

**PART C:**

**OUT-WORKINGS:**

**PRACTICES FOR SPIRITUAL APPLICATION**



## CHAPTER 7

# FILMMAKING AND THEOLOGY: TOWARDS A DIDACTIC AND MYSTAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Introduction

Theology struggles to respond to people who are thirsting for fullness. As its traditional beneficiaries (seminarians, religious men and women, etc.) become fewer and fewer in number and influence, theology is struggling to reinvent itself and make itself more relevant to new audiences. Many of these have little if any affiliation with the institutional Church. As a result, new alliances sometimes need to be initiated, especially in religious studies, favoring a multidisciplinary approach. Among the new avenues that deserve to be explored, is—I believe—the need to recapture the spiritual dimension of theology.<sup>1</sup> This is not a recent problem. In an article published in 1964, the Jesuit Léopold Malevez lamented that “modern theology has too often cut itself off from its living sources in Scripture read in the light of faith, and has degenerated into a completely abstract dialectic, oblivious of the dimensions of the mystery” (Malevez 1964, 225).<sup>2</sup> These words are still

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<sup>1</sup> According to Raimon Panikkar, the fact that the word *theoreia* has come to mean a mental operation without force, without the concern for real human life, is symptomatic of this evolution where knowledge is detached from love: “[...] any ‘knowledge’ without love can be defined as intellectual or philosophical, limited to establishing relationships and finding theoretical links between different thoughts, but with little or no relevance either for the life of the particular individual or for human existence—unless people actually incarnate those ideas in their experience” (Panikkar 2010, 183-18).

<sup>2</sup> In those instances where original texts have been published in French, the translation has been made by the author, who was a French-speaking Canadian national.

relevant today, even though they were written at a time likely to have been influenced by a narrow form of scholasticism.

To be sure, theology responds to diverse tasks. The “dimensions of the mystery” we are discussing here must not only be conceived from a dogmatic perspective, which expresses its coherence discursively and on the basis of revelation and tradition, but also from a phenomenological perspective whose reference is a life under the movement of the Holy Spirit’s life. In this context, it is crucial that a privileged place be given to contemplative theology,<sup>3</sup> not in order to promote one aspect of theology to the detriment of others, but in order to signify that the principal object of theology is the transforming and saving experience of the Trinitarian God. As Rowan Williams, former archbishop of the Anglican Church, told the Synod of Catholic Bishops in Rome: “Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them” (Rohr 2019).

Contemplative theology is based on the necessity of salvation; hence its primary interest is not so much *ultimate reality*, God as a notion, as much as it is *ultimate transformation*, God in relation to oneself.<sup>4</sup> One of our most

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<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, contemplative theology—or mystical theology—refers to a teaching delivered in secret by the Holy Spirit. For John of the Cross, “contemplation is mystical theology which theologians call secret wisdom and which St Thomas says is communicated into the soul through love” (Johnston 2000, 3). In the context of this chapter, we understand it as “the science that reflects on, teaches, the secret wisdom that comes through love” (Johnston 2000, 3). In this effort to recapture the experience of God as the principal object of theology, we have established at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, a Graduate Degree in *Contemplative Theology and Spiritual Mentoring*, which begins with a seven-day silent retreat. It is crucial to us to reconnect with the experience of the desert in the very act of doing theology, thus referring to a theology in which prayer and reason share the same impulse. Accessed September 2, 2019. <https://theologiecontemplative.weebly.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> The theological requirement that truth is conceived only in relation, within the limits of subjectivity, refers to thinkers like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Martin Heidegger: “The construction of a perfectly controlled abstract universal does not interest Balthasar. Nor does objective and objectifying truth. Heidegger was more relevant in seeing in *aletheia* the manifestation, the revelation of the being who lets himself be seen while withdrawing. It is the gift of the being who reaches its fullness in the reception of the one who receives. The truth-adequacy must not offend this movement of being, which is mysterious, inseparable from the most transparent revelation that is the resource of all the faculties of our mind” (Amiot 1994, 76).

pressing concerns is to develop a theology that can link the great themes of Christian faith to the requirements of the kind of self-knowledge that makes it possible to be receptive to the divine life. We need a theology not only focused on the community and ministerial aspect of the experience of God, but also capable of accompanying searchers in their personal quest for interiority.

