Reign-Focus

Theology, Film, and the Aesthetics of Liberation

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Theology offers a lens that reorients cinematic story so that the organic connection between liberative movements in human history and the in-breaking reign of God is recognized and clarified; film challenges theology to explore questions of social justice in imaginative and visceral ways. Viewing films through the clarifying lens of a reign-focus allows us to see films as portals to theological discoveries, as audiovisual stained-glass windows.

The setting is the rainforest of South-Central America during the “Jesuit Reductions,” the 18th Century “civilizing missions” of the Society of Jesus at the height of its zeal and idealism. Rodrigo Mendoza is a merciless Spaniard who abducts Guarani Indians for the thriving slave trade. When he is imprisoned for killing his own brother, Mendoza accepts a Jesuit priest’s offer to guide him to the path of penance and conversion. As it turns out, the path is a *via dolorosa*; the slave-trader is to drag the load of all his armaments—bundled in a net of thick rope and strapped around him—en route to the Guarani village where he will meet his erstwhile victims face-to-face. Mendoza struggles through thick brush, treacherous rapids, and perilously steep slopes as he inches his way to the high altitude.

destination. When he finally reaches the environs of the village, a commotion kindles among the Guarani who are enraged at the sight of their oppressor. One of the warriors loses no time in drawing his knife, threatening to slit Mendoza’s throat. But in that frantic moment, the unexpected happens. The Guarani chief orders the warrior not just to desist from harming Mendoza but to release him from the heavy load still strapped to his person. The “savages” nobly extend reconciling clemency to their oppressor. The hardened Mendoza weeps like a child as the Guarani and Jesuit missionaries unite in jubilation. In the sequence that immediately follows, Mendoza is a completely different person. Alongside the Guarani, he is helping in the building of a missionary settlement. This scene demarcates Mendoza’s dramatic turnabout from ruthless slave trader and murderer to selfless Jesuit missionary who would ultimately lay down his life for the Guarani.

The cinematic imagery at this pivotal juncture of the film The Mission (Roland Joffé/U.K. 1986) still plays in my mind as vividly as when I first saw it. At that time, I could not help but ask, “What really happened here?” Neither voice-over narration nor expository subtitles spell out the inner workings behind Mendoza’s radical 180-degree turnabout. Certainly theology offers a discursive framework for us to be able to describe what had unfolded on screen. A conversion experience, to a degree that meaningfully resonates with the dramatic conversion of Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, had happened to Mendoza as a result of the gratuitous forgiveness extended to him by the Guarani. But the succeeding scene suggests that a specific kind of conversion, what prophetic-liberating theologies would term as a “conversion to justice,” further nuances Mendoza’s experience. It is a conversion that leads him to a profound sociopolitical engagement, a preferential option for the poor and oppressed.

But how do we know that the film actually conveys this meaning when no explanation is offered as to what actually transpires in the sequence in question? The key to answering this question lies in a careful consideration of the language and grammar of film. Let us rewind to those pivotal sequences in The Mission and point out how the film actually offers an explanation, not in words, but in “audio-visual” language. A series of wide-angle shots frames Mendoza’s harrowing effort to drag the load attached to him while providing a panoramic view of the wild and torturous terrain that he is negotiating. The camera’s distance of framing closes in as Mendoza approaches the Guarani village. This time, wide-angle shots
are often intercut with close-up shots so that the outrage of the Guarani and the reticence of Mendoza allow us to feel the real danger that is thick in the air. When the Guarani extend forgiveness, symbolized by their act of releasing Mendoza from his penitential load, the camera provides close-up shots of Mendoza so that his face becomes a canvass of emotions; a threshold between an inner and an outer. Mendoza’s copious tears become an index to a fundamental change in his character; we know that an implicit “miracle” had happened where it counts—within Mendoza’s heart. The artful layering of a musical score, the moving “Gabriel’s Oboe” by noted composer Ennio Morricone, offers an adjunct, aural concurrence to this interpretation. Further validation may be found in the scene that follows. Through the stylistic option known as “dynamic editing,” or simply put, the joining of two discontinuous scenes, the film jumps to the proximate future where we see that Mendoza, quite apparently, had become a new creation. He is working shoulder-to-shoulder with the Guarani as they build the mission settlement together and, shortly after, willingly accedes to having the tribe’s customary body paint applied on him. Moreover, the film offers a prop—a wooden cross being hoisted to the rooftop of the mission house—as a validating allusion to the pneumatic presence of Christ, here experienced as forgiveness, reconciliation, and solidarity.

