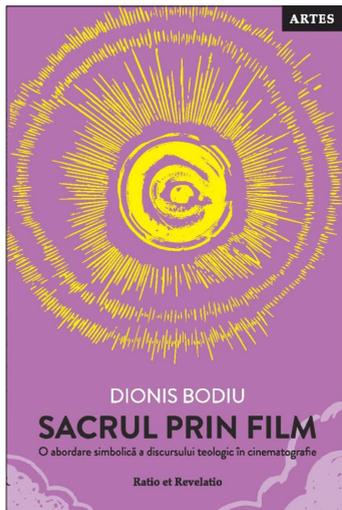


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## Through the “Sacred” Towards the “Cinematographic Idea”

**Review of:** Dionis Bodi, *Sacrul prin film. O abordare simbolică a discursului teologic în cinematografie* [*The Sacred through Film. A Symbolic Approach to Theological Discourse in Cinema*], Ratio et Revelatio, Oradea, 2018.



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The author of this book is a graduate in computer science at Cluj and was awarded a Master's degree in theology at the University of Bucharest, with a thesis entitled *Sacred-profane paradigm as a mean of promoting the theological discourse in cinema*. Bodi, who publishes a blog (<https://dyobodi.wordpress.com>) where he signs as Dyo, has opened some theological controversies and sometimes presents televised conferences on cinema, like the one at <https://aradulevanghelic.wordpress.com/2015/05/17/series-dialogos-sacrul-in-film-cu-dionis-point-video>, where he sums up the ideas developed in this book.

The Introduction begins with the arguments of deacon Andrei Kuraev, who was against the broadcast of a blasphemous film about Christ on Russian television channels in 1997. The Russian deacon defended his position by claiming the need of a “vertical” culture (Bodi 9). Resisting “flattening” and refusing to become “mass culture” and in order to remain “human”, to continue

the “humanization of the world”, culture must communicate “the sensation of the heights,” a sense of holiness (Bodiu 9). This is where the author further develops the terms “hierophany” and “myth”, as defined by Mircea Eliade, and considers that films such as those attacked by Andrei Kuraev “function as a profane, desecrating elements” in the world order (Bodiu 10-11).

Bodiu states that films can be understood as a “space of theological reflection” (Bodiu 12) and proposes three directions of understanding the relation between theology and film, as presented by Joel Martin – theological, ideological and mythological. The book will follow this last dimension, and will analyze the mythological component of cinema. (Bodiu 14-15).

Chapter 1, entitled “Mythical Orientation”, is an attempt to provide a theoretical framework that could explain the concepts of “myth” and “ritual”. The myth is presented in the classical definition provided by Eliade, as “a story of a creation” (Bodiu 18). It is “a sacred story” and “at the same time, a real one”. The myth gives mankind a “model” that “by imitation or participation in the reality helps man to recognize himself, to be truly himself” (Bodiu 18). When discussing the concept of “ritual”, the author also takes over the idea proposed by Mircea Eliade. According to him, the ritual repeats a mythical act and “gives meaning and reality to events” (profane, our completion) (Eliade quoted in Bodiu 19). Because of this understanding, myth and history are no longer “in antithesis” and allow the author to regard Christianity as a myth, a myth that truly happened. An entire subchapter called “The Mythical Character of Christian Revelation and Confession” is dedicated to this presupposition. Further on, the author presents “the histories of the origins in the Bible” and the concept of *imitatio*, which he considers to be fundamental for the existence of all Christians.

The second part of the chapter refers to the “mythical character of cinematographic discourse” and presents time and space in films (describing them as the “alchemy of reality”). Next, the discussion is oriented towards the atmosphere in which the actions begin (Bodiu 28-30). A rather confusing part, in my opinion, is the third, which deals with the characteristics of films using “repeatability and ritual”. This part is divided into three distinct levels: “the experience of watching,” “narrative patterns,” and “repetitive experiences in the actual content of films”. A fourth element that could confirm the mythical character of cinema is the existence of movies in which the characters must “fully assume their path” until, at some point in their lives, this life becomes better and allows them to move on – here the hero in *Groundhog Day* (Ramis 1993) is presented as an argument. At the end of this chapter the author announces the following interpretations, which refer to the experience of the sacred in religion and in cinema.

The second chapter is theoretical, opening with Norman Geisler’s vision about the religious experience, that requires “total engagement” (as mentioned in Bodiu 44) defined by seven “dimensions”. Here the concepts of *hierophany* and *coincidentia*

*oppositorum* are consistently used, both fundamental for the way in which Mircea Eliade defined the sacred. Sacred and sacred space are the only "real" facts (Bodiu 51) which provide order. "In comparison to the sacred, the profane can be regarded as illusory", as a manifestation and source of relativism in human existence (Bodiu 53). The author claims that "the experience of the sacred gives man meaning and reality, an absolute orientation" (Bodiu 53), and that the myth must be understood as a "true, sacred, exemplary and significant history" (Bodiu 54). The last term introduced in this chapter is that of "hierophanic horizon".

