

# CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL

ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

## Same Story But Different Cover: *The Substitution Principle in Religion* and Understanding It Through Watching Films Gökhan Uğur, Beykent University

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Volume 2.2 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.55 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

*Religion occupies an important part in our lives. We typically learn about it from our families and later we may accept it or refuse what we learnt. However, we tend to substitute one for another. This essay is conducted to enlighten that idea formulating it as The Substitution Principle in Religion. In order to prove the premise, respectively, etymological meanings of religion, Religion as a concept are mentioned in the first and second section and after explaining The Substitution Principle in Religion and giving related examples von Trier's *Breaking The Waves* is analyzed. The film's protagonist, Christ-like figure Bess played by Emily Watson, changes the object of her devotion, but the term of devotion does not change at all and that finding corresponds to the idea asserted in the essay.*

**Keywords:** Religion, The Substitution Principle in Religion, Films, Hollywood Movies, *Breaking The Waves*.



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# Same Story But Different Cover: *The Substitution Principle in Religion* and Understanding It Through Watching Films<sup>\*</sup>

## Introduction

It is a controversial question whether there is an innate tendency in human nature to believe in something or not (or even whether there is a human nature or not). This essay assumes there is and its main assumption is that believing something, call it a religion, a philosophy or something else, is an integral part of human beings; it is our innate tendency, so powerful that it affects our lives, so dominating that it has been prepossessing us for centuries and also so difficult to be solved. The question asked above is about ourselves, about all of us, who are in one sense so indefinite, ambiguous and vague. We are *the Man, The Unknown* in Alexis Carrel's words. On the other hand, we are also, in one sense, so definite, explicit and certain; we are like a battlefield where God and Devil try to beat each other in Dostoyevsky's words and even that definition creates its own vagueness.

As it is assumed that there is an innate tendency in human nature to believe in something, the essay goes one step further and explains The Substitution Principle in Religion, a term coined by Hocaoglu (Hocaoglu, 2005). Religion is something that reproduces itself in different shapes, always recreates itself in human life and mind. It can never be wiped out. In the first section of this study, after clarifying Religion as a concept and giving various definitions of religion from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to present, the Substitution Principle in Religion will be explained in detail, giving many examples, especially from the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. In the second section, the relation between religion and movies are indicated and the types of religious movies are classified. Finally, in the third section, von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) will be concentrated on since that film gives us great deal of opportunity to see how the Substitution of Principle in Religion works.

## I. Substitution Principle in Religion

It is not possible to say that all religions share the same characteristics but it is an undeniable fact that religion is found in all human societies. Even the earliest societies, that we know through archeological remains, have religious symbols and rituals. In that sense religion has remained to be the most important and crucial part of human history, explaining our existence, where we came from and how we should comprehend our environments and nature (Giddens 1997, 434). Through the ages, religion has been telling us what science cannot, giving explanations about human existence, which is the thing that science has not given a clear answer. That is why, religion has always been a central issue for societies, ranging from the earliest one to the most developed ones. That is why, it can be said that, religion plays important roles in societies and these roles can be categorized under three headings (Browne 1998, 346):

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Firstly, religion gives people *individual support*. During crises in their lives, such as war, death, natural disasters, religion provides meaning and a source of comfort. In addition to that, religion not only gives individuals a sense of identity and security but also it provides a source of explanation, such as meaning of life.

Secondly, religion guarantees *social integration*. Societies can only survive if people share common values about what is right and wrong. That is why, religion helps to maintain cultural traditions. Religion is a kind of social glue, holding society together, integrating its people and making them accept basic social values. Durkheim believes that religion has such a social function. For him, religion is a coherent set of beliefs and practices having sacred things, which collects every believer under a church (temple) and unites them into a moral community (Durkheim 2010, 76). By sacred Durkheim means that “sacred is set apart from everyday experience and inspires awe and reverence” (Light and Keller and Calhoun 1997, 517). He contrasts sacred with the profane that is ordinary. Moreover, there is no religion that is wrong. Every single religion answers some questions in societies and nobody can give an exact date about when a religion started; there is not a starting point for Religion (Durkheim 2010, 23). Durkheim thinks that worshipping reinforces the sense of solidarity in social groups.

