgrimage is a tribute to Muhammad, the true messenger of God, as he returned to Mecca from Medina. The Hajj is important because Muslims follow the same path Muhammad took following his persecution.

The five pillars demonstrate collaboration between action and faith. If a Muslim does indeed sin, repentance is the answer and asking for forgiveness from Allah is what they are expected to do: “But if one fears from the bequeather [some] error or sin and corrects that which is between them, there is no sin upon him. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” (Q 2:182).<sup>16</sup> Allah is forgiving and so repenting of one’s sins is a way in which they will reach salvation if a Muslim has followed Muhammad and Allah’s commands.

Within the religious calendars of the Abrahamic faiths, the emphasis on Salvation is inevitable to forget. “The calendrical practices of Abrahamic religions essentially dramatizes their respective salvation histories, sometimes with embellishments and expansions.”<sup>17</sup> The religious liturgies are filled with stories that teach followers that their actions affect their salvation, whether individually or collectively as a religious community. When examining the religious texts, “liturgy shows what this god can do, how one can gain access to him, and how one must approach him. It defines the meaning of salvation and how one can achieve it... at the same time, it opens up areas in which one can individually request the granting of everyday salvation goods, protection from disaster, or help in overcoming misfortune.”<sup>18</sup> There is no question about *who* grants salvation in religions of Semitic origin. The question is rather *how* one can build a

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 100.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship with God based on their good merits in order to be granted or achieve salvation. “In liturgy, believers call upon God, pray to him, and humble themselves before him through gestures of submission. . . . The religious calendar structures human life as a relationship to God and to salvation history.”<sup>19</sup> The calendars for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam provide holidays and special observance days that help build a relationship with God and ensure that a person’s devotion is acknowledged. While some holidays are “devoted to the commemoration of God’s gift of salvation and serve to renew and strengthen it”<sup>20</sup>, others focus on “periods of penance and fasting”<sup>21</sup> or “specific expressions of gratitude and intercessions.”<sup>22</sup> Examples within Judaism are Passover, Shavuot, Purim, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and Hanukkah and each holiday serves a specific purpose within religious practice. Passover celebrates the freeing of the Jews from slavery and Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, and it is clear that “all these holidays, then, are related to salvation history.”<sup>23</sup> While Jews may struggle internally with their own individual salvation, Judaism exhibits a collective identity so “in the context of Jewish holidays, salvation means essentially saving the entire people from repression and destruction; misfortune means the threat of this fate.”<sup>24</sup>

While Judaism employs a religious calendar that is applicable to Jews from different denominations, Islam’s religious calendar structure varies between Sunnis and Shiites. Regardless, the calendar “has six major holidays pertaining to God’s intervention

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 101.

<sup>21</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

and revelation as well as to humans' duties with regard to God."<sup>25</sup> Muslims celebrate the New Year on January 1<sup>st</sup> (1 Muharram on the Islamic calendar) to commemorate Muhammad's departure from Mecca into Medina in 622 CE, which is when Islam "officially" became an organized religion. Ramadan, which takes place in September, includes fasting to show penance to Allah and ties in with the celebration of Muhammad's birth. "In Islam, salvation lies in Allah's revelation to Muhammad as the seal of the prophet and obedience to God's commands, while misfortune consists of the impending judgment of God."<sup>26</sup> Islam affirms the idea that salvation lies in God's hands and that the only way to ensure salvation is to follow the religious practices stated in the religious liturgies. "Whether in a synagogue, a church, or a mosque, in the worship of all Abrahamic religions, praising God and emphasizing his sovereignty, submission (in very different degrees) to his majesty and will, and prayers to thankfulness and supplication are central,"<sup>27</sup> which is one way East Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism differ from the Abrahamic faiths. Yet it is important to consider how the concept of salvation described in Islam and Judaism apply to women.

In Buddhism, the term "salvation" does not correctly explain what the Buddhist views on the afterlife are. Essentially, Salvation in the Abrahamic faiths is the equivalent to Nirvana in the Buddhist tradition. It is also important to note that for the sake of this paper, the focus is on Theravada Buddhism, which has its own unique perspective and is a more widely known form of Buddhism. While Judaism has the Torah and Islam has the

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<sup>25</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 100.

Qur'an, Buddhist scripture is in the Tripitaka, three "baskets," which contain a collection of writings from the Buddha. Each has its own purpose and together they form the doctrines by which Buddhist much live. The first basket is the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the Disciple Basket). The purpose of these writings is to give rules and regulations for the community. *Sutra Pitak* (the Discourse Basket) contains Buddha's teachings on doctrine and behavior, which includes meditation and reflection. The third basket is the *Abhidharma Pitaka* (the Higher Knowledge/Special Teachings Basket), which includes philosophy, psychology, stories of Buddha and his past lives, songs, poetry, and most importantly, the *Dhammapada*. The *Dhammapada* are the actual sayings of Buddha and his discussions of the Buddhist doctrines, and arguably the most important pieces of writing in Buddhism.

When Buddha proclaimed the four noble truths at Benares, "Buddha announced that the highest complete enlightenment (Nirvana) cannot be achieved unless one has a "well purified" insight into, and knowledge of the four noble truths."<sup>28</sup> If Buddhists follow the teachings of Buddha then they will reach Nirvana, which is neither a place nor state but a undefinable space where spiritual enlightenment is reached. Ignorance, rather than sin, is the obstacle to Nirvana and this means removing all of your "self" and the removal from constant suffering. "Forbearance which is long-suffering is the highest austerity. The Buddhas declare nirvana to be the supreme state..." (Dhammapada v. 184).<sup>29</sup> Nirvana is the nearest equivalent to a Buddhist concept of salvation essentially because Nirvana is a supreme state in which an individual is no longer in suffering.

