

Joel Mayward

# Parabolic Transcendence in Time and Narrative

## Shane Carruth's PRIMER (US 2004) and UPSTREAM COLOR (US 2013) as Post-Secular Sci-Fi Parables

### Abstract

Subjectivity, memory, and the invisible connections between individuals' identities are all conspicuous themes within filmmaker Shane Carruth's two award-winning indie sci-fi films, *PRIMER* (US 2004) and *UPSTREAM COLOR* (US 2013). In this article, I contend that both *PRIMER* and *UPSTREAM COLOR* are post-secular cinematic parables per philosopher Paul Ricoeur's description of parable: the conjunction of a narrative form and a metaphorical process, addressing the religious via non-religious discourse. Interpreting these two films through a Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic addresses their mutual transcendence in and through time and narrative via their striking visual and auditory aesthetics, the use of montage in their nonlinear narratives, and the depiction of invisible relational connections between the films' protagonists. I conclude that Carruth's post-secular cinema resides in an in-between space: between the secular and the religious, realism and expressionism, immanence and transcendence.

### Keywords

Shane Carruth, Paul Ricoeur, Parable, Post-Secular, Transcendence, Time Travel, Film-Theology

### Biography

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He heard a low and seemingly very distant sound, but singularly grand and impressive, unlike anything he had ever heard, gradually swelling and increasing as if it would have a universal and memorable ending.

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The extraordinary within the ordinary, such is the logic of meaning in the parables.

– Paul Ricoeur

## Touching the Transcendent

Closing my eyes, I remember emerging from the theater into the blue-and-grey evening in downtown Vancouver, BC, after experiencing *UPSTREAM COLOR* (Shane Carruth, US 2013), my whole body transfixed and transfigured adjacent to my wife; we were hand in hand, both of us in silent wonder at what we had just witnessed. The film felt baptismal in its immersive soundscape and provocative images, as if we had dipped into the currents of an eternal river and emerged awakened and dripping with fresh perspectives. As we drove home, neither of us was entirely sure what we had just encountered, but we knew we had briefly touched the transcendent.

Subjectivity, memory, and the invisible connections between individuals' identities are all conspicuous themes within *UPSTREAM COLOR*'s narrative. These themes are also observable in Shane Carruth's debut film, *PRIMER* (US 2004), a low-budget indie film which pushes the boundaries of narrative coherence via its convoluted-yet-cohesive consideration of time travel. The two engineers at the heart of this film wrestle with what it means to act with prescience as they play God, becoming eternal while ordinary humans in a blurring of physics and metaphysics.

In this article, I contend that both *PRIMER* and *UPSTREAM COLOR* are sci-fi cinematic parables per philosopher Paul Ricoeur's description of parable as "the conjunction of a narrative form and a metaphorical process".<sup>1</sup> These films' imaginative fictitious narratives incorporate extraordinary elements within realistic settings of mundane everyday life, re-orienting the audience by way of disorientation as the parabolic narrative-metaphor addresses the limits of human experience, ultimately offering a glimpse of the transcendent. Interpreting these two films through a Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic addresses their mutual transcendence in and through time and narrative via their striking visual and auditory aesthetics, the use of montage in their nonlinear narratives, and the depiction of invisible relational connections be-

1 Ricoeur 1975, 30.

tween the two lead characters, Abe (David Sullivan) and Aaron (Carruth) in *PRIMER*, and Kris (Amy Seimetz) and Jeff (Carruth) in *UPSTREAM COLOR*. Before turning to a deep reading of each film, let us apply Ricoeur’s hermeneutics to parable and sci-fi cinema. I have previously explored Ricoeurian cinematic parables in horror films, via *MOTHER!* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2016), and superhero films, via *BLACK PANTHER* (Ryan Coogler, US 2018).<sup>2</sup>

## Ricoeurian Cinematic Parables

In his 1975 *Semeia* article “Biblical Hermeneutics”, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the genre of parable as the conjunction of a *narrative form* and a *metaphorical process*. This narrative-metaphor points to a third element, an external reference beyond the parable which Ricoeur labels “limit-experiences”.<sup>3</sup> Limit-experiences are human encounters with the horizon of knowledge, imagination, and material reality, immanence nearing or breaching the transcendent. As a narrative-metaphor addressing limit-experiences, a parable is a heuristic fiction which re-describes the religious dimension of human existence without resorting to overtly religious language.<sup>4</sup> It is a story which refers to something *beyond* what was literally told in the narrative, even as that story remains coherent in itself. While some biblical scholars like C. H. Dodd have described this external referent in parables as the “kingdom of God”, Ricoeur appears broader in his suggestion that the referent is “human reality in its wholeness”.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in summary, Ricoeurian parables are (1) a *realist narrative form* in conjunction with (2) a *metaphorical process* referring to (3) an *existential limit-experience* which provokes a possible transformation within the audience. John Dominic Crossan summarizes Ricoeur’s threefold description as *narrativity*, *metaphoricity*, and *paradoxicality*.<sup>6</sup> While Ricoeur applies this description of parable to literature, the translation from text to cinema will become evident in my application of Ricoeur’s concepts to Carruth’s films, even as I aim to steer clear of literary text-based trappings so common in theologians’ and biblical scholars’ interpretations of cinema.<sup>7</sup>