Thirdly, religion provides *social control*. The most distinguished supporter of this idea is Karl Marx. According to him, religion is “the opium of the people” (Marx 2008, 35). It is not religion that created men, but it is men that created religion. Men are shaped by society, so religion must be too. Religious world is just a reflection of the real world. Although Marx thinks that religion is “the heart of heartless world” (Marx 2008, 35) it is never an illusion, justifying existing social order and encouraging people to accept them. Religion does that by showing inequalities as the will of God.

As it was mentioned before, there is not an agreed definition of religion. Nevertheless, there are thousands of different explanations about what religion is. For instance, for Spencer religion is to believe something that is omnipresent and exceeds our perception (quoted by Durkheim 2010, 57). Moreover, Max Müller says that religion is an effort to comprehend the incomprehensible and explain the unexplainable (quoted by Durkheim 2010, 57). Reville explains religion as defining human life through believing a mystic spirit that sovereigns the world and human himself (quoted by Durkheim 2010, 57). For Taylor, in its narrowest definition, religion is to believe spiritual existences (quoted by Durkheim 2010, 57).

Substitution Principle in Religion means, when a religion is replaced by social factors, these social factors that replace religion substitutes themselves with religion. A religion can be replaced by another religion or by an ideology. Even if it is replaced by an ideology, this ideology is likely to be a religion gradually. Religions can be changed over time or a society can have different religions in its history. For instance, Turks have embraced Buddhism, Shamanism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. However, if a society accepts an ideology that objects all religions, that ideology is tend to be a religion in due time. According to Le Bon “mass needs a religion” (Le Bon 2009, 54). Political, religious or social beliefs always take their places in mass. When atheism is accepted by mass, even that world-view becomes a bigoted sect in a little while (Le Bon 2009, 54). It is what we see when we look at Comte’s positivism. It is just like Dostoyevsky’s nihilist

character in one of his novel. One day, Dostoyevsky's nihilist goes to a church, extinguishes all candles, destroys all icons that picture saints and the other holy figures in Christianity, and then he replaces them with pictures of atheist philosophers, and finally lights all candles again (Le Bon 2009, 54). A religion can be changed or replaced by a philosophy, but *Religion* as a fact never changes or never can be replaced. The biggest difference between animals and human being is that human being believes, or needs to believe something and religion has a unique role in that. Religion is to believe something that transcends human being himself. There may not always be love in that belief, but important thing is that human being accepts the existence of something that transcends himself (Hocaoglu 2005, 261). Substitution Principle in Religion emerges from that fact: Human being cannot live without something that transcends himself and that is why when a religion goes extinct, actually, it is not Religion in its absolute meaning, but a specific religion that goes extinct; but human being substitutes something for it, call it a religion or not, which functions like a religion. In that sense, Religion is never wiped out; it always reproduces itself, in different shapes and appearance; it always re-creates itself in human life and mind. Even if someone says that he does not believe in something, be it a God or something else, there is always something that he believes and that may be called "negative belief"; or in other words, he renders his negation a belief. Here, it is not important what is substituted, but it is more important to see what is made absolute. Take positivism as an example: Comte, the founder of Positivism, excludes everything from his philosophy if it is not perceived by the five senses. In doing so, Comte also excludes *Metaphysics* from his philosophy and objects all religions. According to him, religion is a sociological experience that humanity had in its early ages. However, in modern times, religion is given up. He categorized human history in three stages, which is called Law of Three Stages: Theological Stages, Metaphysical Stage and Positive Stage. For him, religious beliefs should be confined in Theological Stages, which is the most primitive era in human history. However, just like Dostoyevsky's nihilist, after destroying all things, which is assumed divine, Comte constructed his own new system that he called *The Religion of Humanity* (La *Réligion de L' Humanité*). Moreover, he wrote a catechism that took Catholic belief as a model, explaining every single detail in his new-born religion. In addition to that, he even fictionalized The Trinity, consisting of *Le Grand Etre*, *Le Grand Milieu* and *Le Grand Fétiche*; his goddess was Woman reminding his mistress Cotilde de Vaux and he declared himself to be a pontiff (or prophet). In his book, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, Comte substitutes Humanity for God, realizing that it is impossible to exterminate Religion, he constitutes a different way, which is similar to Religion.

