Faith and Spirituality in Masters of World Cinema

Faith and Spirituality in Masters of World Cinema: Volume II

Edited by

Kenneth R. Morefield

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INTRODUCTION

CINEMA IN THE AGE OF "RELIGION-WITHOUT-RELIGION"

ANDERS BERGSTROM

Here we are, about to embark on an exploration: a second volume of essays on the touch points between cinema, faith, and spirituality. These are objects of study that we maintain are alive and well, contrary to the common opinion that we live in a secular, post-religious age where religion's influence–and that of its travelling companions "faith" and "spirituality"–is waning. The filmmakers and theorists under discussion in this volume reject the notion that the advances of our scientific age put wishy-washy ideas such as "faith" in their place, in favor of Enlightenment notions of empiricism and objectivity. Strangely, this cry of alarm is issued mostly from and to the faithful, those religious leaders who wish to sound the call for a return to "faith."

This volume is also a testament to the fact that the art of cinema continues to reveal its depths, continuing to grow as a world-spanning art form. Some claim that the early twenty-first century is an increasingly *post-cinematic* age. The multiplexes are packed with, if not all of the same film, sequels to or remakes of last year's hits, digitally projected in 3D to an audience looking for entertainment. In the digital age, actual celluloid running through a projector is an increasing rarity. Cinema must compete against the pull of the Internet, television (though television has benefited greatly in its lessons from cinema), and a hundred other distractions. Who has the time to watch anything, much less the kind of demanding films highlighted in this book? These films require, if anything, time and thought, both found in short demand. While cinema attendance is down in North America,[1] cinema is growing as a worldwide means of artistic expression. It continues to be an important art form, politically and, yes, spiritually charged. Such is the value of studying faith and world cinema in this post-cinematic, post-religious era. After examining the wealth of art offered up in world cinema, we should be surprised to conclude that this is

a secular era, even if the terms on which "faith" and "spirituality" are defined may be unfamiliar and loosely defined.[2]

The cinema, whether its images are captured on celluloid or digitally stored as pieces of data, continues to be fundamentally about representing our shared human experience of being. Thus, it shouldn't come as a surprise that questions of "spirituality" and "faith" would be a part of that represented experience. The essays in this volume proffer explorations of these complex and uneasy topics by looking at the representational practices and thematic obsessions of several masters of world cinema. The films under discussion arguably reveal something about human experiences and the understanding of such loaded terms as "faith" and "spirituality," regardless of the varied personal professions and stances that the directors have made on such topics (or, as in the likes of Buñuel or Godard, in spite of perceived antagonism to religion or atheism). Regardless of the position taken toward the topics of faith and spirituality, these filmmakers are more than capable of thematically and formally relating the issues of spirituality and faith through their various cinematic practices and representations of time and space. As the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky[3] noted: "Cinema is capable of operating with any fact diffused in time; it can take absolutely anything from life" (65). Such a bold statement is bolstered by the varied and various takes on the films in this volume. Whether it is the trajectory of faith in the Bengali Hindu upbringing of Satyajit Ray, or movements of decline and renewal in the French-Canadian experience of Denys Arcand, time and space are explored on the cinema screen. The filmmakers chosen for this collection are all concerned with the way that cinema shapes our perception of duration and movement. Such concerns are spiritual in so far as they reflect the historical religious concern of relating the material to the theological. If we are material beings, how do we relate to an immaterial reality? How do we represent material reality in art? The roots of the term "photography" are in the Greek for "light" and "writing," thus "writing in light.' Cinema adds another dimension, drawing on its (not yet entirely divorced from) basis in the photographic image, *kinema*, "movement" and time. Thus, cinema bridges the material and the immaterial.

This collection aims to illuminate the signification of the terms "faith" and "spirituality" to cinema by exploring connections in the work of some of the great filmmakers, coming from a wide variety of theoretical positions. Directors are never the final word on the meaning of their own work. However, perhaps such an exploration requires some introductory teasing out of such capacious terms in light of the past tensions between "faith" and "art," to say nothing of between "faith" and "theory." Use of the terms

"faith" and "spirituality" cannot help but bring us back to thinking about that term with which I began this introduction: "religion." What role does religion play in cinema going? Faith and spirituality are those things that are unseen. How does this play into cinema, an art form that is all about seeing? What are the uniting threads in a volume on directors whose stated religious positions range from Christian to Buddhist to atheistic? "Faith" in what? Whose definition of "spirituality"?

Generally, spirituality is conceived as a kind of transcendentalism, and a desire to go beyond the material. In this (to use an overused, and perhaps vacuous term) *postmodern* era terms like "faith" and "spirituality" are used as catch all phrases to describe a distanced engagement with such a notion of transcendence. "I'm spiritual, but not religious" is a common way to define one's openness to the transcendental, but also reveals a desire to keep oneself apart from the kind of rigid dogma that is associated with "religion." While the ecumenical use of the terms faith and spirituality in this volume risks flirting with a certain vague meaninglessness, the rigor with which the artists under discussion challenge our notions of how cinema represents experiences of faith and spirituality brings a great deal of substance to a discussion that attempts to re-signify and re-establish the use of "faith" and "spirituality" as critical terms.

