

Article

Cinema of the Desert: The Fight of the Ascetic Women

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Abstract

This paper examines the cinematic portrayals of ascetic women within contemporary film. Historically, the early desert fathers and mothers are venerated figures who embody a life of asceticism—spiritual discipline amidst the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Renowned as spiritual mentors and referred to as Abba (father) for men and Amma (mother) for women, they exemplify a way of Christian life rooted in ascetic practice. Their teachings, preserved in texts such as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, offer profound insights into Christian spiritual praxis. This spiritual praxis has been vividly depicted through iconography and asceticism continues to hold reverence, particularly within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, where it serves as the basis of spiritual–liturgical life. While the core goal and meanings of asceticism have been conveyed through ascetic iconography and aesthetics, cinematic portrayals of ascetic life and ethos remain a relatively under-researched area. The focus of this study is on the film *A Cross in the Desert*, adapted from a literary source, which dramatises the hagiography of St. Paraksevi the New, also known as Sveta Petka and St. Paraskevi of the Balkans (Epivates 944–1012). Through the analysis of film language, this paper aims to shed new light on the ways in which iconographic language has been translated into cinematic language, assessing the ways in which women ascetics have been depicted from a contemporary perspective. The film’s representation of a woman ascetic offers valuable insights into the conceptualisations of the notion of gender as a virtue—embodying sanctity—and potential site of desecration—representing iniquity—as these are experienced as both embodied and spiritual realities. The study offers an analysis of how cinematic language operates, focusing on the visual techniques used to depict the intersection of gender, holiness, and spiritual discipline, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how film functions as a medium for engaging with complex religious and gendered identities. The analysis of film will provide novel understandings of how cinema depicts and challenges gender within the context of asceticism, exploring how these representations influence contemporary perceptions of women’s spirituality.

Keywords: film; asceticism; iconography; desert; women



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1. Introduction

While representations of women martyrs and saints have been prominent in world cinema from the early beginnings of the ‘seventh art’, this theme remains relatively underrepresented and underexplored in the context of the cinema in the Balkan Peninsula. Despite the rich history of religious and cultural heritage, visual arts (iconography and religious art), hymnography, and poetry, as well as an enduring reverence stretching across the ages, depictions of female saints in the cinematic space of the Balkan Peninsula are few and often overlooked. While religion and women have been a matter of both cinema and

scholarly research, asceticism and women remain an unexplored territory in the Balkan context. Likewise, films of different genres produced in the former Eastern bloc countries rarely, if at all, engage with women ascetics and the existing depictions, but rather explore the cultural significance of women within the broader narrative of identity and history.

In this paper, I focus on the film *A Cross in the Desert*¹ (Hadži-Aleksandar Đurović, Serbia/Jordan, 2022). The main research questions are whether and in what ways iconographic language translates into film language, and how ascetic struggle is portrayed in the film.

The film depicts the life of Saint Paraskevi of Epivates (Melchisedec 1889; Lazarević 2014), who lived between 944 and 1012. St. Paraskevi is widely respected in the whole Balkan Peninsula, and this centuries-long reverence and veneration embody timeless devotion, unwavering through the march of time, echoing the profound respect of generations past and present. This tradition that weaves a tapestry of spiritual and cultural significance, immortalised in the hearts and minds of those who uphold her legacy with steadfast fidelity, testifies to something more: an awareness of the spiritual struggle of heart and mind, the fight that women (desert ascetics) took upon themselves. The film *A Cross in the Desert*, adapted from a novel and heavily grounded in hagiography², was ‘received enthusiastically in Serbia and at international festivals, earning more than 30 awards and selections at 60 film events’, which, ‘for a production with a religious theme and contemplative rhythm, is a remarkable achievement. Balkan audiences perceived the film as a return to roots, while Western viewers highlighted its poetic dimension and the universality of its message.’ (Florentin 2024). The film employs both feature drama and documentary to convey a sense of enduring reverence that has withstood the test of time, while simultaneously exploring themes of historical temporality and ontological reality. The filmmaker adopts a distinct approach that markedly departs from narrative and aesthetic conventions of ‘religious film’ and, through its visual storytelling, produces aesthetics of the ‘cinema of the desert.’

2. Context: Ascetics of the Desert

The image of God was truly preserved in you, O mother, For you took up the Cross and followed Christ. By so doing, you taught us to disregard the flesh, for it passes away, But to care instead for the soul, since it is immortal. Therefore, your spirit, O holy Mother Mary, rejoices with the Angels. Troparion (Tone 8) to St. Mary of Egypt.

The early desert fathers and mothers are revered figures who lived the life of *podvig*³—asceticism, spiritual discipline practiced in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Although asceticism is here connected to the early Christians, its roots lie in the Old Testament, with important ascetic figures such as Prophet Elijah. The desert ascetics of Christian times are known as spiritual guides, and they are often referred to as Abba (father) for men and Amma (mother) for women. Their teachings, preserved in texts such as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, offer deep insights into Christian spiritual practice⁴. The texts contain guidance and advice for the spiritual life of ascetics, but not excluding Christians who live in the world, as asceticism is not limited and cannot be reduced only to monasticism. This spiritual discipline exemplifying a Christian way of life is vividly depicted through iconography and continues to be crucial, especially within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, as the foundation of spiritual and liturgical life. Asceticism is inseparable from liturgical life, within which personhood (hypostasis) is to be realised, and it is founded on the hesychastic prayer of the heart and the hypostatic prayer of liturgy.⁵ The hypostatic prayer is cultivated in the heart and becomes the fulfilment of ascetic life whose goal is theosis (θέωσις). Asceticism is often misunderstood as a rigid form of moral training (ἀσκήω—I train) in which morality itself is the goal, whereas in reality it is precisely the opposite. Ascetic praxis

is not primarily concerned with moralism but with turning toward the Person who is the source of all ethics, as Abba Arsenius expressed it: ‘Strive with all your might to bring your interior activity into accord with God, and you will overcome exterior passions’. (Ward 1987).