While Comte substitutes Humanity for God, Anarchism deifies Man. Moreover, as it will be seen later, it also presents itself as a true savior, just like Jesus Christ. Taking into consideration the impossibility of talking about one type of anarchism, it would not be wrong to claim that in its rebellion against every authority and established order, such as state, church, God, family etc., anarchism deifies every single person. For instance, according to Bakunin if God exists, that means man is a slave, but man must be free and that is why God does not exist (Bakunin 2000, 28). For him, Religion corrupts men; it confines them into idiocy, which is the basic condition of slavery (Bakunin 2000, 28). Nevertheless,

anarchists, too, cannot escape from religious jargon, when they mount their arguments. Here is a text, written by unknown writer in 1916 in anarchist journal *Blast*:

I know Ricardo and Enrique, and I am proud to call them my comrades and friends. They are men of that rare type seldom produced outside of Russia and Mexico: men who have *sacrificed* social position, comfort and personal safety for the cause of people. Men big enough to live direst poverty in order to *devote* their time, ability and means to further revolution and liberty. Present-day America has failed to evolve such superior types of social consciousness. Indeed, it has not even learned to appreciate them. Their fate is misunderstanding, persecution and prison.

(*Blast* 1916, 6. *Italics are mine*)

In the quotation above, there is a similarity between Jesus Christ and anarchists Ricardo and Enrique. The central words in the text are *sacrifice* and *devotion*, which remind us Christ. According to Christianity, true salvation can be possible through sacrifice and Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross was for the salvation of the world from the sins of man. Ricardo and Enrique's fate is "misunderstanding, persecution and prison"; they suffered a lot, sacrificing and devoting their lives, just like all prophets that we are told. Moreover, anarchist Traubel's article in *Blast* supports this idea. Here is a quotation below from his article in 1916:

Christians give me a mixed conception of their theological preferences. They give me the impression of a god who raises hell in heaven and of a devil who raises heaven in hell (...) Jesus forgave everybody. He forgave thieves, whores, plutocrats, liars, hypocrites and priests.

Why, Jesus even forgave the virtuous. He even forgave the noble. But the Father forgive nobody.

If Jesus was alive and was an Englishman I have no doubt he would forgive the Germans. And if He was alive and was a German I have no doubt He would forgive the English. Maybe Jesus is alive and is in England. And maybe He's alive and is in Germany. Open your eyes. Look for Him. But don't look for Him in the palaces. Look for Him in the jails. Open your eyes. Look for Him. But don't look for Him among the so-called patriots. Look for Him among so-called traitors.

(Traubel 1916, 7)

When the first and second quotations on anarchism are analyzed correlatively, it is easy to see the savior role of anarchists that they set for themselves. If we want to find Jesus, whose name evokes sacrifice, salvation and pain, we should look for him in jails and among traitors just like Ricardo and Enrique Magon brothers and like many others, whose ideology is against established order. Although they are against religion, they do not hesitate to use pious rhetoric and religious jargon.

As our examples suggest, religion cannot be annihilated. Because religion is innate and natural, it just changes its form and continues its existence whether or not with a different content. If it is annihilated for a while, a new emptiness emerges, in which religion re-creates itself: Existence does not like emptiness. That is why, Comte founded *The Religion of Humanity*, anarchists defied man while they use religious jargon and Marxism was absolutised as a negative religion.

