

Heard and Seen

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE CONTEMPORARY CINEMA¹

The major moral problems to be tackled on film - seriously tackled, not exploited for commercial or publicity expedience - are, as might be expected, problems that affront the social conscience rather than the religious. And to those who frivolously take this to be a reflection on the immorality of the cinema, it might be useful to consider whether it is not rather a reflection on the lack of real charity among the conventionally religious. These major moral problems can be, I think, most easily explored under a few broad headings, though these are necessarily fluid and some films could as easily fit under any of three and some, perhaps, fit uneasily under any. I would suggest then, that it is convenient to survey them under the headings of war, justice, society and the individual, and what one might almost call 'conscience and religion' or perhaps more accurately 'conscience and God'. There is even, I think, a faint embryonic shaping of a category which might almost be called 'conscience and sex', though most of the films I myself would put here could probably be just as well placed under the category of the 'individual', because the situation explored is nearly always conveyed in terms of limited personal relationships rather than in wider implications of the moral law as it is understood by classical theologians.

War. The theme of war in the cinema is, roughly speaking, treated in two quite different ways and it is important to realize this because it is, after all, one of the most constantly recurrent themes in the film output of nearly every nation that played an active part in the last war. We need not take very seriously what one might call the 'War is an awfully big adventure' school, in which heroism, leadership, occasional cowardice and a great deal of glamour are presented with a feeling of near nostalgia for the good old days, when all problems were simplified by the magnitude of the immediate task ahead. Films such as these are still being made, often with great honesty and more often still with great skill. One has only to look at one of the newest and largest of them, Darryl Zanuck's three-hour epic of D-Day, *The Longest Day*, quite one of the best of its kind; it has many virtues, but only at the end, and only mutely, does anyone raise even half an eyebrow of regret that this holocaust should be happening at all. Every country has made, is making and will make films of this kind, but they do not involve much independent moral judgment.

The kind of film which does pass a judgment on the facts of war - and the reasons for it - is much more interesting though it may be less entertaining and far more disturbing, as indeed it should be. Films of this kind, too, have been made in a great many countries. There are so many that one must, of necessity, select a relatively small number to illustrate the point, those of the greatest

¹The substance of a talk given to the Newman Association.

importance, both on account of their technical skill, and the climate of mind which they project. None have been seen in this country much earlier than 1955.

The kind of thing I mean is illustrated to perfection by the great Polish war trilogy made by Andrzej Wajda, *A Generation*, *Kanal* and *Ashes and Diamonds*, for here there is a most interesting development in the conception of the theme visibly worked out as the director proceeds. Wajda is young even now, and was very young indeed when he made the first film, but he is so richly endowed as a film-maker that one feels that he must have lisped, as it were, in sequences: his youth however does mean that one recognizes a development more easily than usual.

A Generation was an eager, enthusiastic, almost starry-eyed picture about how the very young in Poland became engulfed in war. It was full of visual slogans, but made little pretence, even then, that war is fun. It may be a noble, if unjust, necessity, but it is not what one would choose. *Kanal* was a horrifying exercise in heroic fortitude - perhaps we should say heroic sanctity - in the sewers of Warsaw during the Rising. This second film in the trilogy has lost all feeling except that for the necessity for survival: and not much of that crowned with success. The sacrifice of youth and courage and a potential future is shown for the tragedy it is. But *Ashes and Diamonds*, brilliantly acted by Cybulski, Kobiela and Adam Pawlikowski and directed by a man at the crest of his powers, presents the really adult attitude: every side of the conflict is shown in this sensitive - and courageous - exploration of how those who take up the sword shall perish by it. No judgment is passed on either friend or enemy - everybody has some right on their side, some wrong; it is the situation that has corrupted them. This is one of the most moving sermons on the inability of war to settle any question that has reached us. Poland also produced Munk's searing *Eroica*, essentially a debunking of heroism.

