

A Renaissance scholar with a physicist's heart

Jeanette Reedy Solano

Preface: Forever *Maroon* – The perduring influence of the University of Chicago's Divinity School

I would like to preface my comments with an objective, limited comparison between myself and Sam Gill – a prefatory double-face if you will — of two people who do not seem to go together. Sam grew up on a small farm in rural Kansas; I was born in Hollywood and grew up in the San Fernando Valley. We both stayed close to home for college. Sam became a mathematician and computer programmer, and I was pre-med until I almost burned down the chemistry lab, and my professors gently encouraged me to pursue my other love – the humanities. We both found ourselves at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, sight unseen and not quite sure what we had gotten ourselves into! I fully understand his sense of feeling like the outlier and agree that this can be an advantage (Gill 2020:6). We both were forever changed by being pushed and mentored by brilliant professors. Those of us who survived and thrived at Chicago are usually insatiably curious, intrepid explorers, who forge their own way, whether it be Hugh Urban exploring Scientology, my heading off to Brazil for research or becoming a filmmaker, or Sam researching religion globally or opening a dance school!

A physicist at heart

The mind of Sam Gill is explosive and complex. He is a comparativist, an historian, a linguist, a philosopher, and much more. As we consider his life's work, I would like to add 'physicist' to that list. He minored in physics,

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and this way of looking at reality grounds his method. I read him as a physicist at heart, one that enriches our field. In footnote 468 and elsewhere in *The Proper Study of Religion* (2020), he speaks of ‘neutrinos,’ the gyrating building blocks of our reality, and relates them to the study of religion. If religion is about what is ‘really real,’ then we all should take a cue from Sam and include a bit of physics in our work.

I will speak to three ideas: (1) the urgency of being honest about the state of the field; (2) the limits of a body-based epistemology; and (3) how religion and film studies might be a creative path forward.

Genus blues: Gill’s assessment of the current state of the field

In *The Proper Study of Religion*, Sam, channeling Jonathan Z. Smith, does not mince his words – the death of the field is a very real possibility. One of the main causes, Sam submits, is the loss of the ‘interest in the generic’ and the hyper-specialization in religious studies. I am certainly part of this shift; my current tribe is religion and film. In academia, it is not safe, nor advised, to venture outside of your tribe, nor to comment on something beyond your area of expertise. I am also guilty of having, as Sam says, ‘postponed indefinitely’ (Gill 2020:11) a fully satisfying definition of religion. I agree with Sam that species-based area studies within religious studies have weakened the field as a whole, creating fragmented departments of colleagues who mostly identify with their method or area, rather than consider themselves as on the same team. At best, this specialization stunts growth and collaboration; at worst, it results in alienation, turf wars, and methodological disdain.

The great experiment of religious studies in secular public institutions may be nearing its end. I teach in California, in the largest consortium of state universities in the nation, and in the past decade I have seen religious studies departments close, merge with other departments, or become programs. The threat is real, and the coming wave of lower enrollments in higher education, especially in the humanities, does not bode well for us. Sam calls it ‘a time of reckoning.’ This is not academic saber rattling, it is a ‘critical moment of tension’ (Gill 2020:176); the chips *are* down at many public institutions of higher learning! I partially agree with Sam’s solution – a return to genus. We all need to recommit to being scholars of religion first and return to the basics. As far as the methods being considered here today go, I prefer Mary Dunn’s vision, which allows for the possibility of the miraculous.

The limits of a body-based epistemological foundation

I will leave the critique of Sam's Smith-inspired comparative method to the comparative experts on this panel. I do, however, question Sam's purely biological/body-based epistemology. Of course, as a feminist, I champion bodily knowing and agree with Sam that 'we are not brain or mind or thought apart from the body' (Gill 2020:20). However, Sam's insistence on *self-moving* would appear to exclude some. Perhaps this conclusion is due to my lack of familiarity with the entirety of Sam's work, or perhaps I am reading him too literally, but I disagree with his assertion of the 'primacy of human-self moving' as the foundation of knowledge. In the book under review, *The Proper Study of Religion*, Sam is asking us to reframe the study of religion in the context of moving and movement (Gill 2020:140). Not everyone can enjoy and experience their body in movement. I assert that *we are our bodies, but we are more than our bodies*. Our consciousness and ability to think is not solely dependent on moving. Sam claims that 'apart from being integral to a *moving* body, the brain would be several pounds of useless tissue' (Gill 2020:169; my emphasis). Those who suffer from a variety of diseases that rob them of mobility and movement, such as ALS, like my father, are still capable of learning, teaching, and thinking. Their consciousness is not dependent on movement. Perhaps emphasis on the role that *our senses* play in epistemology would be a more fecund path, and this leads me to my third and final point.