In this prologue, I have, in effect, put the carriage before the horse and risked volunteering the content of this essay too soon. This, however, is a deliberate move and is angled to serve a specific purpose. I wanted to offer a taste of the richness of meaning that can be found in film when viewers gain even a modicum of familiarity and understanding of its language as an art form. Within the interpretive framework provided by the theological symbol of the reign of God, an acquaintance with film’s audiovisual language breaks open possibilities for an enriching and transformative theological discussion of human liberation and social justice.

**Social Justice and Global Cinema**

I teach *Imaging the Reign of God: Social Justice and Global Cinema*, a systematic theology/ethics elective niched in Catholic Theological Union’s intensive January term. The course offers students the chance to do theology in alternative, creative ways. It serves as a venue for an appreciation of a different function for film, not just as a weekend diversion over popcorn and soda, but as *locus theologicus*, a sacramental space from which we gain a deeper understanding of the God of the Reign, the God who is ever mindful of suffering humanity. Guided by this “Reign-Focus” (Casaldáliga and Vigil, 77-84)—the optic provided by the reign of God and its profound implications to a world that is hungry for justice and social change—
the course aims to provide an opportune moment for students to engage in praxis-oriented critical reflection.

In brushstrokes, I paint a picture of how the course unfolds. I first lay out the theological discursive framework that informs our hermeneutical project. I then discuss the methodological approach that we employ in the analysis of our selected film titles. Finally, I provide a taste of the actual theological hermeneutics we engage in through a discussion of an actual case study from the class.

**Reign-Focus**

In the course, the reign of God forms a constant horizon of meaning that informs our understanding of the various theological perspectives on social justice that we bring into conversation with the cinematic texts. Thus, in our hermeneutical project—be that a feminist critique or an examination of the phenomenon of migrant labor—we view films from the relativizing optic of the reign of God.

From a close examination of the spoken message and saving actions of the Jesus of the gospels, scholars have been able to paint a picture of a theological symbol that is never defined by Jesus in exact terms, but is central to an understanding of his identity and mission. I am, of course, referring to the basileia tou theou, the kingdom or reign of God, which is at the very heart of the Jesus person and message. So central is basileia tou theou that it is referred to in the New Testament 199 times; 99 of these are found in the synoptic gospels; and 90 of these 99 texts are presented as the very words spoken by Jesus (Ratzinger, 47). Jesus’ person is so identified with basileia tou theou precisely because he is the autobasileia, the “kingdom in person;” it is what he lived and died for.

It is helpful to describe basileia tou theou as having two inextricable dimensions—the “Kingdom of God,” which is the eschatological vision of a complete and definitive eco-human salvation to which God’s saving activity is directed; and the “reign of God,” which emphasizes “the dynamic, here-and-now character of God’s exercise of control” (Schillebeeckx, 141) as made concrete by the praxis of liberation, justice, solidarity, and the option for the poor. The kingdom of God and the reign of God are two sides of the same coin—the kingdom emphasizes the vision, the reign emphasizes the praxis.

While a reign-focus is, quite doubtlessly, a decisive point of departure in our project, we reserve further elaboration of the reign of God until we have examined the cinematic texts and allowed them to speak on their own terms. In the course, theology forms half of the requisite interdisciplinary engagement. If, as we had established, the portal to a theological conversation with film is necessarily the hermeneutics of audiovisual language and grammar, the identification of a germane methodological approach needs to be addressed.
For the course *Imaging the Reign of God*, I had found that Third Cinema critical theory, otherwise known as the “aesthetics of liberation,” fits as a methodological approach for the interpretation of film. In a previous *New Theology Review* essay, I had introduced the concept of Third Cinema in relation to my interdisciplinary doctoral project (Sison 2010). I do not intend to reprise that piece here. My intention is to discuss in sharper relief how the aesthetics of liberation can be a judicious methodological tool in analyzing films for the purpose of generating a theological discussion on liberation and social justice.

