“Embodiment in Film”

I. **Particularity and the Visual Sense**

Luke 12:4-6:“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

The God who numbers the hair on our heads is interested in the details. Beautiful objects have care put into them. The artist who undertakes to learn from Michelangelo may spend days just studying the hands of the *Pieta'*. Equally in life, God as a craftsman, is concerned with the most minute moments of our lives because, like great works of art, they have beauty in their details. Engaging craft means paying attention to the way something is constructed; it means noticing the skillful form it takes. When we spend time enjoying the craft of film, we are mirroring a bit of God's own love of particulars. God has designed human beings to be attentive to creation’s details. When this watchfulness for particulars results in a film, the film can be expected to have a resonance with the viewer’s experience because we, as beholders of the world, are also part of the details. We are, if you will, creatures embedded in the particulars.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his address to his Jesuit order "The Principle of Foundation," stressed the purpose and role of creation by focusing on three key concepts: "He [God] meant the world to give him praise, reverence, and service; *to give him glory*. [. . .] With praise, reverence, and service it should shew him his own glory." These three words are important to Hopkins because they show how we are to interact with God's expression of himself in the world:

- *Praise*, according to Hopkins, is an act of the mind by which we understand the importance of what we apprehend. We recognize God's glory for what it is.
- *Reverence* is an act of intuition and emotion, but more important, it is a certain *stance* toward the world. We pay close and long attention to the world in order to see what God has done there.
- *Service* implies an act of the will: we are called to respond according to what we have seen--to teach others, to act differently, or to create works of art that embody the inscape of God's world.

According to Hopkins, every object has an essence that can be perceived; this essence points to God's design of it and the unified design of the creation. (Hopkins calls this inscape.) God reveals the inscape of an object not only so that it may praise him, but also so that it may be embodied in works of art, which are also acts of praise to God.

Film shots are particularly good at paying attention to certain aspects of the material and social worlds. This is true whether we are talking about long shots that take in a vista or extreme close-ups that focus on the minutiae of a single petal or blade of grass. In this, they can be particular embodiments of inscape. The early Soviet filmmaker Aleksandr Dovzhenko was famous for the detail and attention he gave to waving grain, hanging fruit, or sunflowers. Andrei Tarkovsky learned much from him, and Tarkovsky’s own films spend much time offering close attention to the waving of reeds in the water, the movement of horses, or the green hills. More recently, Terrence Malick, following in the tradition of Tarkovsky, has been noted for given such attention to land and objects that place and image is as

important as are the characters in his films. Admittedly, many, if not most, viewers of the films of Dovzhenko, Tarkovsky, or Malick are not going to practice Hopkins' doctrines of praise, reverence, and service, or even know that the inscape of filmed objects is calling out to them, yet one can still ask if this kind of interaction with the particulars of existence can partake of a Christian spirituality.

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II. Orality and Obedience in Film

"He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." "Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land . . . ." "He who has ears, let him hear." "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (John 8:47, Deut 31:13, Matt 11:15, Rom 10:17)

What is interesting about these passages is that they each make a vital assumption; namely, that "to hear" a matter is to be convinced of it, even to obedience. Sound is intriguing, because unlike the other senses, it has an immediateness to it. Sound is more present than perhaps even sight. All it takes to block out a picture is to close your eyes. To stop hearing a symphony takes more than simply shutting your ears. You'll need earplugs or a sound-chamber. Films such as those of Robert Bresson are good at forcing us to hear certain aspects of the material world that we might otherwise let blend into the general noise of existence. The sound of the shackling of John of Arc, the traffic noise and car brakes in *A Gentle Woman*, or the various muted noises of *A Man Escaped* suggest that there is important information in the aural world. To hear a matter is to be more accountable to it, because it is more fully alive to us. Perhaps this is why Jesus says that "the one who belongs to God hears what God says." Faith requires a full awareness, an involvement, a rapt attention to the nuances of a matter. Obedience is a result of being fully grasped by the immediateness of the command. The oral nature of cinema reminds us that films are about more than expressing themselves; they are about making claims on us.