2 Mayward 2017, Mayward 2019.

3 Ricoeur 1975, 30, 33.

4 Ricoeur 1975, 32.

5 Dodd 1935, Ricoeur 1975, 127.

6 Crossan 1980, 2.

7 Melanie Wright wonders if this frequent conflation of film with texts in film analysis by religious scholars is due to the privileging of sacred scriptures over and above other media; I think she rightfully questions whether such text-based approaches are truly engaging with film *qua* film at all. See Wright 2007, 21–22.

Indeed, film scholar Dudley Andrew has suggested Ricoeur's relevance for interpretation in film theory,<sup>8</sup> and Alberto Baracco has demonstrated Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutic in film-philosophy. Similar to Andrew and Baracco, I apply Ricoeur to film-theology to explore how these parables might be *doing* theology via cinema.<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur considers all parables as having a narrative structure, or *emplotment*. In his *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur's hypothesis centers on the narrativity of human temporal reality, suggesting that we make meaning and interpret all our experiences through narrative – all reality is storied in time. In crafting his hermeneutical circle – what he describes as an “endless spiral” of interpretation<sup>10</sup> – Ricoeur describes three levels or modes of mimesis: mimesis<sub>1</sub> (prefigured time), mimesis<sub>2</sub> (configured time), and mimesis<sub>3</sub> (refigured or transfigured time).<sup>11</sup> Applied to cinema, mimesis<sub>1</sub>, or the world *behind* the film, entails a pre-understanding or “practical understanding” of the nature of narratives, what a filmgoer understands of the structural, symbolic, and temporal dynamics of the emplotted story.<sup>12</sup> Mimesis<sub>2</sub>, the world of the film, is the mode of emplotment, bringing together the individual elements of the story – characters, events, actions, descriptions – and integrating them within the framing structure of narrative, transforming a succession of events into a meaningful whole. Finally, mimesis<sub>3</sub>, the world *in front of* the film, marks the intersection of the film-world with the life-world of the audience.<sup>13</sup> This stage is referential in that the film-world is discernible and applicable to everyday life; it is where the film potentially transforms our perspective and praxis.

Ricoeur asserts that parables are stories which could have actually occurred to people in everyday life yet contain a peculiarity or eccentricity. This peculiarity is not due to fantastical or magical elements, but *precisely because of the parable's realism*. As Ricoeur puts it, parables depict “the extraordinary within the ordinary.”<sup>14</sup> This quality “remains a fantastic of the everyday, without the supernatural, as it appears in fairy tales or in myths.”<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur sees a narrative structure underlying this peculiarity: “Parables are ordinary stories whose entire metaphorical power is concentrated in a moment of crisis and in a denouement that is either tragic or comic.”<sup>16</sup> Such is the paradox of the parabolic structure: it begins in an ordinary manner, one

8 Andrew 1984, 180–187.

9 Baracco 2017.

10 Ricoeur 1984, 72.

11 Ricoeur 1984, 53.

12 Ricoeur 1984, 54–56.

13 Ricoeur 1984, 71.

14 Ricoeur 1995, 60.

15 Ricoeur 1981, 167.

16 Ricoeur 1981, 167. Emphasis in original.

the audience recognizes as the “real world”, only to upend the audience’s expectations of reality through an affective crisis and subsequent coda yet remain within the “real”. Ricoeur places such great emphasis on realism in parable that the genres of fable, fantasy, and magical realism should be considered distinct from or even antithetical to parable’s aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> Would not this need for realism in parable disqualify the majority of science fiction films, with their otherworldly and fantastical elements conflicting with realism? Yet this realist aesthetic is precisely why Carruth’s approach to sci-fi can be considered parabolic: through his emphasis of the ordinary natural world via his grassroots *mise en scène*, he highlights the incredible *within* the quotidian. For both Carruth and Ricoeur, the bewildering transcendent revelation manifests itself because the parable-world appears to be conventional and mundane yet reveals itself to be more than initially meets the eye (or ear, or soul). Carruth’s films are speculative fictions set in the present day; they contain no aliens or spaceships, no advanced technology or otherworldly beings. This parabolic narrative distinction of the numinous bursting through simplicity invites a polyvalence of interpretations even as it resists distortive hermeneutical approaches – it provides boundaries while allowing for imaginative interpretive play.