Rather than being against all metaphysics and religion (atheist), Marx is the enemy of them (anti-theist). As a matter of fact, he says in his famous *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Marx 2008, 35):

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

However Marx also adapted the Jewish pattern of history to Socialism. While Bernard Russell explains St Augustine's philosophy, he emphasizes that the eschatology is mainly Jewish and it comes from the Book of Revelation. In the Old Testament the distinction between the sacred and profane are defined quite clearly but St. Augustine brings these elements together, relating them to the history of his own time. Then, Russell presents us a dictionary in order to make his idea clearer. He says, the Jewish Pattern of history is adapted to Christianity by St Augustine, and to Socialism by Marx. Below, there is a small list of some religious terms and their correspondences in Russell's dictionary:

*Jahweh*: Dialectical Materialism  
*The Messiah*: Marx  
*The Elect*: Proletariat  
*The Church*: Communist Party  
*The second Coming*: Revolution  
*Hell*: To punish the Capitalist  
*The Millennium*: Communist States Union

(Russell 1996,

360-361)

As the dictionary shows, the Marxists pattern of history has a religious base in its essence. The terms on left show us the emotional content of the terms on the right and this content is not unfamiliar to someone who grew up with Christian and Jewish culture. This is what makes Marx's eschatology reliable. Although Nazis, who are less Christian than those of Marx, depending on the Old

Testament and although their Messiah is more analogous to the Maccabees than to Christ, the same dictionary could be made for them, too (Russell 1996, 361).

As the examples prove, even if a philosophy stays against Religion, it uses the same pattern that Religion uses. Since this pattern is familiar to people, the new-comer, let it be another religion or a philosophy, says something new with quite familiar way. Actually, it is the same story, but different cover. For ages, people have been listening the same story. Myths, Abrahamic or other archaic religious stories, even secular movements, all are the same in their essence and they all apply the same pattern while they are telling their stories. That is why, Hollywood movies also have been using the similar pattern in their stories, even if they do not at first glance seem to have anything to do with religion. Our judgment is valid here for Hollywood movies too: A specific religion can be changed or replaced by a philosophy, but Religion as a fact never changes or never can be replaced. It re-produces and re-creates itself in every circumstance in different shapes.

## ***II. Religion and Movies***

The concept of myth refers to the continuity of meaning, which is created in set of narrative fictions and a language of symbols transmitting from one generation to the other, and which reflects a system of beliefs and values. Myth points to the ways in which cultural productions are shaped in material and social history. It is a historical phenomenon that has its ups and downs in cultural favors; otherwise stated, new myths supersede older ones, while the material and ideological culture changes (Slotkin 1990, 1).

Stories are very important part of all cultures, since generations learn their tradition by them and certain moral rules are reflected through listening to them orally. For centuries, stories have been told in different ways. Human imagination has been captured by storytellers, whose stories have affected people's mind emotionally and stories have created happiness or hatred. When people started thinking abstract ideas, they improved their imagination and they also started thinking visually. After the invention of writing, "voice" was fixed into space, which made the storytelling change its medium; story was not something told orally but something written and read. People were no longer had to learn the stories by heart, because they could read stories as much as they want; it was enough to turn the pages.

Technological developments caused another change in the medium of storytelling. Now, not only "voice" but also vision could be fixed into space. Gradually, people started recording moving pictures and since the invention of cinema, it has had very strong tie with religion. *Ipsa facto*, many film scholars are spending a lot of effort on biblical studies and it is not surprising that there is a growing number of articles as well as books analyzing the relation between films and religion. Likewise, many theologians also focus intensively on films to strengthen their arguments, broadening their range of references (Mitchell 2009, 108). Since telling stories is very important part of culture, movies are also very important part of culture. As Blizek and Fielding point out "indeed, we often say of a favorite director that he or she is a great story teller" (2009, 70). That fact creates the connection between movies and telling religious stories. That is why, since the advent of cinema religious stories have been very important for movie makers. For example, from 1898 to



present, more than a 100 feature and made-for-television Jesus films have been produced (Reinhartz 2009, 211). In France *The Passion* was produced by Lumières in 1897 and in 1898 Thomas Edison Company released *The Passion Play of Oberammergau*, while in 1899 Méliès made *Walking on the Water* (Nolan 2009, 9). This shows us that religion and its visual representation are still very important for people.

