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Blessed Broken Bodies: Exploring Redemption in Central Station and Breaking the Waves

Abstract

I focus specifically on the theme of redemption as it is presented in two very different films: Walter Salles' moving *Central Station* (1998) from Brazil and Dane Lars Von Trier's haunting *Breaking the Waves* (1996). The former provides us with a tale of dual redemption while the latter film reinterprets the power of bodily redemption as Bess uses her body to broker salvation and healing for her paralyzed husband. Both these films force the viewer to critique traditional notions of redemption and revision alternatives. Both have broken women's bodies as pivotal symbols/events in the story and both affirm feminist theology's emphasis on this this-worldly redemption, rather than an eschatological disembodied reunion with God in the heavenly realms. This paper was originally presented at the AAR Annual Meeting in Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group on November 19, 2001 in Denver, Colorado

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I. OVERVIEW OF THE ESSAY

I focus specifically on the theme of redemption as it is presented in two very different films: Walter Salles' moving *Central Station* (1998) from Brazil and Lars Von Trier's haunting *Breaking the Waves* (1996). My reading of these films will be from a theological perspective. These two films provide rich fodder for reconsidering the meaning of redemption as they raise questions regarding the very nature of redemption and the role of the redeemer, especially providing Christian theologians with intriguing and disturbing material for reconsidering the fundamentals of Christian redemption.¹

These are two radically different films. One is a road film set amidst the scorched earth of northeast Brazil and the other centers on a small town on a rain-whipped, craggy Scottish coast; however both these films force the viewer to critique traditional notions of redemption and to revision alternatives. Both films have broken women's bodies as important symbols/events in the story. Both narratives also affirm the feminist theological affirmation of this this-worldly redemption, rather than an eschatological disembodied reunion with God in the heavenly realms. Tracing these similarities and differences, as well as clarifying and challenging the theological statements made within the films are my main objective.

II. PLOT FUNDAMENTALS

Central Station

The plot of *Central Station* is fairly straightforward: a jaded retired schoolteacher, Dora, played magnificently by Brazil's premiere stage actress, Fernanda Montenegro, supplements her retirement by writing letters for the illiterate hoards who pass through Rio de Janeiro's Central Train station. A woman, Ana, and her son Josué (Vinícius de Oliveira), approach Dora to write a letter to his father, Jesus. Ana is run-down by a bus moments later and Josué turns to Dora. Dora sells him to clandestine adoption agency for \$1,000R. Irene (Marília Pêna) her best friend, is horrified at the news and explains that it is a organ-harvesting scheme. Dora rescues Josué and the rest of the story chronicles their tumultuous relationship and journey to the Northeast of Brazil in search of his ephemeral father. It is a tale of dual-redemption as we watch each character heal and be transformed through their relation to the other.

Response to *Central Station* in Brazil and throughout the world was phenomenal. One critic mused the *Titanic* phenomena was "a shipwreck in a glass of water" compared to the emotions aroused for millions by *Central Station*!²

The 1998 film by documentary filmmaker, Walter Salles, represents the best of Brazilian cinema's renaissance since the mid 1990's. In regards to the emotional

impact of the film, Salles commented that he finds collective emotion rare today and reasons, "that is what makes cinema so precious and so unique. When people are moved by similar emotions, then it's as if a small miracle was happening again and again and again."³

The film took the world by storm in 1998: it won the Berlin Film festival's coveted Golden Bear award for Best film and Best actress. It was nominated in both these categories as well at the Academy Awards. Others referred to the film as "soulful," "an rewarding Odysseys," "a journey of hope and self-discovery," even "a compelling religious allegory."⁴ Salles, who envisioned and directed the story, wanted to explore two themes: the human "transcendant desire" to communicate and the search for identity.⁵

He muses that perhaps the reason why audiences respond so emotionally to the film is because it values solidarity and communication - values underappreciated in today's competitive society. He used the genre of a road movie because characters are forced "to respond to a world they cannot control anymore.

