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From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies

Abstract

A century has passed since peepshows were the rage, and it may be useful at this time to broaden the question of religion and film from morality to spirituality. Some review of the more familiar questions may position the less familiar. Why indeed should theologians, church people and those who take religion as a significant social phenomenon be interested in film at all? Beyond questions public morality, is there any such thing as a religious film? If there is, at what points do film and theology intersect, if any, and what light can one shed on the other, if any? Is it possible that film viewing may lead the imagination down a path that approaches prayer? Given my own background, my observations will have a decidedly Catholic cast to them, but I think they may hold some pertinence for other religious traditions as well.

Author Notes

Editor's Note: By coincidence, JR & F is publishing in this issue a new translation of the article to which Richard Blake refers, Andre Bazin's "Cinema and Theology." Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinema* (May, 1951), this seminal article is translated and edited by Bert Cardullo of the University of Michigan and printed with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.]

Given the sordid early history of the movies, it may seem strange to think of them in a context of prayer. After all, the earliest public venues for film viewing were penny arcades and boardwalks, barbershops and saloons, where one or more of Edison's Kinetoscopes or peepshows were set up to take the pocket change from eager customers. The material shown in these hand-cranked contraptions was not very edifying either. Then, as now, the biggest attractions featured generous portions of sex and violence.

But before too many years passed, the churches became quite involved in the movies for several reasons. On the one hand, many religious groups saw this new medium as a threat to their most deeply cherished values and exercised their right to speak out in protest or even to organize boycotts of particularly offensive films. The most effective of these efforts was the Legion of Decency, formed under the auspices of the bishops of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, many of the same groups enthusiastically adopted film to suit their own catechetical purposes, using feature films to edify and inspire their congregations or to illustrate moral issues. Some even began producing shorter films for classroom and meeting hall use. In both cases the issue was morality: Films could edify or films could corrupt.

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indeed should theologians, church people and those who take religion as a significant social phenomenon be interested in film at all? Beyond questions public morality, is there any such thing as a religious film? If there is, at what points do film and theology intersect, if any, and what light can one shed on the other, if any? Is it possible that film viewing may lead the imagination down a path that approaches prayer? Given my own background, my observations will have a decidedly Catholic cast to them, but I think they may hold some pertinence for other religious traditions as well.

We can approach the first question, is there any such thing as a religious film, with the help of an expert. Shortly after the end of World War Two, when film criticism was beginning to create its own identity as something different from, say literary or drama criticism, the pioneer French film scholar André Bazin explored the topic in his essay "Cinema and Theology." His topic sentence says it all: "The cinema has always been interested in God."¹

By this Bazin argues that film and religion have a "natural affinity" that film makers in the earliest days of the silent film were eager to exploit. We will follow Bazin's thought in a moment, but before we do, it is important to recall the commercial nature of film. The only reason that this "natural affinity" was discovered and utilized at such an early period is that audiences were willing to buy tickets. If the first ventures in religious film making were economic disasters, then

the genre would have come to a quick and merciful end. Where is this natural affinity between religion and the cinema to be located and examined? Even at this early stage of inquiry, the question becomes quite complex. The relationship between cinema and religion must be interrogated not only in individual films and in the artists who make them, but also in the audiences who receive them and finally in the nature of the medium itself.

For the sake of a facile outline, we will look at first, the artifact; second, the artist, and third, the art form. In each of these, we will have to keep in mind the audience as well.

First: The artifact. This is a question of content, the films themselves

By 1951, André Bazin had already begun to devise a classification system for religious films for his analysis. He provided three initial types: the Bible story, lives of saints and dramas featuring priests and nuns.

The first, the Bible story, soon became known as the spear-and-sandal epics. Audiences love the spectacles of massed armies, pagan orgies and the last minute retribution by divine wrath. These were quite popular in the days of the early silents: *King of Kings*, or *The Sign of the Cross*. In the 1950s we had spectaculars like *Ben Hur*, *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba* or some years later Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. These

sometimes resurface with contemporary trappings, like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Jesus of Montreal*. Their secular cousins include visitors from the ancient world, ranging from Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance* to Joseph L Mankiewicz's and Rouben Mamoulian's 1963 *Cleopatra* or Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator*.