This being said, it is still necessary to find a suitable language, one that can reach those Christians who are distant from the Church precisely because of their thirst for God. As St Augustine has already said, “For it is one thing to know only what a man must believe in order to gain the blissful life, which is no other than eternal life; and another, to know how to impart this to godly souls, and to defend it against the ungodly, which latter the Apostle seems to have styled by the proper name of knowledge” (in Aquinas 1947). How can we articulate and transmit the desire for God, for a life in fullness, from a Christian perspective? How to rediscover the mystagogical dimension of theology, which directs it towards “a penetration, from within, of the mysteries of the faith” (Jeauneau n.d.),<sup>5</sup> as well as the appropriate didactic means to embody it as much in the theologian as in the student of theology?

The artistic dimension offers a promising avenue for answering these questions that are crucial in the development of a renewed theology. A contemplative theology is also a theological aesthetic (Amiot 1994, 75),<sup>6</sup> a theology of the Beauty, of the representation, the virtue of which is to return beyond itself, to the inexpressible reality at the heart of the Christian faith. Should we not encourage a practice of art in theological formation concerned

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<sup>5</sup> In Christian context, “mystagogical” refers to the process of initiation into the mysteries of faith. Traditionally, this qualifying adjective defines a mystical interpretation of the Bible (Origen) where “exegesis [is] not aimed at mastering a textual object but rather at mediating an encounter with the divine mystery” (Bucur 2013, 140). It also applies to the catechumen who receives by the priest (mystagōgos) theological and symbolic explanations of liturgical rites, especially those of baptism and the Eucharist. In this article, this term first characterizes the theological act as a pedagogical means of understanding and deepening one's own relation to God, both individually and communally, not only in a theoretical and intellectual mode, but also in the heart, according to an intuitive and experiential knowledge. By its mystagogical dimension, theology is seen more fundamentally as a teaching of wisdom, a “transformative pedagogy, a spiritual exercise designed to guide the student along a path of ethical, intellectual, and spiritual transformation” (Bucur 2013, 140).

<sup>6</sup> See the close link between theatrical language in both stage and theology in Balthasar's *theodramatic* (Peelman 2002, 48-53).

with re-grasping the spiritual dimension? Henri Le Saux encourages us in this direction when he promotes,

A poetry which would recover the intimate mystery of everything, even more that of the deepest of the heart of man, beyond his hopes, his most essential aspirations, where the I of man and all that manifests it to oneself is still, so to speak, being born ... (Le Saux 1979, 44).

This is a question to which I am particularly sensitive as a result of the release of my first full-length film, *Dawn of the Abyss. The Spiritual Birth of Swamiji* (2016, 61 min). This documentary is the story of an awakening to the Real; it provided me with the opportunity to follow the path taken by this French Benedictine Henri Le Saux in his quest for a God without forms and names (Blée, 2018).<sup>7</sup> In doing so, I have come to see that making a film can inspire the *doing of theology*—or a theological act (*acte théologique*); it facilitates the transition from a more discursive theology to a contemplative theology which, if it is no less discursive, is developed “in the light of a certain perception, already mystical, of the Absolute” (Malevez 1964, 226). In this reflection, I propose to identify some characteristics of a contemplative theology inspired by the creative process involved in filmmaking. But before I develop these characteristics, I wish to say a word about the nature and the construction of this new relationship between film and theology.

## A New Discipline

Making this film and promoting it widely<sup>8</sup> has made me aware of the importance of this medium as a theological *locus* (See Marty 2016, 10), not only in the sense that it can serve as a resource for discussions on religion and faith, but that it can also be a theological act (*acte théologique*), a hermeneutic *locus* capable of inspiring the way theologians and students of theology conceive and practice theology.

