'Painting in light'

Spiritual expressions of light and darkness in popular cinema

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Introduction: suspending our disbelief to participate fully in the magic illusion of cinematic images

LITTLE DID THE PIONEERS OF FILM KNOW, as they worked feverishly to perfect their inventions just over a century ago, that they would bring into being a new universal language as well – the language of film. It has been said that a film is felt long before it is understood, but the very understanding of film depends upon the development of the art of 'reading' a film. This article will explore how light and darkness – the 'stock-in-trade' of film-making – give meaning and depth to stories told on the cinema screen.

The viewer's ability to perceive and interpret elements of film has come a long way since terrified audiences threw themselves to the cinema floor to avoid Lumiere's celluloid train arriving at the station. As film-goers in the 1990s, we are certainly sophisticated and discerning interpreters of special effects, able to spot a goof in continuity (such as a Roman soldier wearing a wristwatch) or a sub-standard makeup job; it distracts from our absorption into the cinematic experience if even one of its elements is not totally believable. As the Swedish film-maker Ingmar Bergman says, 'When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion',[1] but unless that illusion sufficiently fulfils our expectations technically we come away dissatisfied – we have had a reminder that the illusion is not reality.

However, we derive tremendous pleasure in images which to us are re-experiences of the real; film as an art form plays not only on the perception of the image but also on our interpretation of it. The question of a willing suspension of disbelief comes up whether we lose ourselves in the pages of a good thriller or in the midst of a crowded cinema. The making of pictures in our own mind is done for us with film, but the images are no less powerful or provocative than those conjured up by the written word. The advantage – indeed, in our stressful world, the necessity – of being taken out of our-

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selves through the moving image is that we leave behind, if only for a couple of hours, our own lives, worries and preoccupations. We exchange them for an alternative reality that, at twenty-four frames a second, temporarily overwhelms our sense of being.

Yet as participants in viewing a film we forget that the cinematic image has no reality beyond itself. The essential property of film is that it is a medium, a means by which one can convey a message, and the primary ingredient is light itself. When watching a film what we actually see is the result, firstly, of an object being bathed in light, reflected back and then recorded by the camera and, secondly, of the development of the film when light effects the change from negative to positive. The cinema projector is fed the developed film, and then throws up light and shadow on to the cinema screen.

When described in this way, the cinematic process seems rather mechanistic and uninspiring, but what set the new cinematic technology apart from other photographic inventions of its time was its credibility: its potential to make film-goers eyewitnesses to events portrayed (not actually present) on the screen. From the use of light-sensitive emulsion for coating film to the correct wattage of artificial light, the cinematographer's skilful technique projects the viewer to a position within the film. Just as in the theatre the audience unconsciously blocks out the physical limits of the proscenium arch in order fully to engage with the play, so those in the cinema are mentally completely absorbed into the on-screen action, experiencing little if any sense of emotional or geographical distance.

The term used to define film-making as 'painting in light' denotes a creative expression similar to the impulse that has driven artists for millennia. Ingmar Bergman compared his vocation to that of the builders of the great cathedrals, and although he sees a spiritual dimension to his work he does not want his films to be viewed passively in an individualistic fashion: 'It is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship'.[2] Indeed, some attempts have been made by scholars of film to draw an analogy between the ritual of worship and the ritual of film-going: 'As ironic modern worshippers we congregate at the cinematic temple. We pay our votive offerings at the box office. We buy our ritual corn. We hush in reverent anticipation as the lights go down and the celluloid magic begins.'[3] The communal experience of watching a film is partly what defines it as an artistic effort that goes beyond individual consumption, becoming something which makes meaning and thus has cultural value.