From quite another angle, a war film that has had the most extraordinary impact wherever it has been seen is *The Burmese Harp*; in this the Japanese soldier is so appalled by the things that war can do to friend and foe alike that he opts out of life altogether into a nothingness of visual and spiritual shifting shadows, playing his harp and determined to possess his soul in solitude.

Then, sophisticated, cerebral, troubling, confusing, Alain Resnais made a film about war and waste and time and love that shattered the mould of accepted cinematic forms so thoroughly that it seems that they will never be the same again. *Hiroshima mon amour* is a film about war - past and possibly to come - but it is a film full of hope, partly because it reconciles enemies, partly because it shows how one forgets, partly because it shows that one can build up again on the ruins. The technique of flashback and asynchronized soundtrack broke up one's preconceived ideas as they broke up the sequence of the story, and the result is a whole new angle of vision on the problem as well as on the cinema. If men's consciences are going to be stirred, Resnais could hardly have found a better method than in this compassionate and beautiful picture.

Jean Renoir who made *La Grande Illusion* at the end of the thirties about the

1914-18 war, showed that conflict was not sufficient to over-ride class even amongst friends, even amongst enemies, and demonstrated that heroics could be lethal. Now this master of film-making has just produced his 1940 war picture, *Le Caporal Epinglé* (*The Vanishing Corporal*) which opened the 1962 London Film Festival. With detachment, pity, affection, Renoir sees his little men caught in the toils of war and refusing to capitulate to its monstrous imbecilities. Not a young man's judgment this, but a wonderfully ripe and salutary one. From France, again, comes another masterpiece on the theme of war and its injustices. Robert Bresson's *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Echappé* showed us a Resistance fighter condemned to death by the Gestapo, and his escape from prison - a suspense picture if you like, but the suspense is spiritual as well as psychological. Never a hint of judgment on individual Germans; we hardly even see them but only the instruments of their power of destruction. It is the courage never to submit or yield that matters, not the violence that provokes it, and the courage is in itself a tacit condemnation of that violence. Leterrier's thin, bruised face and his long hands become simply symbols of the necessity for man's survival through the spirit which God gives him. It is the degradation of war that Bresson condemns, and it is the degradation that the hero defeats with his dedicated escape.

War is ruthless, cruel, often unjust and always destructive; even the victors lose. We also know that all this will be worse next time, if there is a next time. Salvation can only lie in the reactions of the individual - faith, courage, endurance - so that the soul of man, at least, refuses to yield whatever may happen to his body, his country or the things he loves. This refusal to capitulate to the inchoate forces of mass destruction is what the good directors in every country, east and west, are trying to bring home to us.

Justice. It would seem that the continental, American and British directors are equally exercised about the problem of justice in the modern world, and the way in which we should shoulder our responsibilities - under the law, in spite of the law; taking the place of the law if it will not or cannot act in accordance with our consciences; refusing allegiance to the law if it conflicts with them. Film after film appears in which this conflict is worked out; this is partly due, perhaps, to the agonizing problem that has been posed to all of us since the Nazis showed to a horrified world what can happen if the laws of a nation are so perverted that they turn wrong into right. What then is the private citizen to do, half-guessing or maybe wholly knowing, what is being done in his name by an omnipotent machine? The concentration camps have set all our consciences on edge, and the duty of the private citizen to contract out of public judicial procedure has been muddled - or perhaps clarified - for many a generation to come.

A good, honest and very well-made film which probed into this question quite explicitly was *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Here, the whole point of the film was made when the American judge (Spencer Tracy) told the German jurist (Burt Lancaster) that he had lost his soul the very first time he condemned a

man he knew to be innocent. Easy enough, you may say, for an American to say to a Nazi after the war; we do not know what we might have done had we been ordinary Nazis, but we do know unequivocally what we ought to have done. To see the problem divorced from contemporary events is to see it with more detachment. Take, for example, Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*. Here is a man confronted with a painful problem of right and wrong, and placed inexorably in a position where he *must* make a decision and, what is more, a decision which goes against his instinctive conscience. Billy was good in every way and Claggart was bad. But Claggart was a good master-at-arms and in authority over Billy in time of war. Billy may have killed involuntarily, but with every reason to save the boy whom he loves, Vere is so placed that he must condemn him to death. The officers of the court martial are faced with a choice between law and justice - often irreconcilable as we all know - but Vere is placed in the far more cruel position of having to choose between duty and conscience. Not so far, perhaps, from the jurist's position at the beginning of the Nazi regime after all? Ustinov the director leaves us to make our own decision, for Ustinov the actor has simply retired from the whole situation in his self-disgust.

