

The Frida Zinema

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Reel Faith:

by Carlos Colón and Alfonso Carrillo

Sacred music and religious themes have long been a prominent source of inspiration for film composers across various genres, including horror, drama, and arthouse films. The incorporation of religious music and chants is a powerful way to infuse a sense of mystery, tension, and spiritual depth into a story. Depending on the viewer's own religious background and experiences, these scores can evoke feelings of awe and reverence, or a haunting sense of dread. By drawing from religious traditions, composers are able to create soundtracks that resonate deeply with audiences, amplifying the emotional impact of the visuals on screen. In this article, we will explore two soundtracks that masterfully utilize spiritual soundscapes in genre cinema.

SANTA SANGRE

Music by Simon Boswell

Santa Sangre (1989), directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky, is a surreal and haunting exploration of trauma, identity, and the thin line between devotion and madness. The film follows Fenix, a circus performer traumatized by his parents' violent and bizarre lives. After witnessing his father's infidelity and the subsequent mutilation of his fanatically religious mother, Concha,

Fenix spirals into a surreal journey dominated by his fractured psyche, haunted by his mother's controlling presence.

Religion and music are deeply woven into the film's fabric, serving as both symbolic motifs and storytelling devices. Concha's devout worship of the fictional saint Santa Sangre, whose followers venerate a limbless statue representing martyrdom, highlights the manipulation and destructiveness of blind faith. Religious rituals and iconography—ranging from processions and miracles to themes of resurrection—illustrate the tension between purity, guilt, and redemption. Concha's fanatical control over Fenix parallels the overbearing influence of religious dogma on individual freedom and morality.

Music plays an equally vital role, reflecting Fenix's emotional states and grounding the film's dreamlike narrative. The circus setting introduces lively yet melancholic tunes that juxtapose the tragedy of the characters' lives, while the soundtrack's haunting melodies accentuate moments of psychological turmoil. Music serves as a bridge between reality and fantasy, guiding viewers through Fenix's distorted perceptions.

Together, religion and music amplify the film's themes of control, liberation, and transformation, creating a vivid and visceral critique of institutional power and the human need for spiritual and emotional connection. Jodorowsky masterfully blends these elements, crafting a story that is as unsettling as it is deeply symbolic.

– Carlos Colón

Exploring Religious and Spiritual Soundtrack Music in Genre Cinema

il SORRISO del GRANDE TENTATORE

Music by Ennio Morricone

Among legendary Italian composer Ennio Morricone's extraordinary contributions to cinema, his 1974 score for Damiano Damiani's *Il Sorriso del Grande Tentatore* (*The Devil is a Woman* or *The Tempter*) stands as a captivating yet underappreciated masterpiece. This composition skillfully blends sacred Latin choral traditions with groundbreaking experimentation, creating a haunting and hypnotic soundscape that defies conventional boundaries.

The film itself is a psychological drama set within a convent in an Italian metropolis (Rome?). The Mother Superior, Sister Geraldine (played by Glenda Jackson), employs ruthless tactics, which she disguises as religious devotion, in order to manipulate and control the lives of the convent's residents. Among them are a troubled priest with a Nazi past, a writer recovering from addiction, and a nun struggling with her faith. As moral boundaries blur and human weaknesses are exposed, the film delves into profound themes of power, temptation, and spiritual conflict, evoking an atmosphere of intense brooding.

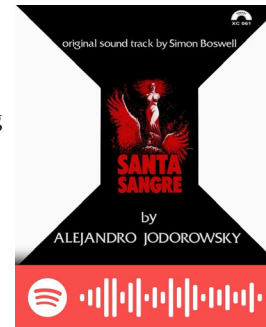
While Morricone is renowned for his iconic spaghetti western themes, his less mainstream projects often reveal a more experimental side to his genius (check out his giallo scores, as well!). Collaborations with the avant-garde group Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza and long-time collaborator Bruno Nicolai exemplify this. It is within this experimental realm that *Il Sorriso del Grande Tentatore* finds its place—a work as daring as it is unforgettable. The score draws heavily on Latin liturgical music – namely the medieval sequence “Veni Sancte Spiritus” – but it transforms these sacred elements into a disorienting, psychedelic choral experience. Vocalists Edda Dell’Orso and Gianna Spagnulo deliver otherworldly performances alongside the choirs Cantori Moderni and Coro di Voci Bianche di Paolo Lucci. Their voices, layered with distortion, create an unsettling tension, further intensified by fuzz bass, primal rhythms, and a reimagining of the “Dies Irae” – another recurring theme in Morricone's soundtrack work (see *Escalation*).

