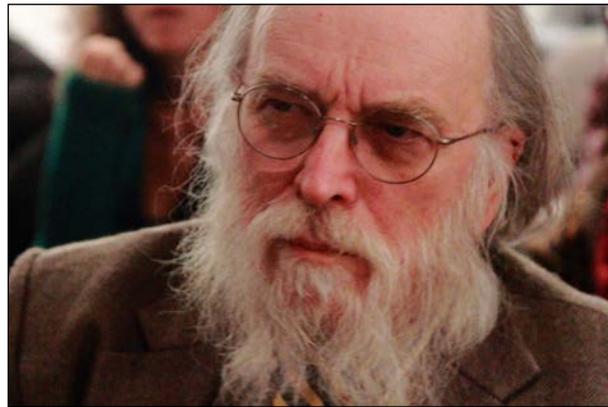


FILM / RELIGION: A CONVERSATION WITH P. ADAMS SITNEY

by Sérgio Dias Branco (University of Coimbra / IFILNOVA)



The film studies community know you mainly from your authoritative work on avant-garde cinema. Your work on religion and film is often forgotten or unknown, even if these strands are sometimes intertwined in your books on avant-garde films and filmmakers. How do you look at this split and connection as author and scholar?

It is reasonable that my writings on film and religion would be little known. I have written five books on cinema. Two of them, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (1974, 1979, 2002) and *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (2008) are explicitly studies of American avant-garde cinema. The other three, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (1992), *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics* (1995, 2013), and *The Cinema of Poetry* (forthcoming) touch occasionally on aspects of religion (i.e., Dreyer, Bresson, Rossellini, Fellini, Olmi, Pasolini, Tarkovsky, Cornell, Dorsky) but never as a thematic thread to delineate the chapters of a book. My essays on religion in the work of Hitchcock, Scorsese, Allen, and my general essay for Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* were written intermittently over thirty years and have not been collected in a single volume. Therefore, this persistent strain in my writing might well escape attention.

Furthermore the aspects of religion that I discuss in my writings on avant-garde cinema are never the center of an exegesis. They do not even treat conventional aspects of religion, as

understood in cinema studies. For instance, Maya Deren's concern with ritual and Voodoo, Kenneth Anger's Satanism, Stan Brakhage's Emersonian stance, Larry Jordan's mysticism, Joseph Cornell's allegiance to Christian Science and Nathaniel Dorsky's concept of filmic devotions are all functions of their aesthetics, and in differing degrees are latent in their films. I touch on them in passing while concentrating on their cinematic inventions and the evolution of their film styles. The earlier avant-gardes, in France and the Soviet Union, were explicitly anti-religious or deliberately blasphemous. Consequently, my discussions of their works do not fall within the usual rubrics of religious studies.

At Princeton University, you have been involved in the research project Cinema and Religious Expression, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Religion, which you co-directed with Jeffrey Stout. Also with Stout, you have taught a course on religion and cinema. Can you talk about the approach, scope, and aim of this project and this course?

Jeffrey Stout is a distinguished philosopher of religion. Like many of my colleagues who teach Religion he does not profess a faith. I, however, am a practicing Roman Catholic and an oddball one at that: liberal in matters of morals, but liturgically ultraconservative. Our personal religious views plays absolutely no role in the course we gave together. We have congruous tastes in film: Brakhage, Dreyer, Kurosawa, Bergman, Tarkovsky, Bresson, Landow, Dorsky, etc. are shared enthusiasms. Both of Stout's sons, Noah and Livingston, are filmmakers. His participation in their education and early careers played a fundamental role in the formation of his views of cinema.

It was very easy for us to agree upon a syllabus. Our readings included Kierkegaard, Tarkovsky, New Testament, Girard, Santayana, Bresson, Bernanos, O'Connor, Nietzsche, Augustine, and Emerson.

Your readers, or European audiences in general, might not realize that the aesthetics of American artists have been massively dominated by often contradictory aspects of Emerson's philosophy. One might even say that Emerson brought into focus a native American religion of "self-reliance" and "experience" (his terms) to which most of our artists, even atheists, have subscribed, often without realizing it. Stout is an authority on Emerson. As such he was later of enormous help to me when I wrote *Eyes Upside Down*. In turn, I believe I have been influential on his understanding of the technical and formal aspects of cinema. After we taught a course together in 2000-2001 he has continued to teach Cinema and Religion on his own. In

2007 he gave the Stone Lectures at the Princeton Theological Seminary: “A Light That Shines in the Darkness: Evil, Egotism, and the Sacred in Film,” which will appear as a book.

Let me pick up on the importance that you, as a Christian, attach to liturgy. Has your aesthetic immersion in religion impacted on your study of film? Have you ever been interested in the field of theological aesthetics? I am also thinking about the connections between the poetic, often lyrical, writings of mystics like John of Cross and the work of avant-garde filmmakers like Bruce Baillie.

