

“Time and Mystery in Film”

I. The Weight of Aesthetics

Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory."

Hebrews 1:3: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

Revelation 4:11: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being."

Arthur Holmes made popular the saying, "All truth is God's truth" because God is the source of all truth, even when it does not automatically acknowledge its divine source. In the same way, all beauty is God's beauty because God is the ultimate source of it all. Indeed, God's good creation expresses beauty because it is the overflow of the Trinity's beauty which is his very being. How can we best understand and describe this divine beauty of God's?

The nuance of the Greek word *doxa* includes English words like "radiance," "glory," and "honor." Some have suggested that the English word "glory," reflecting *doxa*, is a more complete concept of aesthetics than the traditional word "beauty." Often when we use the word "beauty" we tend to restrict our meaning to things that are lovely, sentimental, or perhaps only cute. If we limit the word to those kinds of ideas, we end up relying on other words like "sublime" or "powerful" to describe more intense and disturbing experiences with art or nature. When we think about God's *doxa*, we reflect not only on his beauty and splendor, but also the honor, reverence, and fear that are due him. Thus, we not only have a sense of the variety that potentially exists in glory, we also have a deep understanding of the continuum of our responses--from amusement to peace to joy to awe to fear to ecstasy.

Since God is the ultimate source of all aesthetic experience, we better understand that which is beautiful, glorious, sublime, powerful, and awe-inspiring when we better understand the nature of God. This is the case for film as well. The beauty, the glory or *doxa*, that we experience in a cinematic creation reflects the *doxa* of God. These experiences deepen our worship because we recognize in their beauty, beauty's source and fountain. I know God better because of the pleasing light on the faces of Tarkovsky's characters, the rich color of Kurosawa's late films, such as *Dodes'ka-den* or *Dreams*, or the beautiful rhythms of a film such as *How Green was My Valley*. As the theologian Jonathan Edwards spoke of the Holy Spirit:

It was made especially the Holy Spirit's work to bring the world to its beauty and perfection out of chaos: for the beauty of the world is a communication of God's beauty. The Holy Spirit is the harmony and excellence and beauty of the deity. Therefore, it was his work to communicate beauty and harmony to the world, and so we read that it was He that moved upon the face of the waters. (*Miscellany* 293)

All beauty radiates from God who is its source. When we encounter beauty, our response is one of enjoyment, pleasure, even love. This is not to deny that beauty is often corrupted in this world and that one must discern true beauty from seductive, distorted beauty. Nonetheless, true beauty does create a longing in us for more: it draws us on. *Doxa* as a term, then, can also allow us to expand the kinds of aesthetic experiences in film that also point, however mutely, to God. The sublime, even disturbing,

power of a film like David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* can remind us that not all that is aesthetically moving is beautiful; it may be too overwhelming for that precious word. Yet there is goodness in that power. This is equally true in the static montage constructions of Sergei Paradjanov, whose films, such as *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* or *The Color of Pomegranates* approach something like the power of icons. Even in a film like Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, whose angels are Rilkean rather than Christian, there is an aesthetic longing that pulls at the human person toward something more. For the Christian, this longing finds its source in God, and as we draw near to God, we discover again that he is a creative God, one who pours out his infinite goodness in numerous gifts of beauty, both natural and human. As the Germans say, *Leben ist Loben*, to live is to praise.

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II. Mimetic Thickness, Kairos, and Film

Psalm 90: 4, 9-10, 12, 15: "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. [. . .] All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years -- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. [. . .] Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom. [. . .] Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble."

I Timothy 1:17: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Every moment of our temporal lives is lived within the eternity of God. Indeed, it is God's everlasting nature that makes time itself possible. The succession of events, every time recalled, forgotten, rehashed, relished, or regretted, exists because God has given us the gift of time. As such, our lives, birth to death, joy and sorrow, have a meaningful pattern. They move within the continuum God has given us to experience. They are sometimes hard to endure, sometimes pleasant to share, but they are always large in their importance. There are no small stories.