Making meaning with light and darkness: from the techniques used in classic art to the visual menace of film noir

The manufactured image, then, is just the starting point for the viewer, who makes the transition from seeing to 'seeing as': what do we make of an image, how do we interpret signs the film-maker uses to communicate meaning artistically? One of the most important ways the film-maker does that is by the use of light and darkness, often following the techniques of classical art. D. W. Griffiths, the genius of early film masterpieces such as *Intolerance* and *Broken blossoms*, described his technique as 'Rembrandt lighting'. His heroine, so often the angelic Lillian Gish, was photographed with light coming from behind or above her, indicating an ethereal quality. *Chiaroscuro*, the dramatic use of light to reveal and pull objects from the depths of darkness, was also a favourite effect in early German expressionist cinema. In classics like *The cabinet of Dr Caligari* the direction of light to create unease and suspense was coupled with the emergence from the shadows of evil and dangerous forces. These are techniques which have become stereotyped signals for film-goers in the best pantomime tradition – we all know the villain slinks back and forth from the shadows.

The contrast between light and darkness in denoting good and evil was never more blatantly illustrated than in the *film noir* genre. Although in the truest sense it was a short-lived genre – from the early 1940s to the late 1950s – it emerged at a crucial and traumatic time for western culture and society. *Film noir* refers mainly to Hollywood crime dramas (although there was a European variety as well), characterized by their cynicism and downbeat mood coming, perhaps, from a general disillusionment with American ideals. The genre spanned the time from the Second World War to the Korean conflict and the Communist witch hunt in America, and it mirrored social trends and attitudes. The social upheaval of war contributes heavily to the *noir* themes of loss of stability and security. The post-war gangster film often featured crazed, psychotic figures, echoing the madness of Hitler in their headlong rush to self-destruction. Jimmy Cagney's Jarrett in *White heat* (1949) is an unforgettable example.

The crisis of identity for women in American society after the war comes across in psychological melodramas such as *Whirlpool* (1949) and in tales of multiple personality disorders such as *The three faces of Eve* (1957). In these films characters who can easily be described as pathological were entangled in tabloid-style sex and

murder plots. Society was changing, and one of the most important changes was the role of women. Once their vital contributions to the war effort were over, and the soldiers came back home, women who had had a taste of independence and self-sufficiency were expected to resume their pre-war activities and status as dependent daughters, wives, mothers. It is revealing that the women in *film noir* are malevolent, invariably get their come-uppance, and generally are defined only in relation to men. They tend to derive any power they have from their sexuality.

The visual style of *film noir* corresponds with this negative portrayal of women: underlit scenes at night and menacing darkness suit the Dark Woman, who is at home in the underworld of 'cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings'.[4] There is a strong psychological bent to the images we see in *film noir*: shadowy patterns cast onto characters' faces, claustrophobic feeling to the composition of the photographic frame, the use of silhouettes and reflections. Overall, the image of women as aggressive, independent and sexy shouts danger to the viewer. The centuries-old Christian iconographic link of woman and temptation (Eve and the apple!) is brought up to date in the *film noir* picture of deadly women.

The sense of moral confusion is strong in these films, and lighting in films such as *Double indemnity*, *The postman always rings twice* and *The Maltese falcon* shows a simplistic contrast between the good and the bad. The message of these films is always that the evildoer, however alluring and wily, will be caught and punished: one of the last and enduring images of *The Maltese falcon* is of the 'evil' woman being taken away in the elevator, its grill casting a prefiguring shadow of prison bar patterns across her pouting and unremorseful countenance. *Film noir* signals that the big bad world is a different place from pre-war times; women must assume their subordinate role in society, and America must be wrestled back into a simpler era of law-abiding, God-fearing behaviour.

Ingmar Bergman's cinematic genius illuminates the soul and hints at the silence of God

Exploring the use of lighting technique to make psychological meaning can also lead us into the way other film-makers have expressed spiritual and theological meaning through their use of light and darkness. As mentioned earlier, Ingmar Bergman delves into his own questions about God and the meaning of life throughout his

remarkable career spanning five decades. One writer has suggested that Bergman's inspiration is itself a result of his childhood: 'The darkroom of the film processing becomes both a metaphor for the dark recesses of his mind, journeying back to the childhood past, and an act of exorcism through which the frightening shadows of early traumas are dispelled'.[5]