In this volume, readers will engage with the influence of continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and various other critical frameworks for approaching film, many which could be broadly labeled "theory." What does theory offer to the cinematic explorer of faith and spirituality? Just as it would be misguided to try to subject the films under discussion to a narrow theological interpretation, the same danger is present in subjecting them to a theoretical or philosophical reading. As Simon Critchley puts it in discussing the work of director Terrence Malick in relation to philosopher Martin Heidegger:

> To read from cinematic language to some philosophical metalanguage is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated…Any philosophical reading of film has to be a reading *of* film, of what Heidegger would call *der Sache selbst*, the thing itself. A philosophical reading of film should not be concerned with ideas about the thing, but with the thing itself, the cinematic *Sache*. It seems to me that a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories— let's call that a *philoso-fugal* reading—and more a form of philosophizing, of reflection, reasoning, and argument. (17)

The entries in this volume are written with the goal of illuminating the work of the filmmakers within rather than with scoring points by showing what the films in question "really mean." It is a question of what Gilles Deleuze might have termed a "theory of cinema as conceptual practice" (xv); an examination of cinema not because it illustrates convenient points about faith and spirituality, but rather because the film itself, in its construction and representation, is a spiritual practice. Therefore, we free ourselves from trying to prove the spiritual credentials or nail down the specific faith of a director and instead seek shelter in the cinema to contemplate our own relationship to faith and spirituality.

This discussion is not entirely unexpected given what has been called the "theological turn" in continental philosophy, if not philosophy in general. One starting place for examining the role of the spiritual and faith in terms of contemporary theory and philosophy is the work of Jacques Derrida and the term "religion-without-religion." In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida's most in-depth meditation on the theme of religion, he raises the question of "permitting such a discourse to be developed without reference to religion as institutional dogma, and proposing a genealogy of thinking concerning the possibility and essence of the religious…" (49). Derrida sees a long line of such thinking concerning "possibility" running from Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard to Levinas and Marion, what he sees as "in any case a *thinking* that 'repeates' the possibility of religion without religion" (49). It is this possibility that the various theories that are invoked in this volume allow us. Beyond the tired critiques of dogma and fundamentalism, such a "theological turn" opens up the conditions of possibility for the work of film to critique modernity and rigidity. We see such a critique in many of the conversations in this volume. The application of film theory to study isn't one of "applying" a theory to a reading, but instead searching for an answer to a question. The overarching question of the relation of faith and spirituality to film and the world is what this volume seeks to uncover.

Through practices of cinema and enactments of faith, cinema offers a condition of possibility through its concretizing of space and time on celluloid (or in the post-cinematic era, in digital files). But if we are to become practitioners of cinema, it is in a sense to engage in a kind of religion. Cinema, invoking its *iconic* quality, invites a religious experience, even a "spiritual" experience. Deleuze wrote: "cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world–this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad)" (172). The explorations in this volume can help us see the trace of faith

and spirituality on cinema practice and perhaps how film can restore our faith and belief in the world against the radical doubt that is a part of a religion without religion.

Theory doesn't help us to escape the vagueness of the terms we are dealing with. As one critic of Derrida's religious turn maintains: "Derrida's philosophy seeks to articulate an originary point of aporia that precedes and determines the opposition between the transcendental and the empirical upon which the metaphysics of presence seeks to institute itself" (Bradley 25). Perhaps it is that very "aporia," and the question of its representation or the impossibility of its representation that haunts all the directors under discussion. This is one of the mysteries of cinema. Cinema often gives the appearance of an unmediated reality, as if we are experiencing things with an unprecedented sense of immediacy. These filmmakers act as the prophets of cinema, reminding us of our cinematic idols and breaking the illusions of representation. As Jean-Luc Godard famously said, "This is not a just image, this is just an image." Such a break frees cinema and reminds us of what we are actually witnessing: representation. Cinema breaks our grip on presence and has the ability to move us, through faith of a kind, to other places. This might be an exploration of various times and or spaces. Such an engagement, much like the act of reading, is a spiritual action. These masters of world cinema help us avoid idolatry.

This volume begins with **Luis Buñuel**, perhaps the most influential filmmaker to come out of the Surrealist movement. A famous atheist, the Spanish born Buñuel might seem like an odd choice with which to begin this collection. However, his oft quoted remark, "I'm an atheist still, thank God" perhaps encapsulates best the tension between the function of blasphemy and the religious in his work. In **"The Sacrificial Economy of Luis Buñuel,"** Justin Remes explores the uneasy relationship between this most unlikely of artists and a more prosaic faith. While Buñuel's surrealism and rejection of any kind of easily read symbolism prefigures the emptiness of a certain strand of postmodern thinking, his use of religious imagery points to the function of sacrifice as a key part of the human experience.

Buñuel and his radical anti-institutionalism is followed by a major world director whose reverberations across the history of cinema lend his pronouncements an air of an orthodoxy that he would most certainly have argued against. **Akira Kurosawa** is an acknowledged master of cinema with a great deal of work dedicated to him and his films. Rather than re-tread the ground of his established classics such as *Shichinin no samurai* (*The Seven Samurai*) (1954) and *Ikiru* (1952), Andrew Spitznas takes a

closer look at the role of trauma and faith in the late films of Kurosawa. **"The Flayed Hare: Trauma and Hope in the Late Films of Kurosawa"** utilizes a psychological approach to trauma, while resisting a "reduction" of the meaning of Kurosawa's films. Through an exploration of Kurosawa's film practices we can see how these films reveal the power of faith and spirituality in healing traumas both personal and social. Spitznas traces the ambivalent portrayal of traditional Japanese spiritual practices rooted in Buddhism and Shinto, through *Red Beard* (1965), *Dodeskaden* (1970), *Ran* (1985), *Dreams* (1990), *Rhapsody in August* (1991), and, his final film, *Madadayo* (1993).