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<sup>28</sup> Orrú, Marco, and Amy Wang. "Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (1992): 47-61. [www.jstor.org/stable/1286831](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1286831) (accessed April 28, 2013). Page 55.

<sup>29</sup> Roebuck, Valerie J. *The Dhammapada*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.

Nirvana is enlightenment and a person can only reach this individually: “By self alone is evil done; by self alone is one defiled; by self alone is evil done; by self alone is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another” (Dhammapada v. 165).<sup>30</sup> To end suffering is to reach Nirvana and this is done by removing all egocentricity. Nirvana is not a place or state but it is an end of rebirth, the extinguishing of karma, which makes up a person’s true self. “For those who have not achieved Nirvana, [the] four truths are incomprehensible: They are philosophical statements about suffering in this world, and how to eliminate such suffering, but they cannot be fully understood unless enlightenment is achieved.”<sup>31</sup> To reach nirvana one must enter “the path”, which in other religions would be the same as following the doctrines and professing devotion to a religion: “Having entered upon the path you will come to an end of your suffering. Having myself recognized this, I proclaimed this path which removes all thorns” (Dhammapada v. 275).<sup>32</sup> Nirvana is thus obtained through works and faith in Buddhism by ridding one’s self of karma and allowing one’s true self to come to fruition.

### **Salvation in Hinduism**

Hinduism has four distinct goals that are the foundation to Hindu beliefs:

*Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama*, and *Moksha*. *Dharma* is used to describe a Hindu’s duty to ensure he or she lives righteously. *Artha* represents wealth and prosperity in which material goods are thought to help a person live righteously by warding evil off. *Kama* is desire

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Orrú, Marco, and Amy Wang. "Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (1992): 47-61. [www.jstor.org/stable/1286831](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1286831) (accessed April 28, 2013). Page 55.

<sup>32</sup> Orrú, Marco, and Amy Wang. "Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (1992): 47-61. [www.jstor.org/stable/1286831](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1286831) (accessed April 28, 2013). Page 55.

and the encouragement for Hindu's to enjoy their physical desires and bodily pleasures. *Moksha* is liberation, a kind of salvation, in which Hindu's leave the physical world behind and go through cycles of birth and rebirth.

Hindu's also have four stages of life, which help a person develop mentally and physically. The first is being a student: "During this stage of life our primary responsibility is that of acquiring all the knowledge that previous generations have accumulated."<sup>33</sup> The second stage focuses on the entrance into adulthood and "this is, incidentally, the moral stage of life in that one's life is primarily structured by many responsibilities imposed upon us by religious and social expectations."<sup>34</sup>

People are expected to pursue different goals and pleasures in life such as marriage and wealth while the third stage is the entrance into old age and the departure from these goals and pleasures. "This should be a stage filled with prayer, meditation, introspection, and the reading of religious literature. The purpose is to move our attention behind the world's façade and to obtain union with the universal spirit that permeates the cosmos in its every detail."<sup>35</sup> It is after this stage, in the fourth stage, that full spiritual development is reached and "individuals in this stage are sufficiently proficient in meditation that they have been afforded direct, experiential awareness that the true self is neither physical nor mental, but spiritual."<sup>36</sup> This enlightenment is similar to – though not the same as – the Western notion of salvation, but the stages are in one cycle that Hindus believe will continue on until they are liberated. *Samsara* is "universal manifestation," which describes this constant cycle of death, birth and rebirth. "Life, death and rebirth

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<sup>33</sup> Fuller, Robert C.. *Religion and the Life Cycle*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. Print. Page 84-5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Fuller, Robert C. *Religion and the Life Cycle*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. Print. Page 86.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

are inevitable” (Rig Veda).<sup>37</sup> Hindus continue to reincarnate and rebirth until they are released and liberated. Within Hinduism are the sacred texts, the four *Vedas*, which describe this cycle of *Samsara*: the *Samhitas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas*, and the *Upanishads*. The *Samhitas* are hymns and mantras, the *Brahmanas* are rituals and prayers, the *Aranyaka*’s contain philosophical thoughts, and the *Upanishads* is the conclusion of the four *Vedas*. Worship does not center around one divine being but rather taking traits from divine beings within the Hindu faith and attributing them to oneself: “In real worship, we just not do ritualistic worship but we try to imbibe the qualities of the one we are worshipping.” (Rig Veda)<sup>38</sup> This absorption of divine qualities is one way of performing “*karma*.” The idea of *karma* is a main component in Hinduism. “One should performed karma for the benefit of humanity with an unbiased approach because bias gives birth to evil, which creates thousands of obstacles in our path.” (Rig Veda)<sup>39</sup> It resembles the “Golden Rule” of treat others the way you want to be treated and in Hinduism, you cannot escape constant birth and rebirth if you do not perform good deeds/*karma*. Liberation is only achievable through positive *karma*: “One can emancipate himself only by treading on the path of truth” (Rig Veda).<sup>40</sup> This “path of truth” seems like a limitless experience compared the other religions because “the Hindu criticism of the Christian and Islamic doctrines of god is precisely from this viewpoint, that the Hindu is convinced that Christian and Muslim attempts are limiting God, are making of him something finite and smaller than he is, that they display a lack of appreciation of the

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<sup>37</sup> Doniger, Wendy. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology: One Hundred and Eight Hymns*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Doniger, Wendy. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology: One Hundred and Eight Hymns*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



most elementary principle of the Deity—his indescribability.”<sup>41</sup> Obtaining salvation in Hinduism is a more limitless experience than other religions, but it still adheres to the idea of reaching an eternal state of peace. However, like Buddhism, obtaining salvation can be trivial for women within Hinduism, a religion with patriarchal structure as well.