Religious films can be categorized into five groups (Walsh 2009, 225): The first one is to visualize a biblical story in historical realism. For instance, *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) are not Christ figure films but they can be called Jesus films. These types of movies are actually not simple reproductions of biblical stories since they have very rich visual details and they are quite modern. Second type of religious movies recreates a biblical story as a fiction. Sometimes these fictions are fantastic as seen in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Bible* (1966), *Jesus Christ Super Star* (1973), *Godspell* (1973), *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1999). In the third style, category one and two are combined. As Walsh puts it “a minimalist depiction of biblical story provides an interpretative context for a richer, fully developed modern story” (Walsh 2009, 227). Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) can be given as an example in that category. In the fourth category, biblical story is used as a title for a modern film. For this category, the filmmaker makes use of a biblical story to suggest certain interpretations. *The Life of Jesus* (1999), *The Ten* (2007) and *The Decalogue* (1989) can be given as examples for this category. Finally, in the fifth style, biblical stories are used more fortuitously and indirectly. The rain of frogs in *Mongolia* (1999), the citation of a Bible passage in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or the tattoos in *Cape Fear* (1991) are just some examples for this category.

Sometimes such movies do not seem to be religious, but viewers interpret them through religious perspectives. In this process, it is not that important what it is in the movie but how we decipher it. In many cases, although a religious reference is not obvious, a close reading may reveal some connections between a film and its religious content. This may even attract many to the study of religion and film (Blizek 2009, 31). Even if Jesus or Moses is not directly mentioned, the symbolism and vocabulary in use render it certain that the character in the movie refers to some religious figures. According to Taylor, biblical stories are disconnected in post-secular world and that is why, transplanting religious stories into other genres makes these stories more attainable, while filmmakers and viewers are left more chance to interpret them (quoted by McEver 2009, 279).

There are some religious terms, which may lead us to connect the relation between religion and film. Religion may not be so obvious at first glance but taking these terms into consideration when interpreting films may lead us to different aspects. For example, a movie can consist of savior, redemption, sacrifice, gospel, heresy motifs and when these words are centralized, while thinking on the movie, it is seen that actually that movie is not about what it is telling us but something else. The Savior figure can be an example to show religion converting itself to address new conditions (McEver 2009, 270). Savior figure defeats the symbolic order, which may connote political,



religious or sociological matters, in the film. In that case, the filmic Savior figure is “the lone individual who can defeat the dominant mythology. He or she may seem to have ‘fallen from sky’ or may arise internally, having reached a crossroad and called out of an ordinary existence” (McEver 2009, 270-271). The Savior figure in use can reflect the times in which we live, and although the film is not a religious one at the first glance and it cannot displace churches, which is the mediator of Jesus’ image in people’s imaginations and faith, or other places of worship, it affects subjects that we talk and argue.

The other example on religious term and how it affects our interpretation can be given as Redemption. Redemption means to reform, salvation from sin, to buy back. This word is used for a person who redeems or saves someone from a difficulty. The redeemer generally sacrifices her/himself for another person or society, although his or her rational may not have religious motivation for doing this; the redeemer acts like that because it is expected of him or her (Fielding 2009, 242). Redeem (ga’al) is explained as ‘doing something on behalf of others because they are unable to do it themselves’ (Fielding 2009, 242). The redeemer is the one who pays the price for others or redemption may imply taking revenge. For example, Exodus 6.6 says “wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I *am* the LORD and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arms and with great judgments”. Or God says in Jeremiah 15.21 “I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the gasp of the cruel”. Jesus Christ is the ultimate redeemer because he sacrificed himself for all humanity to save us from our sin. In Ephesians 1.7 it is said that “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to riches of his grace”. When we read Colossians 1.13 and 1. 14 we see “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of the sins.” Titus 2.14 says that Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good work”. Finally, in Hebrews 9.11-14 it is said “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption”.