William Pamerleau explores the possibility of a modern spiritual journey by examining the work of **Michelangelo Antonioni** as a cinematic counterpart to theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich, like Antonioni, takes up the question of how we find meaning in the face of a modernity that has reduced our world to its material elements. In **"The Search for Meaning in Tillich and Antonioni,"** Pamerleau suggests that while they may not agree on the answer to the question, both men agreed on the fundamental problem of modernity. This problem might be expressed as a replacement of the infinite with the finite, or perhaps settling for "the possible" over "the impossible" (to borrow from John Caputo's definition of religious people as "impossible people").[4] This is reflected in Tillich's insistence that spirituality must be ground in an "absolute concern" over the immediate, reduced present of materialism. Antonioni's films also question the possibility of finding meaning. His 1964 film, *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*) highlights the role of industrialization in stripping humanity of our capacity to find meaning. This chapter suggests that Tillich and Antonioni offer an over-lapping map for our spiritual journey.

At first glance, there is nothing surprising about the inclusion of an essay on **Frank Capra** in such a volume as this one. In **"Peforming Unreconciled Struggle: Individual Faith and Organize Religion in the Films of Frank Capra,"** Katherine Richards aptly demonstrates, however, that critical inquiry into the works of one of America's most prolific and celebrated directors is far from exhausted. Focusing on two seldom seen films, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* and *The Miracle Woman*, Richards argues that Capra selected star Barbara Stanwyck because her acting style and persona best embodied the nuanced representation of spiritual conflicts he sought to illustrate. Carefully considering the director's comments about his leading lady, Richards offers a reading of two of the least "Capraesque" films in the canon of a director whose views of faith and spirituality are too often thought of only in terms of a select few of his more popular films.

One of Antonioni's Italian contemporaries, **Pier Paolo Pasolini,** explored the role of religion and spirituality in the modern era. After abandoning the Catholic faith of his youth, Pasolini infused his cinema with a questioning and uncertainty that resonates to this day, yet retained a deeply Catholic sensibility in representing what might be termed the "exteriority of a 'belief'" (Deleuze 175). Pasolini's radicalism and its influence on all aspects of his life and filmmaking–his communism, sexuality, and professed atheism–belie the complex relation of religion to his art. Jill Murphy explores the influence of classic Italian religious art on Pasolini's films, with special focus on his *The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*) (1964), in **"Aesthetics of Passion: Art Historical Readings of the Sacred in the Early Films of Pier Paolo Pasolini."** Murphy investigates Pasolini's use of religious art and his treatment of it as a non-believer. These interactions shift Pasolini's realism toward the sacred by mixing sacred art and profane materialism. Such an investigation highlights Pasolini's attraction to the imagery of the Cross, as he views marginalized, profane figures such as the eponymous pimp of *Accattone* (1961) with a religious eye, while foregrounding the humanity of Christ in his Jesus film.

In **"Unveiling Satyajit Ray's Faith: Tracing the Evolution of His Beliefs Through an Analysis of His Movies,"** Apurva Shah, Pranev Shah, and Yallamilli Venugopal look at the role of faith in the work and life of perhaps the most famous Indian director of all time, **Satyajit Ray**. While Ray was a firm believer in modernity and rationality, the Bengali Hindu milieu and the Brahmo religion of his youth trace an interesting line through his work that thematically sides with progressiveness against tradition. The authors use the tools of psychoanalysis and its insights into the mental structures of religion to examine Ray's use of Hindu myths in his films. They specifically look at the negotiation of the relations of faith and science in Indian society and in the self. A spiritual path or journey is charted through Ray's films, especially the trio of *Devi* (*The Goddess*) (1960), *Ganashatru* (*An Enemy of the People*) (1989), and his final film, *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*) (1993).

No volume on the masters of world cinema would be complete without reference to perhaps the most influential director of the post-war era, **Jean-Luc Godard**. The way that Godard's cinema deconstructs the unified theory of narrative and film style, combined with his attitude toward the sacred, might make his interest and influence on a cinema of faith and spirituality less than obvious. However, in **"'Remove the Inside, You See the Soul': Godard's Possibilities for a Cinema of Inwardness"** Glen W. Norton examines the cinematic potential for representing

inwardness, particularly focusing on Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*) (1962). Norton argues against a materialist reading of Godard, instead focusing on how the pulling away of the layers in Godard's cinema highlights a modern faith that works through doubt and despair. Godard offers a cinema of *sense* over one of deduction, repeating the inwardness that we cannot plumb in life. Godard's singular cinematic style, rather than a focus on meaning and symbol, repeats the inwardness of the soul that we sense in one another. Norton's essay offers a compelling reading of Godard as a filmmaker who is indeed exploring faith and spirituality on the screen.

The question of faith and spirituality in modern society can also be read as one of modernity versus tradition, echoing Claude Lévi-Strauss's fundamental metaphysical dichotomy between "culture" and "nature." Iranian master **Abbas Kiarostami** explores such a relationship within society in his film *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Baad Mara Khahad Baad*) (1999), highlighting the clash that occurs when a modern film crew from Tehren visits a traditional rural village, Siah Darah. In **"The Meeting of the Modern and the Traditional in Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*",** A. K. Anderson questions the idea that Kiarostami, in a repetition of the Western privileging of "nature" over "culture," clearly sides with the tradition. In exploring the different senses of temporality in the different cultures, we sense a level of nuance and skepticism toward religion. Anderson elucidates the different ways that this dichotomy between tradition and modernism, "culture" and "nature" is undermined in Kiarostami's film.