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<sup>7</sup> See also the movie’s official website: <https://www.solarsproductions.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Dawn of the Abyss. The Spiritual Birth of Swamiji* was broadcast on Radio Television Suisse (May 22-23, 2016), officially selected for the 26th edition of the *International Religious-themed Film Festival* (Farel Prize) in Neuchâtel (October 22-23, 2016), and awarded the 32nd edition of the *International Catholic Film and Multimedia Festival* (KSF Niepokalana) in Warsaw (October 1st, 2017). More broadly, it has been seen in several countries and cities, so far by more than 1300 people, thereby providing many opportunities to engage in debate on spiritual and theological issues.

“Film and Theology,” a discipline that began in the 1970s, was not at the time readily accepted by academics. Even if it is still little known and sometimes little understood, the marriage of film and theology is increasingly recognized as a good match (Johnston 2007, 17). Craig Detweiler sees the possibility of “freeing both disciplines from their bookish and elitist tendencies, which threaten to marginalize them” (Johnston 2007, 31). This new discipline reveals its promise particularly for theology which at this moment in time is a theology in crisis. But even as theology is at rock bottom, film can be said to be riding the crest of the cultural wave in its creativity and acceptance amongst the general populace. On this point, I am in agreement with James Hansen:

Most meaningful contributions made in this ongoing dialogue will not come primarily from theological assessments of particular films or by using the cinematic medium simply for illustrative purposes; they will come through a rigorous engagement with the actual process of filmmaking and the effects film has on the viewer (Hansen 2016, 1).

Filmmaking as a creative process can question and accompany other current forms of theology in their own attempt to connect theology to the lived experience and the spiritual quest of our contemporaries. It does so on two levels. The *first* pertains to the *experience of faith*, and the *second* to the necessity of *articulating this experience*. These two levels echo the two principles that, according to Léopold Malevez, define the contemplative: first, “contemplatives are empowered to reflect on the inclination that animates them”; then, “in this reflection on the attraction of faith, contemplatives perceive without discourse—one could say, intuitively—the God who inspires them...” (Malevez 1964, 226.) The tension between these two elements (the desire for the divine and the discursive expression of this desire) constitutes the heart of the theological act, and in this tension the theological act draws on its mystagogical and didactic power. Now, art has its place precisely in this tension; being aware of it is especially important when the two interacting elements (intuition and reflection) tend to be dissociated from one another.

Reflection cut off from the intuition of God becomes a purely discursive theology, incapable of a return to the source. Conversely, intuition without reflection often gets lost in testimony that lacks discernment. Artistic creation emerges in the interstice between the *ascent of the heart* (*élan du coeur*) and its interpretation, and can then reinforce the link between the two. The example of St John of the Cross illustrates this well. His poems are the expression of his drive towards God which then become the foundation of his commentaries, where the deep meaning of his poems is

explained. His poetry is then at once *mystagogical* and *didactic* in that it respectively directs us towards the divine mysteries, nourishing the inner inclination which is the way to these mysteries. His poetry does this through a rigorous and systematic comprehension of what is at stake in this inclination.

We should note that if art willingly participates in the theological act, it is not to be confused with it. Theological discourse is not a poem and must not become one. However, it can let itself be invested with the spirit of the poet (Baker 2012, 507) in order to regain its mystagogical power. For its part, theological discourse must resist the temptation to regulate artistic work; this is a condition for safeguarding the vital impulse that gives it life. The relationship between art and theology must be thought of as a dialogue in which each element in the interaction is able to preserve its own specificity. John Lyden proposes that one should enter into dialogue with the world of film inspired by the way one enters into dialogue with other religions (Johnston 2007, 23). This is an original approach that deserves to be explored, especially in terms of the dialogue of religious experience (Blée 2011; Béthune 2010). Here, dialogue between art and theology can then be seen also as a spiritual act in itself;<sup>9</sup> such a dialogue might draw us closer to God and teach both theologian and student how this drawing closer takes place.