Musical scores, in particular, have a way of commenting upon, assisting, and even carrying the plot of a film. The songs in John Ford's *Wagon Master* act as bardic commentaries upon the action of the film and often hold together the montage of various scenes and images, while in Ford's *Rio Grande* the songs are parallel stories meant to compare and contrast with the main plot. Film scores, more often, give a particular mood to scenes, telling us what emotions to feel. Many viewers admit that a large part of the emotional and imaginative power of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films is the score of Howard Shore. Shore has built up multiple musical motifs to identify and emotionally shape the way audiences feel about the characters.

Hearing a human, artistic voice, a series of recorded sounds, or music in the soundtrack asks us to faithfully consider what we have encountered. Unlike God's voice that we hear and follow, we should not automatically obey the voice we hear in a cinematic work, but neither should we at first blush shut our ears to it, refusing to give it a reception. Rather we should practice an open discernment.

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III. Embodiment and the Heart

Luke 10:25-27: And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

Of course, films are about far more than just sound. They are powerful experiences because they are multi-media. The biblical notion of the "heart" (whether the Hebrew *Leb* or the Greek *kardia*) implies the full person of a human being—the intellect, emotion, volition, even body. As Karl Barth affirmed: "[T]he heart is not merely *a* but *the* reality of man, both wholly of soul and wholly of body" (436). As such, to read with our heart is to employ our whole person. This noticing of particularity, this living in *physei*, that Hopkins recommends is not something that can be done in an abstract, disembodied state. We have to notice the wilting of the washed dandelions underneath the fruitless mulberry on a cold day in October on Nolan River Road. As Malcom Guite observes, "[T]he arts are never *discarnate*, they always begin and end in the realm of time and sense, however much they give us glimpses of another realm which transcends it. [. . . E]very effort to incarnate our own thoughts in the web of language is underwritten by God’s expression of his Word in Christ" (32). We sometimes forget that Christianity is a religion of the body. God created the world and called it good; Christ came to us, to sweat, eat, and weep; we are promised a new heaven and a new earth with a resurrection body; we are enjoined not only to fast but also to feast. Films appeal primarily to our senses of sight and sound, but they can make visual and aural appeals to our senses of taste, smell, and touch. They can present food, material objects, human bodies, landscape, textures, and so on in ways that can create in us physical responses. We, likewise, respond in bodily ways when we respond emotionally and imaginatively. We can feel disgust, elation, arousal, fear, even vertigo. Our bodies respond with the rush of adrenaline and blood. It is impossible for me, for example, not to respond with tears, goose bumps, and exhilaration at the conclusion of *Driving Miss Daisy* when the aging Negro chauffer Hoke Colburn, out of friendship and compassion, feeds his former employer, the Jewish Daisy Werthan, who is enfeebled and in a nursing home.

Gina Bria, in an essay called "A Theology of Things," suggests that God has created human beings to experience truth through our physical senses. Bria, in particular, points to the way our memories are dependent to a large extent on the proximity of physical objects we have experienced. Following the Russian linguist Victor Vygatsky, Bria states that "our memory is stored not only inside our language, inside our heads, but outside of ourselves as well, in the visual and tactile cues we receive from the material around us" (10). As such, we often lose our memories because we are separated from things that act as receptacles of them -- a favorite chair, a beloved scarf, a cherished tool or book. She urges,"Taste the bread, brothers and sisters, taste the bread, hold it, sniff it, put in to your lips, and know the incarnate God, who made the earth and put us among things, for our pleasure and his" (13). It is as "hearts," as embodied beings, that must learn and grow and change in this created life God has made for us. In such a world of bodies, we love our families, our lovers, our friends, our neighborhoods. The same goes for our experience and appreciation of cinema. The textures of the rocky hills in Akira Kurosawa’s *The Hidden Fortress* should make me feel something in my hands. This is a good.