Asceticism, as the narrow path of *podvig* and the constant ‘tension between Tabor and Gethsemane’ (Sumares 2019), is the struggle between the cross and transfiguration. One of the most prominent figures of ascetic women is St. Mary of Egypt, who lived in the sixth century and whose *podvig* of *metanoia* (repentance—change of mind and heart) remained exemplary through the ages to come. Besides St. Mary of Egypt, numerous *Ammas* are listed in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*⁶, the *Philokalia*, and other texts and studies focused on them (Cameron 1993; Cardman 2000; Earle 2007; Forman 2005; Swan 2001; Martinez 2015; Miller 2005, pp. 236–49), such as Amma Theodora, Amma Sarah, Amma Syncletica, St. Domnina of Syria⁷ and St. Paula of Rome.⁸ Undoubtedly, Saint Paraskevi followed their example and path, when, according to her hagiography, she gave her fortune to the poor and left for the Holy Land and then the Jordan desert, where she would begin her ascetic life.

It is important to note here that women ascetics (as well as men) strived for *metanoia* and hypostasis in Christ through the unceasing prayer for the whole world—‘the whole Adam.’ In that sense, theosis means the fulfilment of the promise that all are one in Christ—‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.’⁹ However, this did not mean that biological characteristics of men or women are erased but rather transformed, nor that the soul is gendered, which would represent a theological error and apostasy. The transformation refers to the transfiguration of the ‘whole Adam’—referring to the whole humankind. The mystery of transfiguration is depicted in iconography, where Saints are represented not ‘earthly’ but rather eschatologically transformed by the ‘Uncreated Light’. Asceticism is thus not a rejection of humanity and the world, but the renunciation of ‘the ways of this world,’ the beginning of repentance. It is the radical acceptance of others through Godlike love as the goal of asceticism that is the salvation of humankind, the reconfiguration of the distorted human being unique in its occurrence, the restoration of the human being into fullness of personhood, that is, into the likeness of God. This transformation, through the ascetic life, is conveyed through iconography.

Iconography is not painting, but language. Iconographic language constitutes an important part of the theology and praxis of asceticism—it is not merely visual representation of somebody’s life but the language bound to liturgy (and liturgical spaces) that conveys both historical and ‘timeless time’: liturgy represents a presence of the Eternal in historical time (‘here and now’), while people and figures depicted in the iconographic composition represent historical that is at the same time enveloped by eschatological. Being ‘formed and developed upon the Eucharist’, iconography aims to express both eternity and actuality of the mystery of salvation: it depicts the ultimate reality descending upon humankind as ‘something other than human flourishing on its own terms.’¹⁰ The icon always represents a person, and it is based on the Arch-Person, the hypostasis of the Logos—‘the life of I AM incarnate in Christ.’¹¹ Furthermore, the icon does not refer to itself but rather beyond itself, to something beyond this corrupted world (Vasiljević 2010), to the eternal Eucharist of the Kingdom of God. In that respect, iconography employs different techniques of which perhaps the most striking is that of the inverse perspective (Bychkov 1995) that reverses the point of presence from viewer to icon: an icon is looking at the observer, instead of vice versa, while at the same time its width unfolds (Gabriela 2014).

Pavel Florensky provides the most comprehensive study on iconographic language, from colour, composition, image and icon, and the notion of space and time to the importance of *inverse perspective*¹², while Stamatis Skliris considers iconographic language as a specific relationship to reality, and its importance for film language (Skliris 2005).

Furthermore, the iconographic language involves the *proplasma* (πρόπλασμος) or the membrane, shaping technique, which is also related to film: as the images in icon emerge from the dark (layer) to become gradually coloured, lightened, film mechanics functions in a similar way, through the interplay of darkness (film reel) to light (by the means of projector and strong light for instance) which enables us to see and recognise the images. Iconographic language is important for the analysis of film, its representations, characters, and for assessing the relationship between on-screen and off-screen, space and time, historical and ontological. The link between iconographic language and cinematic language is further examined through the analysis of the film.

3. Film Analysis

3.1. Summary

A Cross in the Desert is the only film in the Balkan Peninsula dedicated to the life of a woman ascetic, St. Paraskevi, an esteemed ascetic figure venerated across all Christian countries. She is particularly well-known and celebrated in the Eastern parts, where she is also known as Sveta Petka (name translated from Greek to Serbian), St. Paraskeva of Trnovo (Bulgaria), St. Parascheva of Iași/Romania, or St. Paraskeva the New. As previously discussed, her widespread recognition and veneration allowed the film to serve as a common space, acting as a bridge connecting different people and languages. The film is also the first Serbian–Jordanian co-production, filmed in two languages: Serbian and Arabic. It is a distinctive film due to its theme, its focus on female characters and exploration of Christian–Muslim relations, and its approach to asceticism. Furthermore, *A Cross in the Desert*, as a feature film, incorporates documentary segments that act as a *framing device* to convey a sense of temporal continuity. In this context, the physical (mechanical and material) aspect of cinematic space emerges as an extension and projection of time.

The film traces the life of Saint Paraskevi from her childhood to her death, highlighting her remembrance across centuries and countries. The film begins with documentary footage of the Church of St. Paraskevi in Belgrade, Serbia, which serves as an introduction to the story. The film then moves to the feature section, which follows a young woman journeying through the desert alongside a group of pilgrims (or Bedouins) only to part ways with them as she searches for her own spiritual place for her ascetic *podvig*. The calmness and silence of the desert reflect the life of hesychasm, which the young woman is about to embrace. Her only initial interaction is with an owl, which brings her food and guides her to an empty (Christian) cave that she chooses as her dwelling, signifying her settling in. Soon, she perceives God's intervention as another 'owl' appears—Zeinab, a Muslim Bedouin girl who will care for her.

The tranquillity and silence of the desert, depicted through long takes, wide shots, and slow passage of time, are suddenly disrupted by the appearance of a devilish figure. This figure will tempt her and remain by her side until her struggle and life come to an end. The devil appears as a man in the desert, first as a mirage and then as a tangible figure, resembling a lost traveller until he ultimately reveals himself as the tempter. From that point, it becomes clear that the film is focused on the ascetic struggle and fight both with herself and the tempter. The storytelling is *non-linear*, shifting between her present struggle in the desert and her childhood, youth, the act of leaving her hometown, her relationship with her parents, and her brother, who enters the monastery, with the memories being interwoven throughout the film. These segments are integrated to depict Paraskevi's personality and life, seamlessly blending as a memory when she confronts the temptations. Her only contact with the real world is the young Muslim girl who provides some food and clothes for her, while Paraskevi provides her with handmade baskets that the girl's family sells in the village settlements and markets (Figures 1–3).



