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Festival Review

72nd Festival de Cannes

Finding Faith in Film

While standing in the lengthy queues at the 2019 Festival de Cannes, I would strike up conversations with fellow film critics from around the world to discuss the films we had experienced. During the dialogue, I would express my interests and background: I am both a film critic and a theologian, and thus intrigued by the rich connections between theology and cinema. To which my interlocutor would inevitably raise an eyebrow and reply, “How are those two subjects even related?” Yet every film I saw at Cannes somehow addressed the question of God, religion or spirituality. Indeed, I was struck by how the most famous and most glamorous film festival in the Western world was a God-haunted environment where religion was present both on- and off-screen. As I viewed films in competition for the Palme d’Or, as well as from the Un Certain Regard, Directors’ Fortnight and Critics’ Week selections, I offer brief reviews and reflections on the religious dimension of Cannes 2019.¹

SUBTLE AND SUPERFLUOUS SPIRITUALITY

Sometimes the presence of religion was subtle or superfluous. For example, in the perfectly bonkers Palme d’Or winner, *GISAENGCHUNG* (*PARASITE*, Bong Joon-Ho, KR 2019), characters joke about delivering pizzas to a megachurch in Seoul. Or there’s Bill Murray’s world-weary police officer crossing himself and exclaiming (praying?), “Holy fuck, God help us” as zombie hordes bear down on him and Adam Driver in *THE DEAD DON’T DIE* (Jim Jarmusch, US 2019). In contrast to these more gratuitous examples, in the brilliantly funny and tender *THE CLIMB* (Michael Angelo Covino, US 2019), the friendship between two men, Kyle and Mike, is told through a series of seven vignettes exploring adult relationships and romances for the millennial generation. The film displays a remarkable

1 My full film coverage from Cannes 2019 can be found at my website, Cinemayward, www.cinemayward.com, and at Fuller Studio, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/contributor/joel-mayward/>. Some film descriptions have been adapted and re-published in the present review. Special thanks to Stefanie Knauss at *JRFM* for her encouragement and advocacy, and to Elijah Davidson at Fuller Studio for helping me gain press accreditation for Cannes.

Fig. 1: *THE CLIMB* (Michael Angelo Covino, US 2019).
Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



awareness of, if not respect for, biblical texts and Christian traditions. In a brief tangential scene, the cemetery workers at a funeral sing a fourth-wall-breaking hymn, “I Shall Not Be Moved”, as they use a backhoe to dig a grave. In another scene during their bike conversation in the first vignette, as Mike confesses that he had sex with Kyle’s fiancée, Kyle declares, “You’re a real-life Judas.” “Well, I guess that makes you like Jesus”, replies Mike with deadpan sincerity. In a late vignette at Kyle’s wedding to a new beau, Kyle’s sisters choose to read certain verses from the books of Ephesians and Revelation, such as “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” and descriptions of the whore of Babylon. All of this is comical even as it demonstrates awareness of biblical content, at least enough to make an effective joke.

THE LIGHTHOUSE (Robert Eggers, US 2019) is Eggers’s masterful follow-up to his remarkable religious horror film *THE WITCH* (Robert Eggers, US 2016) and won the FIPRESCI (film critics) prize. It is a poetic and nightmarish supernatural thriller imbued with psychological horror. Set in a late-19th century coastal lighthouse in the northern Atlantic, *THE LIGHTHOUSE* centers on two men, the grizzled and gruff lightkeeper Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) and his aloof second-in-command Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson). As the isolated and storm-swept environment takes its toll on their psyches, visions of mermaids and mythological gods plague Winslow’s mind. Indeed, Wake’s former helper



Fig. 2: *THE LIGHTHOUSE* (Robert Eggers, US 2019). Press Still:
Cannes Film Festival.