Bazin's second category, the lives of saints, would include titles like Dreyer's classic "*The Passion of Joan of Arc*," and the less classic "*The Song of Bernadette*." He mentions old-timers like "*Monsieur Vincent*" and "*The Flowers of St. Francis*." These still appear on occasion. That old war horse of campus ministry, residence life and Introduction to Theology 101, "*A Man for All Seasons*" is a good example of the type, and we might also put "*Romero*" on this list, or "*Entertaining Angels*," the dramatization of the story of Dorothy Day, or any of the retellings of the Joan of Arc story.

Bazin's third category, the priest and nun stories, contains a vast library, from Bing Crosby's nice-guy priests in "*Going My Way*" and "*The Bells of St. Mary's*" to the tough guys in collars played by Pat O'Brien and Spencer Tracy, to the gay priest arrested in a tryst in "*The Priest*." Hitchcock even had a young priest accused of adultery and murder in "*I Confess*." We have had sweet little nuns in "*Come to the Stable*," singing abbesses in "*Sound of Music*," beautiful missionary sisters in exotic locales who fall in love, like Deborah Kerr in "*Black Narcissus*"

and Audrey Hepburn in "*The Nun's Story*," and the tender but tough as nails prison chaplain who ministers to death row inmates in "*Dead Man Walking*."

Why would such religious content survive in this arguably post-Christian age, in so many forms, for so long a period in such an astonishing variety of films? By all the rules of common sense, movie religion should not survive at all. It is really not a high priority in the other media, and academics and journalists are notoriously reluctant even to mention it without the preface, "I'm not a believer myself, but ..." And furthermore one does not have to be the village cynic to realize that as a group Hollywood producers, directors, writers and actors are not particularly noted for their religious fanaticism. This is after all a most venal industry that would and has made films on any conceivable topic, as long as the producers thought they could sell tickets. Mass murder, dismemberment, lurid sex and grotesque brutality are not unknown in the pursuit of audiences.

Finally, it is an industry that has had a history of bitter conflict with religious organizations, from the Comstock League at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, to the Legion of Decency in mid-century to the militant religious right of evangelical and Catholic Christianity today. Any time it touches on a religious topic, it knows it can expect protest from some offended group, whether its representatives have seen the film or not. Hollywood's apparently natural antipathy toward all things religious runs clearly counter to Bazin's assertion of a "natural affinity," fueled as

it is by a desire to fill all those new stadium seats at the multiplex. Hollywood should despise religion, but it does not, simply because on occasion religion works for it.

And how about the people who buy those tickets? Even a cursory reflection on audiences deepens the mystery. For economic survival, the entertainment industry aims its products at young people, once 18 to 24, now 12 to 19, who as a group will not willingly set foot in a church, reject almost everything the churches teach, and resent church people almost as much as their parents for trying to cramp their lifestyle. In additions, professional critics, film scholars and reviewers as a group look on religious concerns with bemusement at best, contempt at worst and label such films as sentimental, pious and anachronistic. The question remains: If this is a post-Christian, post-religious secular world, at least in the industrialized West, why do the movies go back to the well of religiosity so often - and at times, despite themselves - so effectively and ultimately so profitably? And why do audiences respond favorably as frequently as they do?

Bazin's essay is helpful at pointing out a direction for our inquiry. He maintains that such films tap into our sense of myth. Let me use his own words. These films, he writes, rest on:

... glamorous myth, which is to say an extrinsic one for the most part: the wonder of sainthood or the mystery of priesthood. It's almost a film maker's

trick: to give human dimensions - moral and psychological ones - to protagonists whose glamour in the eyes of the public derives precisely from their difference from common mortals.²

Here is the best of all possible worlds for a film maker. The characters inhabit a strange world, like the Wild West, a space ship, or a battlefield on D-Day. This sets them in their own arena of heroism or failure, a universe unknown to the audience, but one that exerts the fascination of exotic times and places. Even the contemporary characters often dress in funny clothes and are resolutely dedicated to admirable but unrealistic goals beyond the dreams of normal human beings. Movie religion engages the imagination in the construction of myth on alien and thus fascinating territory.