Figure 1. Zeinab.



Figure 2. Zeinab and Paraskevi: First Contact.



Figure 3. Zeinab, The Bread Provider.

Once the devil appears again in the cave in the form of a young woman—who refers to herself in the masculine gender—the film intensifies through the temptations that Paraskevi is to endure and overcome during her life in the desert. The temptations are presented as thoughts, devils’ whispers, caused by memories of the little girl Zeinab, who grows into a young woman who will become a mother and then a grandmother. The temptations are presented through the deadly sins: gluttony, fornication, greed, wrath, and envy (which manifests as sadness), along with spiritual sloth. Ultimately, pride emerges after the act of repentance for spiritual sloth. After wrestling with the last sin, which the film indicates has formed a life-long battle, Paraskevi emerges as a miracle-worker who helps Zeinab’s tribe in times of drought and despair, only to finally leave the desert and, after forty years, return to her hometown. In the last scene where she leaves the desert, the now crippled she-devil follows her, hoping to pull her down the ascetic ladder at the last moment. The film takes an unexpected turn, set many years after her death, when a poor man named George, awakened by the Saint, discovers her undecayed body in a common grave for the poor. From that moment, her relics are transferred to a church with great reverence, leading to numerous miracles recorded over the centuries wherever her relics have been moved. The story transports the audience to medieval Serbia, drawing upon the hagiographical details of the Saint who was transferred from Bulgaria to Serbia at the request of Princess Milica Hrebeljanović¹³ and where she stayed until subsequent relocations due to the advancing Ottomans, ultimately being laid to rest in Romania, where she remains to this day.¹⁴ The film’s portrayal of a female ascetic provides important insights into the conceptualisations

of the body as both a site of virtue (sanctity) and of transgression (iniquity), experienced as both physical and spiritual realities. The next part of this study examines the ways in which cinematic language conveys these ideas, with particular attention to the visual techniques employed to explore the interplay between gender, holiness, and asceticism as spiritual discipline.

3.2. Film Language: From Iconography to Film

The following film analysis aims to assess the ways in which cinematic language operates: if and how iconographic language is conveyed through film language, and how visual techniques are used to depict the intersection of gender, holiness, and spiritual discipline. Understanding film language deepens our knowledge of how cinema acts as a medium for exploring intricate religious and gender identities, as well as how it navigates and employs iconographic language. When it comes to iconographic representations of women ascetics it is important to note that, broadly speaking, these representations can be divided into at least four categories: (1) by their life¹⁵ (2) their achievement—specific strength¹⁶ (3) their role—the role they embraced such as *jurodivi* (*Fool for Christ*)¹⁷ (4) their appearance, specific physical features.¹⁸ Iconographers usually depict Saint Paraskevi holding a cross and a palm branch, a symbol of peace and victory, and often the Saint is represented in the desert with a small church behind.¹⁹

The representation of the Saint in the desert is transferred to the poster of the film in which she is referred to as the saint ‘who built the church in the desert’—someone who, according to the strength of her *podvig*, became an embodiment of the Church (as the dwelling of the Holy Spirit). While the poster shows her from behind, with the shadow of the cross in front of her, symbolising the path to eternity, the icon shows the entire figure with her face turned towards us—in this way, the director visually makes a symbolic transition from the film image (as real life) to the icon (eternity) (Figures 4 and 5). The link between two worlds is the cross. This director’s choice creates the impression of the connection of the earthly and the heavenly—the world in which she lives and leaves—is a transition into the fullness of God’s reality. This transition is communicated through the image that indicates this gentle transition, known to most audiences acquainted with the iconographic desert representation.



Figure 4. Icon of St. Paraskevi: Uncreated Light.

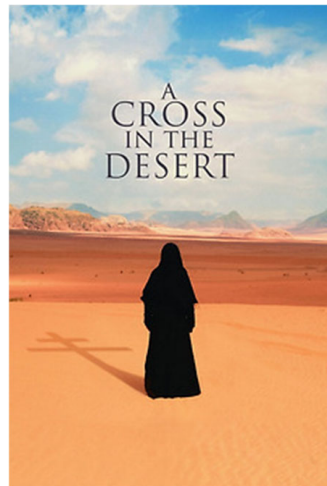


Figure 5. Poster of the Film: Cross as the Shadow and the Path.

The characters in the film emerge through the *non-linear* storyline, which serves to reveal both the complexity of the human being and the relationships between the characters. Non-linear storytelling is woven into the film to emphasise and highlight the sequences of Paraskevi's life that impact her present: through her memories, feelings, strivings, and wishes that becomes source of temptations. While the film is centered around two women, Paraskevi and Zeinab, it introduces two other characters who are pivotal to the story: an angel and a demon. The demon initially appears as a mirage, becoming more tangible as the story progresses, and speaks to Paraskevi throughout the film, while the angel emerges as a silent but distinct figure. The choice to depict the demon as a mirage, then a tangible character in the form of a lost man in the desert, introduces us from the very start of the film to its main topic, which is the story of asceticism. Mirage here has a double meaning—that of deception and a figure of the imagination that manifests as an 'embodiment' of evil to those who choose to fight it (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Demon in Mirage.



Figure 7. Demon Receiving Form of Man.

