

The Ominous Numinous: An Analysis of The Sacred in the short film *Portrait of God*

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COURSE NAME AND CODE: MASTER'S THESIS CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIETY
+ U40071-M-15

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ACADEMIC YEAR OF COURSE: 2024-2025

DATE OF SUBMISSION: 03-02-2025

TILBURG SCHOOL OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGY (TIU)

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“What does God look like?”¹

“While most of you will see nothing, some insist they see a person in the darkness.”² This is the description that Mia, the main character of the short film *Portrait of God* (Clark, 2022), gives of a painting named after the film's title. Here, there is a being ordinarily hidden away in another reality, shrouded in mystery and darkness, that has now chosen to reveal itself to Mia. This entire setup creates an eerie and eldritch impression of the Being on those who behold it. The film even goes a step further than just calling this Being God. Various texts from Christianity have been taken, such as Exodus, Genesis, and the Lord's Prayer, to give credence to the Being as the Divine Being that is worshipped in the real world. Not only is there an interaction between these texts and the film, but they also interact with each other to create a God that is representative of terror and dread and, at the same time, references classical traditions. The depiction is contrary to Christianity, where God is described as good and loving. His benevolent nature and Grace are almost paradoxical to the sinister and alien depiction in the film. This paradox is reminiscent of a theory presented by twentieth-century theologian Rudolf Otto, who proposed the concept of *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. In a very brief explanation, it is the understanding that the Sacred being, or beings, in a religion, stems from an encounter with an Otherness that far exceeds our rational knowledge and concepts. At its core, the experience of these encounters with that Otherness is disconcerting yet intrinsically appealing to the human spirit.

It raises the question, What message does the *Portrait of God* present when looking through the lens of Rudolf Otto's *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*? To answer this question, I will utilize the Communication-Oriented Analysis by Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen, because it is a suitable method for analyzing complex texts and their intertextual relationships. Thus, it allows me to chart several texts, some of which were mentioned, and see how their connections develop the answer to the research question.

Furthermore, for the research question, there will be some steps that I have to trace. The first is to discuss and present the research method. The second is to introduce Rudolf Otto's concepts of the Sacred and the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* as my theoretical framework for this research. The next step is to summarize the film for the reader's benefit and give me a roadmap to reference. The fourth step is to analyze the texts stated in the introduction and some others employed within the film and discuss their relationships. The final step is to explore how Otto's concepts are used within the film by looking through the character's point of view before wrapping the journey up with a discussion of the results.

The Method

The Communication-Oriented Analysis, as indicated in the previous chapter, is a method that focuses on the communication styles between texts. To analyze these communications properly, it is best first to describe how texts are viewed. A text can be a film, book, painting, game, or anything that transmits a story. Each text is composed of three aspects. The outermost layer is the text-external world. This is the level upon which the real author and the real reader exist. Due to a text never

¹ Dylan Clark, “Portrait of God,” Youtube video, 0:40-0:44, Aug 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI9fKfX5V68> .

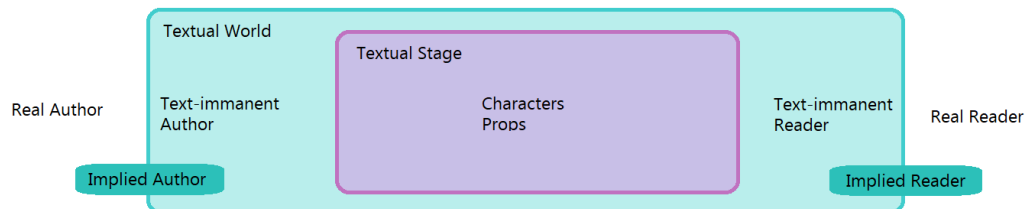
² Clark, “Portrait of God,” 1:10-1:20.

being created in a vacuum, it exists in a paradigm of the author's social, economic, and cultural factors. The real reader, in turn, interprets the texts according to their own life experiences. The real reader is imperfect in their understanding of the text because of this and can have different interpretations from what is described inside it.

Then, there is the conceptual framework called the text-internal world. Like the text-external world, there is an author and a reader who interact with each other. These instances perfectly understand the language, rules, symbols, metaphors, and other literate devices or tools used to transmit the story within a text. To connect the text-internal world to the text-external world, there are two instances called the implied author and implied reader who mediate this translation.

The final part is the textual stage. This is the level upon which the characters and props interact with each other. Through their interactions, the narrative unfolds to the text-internal reader. Below is a scheme in which this paradigm is depicted.³

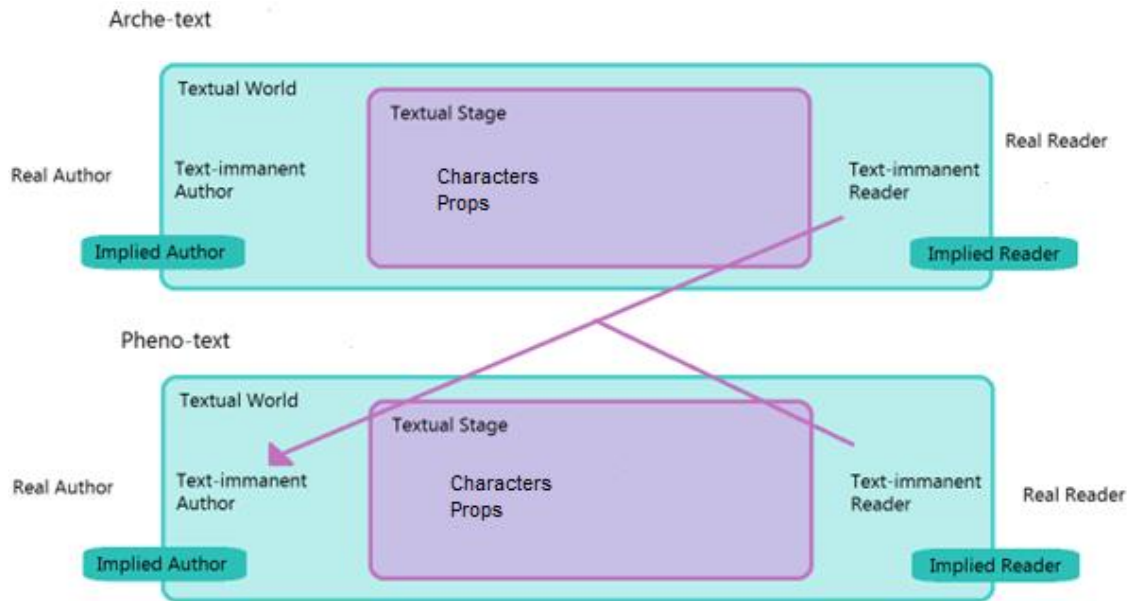
Scheme #1



This paradigm is made more complex when it cites another text because we can speak of communication. This is most commonly applied to texts that exist outside of themselves, which Bosman and Van Wieringen termed intertextuality. The text that cites another is called the pheno-text. The text that is cited is called the arche-text. Like the pheno-text, it has a paradigm. A visual depiction of how an interaction would look is shown below.

Scheme #2

³ Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen, *Video Games as Art*, (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2022), 12-16, PDF.



