

# SPIRITUALITY



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# Screened Signs of Grace: André Bazin's 'Cinema and Theology' and the Sacramental Facet of Film

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## **Abstract**

In his article 'Cinema and Theology' and other writings, the French film critic André Bazin articulates a sacramental vision of film. Such a vision goes beyond films with a religious subject in order to understand the spiritual possibilities of cinematic art. This chapter explores and develops Bazin's thoughts, clarifying concepts like grace and sacrament and the relation that the critic establishes between them and film. To make this exploration and development more persuasive, the text concludes with an analysis and commentary inspired by Bazin's ideas of a scene from the Hollywood satiric comedy *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957).

**Key Words:** André Bazin, Catholicism, film, grace, sacrament, religious cinema.

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This chapter is a reading of André Bazin's article 'Cinema and Theology,'<sup>1</sup> which reflects on the relation between cinema and theology. This reading ended up expanding to other writings because his thought is organic and develops across articles. Analysing Bazin's contribution to a theological approach to film involves necessarily taking into account his ontological approach to film. His ontology has been at times simplistically described as a belief in the simple transparency of the cinematic image. Yet we need to read him closely. When he talks about the connection between reality and what is on screen, he is not talking about a quantitative relationship, but about a qualitative one - as he clarifies in another text, 'Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation.' His interest in the singularity of things challenges cinema creators and spectators to attend to the uniqueness of what is filmed and screened. Along with this, people are invited to acknowledge that these things are indefinable, uncontainable, because they change and it is this unpredictable movement of transformation that film captures moment by moment.

For Bazin, cinema has the ability to confront us with the evanescence of things, but also with their existence, an existence whose traces we see on screen. According to him, movies have the capacity to increase our sense of the mystery of earthly things by screening them. As a Catholic, Bazin refuses to divorce the body from the soul and nature from grace, and therefore aligns himself with Flannery O'Connor's incarnational view of art and of the artist's work. In other words, the French critic saw film as having a sacramental aspect, given that films may present visible signs of God's invisible grace, making grace manifest.

In the introduction to some of his writings, Bert Cardullo calls Bazin ‘a transcendentalist, a kind of cinematic Hegel,’<sup>2</sup> but does not flesh out this idea. Hegel rejected Kant’s distinction between things and our knowledge of them or between appearance and reality. As A. W. Moore notes, Hegel believed that ‘how things knowably appear is how manifestly they are. Reality is not opposed to appearance; it is discerned in appearance.’<sup>3</sup> In Hegel’s philosophy, our ideas transcend the particular because of their universal potential. Bazin’s understanding of film is Hegelian insofar as it values aesthetic experience and the deepness of what is aurally and visually perceived in cinema, but also how this experience and this reading can be shared. Cardullo calls attention to how the critic avoids dismembering a film as an aesthetic object and instead concentrates on its connection with the elements that transcend it and on the interconnection of its parts - as if he is talking about the body and the soul of a person. The link between his Catholicism and his film criticism may be summarised this way:

Bazin’s criticism, then, is not remotely doctrinal in its Catholicism, but is fundamentally holistic; its source lies elsewhere than in aesthetic dissection. His true filmmaker attains his power through “style,” which is not a thing to be expressed but an inner orientation enabling an outward search. This spiritual sensitivity and its enablement through film are central to Bazin’s view of film as obligated to God, to honor God’s universe by using film to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality. This led Bazin to certain specific espousals ... but these were all secondary consequences for him of the way that film could best bear witness to the miracle of creation.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Religious Films

‘Cinema and Theology’ begins with a lapidary sentence: ‘The cinema has always been interested in God.’<sup>5</sup> Instead of a general statement about how theology may help us understand crucial aspects of the art of cinema, what Bazin has in mind is simply the fact that theistic religious films have existed and have been popular since the beginning of moviemaking, from those based on the Gospels to those based on Hindu mythology. A religious film is a work with religious content, that is, that engages with subjects, persons, and concepts that are particular to a religion and its tradition. He is here thinking specifically of Christianity.

