Spirituality in cinema

Summary

The aim of this book is to describe ways of representing religious experience in cinema. Our approach is not based on any confession. We use the word "God" as a metaphor for everything that could be signified by it. We prefer formal methods rather then hermeneutics and believe in some kind of structural qualities of representing the Holy in cinema which can be described and analyzed.

We distinguish three basic terms: spiritually inspired film (the largest corpus of movies classified from thematic points of view), religious film (understood as a genre, including biblical epics) and spiritual film (in the strict sense of the term, based on a structural point of view).

The second chapter of the book is based on studying and comparing the most inspiring and influential theories of spirituality in cinema. The first one is the French film theology created by Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel with their distinction of three styles of representing the Holy in art: the style of transcendence, the style of incarnation and the style of idealization. Paul Schrader's theory of transcendental style was based on the analysis of films by Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Th. Dreyer. Schrader has discovered three steps of the style: the everyday, disparity (with a decisive action) and stasis (a frozen image which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it). Ron Holloway has written a book on "the religious dimension in the cinema" and has seen this dimension in many films of various times and nations including the national cinemas of Central and Eastern Europe. Peter Fraser offers a liturgical model of the "sacramental mode" in film, comparing the experience of the spectator to the religious experience of believers attending Mass.

The original Czech theological concept of spiritual film was invented by Vladimír Suchánek. Focusing especially on the analysis of works by Andrei Tarkovsky and Jiří Trnka he applies the religious term of "transsubstanciation" to the creative process of making films. Suchánek focuses on an interpretation of Tarkovsky's films as does Igor Kováč but their approaches are different: Suchánek takes the work of the filmmaker as a kind of hierophany, in contrast to Kováč who describes the films of Tarkovsky using a Freudian kind of hermeneutics of suspicion. The third domestic attempt to explain the possibilities of the medium to create spiritual meanings was written by Josef Valušiak, the film editor and professor of FAMU (Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). e "miraculous tool" for reaching the effect of "n-dimension" is to study the phenomena of time and using long takes.

Mariola Marczak regards the spiritual auteur films of Bresson, Dreyer or Tarkovsky as examples of the specific genre – the religious film, which functions as a mediator. Some theorists have not written about spiritual film explicitly but we can use their concepts created for the resolution of some other questions: David Bordwell's parametric narration, Gilles Deleuze's image-time and the crystal of time, Pavel Florensky's concept of two worlds, Roland Barthes' third or obtuse meaning by. The conclusions of this research are: the film medium has its specific tools to represent the Holy, we can describe these tools as a style, the key category of this style is time, the product of this style can be described as a certain narrative modus and there is some kind of basic body of spiritual films.

These theses can be confirmed by reference to the ideas of Andrei Tarkovsky. The main categories of his theoretical system are image and time, literally "sculpting in time": "Time, printed in its factual forms and manifestations: such is the supreme idea of cinema as an art". "...the image is not a certain meaning, expressed by the director, but an entire world reflected as in a drop of water". "The artistic image is unique and singular". The third important

element of his cinema praxis and theory is the brightness and credibility of the material world shown on the screen. The question of symbols in the works of Tarkovsky has been discussed for decades. Tarkovsky frequently rejected symbolic interpretations of his films. We are on the director's side in this polemics.

We can image the elements of spirituality in cinema as a landscape of movies where the films of the highest spiritual intensity are situated in the centre. We can find spiritual intention on the auteur's side and spiritual reception on the other end of the communication chain. The spiritual mode is our term for the complex of operations changing the narrative world in relation to numinous transcendence. It can be done by traditional intertextual allusions but there are some specific means of film art, too. First we attempt to find those means in the work of three classics: Carl Theodor Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson. The means we have found are: the representation of transcendental time (by long takes or still lives) and the quality of passiveness. Transcendental time is a variation of time of the universe: it is God's time, the time in which He is watching us. The quality of passiveness expresses human dependence of Him; it could be represented by framing or non-expressive acting in a puppet style as in the films of Robert Bresson who thought of his actors (mostly non-actors) as "models".

The central chapter of our work offers an analysis of the elements of the spiritual mode in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky: The Steamroller and the Violin, Ivan's Childhood, Andrei Rublyov, Solaris, The Mirror, Stalker, Nostalghia, and The Sacrifice. The stylistic constants of Tarkovsky's narratives are: "metaphysical journeys" (created by long takes, shot-sequences or sequences of shots, including pans and pan-and-zoom techniques) and shots of still lives as a small form of the same phenomena, representing transcendental time. The basic element of his visions was image-time (in the Deleuzian sense), full of the intense objectivity of the material world. The typical camera position is a high angle looking down to the earth, more than a low angle looking up to the sky. Tarkovsky used in Andrei Rublyov what we have called – following Pavel Florensky – "reverse perspective", typical for Russian Orthodox icons: narration from various points of view and completed from relatively independent parts of time and space. The effect of this pattern is a feeling of infinity of the narrative world.

Andrei Tarkovsky created his own paradigm of spiritual film and some auteurs followed him. The ways of transcendental time are followed by Alexandr Sokurov, Béla Tarr (Sátántangó) and Andrei Zvyagintsev (e Return). Other examples of spiritual film can be seen in India (Buddhadeb Dasgupta: Uttara), Mexico (Carlos Ryegadas: Battle in Heaven), in the world of Buddhism (Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?) and in Iran (Majid Majidi, Abbas Kiarostami). But we should not forget examples of spiritually inspired films which do not operate in spiritual mode and try to cultivate rational discourse about religion: the films of Krzysztof Zanussi or Ulrich Seidl (Jesus, You Know).

The last chapter is focused on spiritual film in Czech cinema. František Vláčil is considered as a classic of this type of filmmaking in Czech lands. His masterpiece Marketa Lazarová, often compared to Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublyov (although practically unknown abroad), is a genuine example of a spiritual film thanks to its parametric form, intense objectivity of the material world and "reverse" narrative perspective. The semi-documentary Sentiment about the last period of František Vláčil's life was made in a spiritual mode too. Miloš Zábranský's A House for Two was the first attempt to make a spiritual film in the Bressonian style in Czech cinema. Many elements of spiritual mode can be found in the films of Zdeněk Tyc: Vojtech, Called the Orphan, Razor Blades and The Brats.

Is it possible for directors to teach the strategies of spiritual filmmaking and be successful in this very special field? We are not sure. Some kind of hidden mystery remains, after all.