Buddhism and Hinduism, along with other East Asian religions, are structured by their religious calendars as well, yet they differ from the Abrahamic faiths through their lack of one single supreme god. While Buddhism and Hinduism share some understandings, their coexistence does not mean a shared view of religious practices. Some Buddhists in East Asia tend to follow the Chinese calendar, which is a combination of the solar and lunar calendar. Astrology is a large component to the religion through the use of the Summer and Winter solstice and the Spring and Fall equinox. Another important difference is that the festivals on the religious calendar are encouraged but not strictly enforced. Festivals take place both in public and in private because salvation is an individual experience. Also religious liturgies, while they play a role in a religious follower’s life, are not as emphasized as they are in Judaism and Islam. Religious chants may be used and most Buddhists have altars in their homes dedicated to ancestors, good fortune, and many other ideas in which reciting sacred chants is evident but not central. Most festivals surround ancestors or praying for the dead: “people ask for deliverance from punishment in hell, for the forgiveness of sins, and to be spared suffering. Finally, they strive for a privileged rebirth, in the form of reincarnation in a prosperous family or

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<sup>41</sup> Woodburne, A. S.. "The Idea Of God In Hinduism." *The Journal of Religion* 5, no. 1 (1925): 52. Page 60.

in the Buddhist or Daoist heaven.”<sup>42</sup> The idea is that in one’s life in the physical world, “anyone who cultivates true friendship is promised the hospitality, honor, victory over enemies, high social standing, fame, wealth, invincibility, and protection”<sup>43</sup> and that salvation is contingent on living a life fully.

Hindu’s have structured their lives within the four stages and in each stage a person is given certain goals to achieve (like marriage). While the stages each employ specific goals, they all contain the same universal idea: “If one understands what a people thinks about God, he will be able to formulate a pretty clear conception of their thoughts about man, evil, salvation, and the future life.”<sup>44</sup> Living life fully, and not in submission, is encouraged more than devoting one’s life to festivals or reading scripture and leaving the power of one’s enlightenment to a single god, though aspects of some of these are carried out to cultivate one’s spirituality. It is in the fourth stage that a person is liberated, “this is the stage that Hindu scriptures describe as living wholly ‘identified with the eternal Self and beholding nothing else,’”<sup>45</sup> and this represents the break from the ordinary physical and mental world into the realm of spiritual enlightenment. While Buddhism and Hinduism each have their own unique view of spiritual enlightenment, or salvation, they both focus on similar ideas of non-submissions and individual control. Salvation is met through living life both in light of religious liturgy standards but also in light of one’s own spiritual nature and understanding the world around them in terms of spiritual development.

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<sup>42</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 104.

<sup>43</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 118.

<sup>44</sup> Woodburne, A.S. "The Idea Of God In Hinduism." *The Journal of Religion* 5, no. 1 (1925): 52. Page 52.

<sup>45</sup> Fuller, Robert C. *Religion and the Life Cycle*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. Print. Page 86.

## Women and Salvation

All four religions offer a different way to achieve salvation and define salvation, but roughly share in common the universal idea of what salvation offers: a state of peace and enlightenment after death. “Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, . . . and Islam have all had followers who insist that our “highest” identity is not in the physical world but rather in a spiritual world or dimension that is found by turning one’s identity inward toward nonphysical dimensions of life.”<sup>46</sup> In conjunction with these religious ideas, the film analyzes these four different interpretations of salvation and attempts to explore the female perspective in particular. Reaching salvation is one thing but when questions of gender enter, reaching salvation in certain religions can be much more difficult to understand. Judaism is a religion that relies on gendered language in the religious liturgies. For instance, certain religious practices that define a person’s relationship with God have been assigned only to males and not to females. In Judaism, “children are inducted into the community through a religious ceremony,”<sup>47</sup> which for males is circumcision. There is no parallel circumcision for females. Thus, females within Judaism can feel a barrier in their relationship with God because they are not allowed to partake in certain religious practices. Another example is when boys turn thirteen they celebrate their entrance into manhood with a Bar Mitzvah. “In the twentieth century, a similar ceremony for girls, known as a Bat Mitzvah, was developed, but is not universally

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<sup>46</sup> Fuller, Robert C. *Religion and the Life Cycle*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. Print. Page 81.

<sup>47</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 109.

accepted,<sup>48</sup> thus still promoting a gendered religion, which can cause females to question the legitimacy of their relationship with God.

Islam contains gendered religious practices that vary culturally but religious worship is separated by gender. Women are typically moved to a separate area of a Mosque during daily prayers, instructed to cover their entire body, and are expected to pray differently due to their natural body shape. While covering one's body can be attributed to modesty, the limitations on the actual act of praying can cause women to feel subordinate in their relationship to Allah. For example, when reciting *Takbeer Tarehman* (a recitation during *Salat*), women are not allowed to raise their hands above their shoulders, while men are instructed to raise their hands up to their ears. It is simple rules like this that restrict women. This creates a different spiritual experience for women than for men. A large theme in the Islam section of the film is the exposing of the body but in a modest-like way.