The term *Third Cinema* was coined by Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1968 to describe the cacophony of artistic initiatives that birthed in Latin America as a response to the global dominance of Western filmmaking, necessarily classified as First Cinema (mainstream, commercial filmmaking epitomized by Hollywood) and Second Cinema (mainly European auteur cinema). Drawing from the paradigm of decolonization presented in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the original vision was to foster a subversive “guerilla cinema,” that is, a cinema that can function as “custodian of popular memory” for marginal cultures and dialectically challenge the ideological omnipresence of First Cinema, and, to a certain extent, Second Cinema. Although originally derived from the designation “Third World,” Third Cinema does not so much demarcate the geographical origins of a given film as it does the film’s dedication to an authentic representation of Third World peoples who struggle to become agents of their own history in the postcolonial aftermath.

What determines Third Cinema is the conception of the world, and not the genre or an explicit political approach. Any story, any subject can be taken up by Third Cinema. In the developing countries, Third Cinema is a cinema of decolonisation, which expresses the will to national liberation, anti-mythic, anti-racist, anti-bourgeois, and popular (Martin, 34).

Later scholarly developments, credited largely to the work of Ethiopian film scholar Teshome Gabriel, reset Third Cinema toward a trajectory that is less strident and more methodical. Gabriel’s groundbreaking book *Third Cinema in the Third World* speaks of the “aesthetics of liberation” (Gabriel 1982), a methodological approach where an examination of a film’s audiovisual grammar—cinematography, editing, lighting, sets and props, costuming, acting, music—opens the portal to a deeper understanding of a film’s sociopolitical meaning. For the purposes of this essay, I point to a sampling of cinematic conventions and the ways by which they can be, in view of the aesthetics of liberation, indexes of the ideological underpinnings of a film:

- The deliberate choice of low/high camera shots for the purpose of representing sociopolitical power relations
• The employment of wide-angle camera shots to frame communitarian action and to give visibility to a sociopolitical context or setting

• The use of editing strategies to portray a clash of ideologies or to establish a dialectical relationship between two perspectives or positions

• The punctuated inclusion of documentary footage to suggest a link to actual sociopolitical realities

• The use of non-actors as dynamic equivalents of actual people who occupy a particular social location

• The strategic use of music for sociopolitical critique or commentary

• The stylistic option of keeping the film’s culmination “open-ended” to signify that the struggle for liberation continues

In the course, we appropriate the hermeneutical tools derived from the aesthetics of liberation in an expanded sense, not necessarily confining its application to films about the plight of the Third World but to a culturally diverse selection of films representing various liberative currents that meaningfully resonate with the praxis of the reign of God.

**Case Study: Bread and Roses (Ken Loach/U.K., 2001)**

*Bread and Roses* is but one among several titles of socially resonant films—among them, *Hidden Agenda* (1990), *Land and Freedom* (1995), and *Carla’s Song* (1996)—by British filmmaker Ken Loach. In this film, Loach problematizes the case of illegal immigrant workers who subsist on poverty wages as janitors in the great U.S. melting pot that is Los Angeles. Maya, a young girl from Tijuana, Mexico, has made arrangements to cross the Mexican–U.S. border through illegal means. Under duress, she finds herself having to deal with unscrupulous human traffickers or “coyotes” who extort not just cash but sexual services in exchange for the passage. But the clever Maya finds a way to wiggle out of the impasse, and she successfully locates her sister Rosa in Los Angeles. Rosa, dealing with financial problems of her own, manages to find Maya a janitorial job that pays a pittance—$5.75 per hour without benefits. The reality of exploitative labor practices quickly becomes a rude awakening for Maya, who, through her acquaintance with the other janitors and her close association with a union organizer, gets involved in organized protest actions against her employers. Against this backdrop, “an internal Third World congeals as the characters navigate through the compounded political economy of labor, race, culture, and gender” (Sison 2006, 72).

