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Seeing and Being Seen: Distinctively Filmic and Religious Elements in Film

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Abstract
Using philosophical propositions from Stanley Cavell's work *The World Viewed*, I argue in this paper that there is a religious dimension available in film which has to do with a creative and disruptive approach to the normal and naturalized habits of the typical viewer. By examining both Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* and Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*, I attempt to show that these film makers challenge their viewers via the nature of the medium itself and in ways that have religious/ethical implications.

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Summary

Using philosophical propositions from Stanley Cavell's work *The World Viewed*, I argue in this paper that there is a religious dimension available in film which has to do with a creative and disruptive approach to the normal and naturalized habits of the typical viewer. By examining both Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* and Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*, I attempt to show that these film makers challenge their viewers via the nature of the medium itself and in ways that have religious/ethical implications.

Recent work on religion and film has tended to fall within one of the following three approaches: 1) film seen as a culturally predominant medium and therefore a necessary conversation partner for on-going theology (e.g., Marsh and Ortiz 1997); 2) film as providing fashionable examples for the application of various academic theories of religion (e.g., Keefer and Linafelt 1998; Deacy 1997); and 3) the use of popular films as a prime indicator of a culture's values broadly understood and, therefore, (in a thin definition of the term) 'religious' (e.g., Miles 1996). While these approaches are often illuminating in their respective ways, their dominance has often been at the expense of more careful thought--both the nature of the medium and, by extension, what it might mean for an artist to think 'religiously' within it.
To my mind, most of the recent work on film and religion fails to bring the uniquely filmic into contact with the distinctive insights of religious studies. In the three approaches mentioned above, such a point of contact is rare and typically fleeting. In the first case, theologians seem almost compelled to discuss film because of its cultural dominance. Indeed, much time is spent in these works either defending or attacking the appropriateness and value of a theological consideration of film. Such inquiries are driven primarily by the question: what are we as theologians to make of the content of a particular film given film's influence and cultural presence? In the second case, the various theories of religion certainly do not stand or fall as a consequence of their application to a particular film; i.e., the method of applying standard theories is usually a one-way street in which the film analysis merely confirms the theory. Film criticism in this vein is merely the 'exercising' of an otherwise independent train of thought. Finally, the broad cultural criticism found in a work like Seeing and Believing (Miles 1996) could come from any humanistic discipline -- there is nothing particularly 'religious' about it. For Miles, films re-present societal values broadly construed, and this alone puts them loosely in the domain of religion. I believe that the intersection of film studies and religious studies holds more distinctive promise than that.

If film is, in fact, a powerfully new and different medium, then perhaps religious thought, whatever that might be taken to mean, takes on new forms within
it. Perhaps film has as much to say to our understanding of religious thought and religious experience as the current theories of religion might presently be able to say about film. In what follows, I want to give some intimation of what such criticism would look like by recounting how a particular meditation on the nature of the film medium by Stanley Cavell, in his book *The World Viewed* (Cavell 1979), allowed me to see more clearly. The religious nature of two films expressly concerned with religious issues: von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* and Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*. However, unlike the kinds of criticism described above, I hope to show how the religious dimension of these films is inextricably tied to the uniqueness of the film medium.

**Cavell on Film**

Cavell's primary work on film explicitly mentions religion only briefly (1979:39). But more than any explicit connection with religion, Cavell's concerted effort at clear and straightforward thinking about the nature of the film medium holds great potential for the exploration of film within the field of religious studies. Cavell's primary insight is deceptive in its simplicity: the photographic medium allows us to see something that is not present, and, in seeing what is not present, we are able to remain unseen. When we look at a photograph (or at the images presented to us in a typical film), we are given viewing access to something not directly present to us, and to which we in turn are not present either. It is this
dynamic, the ability to see what is not present and remain unseen, in combination with the existential situation of the modern subject, which for Cavell explains film's power for us and its easy rise to prominence as an artistic medium:

In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknowness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition. (1979:40-41)

Although Cavell does not explicitly refer to anxiety, he seems to be saying that this situation with film absolves us of a certain uneasiness about our relationship with reality and our concern for presentness: "In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured: I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)" (1979:26).