While the Buddhist and Hindu liturgies do not use strictly gendered language, both religions are influenced heavily by cultural ideologies that gender becomes an issue. For Buddhists, the bearing that cultural practices have on religious practices has become an issue for women, especially in Japan and China. Kawahashi Noriko's study "Feminist Buddhist in Praxis: Women in Traditional Buddhism", Noriko describes how "The problem of gender discrimination in Buddhism has either been appropriated by certain scholars, or it has been narrated by male members of the Buddhist orders in ways that

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<sup>48</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 109.

estrangle women from their own experience of it.”<sup>49</sup> These limitations have formed due to the discrimination women receive within Japanese and Chinese culture, stemming from the expectations that women fulfill traditional gender roles. Even women who are married to Priests are subjected to this subordination: “Wives of priests are assigned roles as mothers that emphasize their bearing and rearing of male children to inherit the fathers’ temples, and they are exhorted to devote their entire body and mind to those task as the exalted work of a bodhisattva”<sup>50</sup>. It is interesting to note that all these religions focus on the woman’s body, not the woman’s mind, thus creating restrictions on their religious experiences. While women are still a part of the religious community, aAlmost all Buddhist temples today are kept going by the labor of women who are allowed neither an institutional nor a doctrinal raison d’être”<sup>51</sup>. The influence of cultural gender expectations translates into religious practices thus excluding women from the same religious experience as men.

While the gendered language of certain religions may be accepted by women in that particular faith, my film does not try to negatively criticize the women in those religious communities, but rather seeks to explore an alternative perspective that some women may have and it does not seek in any way to disrespect the women who follow these religious practices.

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<sup>49</sup> Noriko, Kawahashi. "Feminist Buddhism as Praxis: Women in Traditional Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (2003): 291-313. [www.jstore.org/stable/30234052](http://www.jstore.org/stable/30234052) (accessed April 27, 2013). Page 292.

<sup>50</sup> Noriko, Kawahashi. "Feminist Buddhism as Praxis: Women in Traditional Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (2003): 291-313. [www.jstore.org/stable/30234052](http://www.jstore.org/stable/30234052) (accessed April 27, 2013). Page 293.

<sup>51</sup> Noriko, Kawahashi. "Feminist Buddhism as Praxis: Women in Traditional Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (2003): 291-313. [www.jstore.org/stable/30234052](http://www.jstore.org/stable/30234052) (accessed April 27, 2013). Page 295.

Religion is a social phenomenon rooted in historical liturgies that vary in interpretation. Some religions focus on collective salvation and some don't even use the word salvation, rather spiritual enlightenment, but either way, religion offers answers to what humans cannot comprehend. "The functional concept of religion is usually concerned with latent functions, that is, with effects that are objective but usually unconscious."<sup>52</sup> While people believe in different salvations, the concept of salvation is evident in most religious or spiritual people's lives and thus the exploration of it, though it can never truly be answered, is as fascinating as the beliefs people carry. Riesebrodt argues, "Religion is a necessary condition for society or the self and has a necessary function in maintaining them."<sup>53</sup> This film attempts to convey an artistic representation of salvation and the affects it has on women in certain religious communities. I attempt to artistically explore and visualize this concept and hope I do it some measure of justice.

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<sup>52</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 72-3.

<sup>53</sup> Riesebrodt, Martin. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. Page 74.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT THE F\*#@# IS EXPERIMENTAL FILM?

Defining what experimental or avant-garde film exactly *is* could not be a more difficult task; it is what it *is not* that truly defines how experimental art and avant-garde films came to be. Its trajectory, historically, is convoluted, “aside from its important if often unacknowledged influence on mainstream film and television, the avant-garde cinema itself has only surfaced to wider view at particular moments in its history.”<sup>1</sup> There is no particular decade that aligns itself with the experimental art movement but it is more of a unique mindset of certain creative souls that have, over time, kept this genre going. It is an assembly of different countries, cultures, techniques, and ideologies that have banded together to collectively reject the mainstream. It manifested itself from several artistic movements in which the area of film and video became the main focus. Experimental cinema would be nothing without experimental art but the word “experimental” doesn’t even begin to give this genre justice. In A.L. Rees’s study on the history of experimental film, he notes that “significantly, the avant-garde has traded under many other names: experimental, absolute, pure, non-narrative, underground, expanded, abstract; none of them satisfactory or generally accepted.”<sup>2</sup> While it may just seem like synonyms for the word ‘weird’, to understand what this type of art and cinema is forces a person to understand what art is as a medium and what cinema is as a medium.

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<sup>1</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 2.

Once someone achieves this understanding, it is necessary to understand what is rejected in these mediums and most likely, that understanding is a working definition of what “experimental cinema” *is*.

While the genre itself is complicated – if it can even be called a genre – it can be easy identifying abstract cinema when watching it. It usually is the opposite of what people would see in a theater today, the “mainstream”, and usually there is some type of shock factor, whether it be in the imagery, audio, duration of clips, or the allegories presented within the frames. “Shock is an idea in art as much as a sensation, to denote the act of stopping viewers in their tracks, however briefly.”<sup>3</sup> Fred Camper, an experimental video artist based in Chicago, breaks the genre down into six simple, yet deeply complicated, rules. This essay will showcase these six points and discuss how they influence the structure of my film, explaining why avant-garde film and spirituality are inextricable, and how the film medium permits the exploration of concepts by creating a space to identify these concepts with a new, and different, lens. I’ll talk about each by starting off with a key concept and quote and then discuss how I applied this principle in my film.

1. It is “created by one person...working on a miniscule budget...and made out of personal passion.”<sup>4</sup> Contrasted to the big budget Hollywood films, experimental films are low budget and usually are not created to yield financial success. Rather they are personal experimentations with the film medium or other artistic movements. “The earlier and socially tinged avant-garde idea was reborn in the radical aspirations of artistic

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<sup>3</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 4.