Gillian Helfield explores the ambiguous philosophical and ideological positions present in the films of Canadian master **Denys Arcand**. **"Embracing the Mystery: Cycles of Decline and Renewal in the Films of Denys Arcand"** traces the history of Arcand's films in relation to cycles in Québec history. The changes in Québec over the twentieth century clarify the uneasy relationship of both Arcand and Québec society to the Catholic Church. Helfield outlines the "eschatological" function of the cycles of decline and renewal and the possibility of the recovery and redemption that can be found in Arcand's films.

Becky McLaughlin gives a passionate examination of faith and spirituality in **Lars von Trier's** deeply polarizing film, *Breaking the Waves* (1996). She reads the film, which some see as merely reinforcing female martyrdom and misogyny, as a profound examination of the question of faith that asks: "What does God want us to do?" **"'Maybe I Was Wrong After All': Doubt, Conversion, and Redemption in *Breaking the Waves*"** explores Bess as a symbol of the *vera religio*. Bess

is seen in opposition to the repressive church elders. Rather than reading the sexual acts leading to Bess's death as meaningless and horrible, instead we should read them on the level of ethics as an enacting of "the gift" and "sacrifice." McLaughlin connects Bess's self-giving to that which certain strains of medieval mysticism used to achieve "oneness" with a non-present beloved (Jan, in the case of Bess, and Jesus, in the case of the medieval mystics). Instead of a hopeless nihilism and meaninglessness, she argues that Von Trier's film portrays Bess's excessive sacrifice as a mirror of Jesus' passion. Rather than being a victim of patriarchy, Bess is instead transformed into someone working out the challenge of faith through doubt.

The role of faith in film is continued in Emile Bojesen's examination of **Claire Denis'** 2009 film *White Material*. **"Nancean Faith and Dis-enclosure in Claire Denis' *White Material*"** elucidates the philosophical faith that comes out of Denis' friendship with Jean-Luc Nancy. Bojesen examines the way that Denis' film enacts Nancy's concept of non-self-presence, examined in Nancy's book *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Denis' 2004 film *The Intruder* (*L'Intrus*) was based on Nancy's work of the same name. Faith and spirituality in Denis' film are a seen as a function of our relationship to the world. Bojesen argues that the role of faith in *White Material* as a function of experience highlights the difficulty of formalizing any kind of belief apart from experience. Thus, it is a faith born of a specific historical–even "existential"–experience, influenced by non-present temporalities. If we have been discussing film as a function of capturing time, Denis' film captures the influence of the past and future on the present. The film represents a faith in a metaphysics of non-presence: a particularly Nancean understanding of faith.

While **George Miller** doesn't often come up in discussions of the masters of world cinema, Yacov Freedman takes a look at the varied resumé of Miller and provides a compelling argument for his inclusion in a discussion of faith, spirituality, and cinema. In **"The Documentary Hypothesis of Narrative Filmmaking: George Miller's Passion for Collaboration"** Freedman looks at the role of storytelling in Miller's films. Tracing the influence of Joseph Campbell and the mythic archetype from *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior* through to his more family oriented films such as *Babe* and *Happy Feet*, Freedman's essay takes a look at the role of spirituality in these films. Miller's focus on the function of the individual in society mirrors his collaborative process of filmmaking. Freedman takes us through his oeuvre, charting how Miller increasingly represents spirituality in the unity of living beings.

In "**The Beatitudes of Everyday Life: The Jesus Archetype and the Paralysis of Historical Imagination in Roy Andersson's *Songs from the Second Floor* (*Sånger från andra Vånigen*),"** Kevin Cryderman explores the echoes of Christianity in Swedish director **Roy Andersson's** scathing critique of capitalism, including scenes where Jesus is explicitly made into a material commodity amidst the apocalyptic economic crisis that frames Andersson's narrative. Capitalism fosters a myopic societal paralysis typified by a central traffic jam and the film's careful use of static shots. Various metaphoric incarnations of Jesus gesture towards a critical counterpoint to this paralysis, namely the appreciation for quotidian beauty and suffering. In connecting form to meaning, Cryderman shows how Andersson's secular realized eschatology reveals the possibilities for change in society and the horror of a misguided faith in the instrumental logic of the marketplace.

The final word goes to Kenneth R. Morefield as he explores the more contemporary career of German filmmaker **Tom Tykwer** and the under-examined aspect of faith and spirituality in his work. Despite the strong influence of universally acknowledged spiritual filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, little attention has been paid to the repeated themes and motifs in Tykwer's films that question a materialistic determinism and fate. In **"What's Lola Running From?: Determinism and Free Will in the Works of Tom Tykwer,"** Morefield looks at how fate and chance play a role in Tykwer's evocation of a late postmodern worldview searching for the evidence of God. This chapter examines whether the structure of Tykwer's films and the way that the question of a spiritual journey or path is answered says anything significant about Tykwer's understanding of faith and spirituality.

The filmmakers encountered in this volume are in many ways rebels and rabble rousers. They are the "deconstructors" of cinema! They remind us that we see the world through a glass darkly, and yet reveal the trace of the spiritual and of a radical faith upon the art of cinema.

Notes

[1] A quick gloss of the relevant studies show that the raw attendance numbers have consistently decreased since the 1930s. For one such relevant study, see Pautz, "The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance" in *Issues in Political Economy* 11 (2002).

