

Spirit on Screen

Going to the movies is one of my favourite treats in life and like Antony, who spoke so well earlier on about his cinema going experiences, I like all sorts of films - from Walt Disney cartoons to unusual European art films, where not much seems to happen and that which does happen seems to take an awful long time to occur – and it's probably going to be filmed in black and white. Some friends of mine will never take a film recommendation from me since a notable evening back in the early 80s when 16 of us went to see a film directed by the Russian film director Andre Tarkovsky called *Stalker*. Has anyone seen it I wonder? We went to see it entirely on my recommendation – and when I looked down the row of seats half way through the film more than half of them were asleep and the ones who were still conscious glared at me in an accusatory fashion. At the end only one of them agreed with me that it is a truly great film.

Tarkovsky is not to everybody's taste but telling the story of watching *Stalker* again reminds me of one of the lovely things about films which is that whilst watching a film is generally a solitary pursuit yet it offers an opportunity, afterwards or at another time, to talk about your response with other people. In that respect film is like any other art form – painting, theatre, sculpture, opera, felt making even – there is an element of relationality about all art. It may only be the relation of the artist, the creator, to their chosen material or art form, yet most artists seek to bring their created works into the public domain and it is there that the public relate, and respond, to that which is laid before them – be it a felt wall hanging like the one created by our Fabric of Diversity workshops and now proudly hanging on the wall in the hall next door, or the latest Hollywood blockbuster now showing at the Odeon and other cinemas across the world. We humans are social creatures and one of the ways we bond with others is through artistic production and our responses to those productions.

Whilst much art is created by a single person, mainstream films are a team effort involving many different people with many different skills and they involve levels of planning which are hard to imagine if you have never made a film. But that makes it even more interesting to reflect on the way that film making has opened up as a result of easily available video cameras, for example, on our mobile phones and with U-Tube as a platform for home made films to be shown across the world via the Internet. Various religious commentators have made a link with 21st century spirituality and this freedom to make films – we've spoken a lot here at Essex Church about people's yearning for connection in community yet needing to have ownership of their own spiritual path. Everyone in the 21st century can be a film maker *and* a theologian.

And of course artistic production has always mediated and elicited spirituality in human society – from those earliest paintings of animals on cave walls and carvings of spiral formations on rocks – most artistic work up until the Renaissance was religious – its function was to portray religious themes and make them accessible to the populace. And although there was then a split, both in our culture and in its artistic expressions, between the secular and the religious realms yet still I think we can say that much artistic work inspires us towards spiritual reflection. Donna Bowman wrote an interesting essay on *Reflections on Cinema, Spirituality and Process* in which she reflects on the links between cinema and what's known as process theology. In her essay she suggests that the watching of films can elicit various spiritual responses in those who sit and watch:

- The first is that watching films may encourage within us an impulse to change in some way – which she links with the Judaeo-Christian tradition of faith in action – a kind of 'get out there and do something' spiritual path
- The second is that watching films may encourage us to reflect on what is and simply to be – which she of course links with an eastern religious approach of turning inwards and acceptance of that which is.

I don't know if many of you have been to the British Museum this summer to see the Indian paintings in their *Garden and Cosmos* exhibition. They are wonderful and the exhibition has been extended until October 11th. One of the delights for me was to see large paintings that told stories – one picture would contain 3 or 4 different scenes that unfold in the myth they represent. In western art we are more used to paintings that capture almost a photographic still point in a narrative – the Crucifixion, the Annunciation, the birth of Jesus, for example. When it comes to the world of film though, narrative is everything – we expect a story to unfold before us when we watch a film – we expect a classic structure of beginning, middle and end – films, like life itself, unfold before us and carry us along with them. This is perhaps why some art house films leave audiences feeling uncomfortable for they may often challenge the perceived way that films 'should be' – denying us the satisfaction of happy endings or coherent narrative progression.

And perhaps it is because of that desired parallel with the unfolding of life's narrative, we may well experience insights into our own lives, our own experiences when watching films or thinking about them afterwards. In some sense, like the message of the story about the neighbours earlier on in today's service – it could be said that in any activity what we meet is a reflection of

ourselves – be that in our assessment of our next door neighbours or the city we live in or a book we are reading or a film we are watching. And paradoxically, in all human activity we may also gain a sense of transcendence – of being taken beyond our small self and being granted a much greater perspective. I found a delightful quotation from American writer Garrison Keillor in which he remarked that “if you can’t go to church and, for at least a moment, be given transcendence; if you can’t go to church and pass briefly from this life into the next; then I can’t see why anyone should go. Just a brief moment of transcendence causes you to come out of church a changed person.”

Commenting on this observation Ken Gire writes “I have experienced what Garrison Keillor described more in movie theatres than I have in churches. Why? I can’t say for sure ... movies don’t always tell the truth, don’t always enlighten, don’t always inspire. What they do on a fairly consistent basis is give you an experience of transcendence. They let you lose yourself in somebody else’s story.” (quoted on page 100 of *Reel Spirituality* by Robert Johnson.)

And I’d agree with that – watching films can take us out of ourselves – it can give us a delicious sense of merging into oneness – the merging that mystics the world over are seeking. But then we have to remember, that depending on our circumstances, this ability to merge may be a positive or a negative aspect of human psychology. Films, like gladiator fights in ancient Rome, can be used to entertain the masses and to keep us contented and therefore ‘in our place’. Films can be used to promote propaganda, to ensure that the population tows the party line – as anyone who has ever seen films created during the fascist regimes of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin will know. There may have been a sense of being taken out of oneself when watching such films but the result is that people lost their individual sense of responsibility for their own lives and for the way they and their society were treating other people. Entertainment is important for us humans – and there is no reason why our entertainments need always be worthy or even particularly wholesome – but I’m with Tarkovsky who’s quoted on the front of today’s order of service sheet – we live in a world that needs harmony and we have to take some responsibility for that – even if our particular form of harmony happens when we’re sitting in a darkened room with a box of pop corn on our laps.

So let’s be people who know that we have some power over the artistic creation that is our life and the people who know that how we greet the world reflects back to us and the people who have the wherewithal to transcend from time to time, to go way beyond the realities of this earthly realm and to sense that there might just be a wondrous other reality – for with human existence as with all truly great films – you really can’t be quite sure – what’s going to happen next. Amen.

But actually we do know because we have the script in our hands – or rather today’s order of service - which tells us that it’s time for the collection.

Benediction:

We do not know what is going to happen next in life, it unfolds before us and we respond. In the week ahead may our responses reflect something of our faith – open to possibility, committed to equality, able to question and reflect, willing to engage with ourselves, with others, with our world and with that which is unknown. Go well and blessed be.

References:

- Bowman, Donna and McDaniel, Jay (2006) *Handbook of Process Theology*, Chalice Press, St Louis
- Deacy, Christopher (2005) *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, Ashgate, Aldershot
- Johnston, Robert K (2000) *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Barker Academic, Michigan