REFLECTIONS ON TRANSPERSONAL MEDIA: AN EMERGING MOVEMENT

Daniel L. Gaylinn
Mountain View, California

ABSTRACT: This introductory article to a special thematic issue of the Journal is devoted to creating a better understanding of the nexus between transpersonal psychology and the media. This article provides a general overview of what appears to be emerging as a transpersonal media movement. A brief discussion of the various signposts and implications of this movement are considered, with particular attention paid to cinema, as film seems to provide a vivid example of how the transpersonal appears in media by virtue of its widespread availability, its diffusion of shared and vicarious experience, and other aspects. Three lenses for perceiving and dialoguing about transpersonal media are offered: transpersonal content, transpersonal form, and transpersonal purpose. Some of the implications are suggested, and an invitation for further inquiry is made.

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an introductory overview of what seems to be an emerging movement of transpersonal elements that are appearing in the popular media. By suggesting only a portion of the mounting evidence for this nascent area of inquiry and research, we invite the reader into a dialogue exploring this emerging movement. This special focus issue of the Journal presents several scholarly approaches to this topic rather than a comprehensive examination of it. The discussion will focus on this movement as it appears in the cinematic medium, since cinema seems to provide a vivid example of what may in fact be occurring within other media sources as well.

MODERN TRANSPERSONAL MEDIA

There are several senses in which the modern popular media may be considered as inherently transpersonal. The first is that the newspapers, magazines, books, television, internet, and cinema which comprise these media are all designed to communicate directly with the masses; they deal intrinsically with the human collective, and thus they may be conceptualized as a form of transpersonal transmission.

Also, the popular media is the major carrier of new information or insight. So just as one might say that the filaments in a light bulb are the media by which an electric light illuminates an entire room, so too, the popular media becomes the source of illumination for an entire culture. “Media” may thus be considered inherently transpersonal inasmuch as it “transcends the personal,” and is “transindividual” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, Vol. XVIII, p. 420).

Email: transpersonalfilms@yahoo.com

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When one takes into consideration the sheer saturation of media in modern-day culture, one becomes aware of the value of bringing a high degree of conscious awareness to the production and distribution of such transmissions. Thus, what we are calling a “transpersonal media movement” represents a particular level of consciousness one can bring to receiving, integrating, and communicating messages via the popular media. This is not a plea for censorship, but rather a call for closer attention to a phenomenally strong force in the “information age.”

Never before has such a broad spectrum of diverse albeit vicarious experience been widely available through the media to what media-theorist Marshall McLuhan termed the “global village,” (McLuhan, 1967). Nor has such a potential for deeply felt expression been so widely shared.

**ANCIENT ORIGINS, CONTINUING INFLUENCES**

As the evidence of our ancient origins plainly shows, the desire to express and share deeply felt experiences is nothing new. From ancient tribes to the present day, people have found expression for the fantastic and ecstatic realms of the transcendent through sacred drama, storytelling, and myth-making, as well as through all forms of imagery and music. In this way, humans found ways to project their consciousness, their minds, from the immanent world of the here-and-now into the transcendent world of imagination and dreams. It is only now that we are able to manifest such projections into a universally shared and vividly tangible form.

Many of the principles that originated in the ancient shamanic practices have remained the same to this day inasmuch as humans continue to access the transcendent/immanent quality of consciousness in an effort to project their minds into the world of an “other” and find meaning in the transcendent (even when the meaning is merely escapist entertainment). In some cases, we may be transported into a transcendent world that is intended to be closely aligned with the everyday world (as is depicted, for instance, by documentaries or the local, domestic, and international news) or, in other cases, we are projected into the realm of fantasy and imagination (as depicted, for instance, by science fiction and cartoon animation). Since any depiction of the world never totally encapsulates the full complexity of the world itself, but rather depicts some aspect of it, we may safely state that either case depicts, at least in part, some combination of both the immanent and transcendent worlds providing the foundation for this emerging movement of transpersonal media.

One transpersonal aspect that film inherently engenders is transcendence of the traditional constraints of space and time. The perceived illusion of motion through the rapid succession of projected still frames of film upon a screen makes the audience project their minds into the images and sounds so as to understand or appreciate the story that is depicted by the film. It is a fallacy however for us to believe that the true sources for these images and sounds are incorporated there upon the screen. The reality is that the film depicts representations, mere symbols of the various people, places, and events that occurred during the actual making of the film. This, then, provides us with access to the people, places, and events of the past as if they were happening right here-and-now. To the viewer, the experience often seems
to be occurring in the present moment by engendering visceral or emotional reactions that feels as real as any. This is an immanent experience in cinema that occurs in the here-and-now of the present moment in which the film is viewed, creating a shared experience amongst members of the film’s audience, even if these members view the film in separate times and places from one another.