The dark night of the soul with its often brutal and desperate confrontation with truth is a theme that recurs in many Bergman films. *The seventh seal* (1957) is perhaps the best known; its title is taken from the Book of Revelation, where the breaking of this seal is followed by 'silence in heaven for about half an hour'. The immensity of meaning in this image for Bergman is encapsulated in the journey homewards from the Crusades of a knight who encounters the plague and Death himself along the way. The contrast of life, symbolized by the innocent little family (travelling in a caravan) of Jof, Mia and their baby son, with foreboding death, which ultimately is to lead the plague victims on a macabre dance against the dawn light, is a compelling cinematographic sight. Bergman employs other striking images, in particular the ominous chess game the Knight plays with Death on a stony beach. We know that although the Knight's victory may for a time stave off the inevitable, Death cannot lose; indeed, he tricks the Knight in a church by assuming the disguise of a monk, listening in the shadows to the Knight's confession.

It is easy to make fun of the portentousness and stark imagery of *The seventh seal*, parodied most memorably in the teen comedy *Bill and Ted's bogus journey* (1991), but it is a film that presents revelation in people who are the salt of the earth (and consequently the light of the world) and grace in the mundanity of existence. Another of Bergman's devices for conveying meaning through light and darkness is the filming of faces in half light. His 1973 film *Cries and whispers* concerns the death watch of two sisters for a third, Agnes. Along with Agnes' servant Anna, the women's contrasting personalities are analysed in the film, which is full of tension and suffering.

In contrast to the stark black and white images of *The seventh seal*, *Cries and whispers* is filmed in colour, with house interiors of deep, lavish red hues (which Bergman tended to associate with the colour of the soul). Bergman's technique of showing the quarrelling sisters Karin and Maria in half-lit facial close-ups helps to bring out the hidden qualities of each: Karin's malice and revulsion for her

life and her husband, Maria's fickleness and vanity. Were these to be the only representations of women in the film, one could say Bergman was showing misogynistic tendencies in these rather ruthless portrayals, but the other two women, Agnes and Anna, are counterbalances of dignity, love and redemption. Death again is a focus of the plot, but Agnes faces her imminent death with composure and a strong faith; she has happy memories, however nostalgic and idealized, of sunny afternoons spent with the other women experiencing 'perfection'.

One of the most memorable images of the devotion these two women have for each other occurs when Agnes is in terrible pain; Anna climbs onto the bed and takes Agnes in her arms, cradling her in a Pieta-esque pose, made all the more symbolic by the chiaroscuro lighting. Here is a maternal figure who is consoling her loved one amongst the atmosphere of guilt, repressed anger and unresolved conflict created by the two attendant (but absent in spirit) sisters.

Cries and whispers is one of the most evocative films that Bergman has created, and is not intended to be received passively. In *The silence of God*, Arthur Gibson describes the strip of celluloid film itself as merely a communication device, and 'on either side of it stand human beings, calling to one another as deep to deep'. That Bergman articulates so starkly the anguish and 'fragile hope' of the soul, Gibson goes on to say, makes these films uncomfortable but 'religious'.[6]

'May the Force be with you': George Lucas introduces magic, mythology and morality in Star wars

In the same way that Bergman's films address the existential angst of modern life and faith, compelling mythological themes of good and evil can be seen in the massively popular and recently re-released George Lucas trilogy *Star wars*. It is estimated that the average American has seen *Star wars* seven times since its release twenty years ago. What is the appeal to ordinary people of the story of a young warrior that takes place in a galaxy 'far, far away'?

It is ironic that the first reactions in late 1976 to Lucas's film project were not promising, and that Steven Spielberg, almost alone amongst Hollywood executives, predicted the success of *Star wars* – he said that people would love it because it had an innocence and *naïveté*. And an amazing success it has been too, if one takes into consideration that in merchandising terms its action figures are the second-best sellers in America after the Barbie doll.