Again, the apparent simplicity of Cavell's argument is deceptive, and it takes some time to get accustomed to it. However, armed with both this particular characterization of the uniqueness of the film medium and an argument about its relationship to modern existential issues, I began to see the religious aspects of film in an entirely new light. On the one hand, film has a unique power in easing the peculiarly modern sense of displacement from reality, our condition of distance from it. In this sense of 'religious,' popular film functions culturally as an opiate
(and precisely in Marx's sense of that term (Marx 1978). By naturalizing almost mechanically the particularly modern forms of alienation, i.e., by making the distance between the viewer (self) and the world viewed (film) an apparently unquestionable 'matter-of-fact', the viewer is relieved of the burden of that distance. On the other hand, I am coming to the conviction that many of the great 'auteurs' of film making are precisely interested in unsettling that relationship once again, and, in the space of renewed dis-ease in the viewer, find other ways of addressing the modern human condition. In a very different sense of what is religious, the artist behind this kind of film seeks both to disrupt the 'naturalized' viewing habit described above and to transform the once safely distant world viewed into one that returns the viewers gaze and places ethical demands on the viewer. Von Trier achieves this transformation by the simple technique of the actor looking into the camera. With Andrey Tarkovsky, the particular combination of the shape of the narrative and the nature of the film medium makes possible its religious potency.

Von Trier

The overtly religious content of Breaking the Waves invites commentary from those interested in religious studies, but the more profound and truly filmic moments have been under-appreciated in the critical commentaries I have seen. Whatever we might conclude the director was trying to say about institutional religion, personal religious belief, sacrifice, miracles, patriarchy, etc., the lead
character's direct looks into the camera and the computer-enhanced images of the intertitles, in concert with the general thrust of the narrative, engage the audience in a way that opens up a potentially religious space through the nature of the medium itself. Bess's looks into the camera threaten our 'unseen-ness' and call us to a kind of imaginative work, an imaginative work guided by the other-worldly quality of the intertitles and the ending of the film.

Bess's looks into the camera have by no means gone entirely unacknowledged. Both articles discussing this film in The Journal of Religion & Film (Keefer and Linafelt 1998; Makarushka 1998) have taken note of Von Trier's technique. However, in the first case the note is literally a parenthetical one supporting the Bataille-inspired analysis of Bess as a 'border-crossing' figure (1998:8), and, in the other, her gaze is merely described and in no way interpreted (1998:4). However, in the language of Cavell, Bess threatens our unseen-ness and does so in a very particular way. In being the only character in the film to look at the camera, to make us feel seen, she establishes an intimacy with the audience that has interesting implications. Her unique intimacy with the audience is paralleled by her unique intimacy with God in the narrative. I assume that most viewers find her conversations with God strange if not disturbing. She apparently sees God in a way no other character in the film does and apparently has an intimacy with God no other character has. When she looks into the camera, we are made part of the world.
she sees. We are made to be a part of her extra-mundane and religious world view, and, by extension, we are brought into, and challenged by, her ethic, an ethic of love and self-sacrifice dependent on her relationship with something other-worldly. Von Trier makes this connection most strongly with Bess's gaze into the camera on her second and ultimately sacrificial ride to the ship. Whatever von Trier himself thinks about the explicitly religious issues listed above, I would claim that he achieves his ends only to the extent that we are made uncomfortable by the looks from Bess.

The discomfort that Bess creates in the viewer works in turn with the unnatural quality of the computer-enhanced world presented in the chapter interludes (‘unnatural’ in the sense of their tension with the cinema verite of the rest of the film). Apparently more controversial than the looks into the camera, the counterpoint style of these interludes has received a lot of attention. The best critical defense of them I have come across is in Victoria Nelson's article, "The New Expressionism: Why the Bells Ring in Breaking the Waves" (Nelson 1997). For Nelson, the style of the interludes is meant to "concretize inner psychological and spiritual forces" (1997:230). She sees Von Trier as working against "...the sort of art Westerners have happily consumed for a hundred and fifty years: social realism shading into modernism that steadfastly upholds a rational-empirical worldview" (1997:232). Nelson champions Von Trier's style by asserting that the interludes and
bells are ontologically weightier than mere Romantic symbols. They are embodiments of psychological turmoil, the materialization of Bess's inner powers (1997:232), a legitimate 'expressionism' that asserts something more real than the conventionally real (1997:229). However, the complete failure of Nelson to mention the fact that Bess occasionally breaks the frame leaves out an important piece of the equation that Nelson intends to defend and which Cavell helps us to understand. Our greater degree of intimacy with the lead character, our being seen by the one who sees the otherworldly, gives the weight these images need to be more than 'over the top' or sheer (and thus unacceptable) Romanticism. In other words, is not any world seen from the position of being unseen, even the manifestly metaphysical ones of these intertitle sequences, a naturalized world, a world viewed?

