

1-25-2023

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Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2023) "The Devotional Frame: A Film Theological and Cultural Critical Reflection on the Experience of Online Worship," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: 10.51644/YSFU7156

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss1/8>

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The Devotional Frame: A Film Theological and Cultural Critical Reflection on the Experience of Online Worship

Sherry Coman¹

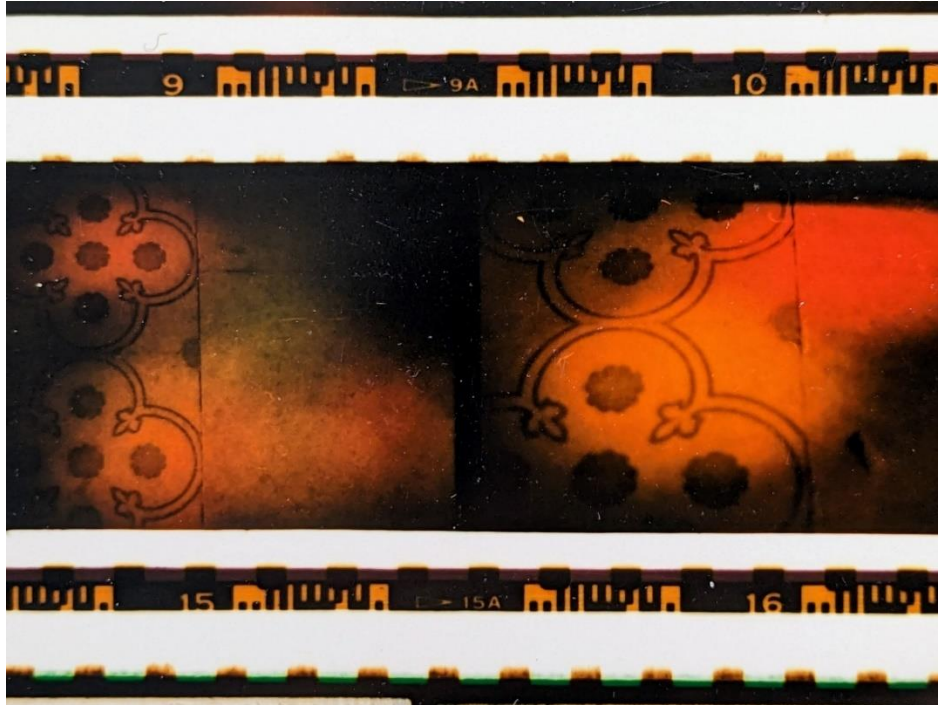


Figure 1 - A photo negative showing stained glass pools of light on the floor of a chapel. The image was captured by the author at the tomb of artist Leonardo da Vinci in Amboise, France, in May 1988.

During the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, many faith communities began to engage screens in a variety of contexts as a means of offering worship. Each of these screens constitutes a “frame” in the way that it establishes content. These include screens that are used inside church buildings during worship, screens that are engaged by worship leaders using tablets, screens that are on laptop computers used to manage hybrid experience in the church building space and online, screens that present live streaming of church building worship services within the homes of remote worshipers, Zoom screens which present a number of participants within a church building space interacting with worshipers in a Zoom space, and Zoom screens which represent the entire worship

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experience—to name just a few. Within a Zoom screen, any number of frames are presented, grouped into “pages,” or frames of frames, depending on how many are attending.

In evaluating mediated worship² and the continuing way in which churches are absorbing screens into their ongoing worship practice, there can be value in considering the “frame” as a form of presentation, both aesthetically and within a sense of church architecture, that leads to a deeper spiritual formation in the worshiper. In addition, much can be gained by reflecting on the ways in which online worship becomes an expression of a kind of cinematic experience, one which can be understood within the film theological idea of devotional cinema.³ Using theory developed by a film theologian alongside some cultural critical and visual cultural theory, this paper will offer a brief reflective survey of how online worship is reorienting our experience and understanding of the “frame” and has helped to make online worship “devotional.”⁴