Along the direction of the aesthetics of liberation, the casting of an ethnically diverse group of non-actors to play the roles of janitors lends realism to the film.
With their unadorned performances and their varied accents, the non-actors are close dynamic equivalents of their characters. The film also uses actual footage from the 1990 Century City janitors’ strike, the very source material for the film; the janitors themselves watch the strike on video during a union meeting. Both the use of non-actors and the introduction of the actual footage of the historical strike infuse the film with documentary-like authenticity. Also notable is the film’s setting, a non-touristy view of Los Angeles, which is a departure from the mainstream Hollywood image of the city. The drama unfolds mostly inside the office buildings where the janitors work. “The film confines the unfolding story in the characters’ site of struggle; the corridors of their depersonalized steel and glass work environment, thus, specifying a politicized space rather than the glitz and glamour synonymous with the city” (Sison 2006, 69).

While no direct reference to God or theology is made in *Bread and Roses*, the janitors’ fight for just wages and more livable benefits meaningfully resonate with the praxis of the reign of God. Liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino have consistently called attention to the vital role of praxical initiatives, including the praxis of indignation and protest, as concrete and valid manifestations of the in-breaking reign:

> The reign of God is not simply a utopia to be hoped and striven for. It is a utopia to be anticipated and constructed in opposition to historical realities, in opposition to objective sin. This sin is substantially whatever puts persons to death by structural means—by structural injustice, by institutionalized violence—in a word, by repression. The holiness that constructs the reign is altogether conscious of its struggle with this sin. (Sobrino, 129)

Sobrino proposes that the prophetic-liberating character of the reign is made concrete in the opposition to the “anti-reign,” that is, the societal structures that perpetuate the oppression of the poor and the weak thus constantly threatening their humanity. This dovetails with Schillebeeckx’s conception of “negative contrast experiences” where the experience of human suffering, negative and death-dealing as it is, paradoxically becomes fuel for a praxis that militates against the oppressive suffering and its causes—“God is the source of a creative dissatisfaction with all that is less than God’s vision of humanity” (Hilkert, 220). The praxis of unmasking the anti-reign or what is “not-God” is an indirect appeal to the reign; it becomes the locus for an understanding of God’s presence within protest. James Cone, when describing attributes of God in relation to the black struggle for liberation, traipses along a similar trajectory: “God is not indifferent to suffering and not patient to cruelty and falsehood” (Cone, 8).

The “creative dissatisfaction” and divine “impatience” in the face of injustice find an analogue in the quest for fuller humanity represented in the protest motif in *Bread and Roses*; an indirect appeal to the God of the reign may be located,
precisely, in the longing and demand for both “bread” and “roses.” In the film, this longing takes the form of union-organized protest actions under the banner “Justice for Janitors.” Following the film’s stylistic options, the employment of wide-angle shots, in their capacity to frame and foreground group action, allow us to see the janitors’ collective engagement in protesting against the unjust labor practices of their employers.

Their goal is to enter the imposing office building—here often shot from a low-angle to emphasize the power-wealth disparity between the janitors and their employers—in order to make their indignation felt and heard within the very corridors of power that have kept them oppressed. When they successfully march into the building, camera angling again dramatizes the power disparity; some of the professionals who work in the building are shot from a low-angle as they peer through a glass wall at the mezzanine floor overlooking the lobby where the protesters have positioned themselves. From their relatively higher vantage point, the professionals appear uneasy as the janitors’ protests reverberate loud and clear within the walls of the building. To borrow the film’s tagline, “The balance of power is about to change.” Where then can we locate an allusive reference to the reign of God at this pivotal turn? To recapitulate, echoes of the in-breaking reign may be found in the collective protests of the janitors that militate against the unjust, dehumanizing situation they are made to accept. Within the struggle for a fuller humanity is the mysterious liberating presence of the God of the reign who, in a manner of speaking, has chosen not to affix his/her signature.