When we think *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, bearing these two terms in mind, we can find religion in it, since R.P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) stands as a Christ figure, “who sacrifices his own life to save the inmates of the asylum from the oppression of the institution” (Blizek 2009, 30). Although, at the first glance, the movie is about the mental health system and how people are being treated, the in-depth reading reveals the relation between the main character and his religious connotations. After McMurphy is betrayed by his friend in the asylum, he gets a frontal lobotomy, in order to control his behavior, because he attacks Nurse Ratched. The Big Chief chokes McMurphy, because he does not want him to be used as an example for the others in the asylum. Then, he takes McMurphy’s spirit with him when he escapes from the asylum. That provides him a resurrection. According to Blizek, “When McMurphy is seen as a Christ figure, the movie takes on a

whole new meaning. It is no longer a movie about the system of mental health, but it becomes a movie about how Jesus expects us to love others and how important freedom is in living well” (2009, 30).

More examples can be given on the subject. For instance, another Milos Forman film, *Amedeus* (1984), can be read as Cain and Abel story or Mimi Leader’s *Deep Impact* (1998), Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkey* and Emmerich’s *Independence Day* can be seen as doomsday movies, while Zemeckis’ *Cast Away* (2000) is a Buddha story. Moreover, David and Goliath story can be found in many movies, which are not seemed to be religious (Blizek and Fielding 2009, 70-73).

### **III. Substitution Principle in Breaking the Waves**

Lars Von Trier is regarded as the most distinguished Danish filmmaker, not only because of his inspirational films and his creative talent but also because of his provocative and contentious language he uses in his films. He developed Dogma 95 with Thomas Vinterberg and he read it out in the Paris conference “Cinema in its Second Century” and just after reading it he left the congress (Simons 2007, 11). Four filmmakers, Trier, Vinterberg, Soren Kragh Jacobsen and Kristian Levring, defined the rule of cinematic art. For them “shooting must be done on location, the sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa, the camera must be hand-held and optical work and filters are forbidden” (Hjort 2002, 362). This manifesto was considered as the Danish filmmaker’s latest provocation (Simons 2007, 11). The first Danish Dogma film is Vitenberg’s *Festen* (1998), which won international acclaim. Von Trier’s *Idioterne* (The Idiots) is the second Dogma film, while *Mifune* (1999) and *The King is Alive* (2000) are the third and the fourth ones, respectively. Gradually, the term Dogma does not only allude to Danish filmmakers and films mentioned above, but also to the other directors from all over the world, who agree with the rules identified in the Vow of Chastity (Hjort 2005, 35). *Idioterne* reflects von Trier’s romantic investment at the level of form and content (Hjort 2002, 363). Trier claims that the main purpose to produce that film is to show “sickly self-centered idiocy on the part of the group’s members, combined with intense sentimentality and emotionally charged scenes” (Hjort 2002, 367). This sentimentality can be seen in his 1996 Grand Prix winner film *Breaking the Waves*, although it showed inadequate loyalty to the rules of the Manifesto.

