

Article

Moving Beyond Text: Rethinking Audiovisual Method in the Study of Lived Religion

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Abstract

While there is growing recognition of film's role in shaping and illustrating beliefs—especially narratively and artistically—there remains limited academic engagement within religious studies practically working with audiovisual content more generally. This article attempts to address this gap by reflecting on the process of our own work on the short documentary film, *Wild Swimming: A Liquid Devotion*. In particular, we focus on the methodological and epistemological insights garnered from working this way and reflect on the questions it forced us to confront. The short film was made by the authors in 2024 and explores wild swimming as a contemporary implicit lived religious practice—instead of merely a physical activity involving cold-water immersion. The film attempts to show how it can serve as a pathway toward encountering the sacred. Reflecting on the experience of making the film, the paper explores what the medium can contribute to the 'empirical excess' of lived religious subjectivities—particularly the dimensions that are physically encountered and observed in practice, and how audiovisual content might be more fully integrated into the academic study of religion. Specifically, drawing from our experience of making the film, it argues for the value of audiovisual research in exploring the embodied experience, sensory encounter and spatial or environmental ritual as essential components of spiritual world-making. Central to this is an argument for the relationship between documentary film and the ethnographic study of lived implicit religion, especially with its focus on praxis. Documentary conventions, we argue, align closely with approaches to lived religion that privilege lived subjectivities, embodiment and subtlety. These conventions allow film to show rather than tell and, importantly, to invite multiple and even unexpected readings. The paper argues that this is especially significant for the study of religion, which deals with realms that often exist outside descriptions in words, because audiovisual media expand the dimensions of communication available to us. Our intention is, therefore, not to privilege audiovisual methods over textual ones, but to consider what additional possibilities they may offer for understanding lived forms of religious practice. It allows for an expansion beyond written textual approaches which, despite the shifts in scholarship to focus on the body and material practice, still dominate the field. By highlighting several of the practical choices made in producing the film, the article also offers important points of reflection on how the experience of the sacred might be further conceived in this way and suggests avenues of focus for deepening audiovisual research within religious studies scholarship. It should be made explicit that the primary objective of this article is to advance a theoretical and methodological discussion of camera-based research for religious studies. Rather than offering an exhaustive analysis of the film itself, we use the film as an empirical case through which to interrogate broader methodological and conceptual questions. Given the constraints of the article's length, a comprehensive film analysis lies beyond its scope. Instead, the film functions as the principal case study



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that enables us to develop, illustrate, and critically reflect upon the epistemological and methodological framework proposed in this article.

Keywords: audiovisual; method; lived religion; implicit religion; religious studies; audiovisual ethnography

1. Introduction: Documentary as Method¹

We have now moved several decades beyond the 1990s, when theology and religious studies scholars first began to seriously recognise that audiovisual or camera-based research needed to be incorporated into the study of religion.

As outlined by [Martin and Ostwalt \(1995\)](#), much of this early theorisation tended to focus on critically approaching film either as a site for theological reflection or as part of mythological and ideological discussions. In these approaches, film was often engaged through Western (Judeo-Christian) theological frameworks—used to ‘do theology’ and explore relationships with the sacred in [Eliade’s \(1959\)](#) sense of hierophany and quest, or to analyse religious ideologies and value systems represented within narrative structures. While focused in scope, these processes remain valid and continue to offer important ways of understanding the sacred, religion and people’s relationships to it.

Importantly though, through engaging this way, scholars began drawing attention to the emergence of new forms of communication and new religious languages that lived within the audiovisual worlds they were analysing. These insights cannot be overlooked, especially in a time where we have transitioned into a world where most students grow up fully immersed in these audiovisual media-rich worlds—spaces that continue to expand in both saturation and in the values they produce and reinforce. As van de Port, writing in 2006 ([van de Port 2006](#)) already suggested, religious actors have learned to engage with the conventions of media representation, understanding how to use it in order to present religion as authoritative and authentic.

As part of this, we must also recognise that digital worlds represent the primary location outsiders turn to when looking to understand faith ([Garner 2022](#)), a cultural environment that is largely audiovisual ([Clark and Ippolito 2023](#)). With the ubiquitous availability of the technologies required to engage this way, this world only continues to expand. The breadth and saturation of these audiovisual forms of communication open many new doors for the researcher. This is not merely in the form of analysis, this continually expanding brings with it many relevant methodologies and approaches for engaging with these tools practically.

Despite all this, there remains remarkably little movement in adoption of these creative approaches from within the field ([Zhang and Qian 2024](#)). Alongside this, there is still significant work to be done in fully grasping, communicating and theorising lived and embodied religious subjectivities through these audiovisual, practice-based methods. While the valuable body of scholarship analysing film from narrative, artistic, cultural and ideological perspectives continues to grow, work that focuses on practically harnessing audiovisual media as a pedagogical and research tool—particularly for what it can express and explore in embodied and experiential dimensions—remains relatively limited. Despite, as [O’Reilly \(2012\)](#) writes, finding it complicated to move beyond words, keeping pace with the continued expansion of digital and audiovisual culture, we argue, is both a necessary and increasingly urgent task when theorising and practically engaging with the study of religion and human spirituality.