Breaking the Waves

Many readers are familiar with the plot and characters of *Breaking the Waves*. It is the story of a deeply religious young Scottish woman, Bess, who falls in love with outsider from the oil rig off the coast, Jan. The film is divided into

seven chapters bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue. Filmed with a hand-held 8mm camera, it exemplifies the "honest" cinema principles of Dogma 95, Von Trier's vow of cinematic chastity."⁶

After a short period of wedded and sexual bliss, Jan returns to life at sea. The forlorn Bess beseeches God to return her love. Jan has a terrible accident and returns home paralyzed and ill. Whether due to his love, his illness, or drugs, he pleads with Bess to take other lovers and tell him of her exploits in order to help him live and heal. The rest of the tale is Bess' response to his request, which she understands as proving her love for Jan to God through action and securing his healing. Bess believes in the power of bodily redemption as she uses her flesh to broker salvation and healing for her paralyzed husband, Jan. She ultimately loses her life and Jan is healed.

Von Trier calls the film "a simple love story" which took him five years to film and produce. The plot is based loosely on his favorite childhood fairy tale, *Golden Heart*, in which an idealistic heroine is stripped and loses everything ... except her fearless spirit and hope. He describes *Breaking the Waves* as "a film about goodness." The Christic references were not lost on audiences and reviewers. *Time Magazine* called it "a calvary of carnality," James Berardinelli traced Bess's sufferings with those of Jesus, and James Wall of *The Christian Century* reads the

tale as a "meditation on modern sainthood, on the power of childlike innocence and faith."⁷

Many feminists have condemned the story as one more misogynistic, sadistic tale in which men destroy women. In my opinion, most secular reviewers, despite nuanced readings, fail to grasp the nature of Bess' relationship with God and her theological world.

III. RETHINKING REDEMPTION:

A THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE FILMS

QUESTIONS REGARDING THE NATURE OF REDEMPTION

What is redemption? From whom or what do we need to be redeemed?

Bradley Hanson has outlined four distinct metaphors associated with Christian Redemption: sacrifice, victory over evil, doing justice, and revealing love.⁸

Hebrew temple sacrifice to Yahweh believed atonement is received through the sacrifice of the life embodied in the blood (Lev. 17:11). The idea of gift offering, which involved your inner intention (kavannah) as an alternative understanding of sacrifice has found more resonance with 20th century theologians than animal sacrifice. Jesus "emptied himself" ("he did not consider equality with God

something to be grasped, but made himself nothing ..." (Ph. 2:6-7). Jesus's confounding of demons, healing of the sick, and his death on the cross are read as triumphs over evil. Explaining how Jesus' person and death satisfy God's sense of justice is more complicated. Theological explanations from Pauline substitutionary atonement theory to Anselm's compensatory satisfaction theory to Calvin's classic substitutionary punishment explanation fail to fully satisfy both our notion of a loving God and a just system. Retribution schemes do not work for many. Recently some theologians have interpreted the heart of Jesus' work as setting people free and working an inner transformation - a reading we find in both *Central Station* and *Breaking the Waves*.

How do these films revision understandings of redemption? *Central Station's* message of redemption clearly rejects traditional definitions of Christian redemption. It is not an overtly religious odyssey, and I find Bowman's extremely creative reading of the film as a salvific Christian allegory a bit forced at times. The film offers a more Hebraic notion of redemption as being concerned with the transformation of self and society into good, life-giving, justice-seeking relations. It would reinforce redemption theories which interpret the heart of Jesus's mission as reconciliation. Josué is reconciled with his brothers and hopes this will extend to his father as well. Dora is reconciled with her past, remembers the good sides of

her formerly despised father, and emboldened to begin a new life at 67. Characters are saved from loneliness, ennui, and cynicism.

Redemption is complicated in *Breaking the Waves* despite the rather heavy-handed representation of Bess as a Christ figure. Not only does Bess prostitute herself in order to save Jan, but she is dealing with her own sin as well: the sin of self-centeredness.⁹

This notion of sin reminds me of Valerie Saiving's pioneer feminist theological work from 1968 which argued that women and men define sin differently and that women's greatest sin is the tendency to lose themselves in service to others ... precisely what God and community leaders counsel Bess to do. Bess is redeemed under these criteria, by offering her life up for Jan, whereas his healing is merely physical.

QUESTIONING THE ROLE OF THE REDEEMER

Who has the power to redeem? Might redemption be a dynamic process that involves both redeemer and the redeemed? Need we have an exterior redeemer figure at all? What are the parameters for re-conceiving a Christic figure?

