

The Experience of the Religious through Silent Moving Image and the Silence of Bill Viola's Passions

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Introduction

With the discovery of the moving image at the end of the 19th Century, a new way of representing and expressing religion was born. Some rejected the new technology due to its close relation with Reality, others realized that it was a great opportunity for religious or educational purposes. The films made at that time were mostly Christian and were projected inside church. The film industry rapidly understood that the moving image was a powerful way to attract new audiences and transformed the explicit religious message projected in the House of God in an implicit theological discourse of the fictional film. The first religious film experience was soon transferred to a new temple: the film theater. After the ascendance of the television in the fifties, the experience of religious film radically changed because of the individualistic condition of perception. Nowadays, it is interesting to see that cyberspace tries to offer a new religious experience through the presentation of all kinds of religious films in a virtual space. If the experience of Religion changed through the ages of

the moving image because of the technological evolution, it is true that this experience is always expressed through a silent space and time. However, does a film have to be silent to be religious? We will understand that the silence of the Transcendental comes from the silence of the image *inner-space* and not from the lack of sound.

The Catholic Church and the moving image

With photography, introduced in 1839, two thousand years of cult images inspired by the Divine lost their *aura* as Walter Benjamin analyzed, and these mechanical images became the “mirror of the world”. It has been quite difficult for photography to impose itself as a possible way to express the Sacred. For example, the photographer Frederick Holland Day starved himself in order to achieve the proper physical appearance of Jesus Christ, importing the clothes and cross from Syria for his photographic representation of the Crucifixion. He had been criticized for both blaspheme and artifice¹. If the discussion about representing or expressing the Transcendental was not new, the “photographic effect” of the image brought news challenges. For example, the photographic image cannot express the *atmosphere* of the Sacred. The religious atmosphere is created by the style of a painter and not through the camera lens. With the moving image it has been possible to create a *sacred atmosphere* due to the dynamics between the images and the sound². For example, in a review of 1912 of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, it was said: “At the recent exhibition, appropriate quotations from the Bible explained the course of the story, while between the portrayals of different sections of the film, hymns and organ music created an atmosphere of solemnity”.

With the discovery of the moving picture the Catholic Church immediately used the film for theological purposes. At first, people loved to see the Gospels narrated through photographic moving images and many

¹ LINDVALL, Terry (2007), *Sanctuary Cinema, Origins of the Christian Film Industry*, New York, New York University Press.

² About the concept of *atmosphere*, see: GIL, Inês (2005), *A Atmosfera no Cinema. O caso de A Sombra do Caçador de Charles Laughton entre Onirismo e Realismo*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia.

ministers used film to illustrate their sermons. It was when cinema became commercial that it really constituted a challenge for the expression of religious values. It is interesting to see that when photography was discovered, something similar happened. Many people said “because photography is the mirror of the world, the painting died”. Instead, as André Bazin demonstrated in his text “Ontology of Photography” photography unchained painting from its obsession in copying nature³. Painting had to find new ways to represent the world and to express it. Painting started to represent sensations, impressions of light instead of representing the world as we perceive it. With theological film the same happened. Since the classical religious representations had the tendency to repeat themselves, either with hagiographic scenes, the life of Jesus, or moral films, theological film had to reinvent itself, out of the norms imposed by the Religious Institution.

Anyway, film imposed itself because of its popularity and because it offered news ways of viewing the world, through the representation of reality, and through the expression of the Unseen. The problem for the Catholic Church was that commercial film was heretic and there was an immense conflict between the “commercial” and the “religious” film, between a “bad” and a “moral” film.

Within the Catholic Church, there were two tendencies: one was totally against the use of the moving picture and the other found great opportunities to expand the biblical messages.

The reasons why cinema was refused by the Catholic Institution

As a new form of communication The Church invoked a few reasons: first, cinema was accused to be physically dangerous for the spectators because of the flickering movement of images that would damage their health. The discontinuous visual effect could cause psychical consequences, like epilepsy or blindness. The second menace was moral: first, the moving image presented many love scenes that were full of luxury, sensuality where the spectators had the tendency to identify with. Here, the problematic principle of *desire* is present in the photographic image that acclaims the re-

³ BAZIN, André (1994), *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, (2^a ed.).

alism of the scenes. Second, cinema was morally condemnable because of the suicide tendency of many characters. Many of cinematographic dramas ended with the *desire* of death once they could not achieved the object of their desire. Finally, many accused cinema for presenting a poor quality of narrative adaptations to the screen (religious or not).

Even the security of the film projection was questioned: in fact, the filmstrips were made of cellulose nitrate, a highly flammable material, especially when it was in contact with heat. Many tragedies occurred due to the spontaneous combustion of the films in movie theaters.