An entanglement exists because the text-immanent author in the pheno-text becomes similar to the text-immanent reader of the arche-text. The goal of the pheno-text's text-immanent reader is to interpret how the two texts are related. This is made more difficult by the different forms of media. In film, more visual information is presented, subtly transforming the text.

In addition to this, texts can exist solely within a pheno-text. On a single layer, multiple texts may exist and interact with each other. These interactions of texts have not been labeled yet, but I will address them as intratextual interactions. These can be charted similarly as intertextual entanglements, though inverted. Due to its similarity to intertextuality, intratextuality follows the same rules. This means that the pheno-text cites or alludes to an arch-text. The difference is that the arche-text solely exists within the textual world of the pheno-text.

Theoretical Framework

It is now time to discuss Rudolf Otto and explain his concepts about the Sacred in *Idea of the Holy* to show the concepts I will be using for my research.

Otto was born in 1869 in Peine, Hanover, Germany. He became a private doctor in 1897 at the University of Göttingen. From the beginning of his career, Rudolf Otto had a mind for liberal theology, which the university facilitated. His work focused on apologetics and theology. In 1911, Otto began a journey across the world, traveling through Asia and returning to Europe via the United States. This sparked an interest in comparative theology and other religions, looking for commonalities. This interest eventually was formulated in his book *Das Heilige*, which was published in 1917. It was popular and widely read, as it was translated into many languages, English and Japan being only two examples. In 1917, Otto became a professor of systematic theology at the University of Marburg. His later works were in line with this framework of the numinous or worked it further out. His framework of the numinous has been widely used in the first half of the 20th century. It helped build the foundations for comparative theology because of its focus on a

universal, common experience. As Paul Tillich drew upon this framework, cultural theology also partially builds upon it. By the 1960s, Otto's idea of the numinous for reasons ranging from critiquing the way that it improperly universalized religious structures that fit Christianity to a rejection of a universal experience and claiming it to be cultural instead.^{4 5}

Despite this critique, the work provides valuable insight in analyzing commonalities and alternate ideas, which is why I will use it. So, without further ado I will begin explaining Otto's ideas of the numinous.

The basis upon which Otto builds is that what we know as the holy or divine cannot be purely comprehended nor reasoned by our rationality. It is an experience of the "Wholly other". It is an event that is experienced through the primal base of our awareness and inadvertently puts it in tension with the structure that we have devised in our daily lives. Despite the tension, this concept of the wholly other is present at the root of every religion, according to Otto. The primary examples given were the Christian, Islamic, and Hindu religions as they are the biggest and most prominent. According to Otto, each has an inherent connection to the inexplicable and sacred Other. As much as individuals may try to rationalize their personal experiences with this Other, they inevitably fall short of capturing the reality of this otherworldly Sacredness or Divinity. Otto drew inspiration from the word "ominous" to highlight this indescribable feeling about the Sacred, or as it is known in Latin, *numen*. Thus, the term numinous is created to indicate the otherworldliness of the sacred.⁶

Due to its otherness, encounters with the numinous evoke two distinct primal feelings in the beholder. These feelings are labeled the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans*. In these categories, the *mysterium* refers to the object that induces these emotions—the numinous, the Wholly Other. A note regarding the *mysterium* is that in the absence of specific extremes of either the *tremendum* or the *fascinans*, the beholder may experience an emotional state called "stupor."⁷ Like the words of the other emotions, stupor is partially a placeholder that indicates the most profound and most incredible experience possible for that feeling. In the case of stupor, the astonishment at the Sacred renders us stupid in wonder.⁸

Now, to analyze the term *tremendum* in *mysterium tremendum*. It is the first type that Otto explored. This is because he considered it the first response people have when they come into contact with the numinous. In the presence of this alien power of the numinous, humans experience fear because we recognize its might and power despite our inability to comprehend it fully. Otto describes this fear as something beyond the natural experience of the emotion. He references the Hebrew term *hiqdish*, which is translated as "hallow." This would make a hallowed dread, which is a special kind of fear associated with Yahweh. In the development of religion, there was an antecedent stage of this awe of the numinous—this religious dread—which has an antecedent stage. Otto identified this historically as *demonic dread* (*mysterium horrendum*). This stage reflects an earlier phase of

⁴ Gregory D. Alles, "Otto, Rudolf | Encyclopedia.com," n.d., <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/otto-rudolf>, accessed on Jan. 29th, 2025.

⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), ix-xix, PDF.

⁶ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 5-12.

⁷ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 26.

⁸ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 25-27.

human development, during which crude demons and primal gods were depicted before the rational mind, with its boundaries, became more closely aligned with religion.⁹

The other primary experience instilled by the numinous is *mysterium fascinans*. The *fascinans* is the other side of the coin; like the *tremendum* and the stupor it is an emotion that goes much further than any rational understanding of the words wonders, fascination, or enchantment. Rather than instilling hallowed dread, it attracts people through feelings of fascination or enchantment. There is an intrinsic beauty in the Sacred that exerts a pulling effect on the beholder. It is an essential trait of the terror that we experience. The *Tremendum* pushes people away or has them groveling, acting only to avert the anger of the Sacred. With the *fascinans* people are drawn towards the Sacred and wish to be in its presence despite of the terror that they experience.¹⁰

It is through these foundational elements that Otto explores the practice and phenomena in *Idea of the Holy*, where the limitations of the mind and the structures we set up for organized religion fall short of that otherness. I will also use this lens to explore the film and study the tensions that these two aspects of the mysterious experiences—dread and fascination—pose within the film and what messages are expressed as a result.

The Portrait of God

Before starting the summary, I will briefly highlight the real author's foundation for the short film as an additional layer of context in the paradigm. The *Portrait of God* is an independent short film produced by Dylan Clark. Released in August 22, 2022 the film is seven minutes long and is centered around a dark presentation room.

To present some extra information surrounding this text, Dylan Clark published a *the making of* video about this project. He discussed the various elements that went into it, such as the ethereal vocal music, the people involved in this project, his low budget, props, and inspiration for how this film came to be. The choices that he made with the available resources, a dark room, and a mask resulted in him drawing on religious dread in the Christian tradition. Examples he gave within this video were the Seraph painting by Teophanes the Greek in 1347 and *the Vision of Ezekiel* by Matthaeus Merian.¹¹

For the sake of the reader, I will briefly summarize the video in this chapter. This will inform those who would not have seen this film and provide a frame of reference for me to draw from when discussing the complex communication-oriented analysis.

⁹ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12-25.

¹⁰ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 31-41.

¹¹ Dylan Clark, "The Making of 'Portrait of God'", Youtube video, 1:20-3:10, Jun 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLDitKQDjUg>.

Act 1: The Presentation

The film starts with a black screen and a citation from Exodus 33:20, “No man shall see Me and live.”¹² The white canvas for a beamer is rolled down, replacing the text, before we see the main character, a red-haired girl in a white blouse, sit down facing the screen.

At the 0:35 mark, the girl starts a PowerPoint presentation identifying herself as Mia Reilly and the title “Portrait of God.” At her side, she starts a stopwatch on her telephone. The viewer gets to see her introduce the work that she is studying, which is the Portrait. The next slide is a black screen showing a picture of the painting.