As a theologian, I primarily saw in this film, *Dawn of the Abyss*, an opportunity to express my own faith, my relationship to the Holy (Otto 1937), in the very fact of putting in pictures the inner journey of the Breton monk. It allowed me to give an account of a deep inclination for life in all its fullness by means of a representation that draws not primarily on concepts and a form of intellectual reflection but on the senses and emotions, this by means of a more immediate and intuitive approach to reality. Secondly, as I reflected on the process of creativity involved in filmmaking, I realized more and more how making this film led me to take another look at the principles of hermeneutics and contemplative theology. I wish to develop three of these principles in this chapter: a desire for fullness, a reflection of our own relationship to God, and the message stemming from interaction.

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<sup>9</sup> John Paul II referred to Monastic interreligious dialogue, based on religious experiences, as a “religious approach, a meeting in the heart of hearts, driven by a spirit of poverty, mutual trust and deep respect for your respective traditions. This experience cannot always be translated into words. What is often the best expression of it is a silence full of prayer” (Béthune 1997, 105).



## A Desire for Fullness

This film is an attempt to give an image to the human thirst for God. The thirst I speak of is the desire for the spiritual, for a life in fullness, accessible to all and yet easy to lose track of. When this place of peace and joy eludes us, we can spend our life seeking access to it. We are moved by a deep urge that sets us out on the quest which then paradoxically reveals that we are already in contact with the object of our desire. Does not St Augustine remind us that we would not seek God if we had not already found him? Léopold Malevez speaks of “inchoate mysticism,” by which he means the inclination aroused in the believer by God that prepares him for life in the Spirit.<sup>10</sup> In this case, remembrance of our being-in-God means adopting a new way of looking at things, reversing one’s perspective (*metanoia*), lifting the veil, opening the third eye, that of faith (Panikkar 2010, 150). *Post factum*, it has become acutely clear to me that the reason why I made this film was the need for conversion. The camera became the primary outward element that enabled me to open my inner aperture in response to this need.

I have been fascinated by cameras since childhood. My father used to film our vacations with his Super 8 camera. As a child, looking through the viewfinder was an extraordinary experience of discovering a heretofore unknown universe that was rich with new meaning. It was a way of taking a fresh look at reality, giving it meaning. It offered an approach to the world that was capable of penetrating to a certain extent its mysteries. This has only become ever-more-true as an adult. The camera offered a way of re-enchanting the world around me, of animating it with the Presence I so longed for in order to find in it a place to quench my thirst. I thereby perceived, without being able to name it, the capacity of the camera to transform internally the person who could have this new perspective on reality, whether that be the director or the spectator.

I do not see here any flight from reality but instead the opportunity for what is real to reveal its deeper meaning and to draw me closer to it. Consequently, the desire to make a film gives expression to an even deeper desire, that of transforming oneself for a life in fullness. I therefore keenly agree with Joseph Marty’s idea that film’s approach to reality is initiatory and mystagogical. Joseph Marty describes in his doctoral research the relationship between Christianity and cinema as “cinematic theological

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<sup>10</sup> According to Malevez, “Because of the inclination that God raises in him, there is, in the heart of the believer, a co-naturalization, a complicity, an immediate complicity with the last realities. It is by this that the attraction of faith prepares mysticism properly so-called, or if one prefers, already participates in it. And that’s what we call inchoative mysticism” (Malevez 1964, 228).

poetics” (Marty 2016, 8). Here it is a question of making (*poiesis*) the space which allows the unveiling of a bit of our deeper identity, by allowing the visible to be a reflection of the invisible. This ties in with Joseph Marty’s idea of what he calls the “le grand et beau cinéma,” which he says is “not just an art of ‘representation’ but a process of initiation: something is born in the one who communicates with life forces that are activated” (Marty 2016, 9).

I was surprised by the comments of several viewers of my film who told me how deeply *Dawn of the Abyss* affected them. After a showing at Monash University in Melbourne, a woman told me she had to see the film again because she fell into a sort of ecstasy during the scene of the young Brahmins chanting Vedic songs and was unable to follow the rest of the story. In the course on Art and the Sacred I teach at Saint Paul University, a student wrote, “Watching this film, I felt at peace with myself—a deep peace, impossible to explain; I was in total silence, and I even shed tears. I felt like I was in India, at the foot of the sacred mountain.”