[2] For another take on the nature of contemporary society's relation to the religious and the label "secular," see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007).

[3] See also "'A State of Mind, Not a Way of Thinking': The Spiritual Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky" by Terrence McSweeney in Volume 1 of this series.

[4] See Caputo, John. *On Religion* (2001).

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SACRIFICIAL ECONOMY OF LUIS BUÑUEL

JUSTIN REMES

"Atheists are obsessed with God."
—Salman Rushdie

In a 1959 interview with Jean de Baroncelli, the great Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel famously declared, "I'm an atheist still, thank God" (qtd. in Kyrou 120). In fact, as anyone who has seen Buñuel's films can attest, he is more than simply an atheist; he is also an antitheist. That is, not only does he lack faith in God, he actively opposes such faith, frequently using scathing satire and blasphemy to challenge religious hegemony. Still, in spite of Buñuel's anticlericalism and atheism, it would be difficult to find a director more obsessed with God. Religious topoi are ubiquitous in Buñuel's filmography, and this includes a particularly prevalent (albeit undertheorized) topos of sacrifice. I want to argue that Buñuel's sacrificial economy reveals a great deal about his complex relationship to religion. I also want to suggest that Buñuel's appropriation of this religious theme is philosophically rich, anticipating Jacques Derrida's theorizations of sacrifice in *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*).

Before addressing the motif of sacrifice per se, it will be useful to attempt to outline Buñuel's relationship to religious faith. It would seem that this could be done with a single word: antagonism. Yet Buñuel's own statements on the matter often complicate such assumptions. For example, in a 1977 *New Yorker* interview, Buñuel asserts, "I'm not a Christian, but I'm not an atheist either," adding, "I'm weary of hearing that accidental old aphorism of mine 'I'm [still] an atheist, thank God.' It's outworn. Dead leaves"[1] (qtd. in Ferlita 155). This statement initially seems to imply that Buñuel had experienced some kind of conversion and was now a believer. However, his subsequent statements and writings all contravene such a view. In particular, his autobiography, *My Last Sigh* (*Mon dernier soupir*), published several years after the *New Yorker* article, features a

chapter entitled "Still an Atheist…Thank God!" in which Buñuel asserts that "[c]hance governs all things" (171), adding, "I myself have no faith" (173).

How can one resolve this ostensible paradox? Did Buñuel obtain a kind of faith for a brief period, only to lose it again? Was he merely confused about his own beliefs? I would argue that the issue has more to do with semantics than metaphysics. Rejecting the label "atheist" is in no way equivalent to believing in God. This can be seen by the fact that, in contemporary America, "roughly twice as many people state that they do not believe in God as describe themselves as atheists" (Cheyne 33). For some reason, Buñuel had grown weary of the designation "atheist." Perhaps he simply found labels in general to be facile and restrictive. Or perhaps the word suggested to him a kind of epistemological certainty which he was not comfortable subscribing to.[2] At any rate, it seems that by the time he began writing his autobiography, he was using the term "atheist" again, this time without explicit reservations. However one chooses to reconcile Buñuel's contradictory claims, there is no evidence to suggest that Buñuel ever regained the faith that he lost as a teenager.

But this is not to suggest that Buñuel's relationship to religion is unambiguous. Consider one of the most memorable passages from *My Last Sigh*, in which Buñuel relates a vivid dream that he had in his seventies:

> In it I see the Virgin, shining softly, her hands outstretched to me. It's a very strong presence, an absolutely indisputable reality. She speaks to me—to me, the unbeliever—with infinite tenderness; she's bathed in the music of Schubert […] My eyes full of tears, I kneel down, and suddenly I feel myself inundated with a vibrant and invincible faith. When I wake up, my heart is pounding, and I hear my voice saying: "Yes! Yes! Holy Virgin, yes, I believe!" It takes me several minutes to calm down. (95)

The dream does not succeed in converting Buñuel, of course; for all its visceral impact, it cannot ultimately overcome his intellectual skepticism. Nonetheless, the anecdote reveals a mind that is constantly haunted by the specter of religion. Even though Buñuel did not believe in God, he could never escape God. His strict religious training by Jesuits throughout his childhood in Calanda, Spain, left an indelible mark on him, and this explains why religious themes are so prevalent in his films. As Steven Kovács asserts, "[Buñuel] turned against the sexual and political restraints of Catholicism without being able to divest himself completely of its trappings" (189). Or, as Buñuel himself would put it, in a 1980 essay, "I remain Catholic and atheist, thank God" (*An Unspeakable Betrayal* 263).

Most scholarly work on the religious content of Buñuel's films focuses on his blasphemies, such as his placement of Jesus Christ at the center of a violent, Sadean orgy in *L'Âge d'or* (*The Golden Age*) (1930), or his recreation of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* using drunkards and beggars in *Viridiana* (1961).[3] I have no desire to downplay the centrality of blasphemy in Buñuel—his irreverent playfulness with religious iconography is an important expression of his anticlericalism and antitheism. Nonetheless, this focus on blasphemy has often led to a critical neglect of other ways that religious topoi function in Buñuel's films. In particular, I want to draw attention to Buñuel's frequent use of the theme of sacrifice, analyzing its religious and philosophical valences.