The use of music and dance in the film is another pathway to a discussion on the praxis of the reign. In a sequence set during a union-sponsored party, we see the janitors in a celebratory mood, dancing to the upbeat rhythm of Latino music. It becomes apparent, however, that the live band is belting out subversive lyrics
that give vent to the oppressive socioeconomic structures undocumented immigrants have to face in the United States. This is capped by an empowering call to action as they all chant “¡Si, se puede!” or “We can do it!” The scene is poignant in that it reflects a seemingly incongruous marriage of hopeful celebration and strident protest, holding them together in dialectical tension. It is thus not merely dissatisfaction but a “creative dissatisfaction.” This convincingly lays down a bridge to a discussion of the eschatological character of basileia tou theou as being present here and now in fragmentary fashion through the praxis of the reign, and as an alternative future reality of definitive salvation, which constitutes the “not yet,” the eschatological future yet to be fulfilled.

The film’s open-ended denouement also offers allusions to the eschatological tension between the “here” and “not yet” of the reign. We do not get a fairy tale ending. While the organized protests successfully pressure management to give in to the janitors’ demand for higher wages and benefits, Maya is deported for a Robin Hood-style crime she committed earlier (she stole money to help fund a co-janitor’s education). Shortly after the janitors rejoice over their victory, we see Maya from the glass window of a bus that is taking her back to the Tijuana border. A reprisal of an earlier scene, the glass window is a symbolic barrier separating Maya from her sister Rosa, and from a life of abundant possibilities. Throughout the film, glass windows function as visual motifs of very real experiences of alienation yet, paradoxically, allowing a glimpse of personal connectedness. Within the contingency of the meantime, Bread and Roses offers a promise of a fuller, more realized future humanity.

**Film as Stained Glass Window**

As a scholar who is passionately engaged in crystallizing a theology-film dialogue, it is my hope that those who minister to the community of faith would explore an engagement with film through the optic of a reign-focus. Consonant with other trajectories in the theology-film inquiry, this engagement aims for a mutually-enriching dialogue: while theology offers a lens that reorients cinematic story so that the organic connection between liberative movements in human history and the in-breaking reign of God is recognized and clarified; film challenges theology to explore questions of social justice in imaginative and visceral ways. Viewing films through the clarifying lens of a reign-focus allows us to see films as portals to theological discoveries, audiovisual stained glass windows reflecting “the diffused but undeniable presence of the God of the edge, the God who is ever mindful of humanity’s weakest links” (Sison 2006, 184).

The reign is God’s dream; it is always a hope-inspiring experience to see resonances of that dream reflected on the silver screen.
Some Practical Suggestions

From my interaction with students, teachers, directors of religious education, and pastors, I’ve come to understand that the hermeneutical piece to the theology-film dialogue, at least initially, appears intimidating to those who are not particularly acquainted with cinematic language. With this in mind, I offer some practical suggestions:

• Film is audiovisual art. Make an effort to pay closer attention to image and music, and not just the more literary elements such as dialogue and plot. Learning technical film jargon is secondary, what counts more is developing an eye (and ear) that notices film language.

• Ask critical questions. Whose point of view is represented in the film and at what points in the film do you see that? How do the gestures and costuming of the characters reveal social location? Does the film’s happy Disney ending contribute to authenticity or is it misleading? A post-screening chat with a “film buddy” over coffee can be an energizing way to articulate and share your critical dialogue with film.

• Devote some time reading on the topic of theology/religion and film. A good place to start is Robert K. Johnson’s accessible book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2006). There are also a number of courses, workshops, and retreats that offer opportunities to engage in a Theology-Film dialogue. Sr. Rose Pacatte, F.S.P., one of our contributing authors for this issue, leads an annual National Film Retreat in Culver City, California (http://sisterrose.wordpress.com/)

• Watch a culturally diverse selection of films, and allow yourself to be challenged by thought-provoking, socially-resonant titles such as *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro/New Zealand, 2002), *Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles/Argentina, 2004), and *Precious* (Lee Daniels/U.S., 2009).

References