At the 1:15 mark, Mia tells about how some people are able to identify a figure in this black image. She then plays an audio recording of 8 people who have seen a figure in the painting. The testimonies are consistent with each other but highlight different aspects. Some speak about it as if the figure is sinister and that it inspires discomfort or fear. Other testimonies speak of a fascination, and they are drawn by the perceived beauty of this figure. She raises two questions, whether their religious experience is real and why they can see God and others cannot. She then looks at the stopwatch and sees that one minute and forty-six point sixty-six seconds have passed. She repeats the process, practicing her lines, and before the transcripts, she pauses and reflects on the painting while holding her cross pendant.

Act 2: Through the Silver Screen

At the 3-minute mark, while Mia reflects on the painting, the action changes. For the next twenty seconds, the camera alternates between Mia and the screen while the music slowly intensifies.

At the 3:20 mark, the viewer can see two white dots on the canvas and the vague outline of a spine. Mia stands up and approaches the painting with an elated smile. She still holds her pendant with her right hand. Over the next thirty seconds, the painting gets more details. By the 4-minute mark, the figure in the painting looks almost skeletal and emaciated. The music swells up. It is a combination of a female chorus and the bass of a cello. Mia sees this figure on the canvas and turns off the projector. However, the figure does not disappear from the black backdrop.

At the 4:26 mark, the head twists to the side, and there is a sound reminiscent of joints popping into place. The main character flees into the back room, which is initially brightly lit. All the lights and walls vanish except for a top-down illumination of Mia alone in a void. She stares off into the void in front of her.

At the 4:45 mark, there is the sound of a footstep and raspy breathing. Mia turns around and sees the pinpricks that introduced the being in the painting. It continues to approach her while making these sounds. As Mia steps backward to avoid the figure, we see glimpses of the creature’s pale body.

At the 5:25 mark, she stops stepping back and turns sideways to say the Lord’s Prayer. The first two words, “our father,” are a vague whisper, and then they become inaudible. At the same time, she holds up the pendant near her face.

¹² Exodus 33:20 in Dylan Clark, “Portrait of God”, Youtube video, 0:17, Aug 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI9fKfX5V68> .

At the 5:34 mark, she becomes audible. She says softly, "Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil, for thy is the kingdom, the power." Barely audible, the last part can be heard, which is, "and the glory."

When Mia says amen, the being is standing in front of her. The camera is out of focus, so the viewer doesn't get a good look at what this being looks like. A wrinkled hand reaches into the light, forcing her to look at its face. With its other hand, it pulls its lower jaw down to its chest. From the back of his mouth Mia sees a wide light that is intensified. When the camera pans back for a closeup of Mia's face, we see the light reflected in Mia's eyes. The music becomes more dissonant as the camera switches between Mia and the light. In the last shot of the light, there's a high screeching, and the light becomes larger. It moves back for a last shot of Mia's expression.

Act 3: Blood of the Lamb

At 6:25, the scene returns to Mia standing in the presentation room with tear-filled eyes and a blank expression. She is clutching her cross pendant so tightly that blood has stained her white blouse over the area of her heart. The camera cuts to her stopwatch, which shows that three hours and three minutes have passed. The camera then returns to look at Mia from behind. The viewer sees that the screen is empty. The presentation is paused on the slide Mia called the *Portrait of God*. At 6:40, the camera looks at Mia's face again. Her shocked expression turns into an expression that could be mistaken for a smile before the film stops at 6:45.¹³

¹³ Clark, "Portrait of God", 0:00-6:48.

Inter- and Intratextual Relationships

To appropriately answer the research question, it is vital to explain all the intertextual and intratextual relationships that occur and the choices that I made for the C.O.A. for the results in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will discuss the text-external context to draw a more complete picture, indicate who the text-internal author and reader are, the paradigm, and justify that the film alluded to it.

External Text: Exodus 33:17-24

The first text I will discuss is the Exodus citation. The book of Exodus is the second book of the Christian Pentateuch, or Hebrew Torah, which is the first five books of the Old Testament. Authorship is attributed to Moses in tradition, but it is uncertain who it is. The time at which the Exodus would have taken place is difficult to conclude as Carol Meyers explains in their commentary on Exodus.¹⁴

Narratively the book of Exodus follows the story of the Israelites' deliverance from the Egyptians and God preserving them in the journey through the desert. In *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, Hamilton divided Exodus into six parts. The first six chapters are the story of oppression. Exodus 6-15 is the story of how the Israelites have been liberated. Exodus 15:27 to Exodus 18 are the Israelite's tribulations in the wilderness. Exodus 19-24 details the commandments and laws at Mount Sinai. Exodus 25-31 is the time of the golden calf and the renewal of the covenant. Exodus 35-40 is the creation of the Tabernacle.¹⁵

The very first scene of the *Portrait of God* is only the following citation, "No man shall see Me and live'- Exodus 33:20"¹⁶ The citation exists within a context, though. Much like Mia is alone in a dark room when she asks to see God in the portrait, Moses is alone in a tent when he asks to see God's face. The people are gathered around this tent of gathering but separated from its interior by a cloud of smoke. When studying the entanglement with Exodus, verses 17-24 are inherently valuable because they depict the interaction between God and Moses in this tent. In these verses, specifically, God is the one who talks and acts the most, and Moses is the one listening. The text is cited in full below as a point of reference for the reader.

¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." ¹⁸ Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." ¹⁹ And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." ²¹ Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²² When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have

¹⁴ Carol Meyers, *Exodus (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-12, PDF.

¹⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 6-10, PDF.

¹⁶ Exodus 33:20 in Dylan Clark, "Portrait of God", Youtube video, 0:17, Aug 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BI9fKfX5V68>.

passed by. ²³ Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."¹⁷

From this Scriptural text, there are three supporting arguments for the intertextual connection between the film and Exodus 33 alongside the citation:

1. The Natural encountering the Otherworld.

The first argument is that, like Moses, Mia is alone when she seeks to encounter God. In Exodus 33, Moses is alone in a special tent outside the main camp, communicating privately with the Lord. At the same time, the Israelites remain outside, witnessing the column of smoke that shrouds the tent. This solitude allows for an intimate conversation, during which the Lord grants Moses a glimpse of His back. Similarly, in the film, Mia is chosen by the God figure and experiences a solitary encounter.

2. A wish to behold God's Glory

In Exodus 33, Moses met with God in a tent outside the Hebrew camp. He asks to see God's glory, implicitly requesting to see His face. The Lord's response in verse 20 indicates that Moses sought a direct vision of God. While Mia does not verbally request this, her actions—focusing on the portrait and touching her cross pendant—suggest a desire to experience a divine encounter. Unlike Moses, Mia does not have a history of encounters with the Lord; she represents the modern individual's quest for divine connection in a secular age, attempting to see what others have claimed to see, in accordance with the Scriptural admonition to seek the Lord's face.

3. Divine Interactions

Both Mia and Moses experience direct physical contact with the divine. Moses is shielded by God's hand, preventing him from seeing God's face directly. In contrast, when Mia encounters the God figure, she is compelled to look directly at its face, not shielded but exposed to the full force of the divine presence. This stark difference underscores the peril and mystery of encountering the divine in the modern world, where the protective barriers of tradition and reverence may no longer be present.