A second transpersonal aspect that film can engender is the tapping of latent or unconscious potential within the viewer’s psyche. Subtly or more profoundly, a film may bring to the surface of conscious awareness the potentiality that suggests a future that is as-yet unlived. Inasmuch as a film may capture and lead the mind of the viewer into events that are yet to occur, the film may also influence future events in a way that no other medium has done. Films, then, can be thought to elicit experiences of the past, present, and the future thereby demonstrating a mode of experience that can exist outside of the traditional bounds of space and time.

Like all art forms, films provide a mirror of the cultural zeitgeist and the spirit of the times and, to an extent, all great artwork can be viewed as prophetic in the way it taps into the collective unconscious and draws upon developing archetypal trends before they surface into the shared consensus consciousness. This is, in part, what makes such artwork great. Now consider how cinema has the potential to depict in light and image the various archetypal dynamics that are at work in the various aspects of a culture to that culture en masse. Through this medium, painted completely by the existence of electric light, the evolutionary development of human communication may be beginning to change.

Consider, for example, how a film elicits shared experience amongst its viewers. In creating a visceral reaction within the collection of its viewers, the film supplies the means by which these viewers can efficiently indicate and communicate intricate levels of an experience, condition, and predicament that may have otherwise remained unconscious or even ineffable. This leads to yet another transpersonal aspect of film—that it may provide a means for accessing a form of linguistic shorthand, through image and sound, the basic sensory perceptions of a complex human experience. Recall that each visual and auditory representation of a film may be laden with multiple layers of intricately designed meaning and purpose.

It is fascinating to consider how such linguistic efficiency may play into the evolution of human communication. It seems significant to point out that just as the psychoanalytic contemporary of Freud, Sandor Ferenczi, suggested that the process of dreaming may have provided the foundational elements (e.g., the neural cortical pathways) that paved the way for the evolution of articulate speech (Taylor, 1992, p. 44), films too may be providing the foundational elements that pave the way towards a collective or shared form of experiencing—an auditory and visual mythology as has been suggested by modern mythologist, Joseph Campbell (e.g., Campbell, 1988).

**Some Suggested Lenses**

Whether we focus on the transpersonal qualities that are inherent in media such as film or on the extent to which those qualities are now coming into fuller play,
I would like to offer three lenses through which we may begin to discern the presence of these qualities. And although I focus on the medium of cinema, these lenses may be easily adapted and applied to most other forms of media. The three lenses are content, form, and purpose.

1) **Content:** the subject matter contained by the medium. Transpersonal content in cinema, can potentially include the depiction or portrayal of a character undergoing a spiritual awakening, a psychic phenomenon, or an altered state of consciousness. The content may also include symbolic representations of religious iconography or anything else that has been associated with transpersonal experience.

2) **Form:** the way in which the message is communicated. For cinema, the form will be represented by the style in which the film is made, including its editing, its lighting, its sound design, the costumes, the make-up, and its special effects. In essence, a film’s form attempts to induce an experience rather than depict one. For example, the rapid editing of cuts between the protagonist’s face as he unties someone from a train track and the speedily approaching train will potentially induce an experience of suspense. Similarly, the swelling orchestral musical score can potentially induce an experience of transcendence.

3) **Purpose:** the intended aim or goal of the communication. For cinema, the purpose is often difficult to discern. It can be ambiguous or even challenging of the viewer’s own intentions. Yet, most evidently, films (and documentary films in particular) are often made with an intended cause or outcome in mind. They frequently aim to reveal, expose, or illuminate an alternate perspective on a particular issue. The purpose of a transpersonal film, then, may be to bring collective awareness to something that reflects some transpersonal cause or value (e.g., freedom, democracy, ecology, compassion, human potential, or some other extraordinary facet of life).