This first element (a desire for fullness) of the process of creation reminds us that the theological act is also above all a vocation to express the human thirst for God. It is born of a deep call for a full life and the need to formulate the way to achieve it. The *Proslogion* of St Anselm (11th century Benedictine monk) is based on this existential and concrete requirement. We once had a homeland, but here we are, exiled. Theology helps find the way to the source. As we read in chapter 1,

Come thou now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek thee, where and how it may find thee. Lord, if thou art not here, where shall I seek thee, being absent? But if thou art everywhere, why do I not see thee present? Truly thou dwellest in unapproachable light. But where is unapproachable light, or how shall I come to it? Or who shall lead me to that light and into it, that I may see thee in it? (Pautrat 1993, 37).

Here, as it may happen in artistic creation, theology responds to a holy desire, that of seeing, of piercing through to the mystery of things: “Teach me to seek you,” continued St Anselm. “Show yourself to my gaze as I look for you, for I cannot seek you if you do not guide my steps, or find you if you do not reveal yourself to me” (Pautrat 1993, 40). For St Anselm, faith precedes his understanding of his/her relationship with the Ineffable. Theology is therefore a gift, a gift of faith, the manifestation of a *charism* that is given to some people. To understand theology in this way reminds the theologian of the necessity of humility, since his/her reflection depends on his faith in a God who ultimately eludes him/her. It is also a reminder that a gift is always granted not for oneself but for the benefit of others.

Theology as a gift of the Spirit is always regnocentric.<sup>11</sup> Its primary intention highlights the entry way into the Kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup>

## **A Reflection of Our Own Relationship to God**

Everything in the film is actually a reflection of the director, his/her sensitivity, his/her understanding of the mystery, his relationship to life, to others, to his/her environment. The choice of frames, words, music, sequences reveals something of myself as much, if not more, than it reveals something of Le Saux. The irony of this situation is that the more the filmmaker is invested in the act of creation, the more the life and the message of Le Saux are able to touch the viewer and become an echo of his/her own journey. The way I look at things cannot be separated from the way Le Saux looks at things.

The same is true of the theological act. If the theologian sometimes tends to hide behind his/her words and their coherence, this only makes him/her more present, and shows how difficult it is to harmonize the words of the theologian with the person who speaks them. It is clear that theology, more

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<sup>11</sup> This assumption falls in with the line advocated by the Belgian theologian, Jacques Dupuis, for whom regnocentrism is the perspective to which the Catholic Church is today called to convert. It is for the Church to announce not itself but the presence of the Reign of God which is at the heart of Jesus' preaching. The latter "put in advance the Church at the service of the Reign when he sent the 'Twelve' on mission enjoining them to announce the coming of the Reign (Mt 10, 5-7). The 'good news' that the Church will have to announce after the resurrection (Mk 16:15) is the very one that Jesus announced during his earthly life: the coming of the Reign (Mk 1:15)" (Dupuis 2001, n.d.). But conversion to the Reign requires openness to the Holy Spirit, whose action, according to Dupuis, cannot be confined to the Church. He then distinguishes the Reign and the Church which is the sacrament of the Reign of God in the world, the credible sign of salvation for all. The Church reveals salvation but does not possess it. The Reign as the Spirit is also present outside the Church within the various religions. Hence the idea of Paul Knitter favoring the regnocentric or soteriocentric model (whose central axis is salvation) to respond to criticisms of his theocentric approach that imposes the idea of God on religions that as Buddhism deny it (see Knitter 1986). In this chapter, speaking of the regnocentric theology, I put forward the need for a theology not primarily at the service of a church-institution, but in response to the growing need among our contemporaries of a life in fullness, listening to the Spirit who, inside and outside the Church, through cultural and religious diversity, breathes the desire to be saved.