What appears in the very beginning as a man in the desert becomes a woman who nonetheless speaks of itself in the masculine gender. The ‘gender confusion’, so to speak, is not a reference to gender per se but represents the confusion that the devil introduces. The devil is portrayed within the theological framework: it has no essence because it has no hypostasis (personhood), and it has no hypostasis because it has no love; it is without substance, and is reckless, peaceless, and ever-changing: from man to woman, from woman to an animal, from ‘brother’ to she-devil (Figures 8 and 9). She will tempt and torture Paraskevi psychologically, spiritually, and physically: the demon is both temptress and tormentor. The narrowness of the space of the cave, the dwelling of Paraskevi in the desert, its darkness being occasionally lit by warm light from the candles and fire or the blinding light of the sun from the outside, establishes the setting in which the main battle will take place. The space closes in, appearing narrower with the sudden appearance of the she-devil. In that sense, the film is marked by periodic descents into the territory of horror through the presence of the demonic figure, with the director combining the visual innocence playing the demon with an aesthetic naturalism, which becomes gradually twisted as she torments the main character and rarely but significantly exhibits supernatural attacks. The supernatural attacks signal the incursion of a hostile transcendent force into the protagonist’s life, emphasising that the conflict exceeds human agency and enters the realm of the metaphysical. Paraskevi is attacked by the demon both physically and psychologically through a series of events.



Figure 8. Demon as Man.



Figure 9. Demon as Woman.

The struggle with thoughts is especially relevant and elaborated upon; the demon (played by brilliant actress Milica Stefanović) initiates ‘the conversation’, with Paraskevi’s doubts and thoughts appearing in the form of a dialogue with the demon. These articulated thoughts and doubts, as much as leaving the audience confused, equally confuse the main character, who, at times, cannot distinguish her own thoughts (coming from her fallen nature) from those of the she-devil. The answer is given through the words where Paraskevi loudly renounces these thoughts as she gradually descends into the depths of her own heart, to which she refers as ‘a cave’. This decent entangles repentance and gratitude and the continuation of the prayer of the heart. With the increased hesychastic prayer, the first temptation presents itself: Gluttony, Γαστριμαργία, is depicted through the she-devil who eats and indulges in the fruits of the earth during Paraskevi’s strict fast on water and herbs. The struggle with gluttony is represented through an out-of-focus point-of-view with handheld camera work and close-ups of the she-devil and the aural soundscape of squeezing fruit, nibbling, and munching that infuse the scene with a sense of lust, going beyond merely suggesting the pleasure that food provides (Figures 10–12).



Figure 10. The She-Devil and The Orange.

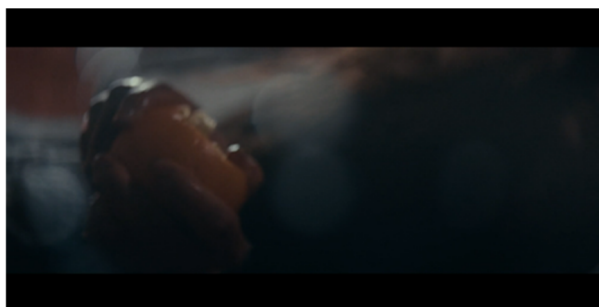


Figure 11. Temptation: Squeezing the Fresh Fruit.

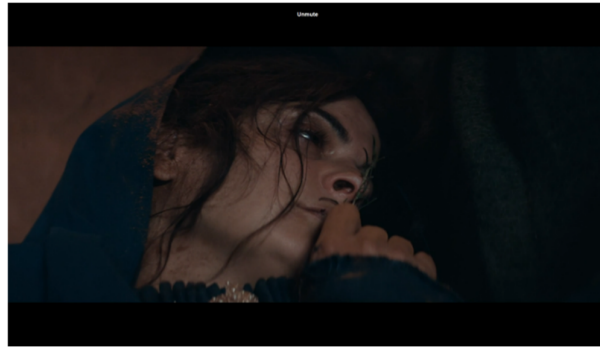


Figure 12. St. Paraskevi Lying Down and Resisting the Temptation.

The temptation is overcome through resilience and a near-death experience, during which Paraskevi confronts the devil's provocation by asserting that many desert ascetics were merely 'human'. It is only after her decisive rejection of temptation that an angel appears, empowering her on her journey as an ascetic.

The image of Paraskevi resembles the mosaic from the small (cave-like) shrine from the documentary prologue of the film, indicating the emergence of someone who stepped into a different realm, a transition from a young woman into the woman—(spiritual) warrior (Figures 13 and 14). While the mosaic represents Paraskevi transformed with a golden backdrop that symbolises the uncreated light, the film conveys the victory over the first temptation in a reverse manner: Paraskevi emerges from the darkness of the cave into natural light.

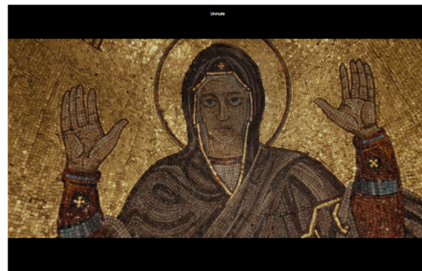


Figure 13. The Mosaic of St. Paraskevi: In Light.



Figure 14. St. Paraskevi: Emergence from the Darkness of the Cave.

The second temptation of Fornication—Πορνεία—begins with Paraskevi's secret encounter featuring a love scene between Zeinab and the young man who will become her husband. Her observation of the young playful love meeting at the lake haunts her. Lust manifests in a dreamlike sequence where Paraskevi faces an offer from a man she previously refused. The man's gaze is reflected in the lake where Paraskevi is bathing; however, before their hands join in an embrace, she starts to drown, only to awake to gurgling and choking (Figures 15–18). Her return to reality through rejection of fornication is followed by the she-devil's giggling and crawling in the cave, moving from the light into the depths of darkness.

The choice of a visual portrayal of fornication is deliberately disorienting—starting at a slow pace, the scene is quickly transformed by irregular jumpcuts, close-ups, and interior framing to produce a dreamlike and somewhat surreal sequence. This approach strips fornication from seduction and sexualisation to display its internal effects as akin to drowning.



Figure 15. Temptation: Reflection of the Suitor.



Figure 16. St. Paraskevi at the Lake facing her Suitor.



Figure 17. Temptation: Hands about to Embrace.



Figure 18. Drowning.