While the centrality of sacrifice in Buñuel has received little scholarly attention, there have been occasional references to it. For example, Tom Conley argues that Buñuel's Surrealist documentary, *Las Hurdes* (aka *Land Without Bread*) (1932), constitutes "a cinema of sacrifice" (184), given the film's several ritualized murders. He cites a scene in which a goat falls off a cliff to its death (the goat has obviously been pushed by the crew), as well as the decapitation of a cock as part of a wedding celebration. (This is not to mention the gruesome footage of a mule being stung to death by bees—Buñuel smeared honey on the mule in order to achieve the shot.) Conley's analysis of the film is compelling, but it must be emphasized that Buñuel's "cinema of sacrifice" is not limited to *Las Hurdes*. In *L'Âge d'or*, the protagonist (Gaston Modot) defenestrates a giraffe for no apparent reason. In *Nazarín* (1959), the titular character (played by Francisco Rabal) offers God a deal: He will sacrifice his own life if God will cure a sick child. In *Tristana* (1970), a rabid dog is shot and killed so it will not infect others. And *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*) (1962) closes with the image of parishioners trapped in a church being joined by a flock of sheep (who, the viewer suspects, will be promptly sacrificed). But Buñuel's fascination with sacrifice is particularly salient in his very first film, made with the assistance of Salvador Dalí, *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) (1929).

The iconic opening image of Buñuel slicing a young woman's eyeball open with a razor (derived from one of his dreams) has received a great deal of critical attention. For some, such as Ado Kyrou, the scene represents a direct assault on the audience: "For the first time in the history of the cinema, a director tries not to please but rather to alienate nearly all potential spectators" (20). For others, the image has strong sexual undertones; for example, Linda Williams claims that it is "reasonable to interpret the woman's split eye as a metaphor for the vagina and the razor as a substitute penis" (83). While these readings are cogent, the sacrificial

undertones of this act are consistently overlooked in critical exegesis. It is important to remember that Buñuel looks up to the heavens before cutting the eye. On one level, of course, this permits a striking filmic metaphor, in which the thin cloud "slicing" through the full moon prefigures the blade slicing through the eye. But it also suggests that what is about to happen is a religious rite, one which is somehow meant to appease God. This is further underscored by the fact that the woman is not desperately trying to escape Buñuel's blade; rather, she submits to the violence willingly, offering herself up as a sacrifice.

The sacrificial undertones become even clearer as the film proceeds and we see a disembodied hand laying in the street. Since *Un chien andalou* suggests the violent removal of both the eye and the hand, it strongly evokes Jesus' words about self-sacrifice in the book of Mark (words which Buñuel, with his Jesuit education, would have been familiar with):

> And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched […] And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. (Mark. 9:43, 47, King James Version)

It is easy to see why this quasi-Surrealist imagery would have been appealing to Buñuel, given its visceral, nightmarish undertones and its conflation of religious devotion with violence.[4]

Another scene in *Un chien andalou* further underscores its sacrificial valences. In it the leading actor (Pierre Batcheff) tries to move toward the object of his sexual desire (Simone Mareuill), but is held back by two ropes. Attached to these ropes are (among other things) two men in religious garb and two dead donkeys sprawled out across grand pianos. On one level, the scene clearly suggests a link between religiosity and sexual repression. But beyond this, it is significant that the apparently sacrificed donkeys are positioned on top of pianos, which are generally associated with high art and culture, bourgeois sophistication and refinement. The implication seems clear: Behind the façade of modern civilization lies a primitive and violent irrationality. Sacrifice is not merely some barbaric ritual of the distant past; it is an immanent part of the human condition.

The same suggestion is made by Derrida in *The Gift of Death*. In this text, Derrida engages in a close reading of Genesis 22 (in which Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah), along with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. For Derrida, Moriah is "our habitat every second of every day" (69). He asserts:

> As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I offer a gift of death, I betray, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. (68)

In other words, for Derrida, to act is to sacrifice. The moment one acts on behalf of an other, one sacrifices all the other others for whom one could have acted. Sacrifice is thus ineradicable. Derrida elaborates on this point with the following example:

> By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher […] I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows), my fellows who are dying of starvation or sickness."[5] (69)

Buñuel's films anticipate this Derridean sacrificial economy. While several examples could be offered, one of the most revealing is *Viridiana*. A brief recapitulation of the film's plot will prove useful.

The film begins with a beautiful young woman named Viridiana (Silvia Pinal) who is about to take her vows as a nun. Her uncle Don Jaime (Fernando Rey) is filled with lust for her, since she reminds him of his late wife. Dom Jaime drugs Viridiana in order to have his way with her, but he is apparently stricken with a guilty conscience at the last moment and unable to go through with his plan. When Viridiana awakens, her uncle tells her about his perverse plot, and she becomes disgusted by him. Unable to fulfill his desire, he hangs himself.

Following this bizarre sequence of events, Viridiana decides that she will forgo her plans to become a nun and instead stay in Don Jaime's mansion to provide charity for a group of beggars and invalids. She is also joined at the estate by Don Jaime's son, Jorge (Francisco Rabal), who lusts after her in much the same way that his father did. One evening, the beggars are left alone in the mansion, and a violent and drunken orgy breaks out (as Handel's *Messiah* plays on the phonograph). When Viridiana returns and sees the mayhem, one of the beggars tries to rape her, and the leper she has been so kind to refuses to help her, instead waiting to violate her himself when the first beggar is through. But Jorge steps in and apparently saves Viridiana from this gruesome fate. After this traumatic experience, she stops dressing in conservative garb, lets her hair

down (literally), and joins Jorge and Don Jaime's former servant, Ramona (Margarita Lozano), for a game of cards, as a wild rock song plays in the background. The film ends with this image, and the implication of a *ménage à trois* is inescapable.[6]

As this intricate and engaging plot unfolds, several scenes suggest Buñuel's continued interest in sacrifice. For example, Viridiana carries with her a cross, a hammer, nails, and a crown of thorns, as if she is taking literally Jesus' words "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). She is ready and willing to offer herself up as a sacrifice. Perhaps she is even desirous of it. After all, the very notion of a beautiful young woman carrying around instruments of torture has conspicuous masochistic undertones, as if religious devotion can function as a displacement of perverse sexual desire. (By the end of the film, of course, Viridiana has given up her self-sacrificing spirit, suggested by the sight of her crown of thorns being destroyed in a fire.)