<sup>12</sup> Our understanding of theology and its object echoes these words of Vito Mancuso: "Eternal life is the main subject of theology. His task is to educate men to enter here and now, without waiting in the dimension of the eternal, because eternity is not after, in the end, over there: it is here and it is now" (Mancuso 2009, 65).

than any other science, is fundamentally subjective. If we regard it as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaeres intellectum*), it follows that, more than a discourse *on* God, it is a discourse *in* God. According to St Anselm, theologians do not understand in order to believe; they believe in order to understand. In other words, their relationship with God gives them, to some extent, the intelligence to say something about it.

The internal state of theologians inevitably influences their remarks, the nature of which will consequently always be relative, that is, conditioned, nonetheless having a universal reach but impossible to be absolutized. While methodology is crucial in theology, its purpose should not be to discover “some ‘objective’ criterion or test or control” (Lonergan 2017, 273), but, on the contrary, to give the subject the means to take part in the process of observation and analysis without giving in to the usual psychological identifications (in reference to the *logismoi* of the Desert spirituality) that make one’s gaze on things confused, partial and without nuances. This echoes Bernard Lonergan’s assumption: “The purification of the categories—the elimination of the unauthentic ... is effected in the measure that theologians attain authenticity through religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. ... Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity” (Lonergan 2017, 273). Theology, as a science, must also take into consideration, along with the Revelation and the Tradition, the experiential and spiritual dimension of both the one who practices it and the authors studied. As Léopold Malevez puts it, “[w]ithout the virtue of faith and the supremely firm adherence that it makes possible, discursive theology would be nothing more than a mind game, a rational arrangement of representations without real significance. Its status as a science comes from the mystical component of faith” (Malevez 1964, 229).

It should be added that film reveals both the presence and the absence of the director. Unless this is the case, there is not room for “magic.” As we have said, without the presence of the director, the film cannot touch the spectator. However, at the same time, the director has to know how to disappear. The director’s choices, words, framing, intentions—everything that gives structure to the film—must be erased so that only the spectator remains in front of a mirror. The image of Henri Le Saux created by the director can then become the space that invites spectators to turn back to themselves, to their own journey, to the space that reflects their yearning to live in fullness. Theologians can be inspired by this relationship of presence and absence involved in artistic creation so that they come to a greater awareness of the impact this relationship has on their words and on those who receive them. For example, a discursive theology cut from its living source reveals far too much of the presence of the one who writes it, which

is ironic in that the authors of this type of theology tend to presume they are being completely objective. The technical terms and the categories they use will reveal, willy-nilly, a desire on their part to reduce divine realities to a system of thought that takes up so much space that no room is left for the reader's conversion of heart.

### **The Message Stems from Interaction**

In light of what we have just said, the film is a reflection of the director and, as such, it can become in turn a reflection of the viewer. This leads us to consider the very nature of the message conveyed in the creative process. From the beginning and throughout the process of making *Dawn of the Abyss*, especially in the editing stage, I found it important to show some friends what I had done. Their first impressions, even more than their intellectual reflections that came afterwards, were major indicators of whether the work in progress respected the above-mentioned balance between presence and absence and was thus able to create meaning. The director cannot determine in advance how the message of the film will be received. And I would say there is actually no real message outside the way the film is received. The message eludes the author and can only come into being in the interaction with the viewer. However, what the director does have a certain control over is the creation of the dispositions for a certain type of interaction. To accomplish that, all that directors have to do first and foremost is follow the impetus (*élan*)—which is an act of faith more than the technical application of knowledge—that drives them to create their films and let go of a desire to give them a pre-established result.

### ***An Embodied Perspective***

The message of the film does not therefore come from the director alone but also from the viewer. The meaning is co-produced (Hansen 2016, 6) and changes according to the circumstances (Hansen 2016, 7)—although it still must be related to the intended meaning of the film. Hence, we see the relevance of considering the challenges of filmmaking and its impact on the viewer in the framework of theological hermeneutics. According to James Hansen, the process of creating a film “is a heuristic ally to Christian theology, an unexpected interlocutor reminding us of our hermeneutical presuppositions and limitations” (Hansen 2016, 31). In this sense, Robert Johnson's criticism of theologians and film critics is revealing. He criticizes the latter, in their choice of films for critical reflection, of determining *a priori* the effect of a film and thus not taking seriously the experience of the