<sup>4</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.



movements (notably surrealism and constructivism) during the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>5</sup> Essentially, avant-garde cinema came from avant-garde art at the turn of the century in Europe. Surrealism, Constructivism, Dadaism, and Cubism are seen as primarily two-dimensional art movements but through the endeavors of certain artists, these art movements were translated into the film medium. Artists began looking to animate their paintings, bring them to a new level that couldn’t be reached on canvas. As A.L. Rees notes, “like [Viktor] Eggeling’s work the abstract films of [Gerhard] Richter, [Walter] Ruttmann and [Oskar] Fischinger were based on the concept of painting with motion.”<sup>6</sup> “New theories of time and perception, as well as the popularity of cinema, led artists to try to put ‘paintings in motion through the film medium.’”<sup>7</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet who was active in France at the turn of the century,<sup>8</sup> spoke about how painters turned to animation in his journal *Les Soirées de Paris*, and “extolled the planned (but not shot) film *Le Thythme colore* (*Color Rhythms*, 1912-4), an abstract work by the painter Leopold Survage.”<sup>9</sup> This was the first step for painters like Survage, who went from two dimensional to three dimensional works and to give creations a new depth that only the film medium could achieve. Paintings rooted in the Cubist or Surrealist movement began to be the “intellectual and artistic core of the modern [experimental] movement.”<sup>10</sup> The manipulation of film, especially hand-painted film, began to be more synonymous with

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<sup>5</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 19.

<sup>6</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 37.

<sup>7</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 20.

<sup>8</sup> "Guillaume Apollinaire." *Poets.org*. The Academy of American Poets, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.poets.org/gapol/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 20.

<sup>10</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 23.

the movement, most notably Len Lye's *Colour Box* (1935), in which Lye actually hand paint the images onto the film strips to create a film. Artists began to manipulate filmstrips more and more. For example, Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) is one the most well-known experimental works and it is simply dead moths pressed between filmstrips.

Both Lye and Brakhage's personal passions are influences in two sections of my film: Buddhism and Judaism. For the Judaism section, the use of color imagery to evoke emotion from a viewer comes directly from *Colour Box* and the idea of sandwiching images together in the Buddhism section are directly influenced from *Mothlight*. For Judaism, the dynamics of black and white imagery creates a solemn tone for the chapter, encouraging a viewer to think more in depth about what is on the screen. The lack of religious symbols causes a viewer to search for religious symbols yet the light fragments bare none. This showcases how avant-garde film allows these cinematic experiences in which the viewer's interpretation of the imagery gives the imagery meaning. This is also exhibited in the Buddhism section through the use of superimposing images on top of one another. The rapid cuts motivate an audience to make sense of the different layers of the image but with limited time. These techniques make the viewing experience both an individual, as well as a collective, adventure.

Experimental cinema is not only an individual practice but a collaboration amongst artists: 2. "It eschews the production-line model by which the various functions of filmmaker are divided among different individuals and groups."<sup>11</sup> During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cubists and Surrealists in Europe worked primarily individually, but as

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<sup>11</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.

experimental art began to move west towards the UK and the US, art became a way for people to unite on a creative front. As people turning to cinema, films became the passions of several people striving to breakdown the constraints many art movements, like Surrealism and Cubism, were demanding of artists. As mainstream Studio productions became more popular during the turn of the century, artists found themselves being “noticeably anti-Hollywood in form, style, and production”<sup>12</sup> and this included removing the hierarchy and traditional production-line model that Hollywood and studio productions employed. Artists were taking on multiple roles in a production such as director/editor/costume designer/key grip and films became collaborations amongst many people. Often groups of filmmakers create works that are constructed individually but are connected via formal considerations. For example, Felix Radax, Peter Kubelka, and Arnulf Rainer experimented with “formal and mathematical systems [which] drew on the spartan music of Weber and the pre-war Vienna School, as in Kubelka’s sound and kinetic montage *Mosaik in Vertrauen (Mosaic in Confidence, 1954-5)*.”<sup>13</sup> Kubelka, a name synonymous with the avant-garde, also collaborated with Tony Conrad, an experimental filmmaker known for his film *Flicker (1966)*, which played with the dynamics of light, in which they “reduced film to its primary elements of light, dark, sound and silence.”<sup>14</sup> These films were done in contrast to studio movies that had a specific director or editor because describing to an editor what the vision for Conrad’s film *Flicker* would be almost impossible. Filmmakers wanted, and had, to take on all roles to ensure their visions were properly constructed and appropriately edited.

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<sup>12</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 40.

<sup>13</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 63.

<sup>14</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 65.

This structure of production applies to the entire production of my thesis film. From the actors to my crew, while I was given the title of “director,” I allowed the actors to improvise and I would adjust the camera appropriately. I worked with the surroundings and the actors to ensure the movement was organic instead of forced and awkward. When the make-up artist, Sara Olson, decided to paint one of the actresses, Mehar Harika, in the Hinduism section, I gave her no direction at all except what type of imagery I was looking for. Experimental film is not just defined by what is shown on the screen but also in the production; things should flow naturally and organically. A genuine collaboration amongst artists begins in pre-production and in production, and a film manifests itself fully in post-production. Linear plot lines are easier to shoot, in theory, because a director knows what shot comes next in the progression of the story. Experimental film opposes this idea and instead linear plot lines become circular and repetitive, giving the filmmaker more freedom with what shots are needed.