Ennio Morricone's influence of religious themes is particularly evident in his score for *Il Sorriso del Grande Tentatore*, where he masterfully intertwines dissonant harmonies, liturgical motifs, and unsettling choral arrangements to explore the duality of faith and temptation. The film's themes of moral ambiguity and spiritual struggle are mirrored in the music's haunting complexity, showcasing Morricone's ability to convey profound theological and emotional depth through sound. By drawing from the rituals, aesthetics, and tensions of his Catholic roots, Morricone not only enhanced the narrative power of the film but also created a unique musical language that transcends conventional film scoring.

– Alfonso Carrillo



Listen to the soundtracks here!





Penda's Fen
by Ellie LaFrombois



A SHOUT FROM THE FRONTMOST PEW

By Bobby Thornson Jr. (@robertthornsonjr)



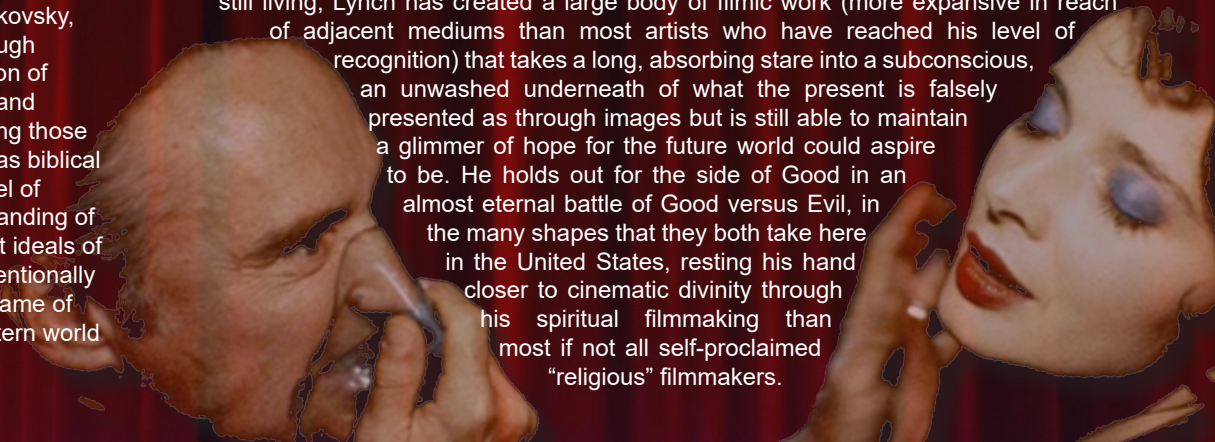
While it's always funny to reference the most amusing moment of Lynch's 2007 BAFTA interview in which he denied a request to elaborate on his claim of *Eraserhead* being his most spiritual film, there is no way that one can deny a consistent sense of spiritualism throughout the entirety of the director's filmography. With a style of filmmaking that seems to pull straight from a viewer's subconscious, Lynch has an almost uncanny ability to leave an audience's fears and desires strewn out in front of them. They seep out from the atmosphere of his images, leaving these byproducts of the mind naked and vulnerable on the silver screen (like a number of his characters). His continued practice of transcendental meditation and commitment to its benefits, as well as his fascination with that which lies just underneath the facade or the surface of something, are likely big factors in such a style. Such has landed him on top of the 'Art Gallery' line within the 'Tarkovsky Ring' of the Non-Narrative Film Diagram in Paul Schrader's classic "Transcendental Style in Film" Book, which quite easily begins to sound like a nonsensical word soup.

While he may be a spiritual filmmaker, he is far—yet simultaneously not far—from being a religious one. Many of his predecessors, most famously Andrei Tarkovsky, were extremely religious people and filmmakers. Although their meditations through films were never a direct relay of the messages of any one religion or organization of faith, they created works deeply embedded with their ideas regarding their faith and beliefs, regardless of how overt they may seem or not seem. Many films, including those mentioned above, by analogy or direct quotation, reference religious texts such as biblical passages and fables (such as the films of Béla Tarr) yet stray away from the label of "religious films". This most likely comes from a broad and contemporary understanding of what makes a film religious, influenced by the increased involvement of capitalist ideals of consumerism in mainstream religion as well as media that have continued to intentionally interpret guidelines of faith further and further away from any original text. The frame of reference for such is the complex, contemporary state of Christianity in the Western world (primarily in the United States), but that's beside the point.