To be sure, some of the elements revealed by one of these lenses will occasionally blend with those revealed by one or both of the other two. For example, in a film considered to have transpersonal content, an element of a film’s form such as its sound design (i.e., its musical or auditory accompaniment) may be used to support or augment the transpersonal aspect. In fact, these musical and auditory elements of the film’s form can sometimes take precedence over the visual content, eventually becoming the content. Examples of this include John Williams’ foreboding heart-thumping musical accompaniment for the shark in the film, *Jaws* (1980), or the emotionally-vacant disembodied voice of the computer, HAL, in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). These films and countless others clearly demonstrate that these lenses are not intended to discern categorical distinctions between the various elements of transpersonal cinema, but rather to provide an overlay of a linguistic template through which we might begin to dialogue more deeply about this amorphous movement that seems to be emerging. In other words, the effort here is not to codify the ways in which transpersonal elements appear within media—as one may miss the forest for the trees—but to provide the means by which we can perceive, consider, discuss, and perhaps eventually press into active service the accumulating knowledge and understanding of this emerging movement.
The content explored by cinema seems to take on a decidedly transpersonal orientation. Ever since the early nickelodeon days of cinema, movies have dealt—at least in part—with some expression of triumph by the human spirit, such as Melies’ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), or even Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), even in spite of its blatantly provocative and racist portrayals. Such films can be considered transpersonal inasmuch as the characters depicted within them are made to transcend some perceived human potential. Many films since then have also offered variations on this theme, perhaps creating an atmosphere in which what is considered “transpersonal” is related to what is seemingly extraordinary in human experience.

The last 5 years have seen the inauguration of several “spiritual film festivals” (existing both within and without the Hollywood system) whose films deal solely with topics and stories of spiritually-oriented experiences, metaphysical issues, and human potentiality. In concert with this emergence, film producer and author Stephen Simon has recently emphasized the need for more “enlightened entertainment” and has developed a “Spiritual Cinema Circle” whose membership receives a selection of inspiring and “feel-good” movies in the mail in exchange for a monthly fee.

Yet, it seems that explicit spiritual content in cinema constitutes only a partial vision of transpersonal cinema. What exactly constitutes a spiritual film and how is this distinguished from a transpersonal one? When dealing with terms as slippery and prone to being misconstrued as “spiritual” and “transpersonal,” it is often easy to confuse the two. First of all, is there a difference between these terms and, if so, how might they show up differently in the media? Does a “spiritual” film always inspire its audiences and make them feel good? Does a transpersonal film always deal with extraordinary content? Perhaps, in contrast to Simon’s Circle, “transpersonal cinema” may sometimes actually disturb (rather than inspire) or unnerve (rather than satisfy) an audience in its instigations towards self-awareness or ultimately transcendence. Examples of such transpersonal cinema might include David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), or Alan Ball’s *American Beauty* (1999), all of which portray scenarios and images that may be difficult to view at first, but at deeper inspection come to be recognized as a depiction of something integral and true about the present human predicament. As is the case in most spiritual traditions, the truth can sometimes be painful and compassion is sometimes aggressive. What is transpersonal, in this way, may not always be pretty, or at least not until after it has been appropriately integrated.

**AN EMERGING TRANSPERSONAL MEDIA MOVEMENT**

These transpersonal ways of approaching cinema are not new to the medium. Independent and mainstream filmmakers alike have addressed these questions in their own unique way and provided the fodder for the medium’s evolution, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of form, aesthetic, and process. Lecturer, author, and filmmaker Phil Cousineau, (www.philcousineau.net) has suggested that there is a transformative potential in cinema akin to that in mythology and...
that its power should not be underestimated. Mediamakers such as Antero Alli (www.verticalpool.com) have utilized ritual in the process of film as a way of instigating transformative experiences amongst his actors as well as his audience. Well-known and well-regarded filmmaking auteurs such as Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Đušan Makavejev, and Roman Polanski have all used films to investigate deeply transpersonal issues in ambiguous and provocative ways. Contemporary mainstream Hollywood films such as *I Heart Huckabees* (2004), *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Spun* (2002), and *Crash* (2004) have also explored transcendent/immanent issues in simultaneously serious and humorous ways, placing the onus firmly on the audiences about when it is more appropriate to laugh or to cry. In addition, associations such as the Association of Transformative Media Arts (www.transformedia.org) have developed, in part, as an effort to encourage the use of media as a means for resolving conflicts, teaching compassionate and humanistic values, and promoting personal and social responsibility.

**CONCLUSION**

If, as it has been suggested by many cosmologists (Rees, 2005), the processes of organic evolution (i.e., natural selection) are being replaced by a new form of evolution that is more cultural in nature, then the developments in technology, including communications technology, will set the course for how we, as humans, will survive into the future. Moreover, it seems that the need for a species-wide form of communication are increasing with our technological abilities to provide it. Never before have the needs of our planet been so great, with looming threats posed by impending environmental and ecological disasters, political and international calamities, and the untold needs of millions impoverished and in starvation. Yet, at the same time, we find that our technologies have advanced to such a degree that we may begin to face these looming threats as a collective of worthy adversaries.