The most important chapter dedicated to "the sacred in cinema" is divided in several parts. The first one discusses film as image and refuses its ability to express theological messages. Here the author criticizes the positions of Wolfgang Zoller and A.W. Tozer, their points of view are considered to be unfounded, since "the film is essentially more than image" (Bodiu 65). The second part presents the "transcendental style in films" which, as argued by Paul Schrader, is a style using camera movement and image editing reduced to minimum, providing even a "sacramental" dimension, as identified by Peter Fraser (Bodiu 66-71). The following part describes John Lyden's approach, which states that the film can be understood as a religion in itself, using the sociological interpretation of Clifford Geertz. This chapter ends with the presentation of the cinematographic art as *locus theologicus*. Bodiu mentions here the interpretation of Brent Plate who considered that both film and religion are able to create worlds (Bodiu 77). The conclusion is that cinema, by appealing to "myths, rituals, hierophanies, experiences," "has the ability either to put the person in front of the meeting with the transcendent, or to confront him with the consequences of a way of life without any direction. Through them, the cinema testifies about an order in the space of human experience, about meanings, about verticality". In their absence the world would be (once again as Mircea Eliade said) a chaos (Bodiu 82-83).

With the fourth chapter, entitled "The Means of the Sacred in Movies", we enter the area of the book that offers the most applied analysis of specific films. This chapter is divided into three parts, the first dealing with "biblical images and themes", as discovered in movies. The second section claims that it would "broaden the area of analysis of the means of the sacred in cinema" considering that the interpretation of "mythical symbolism" could allow a transcultural approach, and, as we understand it, also trans-religious (Bodiu 112). The author returns to Mircea Eliade and uses the symbolism of the Center, of initiation, of cosmogony and the "nostalgia of paradise". Among the author's favorite films (which are extensively used throughout the book) are *Stalker* (Tarkovsky 1979), *Repentance* (Abuladze 1987), *Life as a House* (Winkler 2001), *Silence* (Scorsese 2016), *Titanic* (Cameron 1997), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen 1985) and *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells 2003). A third section (in fact a kind of parenthesis or an amendment because of its powerful contemporary relevance) is "The paradox of the sacred in illustrating the absence". Under this title, Dionis Bodiu talks about the sacred defined in and through its absence. This refers to the

negation of any solution based on faith, about the rejection of the transcendental order by the characters of some movies. This theme is illustrated by movies as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Allen 1989), *Broken Flowers* (Jarmusch 2005), *Manchester by the Sea* (Loneragan 2016) and *Calvary* (McDonagh 2014).

The short conclusions of chapter four represent an anticipation of the fifth, entitled "From experience to idea". The central statement, towards which the whole book "flows", is that film "is not limited to facilitating some special experiences during viewing", instead it "communicates ideas, provokes us to reflect, and sometimes leads us to re-assess landmarks and perspectives on life" (Bodiu 151). This is only the case of "good" films, or masterpieces (like the masterpieces in other arts), which can bring before us ideas, insights so profound (and beautiful) that they can remain as cornerstones that can change our lives. Sometimes this happens suddenly, other times without us even realizing how delicately it is taking place.

At the end of his book Dionis Bodiu presents the experience of the sacred in the film split into three elements which refer to different soul depths: "fascination, fear and idea (meaning)" (Bodiu 153). Here fascination is defined as "the spectator's response to the encounter with paradox, with that image that defies the profound monotony of everyday existence" (Bodiu 157). Fear is labeled as an "earthquake - a death and a resurrection" (Bodiu 159) as films provided particular experiences (Bodiu 160). For the author a mythical symbol in a movie "dies" when represented as a private story, it becomes ephemeral (Bodiu 160). For example, McMurphy, Ken Kesey's character, initially does not resemble Christ, but he eventually completes this experience in the end, through the work of "Grace", that "covers the difference" (Bodiu 166).

For Bodiu the deepest "gift" that a "good" film can bring to humanity is an idea, a new and surprising meaning that can penetrate "the soul". This is the "cinematographic idea" (Bodiu 164), the one that can change lives. The author himself presents his experience as an enlarged horizon made possible by Tenghiz Abuladze's movie *Repentance* (1984).

This book, which is a contribution made by a Romanian author to the broader field of Theology and Film studies, a research field that has begun more than twenty years ago, especially in United States, has the "courage" to describe how intimate consequences of personal experiences as spectator can become theoretical arguments. It is worth noting the author's choice for many of the so-called "secular films," instead of those with specific religious themes, which exemplify the presence of sacred in cinema. But what makes me most enthusiastic about this book is, as mentioned above, the assertion that the most profound effect of a "good" movie on a spectator is to bring him to "a new horizon of life". This confirms my own intuition that a masterpiece can launch a "cinematographic idea" that penetrates the spectator's soul and triggers, through its beauty and truth, a concert of subtle meanings, lightening new nuances in understanding life.