Sometime in the late seventh century, Benedict Biscop, an Anglo-Saxon abbot and bishop, created a monastic community in northeastern England that became famous for two remarkable innovations: an extraordinary library, and the introduction of glass windows into church architecture for the first time in England.⁵ Both of these assets promoted the education of the worshiper, through intellectual study and the engagement of light and colour with the senses respectively. The solid stone walls of pre-Romanesque churches were now giving way to fissures of colour, breaking patterns of squared or “framed” light that splashed across the floor of the sanctuary. It is not hard to imagine how the monastery community may have first responded. Was this a distraction from prayer? An indulgence of sensuality? Over time, however, the power of these windows to help convey the message of the gospels became clear. Within a few centuries, many churches in England and in Europe had begun using their windows to help educate an emerging visually literate congregation⁶ through illustrations of the gospel stories or lives of the saints.

The story of the church and of church architectural contexts for worship has therefore had a long history of relationship to the emerging technology of each era, which can be understood as a natural part of the ongoing human experience of reflecting on how changing technologies impact our daily lives. In 1962, Marshall McLuhan wrote in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* that each technology consumes the one before it, enclosing and enfolding it as part of the new form. As an example extended from McLuhan’s

² Elsewhere, I have discussed why I prefer the term “mediated worship” to “virtual worship.” Although “virtual” has become universally understood to be anything in relation to computers, it also has the cadence of “simulation” or “not quite real.” See Sherry Coman, “Mediated Worship and Spirituality: a Media Theory View,” *i am the true vine* (blog), April 2, 2020, <https://iamthetruevine.blogspot.com/2020/04/mediated-worship-and-spirituality-media.html>.

³ “Devotional cinema” is the title and theme of a philosophically and theologically reflective work by Nathaniel Dorsky. See Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 2003). This book will be further explored in the paper.

⁴ This cannot attempt to be a comprehensive study, as the variety of contexts named each require their own greater exploration and discussion.

⁵ Benedict Biscop, c. 628–690, founder of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Priory in Northumbria, England, in the contemporary county of Tyne and Wear. Benedict was preoccupied with the pre-Romanesque style, in which windows were rare but significant when adopted into architecture. He is famous for mentoring Bede, who wrote his works in the priory library.

⁶ For more on the changing landscape of reading and visual literacy in medieval Europe at this time, see the introduction to Sabrina Corbellini, ed., *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages: Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit, and Awakening the Passion* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013).

own images, a newspaper is replaced by a radio broadcast of the news, which is then replaced by a television broadcast of the news, which then becomes an online streaming of a news broadcast.⁷ While it appears as if each one of these has supplanted the other, we know, contra McLuhan, that newspapers and radio and television broadcasts are still equally viable ways to learn about what is happening in the world. They exist as “alsos” to each other, not as replacements. In McLuhan’s own time, tele-evangelism was being born, in which the movement of the Holy Spirit appeared to deeply impact the lives of average at-home citizens, even though in this particular era in-building⁸ church worship was still thriving.

In our own time, “replacement” thinking about online worship has been hard to resist among faith leaders. In 2022, as churches begin to resume pre-pandemic ways of doing worship, the ongoing preoccupation of clergy and lay leaders has been whether the parishioners will “come back.” If a total number of fifty people attended a church worship pre-COVID, but now twenty-five are remaining at home to attend worship online, the perception is often not one of successful online ministry but of how to bring those twenty-five people back into the building. On the other hand, some faith communities have embraced the online worshipers they have gathered and continue to program and plan for what is increasingly termed “hybrid” worship.⁹ How can the expectations of faith leaders be both problematized and put to rest as they anticipate the future of worship life?

One way might be to consider the frames of coloured light that fell on the floor of Benjamin Biscop’s priory as representative of a starting point for understanding the origin of “frames” as conduits of devotional experience (see Figure 1). The work of the craftsman who made the window intersects with the spiritual life of the worshiper: the frames of light are opportunities for devotional reflection on God, the source of all colour and light, and also on what it means to be an artisan serving God. The strips of lead used to separate the glass pieces mean that each colour has its own heavy boundaries in the wall, but as it splashes into the sanctuary those colours bleed and fuse.