In turning to work this way, we attempt to allow for approaches that engage more directly with the material and mediated dimensions of religious life. We see this to be of particular value for emerging generations of researchers whose lives are deeply entangled with online audiovisual environments and whose experiences of embodiment, identity, space and meaning are often shaped through digital and audiovisual forms. It is in this understanding of experience, beyond the mere expansion of audiovisual culture, where we posit a camera-based audiovisual approach to research holding value.

More significantly, the continued development of audiovisual tools matters not simply for purposes of representation, but for their capacity to function as platforms of communication that speak directly to questions of embeddedness and embodiment. As outlined by MacDougall (2019), among many others, cinema has long been recognised for its ability to draw audiences into its world. Through its framing of image and sound, it evokes the other senses, inviting viewers to place themselves within the scene. In this, it is the most effective media we have access to for bringing ourselves into the world of another, particularly worlds that cannot be easily outlined in words. As argued by Dutch ethnographic filmmaker van de Port (2018), embodied religious practices could, arguably, be the most appropriate place to develop this sensory audiovisual content, as “divine truths are encountered in immediate bodily experiences, which are provoked by a great variety of body techniques” (p. 137). Practices, or techniques, that do not articulate but trigger perception nonetheless. This becomes a salient point for us. We are drawn to this topic because of audiovisual media’s capacity to draw out deeper forms of knowing through tapping into another’s sensory world.

Part of the growing interest in films capacity to work this way, and key to developing the discussion in this paper, we draw on our experience of creating the short documentary *Wild Swimming: A Liquid Devotion* (<https://vimeo.com/1166721854>) (Kollar and Sremac 2024) using the filmmaking process itself as a site of inquiry into these questions. The article is thus a vehicle for reflection on the methodological and conceptual insights that emerged through approaching the study of religion this way—including what this mode of engagement revealed about filmmaking practice itself.

To be explicit, our concern here is not with the findings of the research into wild swimming as implicit lived religious practice that we followed in the short film, but rather with a methodological question: how do audiovisual methods contribute to the study of lived and implicit religion, particularly in accessing embodied, sensory and spatial dimensions of contemporary ‘spiritual’ practice? Following Latour and Woolgar (1986), we treat the short film as a methodological inscription device—a tool through which analysis and discussion can be generated to assess the potential and efficacy of engaging with religion and spirituality in this way.

Though we began this process with audiovisual goals in mind, we recognise we were shaped by our position as Western European scholars working on lived religion. This positionality shaped both the framing of this project and the ways in which we approached and interpreted wild swimming. Our interest in the practice was not neutral but informed by broader academic and cultural engagements with embodiment, nature and so-called ‘secular spirituality’—where individuals seek meaning and transcendence in what might be regarded as everyday practices outside of traditional religious institutions (Ter Borg 2008)—in contemporary Western European contexts. At the same time, our own attraction to wild swimming inevitably influenced what we recognised as meaningful or transformative in the experiences of others. We are aware that this functionalist category of ‘secular spirituality’ is not simply descriptive but analytical and may not fully align with how swimmers themselves articulate their practices (Lynch 2005). This recognition requires us

to remain attentive to the ways in which our hermeneutical and theoretical lens both enable insight and shapes the boundaries of what can be seen and presented.

2. The Film Project: The Inscription Device

To further situate the discussion, it might be good to broadly divulge more details as to what the audiovisual-based project we are discussing was and how it came to be. As we have noted, the film project was primarily based on the idea that audiovisual documentation is key to contributing to a richer, more layered understanding of spirituality as a lived experience. In this, it was strongly influenced by anthropological work on religion which has demonstrated that audiovisual representations can help viewers experience and understand spiritual practices in ways that written texts cannot ([van de Port 2018](#)). Audiovisual language has evolved to communicate depths of situated meaning. This makes it possible to access the deeper levels of understanding that those depicted enact, including many elements of how religion is actually experienced and performed ([Homiaik 2003](#)).

While this approach remains underrepresented in the fields of religion and empirical theology, engagement with religion in audiovisual contexts is not entirely absent from scholarly discourse. Over the past two decades, a broader movement has emerged that provides an important foundation for this project. These conversations have offered both the justification and the methodological grounding for undertaking this work. Beginning with the seminal contributions from authors like [Martin and Ostwalt \(1995\)](#), [Lyden \(2003\)](#) and [Plate \(2003\)](#), scholars have gradually recognised how filmic texts can themselves function as terrains of religious meaning, containing, embodying and transmitting religious experiences and ideas in ways that operate beyond simple representation. Developed through cross-disciplinary work drawing on literary studies, film studies and cultural theory—among others ([Kickasola et al. 2013](#))—this body of scholarship has examined narrative structures, symbolic meaning and the ways audiovisual media shape religious imagination. In doing so, it has established some of the critical groundwork for understanding how research engaging with audiovisual content can be conceived, employed and interpreted within the study of religion.