How religion and film studies might be part of a creative path forward

Sam highlights the loss that can occur in transduction:

[T]he proper study of religion, as its subject of study, is a practice in an aesthetic of impossibilities; the rich embrace of the pursuit of what cannot be fully known of what is transformed as the result of the transduction from a *sensuously rich broadly sensory reality* to the sensory-limited reality of print. (Gill 2020:149)

Sam pushes us to embrace process and senses, yet, here, he does not question why the traditional end product must be in sensory-limited print. Sam waited until retirement to publish his striking photos. One way the academic study of religion could survive is to change what it produces, or at least expand it. I assert that those in positions of academic power need to start valuing scholars' creative work as part of their 'scholarly' work, not as an addendum. I lament, along with Sam, the rigidity of the academy, with its 'chairs and lines' and its obsession with print. We can tell good stories through thick description and ethnography, but we often lose what

Sam describes as the ‘living, moving, vitality of our subjects, diminishing them to mere objects of academic description and analysis’ (Gill 2020:153). If you truly want to revitalize the field of religious studies, in addition to rethinking method and re-embracing the fundamental questions, as this book adjures us to do, we should expand our dataset to include more artifacts and experiences of human creativity and the arts, and broaden the acceptable ends of our scholarship as well.

I suggest that film is a rich medium for a proper study of religion that embraces ‘metastability and nonlinearity’ (Gill 2020:151). Flickering film, and the way we receive it, is nonlinear. Film is a moving medium for our moving subject. Nathaniel Dorsky, a secular experimental filmmaker, speaks of ‘devotional cinema.’ By this, he does not mean film is traditionally religious, but rather that it sparks an opening or interruption that allows us to experience what is hidden and accept with our hearts our given situation. This idea echoes Sam’s intuitive sense of feeling or ‘fit’ as part of our process of knowing. As a film editor and photographer, Dorsky is keenly attuned to how film affects our unique human metabolism; namely, how our brains process information, emotion, and knowledge. Dorsky turns to the technical features of film – intermittent light/vision, time, and editing – and explains how they affect us. The intermittent quality of film is close to how we see all reality, that is, in bits and pieces. This reminds me of Sam’s fascination with neutrinos and their gyrating nature. Sam hints at the power of the visual in his discussion of color, but I would encourage him to turn his keen eye to the medium of film itself, by examining how we visually receive it and can be changed by it. In sum, since one problem is the loss of vitality in transduction, flickering film as an accepted form of scholarship which is actively received by the viewer may be part of the answer.

Toward the end of *The Proper Study of Religion*, Sam includes a vignette of an honest conversation between two longtime friends catching up at the American Academy of Religion. They were discussing the broader value of religious studies, of what we do, and Sam concluded, ‘there is value in teaching young people to engage in concerns common to humanity, to create beauty’ (Gill 2020:241). Meaning and beauty, this is our path forward. I will close with Sam’s injunction, not only to revisit Jonathan Z. Smith and revise our comparative method, but also to be more creative and playful in our work and above all, to dare to create beauty.

Response from Sam Gill: Jeanette Reedy Solano

In the spirit of ongoingness, I would like to make a few comments also motivated by my inability to stop thinking about film and the inseparability of moving and perception.

First, a few notes on your point that ‘we are *more than* our bodies,’ and that my relentless focus on self-moving excludes ‘those who suffer from a variety of diseases that rob them of mobility and movement,’ and your recommendation that we should place more ‘emphasis on the role that *our senses* play in epistemology.’ After writing *The Proper Study of Religion*, I recognized the necessity of extending my argument on these important points, thus my writing of *On Moving* (2022). In that book, I offer a much extended argument for the primacy of self-moving, including an essay titled ‘Differently abled,’ to address the issue of those whose mobility is challenged (to use a euphemism I dislike and address in this essay). I also make extended and strong arguments based on a large number of biological and philosophical positions that perception is inseparable from moving. Indeed, kinesthesia, the feeling of moving, is sometimes (too rarely) recognized as itself a sense. Barbaras, following Merleau-Ponty and Patočka and others, put it simply, writing, ‘In truth, it is moving itself that perceives.’ I strongly feel that only by taking moving radically can we find a defensible platform for the proper study of religion.