Joseph Campbell, expert on world mythology and author of the classic work *Hero with a thousand faces*, admired the way George Lucas used timeless archetypes of the young warrior coming of age and of good battling against evil. Darth Vader is an intimidating and powerful symbol of the dark forces that can seem close to overwhelming us in our struggle to survive in an often hostile world. Like Lucifer in the Christian story, Darth Vader has crossed over from the righteous side of the angels to the forces of evil and, encompassed top to toe in black armour, he sends out a signal of invincible menace. Luke Skywalker (who, not coincidentally, is dressed in light-coloured clothing) is a young man who trusts the 'Force' to guide and empower him to right wrongs and to rescue the universe from evil. He represents the hope that should never die. He inherits the 'Force' – a transcendent force for good – from Obi Wan Kenobe, the old Jedi who is vanquished in the riveting duel with Darth Vader, using instruments which seem to be powerful blades of shimmering light. The 'Force' guides Luke in his navigation (faster than the speed of light, surely!) of spacecraft; in placing his intuitive trust in the Force he is able to defeat the dark forces.

In an interview George Lucas said that he wanted *Star wars* to be a moral study in the tradition of lessons learnt in church, from the family and art, adding that in the modern world these lessons are learnt in the media and the movies. Perhaps many would argue that Lucas flatters himself if he thinks his films have that enduring an impact upon audiences, but there is no disputing the popularity of the *Star wars* films and – no doubt – of the new series of 'prequel' *Star wars* films now being made by Lucas which tell what happened before Luke's adventures. Interestingly, the history of cinema provides ample evidence that films (no matter how worthy) which set out to preach an explicit moral or religious message are not box-office hits, in contrast to films that set out analogously to present religious values or theological issues.

The rapture: a brave attempt to depict the end of the world as we know it by representing biblical material in its most literal sense

The representation of biblical material can be an impossible task for the film-maker, who has to get round a universal expectation that images conform to belief and tradition. Michael Tolkin's 1991 film *The rapture* attempts to 'do' the Apocalypse as it is described in the Book of Revelation in a story about one woman's faith.

The plot, briefly, centres around Sharon, a directory enquiries telephonist by day, who by night engages in kinky sex with her partner and with couples they pick up. She becomes intrigued by colleagues at work who secretively speak of 'the Boy' and a dream about a pearl. After much disillusionment, misery and soul-searching Sharon becomes a Christian, marries and has a daughter, and joins a house church group which gathers to listen to the teachings of a young boy prophet.

After the tragic death of her husband, Sharon feels called to the desert to await the call of God and the end of the world. Taking her daughter Mary with her, she waits with mounting impatience and frustration until, because of her daughter's fervent desire to join her daddy in heaven, she shoots Mary dead and tries unsuccessfully to kill herself – though at the last minute realizing that suicide would cut her off from the God she has so desperately wanted to see. However, the end of the world is imminent – trumpets sound, and televised football is interrupted by the transmission of ghostly images of horsemen riding throughout the land. Sharon sees her daughter, who has come back from heaven for her mother, but Sharon has been shocked and transformed by her experience in the desert. Pointing to the shining lights of heaven just across the river, Mary begs her mother to affirm her faith in order to be let into heaven. Her once devout faith shattered, Sharon refuses to say she loves God, thus condemning herself to an everlasting and solitary darkness, although her husband and child are together at last in heaven. The film ends, eerily, by fading to black as Sharon stands defiant before God.

Tolkin wanted to explore the fundamentalist Christian belief in the 'rapture', which has inspired such stickers displayed on American cars as 'Warning – in case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned' – a reference to the belief that whatever a 'saved' Christian is doing, he or she will be taken instantaneously up to heaven. Following this logic (if not the sequence of events as described in the Book of Revelation) those left on earth will suffer wailing and gnashing of teeth in eternal darkness. Sharon's spell in eternal limbo is just beginning as the film ends – not the usual explicit denouement for a Hollywood movie, with plot resolution through a final shot that tells the viewer that the film has finished. Instead, Tolkin boldly brings down the lights, as in a theatre performance, upon the unfortunate but dogmatic Sharon, standing still awaiting her unending punishment for just saying 'no'. There is no

sound, no musical swell to signal the film's end, and so the combined effect upon the viewer – whatever he or she thinks of the film as a whole – is one of unease. Provocative, undoubtedly, because if nothing else *The rapture* jars with the viewer's perception of how a film 'should' end. Watching this film in the cinema, the symbolic effect of the houselights coming up as the curtain comes down might act as a reassurance for the viewer – he or she is not left in the netherland with Sharon, it was only (!) a story. Still, it takes a hardened film-goer not to ponder a while on the strange message of *The rapture*, and the brave attempt by Michael Tolkin to use darkness to symbolize an eternity without God.

