

EDITORIAL

Religion and Cinema

Frederico Pieper *

Translated by Brasil Fernandes de Barros**

Film is a divine way of telling about life, of paralleling God the Father! No Other profession lets you create a word which comes so close to the one we know, as well as to know, parallel, concentric ones. (FELILINI, 1988, p.102).

The interfaces between religion and cinema have been explored by scholars in a more systematic way since the 1970s-1980s. This does not mean that no works have been written on this theme in previous decades. In fact, the subject has always caused curiosity and provoked debates, especially among religious people, very suspicious of the unorthodox interpretations that cinema provided to religious narratives. Not rarely, the freedom in which the image and movement of the cinema dealt and still deals with symbols and narratives hardened in dogmas and official interpretations provoked suspicion and fury. Since its beginning, cinema has produced works about religious figures and its themes. Since it emerged in the West, it is to be expected that biblical themes would be far more recurrent than the narrative of other religious traditions. But this does not, by any means, mean that they are absent (for example, the Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* was released as early as 1913).

When we think of this relationship between religion and cinema, especially

* Ph.D. and Master in Religious Studies at Universidade Metodista de São Paulo. Professor of Religious Studies Department of Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora. Country of Origin: Brazil. E-mail: fredericopieper@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-5590-2202.

** Ph.D. and Master in Religious Studies at PPGCR-PUC Minas. Country of origin: Brazil. E-mail: brasil@netinfor.com.br. ORCID:0000-0002-5285-4871.

by those who consume and/or analyze this form of art from a more distant perspective, the inclination is to understand that this link is restricted to the theme dealt with by the films. From this point of view, the link between religion and cinema appears more clearly in the moments in which the films hijack and interpret symbols, myths, rites, behaviors and or even religious doctrines. Whether these interpretations have a proselytic purpose - to reaffirm the convictions proclaimed by certain religious institutions - or from the perspective of films that promote interpretations that differ from (and even questioning and confronting) the official readings of religious doctrines.

It is worth citing a few examples to bring them into the concreteness of images. Between the 1940s and 1950s, Hollywood was prodigious in producing epic films about biblical themes and its characters: *Samson and Delilah* (1949); *Ten Commandments* (1956); *Ben-Hur* (1959); *Barabbas* (1961) are some examples. The intention was to produce films with a “historical” content, with a certain fidelity to the official interpretation of the biblical texts. Because they were epics, the power of the deity was usually represented by lightning and thunders. The more pyrotechnical the demonstrations of the presence of the divine it was, the more powerful he appears and the more the authority of the sacred texts is reaffirmed. It is not without reason that religious leaders saw this as an ally in propagating the faith.

But cinema has also provided challenging approaches. The question of evil, especially in one of its personifications in the devil’s image, also occupied the filmmakers. It is curious that this topic of the “antagonist” is a fruitful place to put the ecclesiastic canons in jeopardy. Not least because the normative texts of Christianity do not provide many details about the devil. Apart from being an antagonist, no details are known about his nature, appearance, purposes, etc. So much the better the more laconic the religious text is, the more room is left for the imagination of directors, screenwriters, and producers. As a result, the devil is represented in the most diverse ways: as a nice and funny guy: *The Devil’s Eye* (1960), *Little Nicky’s* (2000); comical and foolish, *Bedazzled* (2000), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987); obsessed with procreating to maintain his offspring: *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Omen* (1976); possessing the human body leading

it to degradation and madness: *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005); willing to make some sort of contract with human beings: *Angel Heart* (1987). There was also no shortage of films that explored his link with pornography: *Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), *Devil's Ecstasy* (1977). This variety of readings caused discomfort in those who expected reaffirmations of established readings. Even films that reinforce ecclesiastical power have also suffered reprimands. So, for example, in exorcism films, the authority of the priest as the one to deal with this situation is usually reinforced. The religious leader is called upon to resolve the situation of a demoniac possession. But this does not mean that these films do not receive a condemnatory verdict from religious institutions.