This engagement, particularly the effort to identify some of what this medium uniquely affords, draws attention to its capacity to capture the subtlety of gestures, tones, and spatial dynamics in practices that often elude verbal description. These are precisely the kinds of tools that support the growing scholarly focus on embodiment and highlight the importance of the material world in religious life. At its core, then, our aim was to create a film that operates within these realms. To begin moving beyond the limits of articulation and to help show how religion is lived through the bodies of practitioners ([Plate 2015](#)).

Shot between January 2023 and March 2024, the film documents stories of Dutch participants' engagement with the practice of wild swimming, swimming in natural bodies of water—particularly in the context of cold-water immersion ([Overbury et al. 2023](#))—and presents research into the spirituality associated with the practice. As the film started as product for exploring audiovisual methods, it was developed in an exploratory and practice-based manner. Wild Swimming was identified as a culturally embedded practice which could be identified as part of a growing movement of 'secular spirituality', or as a form of world-making and knowing that can be described as sensuous, existential and, in this way, spiritual ([Ganzevoort 2011](#)).

The film developed to become an ethnographic phenomenological account of wild swimming and, as we briefly discussed, attempted to convey part of the embodied experiences of people who have made this practice a regular part of their lives. Working ethnographically, the project took shape initially through preliminary interviews conducted before formal development, or in film parlance, production. In the year preceding the

project's formalisation, twenty-one wild swimmers were first informally interviewed in five separate locations in within the Netherlands. This period, and the weeks leading up to the filming, included spending time across various other locations which represented both a form of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) and sensory attunement. This further informed the subsequent semi-structured filmed interviews, which were integral to shaping the final film presentation and informing much of the montage in the final visual product. While thirteen participants were originally filmed, practical data-exclusion criteria were applied to determine the final selection. Ultimately, seven participants were chosen for inclusion in the final edit. The remaining six individuals were excluded largely due to technical limitations. Specifically, issues with sound quality and framing. One was left out because their interview narratives drifted toward unrelated topics, diverging from the central thematic focus of the study.²

The participant observation was guided by a theoretical lens informed by scholarship in post-secular, implicit religion (Bailey 1990; Bailey 1997; Park 2011) and lived religion (Orsi 1997; Hall 1997; Sremac and Ganzevoort 2017, 2018). In this, we were specifically concerned with how the practice of wild swimming contributes to the lived religious subjectivities of its participants in the Netherlands.

While the lived religion paradigm represents the basis of how we began approaching religion in this study, it was Bailey's (1990) theories on implicit religion that proved to be a useful guide during the film's post-production—or editing—and its framing of religion was easily recognisable within the collected footage and interview content. Because the theory suggests that the evidence of religion is observable in outward practice, it became of great value in choosing what to put forward in the final film product. In this, the framework provided a robust and practical 'toolkit' for processing the research.

Bailey puts forward that religion can be ethnographically observed through several outward indicators. Including; the level of commitment shown by participants, the integrating foci that sustain the practice—such as rituals, artefacts and meaning-making structures, and the presence of intensive concerns with extensive effects within these processes. This last point put differently, one can examine how far practitioners are willing to go or what they are willing to sacrifice in pursuit of the perceived outcomes of the practice. These elements, we suggest, are very identifiable in audiovisual form. Working this way then, processing the filmed information became a task of examining the footage and interview content under these terms.

To perhaps more explicitly discuss how this was operationalised, we can briefly turn to the idea of *integrating foci*. When examining the visual data—particularly the footage of the real-time activity, or in filmic parlance, B-roll—alongside data collected during the filmed interviews, we identified what we felt was a strong ritualistic element involved in the practice for the participants. This was evidenced not only by the interviewees' accounts regarding the way they had come into performing the activity regularly, but also visually in the deliberate way they prepared for entering the water. Through these comments and processes, we identified what seemed to be participants creating a distinct space where, in Eliade's (1959) terms, they seemed to set aside ordinary or profane time to step into a sacred or purposeful moment. In a practical and straightforward way, these specific discussion points and demonstrations were thus chosen for inclusion in the final edit. This similar method was applied to the other two points outlined in Bailey's description. We processed the B-roll footage with what we gathered in the interviews, identifying where we felt we saw elements pertaining to the *intensive concern*, or how important the process had become to their lives and their belief in its benefits and showed where we felt we heard or saw levels of extraordinary commitment. Presenting these elements this way, we felt we were

providing viewers opportunity to observe and reflect in order to process what they saw in the data related to terms we put forward in our thesis.

