

Freek Bakker, Mathilde van Dijk, Leo van der Tuin, Marjeet Verbeek (Hg.): Blessed Are the Eyes that Catch Divine Whispering: Silence and Religion in Film

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This collection of essays, the result of a three-day film studies symposium held in Groningen (NL) in 2013, intends to explore the role of silence and religion in film. At first glance, this is a promising focus, but as is often the case with such volumes of collected papers, the chapters reflect varied if not incompatible notions of religion, divergent views of silence, and scant attention to how these themes relate to each other. The result is that there is little in the volume that brings the disparate thematic foci,

methodological approaches, and interpretive strategies into a coherent whole; the essays are largely isolated from each other, and too often fail to engage the larger framing questions posed by the editors in the „Introduction“ and summarized in the brief concluding chapter.

The editors present the collection of papers in two sections: the first „Framing Silence and Religion“ opens with Heidi de Mare’s examination of the film *Crash* (2004), considering how to

approach such a film through what she calls „principles of [...] visual formation“ (p.21). She usefully introduces film theorists Wendy Doniger and S. Brent Plate to open the question of how film functions as myth and engages the human imagination and what Charles Taylor has framed as ‚the social imaginary‘ (see his *Modern Social Imaginaries* [Durham: Duke UP, 2003] and *A Secular Age* [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007]). Although interesting in terms of its theme, the following essay by Christian Wessely on the reception of Wagner’s music in *Melancholia* (2011), ignores the question of silence altogether and only touches upon religion in the closing paragraphs where the author poses a theological question based on the film’s strangely sentimental ending. Sylvain De Blaakmeer’s essay „Silence Resonating in the Cinematographic Space“ takes on the symposium’s stated focus more effectively, probing two recent films on monastic life and witness: *Into Great Silence* (2005), on the Grand Chartreuse, and *Of Gods and Men* (2010), a film exploration of the Trappist community in Algeria that met its tragic end in 1996. The essay reflects a subtle appreciation of the monastic commitment to silence and probes how these utterly different films explore silence as a foundational dimension of monastic practice. Frank Blaakmeer’s chapter turns our attention to Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Light* (1963), offering a penetrating sense of *how* silence functions within the artistic movements of expressionism and symbolism. Kutter Callaway turns to westerns, not a genre

one might have expected in such a volume, opening the question of how silence ‚means‘ in such films, suggesting how a film’s soundtrack is „actually shot through with silence“ (p.83), and astutely suggests how we might consider *True Grit* (2010) as a complex example of this genre. Janneke Bekkenkamp’s essay explores „The Silence of Flowers“ through a „gender-specific analysis“ of „mystical moments“ (p.92) in the films *Hana-Bi* (1997) and *Bright Star* (2009), here suggesting how flowers in these films visualize what the author calls ‚mystical moments‘ – i.e., „beyond words, yet mediating the deepest truths“ (p.93); the essay explores how flowers (among other things) as „super-physical“ (p.107) objects become „avenues of sensation“ (p.105) in these films and in the viewer’s experience. In the final essay of the first section, Lucien van Lierie turns our attention to Indonesian films that take on the violent horrors of the military coup in 1965-1966; here, the silence of terror and the silencing that follows provide an engaging political link with the symposium’s theme, together with a terse but penetrating suggestion of the ritualistic dimensions of killing as sacrifice aimed at cleansing society of resistance and dissidence.

The second section „Attributing Meaning to Silence“ opens with R. Ruard Ganzevoort’s essay „Silence Speaks“ offering „theological musings on silence in religion and film“ (p.123) and bringing the discussion into conversation with recent studies in the North American context devoted to film, religion, and theology. The author’s suggestion of types of silence („repres-

sive silence, transforming silence, ominous silence, and transcending silence“ [p.126]) offers an interpretive lens which might have functioned as an interpretive framework for the essays that follow, simply mentioning it briefly in the concluding essay falls too short. Alyda Faber’s „Silence-effects“ looks at Frederick Wiseman’s films as „parables“ (p.138), usefully suggesting how parables „disrupt the explanatory or myth-making function of story“ (p.139) which is central in several of the essays in this volume, drawing imaginatively on John Dominic Crossan’s brilliant study *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (Farmington: Polebridge Press, 1994). Tjeu van den Berk’s „The Threefold Silence after the Death of God“ explores films by Bergman, Jane Campion, and Lars von Trier, taking up Friedrich Nietzsche’s refrain that God is dead because „we have killed him!“ (p.153); the essay goes far in exploring „the silence of nihilism“ (p.154) in *The Silence* (1963), the experience of depression in *Melancholia*, and what the author describes as the „silence of rebirth“ (p.160-164) in *The Piano* (1993). Jean-Marie Weber’s essay, „Silence and Desire in Psychoanalysis“ approaches Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) in order to elucidate in a fascinating way how psychological categories (largely shaped by Jacques Lacan) might offer a viable way of grasping how such a film functions, offering a concluding reflection on „quiet listening and interpretation at the heart of the cure“ (p.172). Frank Bosman’s „Silent Adam“ turns attention to silence and religion in the animated film *Wall-E* (2008),

suggesting how this Pixar blockbuster receives and reframes classic theological themes of creation and Adamic identity with a driving interest in ecological issues, „ask[ing] its viewers to retreat into the silence of their consciousness to reflect on the near future of planet Earth“ (p.185). The final essay by David Pereyra focuses on the „wholehearted silences“ (p.186) of *Intouchables* (2011), to explore how these might shape „meaningful conversation“ (p.186).

What do these essays, considered as a whole, contribute to the sense of silence and religion in general? Individual essays do address these themes, though only in several cases in terms of how the experience of silence and religion or the reality of religious experience interact with each other. More attention to religious practices – either expressed or implied – would have strengthened many of these essays and the volume as a whole; such an approach might have examined phenomena like the ‚gaze‘ of visual devotional practices and how this form of attentiveness functions in terms of religious images. Inexplicably, such questions remain largely absent from the studies included here. One has the sense, reading them as a whole, that an attention to religious practice was either ignored in the face of the presumed secularism of the late modern world (p.9f.) or drawn into conversation only when an explicit parallel presented itself.

Furthermore, the focus on silence and religion might have occasioned a much more sustained inquiry into the fundamental question of religion itself

– what it is, how it functions in widely varying forms across cultures and historical periods. Here, the question of what roles the fundamental themes of creation and redemption play in indirect as well as explicit ways, given the presumption of secularization, is strangely ignored; one thinks here of the groundbreaking work of Paul Tillich (see, e.g., his *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball [Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 1959], *Art and Ultimate Reality* [San Francisco: Cross-Currents Publishing, 1959] and

the broad reception of his approach to religion, culture, and the arts over the last five decades, a contribution that rarely comes into play in this volume.

Finally, the book's evocative title remains curiously unexplored in the volume. What exactly might be meant by such a whispering, enticing as the phrase is, finds no resonance in these essays, singly or as a whole, and is finally left to the reader's silent musing.

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