Certainly, the films that feature aspects that we clearly recognize as religious offer a great deal of material for analysis. However, we can broaden this plan if we go beyond this most obvious face of the link between cinema and religion. In a strict way, there is no called “religious film” classification. In the major awards shows or in the most prestigious cinemas around the world, there is no such category. For those who are a little older may remember that there used to be this classification in the now extinguished video rental stores. But that was the only place to find “religious films”. In my opinion, the absence of an established category that is recognized by filmmakers, critics and scholars creates a problem that is far from being solved. On the contrary, to what it may seem, this is positive for those who study religion and cinema: what would be the criteria that can someone say that a film is religious? For some authors who approach cinema from a phenomenological perspective, a film is religious not because of what it exhibits, but because of what it points to through what is exhibited. In other words, by exploring the deep dimensions of human existence, even if it does not explicitly theme religious symbols or narratives, a film can be considered religious. Here, is clear that the concept of religion is broadened. Religion is not restricted to its institutional, external and manifest outlines, but has to do with the ultimate questions of existence. An example of how this possibility of a relationship between religion and cinema can be explored is Paul Schrader's transcendental proposal. The weakness of this reading lies in its strength. By broadening the concept of religion to the point of making it coincide with the ultimate questions of life, a certain objectivity in the criteria is lost. What one

researcher calls religious may be, in the conception of another, philosophy or, simply, art - other forms of expression that also deal with fundamental questions of existence.

These proximities between religion and cinema are not restricted to the proposal of the films themselves. Another approach from the same perspective is to look for similarities between the religious experience and the cinematic one: to what extent cinema is not and/or does not fulfill the role traditionally attributed to religion? In the consumer societies, the commercial cinema with its superbly produced *blockbusters* has the power to reach an extremely wide audience. In this sense, if streaming services can represent an impoverishing of the aesthetic experience (after all, special effects still have much less impact on a 6-inch cell phone screen), they amplify the reach of productions. Not rarely, these productions fulfill the role of popular religiosity: it is the creative source of symbols and myths that feed the culture with many heroes and villains. And in doing so, it assumes a quasi-religious dimension. The myth of the hero, a recurring structure in religious mythological narratives, is a constant in these productions. With it, archetypes making up the religious universe are mobilized in a more contemporary framework. Part of the impact that the *Star Wars* franchise or even the comic book productions have today in pop culture is also due to the use of this religious dimension.

It is important to highlight how this face of cinema as religion appears in the experience of important filmmakers. Here, more than being a source of symbols and myths, cinema is assumed as a kind of religion or as art that places itself in the radiance of the sacred. Martin Scorsese, for example, doesn't hide in interviews the formative place of religion in his understanding of cinema. Religion, for him, would be a kind of spiritual search. If we observe well, important titles in his filmography reflect this conception. Since *Taxi Driver* to the documentary about the ex-Beatle George Harrison, passing through *The Last Temptation of Christ*, characters are explored who lived up to the last consequences of this spiritual search. For the American, more than the characters and their plots, filmmaking itself is a way of carrying out this search.

If in the English-speaking context there is a significant production that

exploits the interface between religion and cinema - including a specialized periodical on the subject (<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/>) - in Brazil there is still much to be done. The courses on cinema, many times, ignore the theme. In my opinion, it is not a question of lack of recognition of the importance of religion. Rather, it seems that religion is ignored because scholars and critics coming from the cinema area lack adequate academic background to approach it. Not rarely, this gap generates a superficial and, therefore, very narrow religion's concept. It seems as if religion is restricted to its institutional aspect and, as a consequence, out of sync with the questioning and reflective character of cinema. I don't think it's wrong to say that this is an ignorance of religion that leads to a certain prejudice regarding the theme. On the other hand, the religion researchers are sporadically interested in cinema. It is very common to see researchers whose personal interest leads them to look at the work of a particular filmmaker or a set of films. In this case, a personal appreciation ends up being determinant, often lacking more robust theoretical conceptions. As a result, the cinematographic language ends up being, in most cases, reduced to the script. For this reason, initiatives like this one, from Horizonte journal, exploring the relationship between cinema and religion, are necessary and urgent. This may be a movement that will help merge more systematic studies in this area. And, by the overview made in this editorial, it can be noted that there is still much to be done, both in the possibilities of perspective of approach to the subject, but also in the study of national film productions.

The proximity of cinema to religion has the power to create worlds and invite us to inhabit them. Films describe the everyday world, the one we know. This description has the power to take a new look at the ordinary. But cinema also explores what we desire. By pointing out in this direction, it offers us parameters to judge the world as it is. By exploring our wishes, and how we think the world should be, it allows us the measurement to place ourselves critically in relation to what is given. But beyond the real and desire, cinema brings us closer to that which is unknown to us. Therefore, it also deals with mystery. That's why one of the great masters of this art, Federico Fellini, understood that cinema has something divine about it. It's a divine way to talk about life, not only because it tells us how it is or explores our desires. But because cinema also points us to

unknown worlds.

REFERENCES

FELLINI, Federico. **Comments on Film**. Giovanni Grazzini (Editor). Trad. Joseph Henry. Fresno, California: Press at California State University, 1988.