This contrast between realism and extravagance gives rise to the metaphoric element of parables. Ricoeur posits that the metaphorical process provides the intermediary link between the realist narrative and the existential interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Similar to his larger study, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur argues in “Biblical Hermeneutics” for metaphor as resemblance and redescription. True metaphors, for Ricoeur, are untranslatable; they are ontologically new descriptions of reality. This does not mean they cannot be paraphrased or described, but Ricoeur is quick to note that any such translation is “infinite”, meaning possible legitimate interpretations cannot be exhausted or reduced to mere propositional language.<sup>19</sup> Thus, cinematic metaphors cannot be abridged to semantic synopsis or moral messages – parables are not mere didactic illustrations, but rather world-shattering polyvalent metaphors. Ricoeur puts it succinctly: “Metaphor says something new about reality.”<sup>20</sup> Yet how do we discern a narrative is a parable with a metaphoric process as opposed to a mere story or some other symbol-laden genre, such as allegory or fa-

17 For instance, in R. Johnston 2014, Robert Johnston’s main example of film as parable is the fantasy film *STRANGER THAN FICTION* (Marc Forster, US 2006), which is decidedly unrealistic and moralistic in both form and content. Johnston thus appears to conflate magical realism with parable, whereas I would argue that these genres are similar but distinct. Following Ricoeur and Crossan, I propose that cinematic parables are more realistic, indirect, and subversive than fantastical, allegorical, and illustrative.

18 Ricoeur 1975, 75.

19 Ricoeur 1975, 80.

20 Ricoeur 1975, 80.

ble? In searching for what he calls “signs of metaphoricity”, Ricoeur finds his answer in the narrative structure: the dimension of *extravagance* within the *ordinary* realism of the story “delivers the openness of the metaphorical process from the closure of the narrative form”.<sup>21</sup>

Ricoeurian parabolic realism is congruent with the cinematic realism described and celebrated by classical French film theorists André Bazin, Amédée Ayfre, and Henri Agel. Bazin is well-known for his praise of French and Italian realist cinema and its sacramental capacity; his lesser-known contemporaries Ayfre and Agel also recognize the sacred and transcendent in cinema.<sup>22</sup> Building on Agel and Ayfre’s phenomenological approach, Michael Bird draws a strong connection between cinematic realism and what he calls *spiritual realism*, a term originating with Agel: “If film is understood to possess a continuity with the world it represents, then in order for cinema to have a means by which it can open us to the dimension of the sacred, this means would have to be directed to the discernment of the holy *within the real* rather than leading away from the real as in the case of art that abolishes reality.”<sup>23</sup> Such realist cinema pays attention to the everyday moments, allowing time and images to point us to something beyond the mere material, as seen in the films of recent auteurs such as Asghar Farhadi, Cristian Mungiu, Kelly Reichardt, Debra Granik, and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Ricoeur directs his attention in “Biblical Hermeneutics” to limit-expressions, which utilize paradox, hyperbole, and other modes of intensification to address the external referent of the parables, namely existential limit-experiences. Also described by Ricoeur as “boundary-situations”, limit-experiences are ineffable peak moments within human existence such as death, suffering, guilt, and hatred, but also birth, joy, grace, and love.<sup>25</sup> As religious discourse in non-religious language and image, parables as limit-expressions attempt to describe these limit-experiences of immanence on the horizon of transcendence in a metaphoric montage between film-world and life-world. In *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur suggests that as the reader interprets the text, the text also interprets and affects the reader. Thus the filmgoer discovers themselves anew via the filmic parable-world, a reorientation by way of disorientation. The task of interpretation is only completed when the audience emerges from the hermeneutical circle with a reoriented theological and mor-

21 Ricoeur 1975, 99.

22 Agel 1961, Ayfre 2004.

23 May/Bird 1982, 13.

24 The Dardennes’ post-secular parabolic films are the focus of my forthcoming PhD thesis at the University of St Andrews, tentatively titled “Post-Secular Cinematic Parables: Theology, Philosophy, and Ethics in the Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne”.

25 Ricoeur 1975, 128.

al imagination; Ricoeur calls this “engagement in action”<sup>26</sup> or “moral decision”.<sup>27</sup> Thus, within the application phase of mimesis<sub>3</sub>, an existential and ethical response occurs as the audience shifts from the parable-world into their life-world with both a fresh understanding of reality and a propensity to enact this new understanding. With Ricoeur’s narrative-metaphors and limit-experiences as our hermeneutical framework, we can now turn to Carruth’s sci-fi parables *PRIMER* and *UPSTREAM COLOR*.

## PRIMER: “Did You Notice the Parabolic?”

“They took from their surroundings what was needed and made of it something more.”<sup>28</sup> This repeated statement in the voiceover narration from Carruth’s Aaron – or at least one iteration of Aaron – is an apt introduction to the world of *PRIMER* and its fractured elliptical narrative, a formal decision in harmony with its approach to time travel. As the main characters progress in their time-travel practices and experimentation, the film’s very plot structure appropriately collapses into a confusing cycle. Inspired by Feynman diagrams, *PRIMER* has an “extremely fractured syuzhet [...] It pushes the act of piecing together the overall narrative (or fabula) to a radically obtuse degree.”<sup>29</sup> In this, we the audience are prompted to take from the film-world’s surroundings and, like the ordinary engineers of this parable, make of it “something more”, to search for traces of meaning in the parabolic, to move back and forth in our own memories of the filmic events in order to construct a semi-coherent whole in both time and narrative.