While religion and spirituality are distinct concepts, the former, mainly in reference to faith and systems of belief that maintain some structure or organization, while the latter concerns a more personal singularity, they are deeply intertwined and could probably not exist in the same forms as we understand them without one another. While Lynch does not ascribe himself to any form of religion, his regular practices in spiritual exercises and his style as a filmmaker leave him as a spiritual filmmaker with many transcendental sensibilities (mostly concerned with the image, but also with sound). What many, if not most, religious filmmakers lack are these exact sensibilities that bring one closer to a form of filmic divinity, and their messages conform to the lazy constructs created using the limited language of cinema, without modifying the sense of what the boundaries are before transcending them entirely through the conscious and subconscious of the viewer. Lynch is a filmmaker who, like those who fall within the 'Tarkovsky Ring', is known to achieve what religious filmmakers once strove to do and this makes him more of a "religious" filmmaker than most filmmakers who follow and outwardly push their ideals.

One of the most truly religious things that one can do, as proven by a long history, is to be critical of organized/structured religion and religious systems. Whether Martin Luther with his *Ninety-Five Theses* or Thomas Paine and his critique of the Church, many heavily religious figures whose work dealt with their ideals of faith saw problems with how what they believed in was corrupted (usually through forms of bureaucracy and subsequently power-hoarding) by systems that contradictorily exemplify what that faith or belief stands for. In his own way, David Lynch has heavily embodied this idea in his films, through their narratives and messaging. The essence of his cinematic stance is looking at the facade of something that seems beautiful and well-kept, showcasing a dirty underbelly that is fundamental but not always seen, yet holding onto hope or optimism that this facade can succeed and live on in a more truthful sense (seen in his narrative through lines about the constant battle of good against evil). We have seen this with most of his works, whether he is looking at the industrialized world and the horror of fatherhood in *Eraserhead*, the secret hand of studio oppression and abuse through violence and other means in the Hollywood studio system in both *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, or the dark secrets of every individual in America that boils just below their surfaces against the backdrops of the quaint small towns in *Twin Peaks* or the height of suburbia in *Blue Velvet*.

Not a religious filmmaker yet one of the most spiritual American filmmakers still living, Lynch has created a large body of filmic work (more expansive in reach of adjacent mediums than most artists who have reached his level of recognition) that takes a long, absorbing stare into a subconscious, an unwashed underneath of what the present is falsely presented as through images but is still able to maintain a glimmer of hope for the future world could aspire to be. He holds out for the side of Good in an almost eternal battle of Good versus Evil, in the many shapes that they both take here in the United States, resting his hand closer to cinematic divinity through his spiritual filmmaking than most if not all self-proclaimed "religious" filmmakers.





Faith, Organized Religion, and Mythology in the Films of M. Night Shyamalan

By Brian Ly

Though more commonly defined by his use of twists in his screenwriting, M. Night Shyamalan could perhaps be just as defined by his meditation on religion, a common thread that can be found throughout his many works that span his career. It's important to know his background as a person to understand why this has been such a subject of curiosity, as an Indian American growing up in the greater Philadelphia area in a Hindu household while attending private Catholic school. If it wasn't enough that he didn't quite look like anybody else, you could imagine being of a different creed in an inherently religious space presented another dimension of otherism as he was alone grappling with his identity. Coming from a family of doctors, it was expected that he would continue in the same career path, but instead he found himself enamored by the craft of film shooting amateur home videos on Super 8, not dissimilar to the director he would be compared to when he was dubbed "The Next Spielberg" by media outlets upon his meteoric rise with *The Sixth Sense*. It's not exactly the most unique experience, and in fact it's probably one that's experienced by the plurality, if not the majority, of Asian Americans, this sort of expectation to pursue a prestigious career over your passions, but perhaps it's an effective framework by which his works aren't approached with enough to truly understand where he's coming from and how that is manifested in his films.