Lars Von Trier’s controversial film *Breaking the Weaves* has a special place in the field of religion and film. This movie is about a young childish woman, Bess McNeill, living in a conservative, small Scottish village. She gets married to oil-rigger Jan and she dedicates herself to him, trying to make him happy. The community, in which she lives, does not approve that marriage because Jan is an outsider - a Norwegian. While he is out of the town, Bess cannot cope with living without him and that is why she spends most of her time in church praying for his return. One day, Jan injures himself in an accident and becomes paralyzed. It turns out that Jan cannot engage in sexual activity with Bess for physical reasons, therefore he asks her to have sex with other men and tell him what happened during the sexual intercourse. By doing so, he can get sexual gratification. However, at the beginning, Bess

disapproves of the idea, but at last she makes herself believe that it is the only way for healing Jan. However, when the community hears what Bess is doing, she gets alienated. At the end of the story, Bess is killed by sailors with whom she is having sex. Finally, we see that Jan gets healed and Bess's dead body disappears at sea, a fantastic ending for the movie showing bells are ringing for Bess in Heaven. That unrealistic ending indicates Bess's desire to combine religious devotion and self-sacrifice with joy (Trier and Shiloh 2005, 87) and keeps spectator from the unbearable grief of Bess's death (Bainbridge 2004, 363).

Von Trier defines the film as "a simple love story" and "a film about goodness" that took five years to finish. Its religious references were not missed by audiences and reviewers. Time Magazine described the film as "a Calvary of carnality" and Bess's story is seen as the story of sainthood, although many feminists condemn the film for being misogynistic. In addition to these, the concept of Redemption gets more complicated in *Breaking the Waves* because Bess both prostitutes herself in order to save Jan and she is dealing with the sin of self-centeredness (Solano, 2004). The self-centeredness is repeated several times in the film. For example, in her dialogue with God, he says to her "You are guilty of sinfulness Bess. You did not consider for one second how hard it must have been for him....You put your own feelings above everyone else's. I can't believe that you love him when you behave like that. Now you must promise to be a good girl then, Bess."

Religious jargon is used many times by Trier. "Sacrifice", "revenge", "Eden", "redemption" are the words, which are heard many times by the audiences in his movies. For example, although it is better defined as a marital/sexual/psychological trauma film, in *Antichrist* main characters (She / He) deal with grief by returning to "Eden", which refers prelapsarian Garden of Innocence, in which they find the nature of Good and Evil over again (Sinnerbrink 2011, 169). Although, on the surface, it is a naive story of a small town girl, *Breaking the Waves*'s story also bears different implications. Von Trier explains that his aim was to attempt to provoke himself in the film. He adds "I established a problematic and took things to their logical conclusion, which involves asking whether a sacrifice can be sexual. We know about the sacrifices of saints, so why couldn't a sexual sacrifice be a saintly sacrifice?" (Hjort 2002, 364). The story of *Breaking the Waves* is based on another story, *Golden Heart*, which Von Trier heard in his childhood. He grew up in a strict non-believer family but then by the influence of his wife he converted to Catholicism. Nevertheless, *Breaking the Waves* contains religious dimensions and the filmmaker insists that the notion of self-sacrifice and transcendence show his own religiosity (Hjort 2002, 365).

What makes that movie, which is just a story about small town girl and her obsessive love to her husband, that much religious? As indicated above, this movie has self-sacrifice in its core and this term leads us to a religious field. However, Bess (Emily Watson) is not just a woman loving her husband and ready to do everything to heal him: She is a female Jesus Christ, who sacrifices her body not for the salvation of all humanity but for her husband. Von Trier adapted the story of Christ's Passion to the story of Bess in the movie by creating a melodramatic flavor (Trier and Shiloh 2005, 84). There are numerous signs that can prove what has been suggested. Von Trier adapted the Christ's story to *Breaking the Waves*, retelling the same story in a

different way, recreating a religious myth without deforming its essence. That is why we do not see Christ but a female character, suffering or bleeding on the screen. Moreover, von Trier uses intensive close-ups on Bess, which forces the spectator to tie themselves strongly with her, in other words, create identification with her (Bainbridge 2004, 366). While the spectator identifies her/himself with Bess, s/he also identifies with Christ unwittingly. Here, Religion as a fact recreates itself again.