To conclude the section on Exodus. The real author, as already mentioned, is attributed to Moses. Since the text is still available, the real audience is not only the Israelites but also the contemporary audience and everyone in between. It is impossible to say who the text-internal reader is beyond that he is implicit. No specific audience is addressed in this conversation between God and Moses. Similarly, there is no text-internal author that can be explicitly pointed out. While God and Moses both speak, their phrasing implies they are speaking as characters rather than an author self-inserting himself into the story.

External Text: The Lord's Prayer

The second text that the pheno-text references is another significant biblical text: the Lord's Prayer, which is central to Christian tradition and originates from Matthew 6:9-13. Mia Reilly recites this prayer five minutes into the film. Although she articulates the entire prayer, the film highlights the words from "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," as these are the audible portions.

¹⁷ Exodus 33:17-24, CEB.

An important distinction to make from the outset is that the prayer in the film incorporates the doxology indicative of its usage in Christian traditions: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.”¹⁸ Discussing the Lord’s Prayer in the tradition and the doxology satisfactorily would detract from the main topic, so for now, I will focus on the Lord’s Prayer’s origin, the text as it is written in Matthew 6:9-13.

The Book of Matthew dates back to between 80 and 100 AD. There are differing theories about more exact dating, but the consensus is that it is after the Gospel of Mark because the author draws upon the other book.¹⁹ The real author of Matthew is contested in academic circles, but there is no sufficient proof to appoint another author than the one indicated by tradition, which is Matthew.

According to Carson’s commentary on *Matthew*, Jesus intended the prayer as a model for prayer rather than a new, literal liturgy.²⁰ The prayer follows a three-and-three structure: the first three lines focus on praising God and seeking recognition of His holiness, while the latter three address the needs of the people praying, asking God to give them according to their needs. Each line is linked by an “and, emphasizing that food, forgiveness, and deliverance are all things we need to live.”²¹

⁹Pray like this:

Our Father who is in heaven,
uphold the holiness of your name.

¹⁰Bring in your kingdom
so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven.

¹¹Give us the bread we need for today.

¹²Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.

¹³And don’t lead us into temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.²²

Whilst I already discussed who the real author is suggested to be for the Lord’s Prayer, several other aspects of the C.O.A. still have to be addressed. Due to my choice to go back to the source of the Lord’s Prayer, it is possible to indicate Jesus Christ as the text-internal author. He speaks the text of the prayer to an audience, thus creating an embedded text of which he is the author. In this part of Matthew, the focus is specifically on the prayer, where Jesus addresses God specifically with “our father... the holiness of your name.”²³ It shows that Jesus is speaking to the Father, or God, who in turn receives and understands Jesus’ words. This makes God the text-internal reader of the Prayer. The real reader is again the historical audience as well as the modern contemporary audience. In essence, it is everyone who reads this text. For this research, an ethnographic reception is not essential.

¹⁸ Adam Hamilton, *The Lord’s Prayer: The Meaning and Power of the Prayer Jesus Taught*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 11, PDF.

¹⁹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, eds. Temper Longman III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 61, PDF.

²⁰ D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 336.

²¹ Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 339-342.

²² Matthew 6:9-13, CEB.

²³ Matthew 6:9, CEB.

External Text: Genesis 3:3

The third text referenced by the short film is Genesis 3. Like Exodus, Genesis' authorship is attributed to Moses. It is unknown when exactly it was written, although Andrew Steinmann mentions that if it was really written by Moses, it would have been somewhere in the 15th century B.C.²⁴ Genesis 2:4-3:24 is notable as a story about humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and why the world is in its current state as opposed to the utopian garden.²⁵

Unlike the other texts, this text is inferred rather than explicitly cited. I have three arguments that defend the premise that the film alludes to Genesis. The first link between the short film and the story of the Garden of Eden is the ambiguous definition of death. In Genesis 3, Eve recounts God's command: "God said, 'Don't eat from it, and don't touch it, or you will die.'"²⁶ Despite this warning, Eve and Adam succumbed to the serpent's temptation and their curiosity, eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result, they are expelled from the Garden of Eden. While this act introduces mortality to humanity, death is neither immediate nor obvious, as Adam and Eve live long lives afterward. In the pheno-text, Mia's encounter with God's face parallels this ambiguity. The text-internal reader only glimpses fragments and out-of-focus shots, while Exodus warns that seeing God's face leads to death. The film's ending muddies the expected definition of death: The text-internal reader sees Mia again after the encounter in front of the project. She stands with tearful eyes, gazing at the blank projector screen. Her hand is clutching the cross so tightly that blood stains her white blouse. The final close-up of Mia's face reveals a transition from blankness to what can be interpreted as elation.

The second link to Genesis 3 is found at the 6:33 mark in the film, where a stopwatch displays "3 hours and 3 minutes." This specific time is given significant attention, suggesting inherent meaning. One interpretation could be a reference to Exodus 33, but there are issues with this reading. First, the discrepancy between the hours and minutes seems odd if referencing Exodus; logically, 33 minutes would be more straightforward. Second, Exodus 33 is a broad chapter encompassing a reprimand of the Israelites, a description of the Tent of Meeting, and a conversation between Moses and God. A more precise reference, such as verses between 33:15 and 33:25, would strengthen the connection to Exodus. The reference to Genesis 3:3 resolves these issues. The digital interface of the stopwatch resembles the annotation style of biblical chapters and verses, with the hour representing the chapter and the minutes indicating the verse. It is a concise connection that effectively reminds the audience of Mia's doomed fate for seeing God's face, paralleling the biblical warning against eating from the forbidden tree.

The third link is the gender of the main characters in these narratives. Women, especially named characters, often have a profound impact on the Bible. An example of this is Esther, who saves the Jews from the Persian grand vizier Haman.²⁷ Another is Deborah who was a judge and prophetess in the Book of Judges.²⁸ A final example is Mary, the mother of God in the New Testament. Eve

²⁴ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 24-34, PDF.

²⁵ Steinmann, *Genesis*, 81.

²⁶ Genesis 3:3, CEB.

²⁷ Esther, CEB.

²⁸ Judges 4, CEB.

similarly had an essential role as the primary actor in Genesis 3. She was the person who recounted how they would die if they ate from the Tree of Good and Evil. Though unaware of the consequences, Mia is placed in a similar position when she encounters the God figure.

Despite the apparent link between the pheno-text and the biblical narratives, a crucial distinction shapes the intertextual relationship between *Exodus* and the Lord's Prayer. Unlike the serpent in Genesis 3, which tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, there is no equivalent figure in the pheno-text urging Mia to seek divine knowledge or power. Instead, her motivation stems solely from a genuine desire to see the God figure in the portrait—a longing to draw closer to the source of her faith, as she is urged to in Psalm 105:4.²⁹ This difference highlights that, although Mia's encounter with the God figure profoundly alters her life, it does so not as a punitive and horrifying act but as a transformative experience akin to a spiritual rebirth.

The real author and reader are the same as those of the *Exodus* text, meaning Moses for the real author. and, again, the historical audience as well as the modern audience for the real readers. The text-internal author for this particular instance of intertextual entanglements is implicit, and so is the text-internal reader. This verse is the text that God gave to Eve. Whilst she is relaying it to the snake, she is not the person addressing the text-internal reader.