3. “It does not try to offer a linear story that unfolds in the theatrical space of mainstream narrative.”<sup>15</sup> Hollywood cinema is defined by the story, the narrative, that is both linear and which unfolds in a typical story structure (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution). Experimental cinema does not do this. Instead, plot lines are circular or repetitive, which push viewers to not only pay attention, but interpret the works on their own. My film is non-linear and will allow several interpretations of each section, and so it will foster a community of ideas that are all equally valid. Stan Brakhage can be considered the master of abstract editing, utilizing innovative techniques that are both visually stimulating and intellectually rigorous because Brakhage’s

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<sup>15</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.

“typically abrupt editing style is used to elicit quasi-symbolist metaphor.”<sup>16</sup> This gives films multiple dimensions, several meanings, which make experimental films attractive to certain viewers.

Brakhage emphasized “the objective side of his films – their rhythms, metrics, camera-style, subject-matter – [which] make uncompromising demands on the viewer to elicit and construct meaning, thus shifting attention from the author’s voice to the spectator’s eye.”<sup>17</sup> A huge aspect of experimental cinema is the way films are structured and Brakhage, whose non-linear vision, became a model for experimental films in the 1960s. While the artists at the turn of the century focused on innovative techniques surrounding the actual film strip, the 1960s brought a new wave of intellectuals that challenged each other and the plot system that Hollywood and the mainstream defined.

While Brakhage was known for his non-linear films, Andy Warhol, a name synonymous with avant-garde art, was creating his own film structure. “Andy Warhol, who’s brief film-making career also dated from 1963, and whose urban, disengaged and impersonal art, challenged Brakhage’s Romanticism.”<sup>18</sup> Warhol’s use of no editing and simply producing films in one take “opposed current avant-garde styles and avoided personal signature.”<sup>19</sup> Warhol’s inventive use of camera techniques created a new structure for filmmakers, which showcased the possibilities filmmakers have in relation to the film medium. Three out of the four segments [or scene-sequences] in my film use non-linear patterns to convey the subject-matter. Judaism focuses more on the imagery

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<sup>16</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 67.

<sup>17</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 68.

<sup>18</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 69.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

and Hinduism follows a quasi-linear path but the emotions evoked in the section rely primarily on the imagery as well. Buddhism relies on imagery but also on the superimposed imagery that distorts a viewer's eye. Islam, the most "linear" segment in the film, doesn't even qualify as linear since it uses a circular plot line (the film begins and ends with the same shot).

Experimental cinema is known to call attention to film as a medium. Both in the non-linear plot lines and in the manipulation of film strips (hand-painting film), which resulted in filmmakers who created works that had artistic and existential depth. It was not just what was on the screen, but *how* that image was on the screen and how the image was manipulated through the film medium to reach the screen.

4. "It makes conscious use of the materials of cinema in a way that calls attention to the medium."<sup>20</sup> Peter Greenaway, a British filmmaker active from the 1960's to the present, saw the film medium as a collaboration of technologies. "For Greenaway, Cinema is the sum totally of all technologies which work towards articulating the moving image."<sup>21</sup> Greenaway's films utilized different technologies to achieve the visual spectacle he was known for creating. *H Is for House* (1973) is one of Greenaway's most important works and its simplicity allows the complexities of film technologies to shine through. The use of speech over certain images, the distortion of light in certain scenes, the linguistics of the letter "H," and the style of editing all identify the film as

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<sup>20</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 4.

experimental. It could even be said that “film, video, and electronic media are cinematic equations which slide apart even as they draw together.”<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that focusing on the art medium as a collaboration of technologies was pioneered in the underground movement in the United States. “The American underground was broader than the European and less easily defined,”<sup>23</sup> thus filmmakers like Greenaway were able to see new opportunities for avant-garde film rooted in the experimentation of technologies. Warhol’s structural approach to films also brought attention to the film medium by exploring the concept of time on film. “With loop-printing, repetition and blank footage—devices unique to the film medium—Warhol made works of extreme duration.”<sup>24</sup> Usually in mainstream films time is fragmented on screen, for example, the subject matter of a scene could be a couple at dinner. Dinner, in reality, usually takes about an hour but on film the duration of the scene could be 1-2 minutes long. Warhol sought to push viewers out of this comfort zone through “subtly manipulated time, questioning the seeming simplicity of the long-take. *Empire* (1965), filmed in near-darkness, provokes the eye to scan the screen for nuances of change, leading persistent viewers to examine their own experience of viewing the film.”<sup>25</sup> While Warhol was expanding time on screen, Michael Snow, a Canadian filmmaker, was attempting to shorten time through “counter-montage aesthetics in films.”<sup>26</sup> *Wavelength* (1967) is a 45-minute long film that contains slow zooms and panning shots into an apartment. “The zoom is interrupted by colour changes induced by filters and filmstock,

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<sup>22</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 5.

<sup>23</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 64.

<sup>24</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 69.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 73.

and also by some minimal sub-drama (a conversation, a hammed death, a phone call) which the lens literally passes over in a casually anti-narrative gesture.”<sup>27</sup> Rob Gawthrop, along with Warhol and Snow, also explored time structures but also in relation to image collusion. *Distancing* (1979) “pulls focus on a rainy window throwing light and the shapes of objects into flux... Superimposition thickens the texture while dematerializing the image and object. The film is shot from a fixed position but no transcendental or cardinal viewpoint is implied.”<sup>28</sup>

Warhol, Snow, and Gawthrop brought attention to the medium in a way I attempted to as well. In the Buddhism section, the quick nature of the shots and the superimposition of shots make a viewer question time structures. In Islam, the takes are all much longer, creating a different tone for the segment and giving the viewer the idea that it is much longer than three minutes. For Judaism, the experimental animations paired with the long takes of the two actresses give a viewer no sense of time, allowing the tone of the chapter to shine through as both solemn and steady.

