

11. Religion as Sensation and Infotainment

The focus in the current chapter has been on the camera gaze and how it frames the events in front of the camera to analyze their ethical impact. Actions take place not only in front of the camera but also behind it, in the space of consumption where the audience is involved in the events by watching the documentaries. The examples show that religion is never depicted “objectively” or “neutrally”. The representation of religion has meaning that is produced in the tension between the filmmaker, the camera and the social actors. The filmic meaning shapes the gaze on the social actors, the representation of religion, and the production’s moral modes.

The modes used to represent religion and its related values communicate different moral reasonings. But where are these values located, what kind of values are they, and how do these values come to life? Documentaries always frame and value the facts of their subject from a specific perspective. These represented values are reproduced in the relationship between the spaces of representation and consumption. They are effective as soon as they are perceived and valorized by the audience. Each film and its moral reasoning therefore needs an audience, which is involved in the reception process.

Documentaries that address religion may not distinguish between facts and fiction, for example between historical facts and religious narratives, in their moral reasoning. The result can be an instrumentalization of religious narratives which are then presented as either true and good or ridiculous and dangerous with nothing in between. An observational mode is often missing, with the gaze on religion polarizing and sensational. Religion may appear as a hidden force for which people are only partly accountable – something extraordinary is happening to them and what they do is not theirs to decide.

Associated with a sensationalist intent are depictions of religion that are designed to be highly entertaining. Religion’s role in a narrative may be to provide an OMG (Oh my God) moment, a term used to describe an emotional response involving surprise, disgust and fascination. The goal then is not an accurate representation of religion but rather engagement of the audience. This entertaining mode is one of the two main moral reading modes that define the gaze of the camera and it stirs an active audience response – laughter, shock, disgust, for example. It is also closely connected

with the sensational mode, which may tell the audience that what they are seeing is extraordinary and therefore worth observing, and also filming. Sensationalism may be concerned to discover something new about religion that steers the audience's emotions and it may be deployed when the social actors have not agreed to be filmed. The emotional mode is similar, but the responses it raises involve a stronger connection, positive or negative, to the subject, for example in the form of empathy or animosity. An intimate mode reaches in close to the social actors. It crosses the public space and enters the private sphere, potentially at the cost of the social actor's privacy. And the final mode with entertaining qualities is the interventional mode. It may involve a journalistic gaze that tries to uncover problems and induce change that in the best case will have positive results for the social actors in future.

The second main moral reading mode is the informative mode, which aims to persuade the audience of a cause. It is closely connected to three other modes. The observational mode, which as we have noted is rarely applied in this selection of documentaries, is concerned not with audience response but instead shows its subject evolve in front of the camera, which is in turn always aware that its presence can change what it is filming. The advocacy mode always has informational qualities, but it seeks to convince its audience of a cause and elicit an active response. And, finally, the rational mode, the least common, is applied through moral reasoning based on a sound argument. The mode neither take sides nor manipulates the audience by steering its emotional responses.

These modes of moral reasoning are based on certain ethical principles. While the various documentaries discussed here are based on different principles, each pursues a distinct goal in its moral reasoning. Here we can usually consider those goals in terms of the group of films produced by Mormons and that produced by non-Mormons. On the surface, in *Sisterz in Zion* the mode of moral reasoning embraces the principle of equality. Its communication is not entirely successful as boundaries are still drawn between participants from different backgrounds, but this distinction is not the product of a conscious decision. The moral reasoning of the narration is guided by the ethical principle of equality within the LDS Church. A different principle guides *Nobody Knows. The Untold Story of Black Mormons*, in which Darius Gray has evidently forgiven the church its error. The ethical principle of forgiveness is therefore seen as a viable means of dealing with the racist past of the LDS Church. *American Mormon in Europe* and *American Mormon* apply a blunt moral reasoning, insisting or almost warning that non-Mormons must be well informed before they start

to judge LDS Church members. The ethical principle here concerns avoiding judging without really knowing. In *Journey of Faith* the principle of moral reasoning has three features: scientific rhetoric is combined with emotional involvement and personal belief. The academic experts are personally invested in the cause of proving that *The Book of Mormon* is true. According to the film, both scientific accuracy and religious belief are needed to access the ethical principle of truth. The last production in institutional Mormonism-related films is *The Humanitarian*, discussed as pars pro toto of *Meet the Mormons*, which depicts LDS Church member Bishnu Adhikari, who is more successful than many in all that he turns his hand to. The film's moral reasoning defends the Mormon worldview by including only insider opinions and telling the audience not to underestimate Mormons. It connects the Mormon people's success with their religious affiliation and worldview. The ethical principle is based on the injunction: "Be a good Mormon and you will find success, for Mormonism is the best way of life." The productions in this section differ fundamentally from the other documentaries that are more critical of Mormonism, its teachings, practices, and worldview.

In *Tabloid* Errol Morris shows with a combination of the intimate and sensational modes that the truth cannot be accessed. He deconstructs any possibly credible story and lets the audience know that truth cannot be represented. Specifically, no truth is contained in religious worldviews. As an acclaimed documentary filmmaker Errol Morris has his own authority. Incredible events become credible because of the filmmaker's background. The moral reasoning is based on the principle that what really happened, the truth, can never be revealed. *Sons of perdition* applies a different moral reasoning, for as Ex-Mormons the filmmakers are personally involved. Their message is related to the principle of uncovering inequality, with a summons to stop the exploitation evident in the suppression of teenagers carried out within the religious system they depict. We might wonder if *Sons of Perdition* took the interests of the protagonists to heart, a question we might also ask of Lynn Allevay's *Meet the Mormons*. We would need to understand what those interests were, the subject for another documentary in its own right. The moral reasoning of Allevay's film is based on the ethical principle of accusation, presenting the LDS Church mission as demanding, with exaggerated requirements made on young people, and accusing the church of abusive practices. As we have seen, the filmmaker was intrusive and persistent in trying to keep up contact with the main social actor, Josh Field. Finally *Meet the Polygamists (Polygamy, USA)* is based on the ethical principle of tolerance, which asks outsiders to be open and ac-

cepting of the polygamist lifestyle. The narration shows the modest and morally correct interactions of the community and calls on its audience to be curious rather than judgmental.

Finally, we can consider the idea of responsibility. Is the entertaining mode, with its intimate, sensational, emotional, and interventionalist character, morally justified, and if so, under what circumstances? How shall we respond when people are filmed and exposed in situations of which they are not in control? Do we always have a right to know what is/has been going on in religious communities? Public interest arguments might give grounds for the boundaries of the private sphere to be crossed, even in an entertaining mode, but at the same time the gaze in the entertaining mode exposes victims and may be unhelpful or even harmful, a reality often rejected or at least left unexplored. Documentary narratives enter the private sphere of religious actors and communities because the lives of people who are different are fascinating. If the gaze is respectful and a distance is maintained, the audience might enter a foreign world and enlarge their horizons, but as we have seen, such is not always the case, for all parties defend their own interests, follow their own agendas, and made their own demands of the audience. The filmmakers are in a privileged position, with a power to show, and thus make permanently public, the private sphere of religious actors. Responsibility does not end with the production's distribution: the audience is the final link in a chain of production and consumption and must decide whether a depiction is morally justified or harmful for those involved – including the audience itself.