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Marianella Pastoral Centre
75 Orwell Road
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Dublin 6
Ireland

Tel (353-1) 406-7100

Fax (353-1) 4929-635

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The FURROW

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Communion in the Dark

— *the cinema as cathedral*

Kieran Scott

With increasing regularity, my wife and I face a dilemma on Sunday mornings. The dilemma is this: we ask ourselves – what sacred story do we wish to hear, see and experience this morning: the saviour on the silver screen¹ or the salvation story re-enacted in the church assembly? Our struggle is: where will the ‘Word of God’ be most active and alive for us: in the pulpit or in the moving pictures? Or, to put it another way: where can we experience ‘real presence’ this morning: in communion at the church altar or communion in the dark in the movie theatre?

This is an increasing dilemma for us because we believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation affirms that the universe is drenched with divinity; God is present and speaks in multiple and varied ways today. This means that the Eucharist at the church altar is not so much an exception to the rest of reality but a clue to all of it. Communion/Eucharist, then, can be experienced anywhere and anytime.

That is not to say that cinema is a substitute for church. Although Camille Paglia suggests that there is a fundamental contest between them. It does, however, claim that cinema and church can be viewed through the frame or hermeneutical lens of the other.

My thesis is this: Both cinema and church can be ‘cathedrals’ to tell the sacred tale.

- Both suspend and bracket out the real so that we can see and live by the light that burns in the dark;
- Both can be viewed as forms of religious practice;
- Both, through their social practices, call congregations together, one in the dark, the other in the light, for visions of desire;

1. Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford and Gueric Debona, OSB, 1999. *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999).

Kieran Scott is a professor in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham University, New York. He can be reached at kieran.scott@yahoo.com

—Both create social bonds (of fellowship), taking us beyond the mundane by projecting visions and dreams of other forms of life.

And these visions are sustained by repeated attendance and re-enacting the rituals in church and cinema.

So, when the lights go down in the cinema, we can see other imagined worlds, other ways of being human.

Likewise, when the lights go on in church, we can participate in the projection of dreams and visions of other ways of being human.

That is why on Sunday mornings my wife and I sometimes choose to hear, see and experience the telling of the sacred tale in the cinema. For us, it has become a spiritual practice – a form of contemplation. No longer is it simply a time of leisure or escapism. Rather it has become a time of rest, centring, sabbath and sacrament. However, churches, with their own religious ceremonies, we happily discover from time to time, can also be places for developing this contemplative attitude.

When this transpires, we no longer find ourselves on the ‘horns of a dilemma’!

PITFALLS AND PATHWAYS TO LINKING FILM AND RELIGION

Pamela Mitchell Legg warns of the danger of falling into simply ‘using’ film to serve the agenda and dogmatic purpose of established religion. Here we will note three pitfalls she warns us to guard against.²

The first is when we use films for purely didactic purposes. Here the film is (mis)used to moralize, illustrate a point, prove an argument or lecture. The fundamental error here is not to let the film speak for itself ... in its own voice.

The second pitfall is to turn to conceptual analysis too quickly. In our rush to intellectually decode the film, we short-circuit the experience. Films are *felt* before they are understood. It is an affective, experiential medium and it evokes an immediate affective response. The trick is to avoid all distractions and lose ourselves in the world of the film; like Ludwig Wittgenstein who would sit as far to the front in the cinema as he could, leaning forward in his seat so as to be utterly absorbed by the film. Intellectual analysis can come later.

The third pitfall is to look only for ‘explicitly’ religious films. This is to place the link between film and religion within a narrow, dogmatic framework. Bible films (*The Passion of Christ* or *The*

2. See Pamela Mitchell Legg, 1996. ‘Contemporary Films and Religious Exploration: An Opportunity for Religious Education, Part 1: Foundational Questions’, *Religious Education* 9/3, pp. 397-406.

Nativity Story), or saint films (like *Thérèse* or *The Song of Bernadette*) or films with direct ecclesial concerns (*Agnes of God*) may be appropriate at times. However, they remain locked into traditional theological forms and do not easily intersect with our contemporary postmodern forms and experience.

However, since the 1960s the language of religious films has been changing. During this time, the treatment of the religious in cinema has undergone a significant transformation. This is linked to and shaped by the radical changes in society and the standing (and crisis) of institutionalized religion in postmodernity.

Peter Hasenberg notes in particular three ways of attending to the linkage and expressing religious ideas in contemporary film.³

First, there is the adapting of traditional religious themes to a (new) changing audience; in other words, taking a premodern narrative and re-shaping it to address a postmodern context and audience. We see this in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*.

The second device or language of religious films is to integrate religious themes into genre formulas popular with audiences. For example, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a science fiction genre, offers a vision of history, with an eschatological perspective and a standpoint on what it means to be human. *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and Spielberg's *ET* are in the same genre. The genre of crime fiction has had a strong affinity with religious speculation about evil, the nature of guilt and the necessity of redemption. Peter Weir's *Witness* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy are rich expressions of religious paradox.