Beyond Viridiana's embodiment of the virtuous (albeit naïve) sacrificial logic of Christianity, the theme of sacrifice is foregrounded by the leper, whom Viridiana goes out of her way to help. At one point in the film, he picks up a dove and begins petting it. By the time the beggars are trashing the mansion, however, he has clearly taken the bird's life: he begins to scatter the dove's feathers about excitedly.[7] This is a remarkably rich scene. In part, the killing of a dove foreshadows the innocence that the leper will destroy by preparing to rape Viridiana. Additionally, the act represents one of the film's many blasphemies. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit appears at Jesus' baptism in the form of the dove (Luke 3:22). This is why Igna Karetnikova says that the leper "defiles the symbol of the Holy Spirit by scattering a dove's feathers" (92). Thus, destroying the dove can be seen as a kind of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the only sin that the Bible indicates is unforgivable (Mark 3:29). But beyond even this, the act represents yet another sacrifice. It is almost as if the leper is trying to atone in advance for the atrocities he is about to commit. He knows that any sin can be forgiven, for the right price. (Indeed, Jorge must pay the leper off with a wad of cash to convince him to prevent Viridiana from getting raped.)

But the most memorable and evocative sacrifice in *Viridiana* can be found in the scene involving Jorge and the tortured dog. Jorge generally comes across as a cold-hearted pragmatist, indifferent to the feelings of others. But he seems to feel genuine sympathy for animals. (This likely comes from his father. While he was alive, Don Jaime ignored his son, leered at his servant's young daughter, and plotted to rape Viridiana. And

yet, in a remarkable scene, he goes out of his way to rescue a bee from drowning.) Jorge sees a dog tied by a rope to the axle of a cart. The dog is struggling to keep up with the cart, yet it must do so to avoid being strangled by the rope. Jorge implores the dog's owner to stop this abuse. When the owner refuses, Jorge purchases the dog to alleviate its suffering. He moves on with his day, pleased with his altruistic deed. However, as he walks away, he fails to notice another dog tied to another cart entering the *mise-en-scène*.[8]

This scene is often read as the expression of a nihilistic philosophy, one which suggests that charity and goodwill are futile and pointless. This is likely why *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther said of *Viridiana*, "It is an ugly, depressing view of life." But I would argue that Buñuel is not denigrating Jorge's act of compassion. Instead, he is simply drawing our attention to the fact that by saving one dog, Jorge has sacrificed another. This does not mean that Jorge *should not* have stepped in to help the first dog. It simply means that this choice (like all choices) is predicated on sacrifice. As Roger Ebert states, "There is always another cart and another dog tied to it." It would be difficult to find a more powerful cinematic expression of Derrida's sacrificial economy. Compare Buñuel's meditation with another passage from *The Gift of Death*: "How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people" (71). There is no logical reason why one of the tortured dogs should be rescued and the other left to suffer. Sacrifice, like just about everything else in Buñuel's universe, is governed by blind chance. In this respect, Jorge's sacrifice is comparable to Viridiana's. She attempts to rescue a small group of beggars, but in so doing, she must sacrifice scores of others who will not receive her charity. Jorge points this out to her by saying, "Helping a few beggars does nothing for the thousands of others,"[9] but of course, he is just as imbricated in the Derridean sacrificial economy as she is.

Buñuel's habitual evocation of religious myths and rituals, such as those associated with sacrifice, makes it clear that his relationship to religion is not always strictly antagonistic. Peter P. Schillaci, in "Luis Buñuel and the Death of God," emphasizes Buñuel's role as a "demythologizer" (129). This is correct, but I would add that Buñuel is a remythologizer as well. That is, Buñuel does not merely iconoclastically dismantle the myths and topoi of religion; he also reappropriates them, thereby affirming their value and resonance. Myths have historically been used to confront the *mysterium tremendum*, the inscrutable, the "*wholly other* [*tout autre*]," in Derridean parlance (57). This may be precisely what

draws Buñuel to them, given his own fascination with the numinous. As the director himself acknowledges in *My Last Sigh*, "My form of atheism […] leads inevitably to an acceptance of the inexplicable. Mystery is inseparable from chance, and our whole universe is a mystery. Since I reject the idea of a divine watchmaker (a notion even more mysterious than the mystery it supposedly explains), then I must consent to live in a kind of shadowy confusion" (174).