After overcoming the second temptation, Greed—Φιλαργυρία, Wrath—Όργή, and Envy—Λύπη (sadness) emerge. The she-devil whispers to her thoughts that she is wasting her youth while Zeinab enjoys all the joys of life, being clothed and decorated by her fiancé, who makes a profit in the city from Paraskevi's handcrafted items. Greed comes with wrath

and envy,²⁰ depicted through the hostile dialogue between two women and Paraskevi's harsh rejection of Zeinab (Figures 19–22). The *slow motion* of Zeinab's movement while showing her fiancé's gifts is followed by shaky camera and narrow angles. As Zeinab turns around to look at her friend, Paraskevi appears out-of-focus, the same way that the she-devil appears in Paraskevi's eyes in the previous scenes. These techniques create a double mirroring and an uncomfortable, oppressive atmosphere that serves to signify the damaging encounter between the two women, as well as the instability of the main character. Greed and wrath thus represent a narrowing of the soul and the world-view, alienation, and loss of oneself (out-of-focus).



Figure 19. Instability: Temptation through Envy.

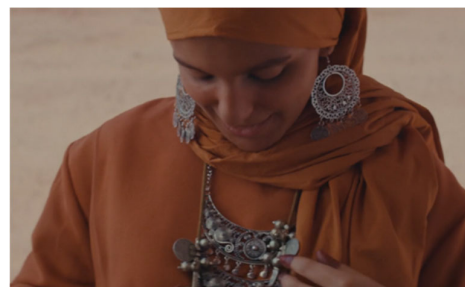


Figure 20. Zeinab in Slow Motion showing the Gifts of Her Husband.



Figure 21. Temptation: Wrath and Greed.

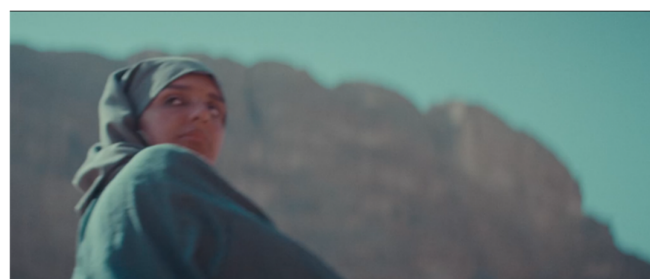


Figure 22. Zeinab Leaving: Looking Back at Her Friend.

Spiritual Sloth—Ἀκηδία—appears as the outcome of wrath and envy, which the she-devil attributes to Paraskevi's heart and not to itself (Figures 23–26). The film frames

Paraskevi in the cave with the she-devil seemingly blocking the way out, signifying another crisis. The camera focuses on her hands, abruptly breaking the praying robe, and follows her running out of the cave into the open desert. The match cuts connect her memory of the past, a vision of herself and her family in the greenery of home with the desert. Changing frames as she is turning around and circular camera movement that follows her pace create an intense sense of confusion and being lost. Spiritual Sloth takes full toll: she lies with her lifeless-like body on the ground, with the close-up of the she-devil placed in parallel to Paraskevi, in reverse position to her head—a subtle inference to the downward spiral the former represents (Figure 27).



Figure 23. She-Devil Blocks the Way: The Temptation of Spiritual Sloth.

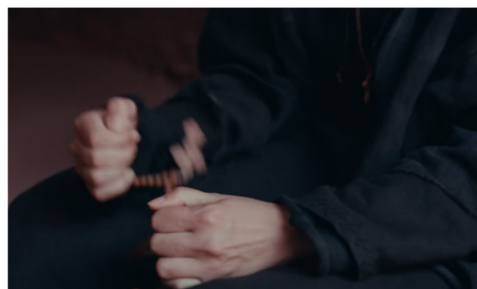


Figure 24. Breaking the Prayer Robe.



Figure 25. Disorientation in Space: The Desert.



Figure 26. Disorientation in Space: The Forest of Childhood.



Figure 27. Mirror Image as Temptation of Downward Spiral.

The shot from the bird-eye view shows the rock on which listlessly lies the small figure of Paraskevi in the position of the cross, engulfed by the desert (Figure 28). The seemingly peaceful environment and the rock, in reverse perspective, appear as the ‘hand of God’²¹ and convey the permission for the ‘void’ as the next stage of her spiritual struggle, known in the ascetic life as the withdrawal of the joyful grace.



Figure 28. Temptation: Paraskevi engulfed by the Desert.

Sloth filmed in abrupt and long shots is replaced with repentance that follows the fall. Fast hyperbolic movements of Paraskevi assembling the praying robe by stringing beads onto a torn strand of hair show the urgency of returning to the hesychastic prayer as the ladder of ascension back to life. With repeated hesychastic prayer, Paraskevi commends the she-devil to depart from her. What follows is a seemingly restored peace: Paraskevi and the now-old Zeinab with her grown daughter sit together next to the water, in the oasis where the two of them first met. Zeinab and her daughter praise God and praise Paraskevi for her holy life (Figure 29). Consequently, the last temptation begins. Pride—*υπερηφανία* is communicated without words, devil’s whispers, or conflict. It is conveyed visually through the shot of Paraskevi walking up the sand hill, an almost idyllic scene in which ascending represents descending (Figure 30). The choice of depicting pride through the ascent to the top of the mountain indicates the theological understanding of pride that is silent, almost unnoticeable, ever-present in the life of every human being as the original sin that can take various forms.



Figure 29. Zeinab and Her Daughter Praise God and Paraskevi.



Figure 30. Temptation: Walk of Pride.

At the top of the desert peak, which manifests as the ‘top of the world’ as she overcame the devil’s previous snares, the illusion of peace is broken with the sudden appearance of her brother Efthimios. As they sit together, he praises her for her victories and suggests her to return to the world for the sake of other people. It is at this moment that she becomes aware of her own pride, and it becomes clear that it is not her brother who found her in the desert, nor is it he who speaks to her. Another shot abruptly cuts through the seemingly peaceful scenery: her brother turns into the she-devil this time with non-human black eyes—the void who, in an unnatural infernal voice, shouts at her that ‘she is dead like the desert’ while gripping her head at the same time. The shot infuses the film with horror, crucial for the storyline, which serves to bestow it with the strength needed to convey the struggle that is profoundly connected with the very core of existence. The anticipation of horror and the potential to face the unpredictable and perilous does not bring satisfaction to the audience but rather evokes a sense of threat. In this sense, the filmmaker subverts the conventions of the horror genre. While the evil figure exists apart from human influence, it still entails human responsibility in the face of the supernatural. In that sense, this scene poses the question of what it means to be human and how evil, as internal and external phenomena, can take over the most ordinary and extraordinary human beings equally.