In *La Verité*, with Brigitte Bardot as the accused, and in *The Boys* we are given the facts as the jury see them, and shown how sadly easy it is to draw all the wrong deductions through prejudice, or stupidity, or malice - or even when trying to do one's best. In each the director seems to be trying to make us, in our turn, give our judgments not only on the case, but also on the judge and the whole system of justice: no complacency here, but a real desire to stir up the consciences of men who may at any time have to play the same part in real life. This kind of question, too, is asked in *Bird Man of Alcatraz*, which poses the problem of imprisonment and punishment and rehabilitation, not dispassionately indeed, but with real cogency for all that. Of what ultimate use is the system, we are to say, if it can so totally waste a man's talents for good even in prison. We cannot answer easily, nor indeed can we easily counter the questions on capital punishment posed in another American picture, *The Hoodlum Priest*, in which Fr Dismas Clark tries vainly as he did in real life, to save boys who could perhaps have made good if given half a chance to break into a more constructive society. If we take the word of the film-makers, we must begin very strongly to doubt the end results of retribution as a panacea for violence.

But the most interesting, perhaps because the most classical, film about conscience and justice that has been shown recently is that which came as the climax of the 1962 London Film Festival, Robert Bresson's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*. Jeanne's conscience tells her she is right, that her judges are wrong even if they are princes of the Church to which she makes absolute submission; nothing can convince her that she may deny her conscience. So she is burned at the stake. Justice, as Bresson said at his press conference in Cannes, justice has been used to procure the ends of injustice. Conscience is supreme, but supremely unsuccessful: and in today's world, who knows but that we in our turn, like

Poles or Hungarians, might be faced with much the same kind of situation one day. The cinema, at least, is not afraid to pose such problems.

Society and the individual. Protean is the only word with which to describe the cinema's attitude to society; there are almost as many views as there are directors, and none of the useful divisions of ideology or creed will give us much of a guiding light. But the men of integrity - artistic integrity, I mean, which is after all the most important in an artist - project a real feeling of responsibility for the society which they portray on the screen. As the prototype we could hardly do better than to choose *Rocco and his Brothers*, that great untidy masterpiece made by Visconti on the tragedy which befalls peasants from the South when they come to face the wiles of the northerners in Milan. Visconti is an aristocrat with all an aristocrat's disdain for caution, in spite of his Marxism, and he poured enough compassion, anger and understanding into *Rocco* to make half a dozen lesser films. We stagger out of this picture feeling that if we spent all our lives trying to right wrongs, we would hardly satisfy the director or justify our own existence. There is a little of Bakunin's brimming revolutionary fire in Visconti's work; riots followed the premiere of *Rocco* in Milan; evidently the cap fitted only too closely. This was a film to shake one to the very bones of one's convictions, and to haunt one afterwards.

The great de Sica/Zavattini masterpieces of Italian neo-realism lie outside our period, but the work of a new, and young, Italian director, Pietro Olmi - *Il Posto* - shows much the same kind of loving, amused yet scandalized concern for little people in the grip of vast modern dehumanizing forces. It is about a boy applying for his first job in a huge concern, never to realize that his success simply means a trap is shutting behind him. And I think we can only include *La Dolce Vita* here; whatever the Italian censorship, political or ecclesiastical, may have thought this is clearly a vast morality play about the vices of the affluent society and its power to corrupt almost all who submit to its dictates. Remember the dead, disapproving eye of the great stranded fish on the beach, putting Marcello properly in his place, or the innocence and vulnerability of the little blonde waitress, the only character uncorrupted by the rat-race.