The catholic point of view insisted on the fact that cinema does not show the reality and tends to create fantasies about life instead of educating through what is true, that is, with moral and strong values. That is why it was is said that “cinema is not a way to educate but to pervert”. In the West, many associations were created to claim the immorality of cinema as a form of temptation to sin because the moving image has the particularity to seduce the spectator, using its language to that transform the reality. For example, the close-up that isolates the object from the rest of the world offers a new meaning. Lust is one of the critics that have been proclaimed: a close-up of the hands of a beautiful young woman praying can express a sensuality that would not appear if the frame was wider (like a medium shot that would not focus on anything in particular).

The reasons why cinema was accepted by the Catholic Institution

The moving picture that used the photographic image and represented the movement of life seemed, at first, to be a perfect way to express the Sacred and its dogma. The Church and the Catholic Organizations understood that the moving image brought a new way for the evangelization of the adults and the children. Cinema was very appreciated by priests or lecturers at conferences for its dynamics, and because of the authenticity of the photographic image, it was considered very important for its documental nature. For example, to present a communication regarding the oriental religious customs, the moving image served their purpose as a perfect documentary to illustrate it.

At first, the objectives of religious films were basically moral and were projected in churches, schools and others institutions. But cinema could be

seen as a divine intervention that allowed the redemption of man. For example, a spectator with alcoholic problems would go to the theatre and see a film about the consequences about being addicted to alcohol. The narrative could be about a man whose family would leave him because of his drinking problem, would lose his job and finally would remain alone and hopeless. The spectator, addicted to alcohol, would understand the consequences, and because of its message, he would stop drinking and turn himself into a new man.

Tom Gunning showed that the first religious films presented the basic moral principles: you should resist to temptation; you should hear the divine voice; you should forgive; etc. As previously mentioned, these narratives were shot based on the cinema of attractions (one type of shot / the wide shot for a unique space / no camera movement / change of space=change of wide shot) that rapidly changed with the filmic language. Gunning calls this transformation “the cinema of narrative integration”⁴.

The Hollywood mainstream film industry continues this tradition of “redemption through cinema”, based on stereotypes, exploring the sensation that touches the public instead of expressing the passions to reach the *inner-space* of the individuals.

The expression of the Transcendental

When the religious cinema (either the adaptation of the Bible, the hagiographic films or the moral cinema) started to decline, a new kind of theological films appeared, based less on the visual representation and more on the expression of the Transcendental.

In the fifties and sixties, Amédée Ayfre, a French Priest who died very young from a car accident, studied the relation between the religion and the cinema. He proposed that the Sacred is the mysterious feeling that bursts into the natural order of the world on a daily base. For him, the Transcendental is over the Sacred that would be the frontier between the Transcendental and the Immanent⁵. Cinema can express the Sacred through its form: for example, Robert Bresson used the discontinuity between im-

⁴ Cf. COSANDEY, Roland, GAUDREAU, André, GUNNING, Tom (eds) (1992), *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, Sainte Foy, Canada, Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

⁵ AYFRE, Amédée (2004) – *Un cinéma spiritualiste*, Paris, Ed. Cerf/Ed. Corlet.

age and sound to express the loneliness of the human being, when it reaches beyond the human condition. Each shot is clearly divided from the next one. Each shot represents a unique space, without emotional connection with the following one. When the feeling of despair ends, the image and sound are newly synchronized.

In his remarkable essay “Transcendental Style in Film”, Paul Schrader believes that the expression of the Transcendental is not outside but inside the reality and inside our *inner-space*. He analyzed how Carl Dreyer used minimalism to evoke the Sacred. For him, the manifestation of God is in small things of life, not in the extraordinary⁶.

The movement of images recreates the movement of life, and can reveal what is invisible to the naked eye but perceptible by the soul; that’s why Cinema is such a strong medium to express the Divine. Even when the theme is not clearly about religion, there is a kind of cinema “that engages the Theological”. As Peter Sellars said in his interview with the video artist Bill Viola, it is when we miss the moment to take the veil off the Mystery that the Sacred manifests itself. If the invisible turns into visible in the moving image, it happens that the visibility projects itself beyond the image and becomes invisible again due to of its infinity. Ingmar Bergman is a master in using this system to reveal the Transcendental. It is possible when the moving image shows and expresses time passing by, and when emotion is actually taking place through that time. For example, when Bill Viola presents *The Passions* in a very slow movement of the image, the spectator feels the experience of passion (like pain) because passion is expressed through the projection time, which is not the time of the world, but the time of the technique, of the medium.