An overarching component of experimental cinema is its aversion to the mainstream. 5. “It has an oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics of mass media and the value systems of mainstream culture.”<sup>29</sup> From the beginning of the various transitions in Europe at the turn of the century to the progressive and innovative styles of the 1960s in the United States, experimental film has always contrasted the mainstream. Prior to the exponential growth experimental film in the US in the 1960s, filmmakers in the 1950s were attempting to avoid the classical Hollywood style that

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 93-4.

<sup>29</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.



defined American movies. With the introduction of the Hays Production Code in 1930, the self-imposed code of censorship in the United States, Hollywood films were targeted towards mass audiences with educational purposes. Life in the movies was supposed to represent life in reality. However, the Code banned anything that would seem harmful to society including homosexuality, adultery, violence, drinking, and drugs.<sup>30</sup>

Filmmakers interested in provocative or thought-provoking films were not invited into Hollywood and so the underground movement started. In a post-war era, filmmakers in Europe and the US looked to each other to see what artistic mediums were being used to avoid the mainstream. Filmmakers within the underground in the USA saw Hollywood's "grip and commercialism"<sup>31</sup> negatively and D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Frederick Wiseman, and Shirley Clarke looked to reinvent the cinematic structure. "Pennebaker, Leacock, Wiseman and Clarke reinvented documentary cinema, turning to directly social themes and "non-interventionist" style. They emphasized spontaneity, as did the fiction films of John Cassavetes."<sup>32</sup> Documentary was not a Hollywood genre like it is today. For example, Wiseman's documentaries focused "less on particular individuals than on institutions of various kinds, ranging from those concentrated within individual buildings (*High School*, 1968) to those of international scope (*Sinai Field Mission*, 1978), and from institutions established and maintained by

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<sup>30</sup> Bynum, Matt. "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code)." *Reformation of the Arts and Music - essays, resources, commentary*. N.p., 17 May 2008. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 64.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

government (*Juvenile Court*, 1973) to those less tangible ones organized by principles of ideology and culture (*Model*, 1980).<sup>33</sup>

While documentary cinema used linear plot lines, the subject matter was in opposition to classical Hollywood cinema and thus still, though arguably, can be considered in the realm of experimental cinema. Another film by Wiseman, *Meat* (1976), used documentary style editing but relied on the aesthetics to convey the overall tone of the piece. The film “is composed of many short shots, the duration of the cutting analogous to the repetitive slicing by the butchers,”<sup>34</sup> giving viewers both an exposé on the meat industry but juxtaposed against avant-garde editing styles.

In relation to the Hays Code, many artists found their place in the underground movement due to the subject matter of their films. Wiseman’s *Meat* would have gone against the stipulations of the Production Code for including “obscenities,” but many filmmakers who were focusing on sexually explicit themes also sought out the underground. “The underground’s reputation for sexual explicitness heralded the social revolution of the 1960s”<sup>35</sup> thus declaring how the underground aligned itself with political and social movements occurring simultaneously. Even within the Cubist movement, sexually explicit themes were celebrated but were promoted within the experimental movement, not the mainstream. Even films in the 1920’s sought to comment on sexual liberation such as Marcel Duchamp. “Duchamp cerebrally evoked

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<sup>33</sup> "Observational documentary - Documentary - actor, film, voice, show, producer, music, cinema, news, story." *Film Reference*. Advameg, Inc., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Documentary-OBSERVATIONAL-DOCUMENTARY.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> "Observational documentary - Documentary - actor, film, voice, show, producer, music, cinema, news, story." *Film Reference*. Advameg, Inc., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Documentary-OBSERVATIONAL-DOCUMENTARY.html>>.

<sup>35</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 65.

and subverted the abstract film in his ironically titled *Anemic cinema* (1926), an anti-retinal film in which slowly turning spirals imply sexual motifs. These “pure” images are intercut with words on rotating discs; the letters spell out scabrous and near-indecipherable puns...”<sup>36</sup> Duchamp’s work in the 1920s pioneered a sense of sexual liberation that would translate to the sexual revolution in the 1960s and thus encourage Wiseman to create films such as *Meat* which uses sexual imagery.

My film focuses on females and their experience with the concept of Salvation, thus clear sexual themes are present. In Buddhism, the full frontal nudity that exists is there to remind a viewer that the female is not just the product of the gender binary, but an actual person. Salvation is a concept that is highly personal so I illuminated this with the use of highly personal images, such as full nudity. The use of full frontal nudity is meant to show the viewer the female form and to represent the shedding of bad energy to one’s most basic self. This stylistic approach is more evident in Hollywood films today, however, previous to the 1960s sexual revolution, nudity was seen as a two dimensional piece of art that lacked movement, emotion, and fluidity. During the 1960s, nudity became more acceptable within the underground, which shows its opposition to the mainstream.

6. “It doesn’t offer a clear, univalent “message”...it is fraught with conscious ambiguities, encourages multiple interpretations, and marshals paradoxical and contradictory techniques with subject-matter to create a work that requires the active participation of the viewer.”<sup>37</sup> Mainstream films are narrative based and so the messages they offer to a viewer were not subversive like the messages in the avant-garde. Avant-

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<sup>36</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 44.

<sup>37</sup> Camper, Fred. "Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film." *Fred Camper*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.fredcamper.com/Film/AvantGardeDefinition.html>>.

garde films are the opposite, attempting to convey emotions or thoughts from a viewer without a clear message. Brakhage believed that “viewing avant-garde film is ... very close to the process of viewing a modern painting,”<sup>38</sup> which relates to Camper’s idea of “active participation of the viewer.” Viewing a narrative film requires a viewer to follow plot points that are usually accessible for a viewer but in experimental film, plot points are not evident and thus a viewer must force themselves to reason with the imagery.