Bazin divides the religious film into three categories. The first category is what may be called the *Christian epic*, which takes as its source the Scriptures, focusing on the spectacular aspects of these narratives. It may be a ‘catechism-in-pictures’ or a ‘Stations-of-the-Cross film,’ as he later calls it, with a more limited descriptive

range. The second category is the *hagiography*, which tells the story of a saint's life or episodes of it. The third category is the *clergy or monastic story*, popularised in the USA through movies with storylines about priests or nuns.

## 2. (Sacred) Cinema

Bazin introduces the discussion of the hagiographical film writing that 'As cinema is in itself already a kind of miracle, it was absolutely appropriate to show a rain of roses pouring down or springs gushing out of arid sands.'<sup>6</sup> Why is cinema a sort of miracle? The word miracle comes from the Latin *miraculum*, 'object of wonder.' Cinema creates objects of wonder, which show us a world past that becomes present or which offer us an imaginary world that becomes actual.

The paragraph on cinematic hagiographies ends with a reference to the Italian film *Cielo sulla Palude* (*Heaven Over the Marshes*, 1949) about Maria Goretti, which Bazin analyses in detail in another essay.<sup>7</sup> Goretti was canonised after she was raped and murdered by a boy who had harassed her. When she was dying, Goretti prayed for her forgiveness of any way in which she gave rise to his actions. Bazin states the view of the film succinctly: 'Divine grace doesn't manifest itself in nature as the product of a tangible causality; at most, it reveals itself through some ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural terms.'<sup>8</sup> *Cielo sulla Palude* is therefore more than a simply religious film, it is a *theological film*. That is, it is a work that

asserts, through the very nature of the its characters, story, and events, the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics, of Christian propaganda that likes to suppose that sainthood is conferred a priori on saintly lives.<sup>9</sup>

The total transcendence of grace is connected with the total transcendence of God. Yet grace, and hence God, is revealed through signs that call for an interpretation instead of an explanation. In other words, God is transcendent but dwells within the world and the stuff that makes up the world in the very fact of its existence, *in its very being*, extending its grace to spiritual creatures whether in its permanent (sanctifying) or transient (actual) form. Grace is always already given, intrinsic to us. We become aware of it when we are conscious of our potential - or as Daniel O'Leary puts it: 'Grace is life fully lived.'<sup>10</sup> Grace is a gift that is palpable and clear to us through the way we arrive at sanctification, which is the fulfilling of our potential as humans, our responses to the occurrences of life as it unfolds. In order to blossom as holiness, grace entails the exercise of free will.

'A saint is only a saint after the fact,' as Bazin sums up, is the crucial idea behind *Cielo sulla Palude*. He tells us that what the director, Augusto Genina, says is:

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This is Maria Goretti, watch her live and die. On the other hand, you know she is a saint. Let those that have eyes to see, read by transparency the evidence of grace in her life, just as you must do at every moment in the events of your own lives.<sup>11</sup>

Even though we see her pray for the soul of the obsessed boy, devotion is not the same as sainthood. For the most part, what we see is a girl enjoying the shore water and doing mundane tasks. These moments, as any other moments, are potentially spiritual. Saint Teresa of Avila wrote in length about encountering God in the pleasurable and the ordinary. Meister Eckart said that if you are not close to God in the everyday, you will not be close to God in church. It is not surprising then that Bazin emphasises the key roles of attention and interpretation that disclose the sacred in a life and in a film, adding: ‘The signs that God sends to his people are not always supernatural. A serpent in a bush is not the devil, but the devil is still there as well as everywhere else.’<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Grace on Screen

How do we *see* grace? Such a question entails a difficulty of seeing whose background is the association of grace with particularity and rarity. That is to say, in order to see grace we have to see in a particular way that may not be available to everyone and, furthermore, the manifestation of grace is rare. From a Catholic perspective, ‘Sacraments are but the manifestation of grace,’<sup>13</sup> but at the same time the ordinary is the realm of grace for faithful and non-faithful alike,<sup>14</sup> because it is in it that the fruits of grace come to light. This is encapsulated in Saint Therese de Lisieux’s saying: ‘Everything is grace.’<sup>15</sup> This statement begs for further elaboration, otherwise its apparent generality may be interpreted as inconsistent and even as belittling grace and its power. As the Dominican Matthew Bernard Mulcahy notes,<sup>16</sup> Saint Paul conveys the same thought in his letter to the Romans, using a less epigrammatic style: ‘In everything God works for good with those who love him’ (8:28).