The Americans are beginning to tackle the problem of society and the individual in quite a new way. *Advise and Consent* cast a pretty cold eye on the conflict between private and public conscience in the corridors of power; *Shadows* showed us what it is like to be coloured in a white world, as well as the converse struggle of a white trying to live at one with coloured society, a theme which the British cinema also adumbrated in *Sapphire and Flame in the Streets*. Or what happens when the individual cannot come to terms with the new world, and society simply bulldozes him out of the way as happens in Huston's enormously sad picture, *The Misfits*. And our own *Angry Silence*, that admirable film, made a clear and explicit condemnation of industrial conditions which refuse to a man his inalienable right to be himself.

This is the thing that is hammered out again and again in films from all over the world. Materialistic society as it confronts most of us today is an implacable

enemy of the nonconformist with ideas of his own. The juggernaut car rides roughshod over Italian, Indian, British workman or American liberal, and the film-makers everywhere are saying passionately this is not fair. Man is born free and everywhere is in chains, even if the chains are largely those of social pressure. Let us show, they seem to be saying, how gallant a fight man can make in our country to be himself and save his own soul.

In films which deal with the conscience - or lack of conscience - of the individual, the British seem to have turned out some of the most significant work. Our new young directors are producing pictures which insist on the right of the individual to go to hell or heaven in his own way. We can point with pride to *A Taste of Honey*, to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, above all to *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* in this field. We can show Laurence Olivier fighting a desperate rearguard battle in *Term of Trial* to be the kind of man he thinks it right to be, even if he loses everything that he holds most dear in the struggle. Society says conform, abide by the rules, give no trouble: but Colin Smith in his cross-country race would rather lose than win it for a system which he despises. And when we turn to the new wave directors in France, we find the same climate. The young killer in *A Bout de Souffle* adopts an anarchical disregard for anything established at all as the only protest he can make, and dies as stupidly as he has killed. Truffaut's little boy in *Les Quatre Cent Coups* never has a chance in the world in which he is placed, but when the long, brilliant tracking shot of his endless break for freedom down to the sea he has never seen takes him in wild despair right into the shallow waves - with what purpose we can only guess at - the despair changes at the end to the technically astounding still photograph of the young surprised face, looking back at us in a terrible perplexity. What can this be but a most damning verdict on the world that has led him to the very brink of suicide; this is your fault, and mine and everybody's, says Truffaut in effect.

It is not perhaps surprising that it is the young men, mostly, who are making this kind of picture, for this is a young man's problem, before he has been forced to learn the necessity for resignation or the virtues of endurance. These films are full of social criticism conveyed with a technical competence and on occasion genius that makes their impact greater than perhaps the immediate subject warrants. With speed, intelligent camera-work, tremendously original methods of telling the story from the inside, so to speak, we become involved to a degree unusual in a more conventionally directed picture. It also makes us identify with the directors (more than with the actors perhaps) in a way rare since some of the very early work in the cinema.

Religion. We find the cinecasts of the sixties, the really good ones, tackling this with a seriousness that could not, perhaps, have been visualized earlier. It is OK to be interested in the relation between God and man today, as it emphatically was not twenty or so years ago. The French have never been afraid to make films about religion, and good serious films too. It is, after all, nearly ten years since Bresson made the *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*, a work shattering