External Text: The Cross

The final text of note outside the film is the cross. In the film, it is depicted as a steel or silver pendant hanging from a chain necklace around Mia's neck. She is seen holding the pendant on several occasions. The cross first appears shortly before Mia plays the transcripts.³⁰ She starts to fiddle with the pendant while listening to the speakers. This behavior is repeated when she stares at the portrait, holding it while inviting her imaginary audience to look at it.³¹ The third instance occurs when the God figure materializes in the painting, and Mia, wearing an expression of ecstasy, holds the cross pendant again.³²

It is significant because, like a written text, a film, or a picture, a symbol conveys something to the people who witness it. In *Theology of Culture*, Paul Tillich wrote about the meanings behind symbols: "Every symbol points beyond itself to a reality for which it stands."³³ In this chapter, Tillich explains that symbols are connected to something beyond themselves and partake in its power. This relational connection to that higher reality prevents symbols from simply fading or changing in different contexts; the original message is intended to represent that otherness.

In Christian history, the cross has come to play a significant role in the life of its adherents and its theology. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, its public use in the tradition started in the 4th century when Christianity did not have to fear suppression anymore.³⁴ At first, its depictions were simple, but over time,

²⁹ Pursue the Lord and his strength; seek his face always!, Psalm 105:4, CEB.

³⁰ Clark, *Portrait of God*,

³¹ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 0:58.

³² Clark, *Portrait of God*, 3:20-3:47.

³³ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 54, PDF.

³⁴ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 1:12.

renditions became more ornate and beautiful. Evolution, such as the crucifix, a depiction of Christ on the cross, happened from the fifth century onwards, with the 8th century being the first depiction of the rendition we have of him in the modern era.

Its meaning is now still close to what it was then, indicative of Tillich's statement of symbols not simply changing meaning. In the words of G.W. Benson in *The Cross: Its History and Symbolism*. "The meaning of the Christian Cross is clear and significant. It is the symbol of life eternal, of redemption and resurrection through faith."³⁵ The empty cross is associated with Christ's victory over death and the salvation it brings to humanity. Followers who wear this symbol express themselves as adherents of this story of Christ, commemorating his victory.

This long tradition and history does mean that in terms of the structure of the C.O.A., there are a lot of unknown agents. It is impossible to say who would be the real author who started using this symbol. Due to the simple nature of this text, a text-internal author and a text-internal reader are implicit. The only thing I can accurately address is that the real reader has been the historical audience, anyone who saw it across all cultures, and the modern contemporary audience.

Internal Text: The Painting

It is now time to turn to the texts that exist only inside the film itself. There are two texts that solely exist within the film's narrative. The pheno-text is the film itself. This is the layer of Mia's story where Mia, the protagonist, analyzes the painting Portrait of God. She goes through the motions and explores the information surrounding the painting.

On the second layer is the painting called *Portrait of God* itself; even though it was called a photo of the painting, I will address only the work itself that she discusses, which is the painting. The text does not exist outside of the film. The only information available regarding the painting is what Mia provides to the viewer. As she explains, only some people can see a figure in the painting, and Mia acts as the text-internal author. She is creating an embedded narrative that exists only within the film's world. The painting itself is a prop; it is a black screen with a white outline on its slide, indicating where the God figure is supposed to reside in the painting.³⁶ The text-internal reader in the painting is implicit because nobody in particular is present when this narrative is told. The real author is still Dylan Clark because, ultimately, he created the embedded texts as well. Likewise, the real reader is anyone who watches it on YouTube.

Internal Text: The Transcripts

In addition to the film, there is an additional text which has a relationship with the painting. These are the statements of the witnesses' religious experiences. Again, nothing about these stories can be found outside of the film. In addition, because their experiences are focused on their perception of the painting, it creates a two-way stream of information, where the portrait informs the speakers in the transcripts, and the transcripts describe what viewers might see in the portrait as

³⁵ George Willard Benson, *The Cross: Its History and Symbolism*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 23, PDF.

³⁶ Clark, "Portrait of God", 1:09.

visualized in the scheme below. Like the portrait, Mia is the text-internal author. for this text because she is the character that presents it to the text-internal reader of the narrative text.

Overview of the Texts

To briefly summarize the C.O.A., the schemes I drew up in the method section would become too complicated to keep track of all the texts and their entanglements. For that reason, I have created a table, presented below, that briefly summarizes everything discussed so far in this chapter. In this table, there is a slight change to the naming convention in the instances of the C.O.A. that I will adopt further in the research. The text-internal author and the text-internal reader will be shortened to T.I.A. and T.I.R. The real author and real reader will be addressed as the text-external author (T.E.A.) and the text-external reader (T.E.R.).

	T.E.A.	T.E.R.	T.I.A.	T.I.R.	Characters/Props	Intra/Intertextuality
Genesis 3:3	Moses attributed	Readers throughout centuries	Implicit	Implicit	Eva, Snake	Intertextual
Exodus 33:20	Moses attributed	Readers throughout centuries	Implicit	Implicit	Moses, God	Intertextual
Lord's Prayer	Matthew attributed	Readers throughout centuries	Jesus	God	Jesus, Disciples	Intertextual
Cross	Unknown	Readers throughout Centuries	Implicit	Implicit	The Cross	Intertextual
Transcripts	Clark	Contemporary Audience	Implicit	Implicit	Unnamed speakers	Intratextual
Painting	Clark	Contemporary Audience	Implicit	Implicit	Painting Figure inside it	Intratextual

There are two main paradigms at play here. In the first paradigm are the external texts, which all interact with each other on some level. Specifically, the Exodus text and the Prayer are put at odds with each other by the film, whilst the Genesis and the Cross provide additional information to cover gaps in the information supplied by this dynamic. In these intertextual relationships, the T.I.R. interprets the communication between the arche-text's Text-Immanent Reader and the pheno-text's Text-Immanent Author within the specific context the film provides. An example is when the T.I.R. encounters the explicit citation from Exodus, understanding that seeing the Lord's face is portrayed as an act that is met with death because the T.I.R. has that historical context.

The second paradigm that is present in the film is that of the intratextual relationship. As I discussed briefly before the table, two texts exist within the film.

The transcripts and the painting These two texts interact with each other in the way they give information. The transcripts provide the viewer with information about what the God figure in the painting ought to look like. The painting is the context and source for what these speakers see. Should the transcripts not exist, the viewer would not know what to expect of the figure in the painting. Had the painting not existed, then there would be no information for the speakers to inform the reader. This intratextual relationship provides context clues and a foundation for the God figure to appear in the painting for the viewer shortly after the three-minute mark.

Analysis

The question now is, what do these texts described in our C.O.A. mean in the film? How is Otto's Sacred portrayed in the video? The short answer would be that there is an elaborate interplay between elements that inspire or represent fear with elements of enchantment. The longer answer is interesting, though, and to give the proper gravitas to the question, I will first delve into how the *tremendum* is experienced by Mia, the Text-internal Reader, wrapping up these explorations by contrasting it with a hypothetical text-external audience. I will do the same for the *fascinans* afterward, despite it being difficult to see how these two elements work on each other for the greater narrative.