Although, in this way, the project remained straightforward and practical, it was also influenced by preliminary research and key ideas of the real presence of the sacred (Eliade 1959; Orsi 1997; Orsi 2016) and transcendence (C. Taylor 2007), including the role these play in spiritual and mental health (van Dierendonck and Mohan 2006). It also remained concerned with participants and their interaction with the cold water and nature in these terms (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). These ideas were identifiable in both the filmed material and the interviews, and they became a significant part of what we have attempted to draw out and communicate in the documentary.

By working this way, the film could best be described as a narrated observational documentary. However, for purposes of grounding and emphasis, a few participatory, immersive and reflexive moments were included—which we will discuss. In all this, the film's 'findings' revolved around ideas related to holistic health and spirituality, the sacred—in particular, the sacrality of water, traditions of nature and water immersion, ritual, coping, meaning-making and transcendence.

Crucially though, the film was deliberately produced as a film first, and, while the elements mentioned above were carefully considered in its creation, its primary purpose remained an attempt to explore what it meant to engage the lived religion theoretical framework within this audiovisual context. Viewing and considering the wild swimming through an audiovisual lens remained central throughout the filming process, the development of the narrative and the interpretation of the material. This orientation also shaped the epistemological and methodological foundations of the project, and it is to this aspect that we now turn.

3. Converging Modalities: Material, Audiovisual and Sensorial Lived Religion: What We Need to Know

While we have outlined that there has been increased recognition of the need for audiovisual engagement, and much of the practical infrastructure for working this way is in place, the significant hurdle that remains is the formation of appropriate theoretical approaches and frameworks for understanding how to research religion appropriately. Due to historical development working from a prioritisation of sacred writings (Meyer 2015; Morgan 2012; Uehlinger 2015), the study of religion remains largely preoccupied with written text and discourse (Knoblauch and Haken 2021). Although scholarship has long included the analysis of art and, as noted above, film has been incorporated into religious and theological studies, the bridge between analysing film as text and engaging with religion through audiovisual practice—like camera-based research—remains tenuous. This, again, underscores the need for more practical, hands-on development. It is only through such engagement that scholars can begin to understand what audiovisual methods reveal, how they operate and what kinds of religious or spiritual knowledge they make available.

It should be evident that the study of lived religion, particularly focusing on its material, outward dimensions, constitutes a significant component of the contemporary field of religious studies. However, engaging with this data, particularly in its audiovisual forms, as a medium for investigating lived religious subjectivities and their world-making has proven to be a more complex and methodologically challenging task. Our belief is that an audiovisual approach to lived religion provides an observational hermeneutical framework for analysing processes of religious world-making, with particular attention to their material, sensory and intrinsically ambiguous and messy dimensions. It therefore methodologically attends to modes and regimes of lived religious subjectivities that are less discursive and that extend beyond discursive articulation.

While the choice to work this way is necessarily methodological, it also begins to signal many of the important epistemological concerns that require discussion. If religion is understood as lived practice, and not simply tied to textual form, then other forms of knowledge appropriate to its study, especially those able to capture this ‘everyday spirituality’ (Ammerman 2014), become not only supplementary, but epistemically aligned with the object of inquiry. Therefore, an audiovisual lived religion takes seriously the ways in which multisensory religious subjectivities and world-making is generated through gesture, atmosphere, rhythm, silence, spatiality and the interplay of bodies and environments—something we were very keen to develop in our documentary.

These dimensions often resist reduction to conceptual or textual abstraction and become lost amidst the ‘discursive colonisation’ (van de Port 2011) of religious studies. Its modernist hegemony of the text risks privileging coherent and stable beliefs and narratives while marginalising forms of lived subjectivities that operate affectively, sensorially and bodily. As Carp (2008) rightly claims, a sensorial and material study of religion encounters “people thinking with nose, tastes, movement, touch and various simultaneous or rhythmically structured combinations” (p. 179). Methodologically and epistemologically speaking, this approach attends to modes and terrains of lived religious subjectivities that are less discursive, symbolic, or semiotic, and more messy, sensory, imaginative, embodied and affective (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2017, 2018).

4. What Is at Stake and What Matters Here?

Having clarified how and why we approached religion audiovisually, we began to recognise that engaging in this work drew us into an epistemological dialogue we had not fully anticipated. Many of the decisions being made were not merely practical but were pushing us toward new ways of knowing and understanding. In particular, we began to consider why audiovisual engagement is conceived of as simply an alternative technique, but not a valid and necessary mode of inquiry for contemporary religious studies and for theological discourse.