Finally, the popular genre of comedy has a natural penchant for religious subjects. Woody Allen's urban comedies, for example, offer ways of talking to people about their existential problems at a level on which they can be easily addressed. In movies as diverse as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*, Allen explores the fragility and finitude of human life, questions of guilt, providence, failure of commitments and shallowness that passes as love. His films invite people to see the implications of nihilism. The absence of God matters, his works seems to suggest. It makes a profound difference in the lives of people.

The third new form of religious cinema, noted by Hasenberg, might be called a secular approach. It tries to find new aesthetic formulas to express a sense of spirituality. Here there are very few

3. Peter Hasenberg, "The "Religious" in Film: From King of Kings to the Fisher King", *New Image of Religious Film*, John R. May (ed.) (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), pp. 41-56.

explicit references to religion. It is hardly ever on the surface. The aesthetic style is meditative and enigmatic that disguises a strong spiritual dimension. Krzysztof Kieslowski's work is a paradigmatic example. His masterpiece, *The Decalogue*, neither preaches nor proselytizes. Each situation is complex – devoid of easy answers. Commandments are not easy solutions to problems but devices to sharpen ethical dilemmas. There are no certainties. The characters in *The Decalogue* seem under the influence of some other power, yet the film series seems open to the workings of chance in human life.

Every part of the film is an open-ended finale. Kieslowski's intent was to concentrate on what's going on inside the characters rather than what's happening on the outside. This, in turn, challenges us – the viewers – to examine our own inner world of tensions and emotions. *The Decalogue* shows that every life is a dramatic story and that behind the faces of familiar strangers and anonymous neighbours lurk mysteries, ethical quandaries and deep yearnings. It is not a film about God. Rather it is about the possibility of experiencing God/Mystery in everyday secular situations. The director is a prophet of a 'secular spirituality'. *The Decalogue* can be aptly called, a postmodern film for our post-modern times.

FILM AS A PUBLIC LANGUAGE OF RELIGION

One of the important aspects of postmodern culture is that our spiritual journeying and religious formation takes place as much, if not more so, in secular culture as in explicitly religious spaces. Part of that secular culture is the world of the arts. The arts of each age, in their own unique way, capture the 'cries and whispers' of each era. Contemporary film, in its own unique way, projects the pertinent questions, issues and sensibilities of our time. Its language is, what Gabriel Moran calls, a second language of the religious – and religious education.⁴ This is a public language for public discourse that expresses what is ultimate in life. The language is common, inter-communal, and secular. Walter Brueggemann named it 'the conversation at the wall'. Brueggemann contrasts this 'conversation at [or outside] the wall' with a more intra-mural, intimate, caressing, 'conversation behind the wall'. However, we do not need to play one language against the other. Our task today is to become bilingual. Contemporary film is indispensable to this task. It is playing a vital role in the construction of a compatible public religious language. Rather than predetermining what a legitimate religious question is, what form it can

4. Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1989).

take and what the correct (orthodox) answer is, this public discourse, grounded in human experience, evokes questions that are asked and issues played out in a form that resonates with people's lives today. Paul Tillich expressed it this way: religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion. In the contemporary cultural form of film, we see this intersection of religion and culture in public spaces speaking a public discourse.

FILM AS 'WORD OF GOD'

But the question must be asked: does this mean that every film is religious? Are they all inherently religious? Of course not. But when they attend to profound cultural questions and depth of meaning the possibility of the surfacing of the religious is close at hand.

Another way of asking the question is: when is film 'Word of God'? 'Word of God' is a metaphor. It is a metaphorical use of language to express divine-human relations. The term expresses the self-disclosure of God and its reception by humans. A corresponding term is revelation. Revelation or 'Word of God' is a process of personal relations. It is the activity of responding to another (person, thing, event) in which the divine is disclosed.⁵ The term 'Word of God', then, can point to the entire domain of reality – nature, history, texts (sacred or secular, written or audio-visual). Every place, every person, every text can be revelatory. But none is guaranteed to be so. All can, but do not necessarily mediate the encounter with the divine. Some may hold more revelatory power than others. Some may evoke a deeper sense of ineffable mystery than others. In the context of the visual arts, we likewise can say, some films are better than others. Some raise deeper questions than others. But he or she, with an openness of heart, who has ears to hear and eyes to see can experience film as hierophany.⁶ We can hear God speak today on the silver screen. How? Evelyn Underhill, in another context, mentors us. She writes: 'Do not think, but as it were pour out your personality toward it [the film]: let your soul be in your eyes.'