As a result, our ability to receive, integrate, and communicate large amounts of information en masse has become increasingly integral to our survival as a species. Just as our ancestors made use of their spoken language to meet the survival needs of the tribal society, we, too, use our media technology to transmit the survival needs of our species and garner the necessary resources, will, and support needed to thrive as a collective into the twenty-first century.

One might thus say that the transpersonal trends in the media began as early as the first story-tellers or as recently as the digital age. However we frame it, it is a movement that is still in process, all its facets still unfounded, its implications still unknown. Yet, the evidence is accumulating and the need for conscious dialogue is rising. We thus commence this special issue of the *Journal for Transpersonal Psychology* as an invitation to our readership, an invitation to begin to consider all of the many ways the transpersonal has developed a presence in the modern world. Read and dialogue here at the cutting edge of a movement coalescing into something that may support not only the enlightenment of individuals, but the survival of the entire “Global Village.”
or expressions that arise in the present moment.

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Venture Inward

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Entertainment Festival (www.hsff.com) which celebrates spiritually-oriented creativity within the Hollywood system. (www.damah.com) which celebrates spiritual experiences in film, and (d) the Hollywood Spiritual Film and Exploration Festival (www.exploringfilmfest.com) which screens films that investigate what it means to be fully human and fully aware, embedded deeply into their storylines (chronologically: 'dream machine'' film camera (on December 28, 1895) (Grasse, 2002). Both of these epochal developments seem

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A motion picture take their shape somewhere between the screen onto which they are projected and the mind of the viewer. It is within this intermediary space, amid the split-second gaps between frames of film as it races through the projector, that the film actually exists.

It may be of interest to the reader to point out that Sigmund Freud’s intellectual breakthrough concerning dream symbolism (on July 24, 1895) (Tarnas, 1995) occurred within months of the Lumiere brothers’ unveiling of their cinematic ‘‘dream machine’’ film camera (on December 28, 1895) (Grasse, 2002). Both of these epochal developments seem synchronistic inasmuch as they both call for a shift of our attention down into the source of our deepest dreams and fantasies.

As is the case, for example, in many of David Lynch’s films.


Namely, such festivals include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) Exploring Consciousness Filmfest (www.exploringfilmfest.com) which screens films that investigate what it means to be fully human and fully aware, (b) the Spiritual Film Festival (www.filmsfor.com) which celebrates spiritual creativity, (c) the Damah Film Festival (www.damah.com) which celebrates spiritual experiences in film, and (d) the Hollywood Spiritual Film and Entertainment Festival (www.hsff.com) which celebrates spiritually-oriented creativity within the Hollywood system.

Stephen Simon was interviewed by R. Krajenke in an article entitled, ‘‘A Voice for Films with Soul’’ in a recent issue of Venture Inward (September/October, 2005), published by the Association for Research and Enlightenment.

Briefly, Alli’s performances, called ‘‘paratheatre,’’ combine elements of ‘‘physical theatre, dance, and zazen standing meditation’’ in an effort to access ‘‘internal landscapes of archetypal process as a spiritual event and movement resource’’ (retrieved from www.paranetheatrical.com/orientation.htm on December 14, 2005). The purpose is for the participants to invoke or evoke as a function of the enacted meditation the spontaneous or visceral gestures, movements, or expressions that arise in the present moment.

For more Fellini films, see, for instance, La Strada (1954), La Dolce Vita (1960), 8 ½ (1963), Juliet of the Spirits (1965), Satyricon (1969), and Amarcord (1973).

For more Bergman films, see, for instance Smiles of a Summer Night (1955), The Seventh Seal (1957), Wild Strawberries (1957), The Virgin Spring (1960), Persona (1966), Cries and Whispers (1966), and Fanny and Alexander (1982).


REFERENCES


The Author

Daniel L. Gaylinn is currently preparing a documentary film in which many notable figures in transpersonal psychology discuss the meaning that may be derived from death. Daniel works as the Executive Director for the Association for Transpersonal Psychology and holds a position on the Board of Directors. He received his M.A. from the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology where he is now pursuing doctoral degree for which his research pertains to the effect of a daily practice with imagination. He received his B.A. from Oberlin College where he developed an independent interdisciplinary major examining “The Effects of Film and Communication on Behavior and Belief.” He matriculated for two summer programs through the New York University film school and one summer program through the Northwestern University film school during which he co-wrote, filmed, directed, edited, and produced a total of seven short films. You may contact him at: transpersonalfilms@yahoo.com