viewer (Johnston 2007, 22). This criticism can have a beneficial effect on theological hermeneutics. While it is true that in the study of a text or a theme, a place is willingly offered to the readers and to their experience of the Holy Spirit (Richard 2006, 24), it seems to me however that this place is actually often limited to the historical and sociological context, hardly taking into account the reader's experience of God in whatever way it is expressly incarnated. Taking this experience into serious account is an essential condition for the exercise of contemplative theology. As Raimon Panikkar states, this makes it a discipline like no other: "We can neither teach nor study contemplation as we do any other subject. Study itself can become a way of engaging in contemplation" (Panikkar 2010, 321).

In this context, filmmaking reminds the theologian of the importance of the place that must be given to the reader, of the reader's ability to embody the meaning taken from the text and to transmute it into action, which, I would add, is first of all a self-transformative action. Once again, the key is not the message itself, a kind of static formula whose univocal meaning is to be imposed in any and all circumstances and contexts. Rather, the key is the partnership between the author and the reader from which the message emerges. Like film (Johnston 2007, 22), contemplative theology is conceived above all as a medium of communication and communion. It only exists in the framework of a relationship to God based on self-knowledge. This means that the comprehension of God, theologically articulated, cannot be purely rational and speculative, the fruit of conceptual thought alone; it must also be based on the spiritual experience of the theologian, and this necessarily implies an awareness of the basic elements of the human psychological condition, such sensations, emotions and thoughts, and the link between them, all of which contribute to the understanding that one has of things. There can be no awakening to God without an awakening to the self. That being so, the author and the reader/viewer can actually connect to one another, and only from there, can they create the space from where a theological discourse capable of transcendence might stem.

### *A Dialogical Perspective*

As a director, the main challenge is to succeed in "codifying" or rather crystallizing the intuition and the experience that one wishes to express and communicate. I consider that the editing activity is at the heart of filmmaking. The marriage of the image with sound, music and narrative must be able to reflect the deep feeling of the editor, embodied in his/her sensations, emotions and thoughts. As is the case with alchemy, it is a matter of creating an unprecedented effect by combining several elements that—taken

separately—would have no chance of producing that effect. But this can succeed only in the immediate welcoming, without recourse to discursive activity, of the sensations and emotions that are the raw echo of the deep desire that seeks expression. What is involved here is the human being as a conscious being, in its totality. This is precisely why the process of creation becomes a path of self-transformation. Paul Valéry expresses it eloquently: “Creation is like breathing; you don’t know how you do it. But artists sense profoundly when they are creating something. Their act engages their whole being. They are strengthened by their cherished pain.”<sup>13</sup> The sign that the alliance between filmmaker and viewer is successful lies in the ability of this alliance to resonate with the viewers, to generate in them an emotion, a feeling and a reflection that sends them back to their own experience of the sacred. The intention of this work, if it can be reasoned-out into logic, is not to write a precise and predetermined message to the viewer, but rather to communicate a yearning, a direction, a thirst. This comment from one of my students about *Dawn of the Abyss* written in the context of my course on Art and the Sacred, is along these lines:

Many moments in this film made me understand my way of life and where I am ... For the first time, I feel that I live for myself and not for others. As Hillel Hazaken puts it, “If I’m not here for myself, who will be?” I finally understand. I’m not about to give up or to run away; I am reaching out. I finally cling to my own being and that is something no one else can do for me. I understood a lot about myself watching this movie. I felt confident about being in the place that is right for me.

Inevitably, this sense of reaching out takes on a particular form according to each individual’s own character. It remains nonetheless the *locus* of a possible communion between the author and the reader. What we have, therefore, is a true dialogue, which Pierre-François de Béthune defines as a word of life that allows itself to be open to another. And, the more this word comes from the heart of the one who utters it, the more it will be able to penetrate the heart of the one who receives it (Béthune 1997, 50). Now, this heart to heart is precisely the place of an opening to contemplative life. If it is to become the driving force of the theological act, truth is not therefore to be found first of all in the description of a fact or in the articulation of a belief or in an *a priori*, but in the dialogical coherence of an imaginative representation capable of reaching beyond itself, in the

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<sup>13</sup> Original inscription on the pediment of the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, 1937. Original version: “Tout homme crée sans le savoir. Comme il respire. Mais l’artiste se sent créer. Son acte engage tout son être. Sa peine bien-aimée le fortifie.”