Tarkovsky

Tarkovsky finished The Sacrifice in 1986. It was his last film, as he was to die from cancer at the end of that same year. It contains many overtly religious elements. For example, it opens with Bach's Saint Matthew's Passion on the sound track and uses a wide variety of religious music throughout. It begins narratively with the lead character telling his son a story about a monk, a dead tree, and a lesson of requited faith. It deals with supernatural themes of magic, miracle, and witchery. In short, the film poses a formidable challenge for sorting out what Tarkovsky
wants to accomplish with his religious eclecticism. However, what I want to show in this paper requires only that I deal with the narrative elements and the effect these elements produce at the end of the film. By making the overtly religious peripheral, I hope to show that there is something else happening, something religious in nature but which is a consequence of the medium and not of the tapestry of religious references that Tarkovsky weaves.

The protagonist of *The Sacrifice* is a man named Alexander who abandoned a promising acting career for a life in academia as a theater critic. It is his birthday, and his family has gathered to celebrate at their beloved home in the countryside. But before the birthday meal can begin, jets roar overhead and the party learns from an eerie television broadcast that the world is on the verge of a nuclear holocaust. Finally driven to his knees by the agony of impending doom, Alexander prays to God for the deliverance of the world from the coming destruction. In return, Alexander promises to leave the family he loves, destroy their beautiful home, and never speak a word to anyone again. "I shall give up everything that binds me to life," he says in his plea to God, "if you will only let everything be as it was before, as it was this morning, as it was yesterday: so that I may be spared this deadly, suffocating, bestial state of fear."

Soon after Alexander's plea, the postman, Otto, returns to the house to tell Alexander a way out of the situation. He tells Alexander that one of his own serving
girls, Maria, is a witch, and that if he were to go to her home and sleep with her, all would be well again. Alexander resists the apparent absurdity of these claims at first but is finally convinced to go to her. He sleeps with her that night, and, when he awakens in his home the following morning, the world has indeed returned to its state before the outbreak of war. Alexander finds his family outside the house enjoying breakfast in the morning air. However, Alexander remains true to his offering to God. In a single-take, long-shot (the simplest of world 'views', the most natural capturing of material reality), Alexander proceeds to set the house ablaze, refuses to speak a word to his family during the ensuing chaos, and is finally taken away in an ambulance. The film ends with a scene of Alexander's son watering a dead tree, having been told by his father in the first scene of the movie that if he watered the tree everyday with diligence and faith, then it would one day blossom again.

It was with Cavell's help that I was finally able to formulate why I find this narrative sequence especially powerful within the film medium. At the end of the film, when Alexander is burning down the house, we see in this photograph of reality two worlds and not one. We see the world of his family members, a world in which nuclear war has not broken out and in which the actions of Alexander could be seen as nothing short of insanity. But we also see Alexander's world, a world returned from the brink of obliteration, a world transformed, or at least
restored. In Cavell's terms, this narrative development has two effects. First, these two worlds, which are present to us at the end of the film, are given in the same image, the same photograph of reality -- a unified view enhanced by the single-take, long-shot of the mise-en-scene. The world we view in this final sequence is a world split in two, such that the single image of reality represents both the world of the one who has made a sacrifice and the world of those who do not see the sacrifice or its effects. In giving a dual role to this one image of reality, the image begins to function more like a symbol than a world viewed. The view of material reality, the simple reproduction of sight, has exploded, as it were, in this bifurcation. (Indeed, isn't this a religious problem par excellence - that more than one reality can pertain to the same 'place'?).  

More importantly, it seems to me that in this bifurcation of the image of reality, we, the audience, can no longer remain unseen in the way to which movies have accustomed us. Because of the bifurcation, the audience is implicated in the tension between the two worlds. As the perception of all of the other characters gets wiped clean of a particular past, the past in which nuclear war has broken out, they return to our world, the world in which we ourselves were living when we walked into the theater, a world in which nuclear war has not taken place. However, in having followed them into that apocalyptic world and then returned, we become seen by the world of the lead character; we become seen by a world in which nuclear
war has been reversed by the sacrifices of one person. Being seen by that world, or perhaps being caught between the two, places a certain ethical weight on the audience, and I think this is what Tarkovsky intends. I use the word 'weight' intentionally here, for the film's opening dialogue includes a direct reference to Nietzsche's "The Greatest Weight," his ethical proposition of the 'what if' of eternal recurrence (Nietzsche 1974). I think that Tarkovsky is trying to offer an ethical proposition of his own, viz., 'what if we live in a world restored and we do not see it?' However one might formulate the question, I think that it is precisely in the becoming-seen-again that this ethical weight is brought to bear.