Made on a meager shooting budget of \$7,000 and a skeleton crew of Carruth’s family and friends, *PRIMER* ultimately won the 2004 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. It opens with Aaron’s narration as heard through a phone recording in his attempt to explain to his past/future self (and the audience) what has/will transpire(d). From the inaugural shot of a garage door opening (a repeated motif), there follows a series of scenes of four engineers experimenting with entrepreneurial ideas in Aaron’s garage. During one experiment involving the electromagnetic reduction of an object’s weight via various elements and power sources, Abe and Aaron accidentally discover (or create?) an approximately 1,300-minute time loop, an enclosed field in which an object is somehow unanchored from linear time and placed into a state of parabolic time in a continuously repeating sequence,

26 Ricoeur 1981, 168.

27 Ricoeur 1978, 245.

28 *PRIMER* (Shane Carruth, US 2004), 00:01:15–00:01:21.

29 Bergstrom 2013.

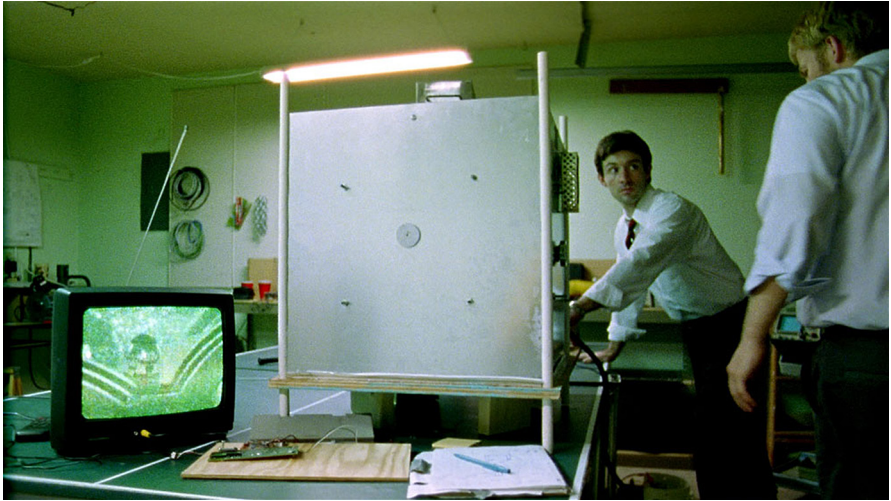


Fig. 1: Discovering time travel. Film still, PRIMER (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 00:12:07.

allowing the object to be removed either in the present or at some point in the past (fig. 1).

Building upon the discovered premise, Abe eventually creates “the box” – this is a larger unit capable of containing a human being and allowing them to go back in time if they enter and exit the box at the correct points in the parabolic traversal (fig. 2). Abe describes this process to a bewildered Aaron:

ABE: Look, everything we’re putting into that box becomes ungrounded, and I don’t mean grounded like to the earth, I mean, not tethered. I mean, we’re blocking whatever keeps it moving forward and so they flip-flop. Inside the box it’s like a street, both ends are cul-de-sacs. I mean, this isn’t frame dragging or wormhole magic, this is basic mechanics and heat 101.

AARON: This is *not* mechanics and heat.<sup>30</sup>

As Abe and Aaron repeatedly travel back in time to take advantage of the stock market – being careful not to disturb their double selves within the overlapping timelines – a crisis occurs when an acquaintance, Thomas Granger (Chip Carruth), appears to have also traveled through the box, but for a much greater length of time, leaving him disheveled and ultimately comatose. Since neither Abe nor Aaron can imagine a logical scenario where they would share their secret knowledge

30 PRIMER (US 2004), 00:25:41–00:26:00.





Fig. 2: The box. Film still, *PRIMER* (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 00:45:07.

with Granger, the pair's trust in one another (and in their own moral goodness) is called into question. As the narrative progresses, both the duo and the viewer realize that the diegetic timeline is fractured and overlapped, with multiple Aarons and Abes circling through events, causing everyone (both characters and audience) to lose their grip on what is happening.<sup>31</sup>

*PRIMER*'s narrative has been described as “confounding” and “labyrinthine”, leaving the audience “disoriented by the abrupt, matter-of-fact infusion of weirdness” in the otherwise mundane events.<sup>32</sup> Carruth likely intended this disorientation, for when ordinary humans are facing a paradox or a limit-experience, they need interpretation in order to gain understanding, even if full comprehension is impossible. In a 2004 *New York Times* interview, Carruth described his approach to the film's narrative structure:

My favorite films are the ones that can't be tidily summed up... yet I walk away with a sense of the core. I wanted to make a film like that. As I was writing, my brother would say, “It's confusing.” I would ask, “Well, what do you think is happening? Just take a guess.” He always got it right. He'd say, “No, no, I get it, I just don't think anybody else would.” But that's exactly what I was going for. I

31 It is worth noting here that Shane Carruth's composed soundtrack for the film becomes increasingly digitized, agitated, and ethereal as the narrative spirals into bewilderment.