Central Station is unique in that, unlike many redemption narratives, there is no one heroic, sacrificing savior figure. Alternatively, both Josué and Dora

function as savior figures for one another. As they travel together, Dora becomes increasingly warm and motherly towards Josué. She literally saves him from death twice and Josué (Joshua) returns the favor after her collapse in House of Miracles. His name is not accidental: Joshua was the leader of the road-weary Israelites who led them to the Promised Land after wandering 40 years in desert. He is figure of great faith in spite of dire circumstances (remember the odds at Jericho?) His original name was Hoshea which meant "salvation;" however, Moses changed his name to "Joshua," which means: "The Lord saves or the Lord gives victory". Joshua is also the Hebrew form of the Greek name "Jesus". Joshua's 1250 b.c.e. conquering of the land of Canan made eschatological history and concretized God's redemption of the Israelites. Both the wary, yet idealistic orphan and the jaded con artist function as unlikely, but remarkably effective co-redeemers in the tale, challenging viewers to reconsider the possibility that savior figures can be less than perfect.

Who has power to redeem in *Breaking the Waves*? Many reject Bess' Christic association for a variety of reasons.¹⁰

Many feminists have discarded any possibility of Bess's autonomy, seeing her as a figure "sacrificed on the altar of patriarchy" by a sadistic husband and cruel God. A few feminists, myself included, find that Bess does indeed possess autonomy and power. I, like Jan, find her stronger than the lot of us. I would argue that she does have tremendous power of choice despite her choices being made by

patriarchal figures. She does ultimately choose to pursue what is most important to her: love. At first she refuses Jan's desires ... saying they are not her own, but later she boldly declares that it was her choice, if not her idea. Perhaps critics who reject the notion of Bess's autonomy are as guilty of paternalism as the church elders in the film.

Does Bess have any real power?

Nowhere is Bess' independence more clear than in her scenes with Dr. Richardson. In the scene where she sexually propositions the doctor, she lies on the bed naked and says (in the tone of a school teacher): "You can touch me now ... You can have me now"

In their first scene together she admits she feels responsible for the accident on the rig.

Dr. Richardson somewhat mockingly responds: "Wow! What powers you possess!" He does not understand her religious worldview. She believes in the power of prayer. For Bess, it is a simple cause and effect situation. She prays and God answers her prayers. In her mind, she does indeed have power, but not a power the outside world recognizes.

Bess' strength is contested throughout the film. I find Bess to be an incredibly strong figure. Agreeing with me are Jan and her pastor. Jan rebukes Dorothy (Dodo) as she speaks of Bess' weakness and claims Bess is stronger than both of them. Her pastor reminds her that she has God-given strength.

In the scene when Dr. Richardson comes to call, after she has become a prostitute, Bess is serenely in control. Her mother has just castigated her and warned her of her impending ostracization: "You're not strong, you are a feeble girl." Dr. Richardson then enters and speaks to Bess alone:

Dr. Richardson: Come on Bess, You are not a kid anymore ..."

Bess: I save Jan from dying. Sometimes I don't even have to tell him about it.

We have a supernatural connection¹¹

Bess: God gives everyone something to be good at. I am good at this.

Dr. Richardson: What is your talent, surely it can't be [opening your legs]

Bess: (resolutely) I can believe.

He then capitulates and admits he loves her. The representative of the scientific world is transformed into a believer, if only in Bess' goodness. She turns stone cold and escorts him out. Bess oozes control in this scene. She is transformed from a "feeble girl" who is easily influenced by authority figures into a strong woman who knows her mind and is not afraid to kick a respected doctor out of her home.

Bess knows her power is not anything that humans can understand. She really does not need to explain it to them. Hers is a pact between God, Jan and herself. They communicate. They have formed a trinity in which Jan's redemption is being worked out. As with God, Bess is in direct empathetic communication with Jan. There are several love triangles in *Breaking the Waves*, the most poignant of which I found to be the God-Jan-Bess triad.

In Control Until the End

Even after being stoned, shunned by her mother, and knifed by sailors, Bess has enough wherewithal to instruct Dodo in how to assume her place petitioning God for Jan's healing. Her relationship with God takes seriously the promise of Jesus' parable in Luke 18:1-8 (about the unjust judge and the widow who wore him out with her persistence.) Bess is very calm and explicit in her instructions to Dodo:

Bess: "I'd like for you to pray for Jan to be cured and rise from his bed and walk."