The Fear of the Divine

The *mysterium tremendum* as Mia experiences it is an intense and almost singular process during the second act. In the first act, the main character either does not know the readers' cues or is ignorant of their impact. Since she still believes that she is living in a mundane world. One where the rules imply that the mysterious oddity in her presentation is a psychological affliction. That she hears the people in the transcripts share their testimonies is accompanied by some contemplation, but nothing indicates to the viewer that she is aware of anything greater at play. It is only when she goes through the second practice run that Mia is mindful of the Something that the speakers saw. At this stage, there is a process in which the internal texts of the film take shape on the narrative level of Mia. She begins to see a figure in the presentation, while initially she is fascinated by its appearance, she soon expresses distress over it.³⁷ Due to Mia being a character and having thoughts, I have to consider two potential reasons for her reaction to the figure. The first is that she recognized the awe-inspiring power of this Other. The power is equivalent to the one in the Bible that has wrecked civilizations with its righteous wrath. Another potential reason for this fear may be that this God figure does not match with the God figure she envisioned in her religious life. A figure that is emphasized by love and sacrifice, evidenced by the cross rather than a crucifix around her neck.

Regardless of the potential reason for her discomfort, the retreat she started is turned into flight as the figure in the painting moves, rather than disappearing because the screen is gone. There is an ongoing process in which the figure in the painting becomes a part of Mia's reality. In these moments, it is evident that feelings of enchantment rapidly turn into fear. When the process is complete and the figure moves, Mia resorts to the primal fight or flight response inherent to humans.³⁸ The girl runs into the backroom, and after closing the door behind her, she is trapped in a void of darkness. A singular light illuminates and follows her as she retreats. When the God figure is visible, Mia is no longer running away, although she avert herself and prays. The entire second act is one harrowing experience for Mia where she is confronted with the dreadful image and power of the God figure. Every moment when the God figure is shrouded in darkness Mia avoids looking at it. The third act tells little of Mia's religious experience. The only signs of the distress she experienced are a tear-streaked, red face and the bloodied hand that clutches the cross.

³⁷ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 3:27.

³⁸ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 4:07.

The T.I.R., on the other hand, has access to a plethora of information to prepare itself for the events that are to transpire with regard to the *tremendum*. In the film's opening scene of the citation of Genesis 33:20, the T.I.R. is immediately made aware that what is to come will be reminiscent of the Biblical God's power to strike down people for the mundane parts of life, such as looking up at something. Due to the media format, the T.I.R. can also access background music. The deep thrum of large string instruments evokes a sense of dread. High-pitched feminine vocals replace this as Mia talks about the Portrait, which signifies divinity. All background music is gone when the speakers of the transcripts say that they don't like looking at it. For these reasons, the T.I.R. knows to take the various statements seriously. For both the T.I.R. and the T.E.R., the expectations are set of what to expect the God figure to look like. When Mia resets the presentation, she goes back through the slides. With her face turned away, she does not see the God figure already present in the slide at 2:34, and for a split-second, it is visible. The T.I.R. does have access to its information and has a warning of what to expect.

From this point on, the T.I.R.'s experiences with Mia are like those of a person standing on the bank of an old pond. What is hidden near the bottom of the pond is hidden since only the most prominent objects closest to the surface are visible. In this same manner, the T.I.R. is looking in from the mirror on the surface. The darkness shrouds most, if not all, of the God figure to the readers, and thus, the T.I.R. is reliant on Mia's reactions to get a closer approximation of what a direct experience with this Wholly Other would be like. In the final act, the T.I.R. is left to interpret Mia's stupor. The blood on her blouse from the way she clutched her pendant is reminiscent of the stigmata, a symbol of wounds that are reminiscent of Christ's sacrifice.³⁹ This is a grim reminder of suffering and the theme of death, which is referenced multiple times throughout the film.

For the hypothetical third point of view, the Text-External Reader there will be two readers to compare the views with. The first character is Harvey, a middle-aged Belgian atheist who has only interacted with religion very superficially in his life and doesn't care for horror movies. The other T.E.R. is Stacie, a young, devout Southern Baptist who converted a couple of years prior and used to enjoy horror movies. Like the T.I.R. these text-external readers rely on the cues presented by the camera and audio. Unlike the T.I.R., these two people do not exist within the narrative paradigm and will have different understandings of what is going on in this setting. References and ideas that are portrayed in the setting will be interpreted based on their backgrounds and knowledge.

The first example of this imperfect understanding and difference to the T.I.R. is the opening text. While Harvey can see that it is from the book of Exodus, the origin has little value to him. His focus is on the meaning of death, in the knowledge of the senseless death encountered in slasher movies. Stacie, on the other hand, has the capability to reference it to more of the arche-text because she knows it is intended to be a horror movie. Her associations will be of the time that God has struck down people for disobeying him.

When the two viewers see Mia practicing the presentation and playing the transcripts, both have some preconceived notions of what God looks like. Harvey would know from cultural stories that God is supposed to look like a man. These associations might be accompanied by light, clouds, and other things associated with goodness. Stacie shares this image, and through her community's emphasis on love, she thought of him as a kindly figure. It is for this ingrained reason that

³⁹ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 6:28.

Stacie would be quite discomforted by the image that is presented. The scary God figure is an anti-thesis to her preconceived notions that she had. Harvey, on the other hand, did not have God as the object of his worship. He experiences all discomfort though the fearful image created in the film itself. The grotesque horror at the wrongness challenges different parts of his rational faculties, such as the discomfort with the possible existence of dreadful entities.

The T.E.R.'s awareness of the *tremendum*, of this mystery that inspires fear and dread in such an intense manner as Otto describes, does require the viewer to be able to surrender themselves to this moment on the screen because of a certain distance to the media format as well as that it is a deeply personal experience.

The Fascination of the Unknown

Compared to the events that inspire dread, the moments of the *fascinans* are fewer and less explicit, though no less significant. Again, we need to discuss the main character first because she is the target for the events that unfold. Mia experiences this primal fascination with the Other at three moments in the film. The first time is at the first sight of the figure that she saw in the painting. The figure that had previously been hidden from her begins to appear in the portrait, and the red-haired main character reacts to this with a smile while fiddling with her pendant. Thus creating the impression that she has had a positive religious experience. The second event that could be considered a moment of the *mysterium fascinans* is when the God figure made her look into his visage. Her eyes are full of the light radiated by the God figure that previously chased her. The third event is Mia's little smile exactly when the film ends. One might question whether she really is joyful at the existence of the God figure or it is a trauma response while she breaks from the Stupor in response to the *mysterium*, but it is likely to be a positive smile because she begins to comprehend what has transpired.

For example, in the moments that Mia undergoes, the T.I.R. recognizes the emotions that Mia goes through and how it is intended for the audience. When the God figure first appears for a split second, the T.I.R. is privy to a secret that Mia is not yet in on. The information provided by the speakers allows for two interpretations: something that is beautiful in its mystery or something scary. The first reaction is open for interpretation and may well be accepted as a moment of the intimate fascination that some of the speakers underwent. It was a brief glimpse that only the viewers (both Text-Internal and External) could glimpse.

The feeling of fascination is once more encouraged when the God figure enters the light. Though it is not entirely in the light, when the hand touches Mia, it is in a calm and almost gentle manner. Even in the grotesque manner in which the God figure opens its mouth, something in this moment keeps the T.I.R. hooked and draws the instance in. The white light appears, and the T.I.R. sees it growing. Briefly, it is put into the position of Mia but is forced to see how it intensifies by how it grows brighter in the reflection of Mia's pupils.