32 D'Angelo 2004.



Fig. 3: Multiple timelines. Film still, PRIMER (Shane Carruth, US 2004), © ERBP Film, 01:14:04.

wanted it to be right on that line [...] The audience never knows more than Abe and Aaron know ... But “Primer” is airtight; the information is in there. No one’s shown me a hole yet. People who decide to see it a second time, a third, fourth, fifth time [...] they tell me it’s a different experience.<sup>33</sup>

In Ricoeur’s hermeneutical circle, he proposes a dialectic between “guessing” and “validating” where one intuits a proposed interpretation of a text – a guess based in probability – then seeks validation of the interpretation *within* the world of the text itself. PRIMER prompts exactly this response within its audience, as if by entering the film-world they too have entered a box of the parabolic: “the box” is a metaphorical hermeneutical circle. In their early experimentation, Abe says to Aaron, “When you were controlling the feeds, did you notice the parabolic? Hey, it’s important. Parabolas are important.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, PRIMER is parabolic in both senses of the word, via its ever-curving cul-de-sac of plotment as well as a narrative-metaphor evoking a limit-experience in its audience. As Carruth says (and personal experience affirms), repeat viewings of the film generate different experiences and interpretations, which is precisely the Ricoeurian “endless spiral” of interpretation within the hermeneutical modes of mimesis.<sup>35</sup>

33 Shulman 2004.

34 PRIMER (US 2004), 00:23:44–00:23:49.

35 Ricoeur 1984, 72.

Looking for other signs of metaphoricity, we can observe the motif of doors opening and closing: at Aaron's home, the storage-unit hallway, and the actual time-travel boxes themselves. In particular, the storage hallway of seemingly infinite doors (fig. 3) housing the boxes is a striking symbol for the multiple timelines occurring within the film, connoting the various possible trajectories and decisions Aaron and Abe are capable of making, generating endless potential second (and third, and fourth) attempts to do the right thing at a specific point in time (although what is morally "right" becomes increasingly opaque). The doors also suggest an infinite number of possible interpretations for this parabolic story – which interpretive portal will we enter on this occasion, in this viewing?

In moving from text to action – to the world *in front of* the film – *PRIMER* provokes one obvious question: *what would you do if you could travel in time?* While a plethora of other science fiction stories have explored this query, *PRIMER* is unique for its simple-yet-complex parabolic approach, where its very realism reinforces its philosophical and theological questions. The settings are mundane and sparse – a garage, a kitchen, a storage-unit facility, a hotel room – while the time-travel machine is mostly PVC pipe, wires, and duct tape (fig. 2). The American indie aesthetic of the film itself – the handheld cinematography, the 16 mm film, the non-professional or unrecognized actors, the real-life locations, the improvisational-sounding technical dialogue – connotes a cinematic realism. It is this very lack of extravagance which provokes a sense of wonder, as if the most transcendent and miraculous of all human events quietly occurred in a little corner of Texas. The boring engineers must contend with the fact that they have a unique prescient knowledge and the capacity to change events for good or ill; their ability to step outside time ever so briefly allows these ordinary men to begin acting like gods, orchestrating moments in order to fulfill their will. Cultural critic Chuck Klosterman describes *PRIMER* as “the finest movie about time travel I’ve ever seen” because of its realistic aesthetic:

The reason *PRIMER* is the best [...] is because it's the most realistic [...] the plausibility of *PRIMER* is why it's so memorable. It's not that the time machine in *PRIMER* seems more authentic; it's that the time travelers themselves seem more believable. They talk and act (and *think*) like the kind of people who might accidentally figure out how to move through time, which is why it's the best depiction we have of the ethical quandaries that would emerge from such a discovery.<sup>36</sup>

This is precisely the realism of Ricoeurian parables, the extraordinary within the ordinary, as well as the ethical and theological questions the cinematic parable pro-

36 Klosterman 2009, 63–64.

vokes in the audience. Carruth has stated that the film is about risk and trust, about how two colleagues' morals and identities are pushed to their limits via an impossible situation becoming possible. As Aaron and Abe confront the endless cycle of selves they have created via the time loops, the film ends on an ambiguous note, with Abe choosing to watch over his past selves like a guardian angel while Aaron seeks to expand the experiment to global proportions.