The film returns to its slow pace, showing Paraskevi performing miracles: one of rain in the time of drought, which Zeinab and her tribe desperately need in order to stay on the land, and the other of ‘mystical fire’, where Paraskevi is depicted as Moses in front of the burning bush (Figures 31–33). In the former, the match-cut between Paraskevi, pondering in the joy of the hesychastic prayer, and grateful Zeinab, with the close-ups of both women stretching their hands towards the sky, signifies the miracle of the righteous and the established connection between the two women.



Figure 31. Prayer for Rain: Stretching Hands.



Figure 32. Zeinab in the Rain: Stretching Hands in Thanksgiving.



Figure 33. St. Paraskevi as Moses and The Burning Bush.

The shot subtly communicates the Christian–Muslim relation through two women, friends, who are firmly united by love that envelops them both from within and from above. The rain and the fire symbolise purification and tempering of the soul through Divine grace and Divine fire.

The last scene with the main protagonist is that of her final departure from the desert, as Zeinab's family greets her, she is again on the same road back to her homeland, but followed by the now crippled she-devil. The devil is represented as wounded by her virtues, while her composure and pace communicate the stability and awareness that the temptress will not leave her until her last breath. The imagery of the scene strikes a resemblance with Norman Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof*, though it carries a distinctly different meaning: unlike the fiddler figure, who represents collective instability yet paradoxically is invited along, in this film, it is the demon that follows the Saint uninvited (Figure 34).



Figure 34. ‘Fiddler on the Roof’: Leaving the Desert with Peace, followed by Crippled She-Devil.

The film shifts to a different era when her relics are discovered to show her subsequent transmission to Serbia. The film finally returns to the documentary form and ends with a series of shots of the city of Iași and the Cathedral with her actual relics showing the contemporary veneration of St. Paraskevi (Figures 35–37). Feature and documentary modes blend into one another while the documentary form is used as a framework for the whole film. By comparison, tilt shots serve as an effective cinematographic device connecting different time periods and geographical spaces.

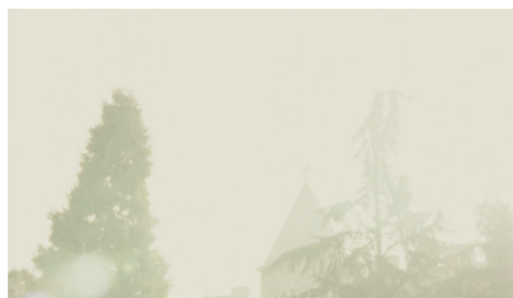


Figure 35. Transitions: Tilt Shot.



Figure 36. Transitions: The Moon connecting Past and Present.

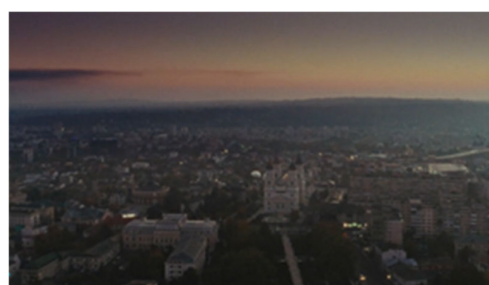


Figure 37. Documentary: The City of Iași and The Cathedral of St. Paraskevi, Present Day.

An angel and a devil appear subtly in the documentary sequences: at the very beginning of the film, the actress who emerges in the film as the she-devil is placed as standing outside the Church gate in Belgrade, waiting to ‘capture human souls.’ At the end of the film, the actor who plays the angel appears among the believers, people in the Church, close to the relics of St. Paraskevi. It is the ‘visual language’ that gives the film its strength ‘with its wide, almost static frame that invite contemplation, in which the director does not seek movement, but presence and where each image seems painted in silence: the chromatic palette shifts along with the character’s journey: the golden tones of the city turn into arid hues, ochre and white, until everything dissolves into light.’²²

More importantly, *A Cross in the Desert* opens an important question of whether and in which ways the film represents a new form of hagiography departing from the usual ‘hagiographic rhetorics’²³ and the understandings of ‘religious film’. The director offers a solution through his film, where hagiography and iconography are intertwined and translated into film language. In that sense, the film approaches the topic from the ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside,’ through subjective point-of-view rather than objective-observer point-of-view, prominent in modern religious films such as *Of Gods and Men*²⁴ and *Silence*.²⁵ This approach enables the focus on inner struggle rather than external events. The focus is on the interior trajectory of the fight of a woman, asceticism in its core meaning, and its implications and relevance today for each person—which is open-ended—only in the sense that the viewer is invited to contemplate on their own struggles. The periodic narration does not diminish the value of the dramatic part of the film but rather offers it a framework that connects time, space, and the beliefs and identities of people. Narration, an unusual choice at first glance, serves not to ‘preach to the converted’ but to add to the story a different dimension, that of the respect and veneration of the different peoples in the Balkan Peninsula. The real strength remains in the film language that follows closely the conventions and purpose of iconographic language; the main protagonist depicted in the film is not an ideal figure but a woman whom we see gradually transformed: from ordinary girl she passes from darkness to light (from image to likeness) in her struggle; a woman who lived in a specific space and time is placed within ontological and historical realities (historical contexts of both past and present). In conveying the story of the most respected woman in the area the director breathes new life and relevance to asceticism; finally, the aspect of the Christian–Muslim relationship through the friendship of the two women is subtle and unintrusive, depicted as a deeply human relationship with its ups and downs, where neither of the women loses their identity and purpose in the world they share.

4. Conclusions

‘Poets and prose writers misrepresent people in extremely important ways, when—as they often do—they portray immoral people as happy and moral people as unhappy, and write about the rewards of undiscovered immorality and how morality is good for someone else, but disadvantageous to oneself’ (Plato 2008, p. 87).