Being open to the signs of grace in the world requires holding off judgement, letting things be and marvel at their autonomy (which must not be confused with independence). The understanding of grace as constitutive of nature is more discernible in human nature, which is *imago Dei*, image of God. But embedded in this understanding is the idea that a sacrament gives form to the spiritual bond between God and us. It is in this sense that we speak of Jesus Christ as a sacrament and of the community that he gathers, the Church, as a sacrament.<sup>17</sup> The world itself may also be seen as a sacrament. As O’Leary contends, ‘The sacraments of the church make explicit what is implicit in the sacrament of the world.’<sup>18</sup> O’Leary explores what he calls sacramental imagination and his vision is similar to Bazin’s perspective on the artistic capacities of cinema:

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It has to do with a wonderful capacity for seeing into, and beyond, the mystery of what happens. It allows us first to experience what is presented to us, and then to discover within it, much more meaning than the basic phenomena would allow.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of sacrament can be broadly understood simply as an imaginative engagement with the world that does not attempt to see what is beneath the surface, but to make sense of its concrete aspects. The spiritual dimension of film has to do with the significance that we find in such aspects and grace is but the loving and creative ability to grasp meaning and give significance. *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957) provides a concluding cinematic example that is outside the religious realm. Yet, as we shall see, this film can be understood from a spiritual perspective that is holistic, plural, and universal - truly catholic, we may say, or at least a perspective that relies on human commonalities and encourages conversation. Bazin was an great admirer of this work about publicist Rock Hunter (Tony Randall) who pretends that he is involved with a popular and buxom blonde actress (Jayne Mansfield) in order to get her to do a commercial and to get promoted. The resultant life of riches makes him forget his fiancée Jenny (Betsy Drake). In the scene of their reconciliation, he is drunk with power, success, and affluence. He is alone with a large collection of pipes that is the image of material abundance. He is as physically drained as spiritually dry. Jenny shows up to return her engagement ring and he is confronted with a meaningful object as well as a person he loves but could not treasure. Their reunion will take the form of a meeting of silhouettes - simple and delineated figures that could be used in a advertising poster. Without shying away from the connection with advertising images, this moment reveals how the profane is not opposed to the sacred. Instead, the profane is the place where the sacred can transpire. These outlines are produced by their bodies, but are also immaterial and therefore express the connection of their souls. They breathe together and the smoke that comes out of the pipe is no longer a sign of death (or vice) but of life (or virtue). The striking poetic image of a puff in the corridor condenses their bond.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> André Bazin, 'Cinema and Theology', in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, ed. Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 61-72.

<sup>2</sup> Bert Cardullo, 'Introduction', in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, ed. Bert Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), xii.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Cardullo, 'Introduction', xii.

<sup>5</sup> Bazin, 'Cinema and Theology', 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bazin, 'A Saint Becomes a Saint Only after the Fact (*Head Over the Marshes*)', in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, ed. Cardullo (London: Routledge, 1997), 205-209.

<sup>8</sup> Bazin, 'Cinema and Theology', 63.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel O'Leary, *Begin with the Heart: Recovering a Sacramental Vision* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Bazin, 'A Saint Becomes a Saint Only after the Fact', 209.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009), 303.

<sup>14</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 21 Nov. 1964, pars. 16 and 39.

<sup>15</sup> See Therese of Lisieux (as Sainte Thérèse de l'enfant-Jésu et de la Sainte-Face), *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 1009.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Bernard Mulcahy, OP, 'Not Everything Is Grace: Aquinas's Notion of "Pure Nature" and the Christian Integralism of Henri de Lubac and of Radical Orthodoxy' (PhD Thesis, Australian Catholic University, 2008), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Schmemmann points out in *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 113, that 'The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom - not because she possesses divinely instituted acts called "sacraments," but because first of all she is the possibility given to man to see in and through this world the "world to come," to see and to "live" it in Christ.'

<sup>18</sup> O'Leary, *Begin with the Heart*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 20.

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