A move in understanding how religion can be processed this way means a move to further discuss the practical and tangible manifestation of religious belief through its intersections with daily routines, regimes, habits, rituals and individual experience. It directs attention to the everyday practices of ordinary people (Hall 1997) and to the material and embodied dimensions of religion as they occur in daily life and narratives (Ammerman 2014). Rather than confining religion to its traditionally sanctioned or doctrinal forms, this lived religion assumes that faith is experienced across diverse contexts—sometimes formal, but often informal or embedded within ostensibly secular spaces—where it functions as a source of transcendence and meaning (Edgell 2012). The emphasis shifts from belief alone to practice, particularly practices unfolding outside institutional settings (Ammerman 2014). In this framework, religion encompasses how individuals internalise and embody the spiritual and sublime, incorporating them into actions, decisions, and relationship.

This approach, therefore, enables, or even requests of, us to study religion through the vector of practices, i.e., concrete acts that involve people, their bodies, things, spaces, pictures, texts, and other media through which religion becomes tangibly present. Working at the point of praxis, or site of purposeful engagement (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014). This material approach takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things and is part and parcel of social networks (Meyer 2012).

By privileging practice, embodiment, and context over official institutionalised doctrine and theological canon, lived religion aligns closely with ethnographic approaches to research. This alignment became important for us because it created a direct link to

anthropology and its long-standing engagement with audiovisual methods. Ethnography—especially ethnographic film—has historically been rooted in anthropology and has demonstrated how visual media can convey dimensions of religious life that are difficult to access through text alone, especially in relation to experience (Homíak 2003). As Kraft (1985) argued, knowledge of religion may in some respects be more accessible through anthropological methodologies such as film than through traditional theological approaches.

Therefore, if religion is lived, enacted and sensory, and if people construct meaning through sensorial and bodily engagement with its aesthetic and material dimensions, or even if we simply acknowledge that humans construct their worlds visually (Morgan 2005, 2012; Meyer 2015), then methods capable of attending to the observable—gesture, space, movement, atmosphere, and environment—become particularly appropriate. Audiovisual approaches are therefore not merely supplementary but epistemically suited to the study of lived religious subjectivities.

Continuing with this logic, visual engagement is not merely illustrative but epistemically aligned with the object of inquiry. The camera, used as an observational research tool, enables attention to the embodied negotiations of everyday spirituality as they unfold in practice (Homíak 2003). It also provides a means to show as well as tell, offering a non-linguistic mode of conveying knowledge that complements verbal description. This dual capacity, as part of key concern to our study, allows the capture of dimensions of lived experience that may not be easily articulated in language (Young 2009).

For us, then, it was in approaching wild swimming as a lived religious practice that the epistemological dialogue we had entered into became most apparent. This rested on the assumption that religious meaning is enacted through these concrete, situated practices, and that such meaning cannot be detached from the embodied and environmental contexts in which it is experienced. In this sense, we see meaning preceding articulation (Carp 2007). This does not argue that audiovisual methodologies supplant written text-based religious studies scholarship—although it questions its significant epistemological dominance. In this, we are part of a rethinking of what counts as evidence, what constitutes religious knowledge and how religious world-making comes into being through multisensory engagement.

Drawing on her anthropological and ethnographic research in West Africa, leading religious studies scholar Meyer (2012) argues for a cross-cutting of genealogies in the study of religion. She suggests religious studies can productively draw from anthropology's aim to 'make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange', engaging in the 'frontier areas' where clashes arise over how religion is understood and defined. It is through such encounters between differing disciplinary approaches that new analytical tools can emerge, tools capable of more fully engaging with and communicating religious experience. We identify with this sentiment, seeing ethnographic film as such a frontier area, and by engaging with audiovisual methods it becomes possible to approach practices, spaces, embodied subjectivities and rituals in ways that both reveal and reframe lived religious experience.

5. An Audiovisual Ethnographic Genre: The Language

Following Meyer's call, we found in anthropology many indispensable tools, particularly through its long-standing engagement with audiovisual ethnography. This discipline offers not only epistemological and methodological guidance but also the necessary conceptual vocabulary to articulate religious experience in audiovisual form. An important element in anthropology's capacity to inform audiovisual religious studies is realised through its engagement with genre. As anthropology has turned to film, it has inevitably engaged with genre as a key framework for interpreting and reading audiovisual data.

This became important, as a core critique we came up against in this process was related to how such a film could be read or understood.

As Feuer (1992) discusses, while genre is often treated merely as a classification system, it can be viewed as the basis of a film's grammar and thus, is the basis to its interpretive framework, the ideological construct that provides and enforces a pre-reading. Because of this, genre has developed into one of the most important organising tools for engaging with audiovisual media, dating back to cinema's infancy. Particularly as American cinema tended toward storytelling, recurring elements were introduced not only to aid viewers in interpreting films but also to help filmmakers plan their work. It introduces the paradigm for how the film is read. This interplay between culture, audiences, and filmmakers created the very language through which films are read (Tudor 2012). Genre, in other words, is as much a tool for reading films as it is for making them. Given its central role, it is impossible to avoid engaging with it. Even in our short work, we recognised it influencing discussions on how to approach our data and anticipate its reception.