A film is show and tell. It combines the showing and the telling of a story. It is a visual narrative process. We live in a story shaped world. We all live and move and have our being in family narratives, neighbourhood narratives, national narratives and global narratives. All of us have absorbed and internalized stories from television talk shows, sit coms, soap operas. These stories frequently define success in terms of financial status, self-worth in

5. Gabriel Moran, *Both Sides: The Story of Revelation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2002).

6. Michael Bird, 'Film as Hierophany', *Religion in Film*, John R. May and Michael Bird (eds.) (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), pp. 3-22.

terms of sexual attraction and the use of force as the only way to resolve conflict. These stories live inside us. Good movies help us to question these narratives inside us. They enable us to discern where our cultural stories are in conflict with our sacred stories. They offer us the opportunity to experience salvation on the silver screen. The genre of the film narrative may have a mythical structure (*The Empire Strikes Back*) or a parabolic form (*An Inconvenient Truth*). But it will be a good film if it rings true to human life. We will recognize our own journey in it. We will feel its movement in our bones and know it is 'right'. At that moment, it will be 'Word of God'. At that moment, we will experience an epiphany of meaning, a spiritual awakening, a rich sense of presence, in a word, communion in the dark.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The educational implications of revelatory films are manifold. Briefly we can note five:

1. Movies educate people's emotions, train our sensibilities and perceptions to a richer range of feelings and awareness.⁷
2. Films articulate a range of values, embodying them in characters and narrating conflicting values, as the characters play out their values in human lives and commitments.
3. Films are what Neil Hurley calls 'the new humanism'. In speaking to literates and illiterates alike, they tease out of us a sense of greater possibilities, alternative selves and new horizons.⁸
4. Films are visual stories offering us self-images, images of the other, and visions of the natural world. Herbert Marcuse notes: every authentic work of art can be revolutionary. It subverts perception and understanding, indicts the established reality and unveils images of liberation. Good movies, likewise, can be parabolic or countercultural.⁹
5. Finally, if the film is to function salvifically it must be interpreted. Interpretation is a dialectical process that takes place between the viewer and the visual text. We interpret the film. The film, in turn, interprets us, culminating in richer meaning. This expands our horizons and deepens our humanity. And, if it is the authentic 'Word of God', it will evoke in us a response

7. Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

8. Neil Hurley, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978).

9. Jim McDermott, 'Films That Move and Provoke', *America* 195/5, 2006, pp. 24-26.

to heal the world's ills. That response may be righteous anger directed in works of justice to mend a broken world. Or, if the film captures the elegance of the universe, it may nurture ecological sensibilities and inspire a moral and spiritual life-style response.

That is why my wife and I regularly keep sabbath in the cinema. It has become a spiritual practice of hearing, seeing and experiencing the sacred tale of our redemption and salvation. It has become for us real communion in the dark.

Beyond the Good Samaritan. We are, it is said, to follow the example of the 'Good Samaritan'. This leaves out three crucial facts. First, there is no evidence, that the Samaritan was 'good', an adjective which is not used in the gospel account. He may have been thoroughly immoral and disreputable. The point was that, when confronted by an urgent crisis, in contrast to the two religious professionals, he did what was needed. Second, the parable is Jesus' answer to the question 'Who is *my* neighbour?' The 'I' in the story is not the Samaritan but the man who fell down on the road. It is not primarily about giving, but about *receiving* neighbourly friendship and help from unexpected quarters – in this case from one who was a foreigner and a heretic. And, finally, while it remains an important part of Christian practice, it is only a part: there is much more, and we need, as Ann Morisy suggested years ago, to move 'beyond the Good Samaritan'. It is often more important to build a better and safer road so that thieves do not operate so freely.

—KENNETH LEECH, *Doing Theology in Altav Ali Park* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd) p. 48

Prayer: Dialogue of the Deaf or Dual Control?¹

Richard McCullen

One of the most striking images of Pope Benedict XVI that our television screens threw up last May during his visit to Poland was that of his entry into the former concentration camp of Auschwitz. We saw the lone white figure, frail and pensive with hands nervously clasped, as he – a German Pope – passed under the celebrated arch leading into that camp of death. Some twenty metres or more behind him was his accompanying entourage. Breaking the encompassing silence, which seemed to speak eloquently of the silence of God, the Pope began:

To speak in this place of horror, in this place where unprecedented mass crimes were committed against God and man, is almost impossible – and it is particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany. In a place like this, words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence – a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this?

We were listening to what seemed like a dialogue of the deaf. Then as the Pope's distress seemed to become more acute, he continued:

How many questions arise in this place! Constantly the question comes up: Where was God in those days? Why was he silent? How could he permit this endless slaughter, this triumph of evil? The words of Psalm 44 come to mind, Israel's lament for its woes: 'You have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness ... because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?'

1. Talk given to young adults at St Peter's, Phibsboro, Dublin 7, 21 November 2006.

Richard McCullen is a Vincentian priest. Address: St Paul's, Raheny, Dublin 5.