Moreover, *PRIMER* has unique resonance with the Ricoeurian stage of refiguration in the narrative, where the "real" of history and the "unreal" of fictional narratives are able to be bridged. In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur suggests that through the act of reading, an imaginative text (such as a film) serves as a mediator for the audience to move between the fictional film world and the practical and affective realm of existence, a "transcendence in immanence".<sup>37</sup> Thus, as we "read" *PRIMER*, the diegetic untethering of time in the narrative makes us keenly aware of the non-diegetic experience of time itself in our real existence, even as we resist breaching our suspension of disbelief. In other words, the back-and-forth movement from the parable-world of *PRIMER* into the life-world of the audience has the revelatory effect of a fresh awareness of the experience of time even as the film is unfolding. It prompts lingering questions about time's very nature that are reminiscent of Augustine's wonderment in his *Confessions*: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know."<sup>38</sup>

Ultimately, *PRIMER* suggests that our human existence tethered to time is not a limitation but a freedom. As Ricoeur puts it in *Oneself as Another*, our identity is anchored in time and narrative, a self-sameness throughout changes in history, a selfhood as becoming.<sup>39</sup> In real time, I am and I am not the same person I was six hours (or six years) ago; in *PRIMER*, emancipated from time, I am both persons at once, which means I am also neither. When I am time-less, I am thus narrative- and self-less, making all observed reality and history seem inane as my very self disintegrates (as they continue to use the box, the engineers begin to bleed from their ears and lose the ability to write). Simple statements about reality stop making sense. Or as Aaron puts it, "Man, are you hungry? I haven't eaten since later this afternoon."

37 Ricoeur 1988, 101.

38 Augustine 2006, 242.

39 Ricoeur 1992.



Fig. 4: "They could be starlings." Film still, UPSTREAM COLOR (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:00:07.

## UPSTREAM COLOR: Synaesthetic Spiritual Connections

"Close your eyes."<sup>40</sup>

That these are the first words of dialogue voiced in UPSTREAM COLOR is not insignificant. Paradoxical in its invitation (what audience would close their eyes to watch a film?), it suggests that the film's strengths are multisensory, requiring what Vivian Sobchack calls a "synaesthetic" engagement with the film's body.<sup>41</sup> With its strong emphasis on the auditory – it received a special award at the Sundance Film Festival for its accomplishments in sound design – the film has a structure best described as *symphonic*, with a musicality to the editing rhythms which provide coherence to the disparate images and disjointed sense of time.<sup>42</sup> Beyond the apt comparisons to another metaphysical 2013 sci-fi film, COHERENCE (James Ward Byrkit, US/GB 2013), imagine that Terrence Malick made a film based on a Hayao Miyazaki story, and you may have a glimpse into Shane Carruth's *modus operandi*.<sup>43</sup> While UPSTREAM COLOR has an elliptical and fractured narrative akin to PRIMER, a perceptive viewer/hearer can eventually puzzle together the pieces of the emplotted events, even if the significance and plausibility of those events remain opaque and open to interpretation. A critical summary of the film's narrative reveals its parabolic dynamic.

The opening shot is of trash bags filled with intertwined paper chains being carried towards a garbage dumpster. The montage of subsequent shots over the next

40 UPSTREAM COLOR (Shane Carruth, US 2013), 00:02:30.

41 Sobchack 1992, 129–140.

42 For an excellent analysis of UPSTREAM COLOR's distinct sound design, see Kickasola 2013.

43 Mayward 2013.

20 minutes is mysterious and jarring, held together by the underlying humming score Carruth employs (Carruth composed the music for both of his films). A man – credited as “Thief” (Thiago Martins) – harvests some blue dust and larval worms from plants growing in a greenhouse. Combining this azure substance and the worms, the man brews a concoction. Some boys drink this potion, resulting in a psychic connection and giving them fantastic abilities to mimic each other’s movements. *How* this spiritual link works is unexplained, yet *that* it is happening is undeniable – it antecedes a later scene of Kris and Jeff witnessing a murmuration of starlings, the birds undulating across the skies in inexplicable natural harmony (fig. 4) as the couple realize that their personal memories are intertwined (more on this below).

The Thief places a worm in a capsule. After failed attempts to sell the “drug”, he abducts a woman, Kris, and forces her to ingest the pill. This leaves her in a hypnotic trance-like state and under total control of the Thief’s verbal suggestions. Over the course of several days, the Thief steals Kris’s funds and identity, forcing her to enact bizarre repetitive rituals of drinking water, stacking poker chips, and transcribing Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* onto paper scraps which she makes into a large chain (similar to the one seen in the opening shot). In this liturgy of imprisonment, the camera frames the Thief in the peripheral, able to hear him but unable to see him; he tells Kris his head is made of the same material as the sun, blinding her (and us) to his visage, a thwarting of any possible face-to-face encounter with the Other.<sup>44</sup>

After the Thief leaves – again, we *hear* but don’t see him go – Kris slowly awakens from hypnosis (or does she?) to discover an enormous worm crawling under her skin. Despite her most violent efforts, she is unable to remove the parasite from her body. The film jump-cuts to a new character, credited as “The Sampler” (Andrew Sensenig), placing a large amplification speaker pointed downward into the earth in an empty field, a pulsing soundtrack emitting from the sound system. The Sampler is then seen waiting in the field at night when Kris appears, bleeding and wearing only a nightshirt. “It won’t come out”, she murmurs.