The film *A Cross in the Desert* stands out as one of the rare efforts in modern cinema to explore and engage with the theme of asceticism. It delves into existential questions by portraying the life of an ascetic woman—a saint widely revered across the Balkan Peninsula. Her ascetic journey is depicted as an internal struggle, symbolised by her battle against the seven deadly sins. This struggle is expressed visually through the language of film. Creating an engaging film set in the desert, centred on a ‘rigid’ topic like the seven deadly sins, is no easy task. However, the filmmaker delves into this theme, utilising cinematic techniques to bring it to life and make it relevant and thought-provoking for a contemporary audience. While the film could be categorised as a ‘religious film’ or a poetic work (Grace 2009; Tarkovsky 1989; Sitney 2015) in the transcendental style (Schrader 2018; Radovic 2025), I argue that the

film surpasses these categories and opens new ways of dealing with asceticism on film. The title of this paper is, therefore, no coincidence: the term ‘cinema of the desert’ is not chosen to reflect the film’s geographical filming location but rather because of the film’s specific approach, visual conceptualization, and cinematic solutions. Its close and intertwined relationship with iconography, and the meanings of ascetic hesychasm, is conveyed by the means of visual storytelling, frequently without dialogues or any narratorial exposition. The visual language and cinematic techniques depict the struggle between iniquity and sanctity: while this conflict is embodied, that is, visually expressed often through her body, it is evident that the battle is spiritual rather than physical.

The film employs a non-linear storyline and the interplay between documentary narration and feature, alongside cinematography, montage, symbolism, metaphors, mise-en-scène, and the strategic use of lighting, sound, silence, and dialogue. All these components collaboratively create a cohesive depiction of a woman’s solitary existence and struggles in the desert. When it comes to the central question on the iconographic dimension of the film, it is primarily exemplified through the effective synthesis of the techniques that facilitate a profound exploration of the concept of asceticism. Furthermore, the hagiographic quality of the film, as I contend, is not predicated on its rhetoric but on the film’s capacity to translate these thematic elements into an innovative cinematic language—rendering them pertinent to contemporary audiences while abstaining from resorting to conventional entertainment industry standards.

The film explores the ways to convey the story of a woman in the desert in a unique and understated way, drawing its inspiration and sources from iconography. Centred around the struggle with deadly sins as the backbone of the storyline, the filmmaker liberates himself from the burden of heavy moralistic narrative to engage in a visual exploration of humanity and holiness, evil and good, darkness and light.

As discussed in the film analysis, iconography shapes film language by guiding specific shooting techniques, the interrelation between shots, the use of lighting, and the absence of perspective, crafting the story as a visual hagiography. As discussed, specific ways the film translates iconographic language into cinematic form include the composition of the saint in the desert that acts as a mirror reflection of her icon, as well as the framing of the human face that, by way of light and composition, implicitly resembles the mosaic fresco. Frequent depictions of St. Paraskevi from the back, standing in front of ‘the burning bush’ or facing the natural light from the outside of the cave, indicate the transitioning process of an ascetic woman into sanctity, from profane to sacred, as her true face—hypostasis is yet to be revealed in the actual iconography.

This is precisely the real strength of the film, which lies in communicating the journey to sainthood as a transition from film to icon. In other words, *A Cross in the Desert*’s key reference point around which the film language revolves is the icon and this is made manifest *dramaturgically* through the ascetic struggle in the desert and *aesthetically* through the composite use of live-action and documentary that in its climax uniquely shows the transfiguration of these boundaries and time and space itself through the person of the saint that witnesses to God’s continual presence on the earth (the film finishes with a time-capsule of nearly a millennium of history).

In depicting the saint, the author who initially draws on (written and iconographic) hagiography refrains from criticising or idealising the body as a site of struggle. Gender is approached theologically as the film engages closely with ascetic theology. Her femininity is neither portrayed as asexual nor her holiness as unfeminine. This represents an entirely new approach to the saintly woman, starting from understanding her as a character within a specific historical context, considering her choices and the task she takes upon herself, choosing it as a determining factor of life in order to penetrate the essence of its meaning.

She does not cease to be a woman, but even in light of her historical epoch, she is considered equal to a man with her physical strength and endurance. With her feat, she becomes Christlike, finding herself in a realm in which there is no longer a division into ‘male and female, slave or free’. At the same time, she remains female without losing her identity determined by the necessity of her biological hypostasis. It is on these premises (on which Christianity rests) that the film (again somewhat hagiographically) builds an image of a woman who loses and searches for her identity. This identity is essential, not rooted in the social roles of that era, nor in her biological constraints or her spiritual and psychological condition, but it is realised through Christ. In that process, she loses herself in order to find herself, that is, she has to strip all her masks to gain her personhood (hypostasis) in Christ. Parallely, the demon is an occurrence without hypostasis, therefore without essence, nonetheless a real spiritual entity whose manifestation is always a form of deception, whether it be spiritual or physical. The demon shifts from man to woman, mixing the verbs and terms, even appearing in the form of an animal—manifesting as instable entity that cannot rest as it has no inward dwelling space and peace, neither love nor communion (with God and others)—hence it is the illusionist master that plays with human complexity to provoke the desired outcome. In depicting female spirituality, the film does not deviate from the classical text but rather inserts itself into the *everydayness* in an intimate and careful way, and in this sense presents the spirituality of women ascetics as an important experience and foundation on which the church itself rests.