Yet at the same time the struggles and conflicts the heroes experience are all too familiar. The paradox is irresistible. They are odd-balls, people apart from the common run of humanity because of their uncommon idealism and way of life, but they are real people just like you and me. A grizzled fisherman named Peter appears wrapped in a tattered robe and sees Christ face-to-face (an alien experience for audiences). Yet he wrestles with the idea of giving up boat and nets to follow him, and his family opposes his choice (an experience familiar to anyone who has faced a change in mid-career). The priest, for his part, dwells in the strange, celibate world of the rectory, and the movie nun wears really grotesque outfits, but members of both groups are capable of falling in love, feeling depressed or angry and have

their personal quirks just like everyone in the audience. They resent their narrow-minded bosses, despise their annoying companions, struggle to solve some very human problem, like starting a little league team or rescuing a murderer from execution or resolving their own sexual conflicts. In dark moments they are tempted to chuck the whole thankless project for romance, money or career advancement: very human and very familiar experiences for anyone.

Religious films of this type, then, provide a kind of divine voyeurism, where the audience can project itself into an imagined, somewhat distant world and yet sympathize with the human conflicts of the character. When such a film is well done, and if its level of honesty is tolerable, it can provide a bridge between the known and the unknown, the material and the spiritual. These films can be "edifying" in the sense they build us up and make us feel better about ourselves because of our contact with people whose spiritual aspirations we admire, if only from a distance.

Since films of these religious types fudge the difference between rarified spiritual conflicts and human struggles that even the most irreligious audiences can identify with, academics, especially in theology departments, have been among the most avid users of the medium. Films supply the medium for leading students from the known to the unknown, even if the boundaries are a bit unclear. If the course in Introduction to Theology 101 is starting to drag in mid-semester, and the students

refuse to react to anything in their readings, show them "*Romero*" or "*A Man for All Seasons*" or as a last resort any Ingmar Bergman film!

As a film teacher myself, I naturally have some resentment about using films as audio-visual aids for some other discipline, but I am grateful that colleagues have found a place in the academy for film. What I do find extremely interesting and commendable is the broad range of interests and catholic taste of this generation of religion teachers who found an ally in film starting in the mid-1960's. The old-time edifying but sentimental fare held little attraction, nor did Bible spectacles. Not even Charlton Heston in "*The Ten Commandments*" could part the widescreen Red Sea and bring them back. The selection of films revealed a welcome advance in sophistication.

An example may help further our reflections at this point.

Since I have already done a little Swedish name dropping by mentioning Ingmar Bergman, let's start with his, and the theology department's idea of the perfect religious film, "*The Seventh Seal*," made in 1956 and immensely popular through the 1960's. Through use and overuse, his name and this film in particular have become synonymous with the religious film.

It is a natural. Bergman's credentials are impeccable. The son of a Lutheran minister who served as chaplain to the Swedish Royal court, Bergman became the

typical rebellious young artist. But in his middle years he returned to the religious discourse that colored much of his childhood. He made seven films during this theological period, beginning with "The Seventh Seal" in 1957 and ending with "The Silence" (1963).

In "The Seventh Seal," which marks the start of Berman's cinematic journey of faith, a knight returns from the Crusades, wondering if his years of sacrifice meant anything. The intensely literate script, published in paperback for classroom use, brims with quotable, thought- and discussion-provoking lines for undergraduates. At one point the Knight says: "Faith is a torment, did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out here in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call." In the famous scene where Death, disguised as a monk tricks the Knight into making a confession of his inmost fears, the Knight cries: "Why can't I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way even though I curse Him and want to tear Him out of my heart? Why in spite of everything, is He a baffling reality that I can't shake off: Do you hear me? ... I want knowledge not faith, not suppositions but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal himself and speak to me." Death responds, "But He remains silent." The Knight: "I call out to him in the dark but no one seems to be there." Death: "Perhaps no one is there." The Knight: "Then life is

an outrageous horror." It is a great way to back a class into Kierkegaard's leap of faith, with or without the fear and trembling.

In "*The Virgin Spring*," (1959), Bergman returns to the middle ages to look at evil in the world, revenge and salvation as affirmed by miracles. A distraught father murders the goatherds who raped and murdered his innocent daughter, and as he buries her a miraculous spring suddenly appears in the ground near her body. It is an affirmation of her eternal life, but what are we to think when the miracle comes as the result of a brutal act of vengeance, when the father has reverted to his pre-Christian rituals to strengthen himself for the murder he plans. What is the place of Christianity in an ecumenical, multi-cultural world that is both pre-Christian and post-Christian at the same time? And so on through the Bergman films of the religious period.