The film’s soundtrack begins again as we watch the Sampler’s surgical process of removing the rope-like parasitic worm from Kris and placing it within a young pig. The exorcism complete – one recalls Christ casting demons into a herd of swine in Matthew 8:28–34 – the pig is then brought back to the Sampler’s farm as Kris stumbles dreamlike through her house, a crowd of hazy figures surrounding her. She suddenly awakens in her car by a highway, confused and feeling untethered to reality; by now, she has lost her job, her finances, and any sense of security in the world. She has experienced the most invasive and destructive of traumas – her very sense of self has been violated and erased.

44 An allusion to Emmanuel Levinas.



Fig. 5: God's eye view of Kris and Jeff. Film still, UPSTREAM COLOR (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:09:35.

The narrative leaps forward through time and introduces Jeff, who encounters Kris during his train commute and is intrigued by her presence (her shortened hair suggests that extensive time has passed since her traumatic experience). Jeff feels drawn to Kris, and despite her initial hesitation, he patiently pursues a quiet romance with her. Interspersed between scenes of their budding relationship, we see the Sampler recording noises and music from the world around his pig farm, collecting auditory samples from nature. As he walks through the large pigpen and draws close to the animals, he is suddenly transported to various human individuals, silently observing people who appear unaware of the Sampler's presence (the parallels to the presence of the angelic or divine are conspicuous).

When Jeff and Kris finally kiss and consummate their physical relationship, we suddenly see them lying on a white sheet in the middle of the Sampler's pig farm. They begin to realize they are somehow linked when they notice their mutual scars from the pig transfusion, and also that they share similar stories of past unexplained traumas and financial ruin. Moreover, their memories seem to be mingled: when they share about childhood experiences, each recalls the same event as their own in a muddled blurring of memory, history, and forgetting. Kris discovers that she is unable to conceive a child, her body (unbeknownst to her) having suffered and recovered from endometrial cancer. However, her pig avatar successfully gives birth to piglets, who are rounded up by the Sampler into a burlap sack and drowned in a nearby stream. This horrific event, though occurring at a distance, somehow initiates an existential panic in the human couple: Kris frantically searches as if for something lost, while Jeff spontaneously starts a fistfight with co-workers. This dis-ease prompts Kris and Jeff to



Fig. 6: Healing from trauma. Film still, *UPSTREAM COLOR* (Shane Carruth, US 2013), © ERBP Film, 01:33:56.

barricade themselves in their house and hide in a bathtub; we view them from an iconic God's eye shot, their limbs intimately intertwined, a linking of body and soul (fig. 5).

The Thief and Sampler are also linked, but via a complex lifecycle: the mysterious blue material comes from the Thief and his plants, is ingested by the worms, enters the human victims, transfers to the pigs via the Sampler, leaks into a nearby creek through the pigs' deaths, then emerges anew in the blue orchid plants growing nearby; these are harvested by horticulturalists and sold in the Thief's neighborhood. Such circular imagery of death bringing new life – another metaphorical hermeneutical circle? – connotes both Buddhist samsara and Christian resurrection. The true origin of the spiritual sapphire substance remains unclear.

In the final act after the bathtub scene, the narrative suddenly increases in both pace and metaphoricality as Kris and Jeff begin to recollect and recover their past identities. In a dreamlike sequence, Kris, Jeff, and the Sampler all sit down at the same table in a barren warehouse-like room, when suddenly Kris makes eye contact with the Sampler – she is now aware of his presence. Face to face with the Other, the Sampler collapses under her gaze. The scene then cuts to a parallel moment at the pig farm as Kris shoots and kills the Sampler – the mind–body problem plays out narratively. Again, how such spiritual teleportation occurs is unexplained, yet that it is concretely happening is certain. Along with other victims, Kris and Jeff turn the farm into a sanctuary for human and pig alike; as a result, no more pigs are drowned and the orchids in the river no longer turn blue. Thus, the Thief is deprived of the worms for his drug and the cycle of trauma is broken. The film closes with a beautiful shot of Kris cradling a piglet, a look of peaceful contentment on both their faces (fig. 6).