When the scene changes from the darkness to the presentation room, the T.I.R. is confronted with similar yet different emotions on Mia's face. It is also made aware of how much time is missing. This knowledge that something was in between the two scenes has a mystique that arouses curiosity. What is it that Mia exactly experienced? This absence in the experience intrigues the T.I.R. to the point that it wishes to experience it. When the camera looks at the dark canvas

where the portrait is, it is as if the T.I.R. has been excluded from the vision that Mia had. It was privy to the terrifying aspects, but the profound and attractive elements were what it was secluded from.

The T.E.R. then presents a twist on these understandings that the T.I.R. has because the T.E.R. does not have a perfect knowledge of the narrative text, leading to a situation where these moments of the *fascinans* lead to multiple potential interpretations. When Stacie and Harvey see that first and mysterious glimpse, Stacie may decide that she is already assuming that this will be a mockery of her idea of God and his visage; she would be repelled, while Harvey's limited perspective would pique his curiosity. He is encountering the unknown here, and it is drawing him in. The feeling that the T.I.R. had of being singled out would be shared by Harvey when he watched it.

For Harvey and Stacie, the moment that the God figure shows Mia the light is a revelation. There may still be discomfort from the lingering memory, but Mia's relaxation is an indication of something beyond the daemonic dread that was previously inspired. This light and its effect show Harvey and Stacie that the God figure is beautiful and mysterious. That Mia is not killed physically indicates that the God figure may not just be an eldritch and unknowable being that kills those who see it. The blood-stained shirt may evoke the image of Christ's passion in Stacie's eyes. On the other hand, Harvey may think that what Mia saw was imagined. The grip that she had a trigger response to brain stimuli. It was a terrifying dream that ended with a beautiful ending that appealed to his sense of curiosity to figure out what it was that Mia saw in the light. For both characters, Mia's new expression before the camera fades may be accompanied by a sense of relief.

Discussion and Messages

Now that I have presented all the information from the short film, it is time to discuss what meaning can be drawn from it. The different perspectives and textual connections are a network that seeks to emphasize a number of messages that are inherently tied to the Sacred.

The Numinous isn't Rationalized Easily

It is common in our society to create a pattern where fear is associated with evil. One only needs to look at stories such as Dracula or the cultural perception of Lucifer's appearance. It has to be stated that fear as an emotion does not emerge without cause. These reasons are myriad but can often be indicated. In the case of Dracula, even when taking away metaphorical meanings and relying on the literal, it is because he is a vampire. His being is a predator that lives specifically on the blood of humans. As a concept, this makes humans vulnerable, and death or harm is an intentional detriment against which struggle is an almost hopeless cause.

This idea of fear as an evil is contrasted by idealizations of hope. The knight in shining armor that comes to save the day or the 'and they lived happily ever after' ending popular for fairytales. Christ was born as a human in order to save humanity from eternal loss, to be replaced with everlasting life for our souls in the presence of the Lord. It is one of the reasons that exemplifies his goodness and gives humans hope.

The film plays into these cultural perceptions of fear and evil in order to craft this eldritch view of God. Examples of this are the recurring themes that invoke death through the referencing of the various arche-texts. The perpetual interplay with the ambient darkness and Mia's reactions to the unknown instill this sense of dread that the God figure is a threat. The Exodus citation situates the God figure of the film as the God of the Old Testament. The same Being that punished humans with events such as calling down rain for forty days in the story of Noah⁴⁰ or the story of Uzzah, who tried to prevent the Ark from touching the ground when it fell.⁴¹ The film builds up a veneer similar to a Marcionite belief, where the Old Testament God is not the real Ultimate good. He created the material world and abides by a sense of justice, but it is brutal and twisted because of his limitations.⁴² Mia further strengthens This implication by using the Lord's Prayer. While she is seen praying the entirety, the only part that is prominently presented is the line, "Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil, for thy is the kingdom, the power."⁴³ since the God figure that emerged from the painting is the object from which she asks to be saved, it appears to be a force of evil.

That it is able to build this image that, at least superficially, separates the Old Testament from the New Testament is because it is not a foreign concept. In the early beginnings of Christianity, this perceived disparity was already present. Gnostics such as Marcion saw the dread and punishment in the Old Testament and opted to reject it. Focusing on Christ's sacrifice and God's love as objective markers of the creator God that is not tainted by limitations. It is an example of the rationalization of the divine attributes inherent in this incomprehensible Divinity that Otto touches upon in his first paragraph. It is still present in modern-day Western Christianity as well; modern churches emphasize love and avoid concepts such as divine wrath wherever possible. It is a thing that the blog Faith in Ireland remarked and supported by citing R.C.P. Hanson, who stated, "Most preachers and most composers of prayers today treat the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God very much as the Victorians treated sex. It is there, but it must never be alluded to because it is in an undefined way shameful."⁴⁴

This dualistic view, the overemphasis on a separation between Divine Love and Wrath, rapidly crumbles when one examines the narrative more closely. Here, Otto's framework is especially useful for making sense of what is going on.

In the analysis using different viewpoints, it was difficult to separate the depictions of the *fascinans* and the *tremendum*. Moments such as the reading of the transcripts or Mia's response to seeing the God figure are reactions that differ upon the time that something happened. The God figure's Being is a similar dichotomy; on the one hand, it is perpetually shrouded in darkness, but on the other hand, it is filled with light that springs from its eyes and throat. It is in this imagery and behaviors that proof is provided that there is an interplay between the Exodus text and the Lord's Prayer, rather than them being opposing. The Exodus citation emphasizes that God's greatness and image are overwhelming for us to bear.

⁴⁰ Genesis 5:32-10:1, CEB.

⁴¹ 2 Samuel 6:1-7, CEB.

⁴² Antti Marjanen, Petri Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian Heretics*, (Boston: Brill, 2005), PDF, 105.

⁴³ Clark, *Portrait of God*, 5:25-5:40.

⁴⁴ R. P. C. Hanson, *God: Creator, Saviour, Spirit*, (London: S.C.M., 1960), p. 37. In Patrick M, "God's Love Vs God's Wrath? (1)," FaithinIreland, August 5, 2020, <https://faithinireland.wordpress.com/2020/08/05/gods-love-vs-gods-wrath-1/>.

However, within the broader context referenced, He remains a protective God who does not take lives without cause. The Lord's Prayer is a structure that praises him for his qualities as a ruler and asks for the blessings that he provides.

The third act is a culmination of the interplay between the texts and proof of there only being one God addressed in the film. When the Reader is removed from the presence and visage of the God figure, it is made aware of other symbols present. Namely, the time that has passed and the wound that Mia suffered. This wound, caused by gripping the cross so tightly that it stained her white blouse, is a symbol known as a stigmata in the Christian tradition. The New Catholic Dictionary describes it as markings on the hands, feet, and, at times, shoulders, back, and side. They show that those bearing them are participating in Christ's Passion.⁴⁵ This wound that Mia has, therefore, puts her in a position reminiscent of Christ. I will further explain how this carries implications of spiritual cleansing and rebirth. For now, I will say that it exists because of the way Death has been referred to before and that she is now put in a position akin to that of Christ. Beyond the physical injury, there is also significance to the blood that stained the white shirt. In the Evangelical tradition, there is a hymn called *Are You Washed In The Blood of The Lamb*, which has the following refrains, "Are your garments spotless? / Are they white as snow? / Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"⁴⁶ The lyrics emphasized Christ being the stand-in of an innocent animal for the sins of the people. The visual imagery of white robes means a sinless state. In the film, this sinless state of the white blouse or garment being spoiled by her blood gives the impression that she has been marked by something.