Notes

[1] As Ernest Ferlita points out, the *New Yorker* article mistakenly cited Buñuel's original aphorism as "I'm not an atheist, thank God" (236). This error is understandable in light of Buñuel's apparently contradictory statements about God.
[2] It might be useful here to recall Derrida's formulation: "Although I confirm that it is right to say that I am an atheist, I can't say myself, 'I am an atheist'" ("On 'Atheism' and 'Belief'").
[3] Regarding *Viridiana* (which was strongly condemned by the Vatican) Buñuel stated, with characteristic coyness, "I didn't try to blaspheme, but, of course, the Pope knows more about that than I" (qtd. in Karetnikova x).
[4] The imbrication of religion and violence is another pervasive theme in Buñuel's films. It can be seen in the aforementioned murderous Christ figure in *L'Âge d'or*, the crucifix which doubles as a pocketknife in *Viridiana*, and the violent reprisals against heretics in *The Milky Way* (*La voie lactée*) (1969), to offer just a few examples.
[5] The ethicist Peter Singer makes a similar argument in the opening of his book *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*. He suggests that each time one purchases something which is not a necessity (like an expensive pair of shoes), one implicitly sacrifices the lives of numerous children around the world who are dying from starvation, since that money could have been used to save their lives.
[6] It is worth remembering that this film, replete with incest, orgies, attempted rapes, and blasphemies, was made in Spain in 1961, during the repressive reign of Franco. As Andrew Sarris notes, "How Buñuel managed to realize *Viridiana* at all under the Spanish censor may never be fully explained" (56).
[7] This scene strongly echoes a passage in *L'Âge d'or*, in which a sexually frustrated Gaston Modot begins tearing pillows open and violently throwing their feathers about. As Ado Kyrou usefully points out, "[F]eathers are a clear symbol of masturbation" in Freudian psychology (91).
[8] The unnecessary and arbitrary torture or killing of animals recurs again and again in Buñuel's films. Indeed, this is often precisely how he accentuates the motif of sacrifice. One cannot help but wonder if this fascination with animal cruelty is related to a formative experience which Buñuel had in his youth, recounted in *My Last Sigh*: "When I was a student, I remember dissecting a live frog with a razor blade to see how its heart functioned, an absolutely gratuitous experiment for which I still haven't forgiven myself" (226).
[9] The translation is taken from the Criterion Collection version of *Viridiana*.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE FLAYED HARE: TRAUMA AND HOPE IN THE LATE FILMS OF KUROSAWA

ANDREW SPITZNAS

> "We all need to forget something, so we create stories. It is easier that way."
> —the Commoner, in *Rashomon*

> "To be an artist is never to avert one's eyes."
> —Akira Kurosawa, upon receiving 1989 Honorary Academy Award (qtd. in Lu 38)

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) directed thirty films over a career that spanned fifty years, from *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943) to *Madadayo* (1993). Much scholarly writing on Kurosawa rightly points out that his films uniformly depict protagonists living in and responding to a fragmented world. However, less writing has focused specifically upon the psychological and spiritual effects of trauma, endured by so many of his characters.

In addition, most academic work tends to focus on Kurosawa's films of the 1950's and 1960's. Less ink has been devoted to his later films, especially those released in the 1990's, which are not infrequently dismissed or devalued as evidence of an artist in decline (Desser 53).

However, it is my belief that while these late films depart markedly from the intense jagged kinetics of his earlier films, Kurosawa's late works possess a contemplative beauty in their more static tableaux, while their more didactic tone eloquently sums up a career's worth of statements upon the individual and societal effects of trauma, and the possible avenues of response to this trauma.

To explore this notion, I will first present a brief biography of Kurosawa, noting especially the multiple traumas he suffered as a boy and

young adult. This is done not in the service of any reductionism–I am strongly opposed to any such effort whether psychobiographical, political, or cultural in nature–but rather because Kurosawa's experiences clearly informed his art, something he frequently acknowledged in his writings and interviews.

Next, I will offer a definition of trauma and a general overview of the psychological effects of such experiences. This will give us a framework within which to explore these themes in Kurosawa's later films, starting with *Red Beard* (1965), as this work in many ways marks the close of a major section in Kurosawa's career, while having much to say about trauma and its sufferers. I will then discuss five additional later movies, concluding with his final film, *Madadayo* (1993).

Trauma in Kurosawa's Childhood and Early Adult Years

In reading Kurosawa's autobiography, published in 1982 when he was 72 years old, it is striking to note the prevalence of traumatic memories even in his earliest years. Indeed, the first four events that he recalls from his childhood are traumatic. For instance, he tells of seeing a house fire as a baby and vividly recounts witnessing as a preschooler a white dog sliced in half by a streetcar, a sight so distressing that for a long time thereafter he would fly into a rage if shown a white dog (Kurosawa 4-5). Kurosawa was confronted with human mortality at a young age, too, when in fourth grade, his favorite sister died from a sudden illness. Again writing in his autobiography he recounts laughing hysterically at her Buddhist funeral, stating, "To me, the whole thing was absurdly funny" (19).

The watershed event in his young life was the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. The quake and subsequent fires, as part of one of the worst natural disasters in recorded human history, killed 140,000 people and left homeless more than half of the residents of Tokyo and neighboring Yokohama (Hammer 243-4). In the hours and days immediately following, Koreans in these cities were ludicrously scapegoated for the disaster, rounded up and massacred by the dozens and even hundreds (158).

Thirteen-year-old Akira witnessed his father become surrounded by a lynch mob which perceived him to be a Korean, before his father could angrily persuade them this was not true (Kurosawa 51). Soon after, his older brother Heigo spent an entire day dragging Akira around the devastated cityscape. Seeing the massive carnage and destruction, Akira thought, "This must be the end of the world...the lake of blood they say exists in Buddhist hell couldn't possibly be as bad as this" (53). Whenever Akira tried to turn away from an awful sight, Heigo would scold and