Bergman's modern day reincarnation of the knight appears as a rural pastor in "*Winter Light*." (1961). This cold, unfeeling man, apparently modeled on Bergman's own father, discovers his own inability to love, faces the apparent futility of his ministry and for all appearances loses his faith. In the final scene, however, he decides to go ahead with his Eucharistic service, even though the only parishioner in attendance is the woman who has been his lover and remains devoted to him, but whom he has rejected with astonishing cruelty. Is he a hypocrite or a giant of faith, trying to do God's work amid his own personal doubts and failings?

Like Job the tormented or Jeremiah the insecure, he may wonder why God has put him in this terrifying darkness. Is his return to the Eucharist a stunning act of faith in an unseen God, or is the only way he can keep job-security and state sponsored retirement and health benefits. Bergman does not know, nor does the pastor himself, nor do we. It is a perfect image of the messiness of faith that we tend to think is a modern phenomenon, but which has probably vexed Christians since the Last Supper.

Let us stop at this point to see where we have been. The films of Bazin's three categories all involved readily identifiable religious figures and images. For him religious films were those that dealt with religious subject matter. Bergman's theological films, like Federico Fellini's, often featured perfectly secular, contemporary figures, but the scripts explicitly teased out the religious implications of their lives in some quite traditional theological terms like faith, redemptive love, sin and atonement. This category would include Bergman films like "*Through a Glass Darkly*," "*The Silence*" or his masterpiece "*Wild Strawberries*." While the identifiably religious figures address traditional theological questions in recognizable religious language, the secular protagonists resort to symbolic, analogical or metaphorical language to grapple with their religious questions.

Finally, we could look at films that involve neither religious figures, nor religious language, but invite an exploration of religious questions exclusively

through parallels and analogies. These have provided endless material for ingenious theology professors and homilists. And yes, I plead guilty myself. Here, to stay with Bergman for a moment longer, I would think primarily of Bergman's "*Persona*," a story of a psychiatric nurse who takes upon herself the illness of her patient in order to heal, or one might say "redeem" her. In this film, one might be tempted to look upon the nurse as a Christ figure and discuss the theological implications of her self-sacrifice. Closer to home, we might look upon "*Superman*" in the same fashion. The son is sent from an alien planet by his father, becomes both human and super-human and is able to use his alien powers to save humankind from the forces of evil. And we could make a similar case for countless Westerns: the mysterious stranger rescues the town or the wagon train from destruction by evil forces. The action in the film is "something like" the action of redemption. The characters played by John Wayne, or Randolph Scott or James Stewart, tell us "something" about the character of Jesus in the New Testament. In the end, the stranger rides away into the sunset, further to the west, but he has left his mark on the people of the town.

Our inquiry so far has been limited to content and its reception by various audiences, popular and academic. The Bergman films are instructive because they include the categories of Bazin's paradigm but go significantly beyond it. Although he has not done Biblical epics, Bergman has featured saints and clergy, two of

Bazin's categories, and many of his other films brim with theological concepts or invite and exploration of theological themes by way of analogy. This second group, Bergman's secular looking but theologically charged films like "*Persona*," opens the way to still another dimension of our inquiry, a way to move beyond manifestly religious content (images, concepts and words) to something a bit more subtle, and I believe more rewarding for an exploration of a much wider range of contemporary films.

A second consideration, *The Artist*:

At this point we may be accused of cheating a bit. We are not, but the allegation deserves serious consideration. The accuser makes the case like this. Just because we know that Bergman's father was a Lutheran pastor, and that Bergman himself made several films with overtly religious content, are we prompted to look for religious meanings in his other films, to the point of finding it where it does not exist at all? In other words, do we simply classify Bergman as a religious film maker, and then conveniently read our own meanings into the text on the assumption that since it is Bergman it must involve religion? This is a criticism I have often made myself when I see colleagues in theology departments - or other departments - using films to further their own educational or ideological agenda. What are we talking about when we look at the artist rather than limiting our inquiry to the content of the films?

The method deserves some attention. Auteur criticism, which places a preponderant almost exclusive emphasis on the role of the director as creator of the film, has largely fallen out of favor in recent years. Yes, the revisionists are correct: Many people collaborate in making films (writers, actors, camera operators, set designers and dozens of others). It distorts reality to invest one individual with sole responsibility for the finished product, as though he or she were the only artist involved in the process, like a poet or painter toiling alone in a draughty garret. During the years when auteur criticism ruled the journals, however, critics learned to appreciate the personal touches that the best directors could put upon their films. We can identify some artisans as auteurs, who place their own personal stamp on their films. These "auteurs" are persons, not machines, and they bring the baggage of personality and experience with them. For good or ill, they have their own way of looking at the world.