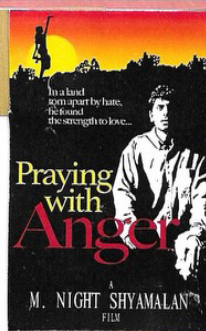
Praying With Anger, the film he made while a student at NYU, is probably the urtext of who he is as an artist. Whereas he is typically known for working in the genre space, this film is a grounded drama centered around an Indian American teenager played by none other than the man himself, who returns to his home country and grapples with the clash between his Western and Eastern identities with a sort of detached relationship with his faith as someone who feels alienated by every permutation of intersectionality of his identity, permanently and constantly out of place with anywhere he may identify as home while feeling like both a perpetual foreigner and a stranger even in his own skin that the only way he interacts with the world is in a cathartic praying with anger. I think it's fair to say that the works of any auteur tend to be autobiographical to some degree, but this film, which is not atypical of a debut work, particularly a student film, is definitely the most revealing self-portrait of the thematic concerns of a director that isn't quite as explicitly expressed at this level ever again in his films, yet it totally makes sense in the context of how to approach the rest of his filmography as a starting point of what he feels like he has to say as an artist.

He follows up his debut with *Wide Awake*, another film about a boy and his relationship with religion, but what follows it are easily the defining works of his career in his three-film run of *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs*. It's probably more worthwhile to consider *Unbreakable* in context with the other films of the trilogy, but the films it's bookended by are easily the most financially successful and critically acclaimed films of his career. There's not much more that I can say that hasn't been already explored with these two films in particular, as they are perhaps both the most overt and explicit in exploring how the greatest test of one's beliefs is in faith. In *The Sixth Sense*, we see the classical spiritual definition of the term of being able to perceive God equated to the more supernatural ability to see ghosts in the construct of a genre film, where a vulnerable child who has experienced deep emotional trauma and hardships in his short life learns to confront his own fear in order to do good and help others, which is sort of the ultimate Catholic journey of embracing a God-fearing way of life. Likewise, faith is put to the test in *Signs*, where a former Episcopalian priest who loses faith in the face of tragedy goes through a transformative religious experience in the form of a literal alien invasion and has his faith renewed in the process.

Perhaps the richest meditation of these themes comes in the form of Shyamalan's only connected film universe in the trilogy of *Unbreakable*, *Split*, and *Glass*, where he equates superheroes to the modern form of mythology that people use to make sense of unexplained phenomena. The films essentially center on the existential argument of whether these uniquely empowered beings, who may have otherwise historically been regarded as gods, exist for any particular purpose and whether they have a duty to serve mankind or are inherently superior lifeforms that have their own priorities and goals, and in some ways these warring philosophies represent the conflict between monotheistic and polytheistic religions in terms of how they explain the world and the trials faced by humans as inflicted by divine force, yet share a commonality in these tests of faith that religion inherently fortifies.

Where this concept of faith most intersects with actual organized religion is sort of allegorically represented in the secluded community in *The Village*. Though not overtly religious, there's an inherent cult-like nature in how everything operates, not dissimilar to this overall idea of how power is maintained in particularly more politically structured religious organizations. That isn't to say that the leaders rule with tyranny or have any real desire for control, though that's certainly exhibited to some degree, but the origin of these defined rules initially comes from a place to protect their constituents, believing that they alone know what is best for the people, a sort of corruption of the original religious doctrine for an orderly society. What maintains order in this society is not an explicit enforcement of law and order but this sort of faith in human figures as sort of messianic beings, a quite literally blind belief that those in power have an inherent good for the people and will act in accordance to do so without any real mandate beyond a prior track record, which in itself can be manufactured into a pristine doctrine by which the members refer to without question.

Thus when presented with evidence to the contrary, the members do not have a framework by which to interpret the world and thus refer back to these doctrines and defer to the experts, fortifying their faith to an even stronger extent and maintaining the power that belief has over the people.



If there's a film within his filmography that most overtly reflects religion besides his debut, it's definitely the widely panned *Lady in the Water*, a film that upon release left viewers and critics alike completely baffled and through time has developed a sort of religious following itself. The background of the film takes a more mythical approach with the introduction of creatures such as narfs and scrunts, yet the setting is rather ordinary as it entirely takes place in an apartment complex, with a colorful cast of characters that all take a sort of fantasy type of role in a sort of trial to save humanity, where the messiah figure is none other than a character played by M. Night Shyamalan himself. In a way, the film exists as a sort of fulcrum to Shyamalan's career itself, where his initial goodwill as a genius prodigy is being put to the test by the market as each subsequent film doesn't quite match the expected success despite the budgets and productions growing grander. It's with the colossal failure of this film and his follow-up, *The Happening*, that he sort of falls into the mode of studio filmmaking by committee as his authorial voice fades in the name of other players, like Nickelodeon and Will Smith, in his two following films, *The Last Airbender* and *After Earth* respectively.