Although I do not see offhand a relationship between St. John of the Cross and Baillie, I would be eager to read an essay on that subject if you have one. I am too literal-minded to make that leap myself. I do discuss St. John of the Cross when I lecture on the Straub/Huillet film, *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (*The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp*, 1968), because they cite his poetry in the film. Generally, I do not find analogical criticism particularly useful. I want to know what the filmmakers were reading and thinking and how their sources shaped their films. With considerable caution one might want to extend those sources to forces active in the filmmakers’ culture. I did that when I repeatedly invoked passages from Dante in analyzing films in *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema* or Emerson and Whitman in *Eyes Upside Down*. But I would not bring up Emerson or Whitman in discussing an Italian filmmaker unless I had evidence he or she had read either of them, nor Dante for an American avant-garde filmmaker without similar evidence.

Of course, my liturgical worship and my theological readings have influenced my film criticism, but so has my examination of Protestant writings, ancient Greek religion, Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, Nietzsche, etc. I will grasp at anything that throws light on the films that occupy my mind.

I am not sure what you mean by “theological aesthetics.” I assumed that all aesthetics had theological implications. I have never consciously explored that domain as an academic discipline.

I was not suggesting a direct connection between John of the Cross’s writings and Baillie’s films — although perhaps I could do it in regard to David Lynch’s films... — but merely pointing out that they can both be seen as lyrical poets.

Catholic film thinkers such as André Bazin and Robert Bresson have been interested in discussing the role of reality in cinematographic art, even though their reflections are not identical since they

come from different perspectives and reach different conclusions. You are more concerned with artistic ideas and expression embodied in film. Do you regard these differences as subjective, connected with different ways of understanding and experiencing the Catholic faith (understandings and experiences fostered by catholicity and the way it points towards ecumenism)? Or do you think that this aspect is irrelevant and we are just talking about three distinct film thinkers who also happen to be Catholic?

I am tempted to answer that these are just three distinct film thinkers who happen to be Catholic, but for two important points. In the first place, it would be absurd for me to put myself in a class with Bazin and Bresson. More to the point, however, is the fact that I find the question fascinating and provocative. I have not felt the influence of Bazin in my work. In fact, I think my concentration on the Romantic tradition and the function of the imagination in cinema has been, if anything, anti-Bazinian. But I have been greatly influenced by René Girard, a Catholic scholar of literature (never on film) who has devoted his very distinguished career to aspects of literary realism and its relation to Truth.

Therefore, your question makes me somewhat uncomfortably aware of the “Protestant” bias of my aesthetics. In this I am not alone, as an American. Even our greatest Catholic fiction writer, Flannery O’Connor, chooses radical Southern Protestants for her subjects. Catholic thought has had little effect on the arts in America. My own aesthetic formation emerged from reading ancient Greek and Roman writers — with a Nietzschean emphasis on ritual — and from a thorough emergence in the English-language Romantics. Blake and Wordsworth, whom I adored, may have been nominally Christians, Emerson and Melville perhaps not even that, but none of them had any use for the Roman Catholic Church.

It was not until I began to write on Bresson in the late 1970s that I ventured onto a Catholic subject. I found Girard’s examination of mimetic desire particularly productive in understanding *Mouchette* and other Bresson films. Even then, my early Sunday School training in the provincial bigotry of lower class Irish-American Catholics was no use to me. Eventually my own study of the Gospels (influenced by the Protestant theologian, Rudolf Bultmann), the Church fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante informed my approach to a range of Italian filmmakers as well as Scorsese and Hitchcock. Later, in order to conduct a seminar on Tarkovsky, I made myself familiar with the history and major tenets of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Jean-Luc Godard once said “I’m not a religious person, but I’m a faithful person. I believe in images.” This opens the door for a discussion that goes beyond works of art with religious subjects, which of

course may be rich and complex. What are your thoughts about the connection between faith and visual art, particularly in film?

Gilles Deleuze, apparently elaborating on Godard's point, makes the more lucid case that we (and the modern cinema) no longer believe in the world. He understands this as a transformation of what he posits as the affinity between cinema and Catholicism. In fact, he cites Godard's cinema as precisely the locus where belief in the world is most decisively at stake.

I find Deleuze's notion fascinating. However, I do not see any relationship at all between the theological virtue of faith — the gift that convinces me that God is in Three Persons, for example; or that I am subject to an infinity of hell or heaven — and cinema, which can astound me, move me to tears, thrill me, bore me or disgust me, but can convince me of nothing.

In short, visual art can evoke or merely refer to theological revelations, but it cannot conjure or even reenforce faith..

What do you see as the prospects for the scholarly interaction between cinema, philosophy, and religion?

There is already a fecund interrelationship between philosophy and film studies. I am thinking particularly of the writings on film by Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell. As far as I know, there is nothing of comparable sophistication on religion and cinema, unless it would be the yet unpublished work of Jeffrey Stout.



Die große Stille.

Such an interaction will always depend on the work of filmmakers and the elements that they use and evoke — like the Christian components in some of Stan Brakhage's films. Are there any recent films that have made you think philosophically and religiously about them?

Die große Stille (*Into Great Silence*, 2005) and the recently unveiled films of Jerome Hiler (made over the last fifty years) touch upon religious issues, very obviously. However, I would not ever claim to “think philosophically and religiously.” I am merely a film historian. By the way, as a film historian, I find the “Christian components” in Brakhage’s later films of minimal interest, even in regard to what I consider the religious strain in his work.