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IV. The Land and Human Belonging

> “I will heal their apostasy;
>   I will love them freely,
>   for my anger has turned from them.
> I will be like the dew to Israel;

he shall blossom like the lily;
he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon;
his shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow;
they shall flourish like the grain;
they shall blossom like the vine;
their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon." (Hosea 14: 4-7)

Some cinematic genres, such as the western, film noir, or the maritime adventure, depend upon particular expectations about place and space. The western, for example, often depends upon wide vistas and harsh climates to set a certain mood and even a way of life for its people. It can offer us a wilderness of sublimity and violence; it can also offer us a land that supports and nurtures its inhabitants. Noir, on the other hand, almost always offers a harsh urban world of asphalt and darkened alleys. Even, an exception, such as François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, will make the snow-bound hide-out in the French countryside into a landscape of anxiety and violence. John Huston's *Key* Largo marries the sweltering heat and fear before and during a hurricane with the stupidity and thuggery of gangsters. How one defines the land and what relationship human beings have with it is central to definitions of human identity and human belonging. Space represents a geographic locale, one empty in not being designated. Place, on the other hand, is what happens when a space is made or owned and, thus, involves landscape, language, environment, and culture. When we map something we are designating what a certain space is, and designating what a space is also tells us what we perceive our relationship to that space to be. A place is *for* something. A place is where we belong.

The way a film presents its setting can make claims on the identity of characters. It can offer us openness and/or inclosure; it can focus on sky or sea or land; it can play off light, color, shade, texture, or geometry. John Ford's *The Quiet Man* gives us a green Ireland that is lush not only in its sense of fertility, but also in community and belonging. In *Young Mr. Lincoln* he does something similar; the presence of the river, languid or threatening, is constantly evoked in order to understand Abraham Lincoln and his love of its constant movement. Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* presents the Australian outback as a place of beauty, danger, starvation, and abundance. The aboriginal youth belongs in a way that the stranded brother and sister do not. He understands the place—its geography, animals, and even spirituality. They are both drawn to the outback, yet ultimately unable to enter into it as he can. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Voyage in Time* is a documentary in part about the great Russian filmmaker trying to come to terms with Italy, both its scenic and historic past. The film is also a search for spaces and places where he might find some room for himself, an alien in their midst. These relationships to land and place do not arise entirely naturally; they are socio-cultural responses, as well as individual cinematic visions. Can a biblical theology of place and embodiment, then, interact with these visions?

Walter Brueggemann in his important 1977 socio-critical study, *The Land*, looked at how place is central to the biblical faith of Israel, and by extension, to the Christian Church. Brueggemann uses the terms "space" and "place" in a similar but not entirely synonymous way to how I have just defined them. Space, for Brueggemann is not only an undesignated geographical locale, it is also "an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority, " while place "has historical meanings [. . .] which provide continuity and identity across generations." In the Jewish experience, the promised land is always the receptacle of shalom:

> The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but is always *a place with Yahweh*, a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him. It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel of its historicality, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place which is a repository for commitment and therefore identity. (5-6)

The land becomes the physical, social, and symbolic conduit for identity, responsibility, and blessing. The Old Testament, in one sense, may be understood as Israel's memory of both her states of landlessness and landedness. Israel's experience of landlessness includes:

1. The Abrahamic sojourn (Gen 12, 15), a time when God's people learn faith by stepping out into landlessness on the promise of a new land. Sojourning has a direction to it; one is on the way to somewhere.
2. The Wilderness wanderings (Ex 16-18), a period when Israel must learn that not just any land will do (Egypt), that God is their true source and provider of blessing.
3. The Exile (II Kings 24:14-15, Ps 137, Lamentations), a time of judgment, a time of separation from the place they love that they might be eventually restored and renewed (Jer 24).