When the movie industry started, in the beginning of the twenty century, many directors used especial effects to express the Unseen. The problem is that if the cinematic tricks evoke other worlds, these worlds are not necessarily different from our world. The tradition of using special effects became suspicious when the intervention of God grown to be accepted as a tangible fact of life. Filmic form had to be transparent and realistic, that is why the superimposition or the stop-motion would serve only to represent miracles, visions or dreams.

⁶ SCHRADER, Paul (1972) *Transcendental Style in Film, Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Berkeley, University of California.

Many directors and scholars agreed that to express the Unseen, the Transcendental or the Sacred, the film had to explore the reality, because it is from the reality that it is possible to go far beyond the appearances⁷. That is why the director should not impose its personal point of view and should leave the spectators to interpret what they see with their own experience, mental and emotional. In this case, for example, the shots have to be wide to respect the spatial totality and give the opportunity to the public to choose what to see first and what to see after. The image should allow freedom of interpretation. The image should be polysemous, without any pre-existing meaning.

The Interpretation of actors in the Religious Cinema: a difficult issue

In the silent film industry, cinema presents the photographic image of an actor and not the actor himself (like theatre does), therefore, some producers argued that “cinema gives the impression of life, but a life without blood, meat and voice; that’s why cinema expresses something spiritual (...) Cinema has a propensity to purify the subjects that are blasphemy”.

On the other hand, since actors had to do the interpretation of characters (very few scenes of the actual Bible were shot, it was the life of Jesus that people wanted to see, from His birth to the Passion), as a consequence, it turned out that the photographic image showed the artificiality of the protagonist (in particular when it concerned a famous actor, the spectator could not forget that Jesus on the screen was not the real Jesus, but the actor itself), and it was difficult to find a consensus regarding His representation. A famous actor cannot hide his face behind the face of Jesus. As André Gaudreault said, almost everything on the screen gains a strong probability of existence, because of the movement of the photographic images. Therefore when the public watched a film about the Life or the Passion of Jesus, it may be questioned if it was a documentary or a fiction⁸.

⁷ Cf. MARSH Clive, ORTIZ Gaye (ed.) (1997), *Explorations in Theology and Films, Movies and Meaning*, Oxford, Blackwell.

⁸ GAUDREAU, André, “La Passion du Christ : une forme, un genre, un discours” in COSANDEY, Roland, GAUDREAU, André, GUNNING, Tom, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-101.

The interpretation by non-professional actors had the advantage to enhance the figure of Christ because everyone could interpret his face as the face of Jesus. The other advantage of the amateur is to be able to play Jesus without having the pretentious of being Jesus. A simple, unknown man represents all mankind and the audience is able to “be” with him and to feel like him. Here, the ambiguity between a documentary and fiction is not that important once there is no intention for the camera in transforming the narrative into a show. The film of Mel Gibson *The Passion of the Christ* is a good example of this pretence. The spectator forgets the real meaning of the Jesus Passion because the image and sound oblige the viewer to focus on the suffering. For Gibson it is the expression and the spectacle of the Jesus pain that matters, not the meaning of it. In *The Passion of the Christ*, the cinematographic apparatus is used to amplify the sensation in the noisy suffering of the body. There is no place neither for silence or meaning of the Transcendental.

The PASSION and The PASSIONS

One of the immense controversial religious subjects on the screen is *The Passion*. As mentioned before, since the film projected on the screen can be perceived either as a documentary or as fiction, the enunciation of the film shouldn't be ambiguous.

In painting, Jesus has been represented through the style of the artist, and it is obvious that the “reality effect” is not as strong as with the moving image. The painter does not intend to recreate the life of Jesus but to express the Divine through His representation. Without the movement of the image, it is easier to maintain the Mystery, once the painting time is *in* the image. With cinema, time is *outside* the image, especially when it is manipulated by the editing.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the film industry would represent The Passion of Jesus Christ as a play that was shot with emphasis in action. People love to see the history of Jesus but soon the public asked for more subtleness, particularly with the representation of feelings. With the new language of film, directors understood that spectators were able to share more emotions than actions. If the religious subject became less im-

portant, there was no doubt that it would have an important part in the popularization of film and it remained, even implicitly, in the narratives of the mundane world⁹.