Now, to the area of your expertise, film. I had hoped that you might engage with my discussion of Carlos Saura’s flamenco films in *The Proper Study of Religion*. I intended to provoke a question of truth and reality in film with this discussion, and offer my sense of film being a perfect example of what I refer to as an ‘aesthetic of impossibles.’ Film is based on the supposed objectivity of the lens, yet it is also the artful lie, made, made up. I had hoped that this would engage you. Another time, perhaps.

In light of your approach to film in your book, *Religion and Film* (2022), I think my approach to film is somewhat different. Film is certainly *techné* and thus should be considered in the context of technology, of course, among so many other things. In my book, *Religion and Technology into the Future: From Adam to Tomorrow’s Eve* (2018), the theme running through the 30 or so essays is one of making. I am concerned with the human idea of making a sentient being. I find that those who make such claims or even have such aspirations tend to identify themselves as gods. Certainly, a theme of religion is the exploration, if not an account, of the making of the world and all that resides within it, humans included. The gods are the ultimate makers according to religions. As I traced these ideas in cultural materials – novels, tales, films, and television – rather than in explicitly religious

literature, I discovered some interesting things. It is commonly powerful, rich white men who are the makers (they live in big houses, but they dwell in ‘the cloud’ in control of *The All*), and their made beings are commonly attractive female companions, often little more than sex dolls. Examples of such female figures, from Shelley’s creature (whom I read as more feminine in some respects as the voice of Mary herself), Alicia/Hadaly (the first android) in Villier’s 1886 French scandal of a novel *Tomorrow’s Eve*, Maria the tin robot (the first one in film) in Lange’s classic 1927 film *Metropolis*, to Samantha in the recent film *Her*, to Ava in the film *Ex Machina*, and on and on, all appear to fit this pattern. Even Galatea and all her Fair Lady progeny through the centuries fit the pattern. What I discovered in this exploration is that these female made beings are far more than just passive, compliant sex toys. Particularly inspired by Ava in *Ex Machina*, I chart a god-killing, independent, yet utterly anomalous woman (she is made of plastic and wires, after all), who liberates herself from her maker (and from technology?) to enter the world and do we know not what.

Beyond this theme, I considered many other films, including: *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which spends over two hours demonstrating that it is ongoing moving that is one’s only hope for redemption and salvation; the *Terminator* films, especially *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, about which I also wrote a published article, ‘Jesus wept, but robots can’t’ (2021a); EVE in *WALL-E*, who, along with Furiosa in *Fury Road*, is key to a narrative centering around the connection of life with a ‘little green sprout’ (planetary destruction); Samantha in *Her*, who has what I think is the most wonderful interpretation of Vernor Vinge’s 1993 notion of ‘singularity’; and on and on.

But as I was reflecting on all this, I began to realize that modern Western filmmaking is yet another example of rich white men making female sentient beings that are so often sex toys. Recently, I read Joyce Carol Oates’ *Blonde* (Marilyn Monroe being the total creation of studio execs), and that reminded me of the film industry being at the center of the #MeToo movement. Like my T’omorrow’s Eve (me being yet another white male making a female in some sense), these created beings kill (or imprison) their makers and go on to independent and powerful places. For me, this seems to be a major tale (not unconnected from religion), presaging at least one possibility for our future, maybe the only hopeful one I know. It also says something about filmmaking.

Finally, in *On Photography* (2021b) and *On Moving* (2022), I write of the distinction between still photography and film. On the one hand, this is self-examination, since I tend to prefer still photography to film. In my essay, ‘Moving pictures,’ I try to suggest something of the aesthetic of impossibles of both still images and movies (the term says much). In

my own still photography, challenged by my being in the constant presence of moving dancers, I explore techniques of blur and moving trails to suggest the moving that isn't there. Then, too, movies are comprised of the sequencing of still images that, taken together in our very efficient flip books, appear to be moving, yet it is but the illusion of moving. How wonderful.

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