*UPSTREAM COLOR* is rich with not only Ricoeurian signs of metaphoricality, most notably about the experience of trauma, but also humanity's ultimate concern,



a longing for transcendence and connection. The film has been repeatedly described as *spiritual* despite never overtly depicting or addressing religion or God, a non-religious “spiritual impressionism” and “science-fiction with overtones of transcendence”.<sup>45</sup> Film critics have observed this spiritual dimension in both the film’s narrative and its formal aesthetic, calling it a “cerebral-spiritual love story”,<sup>46</sup> a “colossal cosmic synch-up [...] of material on the smartphone of Earth and the mainframe computer of the heavens”,<sup>47</sup> and stating, “if you’ve ever sat at your desk wondering whether there’s more to life, or been kept awake by an insidious hum in the darkness, this will speak to your soul”.<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Biles observes that the film contains implicit religious motifs and ideas, highlighting the themes of “redemption, salvation, perfection, identity, and trauma as a path of spiritual attainment”.<sup>49</sup> Carruth himself describes the subtly religious inspirations for the film’s story:

It was the nagging feeling about where personal narratives and personal identity come from. The idea that people would identify themselves as having a particular personal or religious belief. When I was having conversations with people I was wondering if, once these ideas become cemented, whether I was having a conversation with someone who was present and critically thinking or whether I was having a conversation with someone who had compiled a set of talking points over time.<sup>50</sup>

He mentions that the film addresses the “universal feeling of something unspoken, or a certain religious belief in a God or a cosmic force controlling events”.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in an interview with *Film*, when responding as to whether the film had a religious influence, Carruth replies:

I mean it’s definitely influenced, because I think we all are. I guess you could tell a version of this story that would be like *It’s a Wonderful Life* where you’ve got the angels that are looking down and talking about him and then they send one. In that way you’ve got human characters that are affected at a distance from some heavenly place [...] So I guess the answer is that the ambition of the film is to be universal and not to speak about any one religion or even religion itself instead of... I feel like we’ve got tons of religions that we don’t even call religions, you know?<sup>52</sup>

45 Brody 2013.

46 Chang 2013.

47 Bradshaw 2013.

48 Johnston 2013.

49 Biles 2013, 164.

50 Koehler 2013, 12.

51 Koehler 2013, 13.

52 Fischer 2013.

A 2013 *Wired* exposé on Carruth contains this insight into his religious background: “For a while, his parents belonged to a progressive, hippie-ish community called the Lord’s Chapel. The congregants met in a high school gym or at potluck dinners, where they sometimes spoke in tongues.”<sup>53</sup>

Could this Pentecostal upbringing and interest in religious phenomena inform the spirit-laden near-miraculous moments of *UPSTREAM COLOR*? The narrative of an omniscient deity (the Sampler) orchestrating the spiritual destiny and health of individuals only to be overcome and killed by those individuals – this all suggests that *UPSTREAM COLOR* could be described as a pneumatological “death of God” film, or a “middle spirit” of remaining beyond trauma’s aftermath.<sup>54</sup> As time and narrative increasingly blur over the film’s running time, the hovering Spirit over the (upstream) waters heals the victims of religious trauma, even as those very victims put to death the religious institution and metaphysical god of theodicy. This is not an atheistic but an *anatheistic* film – it is about life with god after god is dead.<sup>55</sup> Like its inspiration *Walden*, this sci-fi parable invokes a spiritual awakening, inviting the audience to “live deliberately” with an awareness of the transcendent gift that is everyday human existence.

## Post-Secular Parables

As of this writing, Carruth has directed only *PRIMER* and *UPSTREAM COLOR*; two follow-up film projects, *A TOPIARY* and *THE MODERN OCEAN*, remain unrealized. During the writing of this article, the website to Carruth’s film production company, ERBP Film, suddenly closed down and became inaccessible. In an October 2019 interview, Carruth stated that he is retiring from filmmaking to focus on other projects and charity work.<sup>56</sup> Yet even if Carruth produced only these two films, his art should be recognized as part of the “post-secular constellation” emerging in contemporary cinema.<sup>57</sup> This post-secular aesthetic could be described as an in-between space between the secular and the religious, realism and expressionism, immanence and transcendence; it is where Carruth’s cinema resides. Post-secular cinema invites us into an open space of liminality, wager, and possibility; such motion pictures allow us visions of our subjective link to the “real world” even as they upend and expand our beliefs and imaginations, showing us both our world and other possible worlds,

53 Rafferty 2013.

54 Rambo 2010.

55 Kearney 2011.

56 Pape 2019.

57 Bradatan/Ungureanu 2014.

anchoring us in reality while pushing at the existential boundaries. This is precisely what Carruth's post-secular parables accomplish: through the blending of realist and formalist cinematic styles in science fiction rooted in physical science (PRIMER) and haptic spirituality (UPSTREAM COLOR), audiences encounter what Richard Kearney calls *epiphanies*, "the consecration of ordinary moments of flesh and blood *thisness* as something strange and enduring", a "transfiguring instant" which "happens in the gaps, in the breaks of linear temporality when an eternal now [...] explodes the continuum of history".<sup>58</sup> Indeed, akin to Andrei Tarkovsky's own sci-fi parable, STALKER (USSR 1979), Carruth's epiphanic cinema is truly sculpting in time.<sup>59</sup>

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58 Kearney 2011, 103.

59 Tarkovsky 1986.

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