

EDITORIAL

AMERICAN CINEMA AND THE “GOD QUESTION”

When Andrew Greeley presumed in *The New York Times* (January 18, 1976) to tell us “Why Hollywood Never Asks the God Question,” he was really begging the question. Greeley is not precisely a theologian of culture and the *Times* is hardly a standard vehicle for academic debate, yet the audience that the *Times* reaches is undoubtedly awesome and Greeley has a reputation for serious cultural comment; the combination, it seems to me, demands a studied rejoinder. Without any apparent awareness of the analogy between his assumption concerning American films—that they never ask the God question—and the battle that has raged in academe for the past two decades over the relationship between religion and literature, Greeley gives the nod to the European directors whose works seem to hold an hypnotic attraction for the American intellectual-turned-film-buff.

Greeley is not so monolithic in his assumption about films that he could be accused of saying that raising the God question is equivalent to professing belief; he is aware that at least two of his directors, Buñuel and Bergman, are unbelievers—the former is routinely, and with reason, characterized as an atheist. Fellini, though profoundly imaginative, is scarcely orthodox; and only one, Rohmer—by far the least of the four artistically—fits a traditional religious frame. They at least consider the question worth raising, he insists. But even this reservation calls for careful distinctions. Because they are all victims, to an extent, of varieties of religious dualism—an orthodox Northern European Protestant split in worlds (Bergman), an anticlerical Southern European Roman Catholic schizophrenia (Buñuel, Fellini), or a confusion of semi-Jansenist piety and Pascal’s gamble (Rohmer)—the God they can by a severe stretch of the imagination be said to raise the question of is one who is either dead or totally absent or perplexingly aloof. Greeley seems to know that he is skating on thin ice when he characterizes their movies as religious, yet he concludes that “European directors are not afraid to *speak directly* about the meaning of human life and the mystery of human death—which is what religion is supposed to be all about” (my emphasis). Even this minimal concern he refuses to acknowledge in the works of American directors, not apparently because he has failed to see the right films, but rather, we can suppose, because he refuses to investigate any other mode of treating these issues other than “direct speech.”

“The good religious film has eluded the American industry,” Greeley asserts. “American filmmakers have produced movies about religion, movies which use religion, movies which exploit religion to titillate or terrify, but no religious movies.” As evidence of European

directors' "eagerness to come to grips with religion," Greeley repeats the usual examples: Buñuel's "Nazarin" and "Belle de Jour," Bergman's "The Seventh Seal," "Through a Glass Darkly," and "Cries and Whispers," Fellini's "La Dolce Vita," and Eric Rohmer's "My Night at Maud's." The American films that he lists as using religion or being "about" it are for the most part not even good films—from "The Ten Commandments" through "Going My Way" all the way to "The Exorcist." Only Martin Scorsese seems to make the grade for Greeley inasmuch as he "is able to drag in the God question for a few moments in 'Mean Streets.'"

The reason for this lamentable failure, according to Greeley, is that for the past half century America's cultural elite—"made up of first generation alienates from either pious Christian families . . . or strictly observant Jewish families"—has been "convinced that religion was not worth writing about." Even though Greeley is flexible when he suggests a workable paradigm for the "God question," there is a regrettable literary bias to his film interpretations that seems consistently to ignore the language of film itself. "Phrase it your way," Greeley allows, after offering his variations on the "religious question": "Is God mad? Is there graciousness in the universe? Are we alone? Is our hopefulness ultimately a deception?" The other possible middle terms Greeley proposes are simply "the grace question, the meaning question, the hope question." Despite his care in concretizing the religious question, Greeley leaves us with the impression that he would ask Jesus why he avoided the God question in his parables—because the parables do not "speak directly" about any religious problems. They tell stories: they speak only indirectly about God and man.

To consider only those works religious that actually use religious or theological language is indeed a very narrow and limited path to the understanding of the religious dimensions of literature—or film. This is in effect merely a subtle variation on the least subtle of all approaches to their interrelationship, heteronomy, which insists that theology must finally be the norm for assessing the worth of a work. Since T. S. Eliot's classic statement of the view, other interesting and less condescending theories have been advanced. One could say with Paul Tillich that insofar as all concerns of man are rooted in his ultimate concern—God, the ground of his being—any genuinely human effort to expose man's drives is at least radically religious. The extremes here are obvious, though. Whereas heteronomy limits too severely the possibility of discerning the religious dimensions of a work, Tillich's theonomous approach would consider almost every good film basically religious. In between these extremes are the varieties of autonomous interpretation which generally agree that one must explore the formal structures of the work itself for the literary analogues of religious images. Autonomy

accommodates the metaphysical reaches of metaphor and symbol; it respects the religious roots of mythic and archetypal images.

Pauline Kael, the dean of American film critics, in a 1975 speech before the Arts Club of Chicago, made a reasonable case for the thesis that “almost every interesting American movie in the past few years has been directed by a Catholic.” The “sensual richness” in the Catholic backgrounds of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Robert Altman has enhanced their capacity, she feels, to do what film does best—“enlarge our experience.” “When you see movies like Coppola’s *Godfather* films, or Altman’s newest movie “*Nashville*,” Kael stated, “you get the sense of American epics, of directors really dealing for the first time with the American experience, and dealing with it truthfully.” Her gracious, if not generous, estimate of their contributions to film can, I believe, be extended to include recent works of other outstanding, younger American directors. Kael implies the “surplus of signifier” that Frank Kermode says contributes to the making of a culture’s classics.

We can readily acknowledge that contemporary American films have posed the “God question” in each of the three categories that Greeley offers—with more theological precision than interdisciplinary sensitivity—provided we abandon his indefensible assumption that the God question must finally be raised “in so many words” if it is to be considered raised at all. Francis Ford Coppola’s “*The Rain People*” projects a world that is ultimately gracious, insisting that even tragedy can yield unexpected benefit. Stanley Kubrick’s highly touted “*Barry Lyndon*” represents a vision that has become a signature of the director himself in which the best laid plans of man go awry. In the stunningly visual world of Kubrick’s film, man is not an end unto himself; meaning is discovered not made, discovered in interaction with others. The same pattern of discovered meaning is evident in Hal Ashby’s “*Shampoo*” and Arthur Penn’s “*Night Moves*,” and the question of our hope and its foundation is fundamental to the meaning of Robert Altman’s “*Nashville*.” What makes it possible for us to survive the senseless assassins we nurture is the very breadth and variety of the people themselves and the trust they sustain in a process that seems so utterly insane at times. This hope Altman suggests, as his camera studies the return to normality in the faces of the rally crowd, transcends the assemblage itself.

If one’s aesthetic is truly and fully human, art is definitely viewed as related to life; traditionally, great art on one level at least has been considered an expression of man’s hope—a celebration of life’s promise that transcends the individual to reach out to and sustain the aspirations of others. Cinema of all art forms, because of its unique representation of movement in time and space, is ideally suited to the portrayal of the most basic of all human drives—the quest for meaning in one’s personal life and for the meaning of existence as such. And American directors have

been particularly successful in developing this mythic quest for meaning in terms of the visual journey as is evident in this impressive sampling of recent films: Dennis Hopper's "Easy Rider," Jerry Schatzberg's "Scarecrow," Terrence Malick's "Badlands," Peter Bogdanovich's "The Last Picture Show," George Roy Hill's "Slaughterhouse-Five," Arthur Penn's "Alice's Restaurant," and Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey."

I would suggest, therefore, that the religious question in cinema is at least adequately addressed in terms of the question of meaning and that film as art is superbly qualified to realize this meaning formally in its genre of quest.

—JOHN R. MAY