God working God’s light in each of us has the capacity to transform who we are, as much as reflected light transforms a marble floor into a maze of colour. If we imagine ourselves in that seventh-century chapel, we can fix our gazes on the separated colours built into the church wall and be astonished by the breadth of the whole window. We can see its overarching structures and cohesive image. Then, when we look to how the colours fall on the floor in front of us, we can be engaged in something mystical and entirely personal, which might have to do with how our spirit is engaging the miracle of the blended softened colours. The very inclination to make a stained glass window is an invitation to God to enter the space, in the same way that some early Renaissance cathedrals maintained a “Holy Ghost hole” in the ceiling, through which the Spirit might descend when summoned.¹⁰

⁷ See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), chapter 2.

⁸ I prefer “in-building” rather than “in person” to describe people gathered in the same physical space, to contradict the implication that people who worship online are not bringing the whole of their person to the worship experience.

⁹ The term “hybrid worship” is increasingly coming to mean a combination of live and live-streamed worship experience, which can include any of the scenarios outlined in the first paragraph of this paper and more. In an informal survey, I discovered that some people resist the word for sounding too technical, with the term “blended worship” sometimes preferred.

¹⁰ For more on Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost holes, see Elizabeth Lipsmeyer, “Devotion and Decorum: Intention and Quality in Medieval German Sculpture,” *Gesta* 34, no. 1 (1995), <https://doi.org/10.2307/767121>.

To bring this metaphor into present day worship, we need both of these macro and micro experiences—and in 2022 we do not always experience them at the same time. As a result, we are sometimes in danger of judging the usefulness of the window in the wall before we have understood how the colours on the floor are engaging the spiritual life of worshipers. Our aesthetic response to online worship, in its difference from in-building worship, and particularly in its attempt to “frame” the in-building experience, is often focused on the architecture of the experience, in which assumptions are made about the meaningfulness of church reduced to “Zoom squares” or video messages. The church needs to find a way to study and know the impacts on online worshipers—the equivalent of understanding what is happening in the encounter of light and colour on the marble floor. Without that work, we cannot really move forward meaningfully in our worship planning online.

For many, the church is meant to be an assembly of the gathered in one place at one time. To have some parishioners in a church building while others are online creates for some people a vivid distinction between collective and individuated experiences of worship. Inherent in this critique is a belief that the bodies gathered together in pews are having a shared experience of God’s work in them through the worship in a way that it is not possible to have online. In response, however, we might argue that individuals in the pews are having a devotional experience of church, side-by-side. The ways in which they hear the gospel readings, or how the music affects their spirit, or what they pray for, are all highly individuated devotional experiences. By gathering together, however, there is an experience of community, of knowing they are not alone. When these individuals rise from their seats to follow each other to receive the Eucharist, or to sing songs, or to find fellowship in another room, they become interactively engaged with each other. They remember that they are part of a community.

A very different version of the same dynamic *also* takes place online. The worshipping individual has their unique experience just like the person in the pew. They have devotional responses to prayers and scriptural readings and music, and then they find community in the use of the chat in an online social media space, or in online coffee hours afterwards. Their interactive immersive experience offers a *different* kind of community, one which has not yet been fully measured for its impact on spiritual life. It is not a *replacement* for being in the building, it is an *also*. It is possible that the online worshiper has more devotional time than community experience, just as a pew-worshiper may have more community than devotional experience. But rather than judge these individually, how can we see both as vital to worship?

In his book *Devotional Cinema*, experimental filmmaker and theologian Nathaniel Dorsky considers the experience of the flow of time within a film for the cinemagoer, and suggests that within a movie’s use of time there is an opportunity for experiencing a film devotionally.¹¹ In his discussion, he creates two categories of temporal movement in film: “relative time,” which pushes along the storytelling narrative and helps us stay in the decision-making of the characters, and “absolute time,” which occurs when the story seems to have come to a halt in order that we might just simply dwell with these same characters. In North American cinema, which is deeply preoccupied with “story,” there is not a lot of “absolute time,” which might be perceived by film directors and editors to be slowing things

¹¹ See Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 32–38.

down too much. As an experimental filmmaker who works in non-linear formats, however, Dorsky maintains that such moments of simply *being* are essential to our deeper connection with any film's meaning. Without them we simply become consumers, eating fast food mechanically that we don't stop to savour or digest.