Equally, God's gift of time establishes the patterns of life, its rhythm, and its dance. Our heart beats in our chest and our blood courses through our bodies because we exist in motion, moving from the past through to the future. This suggests that two very important elements in emplotment have their most basic source in God's design: narrative rhythms and the experience of time itself. When we recount narratives, such as those in film, we are reflecting God's design for us. Our lives have moral accountability because an account can be given of their chronological course. Chronology allows us to judge our lives and by extension the lives of characters in films in differing ways:

1. We can approach a plot *contextually*. Thinking contextually doesn't mean that we hold all values relative to one another; however, it does suggest that we should consider the social situation and mores that frame an action or thought. This is often a necessary clue to how we understand the faults of characters. In John Ford's *Stagecoach*, once we learn that the prostitute Dallas fell into this way of life because her family was wiped out in an Indian massacre, we have to reevaluate the shame into which she has fallen.
2. We should encounter a plot *dramatically*. To recognize the value of a life, we need to be sympathetic to its drama. This is a skill we need in life, too. In his years as a pastor, Eugene Peterson often turned to the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky in order to recover the importance of his

parishioners: "In the flatness and boredom [of suburbia] I lost respect for these anemic lives. [. . .] Dostoevsky made them appear large again, vast in their aspirations, their sins, their glories. [. . .] I discovered tragic plots and comic episodes, works-in-progress all around me. [. . .] There were no ordinary people" (24).

Perhaps, like Peterson, we are prone to not see the drama in ordinary lives. To think dramatically is to recognize *the shape of a life*, to look at its struggle over the course of a story's plot. We celebrate a character's redemption or mourn her fall because we have listened to the arch of her story. Dallas' story does not end with her being shamed and driven from Tonto and the Arizona Territory; she proves her worth by helping deliver and care for Lucy Mallory's baby, and she experiences understanding, even grace when the Ringo Kid looks beyond her past life and still wants to marry her and move to his ranch south of the border.

3. We need to reflect on a plot *realistically*. Theologian William Lynch maintains that a true literary and theistic interpretation practices the "analogical imagination." An analogy seeks to draw out a connection between two things. Thus, one can draw an analogy between two historical eras, two cultures, or between two figurative examples. Lynch maintains that a clear analogy should be drawn between the actual world and the fictional one. Reality is messy. It is complicated, even contradictory. A work of fiction or poetry that tries to suppress part of this reality ends up being flat and one-sided. Quite often, it is worse: it distorts the truth of our world. The best images are ones that practice a "thickness" of description. If they offer one portrait of reality, they also tend to connect us to other portraits that round out a true sense of how things are. No person is perfect, nor is any human situation free from weakness and failure. Yet neither is anyone all bad. Ford's *Stagecoach* shows us this lesson, not only with the life of Dallas, but also with the drunk Doc Boone who learns that he can still be a good doctor and the dandyish Easterner, Samuel Peacock, whom we also discover understands Christian charity and compassion.

As such, films remind us that God calls us to patience, that there are some gifts that can only be given, some skills that can only be obtained, over a period of time with careful attention. Human lives are not easily understood. A film will often not unfold its wisdom or delight without a well-told development that expands as it goes. Their gifts exist in time.

In addition, the narrative structure of a film is well-suited to teach us about extraordinary and significant moments of time. *Kairos* and *chronos* are two Greek words for time that can be used synonymously and often are in ancient literature; however, sometimes in scripture, the word *kairos* has the additional distinction of naming divine, appointed times—moments or even eras of special providential significance. In this later sense, we are to live in God's *kairos*, his own eternal time, his own plan for the unfolding of history, and this calls us to transcend the world's standard *chronos* time when it tempts us to live as if God doesn't exist. Patience is the virtue that teaches us this. Cinema is especially good at slowing down or speeding up our experience of time through the various techniques of cutting, montage, short and long takes, and asynchronous accounts of a story, moving forward or backward in time to relate significant events.

Victor Enrice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* is an excellent example of *kairos* time. The story is shot mostly from a child's perspective. Set in the years near the end of the Spanish Civil War, the child Ana continues to experience significant moments throughout—watching the movie "Frankenstein;" a school anatomical cutout, named Don Jose whose internal organs she must help identify; Ana and her sister outside an abandoned sheepfold with a well; walking with her father and identifying mushrooms. None of these

moments mean much by themselves, but they are each significant to her, and by the film's end they have accumulated with a profound power and significance. The film is often defined by stillness, spareness, silence (not silence per se but only the sounds of a quiet, inactive world), and perhaps finally by gentleness. The blood on the rock and straw that Ana finds in the sheepfold after the rebel she had befriended is discovered is more horrible because it is seen from the child's perspective. The image of Frankenstein meeting Ana in the woods has packed in it tenderness, sadness, and a sober sense of painful aftermaths. The film's ending with the child in the window calling on a spirit is equally all these things. Cinema makes this kind of time more readily available to us perhaps than other media.