Finally, it is important to remember that *A Cross in the Desert* re-actualizes the biblical message ‘woe to those who call evil good and good evil’²⁶ and in this respect, successfully portrays virtue as joy of life, while immorality is depicted as boring, predictable, and repetitive, ultimately exhausting for both the protagonists and the viewers. In this sense, the film, perhaps unintentionally, subverts and challenges modern popular cinematic narratives that portray evil as entertaining and alluring, while depicting virtue as dull, restrictive, and outdated. The director took a rather intuitive approach in the process of filmmaking, steering clear of intellectualization to convey the ascetic experience. Guiding the intricate storyline through his personal vision, the director reveals the ascetic struggle as something that potentially reflects the universal struggle of every human being. According to the director, ‘the process of creating the film was purposeful, although it was not always guided by clear intent’²⁷ which allowed for more spontaneous and authentic artistic growth in exploring new ways to convey the story.²⁸ *A Cross in the Desert* is a journey into a desert, an experience, a confrontation, and self-reflection in silence. It constitutes an exploratory odyssey for both the audience and the filmmaker, as they endeavour to comprehend asceticism as a way of life through a story that is unconventional and richly layered, rooted in the filmmaker’s own cultural tradition as well as that of the peoples of the Balkan peninsula. The film is an artistic endeavour not only to portray the subject at hand but also to explore it visually, showcasing the potential of film as a medium capable of providing an immersive and distinctive artistic and spiritual experience. The film is not a construct or an intellectual contemplation; however, ‘within the controlled environment of the set the uncontrollable happens’.²⁹ It works on a personal experiential level—‘breaking the fourth wall and spilling over into the audience’.³⁰ The film offers an intriguing introduction of innovative methods and modalities for engaging with the subject matter, paving the way for new artistic pursuits on similar themes and expanding the potential for understanding and going beyond the category of ‘religious film’ within a contemporary context. Cinema of the desert represents an artistic attempt and experience, but it can also be the herald of a new artistic path and new genre developments.

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Notes

- ¹ Hadži-Aleksandar Đurović, Serbia/Jordan, 2022.
- ² It is important to note that the director, as well as the writer who dramatised the life of St. Paraskevi, relied heavily upon Serbian hagiography. According to Serbian hagiography, St. Paraskevi spent 40 years in the desert (while Romanians, for example, hold that she was around 27 years old when she died). Despite some mismatched data about her age, the essence and the meaning of her life are preserved and equally respected. One of the earliest written accounts of her life dates back to the 12th century, under the Ecumenical Patriarch Nicholas of Muzelon. A subsequent official account was provided by Bulgarian Patriarch Eftimie of Trnovo in the late 14th century. In 1643, the life of St. Paraskeva was published in the Romanian language. Metropolitan Varlaam of Moldova compiled this version using Greek and Slavonic manuscripts, drawing heavily from Patriarch Eftimie's earlier work.
- ³ Podvig can be translated as struggle and refers to an inner disposition and the act of fighting with oneself.
- ⁴ ἀποφθέγματα τῶν πατέρων Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh; Ward (1987).
- ⁵ Zachariou (2023a, 2023b); see section on 'Film and Ascetic Iconography' in Radovic (2024).
- ⁶ Apophthegmata Patrum (ἀποφθέγματα τῶν πατέρων) is a collection of texts dating mostly from the fourth and fifth centuries. Sayings are presumably in Coptic and Greek, taken from the oral tradition; records are in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Greek, with later Latin and Slavonic translations. Benedicta Ward (ed.): *ibid.*, pp. xx–xxvii.
- ⁷ The fifth-century ascetic recorded in the Byzantine Synaxarium.
- ⁸ An early desert mother from the fourth century was recorded by Saint Jerome. Herbermann (1913).
- ⁹ Galatians 3:28; King James Version 21st Century.
- ¹⁰ Manuel Sumares: *ibid.*, p. 93.
- ¹¹ Sophrony (1997); Manuel Sumares: *ibid.*
- ¹² Viktor Bychkov: *ibid.*
- ¹³ Milica Nemanjić Hrebeljanović (1335–1405) came from the Nemanjić Dynasty and was married to Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović. After her husband's death in the Kosovo Battle, Milica de facto ruled the lands until her son became 'a ruler' of the Serbian lands—her son, Prince Stefan Lazarević, ascended the throne in 1393. In the same year, Milica would become the nun Eugenia and later Ephrosinia, after receiving the Great Schema.
- ¹⁴ Upon the discovery of her incorrupt body, her relics were enshrined in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Kallikrateia (the present Mir Marsiinan, situated on the shore of the Anthira Gulf—Buyuk Cekmece, South-East of Thracia); in subsequent years, Paraskeva's relics were transferred to various churches in the region. In 1238, the relics were transferred from Kallikrateia to Veliko Tarnovo, capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire, and then, her relics were moved for five years to Vidin (1393–1398). They were then transferred to Belgrade (Ružica Church), where they remained until 1521, when Belgrade fell to the Ottoman army and the relics were transferred to Constantinople. In 1641, the relics were transferred to Trei Ierarhi Monastery in Iași, Moldavia, and in 1888, they were transferred to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, Moldova, today's Romania.
- ¹⁵ The story of the life of St. Mary of Egypt.
- ¹⁶ Saint Martyr Marina is represented as beating or conquering the devil, often with a hammer, symbolising her overcoming the devil through her martyrdom and faith.
- ¹⁷ Saint Xenia of St. Petersburg is often depicted in her husband's or worn-out clothes, signifying her life of *jurodivi*.
- ¹⁸ Saint Matrona of Moscow is depicted as blind, as she was during her lifetime. This is unusual in iconography, which normally represents saints as transformed.
- ¹⁹ The only known winged representation of St. Parascheva dates to the 19th century in Plovdiv. Kuyumdzhieva (2014).
- ²⁰ Envy is depicted in the film both as anger and a form of sadness for others' prosperity.
- ²¹ While this resemblance can be accidental and not planned in advance in the process of preparing the film, it strongly corresponds to the 14th century Byzantine fresco *The Souls of the Righteous in the Hand of God*.
- ²² Streche Florentin: *ibid.*
- ²³ see Note 22 above.
- ²⁴ *Des hommes et des dieux*, Xavier Beauvois, France, 2010.
- ²⁵ Martin Scorsese, USA, 2016.
- ²⁶ Isaiah 5:20 KJV.

- ²⁷ Hadži-Aleksandar Đurović: Personal Interview, 24 November 2025.
- ²⁸ According to Engin Isin, a creative and purposeful act is one that opens up new possibilities or initiates change, but it does not have to be premeditated or consciously planned. These acts are motivated by purpose and creativity, yet they may occur spontaneously or as a result of unintended consequences, rather than through deliberate intent. Isin highlights that such actions can still hold significance and be transformative, even if they are not driven by explicit intention (Isin and Nielsen (2008)).
- ²⁹ see Note 27 above.
- ³⁰ see Note 27 above.

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