Knowing his background, for example, a critic can reasonably conclude that child and adolescent, young Ingmar Bergman was steeped in the religious tradition of his family. He says as much in countless interviews. One might then look at the films, even the most secular of them, and discover traces of his Lutheran sensibilities and imagination where there is little or no Lutheran content. His characters, for example, face their problems as good Protestant individualists, rather than as members of a supportive, but maddening community, as might a

character appearing in a film by Catholic artists, like Coppola, Fellini, Scorsese or John Ford. Redemption, even in secular terms, comes from without, from a redeemer figure, almost always a self-sacrificing woman, who offers love or grace gratuitously and waits to see if this Lutheran hero can or will accept it. Catholics like Alfred Hitchcock or Martin Scorsese place less trust in a moment of decision, where the solitary individual accepts or rejects grace. They have their characters wrestle with grace in a crowded, threatening, sinful world. Their heroes have a lot to do with working out their own redemption, hit and miss, success and failure, and the work poses extraordinary dangers for them.

Bergman's characters talk endlessly about their relationships, as people schooled in the preeminence of book and word. John Ford or Francis Coppola rely less on self-reflective talk but use rituals and communal gatherings like meals to provide a sense of belonging and acting as a member of a group. Bergman's sets are spare, and he forces viewers to look intently on the individual whose face fills the screen. Fellini's sets tumble full of crowds of characters and sacramental objects like blood, water, loaves of bread, plates of pasta, works of art or personal mementos. Bergman's characters appear alone in claustrophobic close-up. John Ford decorates his set with the entire Seventh Cavalry. Of course, the exception is music, the art form that is the glory of the Lutheran tradition. A Bergman film looks austere but often sounds glorious. For Bergman, God - and love, its secular

manifestation - is transcendent, distant, chillingly silent, or at best calling across an abyss asking for a leap of faith. For Catholic film makers, God, love and redemption are found in the family, the team, the regiment or the mob.

Why are Protestant and Catholic film makers so different in so many facets of their work? The theologian David Tracy argues that the Protestant theologians and mystical writers stress the distance from God, while Catholics stress God's closeness. The Protestant imagines God as transcendent and totally other, while the Catholic imagines God as immanent and something analogous to our human experience. Consistent with his Catholic point of view, Tracy calls his book *The Analogical Imagination*. On the other end of the spectrum, Paul Schrader, film critic, director and screenwriter, is a graduate of a Dutch Reformed seminary. When he writes of religious experience in film, he entitles his book *The Transcendental Style in Film*. With his Calvinist imagination, he believes that a religious experience is possible in film only when all extraneous materials are pared away and we are left with what he calls "a film of sparse means," like a face alone on a screen. He illustrates his thesis through the works of three austere film makers, Robert Bresson, a Catholic, Carl-Theodore Dreyer, a Lutheran, and Yasujiro Ozu, a Buddhist. Their "sparse means" strike a resonant chord in Schrader, the Calvinist Christian.

By way of parenthesis, and to keep us from hurling anathemas at one another, we should underline that Tracy argues for a "tendency" or conceptual emphasis, not mutual exclusivity. One does not involve the absolute rejection of the other. If we construct a spectrum with transcendence on one end and immanence on the other, most Catholics, in most circumstances, will tend to settle more comfortably somewhere toward the immanent end and most Protestants toward the transcendent end, and neither group would deny the legitimacy of the other.

If we can identify such Protestant elements in all Bergman's films, might it be reasonable to approach Woody Allen films with a sensitivity to his Jewish background, or John Ford and Martin Scorsese with an awareness that their lives are rooted in Catholicism? Why not? Two points are worth underlining. One, it makes no difference whether these artists remain practicing Catholics (or Lutherans or Jews for that matter), or if they ever did take their religion seriously. It is enough for them to have grown up in a Catholic environment and developed what sociologist-novelist-polymath-gadfly Andrew Greeley calls a Catholic imagination, or more simply a Catholic way of looking at the world.³ One may choose whether to accept or reject the Catholic Church, but one cannot choose whether to accept or reject being Catholic, any more than one can accept or reject being Polish or Italian. Paradoxically, the more consciously artists reject their

heritage the more they demonstrate what deep roots the culture has struck in their psyches. They can not let go.