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III. Sacrament and Sensing the Transcendence

Ephesians 1:7: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."

John 15:5: "I am the true vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Christians disagree on the sacraments. We disagree on how many there are and how they function in the life of a disciple of Jesus. For example, the taking of the cup and bread, some call the Eucharist, some Communion, and others The Lord's Supper; our different names reflect in part our different understandings of it.

But we are all agreed on a more general sense of sacrament. All Christians know that God is continually at work in every aspect of creation, that as Karl Rahner says, "Grace is everywhere." All areas of our lives are open to the actions of God, and in every instance, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the senses to feel and taste, we can know that God abundantly and continually acts upon our behalf beyond anything we desire.

To remain in Christ the vine we must learn to receive God's help through the ordinary matters of life. God can teach us and transform us as we offer our work as prayer, as we care for our families, as we give and receive in our communities. God is at work in both our feasting and our fasting. He can make us more like him as we feast on a savory meal, receiving the richness of creation. He can make us more like him as we fast, dealing death to our gluttonous and lecherous impulses.

Film is well suited to be a vehicle of sacrament. God may use a film like *To Kill a Mockingbird* to convict us of our own hypocrisy and folly or to enrich us with the love of the created order in all its joyous tastes and textures. We can both be shamed by the racial prejudice of Southern Mississippi and at the same time taken with the joys of Scout and Jem's small objects they have kept, given them by Boo.

It is also possible that as a vehicle of general sacramentality that we might even encounter God in the experience of the film. Frank Burch Brown has suggested four ways in which this 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. Kurosawa's recontextualizing of *King Lear* is an example of such an ache. The characters are all longing for something

transcendent to step into their tragedy. And perhaps this is to be expected since Shakespeare's original so manifestly asks the same questions. However, Baz Luhrmann's recent treatment of *Romeo and Juliet* surprisingly does the same thing. Luhrmann resets the tale in an almost apocalyptic Miami Vice-style world without any real comfort for normalcy. The Catholic piety displayed by Juliet and by Father Lawrence in the film continually reminds us that faith and love are missing in this violent and sexually confused world. Each film manifests a terrible vision of the world's misery and more so a longing for the divine. Andrej Wajda's *Kanal* also creates a Dante's *Inferno* out of the Polish resistance trapped in the sewers of Warsaw during WWII, but being that it is inferno, the light of God is ever absent and therefore ever present as a question.

2. *Radical Transcendence*: Here, we experience God as the one who is Wholly Other, high and infinite above our experience. Such films offer austere visions of God as fiery and powerful, glorious beyond our understanding. We have a sense of our finiteness, dependence, even sinful separation from the universe's designer. Roberto Rossellini's history film *Blaise Pascal* deals with this kind of vision of God, and even if Rossellini himself at this point in his life could not embrace such a vision, Pascal's struggle is one many believers can identify with. I experienced something like this, too, the first time I viewed a film of Pizzetti's opera *Assassinio della Cattedrale* based on T.S. Eliot's famous play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, about the martyrdom of Thomas Beckett. Becket's life and death became for me a window into a demanding spiritual power beyond my daily, ordinary existence.
3. *Proximate Transcendence*: This is when the text offers us a picture of God who is mysterious, "within and among and beyond things earthly and tangible" (120). Malick's *The Tree of Life* and Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* offer very different examples of such experiences. In both, the world seems ordinary but something is also mystical, challenging our common perceptions. However, in the former, the mother clearly knows that there is a God and prays as such, even as Malick also uses the evolutionary history of the planet, the constant highlighting of memory and experience, and a vision of heaven at the end to not let us forget this reality. In the later, Rossellini gives us a picture of a very earthly Francis and his followers, seemingly bereft of the miraculous, but constantly amazing us with the power of agape love.
4. *Immanent Transcendence*: Here we sense God's sacredness within the ordinary aspects of life, the enfolded life of the body, a life which we can sense even in a film not immediately about faith. The film version of *Babette's Feast* focuses on God in the daily stuff of life, such as the feast cooked for the village by Babette. The films of Eric Rohmer often do this, too. Even when his Catholic sensibilities are not on the surface such as they are in *My Night with Maud*, there is the sense in his filmography that life is more than the moral ambiguities of the modern French. For example, in *A Tale of Springtime* the finding of a necklace, almost by accident, becomes a moment of unlooked for grace.