both by its density and its uncompromising realism; and who is likely to forget *Dieu a Besoin des Hommes?* That the French can still make films as good as this we can see from *Léon Morin*, in which we were shown a priest - contemporary, human and yet disciplined - who was not afraid to enter into a dialogue with Marxism as well as to deal briskly with the hungry human love of a woman, and yet leave us feeling the better for having watched the film. A very grown-up piece of work indeed. But perhaps the prototype here is Bergman, with his tortured quest for the meaning of God's purpose in our lives, his pursuit of the clues which might lead him to the still centre of a world where love surely will be undefiled by the cruelty which he senses all around him. The conflict between Jacob and the angel pales before Bergman's pilgrimage through *The Seventh Seal*, *The Face*, *The Virgin Spring* and *Wild Strawberries*, in search of the heavenly Jerusalem for which he seeks so painfully. In these films, leaving aside his private language of symbols which recur from one to the other, almost every human situation is explored in relation to this quest for reconciliation with God. The fact that the director does not hesitate to use brutality, sex and cruelty, both mental and physical, when he needs them to make his point, has blinded many filmgoers to what, in the opinion of many more eminent Catholic critics than myself, is the inherent primacy of a thirst for religion in most of his films. At once the son of a pastor, a Swede with all the peculiar problems that this predicates, and a man of his troubled age, Bergman has a rocky road to follow, and there is no wonder that his footsteps are often blood-stained. The problems he explores are problems we all meet in some form or another, and only a man of the mid-twentieth century could work them out in quite this way. Western problems, primarily, with western values in the melting pot, add up to a syndrome that we can all recognize.

After the religious films that portray religion in the modern world, and films that portray the quest for religion in that world, we come to a third category that gives the deepest offence to many sincerely religious people: films like *Viridiana* or Berlanga's *Plácido*, seen in the 1962 London Film Festival, films which are in violent protest against organized Christianity, and particularly against the Church but which, by their very protest, must of necessity testify to the enormous importance attributed to religion even by her enemies. I feel strongly myself, that Bunuel's *Viridiana*, with all its sacrilege and mockery, is yet a more potent witness than many a pious picture of priest and congregation, of saint or religious society. What is wrong with the body of believing Christians, that they can make Bunuel, a child of the Church in the first place, put all the forces of his genius to the task of nullifying everything they care for? The Russians, in *The Cranes are Flying*, could afford the moving gesture of the old grandmother's farewell sign of the cross on her grandson's forehead, because they do not think religion matters. Bunuel is under no such delusion, and is passionately concerned to destroy its influence where it stands for obstruction, for superstition, for a failure in justice and compassion towards the poor and the underprivileged. We should be, in a way, grateful to him for making us

think how we may do better. It is to a certain extent our fault that he makes films like this, and we would do well to think about it.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

Reviews

THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY, by Charles Davis; Sheed and Ward; 30s.

Few theologians in England can have done so much as Fr Charles Davis to introduce this country to the renewal of theology on the continent and to draw the attention of dogmatic theologians to the perspective of the historical dimension in Revelation. Here is the challenge to dogma from the field of biblical, liturgical, and patristic research, and this challenge is reflected throughout this collection of essays published on various occasions. Perhaps it is especially the essays on 'The Christian Mystery and the Trinity' and 'The Resurrection and the Atonement' that reveal how much has been lost in the past through an insufficient understanding of the biblical and the liturgical approach. But the author most interestingly suggests that we should go further than simply stating biblical theology as it is given to us in the bible and that we should attempt a transposition of biblical thought to meet the contemporary intellectual development. This opens up the further question as to whether some of the present philosophical trends are not particularly suited to explain and illustrate the historical dimension of Revelation as in the past the classic philosophy has explained and illustrated the metaphysical problems of Revelation. For instance Fr Cornelius Ernst in his introduction to the 'Theological Investigations' of Fr Karl Rahner compares Heidegger's conception of man, not as what he is in his eternal nature but as what he is directed towards in the future, with the biblical view of man as orientated towards his future as revealed in Christ. This is not eclecticism but an integration of these truths from contemporary philosophers into the *philosophia perennis* of Thomism. Moreover Fr Davis rightly refers to the need to counter what might become a too exclusively biblical, liturgical and patristic theology with a renewal of speculative theology following the lead given by Fr Bernard Lonergan, the great exponent of the classic metaphysical tradition.

We must have 'a vision of the whole' as Fr Davis says and the problem is basically that of a synthesis of the historical and of the metaphysical aspects of Revelation. I am inclined to think that Fr Davis' stimulating essays 'On introducing the theme' and 'The dangers of irrelevance', in their stress on the need to be apostolic and to meet the contemporary mentality, tend to obscure the more