Second, if that proposition is feasible, it allows us to go beyond religious content and to use religion as a critical tool for a better critical understanding the films, all kinds of films, even those that look most secular. There is sweet revenge in this. For years, theologians have been using films for their own devious purposes; I seek reciprocity: the right to use theology for my own perfectly legitimate purposes. I want to add but one more arrow to the critical quiver to help us understand the films, even if it means using theology.

The question of reading into the text remains, however. Do we see what we want to see? Yes, that may be true. We may go overboard, just as we did thirty years ago with our relentless quest for one-to-one symbols. We thought at one time that whenever one of Fellini's Italian peasants stopped for lunch and broke open a loaf of bread and cracked a bottle of Chianti that we were looking at a hidden Eucharist. No, I hope the methodology I have outlined is a bit more sophisticated than a primitive form of symbol hunting.

For example, perhaps we can more sensitively appreciate John Ford's portrayal of the U. S. Cavalry if we notice his fascination with the male group and the traditional nuclear family, with the uniforms and parades of military life, with

its clearly structured chains of command, with its rituals of death and marriage, with its struggle for personal integrity in conflict with tribal loyalties. Much of this portrait of Ford's cavalry is drawn precisely from his experience of the Irish-American Catholic Church at the start of the Twentieth Century.

Again, the reception of the material can enhance the meaning. Catholic audiences or Catholic critics may be more alert to the roots of Ford's imagery than the dogmatic secularists of the academy. Is this a problem that leads to an overly subjective reading of the film? Perhaps, but we may bring a valid sensitivity to the text and thus make a contribution to a critical appreciation of the film, much like a woman responding to a female character. She is simply alert to things that a man might miss.

However, even if we risk reading into the text to some degree, so what? This is more than a flippant response. Any work of art with any depth provides enough complexity to admit many interpretations. We are still arguing about Hamlet after four centuries. Pure objectivity has proved elusive in criticism, and most of us have abandoned it as an illusion at best, at worst a deception. Film critics have no problem in proclaiming themselves, Marxists, feminists, Queer theorists, anti-Americanists, defenders of family values or African-American advocates and adopt a public critical stance from their self-conscious perspective. Each risks distorting the text to suit a particular agenda, of course, but still each has a

contribution to make. One might conclude that a reading of Othello in a Black Studies program might overstate the case of Shakespeare's racism, but examining the arguments might also provide another valuable perspective to enrich everyone's reading of the play. Similarly, I would like to think religious critics, especially those of a Catholic background, also have a place in the critical literature. Why not view a film as a religious critic or more particularly, a Catholic critic?.

Third, and finally, a few concluding thoughts about the art form itself

The common consensus, which I hope to challenge and qualify later on, is that film, since it mechanically reproduces physical objects set before the camera's lens, is much less successful in capturing spiritual realities than other media, like literature, painting or music, each of which involves an apparently more aggressive intervention of the artist and thus a more intimate, spiritual relationship between artisan and audience.

Again, the distinction between the content and the art form itself is crucial. The content may lead one to share vicariously the experience of a biblical figure, a saint or a nun. The appearance of traditional theological language, or icons may lead one to think about familiar religious issues. Certain film makers are quite skillful in utilizing the content of their work to accomplish these goals. Direct religious experience, however, is another question altogether. Judged in terms of

content alone, most films do a pretty poor job with inviting viewers to enter into any direct awareness of the presence of the Numinous: The swelling choral music - suggesting heavenly choirs - eyes rolling upward toward a bright off-camera light, and the half-step backward to indicate awe, really don't do it for me, and in more cynical moments sophisticated viewers are tempted to giggle at such ham-fisted spiritual shenanigans.

But as a self-identified Catholic critic, I want to suggest that by moving beyond content to the nature of the medium itself one can discover an avenue toward an awareness of the Divine. I want to argue that the cinema itself is a medium of contemplation.

We have to follow a careful line of reasoning in steps to avoid overstating the case. An imaginary scenario might help.

Try to picture an empty picture frame hanging on a wall. We want to fill that frame with an image, and we have a choice among different media, each of which brings its own consequences. First, we can fill the frame with a painting, an oil painting of anything: an apple or a beautiful young girl. As we gaze into the frame, the original model becomes irrelevant. By the time we view the painting the young girl may be withered old woman and the apple may have long since rotted away. Perhaps neither ever existed at all outside the artist's imagination. That is

unimportant. We are much more concerned with the painting, not the reality it represents; the oil and canvas, not the piece of fruit or the person. We contemplate the artist's vision of the reality, the spiritual entity that the artist has created for us. Its proximity to a real apple or a real woman means nothing in comparison to the artistic arrangement of color and mass on a canvas.