The latest act of M. Night Shyamalan's career is a rebirth in many regards, as he scales back from studio filmmaking and shifts to a more independent mode of self-financing and a return to genre film, where he has more creative control and is able to explore the themes he had always been preoccupied with, but with a new perspective given life and career experience since and an overall different approach. Starting with a pretty well-received found footage film in *The Visit* and completing the loop with his *Unbreakable* trilogy, as mentioned prior, he then makes a film about a beach that turns people old, aptly titled *Old*. Where he makes an emphatic return to a deep exploration of religious themes is in the film *Knock at the Cabin*, a film with more explicit references to religion as it centers on a trial of disasters on individuals held captive whose faith is ultimately being tested until they are greeted by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and are forced to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to save humanity.

Even his latest film, *Trap*, which doesn't overtly have anything to do with religion, is about testing faith, whether you're a daughter excited by your father taking the day off to treat you to a Lady Raven concert or a loving wife with no real founded concerns over the security of your relationship with your husband or any known history of criminal activity, reckoning with the fact that someone you deeply love and trust may actually be a serial killer.

In a world that is truly abhorrent that makes you question whether humanity is so evil or whether a divine power would allow for the world to become some way, religion may just be your one way of making sense of it all. Though he may grapple with his identity of being Indian and American, Hindu and Christian, M. Night Shyamalan, at the end of the day, is just a guy from Philadelphia, so the one thing he does know is to "trust the process."





the witch by Micah Lara (@spectreskeleton)

1 The Mormon church can be the butt of a joke (hello Book of Mormon musical), and called out as being a cult. Yet, the Mormon church is still alive and well, despite people giving pushback. But his mentality translates to other religions and faith too. The church at large has many devout believers, and plenty of people giving pushback. So which is the right way- being faithful or having a lack of faith? The movie Heretic dives into the complex world of religion, and makes us question if we are to hold onto our beliefs.

Heretic Creates Lots of Questions About Faith

Written by: Emily Kraus

Some spoilers ahead because duh.

2 Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant) says that he is interested in finding out more information on the Mormon church, so he is visited by two missionaries, Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East). But they've already been struggling with getting people to convert to the church, and Sister Paxton even references that people don't take the Mormon church seriously. Once they meet Mr. Reed, he engages them in discussion about their theology, and puts them through various tests that make them question what they actually believe.

3 When the sisters first enter the house, Reed says that his wife is looking forward to meeting the sisters and is making blueberry pie. He keeps leaving and entering the living room to check on his wife, and the sisters sense that something is off. It's revealed that one of the candles lit in the living room is actually a blueberry pie candle, and Reed's wife is nonexistent. Reed points out to the girls that they believed the lie that he created for them. They believed it as their reality, even though they could have easily checked the candle scent at any time. This creates a discussion of do we continue to believe something, even with evidence suggesting it is wrong?

4 Reed also relates religion to different iterations that have come out of Monopoly (he specifically uses Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). They all have the same core beliefs, yet just look a little different. He also says that the idea of a savior character is not new, it goes back to ancient history before the bible was even written, so religion seems to be copy/pasting from the times before Reed keeps referencing to the girls that he thinks there is only one true religion. He later reveals it is the need to have power over others. After all, organized religion always has some sort of leader, and congregations are preached at by a pastor, the person who knows most of the congregation of the church. When people's hardships are taken to the leader of the church, it is met with "thoughts and prayer" or just genetic religious advice, which is hard to justify as helpful at all.

7 The thing is, there is no straight answer to the above questions, or any question regarding religion. People will always be for or against religion. And the honest truth is we won't know the truth about our questions until we have moved on from this earth.

5 But Reed also goes about convincing the girls in an unethical way. He takes the sisters down to his basement, and he presents to them a prophet who eats a pie that kills her, then she is resurrected to tell them what she saw when he died. Sister Paxton hears the prophet say "it's not real," which leads her to believe that the whole prophet spectacle itself is fake. It is later uncovered that the prophet was killed by the pie, then swapped out with another girl who is alive. Reed is slowly killing off women he has caged in his house and he sees this as a way of proving his point rather than an unethical practice. Is this experiment just a way for Reed to show that he has power over these prophet women he has tortured?

6 The ideas presented in the movie warrants discussion from the viewers. Is a belief in God actually valid? Do we believe in God because we were told from a young age and we don't question it? Is prayer really powerful, or is it merely a suggestion for people to do so that we can try to have control over our outcome?





Cover art by Jesse Camacho
(@candycoloreclown)



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