The Spiritual and Film:
Two Test Cases from 1947

Meeting God

It is one thing to discuss the religious subject matter of a film; it is another to suggest that it might also be an instrument of the divine. Frank Burch Brown has suggested four ways in which meeting God in a work of art can happen:

1. *Negative Transcendence:* This is when an artistic work, because of its representation of loss and tragedy, seems to ache for God's presence, even while in the work itself God appears absent. The one not present is the one that the work cries out for. František Vláčil's *Marketa Lazarová*, many of the films of Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar,* and Carl Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* have religious subjects but offer a terrible world in which God seems to be silent. Each manifests a terrible vision of the world's misery and longing for the divine.

2. *Radical Transcendence:* Here, we experience God as the one who is Wholly Other, high and infinite above our experience. The work offers an austere vision of God as fiery and powerful, glorious beyond our understanding. Darren Aronofsky's *Π* is highly unorthodox, but it nonetheless suggests a vision in which the divine cannot be controlled by us. Peter Weir's *Fearless* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* in other ways also look to God's majestic difference. We have a sense of our finiteness, dependence, even sinful separation from the universe's designer.

3. *Proximate Transcendence:* This is when the work offers us a picture of God who is mysterious, "within and among and beyond things earthly and tangible" (120). Terence Mallick's recent trilogy of films, *The Tree of Life, To the Wonder*, and *Knight of Cups,* offers examples of such experiences--the world seems ordinary but something is also mystical, challenging our common perceptions, and it can't be understood otherwise. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* and his *Nostalghia* also take a similar approach.

4. *Immanent Transcendence:* Here we sense God's sacredness within the ordinary aspects of life, the enfleshed life of the body, a life which we can sense even in a poem, story, or play. The film version of *Babette's Feast* focuses on God in daily stuff of life. Something like this takes place, too, in Victor Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive*.

Sacrifice and Redemption

Nonetheless, this helpful heuristic does leave somewhat muted the larger drama of Christian salvation. Can film also help us encounter the God who redeems, who sacrifices and suffers in Christ that we might be restored? Of course, the tradition of Christ films offers us this possibility, yet this Christ-pattern often shows up in films about Christian culture and life, such as *The Apostle, Places in the Heart, Tender Mercies;* in tales of priestly sacrifice, such as Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* and Alfred Hitchcock's *I, Confess;* or even in strangely negative reversals, such as Charles Laughton's story of a killer preacher, *Night of the Hunter* or Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*

One can also find this in unexpected places. Roberto Rossellini, a non-Christian who was nonetheless haunted by Catholicism, often explores this theme of redemptive sacrifice in his films, such as *Rome Open City*, which began ostensively as a documentary about the life of Don Pietro Pellegrini, a priest who was killed for supporting the resistance movement in WWII. It quickly expanded to an ensemble

cast of intertwining stories about the heroism and struggle of the movement. His *Europa '51* follows the life of a woman who becomes a modern Francis of Assisi by suffering for the poor and workers of her world. This can also happen in films from the non-Christian world, such as Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp*, the story of a Japanese solider who becomes a Buddhist monk in order to take up the task of burying the Burmese dead or in Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, the story of a zombie-like administrator Watanabe who comes to life and sacrifices all to help a poor neighborhood finally have a clean park in place of a bio-hazard.

<u>Working for Justice</u>
Cinema is often animated by the themes of protest and justice. Works such as Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D*., or *Shoeshine* sensitively examine the lives of the poor and abandoned, forcing us to ask questions not just about their individual lives, but also the social evils that plague their existences. Others such as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* use humor to explore similar issues, the troubles of prison, the modern industrial plant, or family life and poverty.

Some films take us into the more personal elements of these struggles, but they are still set against conditions that call for reform and justice. Rene Clement's lyrical *Forbidden Games* examine the struggle of two children to come to terms with the death and abuse in occupied rural France in WWII. Alaim Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* examines the challenges and tragedy of an interracial affair between a French woman and a Japanese man in light of the bombing of Hiroshima. Robert Bresson's *L'argent* explores the disturbing and violent impact of the culture of 1980s greed on one man and his family.

The Christian hope of the *eschaton* can effectively interact with such cinema, seeking to refine our understanding and practice. De Sica, for instance, can teach Christians how to better cross divisions of class and color by seeing the humanity of those on the "other side," as well as by reforming unjust laws. Bresson and Chaplin might cause us to ask what the spiritual cost is to people in an economy that bases self-worth on what one owns.

Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Case #1: *Brighton Rock* (1947 UK, Charter Film Productions)

<u>Director</u>: John Boulting
<u>Screenplay</u>: Terence Rattigan and Graham Greene
<u>Cinematography</u>: Harry Waxman
<u>Score</u>: Hans May

<u>Chief Cast</u>:
Richard Attenborough: Pinkie Brown
Hermione Baddeley: Ida Arnold
William Hartnell: Dallow
Carol Marsh: Rose Brown
Harcourt Williams: Prewitt
Wylie Watson: Spicer
Nigel Stock: Cubitt

“I can assure you that John Boulting (the director, while his twin brother Roy was producer) worked quite as hard as myself to retain the religious theme. And modifications of that theme are the responsibility of the British Film Censor, who objected to various passages in the dialogue of a specifically religious nature. Apparently, one is allowed a certain latitude in using the name of God as an expletive, but any serious quotation from the Bible is not permissible on the English screen.”—Graham Greene, Letter to Daily Mirror, 9 January 1948

“The original ending, with the old priest and the young girl going off to play her record would, I think, have been disastrous for the film. In this way, anybody who wanted a happy ending would feel they had a happy ending. Anybody who had any sense would know that next time Rose would probably push the needle over the scratch and get the full message.”—Interview, 1968

The opening credits assure us that the gangster-ridden Brighton is no more. The film was released as *Young Scarface* in the United States, playing off the Howard Hughes’ 1932 *Scarface,* a popular pre-code gangster film. When the film was released in Britain in caused an outcry in some quarters because it was thought it reflected poorly the post-war country and because some argued that the religious meaning of the novel had been lost. Greene wrote himself in defense of the film, not as praising the world of crime but as condemning it. Greene hadn’t been so sure about Attenborough in the role for Pinkie, though Attenborough had played the role opposite Dulcie Grey in the stage version in 1944. But once he saw the completed film, he felt Attenborough had more than done the role justice.