Next, we remove the painting and replace it with a photograph. This medium presents an entirely different object for our consideration. It is a chemical reproduction of a real apple. The artist has chosen setting and lights, shutter speed and texture of paper, but still the actual subject is present, and the artistic impact is based solidly in the original material object. It is one, particular apple that really existed at one moment of time. But it is still artificial. It is a real apple, but one caught in a single instant of time, a fraction of a second. Everything prior to the shot was preparation. Immediately after being shot, the apple moved on to another mode of existence and no longer exists as the apple that was photographed. Perhaps the photographer ate it. Thus the photography is both actual and artificial, a real apple but an artist's placement of it in an irretrievable moment of time.

Cinema adds this missing dimension of time and thus pushes the artifact even closer to physical realities. Objects grow and move and change right before our gaze. Yes, it is still an artifact, still under the direction of a film maker who chooses lights and settings, and even more edits the film into a series of connections

with other realities. The moving images can even tell a story. Those real faces of real actors function amid shifting visual habitats. They can speak and sing; the faces become transformed from laughter to tears as we watch. More than any other medium, the film creates art that cuts very close to the shifting, transient skin of the real material world as it exists in daily experience. We become so engrossed in the spectacle that we think we are watching reality and forget that we are watching a film, an artifact.

This leads to a fascinating epistemological question for the audience: In looking at the film in our once-empty frame, do we look at the film, or is the film more precisely a medium through which we look at the real world? Is the image on the screen an object, a collection of moving lights and shadows, that we observe, or is it a lens, through which we observe the material universe with all its landscapes and faces, frolic and bloodshed, flowers and furnaces? What exactly is in that frame?

Of course, it is both, but anyone who has tried to teach Introduction to Film knows the difficulty in teaching students to observe the artifact on the screen and not get lost in the extra-filmic "reality" that the images on the screen recreate. That uniquely intimate relationship between medium and object brings the observer and observed into an privileged unity that invites contemplation.

The unity of lens and object hold enormous implications for a theological inquiry. Of its nature, I conclude then that the cinema is a medium for contemplation. It forces us to look not at itself, but through the film to the marvels of the material universe that it presents for our gaze.

This strikes close to the point of my project about reaching toward a spirituality of the movies, at which the somewhat pretentious title of this paper hinted. Again, it is a Catholic project that should have implications for other faith traditions. Let's go back a bit. As we recall, David Tracy and others have maintained that Catholics tend to see God as present, immanent in the material universe of space and time, not as a distant other. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God." The Jesuit anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin tells us that the material universe tends toward its Omega Point, the presence of God as its deepest reality. The Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola tells us to "consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth." Let me presumptuously add to that chorus: "Look at a movie, really look, and you will see the face of God."

That sounds awfully slick. But is it true? If we confine our reflections to the medium, I think one can make a strong case for it. John Ford, Francis Coppola or Alfred Hitchcock would be puzzled by all of this. Their skepticism makes no difference. Whether they like it or not, as Catholics, practicing or not, Irish or Italian

or thoroughly assimilated American, as artists formed in a Catholic tradition, they see material objects as sacramentals, as having a meaning that approaches the symbolic. Catholics appreciate in a visceral, sensual way that God is there, immanent, deep down in things; that God is present and active in the material order he has created. They are sensitive to godly implications of community and ritual in a way that others are not. As Catholic critics, sharing a kindred imagination with the artists, we see a Catholic reality, reproduced through a Catholic imagination, up there on the screen. Others might miss it, but we see it and feel it.

These directors would probably be shocked that someone would identify them as Catholic artists whose work invites contemplation of God's presence in the material universe. Properly so. They are artists, period. They tell stories and make pictures. The work of measuring the theological implications of their films belongs to critics, not artists. They are not critics. Neither are they priests or Jesuits. I do not share their luxury of denial. I am both. So I repeat: "Look at a movie, really look, and you will see the face of God."

¹ Andre Bazin, "Cinema and Theology" in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. and tr. by Alain Pierre and Bert Cardullo, (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 61-63.

² Bazin, p. 64.

³ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: U of California, 2000), p. 6-7.