**What Is a 'Religious' Film?**

Clearly, films have no trouble taking up manifestly theological and religious content. It is equally clear, given the dominance of movies as a cultural force and product, that many people in the field of religious studies would have good cause to discuss that content critically. But if one throws out the manifestly religious, as I have tried to do here, precisely what is 'religious' about what remains? How best to talk about this is something I am struggling to clarify and is something, it seems to me, that those in the field of religious studies would be uniquely qualified to help clarify. My concern is that such criticism is hard to come by in the current landscape, a landscape dominated by the twin peaks of either the avowedly secular or the tradition-bound theological project which sees film only for its cultural
pervasiveness. I have come to think as a result of the investigation above that the 'religious' in one sense can be seen as inextricably tied to the ethical,\(^3\) which is to say that the films discussed here try to engage us ethically if non-propositionally (without being explicitly prescriptive or proscriptive); they try to engage us ethically at precisely the level of our world view, i.e. imaginatively. 'Being seen' in a medium which has accustomed us to the comfort of having 'views' without having to be accountable for them awakens our responsibility for our own fantasies: "Viewing a movie... takes the responsibility for it out of our hands. Hence movies seem more natural than reality. Not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is already drawn by fantasy" (Cavell 1979:102).\(^4\) What I am suggesting is that there is an important sense of the word 'religious' in which the naturalized fantasy of most films is overcome, and in its being overcome, the viewer is ethically/religiously engaged.

In his own writings, Tarkovsky seems to consider his role as artist along these same lines.\(^5\) The decidedly Christian tenor of Tarkovsky's thinking, as should be clear even from the bare-bones narrative discussed above, has at its foundation a more general emphasis on the responsibilities between artists and viewers: "Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer'... is crippling people's souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial questions of his existence, his
consciousness of himself as a spiritual being" (Tarkovsky 1987:42). In this light, and outside of any specific religious tradition, Tarkovsky views his art as serving a religious function: "The allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to the good" (1987:43). Finally, his vision of achieving these aims is not a simple-minded one: "Art only has the capacity, through shock and catharsis, to make the human soul receptive to good. It's ridiculous to imagine that people can be taught to be good; any more than they can learn how to be faithful wives by following the 'positive' example of Pushkin's Tatiana Larina. Art can only give food - a jolt - the occasion - for psychical experience" (1987:50). How best for a critic concerned with issues of religious experience to engage the particularities of the film medium as well as the religious sensibilities of this kind of artist is difficult terrain, but terrain which stands well outside the broad cultural criticism and 'stock' theoretical work which dominates the present literature.

1 The film clip is included with some hesitation. For those who have seen the film, it serves as a reminder. For those who have not, the clip's power (or, as I fear in this context, lack of power) depends on the sweep of the previous narrative. The clip, indeed, is something quite different from one's experience of the same sequence when seen in the course of the entire film.

2 For a thought-provoking study of similar issues as they relate to the films of Pasolini, see Steimatsky (1998). There is also a lot to gain from Schrader (1972) in relation to the issue of 'place' and the religious.
3 For a recent and valuable discussion of the kinds of relationships between the religious and the ethical which concern me here, see Yearley (1998).

4 For an insightful and more detailed elaboration of the distinctions between imagination and fantasy, as well as a discussion of the import of these differences for religion and ethics, see also Murdoch (1998).

5 For those readers unfamiliar with it, Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time* is a reflective mix of theory and biography in which all of his films are discussed.

6 I think that it would be worthwhile to consider further the place of auteur theory in examining the ethical dimension of a film with religious sensibilities. Tarkovsky could easily be the focus of such a study.

Works Cited


Keefer, Kyle and Tod Linafelt. 1998. The End of Desire: Theologies of Eros in the *Song of Songs* and *Breaking the Waves*. *Journal of Religion & Film*. 2(1)