Discussion Questions

1. Along the spectrum of film adaptation, where does the film fall in relation to the novel?
2. What does the opening montage of scenes from Brighton suggest about the film’s setting? There is a similar montage at the races. How does it add to the setting?
3. How does Fred the reporter drive the first part of the film?
4. How would you describe the musical score? What kind of emotional work does it do in the film?
5. How effective is the fun ride sequence? On what grounds?
6. How would you compare Ida’s character in the film as compared to the novel?

7. What are some of the ways the film imparts Pinkie's character to us?
8. Does Pinky's strangely puritanical character from the novel make it into the film? Why and/or why not?
9. What kind of character does Rose become with Carol Marsh's acting style?
10. How does the film simplify the novel's plot?
11. How do many of the camera shots give the film a sense of claustrophobia and fear? What does this reveal about the noir world the characters live in?
12. How would you describe the shift between Ida as a clown on stage and Pinky and Rose in the seaside audience? How does this compare to other moments of almost confrontation or identity?
13. How would you describe Prewitt the lawyer? What does his character add to the film's effect?
14. When Ida confronts Rose in Pinkie's room the two female leads and what they represent are brought into close-proximity. What does the scene suggest about the film as a whole?
15. How would you describe the emotional changes in the last few scenes?

Faith in the Film

Rose and Pinky's Catholicism comes through in small ways in the film—not a serious debate, but more (no pun intended) like grace notes. It only really comes out when he proposes that they commit suicide together. Rose insists that it's a mortal sin, the worst sin of all. The ending would certainly have been surprising for those who had read the novel. Is the ending of the film a spiritual ending?

Likewise, can the film impart a sense of divine presence in one of the forms that Brown discusses? Can it give one a sense of salvation? Of justice and the work of God in the world?

Case #2: *The Fugitive* (1947 US, RKO/Argosy Pictures)

Director: John Ford
Screenplay: Dudley Nicholas
Cinematography: Gabriel Figueroa Mateos
Score: Richard Hageman

Chief Cast:

Henry Fonda: The fugitive priest
Dolores del Río: The native woman (Maria Dolores)
Pedro Armendáriz: The police lieutenant
J. Carrol Naish: The police informer
Leo Carrillo: The chief of police
Ward Bond: El Gringo

"There are moments in the film when one feels that Mexico itself has taken command; not Graham Greene's squalid Mexico, not Lawrence's Mexico of sun and emptiness, but the Mexico of ink-black and white which Eisenstein and his cameraman Tisse saw when they planned their revolutionary film.""--Dilys Powell in *Sunday Times*, 4 May 1948

Once production moved to Mexico, Ford essentially jettisoned most of the script and set out to film a deeply visual, expressionist poem. One can understand why so many hated the film. It did not reflect what they had come to expect from the director John Ford, maker of the great myths of Americana. Greene had heard so many negative things about it that he could never bear to watch it. In a sense the film does represent Ford's mythic instincts more than Greene's realist ones. As a cradle Irish Catholic, Ford's religious sense was often better on display in films in which the Christian subjects are Protestant, such as *How Green Was My Valley* or *My Darling Clementine*. When he did let Catholicism come to the surface, he could make a rather weak film such as *Mary of Scotland*, yet it could also form an important subtheme, such as his 1953 hit *Mogambo*.

Many would group *The Fugitive* with the former rather than the later. Nonetheless, it has a kind of mystical simplicity that shouldn't be entirely discounted. I think Ford was right to still be proud of it. It foreshadows the lyrical concentration that he would perfect in *Wagon Master.* It may not be one of his great films, but it is worth watching and thinking about. And it deserves being part of a continuum of characters Henry Fonda made famous for Ford: Young Mr. Lincoln, Wyatt Earp, and Tom Joad.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the purpose of the opening statement?
2. The film's expressionist cinematography by Gabriel Mateos tends to dominate the film. What kind of mise-en-scene does it bring about?
3. How does the film use shadow and light to create piety?
4. What role does the musical score play in the film?
5. Much the dialogue in the film is spare. How does this shape the film? What are the exceptions to spare dialogue?
6. What role does baptism play in the film?

7. Are the characters too simple in the film, too good or too evil? Why and/or why not?
8. How would you describe the motives and feelings of the police lieutenant?
9. How are the motives of the revolution exposed as hollow in the film?
10. The mestizo woman is often compared to Mary Magdalene. Would you say this is a fair comparison?
11. What are the priest's faults in the film? What lessons does he have to learn? How self-aware is he?
12. What does he mean by the following?
    "It wasn't courage, doctor. It was only pride."
    "I want to live my death."
13. How would you describe the character El Gringo? What is his role in the overall plot?
14. How do public spaces become sources of potential danger in the film?
15. How would you describe the ending of the film?

Faith in the Film

- How much is faith (or religious understanding) meditated by the visual? Can this be said of the film?
- Likewise, how much sympathy with the piety of the village do we need in order to experience it?
- What role does hope play in the film? Are we able to sympathize with those who desire it?
- Does the film's portrait of good and evil shape our potential faith response? How so?