To wrap up this section, the Divine is complex and simply incomprehensible in its fullness to us. The examples I gave are to show that the God figure is narratively God in both the Old and New Testaments. His image and presence are as distressing as he could be in the Old Testament, but at the same time, there are signs and expressions of his Love and sacrifice that are integral to Christianity in the third act when the T.I.R. is forced from a different perspective than Mia's perspective. It contrasts a popular view of the loving God that is reductionist in nature, reducing him to qualities that are comforting to the individual person.

Plurality of Death

The second message is that the meaning of death is not only about the physical state of our body. In our Western contemporary culture, the ordinary understanding of death is that the body quits functioning and that there is no organ function and brain activity anymore. There's also another interpretation that the short film is going for, which is spiritual death. In Christian culture, spiritual death is often expressed along the lines of the separation between the human soul and God. Sins that humans commit further separate us from God.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ P. Siwek, "Stigmatization," In *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., Vol. 13, (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2003), *Gale eBooks*, accessed September 24, 2024, 530-532, <https://link-gale-com.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX3407710690/GVRL?u=tilburgb&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=4cfe0159>.

⁴⁶ Elisha Hoffman, *Are you washed in the Blood*, (n.p., 1878), https://hymnary.org/text/have_you_been_to_jesus_for_the_cleansing, accessed Jan. 2nd, 2025.

⁴⁷ "Dictionary : SPIRITUAL DEATH," Catholic Culture, n.d., <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=36594>, accessed Jan. 2nd, 2025.

However, neither of these definitions applies to Mia. Simultaneously, the narrative gives multiple reminders that Mia's life is forfeit, which means that there must be an alternate interpretation of death. This interpretation is a mental death, followed by a new life or resurrection of sorts. The reference to Exodus is important to situate the God figure in the tradition and showcase his power, but it is the allusion to Genesis in the third act that shows that death is not always in the form that we are accustomed to. Adam and Eve ate the fruit, and they eventually died. Their physical death took hundreds of years in Scripture. Their spiritual death, on the other hand, was immediate, for they were separated from God now. This misdirection on the meaning of death is essential because Mia's spiritual death follows that path in reverse. Since she had only a tiny amount of blood spilled and her expression changed at the last second, it is safe to say that Mia is physically alive and has brain activity.

The only remaining interpretation of death for seeing the face of God is a spiritual and mental death of the old self. The person Mia used to be is so irreversibly changed that it would be impossible to return to her old self, even if she wanted to do so. This is why the text of the cross is a deceptively important text for explaining Mia's situation. As I explained in the chapter discussing the various textual entanglements, the cross is a symbol that represents Christ's resurrection and victory. This is also where I return to the previous message with an emphasis on the stigmata. his stigmata places Mia in a position reminiscent of Christ's triumph. Since she is only human and faced with God, she does not carry the burden of all of humanity. However, what is cleansed is her spirit. With Mia's spiritual death and resurrection, she is now allowed to be even closer. The story of Mia is a reiteration of the age-old message about the graceful features of God. A new format where his forgiveness and cleansing presence affect humanity.

The Divine is Everywhere

The final takeaway of the film that I will discuss is that religious experiences like these can be found anywhere, provided that they are putting themselves into a mindset that allows for the reception of these experiences. When Mia studied the painting, she looked into how a religious aspect, namely the face of God, was expressed in this painting. This portrait is made by an anonymous figure and oozes a mystical aura; it then proves to be a gateway for the God figure to come into Mia's space. This experience has two factors that show that anyone may have a deeply profound and disturbing encounter with the numinous. The first factor that explains why the Divine can be found everywhere is straightforward. It is not the painting itself that has these characteristics. Mia used a picture of the painting to share the topic with her future audience. This copy of the original still facilitated the encounter with the numinous, even though it was not the work itself. This shows that anyone who has a copy of this painting is at risk of being chosen by the God figure to see its face.

The second factor has to do with the nature of painting and its relation to culture. In the film, the painting's intended meaning appears to be the absence of his presence and mysterious revelation to a few people. The painting's rules are a very literal interpretation of Tillich's ideas of symbols. In *Theology of Culture* Peter Tillich explained the difference of signs and symbols. His main distinction was,

“Every symbol points beyond itself to a reality for which it stands.”⁴⁸ Thus the meaning of a symbol is that its connected to something greater than itself. It is not just a representation of these greater meanings, but an extension of it.⁴⁹ So, as I opened this paragraph with, the painting is a literal interpretation. That it allowed the God figure to come into the natural world shows that within this setting, the Divine is real. This also means that symbols such as the cross are not just a remembrance but a connection to Christ as a God figure and a way to have his presence close. Within this setting, figures that are expressed in religion can likely be found through other symbols as well. It is the same for our world. There are a large number of symbols that are meant to reflect aspects of the Divine. Some are subtle, others are explicit, but the watchful person who is open to receiving this knowledge and these experiences can learn about God and religion through these means in addition to the Church and Scripture.

Conclusion

To conclude on the topic of what the meaning of *Portrait of God* is when looking through the lens of Rudolf Otto's *On the Holy*, three messages are most prominent. The first is that the imagery of the Sacred is not easily captured in simple, rational categories. It is not a rejection of it, but the image of God is not as simple as the film shows by playing it by using various symbols and even biblical texts that appear to be oppositional but work like two sides of the same coin. The second message is that death, as a concept, can mean to apply to a mental death regarding the world. An encounter with this eldritch numinous has, at the very least, the capability to spiritually resurrect a person to be closer to it. The final message was that religious experiences can be found everywhere if one is willing to look for them. That the case for the film chose to focus on a picture of a painting does not exclude it from occurring with different circumstances in society.

Each of these messages was able to be portrayed due to the genre and media format in which the *Portrait of God* is situated. Its position as a horror film allows it to present questions and answers that are unorthodox for traditional religion, but still profound in their nature. It gives the possibility to reflect on what God is like through its theology, posing as a mirror to the traditional theology provided in Christian traditions. Its message works well because of what I discussed in the analysis about churches overemphasizing God's love. It is a process that has a risk of making God to be one-dimensional. Films like *Portrait of God* challenge the status quo and raise questions in the viewers. These are questions that a priest or pastor would have to answer in a way that befits Scripture because God has been so elusive that negative theology was developed as a way to try to understand what God is like.

Further research regarding the subject of *Portrait of God* might consider an ethnographic approach to see how this version of God would be received in modern Christian churches. Would they be receptive to a supplemental image of religious dread? Would they reject it altogether to focus on love and the comforting images people have? Would there be a wholly different pattern among these religious people who watched the film?

⁴⁸ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 54.

⁴⁹ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 54-60.

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