Dodo obeys and follows her instructions to the letter. In fact, she is down on her knees at the hospital as Bess is being beaten to death on the ship. Bess had all her bases covered. Dodo was plan B if her sacrifice did not work.

Bess' last words, as she lays dying on the gurney, are: "I've freed Jan." They are eerily reminiscent of another battered and broken figure: Jesus, whose last words were: "It is done." Earlier Jan had insisted he wanted to free Bess from her life of

regimented conservative Christianity. In the end it is a healed Jan back at sea that is freed. In yet another way, the female savior has turned the tables, broken the rules, and turned our expectations on their head.

IV. CONCLUSION

Viewing these films with a mind open to redefining redemption theory causes us to entertain the following queries: What lies at the heart of redemption? Does redemption necessarily involve bodily sacrifice? How does postmodern film offer us both new theories of redemption and a critique of Christian understanding of redemption? Both these films force the viewer to critique traditional notions of redemption and revision alternatives. We are offered three unlikely, yet successful, redeemer figures: Josué, Dora, and Bess. They all heal and are broken in the process. Broken women's bodies serve as pivotal symbols/events in both films and while this may raise feminist suspicion; they also ultimately affirm a feminist theological vision of this this-worldly redemption, rather than an eschatological disembodied reunion with God in the heavenly realms. The healing experienced by all but Bess takes place in this world. Finally both films offer a vision of reconciliation and exuberant freedom. We are left with visions of wholeness and healing: surely a primary goal of any theory of redemption. Indeed, these films cry out: "May fathers be reconciled with their children, may families and bodies be made whole, and may the miraculous bells continue to ring!"

¹ Questions raised include: What is redemption? From whom or what do we need to be redeemed? Who has the power to redeem? Might redemption be a dynamic process that involves both redeemer and the redeemed? Need we have an exterior redeemer figure at all? What entrenched ideas do Christians hold regarding the necessity of bodily sacrifice? How might these postmodern films offer us both new theories of redemption and a critique of Christian understanding of redemption?

² Marcelo Coelho, "Arthur Omar mostra o lado oposto a "Central do Brasil," Folha de São Paulo, 08 de abril, 1998. To see Coelho's article and for a selection of Brazilian reviews go to: <http://upd.cefetsp.br/~eso/artigosfolha.html>. All translations from the Portuguese are my own.

³ Interview with Walter Salles accessed at <http://www.spe.sony.com/classics/centralstation/interview.html>.

⁴ Reviews: see Barry Paris's review at: www.post-gazette.com/magazine/19990212central14.asp; Janet Maslin's NYT review at: www.nytimes.com/library/film/112098cnetral-film-review.html; and finally Donna Bowman's "Faith and the Absent Savior in Central Station" in the *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 5, No.1, April 2001 (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/centstat.htm>).

⁵ Interview with Walter Salles accessed at <http://www.spe.sony.com/classics/centralstation/interview.html>.

⁶ Dogma 95 is a set of movie makers and their manifesto or set of principles. They are dedicated to producing unmanipulated cinema without artificial manipulation such as lighting, musical scores, false props or sets. Films are to be shot in sequence. Actors are also allowed to improvise. For more on Von Treir, see http://www.geocities.com/lars_von_trier2000/biografi.htm.

⁷ These three reviews are mentioned in Linda Mercadante's interesting article "Bess the Christ Figure?: Tehological Interpretations of Breaking the Waves" *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 5, No. 1 April 2001 (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/bessthe.htm>).

⁸ Bradley C. Hanson, "Christ's Work of Reconciliation", pp.155-182 in *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). My brief overview is indebted to Hanson.

⁹ The theme of self centeredness as Bess' chief sin comes up repeatedly throughout the film. In her second dialogue with God, for instance, God replies: "You are guilty of sinfulness Bess. You did not consider for one second how hard it must have been for him... You put your own feelings above everyone else's. I can't believe that you love him when you behave like that. Now you must promise to be a good girl then, Bess."

¹⁰ Linda Mercadante's seminary students heartily rejected any association between Christ and Bess, they did not recognize Christ and argued: "Jesus did not die on the cross because humans begged him to do it." See Mercadante's article above. Brent Plate argues that Bess's Christic act fails because it is not public.

¹¹ he psychically knew, for example, that they had to shock Jan's heart during surgery, even after Dodo denies it.