Bill Viola, an American contemporary video artist, learned the traditions of poets and mystics, including Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. When he began with video he believed that through the common threads in all these traditions, what is in front of our eyes is merely the surface of reality. In order to go underneath the world of appearance, Viola proposes to work the sensory experience (the language of senses) because it is the best way to reach what is beyond. With his work "The Passions" the experience of the spectator is ambiguous because he does not know whether the character is posing for him or if what he sees is a real emotion the perception is between exhibitionism and a deep emotional intimacy. The public cannot really share the story of the subject since it does not know, but can feel the emotion. The lack of knowledge does not mean that there is no participation with the expression of the emotion. There is a strong empathetic relation that human beings can share with each other. The expression of emotions leads to compassion. For "The Passions" Bill Viola was inspired by the work of Ibn al-Arabi. He says that traditions of the poets and mystic gave him the language to understand what he really was seeing. They taught him that we live on the surfaces in a world of appearances. He explains that "*if you get caught by this surface, then you stay on the surface. Your sight is inaccurate, the senses convey misleading information, one-dimensional translations. Rather than discarding these translations, the task is to understand and master sensory experience because you need the language of the senses to help decipher these surface distortions and penetrate through to the submerged connections underneath*"¹⁰. With his work of art Bill Viola wants to provide the spectator the experience of discovering his *inner-space*, only by looking at it. The video artist wants to show that the witness of somebody's suffering transforms the way we perceive life. It should become a religious experience when it is about compassion. We are no more observers but we participate with each other. In "The Passions" the human face is always changing and what the spectator perceives is the transforma-

⁹ FRASER, Peter (1998), *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers.

¹⁰ VIOLA, Bill (2003), *The Passions*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, p. 195.

tion of his soul. Bill Viola shows that the cycle of suffering is endless but when it disappears, enlightenment and release replace anger and fear. As a cycle, suffering will actually reappear as a temporary phenomenon. He manipulates the real time in a subjective time, a time experienced. Viola quotes Titus Buckhardt, a scholar of Islam and other spiritual traditions who said “*one of the fundamental condition of happiness is to know that everything one does has a meaning in eternity*”. That is why the notion of cycle and transformation is so important for Bill Viola and very present in his work. The desire to search and discover the Mystery has to be alive in Man, and since time is movement, the desire passes from an individual to another, in a continuous cycle. That is part of Mystery.

In *The Passions*, Bill Viola created a very special piece in 2000, “Memoria”, remembering The Veronica’s Veil.

*“Memoria is a portrait of the human condition of suffering. At times barely perceptible, a grainy image of a man’s face expresses anguish, sorrow, and distress in slowly building and evolving waves of emotion. Gradually the face becomes clearer; at other times it returns to grainy darkness. Projected onto silk, the image has a silvery, luminous quality, underscoring its fragile nature and endowing its presence with an immaterial, visionary quality. Literally and metaphorically it exists at the threshold of visibility, functioning less as a photographic document and more like an image from the world of dreams and memory. The source of the man’s suffering is never revealed. Slow-motion playback suspends the unfolding emotions in the malleable time of subjective experience. What is normally a fleeting condition in the course of human life now flows within the largest stream of eternal time.”*¹¹

With time, the face of a man is revealed on the vaporous screen. This revelation is made through its appearance and fading in the silence of the veil. And there is plenitude in the silence of the image that touches the *inner-space* of the spectator. Time is transfigured by the disappearance of the figure and the emptiness that follows. Though, it proves that there was a presence, the presence of the Religious. The motion that leads to emptiness, appearance and fading is a motion that becomes deep: the fading

¹¹ VIOLA, Bill, op. cit., p. 96.

leaves an empty space on the veil, but the spectator keeps in memory the impression of the appearance. The image is displaced from the veil to the memory. The silence of the suffering face remains in the infinite of life through the human condition.

Conclusion

It is interesting to see that film is an object “in transformation”, also applied to the way many people live the religion in constant “in transformation”. Every media has its own way to bring and express meanings, and it is important not to forget the social and technological context of its production. In the cinema of attractions, there was a tendency for the image idolatry, through narrative. But idolatry developed into cult, when the moving image started to express the Transcendental without representing It directly. Today, most of religious films are not based on the religious dogma but they look for the transcendental expression in human values, humility and simple facts or situations. That is why the real world is the best space to look after It, without any extraordinary effect.

Some of the controversial issues of the first religious cinema are still argued today¹². One of the reasons is the difficulty to express the Sacred without using *clichés* or stereotypes. The superficiality of the sensation transforms the Divine into a spectacle that seduces the spectator and does not allow to interpret and think about what it is seen on the screen. The experience is merely sensorial and not religious. In the moving image, the Transcendental needs a silent space to express Faith, since Its manifestation is never partial, but always complete. The atmosphere of the religious moving image, as “Memoria” in Bill Viola *Passions*, is the *aura* of the silence that emanates from the work of art.

¹² Cf. MITCHELL Jolyon, PLATE Brent (eds.) (2007), *The Religion and Film Reader*, New York, Routledge.