Dorsky defines these temporal spaces in part by thinking about how time works in Theodore Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). He contrasts the active camera trained on the judges and bishops as moving in "relative" or narrative time, while the sustained close-ups on Joan, which seem to defy editing pace, are examples of "absolute" time. These qualities of time experience are understood to be created by the filmmaker intentionally, in order to invite the viewer into different modes of experiencing a film's message or aesthetic presentation.

Building on Dorsky, when we watch movies, whether in a cinema or streaming them online, we are preoccupied with our own internal narratives of what our experience should be. We are already calculating the "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." We are ready to offer up our short review to a friend that highlights script and action, cinematography and performance. In this way, we are responding to the "relative time" of the film's overarching story, theme, or message. But there are also times when we might simply watch a favourite scene online over and over for the sheer pleasure of it, freezing the image in key moments to really savour a facial expression or a wide panoramic shot. When we do this, we are carving out "absolute time" within our experience of the film. Dorsky believes that such moments are devotional: our spirit is engaging with something intangible that feeds us and connects us to the wellbeing we yearn for. It stimulates our imagination, and it gives us a way to emotionally challenge or stabilize ourselves.

It is possible that our preoccupation with internal narratives about our experience of church worship is impacting the way in which we think about online worship. We have a sense of how the church experience *should* flow for us as individuals, and for others as well. We are absorbed with the "relative time" of what that experience should be. How can the person at home, we wonder, possibly follow the "story" of the church worship service through a device frame? While some clergy and lay leaders have prepared worship resources by shooting and editing them ahead of time,¹² the majority of online worship takes place in a context of worship being simultaneously offered in a church building. There might be some reflective silences during prayers but, generally speaking, there is little opportunity for "absolute time" in these worship times. If, however, an online or an in-building worshiper stares out their window at a tree or up at the decorative work on the ceiling while listening to a sermon or singing a hymn, they may experience something of the "dwelling" that marks absolute time. Dorsky writes that both relative time and absolute time are essential parts of a cinema experience.¹³ They are for church as well, both in the church building and online.

It should be clear by this point that absolute time is a criterion for devotion. We need whatever space and time is required for God to fill us with God's presence and/or to work transformation within us. We can experience the joyful mysteries through communal singing

¹² This paper has not fully considered the separate experience of pre-created and pre-recorded worship services. However, I see these services as unique worshipers rather than as reproductions of worship that has otherwise previously taken place.

¹³ "When the absolute and temporal are unified, film becomes a narrative of nowness and reveals things for what they are rather than as surrogates for some pre-determined concept." Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 37.

or meditating on church architecture when we are in the church building space. We can also have that experience while engaged in online worship. The light falling on the marble of our own faith journeys can happen in a myriad of ways, none of which can be fully prescribed by worship planning. Even a pastor or priest will admit that they have no way to control how a listener will hear a sermon. Mediated worship simply offers another kind of stained glass, through which light and colour and God's desire to transform us may take place.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the devotional frame is not subject to challenges. Here again we can turn to cultural criticism to help us understand why. In his iconic essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, originally written in 1936, German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin laments "the film" as a medium which fails to represent the "aura" of a unique experience of art, because it is encountered only through reproduction of its process.¹⁴ Since we cannot join the actors and director on an actual film set, he tells us, the finished product is a mere imitation of what actually took place. His comparison is to the art made for religious ritual, and to the experience of standing in front of an original work of art in a gallery. A reproduction, he says, cannot possibly match the experience of standing in front of the painting. Attempting to "reproduce" works of art, he believed, actually diminishes the power of the original. We are not only attempting to make a likeness of something that cannot be reproduced, writes Benjamin, but by trying to do so we are also making the original less significant. In this way, Benjamin was perhaps looking ahead to a time when works of art would hang on the walls of student dorm rooms, or when we might Google Vincent Van Gogh and find not only many versions and qualities of reproductions of his paintings but also memes and re-inventions of his original work. For Benjamin, it came down to the unique experience of the artist in relation to their work. We go to big art shows, he says, not just to see the originals but to have the experience of standing in front of them as the artist once did.