went mad and killed himself, believing there was “salvation in the light”. By the coda, we know exactly what he means – both characters (and possibly some audiences) tip over the brink from sanity to madness. The question of God (or gods), myths and the spiritual realm is of significance here via the presence of sirens and ghosts, mermaids and manifestations. Both Winslow and Wake worship the light with fundamentalist devotion as the island’s foghorn blares with a liturgical rhythm. “I’m God fearin’, if that’s what yer askin”, quips Ephraim when questioned as to whether he is a praying man. A lone seagull acts as a sort of demonic spirit – the Black Philip of *THE LIGHTHOUSE* – in its incessant pestering of Winslow. Gulls contain the souls of dead sailors, says Wake; it’s bad luck to kill a seabird. Could the gull in fact be the deceased former caretaker? Or is it the soul of the man Winslow allowed to perish in his previous employment in the Canadian north? When the bloody confrontation between man and bird finally arrives, it leads to a changing of the winds and the coming of a relentless apocalyptic storm. Akin to the alluring conch-like staircase of the lighthouse, the men’s minds and souls begin to spiral during the storm until they are sucked into oblivion by the maelstrom of mental anguish and metaphysical dread. Indeed, *THE LIGHTHOUSE* would pair well with any Bergman, Tarkovsky or Kubrick film as a fellow hallucinatory masterpiece.

CINEMATIC ISLAM AND THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

The Muslim faith was prominent in three of the films I viewed at Cannes, with each film specifically exploring the tension between conservative/literal and liberal/metaphorical interpretations of the Qur’an. Based on an Algerian novel, the animated film *LES HIRONDELLES DE KABOUL* (*THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL*, Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec, FR 2019) competed in the Un Certain Regard section. The story features a young couple, Mohsen and Zunaira, attempting to keep hope and love alive in the midst of the Taliban-controlled ruins of Kabul. Zunaira is a vivacious artist and former teacher, and her marriage to Mohsen is



Fig. 3: *THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL* (Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec, FR 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.

Fig 4. LE JEUNE AHMED (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, BE 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



remarkably progressive. Yet despite his resistance to Taliban rule, Mohsen finds himself caught up in a mob mentality as a crowd publicly executes a woman by stoning her to death in the market. In a parallel story, Atiq is a prison warden for a women's prison; his wife, Musarrat, is slowly dying of cancer, causing Atiq much anguish. When a fatal accident occurs, the lives and fates of the two couples become intertwined, inevitably leading to a confrontation of interpretations regarding the true Muslim faith – will Atiq remain faithful to the Taliban or his conscience?

This conflict between divergent Qur'anic interpretations is also clearly present in the Dardenne brothers' in-competition film, *LE JEUNE AHMED* (*YOUNG AHMED*, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, BE 2019), for which they won Best Director. While their previous films have elicited religious and theological interpretations,² this is the Dardennes' most direct portrayal and analysis of religion through their cinematic post-secular parables. In fact, *LE JEUNE AHMED* is likely to be the brothers' most divisive and controversial film in its empathetic-yet-opaque exploration of Islamic extremism via the radicalization of 13-year-old Ahmed (Idir Ben Addi), who plots to kill his teacher based on his interpretation of his local imam's fundamentalist teachings. Myriem Akheddiou gives a wonderful performance as Ahmed's teacher-turned-victim, Inès. Ahmed attends Inès's after-school classes, but he has recently become quietly antagonistic towards her due to the influence of the imam (Othmane Moumen), whose extremist views coincide with Ahmed's idolized cousin, a jihadist terrorist. The imam declares Inès an apostate "bitch" who is trying to destroy their religious traditions. Yet Inès is also a faithful Muslim and embodies the Islamic pillar of charity via her generous actions towards educating young people. In this, the

2 See, for instance, *Journal of Religion, Film, Media* 2, 2 (2016) on the Dardennes' cinema, https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/issue/view/3 [accessed 3 June 2019].



Fig. 5: Cannes Press Conference LE JEUNE AHMED. Personal photo: Joel Maynard, 21 May 2019.

Dardennes offer a rich mosaic of Muslim faith as various skin tones and national backgrounds come together for a parent meeting about a new Arabic class Inès wants to teach the youth. For the Dardennes, the 21st-century face of Islam cannot be reduced to stereotypes of Middle Eastern terrorists, but rather must be viewed via the Levinasian transcendent face of the Other.

In the Cannes press conference, I was able to ask the Dardennes about their motivation for finally addressing religion in one of their films.³ Luc responded that it felt timely in a post-9/11 world, and that such fanaticism is not restricted to Europe or religion – we see evidence in Sri Lanka, America, Israel, etc., as well as throughout religious history. The brothers were interested in *how* and *why* religion – what Luc called a work of “imagination” – could lead to such violence, and how the imagination might be reformed and redeemed. The Dardennes do not presume to be experts about Islam, so they did extensive research and sought lots of input for their portrayal of religion, offering various viewpoints within the film itself. In this, LE JEUNE AHMED boldly and effectively raises complex ethical, religious and political questions without giving simple answers, inspiring hope for fruitful conversations about religion in the public sphere.