It will be beneficial to explain Jesus' story briefly and, then, show its reflections on Bess's to prove that Bess's story is based on Jesus'. After Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, examines Jesus he decides that Jesus is innocent, but the crowd and Jewish leaders want him to see dead. Pilate cannot persuade the crowd and he sends him out to be crucified. In Golgotha, Jesus is crucified and dies after the morning through mid-afternoon. In Christianity, the episode describing Jesus carrying the cross on his way to his crucifixion is mentioned in all four Gospels. According to Gospel Harmony, after being flogged, Jesus was mocked by Roman soldiers, clothed in purple robe, crowned with thorns, beaten and spat on; a very common subject in art.



Multscher, Hans, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, (1437), Staatliche Museen, Berlin

That episode can be seen in *Breaking the Waves*. After church casts out Bess, she visits hospital to see her husband and she is taken by some officials to a hospital in Glasgow “for her own good”. However, on her way to Glasgow, she escapes. When she goes back to her town, she is mocked and stoned by teenagers. Her mother does not open the door. Bess carries her motorcycle feebly to church climbing the ramp, while teenagers still mock and insult her, like Jesus carrying his cross on the road to Calvary. Because she was beaten and threaten by sailors using knife, we see her blouse is torn out on the back that refers to Jesus' being flogged. Already physically fatigued, she faints in front of the church. When Dodo, Bess' sister in law, finds her on the ground, she says Jan is dying. Bess again decides to go back

to ship to have sex with sailors to save Jan. But this time, sailors beat her to death and she dies at the hospital. After that, her body is buried at sea but it disappears suddenly, which is also a reference to Christ and his Resurrection.



*Bess on her way to Calvary*

Since Bess's decision to sacrifice her life is within her control, she is a female icon (Mandolfo 2010, 291). She has the power of autonomous choice and she chooses love. At the beginning, she refuses Jans' lustful requests, but finally she makes her own decision and accepts what Jans wants. The sacrifice makes Bess "an agent of feminist resistance against a patriarchal church that would have its members love the 'the Word' more than human" (Mandolfo 2010, 291). However, Bess prefers worshipping humans over worshipping Words: "Bess changes the object of her devotion from Word to flesh, but the terms of her devotion, [...] does not change at all" (Mandolfo 2010, 291). This point overlaps with the argument mentioned in the article about Religion.

**Conclusion**

For ages, people have been listening to the same story. Myths, Abrahamic or other archaic religious stories, even secular movements, all are the same in their essence and they all apply the same pattern while they are telling their stories. That is why, Hollywood movies also have been using the similar pattern in their stories even if they do not, at first glance, seem to have anything to do with religion. Many film scholars are spending a lot of effort on biblical studies and it is not surprising that there are a growing number of articles as well as books analyzing the relationship between films and religion.

Here, it was assumed that a religion can be replaced by another religion or by an ideology and the essay's premise was centered on the idea that even if a religion is replaced by an ideology, this ideology are likely to be a religion gradually. Human beings cannot live without something that transcends himself and that is why when a religion goes extinct, actually, it is not Religion in its absolute meaning, but a specific one. That premise was tried to be proved by giving many examples, ranging from Marxism, anarchism to positivism, and since films are another medium for storytelling, Hollywood movies were adduced as

evidence in order to show that we listen or watch the same story; the same story, but different cover.

The *Breaking the Waves* is a convenient field to prove the argument. We watch an unfamiliar Jesus story, which is told by an extraordinary director. In the film, what we watch is the re-production of an ancient story, which has one face in different shapes. In *Breaking the Waves*, the main character is mainly presented by close-ups which create identification and with whom we identify ourselves is not Christ himself but a different version of him, Bess. Von Trier, who once said that “I am a very bad Catholic, in fact I am becoming more and more of an atheist” (Fielder 2009), resembles Dostoyevsky’s nihilist because while Trier extinguishes all candles, destroys all icons that picture saints and the other holy figures in Christianity, he also replaces them with pictures of secular heroes, and finally he lights all the candles again.

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