At first, Benjamin's theory might seem to uphold those who worry about the practice of online worship, or who wish to propose a fasting from certain elements of worship like Holy Communion. Benjamin's concern is important: any time we reproduce something we risk losing a layer of meaning in the process because we have become further away from the original.

But is online worship a reproduction? Both Benjamin and McLuhan, and many others in the eras between them, are concerned about the authenticity and integrity of experience being represented by media. They do so by comparing one kind of media to another: Benjamin compares film experience to being in an art gallery; McLuhan frequently compares television and "electric media" to the printing press. Neither one of them, however, considers the problem of the distance between the first technology and what it is attempting to represent. We accept that a painting of a bowl of flowers is not actually a bowl of flowers, we might say to Walter Benjamin. We know that a printed manuscript of a writer's words is not actually the writer speaking to us, we might say to McLuhan. Does this mean that what we are experiencing is of less value? Does the painted "still life" still remain a poor attempt to render what can be experienced when standing in front of a bowl of fruit? Do we think that we cannot possibly fully appreciate the words of Martin Luther unless we were somehow able to hear them spoken by the man himself? We quickly adapt and absorb new

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Harlow, England: Penguin Books, 2008).

technologies, understanding how they present to us new ways of appreciating meaning we want to capture.

We can also problematize Benjamin's theory in our own church contexts by asking whether the livestreaming of a worship service is a "reproduction" in Benjamin's sense. More likely, a simple recording of a worship service is just that: a record, not a reproduction. A reproduction occurs if the recording of a livestreamed worship is then re-edited in some way to alter its essential nature, i.e., some parts of the service are edited out or juxtapositions have been introduced which result in a change to the original meanings. This might be equivalent to taking a photograph of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and cropping out the frame. For a textual example, consider how a play by Shakespeare can be produced in many different ways with different interpretations, potentially shifting emphasis from its intended meaning. By contrast, online worship is most often not a reproduction of that worship, but a means of replaying and re-experiencing the worship. It can also offer a participant viewer greater possibility for the experience of absolute time, with a capacity to pause between the elements of a service for personal prayer and reflection. The participant viewer can also offer their own manipulations of the experience, for example by speeding through a hymn they dislike or listening to only part of the sermon.

This kind of user-driven selective manipulation of the recorded worship experience may seem like a negation of the full experience of church. But it is more likely a reflection of the individual, not of media itself. In a church building, a pastor cannot possibly prevent the daydreaming of the sermon listener who is planning their grocery list for after church. They also cannot control if a baby will cry during the psalm or if the person leading the prayers will mispronounce key names. There are always human-caused impediments to the progress of meaning, in any context. While these examples may seem accidental in contrast to the self-selected experience of selectively watching a worship video, they are actually not that far apart. We are always in the activity of finding and making our own meaning, in any worship circumstance.

Benjamin's "aura" can, then, be newly understood to be the experience of the participant viewer in the presence of the online event. Because a recorded service is *not* a reproduction of that service but rather a replayable version of it, each new experience of it can be termed an authentic encounter. Rather than becoming the art patron of Benjamin's imagination who stands in front of a painting and feels they are in the shoes of the painter we have a different paradigm, one in which the viewer participant has the opportunity to consider and reflect and devotionally pray on that worship in a way that might be very different or not possible at all in a church building. In becoming creators and curators of our own experience in online worship, we are more likely therefore to become devotional in our experience of church.

How does this then impact our understanding of what church is? If we bring ourselves back to Benedict Biscop's priory, we are confronted again with the experience of worship that is both pragmatic and sensual. The gathered monks are in an assembly in which they chant, pray, and sing in unison. And yet, as they contemplate the disruptive miracle of splashed coloured light on marble, they are in their own devotional corners. We are always engaged in both in a worship experience. When we are gathered online we are only continuing this practice. The frames of our worship experience are our new frames of reference, and God is still working in all of it to reform and rebuild God's kingdom.