ATLANTIQUE (ATLANTICS, Mati Diop, FR/SN 2019) also shares in this conflict of interpretations, albeit without the strict extremist perspective. Diop was the first black woman to have a film in competition at Cannes, and ATLANTIQUE (winner of the Grand Prix) is a fever dream of a ghost story, combining magical realism with conventional romance. The film is set in the Senegalese city of Dakar, and the environment is a bricolage of traditions and modernity, urban decay and natural beauty. A group of young construction workers decide to depart for a better life in Spain, quietly slipping away in the night to navigate the ocean currents. One of

3 The Cannes press conference with the Dardennes is available online: <https://youtu.be/VWUzrfnm1ll> [accessed 3 June 2019]. My question for the Dardennes begins at 20:30.

Fig. 6: ATLANTIQUE (Mati Diop, France/Senegal 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



these workers, Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), is reluctant to leave his lover, Ada (Mama Sané). Yet the 17-year-old Ada is betrothed to another man, Omar (Babacar Sylla), a person of wealth and local prestige; their Muslim faith might be the only thing they have in common. Ada's traditionally minded religious friends view Ada's promiscuity with Souleiman disparagingly, while her liberal friends are simply excited about Omar's big house and Ada's new chic bedroom.

ATLANTIQUE takes a turn towards the fantastical during Ada and Omar's wedding night, when a mysterious fire spontaneously appears on the new couple's mattress, prompting a police investigation and plenty of unease. Has Souleiman somehow returned from his ocean voyage, enacting revenge upon his lost love? It appears the souls of the boys lost at sea have returned in a spiritual somnambulist form as *djinn*, possessing the bodies of their former lovers when night falls. There are some parallels to the Senegalese film TOUKI BOUKI (Djibril Diop Mambéty, SN 1973), which follows two young lovers on their journey out of Dakar to a new life in France, only to have the love of homeland cause a rift between them. Indeed, ATLANTIQUE's Mati Diop is the niece of Mambéty; it as if she is possessed by the spirits of her relatives within her own exquisite film.

While space does not permit me to offer a deeper analysis, I should mention that the Islamic faith is also significant in the following critically acclaimed films from Cannes: THE UNKNOWN SAINT (Alaa Eddine Aljem, MA 2019), FOR SAMA (Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, UK/US 2019) and IT MUST BE HEAVEN (Elia Suleiman, FR/CA 2019).

UNLIKELY CATHOLIC MARTYRS AND SAINTS

Films like the painterly masterpiece PORTRAIT DE LA JEUNE FILLE EN FEU (PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE, Céline Sciamma, FR 2019), the wistful yet inert FRANKIE (Ira Sachs, US 2019) and the genre-defying mindfuck BACURAU (Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, BR 2019) each made subtle nods to Roman Ca-



Fig. 7: A HIDDEN LIFE (Terrence Malick, US 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.

tholicism's influence in their respective nations. Yet two films were quite explicit in their biographical depiction of Christian faith. Debuting in competition at Cannes, visionary filmmaker Terrence Malick has crafted his most explicitly Christian film with *A HIDDEN LIFE* (Terrence Malick, US 2019), a long-awaited project focusing on the life of Second World War Austrian conscientious objector Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl). The film was originally titled “Radegund”, the name of the idyllic mountain hamlet where Franz and his beloved wife, Fani (Valerie Pachner), reside with their three young daughters. When the Nazis demand allegiance to Hitler, Franz quietly refuses, an act of defiance motivated by his deep Catholic convictions and his troubled conscience.