Presence that cannot be contained by any formula. In other words, theological discourse becomes dynamic and a word of salvation when it is born from welcoming the otherness—which refers here to filmmaking as an artistic medium—and to the reader/viewer with whom I co-produce through the medium of film it becomes a way to express and to articulate one’s own desire for fullness. This is undoubtedly the great message of Henri Le Saux, and it is also the intention I had in making this film, namely, in a context of hospitality, to give a sense of the invisible through the visible, to be open to transcendence in the reception of the contingent, to evoke eternity through the movement of space and time.

### Concluding Remarks

In his last lecture, shortly before his death, Karl Rahner spoke of the difficulty theology has reconnecting with its *raison d’être*:

I would simply confess that, poor theologian that I am, in all my theological utterances, I have thought too little of their analogical coefficient. We dwell too much on talking about whatever it is we are talking about and forget what it is all about (Rahner 1985, 20).

For Rahner, “what it is all about” is the abyss of the utter unknowability of God, this unknowability that Le Saux discovered near Ramana Maharshi, at the foot of the mountain Arunāchala. What it is all about is the living God, present in the heart of oneself and of the world, always analogically apprehended, and always remaining beyond our conceptual grasp (*advaita*).<sup>14</sup> It is my hope that these brief reflections have shown there can be a fruitful dialogue between filmmaking and theology, one that will give theology a way to renew itself by taking hold of the experiential and apophatic dimension that is essential to it.

If the medium that caught our attention in this chapter is filmmaking, this dialogue certainly applies to all the arts. However, filmmaking has a singularity that makes it a privileged partner with theologians. I believe that the capacity of film to transform viewers by “projecting” them from the visible to the invisible makes it a privileged partner of the theologian. This is due to the fact that this art belongs to the order of the ritual, of liturgy. When we watch a movie, it is normally from beginning to end, without interruption. The time of the experience is short, two or three hours at the

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<sup>14</sup> Le Saux captures the ineffability of God in his experience and understanding of *advaita* (non-duality) which he expresses as the “reminder that God — and therefore nothing of what he did — can ever totally enter our concepts” (Le Saux 1966, 183).



most, and its place is a hospitable one (Marty 2016, 8). We are welcomed into a darkened room, invited to put our senses at rest in order to have a better experience. The film does not make us passive, but rather more disposed to experience an inner journey in the world of one's own sensations, emotions, and thoughts.

The itinerary is not set in advance, despite its proposed and meticulously thought out framework. "In the projected images," writes Joseph Marty, the viewer "projects and identifies him/herself, giving their own life to these vampiric shadows. The projection booth, the theater, and the screening are all called projection. What a curious process, beginning with a device called a projector that is operated by a projectionist!" (Marty 2016, 40). The film does more than describe a situation, deliver a message, and make us think; in the dim light of the space that is the viewers' situation, we are even more able to "die in order to become." This is what makes film initiatory.

Film echoes the theological necessity of showing the passage from the old self to the new self (Eph 4:20-24), and by so doing, contains the opportunity to reach people who, although inclined to spirituality, have moved far away from Christianity and those who do not yet know that theology can have meaning for their lives. Film activates the power of the imagination in a unique way, and gives birth to the myths of today's society. Robert Johnson considers film to be the primary source of meaning throughout the world (Johnston 2007, 16). Being aware of the extent of the impact of film—and taking it fully into account—is certainly one of the ways theology can recapture the vivid debate among Christians about the role of the visual arts in connecting us to the Sacred that has been going on since the earliest times of the Church (See Menozzi 1991, and Besançon 2000), and thus make the image once again a *locus* of spiritual awakening.

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