When discussing genre, we are, in very straightforward terms, looking at loose sets of recognisable conventions within a film, including consistent iconography, stylistic approaches to lighting, camera styles and narrative structuring. These structures, of course, are not necessarily static and domineering. However, they provide the viewer with necessary pathways for understanding the film (Bordwell and Thompson 2010). In grasping and working with generic conventions, we tap into necessary languages of film that are key for communicating effectively with an audience. Because genre shapes the expectations through which viewers interpret a film, it functions not only as a tool of production but also as a tool of analysis to determine if the film adequately communicates what it intends to. There are conventional rules governing these systems, and genre is as likely to influence a filmmaker in their choice of shots as is the prior training of an ethnographer. That is, not only what is the proper subject of film but also what, within that subject, is the proper way to record it (Young 2009).

What this practically means is that engaging with generic discussion is itself part of the epistemological dialogue we have begun to outline. Each genre-based decision is also a decision about how knowledge will be produced and communicated. It is part of what it means to engage seriously with the language of film and it is a dimension of audiovisual research that must be grasped if the approach is to be employed effectively in religious studies—including opening the door to many important reflexive considerations.

An important reflexive choice, then, concerned recognising what genre(s) worked best in approaching the subject. While many of the choices about how to present our film came from practical restrictions related to available equipment and skill, we recognised that an observational cinema approach to documentary suited our goals best. This is largely due to its history of emerging from an attempt to show rather than tell, positioning itself in contrast to narrative fiction and early documentary conventions such as continuity editing and authoritative voiceovers. As Young (2009) notes, observational filmmakers aim for credible representations of reality, and if 'seeing is believing' is essential to making the form work, then the film could only succeed if audiences believed they were witnessing real events. In this sense, we aspired to move as directly from field to screen as possible, almost presenting visual field notes (Asch and Asch 2009).

By minimising overt narrative structuring, it reduced reliance on imposed storytelling frameworks (Young 2009). As MacDougall (2006) notes, the approach attempts to move away from a "word-and-sentence" logic towards an "image-and-sequence" aesthetic (p. 225). In this, through a montage of scenes of 'actuality', it attempts to create space for viewers to interpret content rather than directing them along a predetermined path (Asch

and Asch 2009). Work with this genre's logic meant we could easily match the work our research desire to privilege practices, spaces and embodied subjectivities.

It should be noted that, like any genre, observational cinema is not a rigid structure. Rather, we recognise that we have drawn heavily from its codes and language. In practice, this meant employing longer takes, emphasising natural sound and avoiding direct or authoritative narration. We focused on the processes and practices of the wild swimming, deliberately avoiding any complex structuring or montage.

In this, we also held a goal inviting the viewer to slow down, to explore the methodological possibilities created by working this way. To help the viewer move toward a 'meditative observation' and 'reflective slowness' and to move away from the accelerated context of academic knowledge production. As Prosser and Loxley (2008) put it, we sought to provide an alternative to the "hegemony of a word and number based academy" (p. 4), looking to encourage the viewer to contemplate further and reflect more fully on the diversity of human experience. This approach aligned with our goal of providing an embodied, sensory understanding of the material qualities of water and sound within their concrete spatial environment. This emphasis on sensory attention and embodied presence naturally aligns our work with approaches developed in sensory ethnographic cinema.

Consequently, the film also engages with conventions theorised in what has been labelled sensory cinema, particularly attempting to evoke the sonic and meditative practices of everyday cold-water immersion. While we have touted here that 'seeing is believing', we understand that other senses play a role in fully forming our understanding. We also understand that, while the video camera is, in a practical sense, technologically limited to capture the visual and the auditory elements, this form of representation can trigger the viewer's imagination of the other senses (Elliott and Culhane 2017).

Therefore, we sought to explore the affective terrain of these sonic practices and the immersive soundscape of the water, the beach, animals and other human voices. Key to this was beginning the film with a participant-observation segment, treating the camera itself as an integral part of the sensory experience. In this, drawing from Ferrarini (2017), we agree that making a piece of sensory ethnography means it should first inscribe in itself the body of the maker, and from that we strived, "to evoke that corporeality in the audience" (p. 11). By attuning the audience to sensuous scholarship, we positioned the work as a product of attentive filmmaking and as an invitation to engage with the material and affective textures of the field. This approach, in moving aside from typical continuity editing conventions, sought to direct the audience away from viewing the film as a purely edited construction, and instead we attempted to attune them to the process of being in the field. By drawing on this tradition from within ethnographic filmmaking, we aimed to leverage video's unique potential to represent the embodied and multisensory nature of fieldwork, thereby seeking to evoke a direct sensory experience in the audience (Pink 2013).