Likewise, Israel's landedness may be seen in three periods:

1. The Conquest and Period of the Judges, where Israel receives the gift of the bountiful land by God's power and where the people experience the temptation the land also offers--that of the illusion of self-sufficiency.
2. The Monarchy, where Israel experiences a fuller measure of the blessing, but also the corruption of monarchial control and land grabbing, as well as eventual division and rupture (I Kings 12, 21, Amos 4:1-3, 6:1-6).
3. The Second Temple community (Neh 9, Ezra 9), where Israel renews the covenant of land and city, yet also struggles with how to be a separate people before God.

Israel's memory "maps," if you will, the geographic space they reside in or wish to come/return to. This experience reminds us that a space becomes a place for good and for evil reasons. The New Testament Christian church has a kind of continuity with Israel's memory, for in one sense, the church is an entity engrafted into Israel (Rom 11:11-24, Eph 2:11-13), while in another sense the church *is* Israel, the people of God (Gal 6:14-16, Eph 2:14-22). The church, like Israel, experiences both sojourn (Heb 13:11-13) and the hope of a land (Heb 12:14-24, Rev 21), and the larger New Testament vision is one that expands the landedness of Israel to the whole creation (Rom 8:18-25, Eph 1:18-23). Of course, this is not to say that the Old Testament ignores God's rule of all creation (Gen 1-2, Ps 96, Is 40:21-32). Nonetheless, there is a renewed sense with Jesus that the expectation of shalom is now a global one (Col 1:15-20, II Pet 3, Rev 21). God will judge, then condemn or restore all things.

As we can see, the experience of Israel was both a land-bound and a land-free one, always embodied and local, yet also faith enacting and God-dependent. These kinds of pointers suggest ways we might interact with visions of land and place in films. I am not suggesting that the experience of Israel and its globalization in the Church can be simply extended to that of cinematic pictures of land; however, they can offer gestures that we can find in films. In particular, we can ask whether the characters live in shalom or not. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *49th Parallel* besides being a propagandistic study of Nazis loose in Canada in WWII, continually offers the Canadian landscape as lessons in the varying native strengths of its people. This includes a brilliant sequence in which the Nazis meet an

immigrant Hutterite community who live in accord with the land and the bread its offers. Huston's *The Misfits* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, on the other hand, suggest ways in which land and place can be abused, the former a meditation on the end of the horse trade in a desert; the later, the failure of prospectors against a harsh Mexican land they do not entirely understand. And Mikhail Kalatozov's *Letter Never Sent* shows how the Siberian wilderness can dominate, even destroy a team of geologists who are seeking to make their way back to a human outpost. Kalatozov's treatment of the sublime can be overwhelming, bringing together awe with fear and beauty. The wilderness is far larger than us, a power that can be accommodated, but perhaps never really conquered, despite the head geologist's desire to master such a world.

We can also examine the ways in which "sacred" space is portrayed and understood. Hiroshi Teshigahar's poetic documentary on the architecture of Antonio Gaudí is really a meditation on the power of space; we learn that we are embodied beings shaped by the buildings and vistas around us. Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* is partially a lesson in the particularity of home and forest, as well as the sudden miracle of the unlooked for divine in a place. Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* suggests that a harsh climate and people can nonetheless be the hidden hand of the divine working its way into the conscience and consciousness of a woman too used to manipulating her way out of any problem, while Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* shows the subtle impact Naples can have on a British husband and wife and their unraveling marriage. Its fertility, openness to emotion, and comfort with both death and the miraculous overcome the couple without them even knowing it. Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* ends with its chief characters each receiving an unlooked-for blessing in the town and cathedral of Canterbury.

Even if Bergman, Rossellini, or Powell and Pressburger themselves did not believe (or perhaps only half-believed) in the divine, there films offer us a vision of place that hints of inscape and perhaps even sacramental place.