Conclusion: film, like literature, attempts to deal with the questions we have about our own existence

The earliest names for patented projection machines, such as 'Vitascope' and 'Bioskop', intimated the cinematic linking of art to life, seeing it as a communicative element which helps to make us human. Storyteller Ruth Sawyer says that 'creative art is the power to be for the moment a flash of communication between God and man' [*sic*].[7] In our culture, it seems that more and more of us are passive consumers of art, leaving it to professionals to make our entertainment for us. Yet there is little question that film-goers experience emotional and psychological stimulation from their encounters with film; even more intriguing, the reaction of the viewer may not be at all what the film-maker intended.

An intriguing instance is seen in the making of the classic German film *Metropolis* (1926). Fritz Lang was inspired to write this tale of a future dystopia when he first saw the skyscrapers of New York City. The story concerns a bloody revolt by dehumanized workers who toil underground for a tyrannical master, and Lang was concerned that humans, as the creators of the City, would eventually end up trapped as its victims. At the same time, Lang was especially proud of how his avant-garde vision of future technology was becoming reality (e.g. overhead motorways). One fan of the film, however, was attracted to its picture of technological efficiency and the romanticist ending, in which the workers reach a compromise with the tyrant. This fan, Adolf Hitler, saw the film as a legitimization of his own idea of responsible rule. Lang, knowing that his film had become a favourite of Hitler's, fled to America when Hitler came to power, his own leftist political leanings out of step with

National Socialism. Subsequently, others have pointed to *Metropolis* as a prophetic foretelling of the rise of Nazism.

It would be easy, in an article about cinema, simply to describe in full several films and then insist upon a definitive reading of how they employ light and darkness to illustrate notions of good and evil, happiness and loneliness, safety and danger, life and death, heaven and damnation. However, there can never be a limit to the number of theological, psychological or cultural meanings of a film; only a few have been put forward here. If any of the films that have been mentioned in these pages are unfamiliar to the reader, he or she is urged to hunt amongst videos in libraries and shops and to fill out this limited discussion by watching the film. The imagination is a wonderful thing, and chances are that a dozen people watching *The seventh seal* will come up with at least as many interpretations. The writer Neil Hurley urges us to think of the cinematic images as a positive aid to spirituality: 'While seeking recreation, diversion and understanding, moviewatchers are often exercising transcendental faculties of insight, criticism and wonder that come remarkably close to what religion has traditionally termed faith, prophecy and reverence'.[8]

Because of the universality of film culture and the common experience of cinema, film may work as a catalyst for people in different cultures to examine their values, explore ideals that are personally freeing and affirming and reflect on their own responses to what they have seen and heard on screen. This has been possible throughout the history of art, and the newest art form of cinema, by painting in light, takes its place amongst other artistic windows into the soul.

In a world bombarded with visual images, how can a sustained visual narrative have any spiritual meaning? I feel simply that its prime function of telling a story is one that has stimulated imaginations and has drawn people together in a common vision from the earliest days of oral storytelling. Film can be an escape from reality – a welcome respite from the demands of daily life – but it can also engage us in dialogue with images that challenge and excite us. Movies may be magic (in the sense of illusion) but they deal with real questions and issues in our lives, and we ignore at our peril the influence that films have on our thoughts and attitudes. Film mirrors the world, and perhaps occasionally the light and shadow of the cinema screen can also make us more aware of the patterns of shadow and light in our own lives.

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NOTES

1 A. Gibson, *The silence of God* (London, 1969), p 10.
2 *Ibid.*, p 11.
3 G. Hill, *Illuminating shadows* (London, 1992), p 3.
4 A. Kaplan, *Women in film noir* (London, 1980), p 41.
5 R. Lauder, *God, death, art and love* (New York, 1989), p 38.
6 Gibson, *op. cit.*, p 11.
7 As quoted in Hill, *op. cit.*, p 10.
8 Neil Hurley, *Toward a film humanism* (Delta, 1970).