It is perhaps important to mention that working with this focus on observation and sensory experience provided us the space to prioritise data collection over creative presentation. The generic conventions here allowed for what Grimshaw (2013) describes as a kind of abdication of directorial control, meaning we did not have time for ordering shots in specific ways to fit what we wanted—in fact, some of the best data collected was not recorded 'well', yet was included in the final presentation. Other approaches would have required more deliberate shot planning and technical precision oriented towards a tightly controlled product, which would have worked against these priorities. Working largely in an observational style, with emphasis on immediacy and minimal intervention, aligned well with these constraints.

Starting with this straightforward logic, no strict script, and an openness to shaping meaning in the edit allowed us the space to process the material in a highly reflexive

manner. This iterative process represents perhaps the most significant ‘finding’ of working this way, offering a crucial element for the contemporary academic environment. Through the analysis of recorded interviews—themselves informed by prior conversations—we developed a loose narrative around the participants’ engagement with the water. The observational style ultimately provided the necessary distance to analyse and rethink our material, enabling a process of critical reflection where even unconscious decisions made in the field could be identified and examined. This gave us the time to further interrogate our positionality and the consequences of our presence.

In this process, we recognised what (Ginsburg ([1973] 2003) suggests, that, “the relationship between the producer and subject is more prominent for the audience than it is for the reader of a written text” (p. 368). During editing, becoming ‘audience’ to our own material allowed us to re-immersing ourselves in the footage and step back from the immediacy of fieldwork, enabling us to reconsider and process anew much of what had been collected. By filming the world like this, we are displaced from our regular platform of seeing. Here we strongly identified with the ethnographic filmmaker MacDougall (2019), who describes this process as a “dislocation as method” (p. 7).

6. Historical Awareness

Despite the reflexive space we recognise here, we must not overlook the fact that observational filmmaking has long been subject to critique around issues of reflexivity and positionality. To understand this, it may be worth a short detour to discuss that it is not odd that anthropology and film came to find each other.

Both were developed in a similar period and have many parallel historical developments, having been born out of the same nineteenth-century Euro-American intellectual and cultural foundations. Film’s earliest function was to capture everyday life, which soon extended to include the everyday life of the ‘exotic’ people anthropology was interested in. As noted by MacDougall (2006), documentary itself was an early genre that developed from the anthropological desire displayed in many natural sciences, to bring visual evidence into their work and describe their findings visually. This is relevant because, as noted by Ruby (1980), as both anthropology and the documentary genre developed, they both worked towards reaching the middle-class goal of understanding what ‘we’ must do with ‘them’. Where ‘them’, of course, was code for the poor, “the powerless, the disadvantaged and the politically suppressed” (p. 166).

Developed through the 1950s and 1960s amidst new access to portable filmmaking equipment, observational cinema itself represented an attempt to move past this gaze. However, by the early 1980s, this approach was already facing major waves of criticism, through the reflexive turn in anthropology, postcolonial critique, feminist anthropology, and challenges to scientific positivism. Early observational films attempted present themselves as neutral and minimally interventionist, suggesting that reality could ‘speak for itself’. These critics were quick to argue that all filmmaking involves selection, framing and editing, and that the absence of narration does not remove the filmmaker’s interpretation. Observational cinema was linked to ‘visualism’, described as distanced, disembodied and aligned with a privileged, controlling western gaze (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005). In all this, it was often dismissed as naïve ‘realism’, linked to photography’s association with scientific positivism and seen as epistemologically simplistic and out of step with a critically self-aware, postcolonial discipline (Grimshaw 2013).

This critique must be heeded. Working from a similar standpoint, we felt it necessary to frame our content around direct input from participants. In planning the shots, we drew on information provided during the earlier semi-structured interviews. The shooting was thus informed by a concern to work with this input—in what could be defined as part of

what Bee (2024) suggests is a “collaborative intervention.” In one location, we even received video content from participants. While this content was not included in the final edit, it helped inform the reflection process. In this, we were borrowing from participatory theories of documentary filmmaking, recognising the value in shared authorship as a pathway to get around academic bias (Goopy and Kassan 2019).

While we were explicitly transparent in our introduction of the camera, including how it would be employed during our time in the field, asking for permission on where we could engage, we did not allow the participants to direct its flow or provide further comment. Looking ahead though, we identify the value in feedback loops and providing participants opportunity to direct the camera or even to discuss their content in ‘photovoice’ type scenarios designed around participants providing feedback to the content displayed (Williams and Whitehouse 2015).