Nina Menkes, one of the few known female experimental filmmakers, uses filmmaking as a political and spiritual practice – a direct intervention into discourses and events she considers socially destructive.<sup>39</sup> This is the message I attempted to convey in my film--political and spiritual commentary on Salvation. Her messages are hidden within her films and force viewers to make sense on their own, something mainstream movies avoid. In the Buddhism section, the attempt to convey the transition into Nirvana through colored smoke imagery is not made clear but the imagery is thought provoking, giving viewers control of their experience. The Judaism section relies on animation, like that of Oskar Fischinger, to convey an overall tone that pushes viewers to think about Judaism differently. Islam uses out of focus shots compared to in focus shots to highlight how the female form is hidden in Islam and how the exposing of it seems controversial. Hinduism explores the cycle of birth, death, rebirth and the struggle to reach enlightenment through reincarnation of animals. While these messages are not clear, they are there and make viewers think intellectually about the images they are being presented with. Like Menkes, I chose to focus on a topic that, while not socially destructive, is socially popular but has rarely been explored in relation to females alone. Experimental

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<sup>38</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 68.

<sup>39</sup> Petrolle, Jean, and Virginia Wright Wexman. *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005. Print. Page 92.

film gives me the freedom to explore this topic without the constraints of a linear narrative but with the menagerie of innovative tools and techniques.

Experimental film's rejection of mainstream film structures gives filmmakers freedom to explore concepts that require a viewer to push their own intellectual boundaries. It is an artistic tradition that has numerous influences, which in turn has made the tradition almost undefinable. As A.L. Rees describes it, "The avant-garde once was, but is no longer; or it never really was, but only seemed to be."<sup>40</sup> The avant-garde not only encourages exploration but the avant-garde itself *is* an exploration. Through innovative film techniques to subversive messages, experimental film pushes a viewer to think outside of the box, to make sense of the imagery on a screen, and to give this imagery meaning. There are usually no wrong answers.

From the influence of cubism and surrealism to the role the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the avant-garde has developed into a quasi-defined genre that encourages filmmakers in the underground to push boundaries. This structure has been shaped by a continuous rejection of the mainstream and the structure it has set forth such as linear narrative and non-subversive meaning. Each film within this genre adds a new dimension that showcases the immense capabilities of the film medium. Whether it is hand painting images, like Len Lye, exploring the dynamics of light, like Kubelka, creating new cinematic rhythm, like Brakhage, manipulating time, like Warhol, fusing different technologies together, like Greenaway, focusing on subjects deemed "obscene," like Wiseman, each artist presents a new perspective. These perspectives translate themselves into influencing other filmmakers to experiment with the film medium itself.

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<sup>40</sup> Rees, A.L. *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999. Print. Page 3.









## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We will never know what happens after we leave the physical world but religion offers answers for people. Religion is the backbone of many communities, influencing how people dress, act, and perform in daily life. It also provides answers to questions people are either too afraid to ask or scared to confront. Religion gives people a sense of security in understanding what will happen to them after death. Still, the question of salvation is much more complicated than it seems.

Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism each employ a different perspective on salvation, but what all four share in common is that they provide answers (however incomplete) about what happens once we leave this physical world. For Jews, obtaining salvation is a different path than Buddhists, yet they are both on the search for the same thing: spiritual enlightenment, a state of being in which a person is commended for their actions and rewarded with eternal peace. However, since all of the mysteries connected with salvation are still unknown, salvation is not something that can be completely explained, just explored.

However, while answers may never explain all of these mysteries, the journey to salvation is as fascinating as the concept of salvation itself. What happens to us in the future is just as important as what we are doing in the present. I attempted to follow this mantra as I completed both my film and this supplemental paper. I focused on the journey, the steps taken to look into salvation, and this inspired me every day of shooting

and each day of editing. If I focused on the future, I would not enjoy the present and working on this thesis has been not only rewarding but mind-opening as well. I began to question my own beliefs, which reminded me that this thesis has not only been an exploration of religion and film, but a reconnaissance of myself as a person, an artist, and as a spiritually open person.

Through my research on experimental film I was able to learn about filmmakers that I had not encountered before. The experimental film genre is unique in its structure, production, and in the messages it attempts to convey and I consider it a safe space for filmmakers who seek a different approach to the film medium that mainstream film cannot provide. It is a space that allows filmmakers to perceive reality differently and to encourage viewers to make sense of reality in new ways. It is because of filmmakers like Lye, Brakhage, Warhol, Greenaway, Menkes, and more that filmmakers in my generation have a unique space to share work that rejects mainstream structure and attempts to do more than just simply entertain. These works seek to explore concepts that have not been explored before and to push boundaries artistically through new stylistic approaches and manipulated imagery. The film medium permits artists to explore new techniques and master peculiar ones all in a quest to create art with new, subversive, controversial, and undefinable meaning. The avant-garde is much more than just a genre of filmmaking, it is a lifestyle that encourages questioning and promotes taking risks.

This film has been a leap of faith and examining the content within this paper has led me to new interpretations, both in terms of my own personal spirituality and in terms of my integrity as an artist. This project has allowed me to navigate between religion and film, two subjects that I have found are much more analogous and compatible than it

seems. I hope this thesis encourages people to evaluate their own spiritual beliefs and examine their perspectives on experimental art and film and to think critically about the roles religion and film play in our daily lives.

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