A HIDDEN LIFE presents its Christian heritage unashamedly even as it exhorts and critiques both the Second World War era and contemporary institutional church. The film is infused with biblical references through Franz's and Fani's prayers, as well as visual symbols and narrative themes. Churches and priests play active roles in the narrative as mentors and guides, and God is often directly addressed in the Malickian voice-over narrations. For instance, Franz prays a version of Psalm 23 aloud while waiting for his trial in a German prison; as the camera hovers through the hallways like a wandering spirit, the biblical words offer hope in the midst of apparent despair, the Good Shepherd restoring the prisoner's soul. Yet critical questions remain. Will the spirit of Antichrist (the term is mentioned multiple times) reign in Europe? Is God the author of such suffering? Can faithfulness to God make a genuine difference in this world? These questions of theodicy in the context of a historical narrative are striking in their contemporary relevance, particularly regarding the political allegiances of Christian churches in present-day America. Even as he is memorializing the tragic experiences of World War II, Malick is also raising crucial prophetic questions as to whether the church will wed itself to bigoted political powers who commit injustices and perpetuate lies, or rather, act in resistance and solidarity with the oppressed. In this, *A HIDDEN LIFE* won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, awarded by a jury of Christian filmmakers and critics.

Fig. 8: JEANNE (Bruno Dumont, France 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



Similar to *A HIDDEN LIFE* in its exploration of a Christian martyr's biography but strikingly different in aesthetic and tone is Bruno Dumont's *JEANNE* (*JOAN OF ARC*, FR 2019), his follow-up to *JEANNETTE, L'ENFANCE DE JEANNE D'ARC* (*JEANNETTE: THE CHILDHOOD OF JOAN OF ARC*, Bruno Dumont, FR 2017). Where the earlier film was a mashup of mystical theology and heavy metal music as it focused on the early years of Joan's life and her visions of saints and angels, *JEANNE* is centered on the battles and trials of the teenage Joan, culminating in her martyrdom. Based on the writings of Charles Péguy, Dumont's post-secular approach appropriates religious writings and hagiography, transposing Christian tradition and history for a postmodern context. Where the first film featured head-banging punk and metal music to accompany Joan's visions, *JEANNE* instead features French pop singer/composer Christophe (Daniel Bevilacqua), who makes an appearance late in the film as one of the robe-covered clergy at Joan's trial. Christophe's songs support the visuals as a kind of narration. Young actress Lise Leplat Prudhomme never sings in this film; instead, the cinematography is often strikingly beautiful still frames or slow zooms on Prudhomme's defiant face, her visage both captivating and confrontational. The effect of the synth music, the repeated lyrics and the frame of Prudhomme creates a hypnotic effect, perhaps akin to meditating before a Christian icon. *JEANNE* won a Special Jury Mention in the Un Certain Regard competition.

WORSHIPPING THE STARS

Beyond the films themselves, I was struck by the religious dynamic of Cannes bystanders' and tourists' worshipful treatment of the films' stars. It seems not much has changed since 1955, when film critic André Bazin described Cannes as a "religious order" marked by its own daily offices (matinees and premieres)

and religious habits (tuxedos and gowns).⁴ Eager mobs of onlookers – many who would likely never see a single film during the festival – would wait for hours outside the Palais or the Hotel Martinez on the Croisette, craning their necks (and their phones) for a possible glimpse of a celebrity. The red carpet served as a sort of sacred site; only the most faithful and penitent (and properly attired) were allowed to make the brief pilgrimage up the red steps into the massive Grand Théâtre Lumière (and no selfies allowed!). Indeed, there was a liturgy for the in-competition film premieres and galas: only formal evening wear allowed, with the filmmaking team arriving via black vehicles at the bottom of the steps in order to be photographed and adored by the teeming worshipers. The stars would wait patiently for the right moment in the liturgy, then they would ascend the steps to be greeted by festival director Thierry Frémaux before entering the Grand Théâtre Lumière to a standing ovation. I confess, seeing Tilda Swinton, Isabelle Huppert and Willem Dafoe in the flesh does bring with it a frisson of reverence, as if one has suddenly encountered a sacred or angelic figure. Richard Dyer’s description of celebrities as “heavenly bodies” comes to mind, as does his paradox of the star: these celebrity idols are both ordinary and extraordinary, present yet absent, a tri-fold manifestation of ideology, social construction and marketed commodity.⁵ Such is also the paradox of the Festival de Cannes, a gathering which is at-once inclusive and exclusive, high art and consumer entertainment, secular and religious – it is the temple where the pilgrims have put their faith in film itself.

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- IT MUST BE HEAVEN (Elia Suleiman, FR/CA 2019).

4 Bazin 2009. Thanks to Stefanie Knauss for directing me to this essay.

5 See Dyer 1998; Dyer 2004.

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