For us, however, in experimenting with camera-based engagement, the presentation of the practice took precedence over individual perceptions of the practice. In this, we identified with Grimshaw (2013), who suggests that, amongst the renewed interest in phenomenology—which lies at the heart of this study and the study of lived religion—there has been a reopening of space for observational cinema as a distinctive mode of knowledge practice, particularly in the approach’s values of “understanding human subjects in the world” (p. 236). In this, continuity, the affordance of detail, contextual depth and material engagement became central to the film’s construction. Thus, ensuring that the practice could be perceived in relation to its surroundings and allowing us to engage with human subjects through their embodied interaction with the practice.

7. Concluding Remarks: A Sensory Work Moving Forward?

What has been discussed above begins to illustrate something of the world that is revealed through actual engagement with audiovisual approaches in religious studies and re-emphasises why we believe it is necessary. Through critical reflection on the process of working this way—re-engaging with the material, time in the field and our motivations throughout the production process—important insights emerged. At the core of this is a belief that audiovisual content is a necessary tool for understanding the fullness of religious and spiritual experience, especially within current discourse on lived and implicit religion. In beginning to identify how the language of film, particularly through genre, can be read, reflected on and developed, we have taken a first step toward addressing this need. However, the critical gap remains, there is still an absence of a clear framework for the future of audiovisual engagement within religious studies, raising an important question as to what forms of audiovisual engagement might best align with the goals of the discipline while incorporating the lessons learned through this process.

This study, we believe, only begins to highlight how video’s capacity for observational and sensory engagement is essential for our field. As De Groof (2018) writes, scholars need historical, anthropological and linguistic understanding of local cultures to effectively analyse them, and for us, as scholars of religion, this extends to knowledge of the embodied experience. As Plate (2015) reminds us, in working on understanding religion and belief, we must attend to “the pivotal place of bodies, performance, the senses and new orientations grounded in spatial theories” (p. 4). This is the place religion takes its forms and where we can move it on into theory. Drawing on what we flagged near the outset, we need to work with audiovisual media’s ability to draw audiences into its world (MacDougall 2019).

In the important work discussed above, Meyer (2012) develops the notion of sensational form to show how religion can be understood as a prescribed configuration of practices designed to draw out a sensory response in relation to what lies ‘beyond’. Meyer argues that humans are sentient beings who relate to the world through perception, engaged

through all the senses. Knowledge, in these terms, is generated through the mobilisation and cultivation of senses that evoke emotion, producing imaginaries that pull together these impressions into meaningful wholes. Meaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply related to sensorial engagement with material. By focusing on sensational forms, we draw attention to the role of the body as a producer, transmitter and receiver of the transcendent. In this light, audiovisual content itself is one such sensational form—something that can evoke responses and shape meaning in the way Meyer suggests.

This contemplation draws back to what was already identified in film in its earliest days and what has made it so successful—its ability to stir emotion and strike at the senses (Plate 2017). Combining images with sound makes it possible to go beyond the simply visible and auditory, and the sensations evoked play an important role in our understanding of the weave of forces that exist around what is presented. As noted by L. Taylor (1996), pictures are “transformed by the simultaneous soundtrack, which is in turn modified by the adjacent picture” (p. 75). Through this process of stirring the senses, film “becomes a sensory medium nearly as much as the human subject is a sensory being” (ibid). For a study focused on lived religion and spirituality, where the practice is deeply embodied, providing sensory understanding becomes essential for grasping the practice.

This is precisely why, if audiovisual content is to grow as an effective part of communicating beliefs, we need to engage with the senses, take seriously the language and tools available to us in ethnographic filmmaking and provide viewers with access to the empirical data presented in this way. More specifically, this requires researchers to operationalise sensory data by treating observational footage as primary empirical evidence to map the objects of study, while embracing the capacities inherent in the framing of footage coupled with sound against the phenomena under investigation.

Alongside this, and importantly, we argue that these tools and visual languages allow both the researcher and the wider academy to recognise an entirely new domain of empirical data that only reveals itself through these lenses. As we have argued throughout, developing such a framework is not optional, but is both possible and, as such, necessary for the discipline. By beginning to work from these practical conventions, we feel the discipline can move forward, providing concrete pathways for viewers to access the sensory knowledge that enables our minds to process belief.

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Notes

- ¹ It may be useful to briefly discuss a few key terms related to audiovisual content. In working this way, we are drawing from studies where the terms *film*, *cinema* and *video* can be used somewhat interchangeably. Strictly speaking, each term refers to a specific element of the production and presentation process, and each carries a different connotations for the reader. However, the terms can overlap. Video can be considered a film, and that film can be analysed as cinema. With that, this content is often discussed as simply *visual*. Yet, strictly speaking, this refers only to one of the senses engaged by a film. Therefore, to support the discussion more accurately and comprehensively, the term *audiovisual* has been adopted as the default to describe the type of content under consideration.
- ² It should be noted that this was an experimental process for us as researchers. While we possessed some experience in the practical elements of filmmaking, the process remained one of continuous learning and experimenting with different production possibilities. Mistakes were made along the way which rendered some of the content unusable or irrelevant.

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