

## Preface

WALTER BENJAMIN IN HIS 1936 ESSAY, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” argued that modern forms of production inevitably transform the function of art, destroying its religious function and liberating art to serve new social and political purposes: “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. . . . Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”<sup>1</sup> Benjamin at times seems almost to feel the loss of the religious function that once was central to art but then asserts the necessity of such destruction, describing the process as “a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind,” a process that is “intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.”<sup>2</sup> The shattering of tradition is an inevitable component of the dialectical progress through which history is moving, in Benjamin’s account, and a sense of crisis is a necessary prelude to the change of consciousness and society that will be needed in the emerging age.

In Benjamin’s view, cinema, as the new art form that depends entirely on new technological means of production for its existence, will play a prominent role in the emergence of a new stage of art

that will sever the outmoded connection between art and religion, a connection that belongs to an earlier and now superseded stage in the development of culture. Benjamin offers a number of illuminating observations concerning cinema and what we now call the mass media, and he is prescient about the implications of the mass media for the ways in which political leaders will interact with the public in this new age, but his one-sided understanding of the dialectic of faith and culture made him blind to the ways in which artists could find new ways to explore a theologically rich vision of the world through the new art of cinema.

Perhaps no filmmaker more fully displays the potential of cinematic art to set aside psychological and naturalist views of human life and portray instead the subtle presence and action of grace in a world distorted by the constant pressure of sin than French director Robert Bresson (1901–99). Bresson's films are not widely known in the United States—he could fairly be called a filmmaker's filmmaker and is deeply admired in the world of cinema. Speaking of Bresson's 1996 film, *au hasard Balthazar*, Jean-Luc Godard expressed deep admiration: "I'd compare Pascal's *Discourse on the Passion of Love* to this film. The film affected me the same way as Pascal's writings on passion." Louis Malle has spoken of the same film in superlative terms: "It seems to me that cinema has finally entered a certain zone that it had previously barely touched." Novelist Marguerite Duras also speaks of Bresson's work in the highest terms: "I think Bresson has brought something extremely new to cinema today, which is thought."<sup>1</sup>

Bresson developed his artistic craft to bring to fulfillment what can well be described as a Catholic vision of life presented through cinema. His best known film is perhaps *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), a beautiful film that is deeply faithful to the great novel by Georges Bernanos, a novel that might at first strike one as unsuited to film adaptation. Bresson based two of his thirteen films on novels by Bernanos (the other is *Mouchette*), and it would be plausible to argue a kind of artistic parallel between Bernanos in the world of literature and Bresson in the world of cinema: each develops the

contemporary potential of an art form to reveal new artistic possibilities for exploring a Catholic vision of life in the modern world. Each engages in a dialog between faith and culture in the world of art and demonstrates that faith has a still vital part to play in such a dialog, contrary to the views of theorists such as Benjamin.

Bresson's film achieves its fidelity to the spirit of the novel by Bernanos in spite of omitting a number of episodes and scenes from the novel. The film uses cinematic means to replicate the narrative frame of the novel, showing the priest writing in his diary, using occasional voiceovers by the unnamed priest-narrator overlaid against images of the external activities in which he is involved, and generally establishing an intense focus on his spiritual struggles. Bresson commented on this artistic intention: "In my eyes, what was striking was the notebook of the diary, in which, through the curé's pen, an external world becomes an interior world and takes on a spiritual coloration."<sup>3</sup> The external world is often represented through sound fragments, such as the barking of a dog off screen or the sound of distant wagon wheels, capturing the desolate quality of a village described by Bernanos as in the grips of a cancerous boredom. Bresson, as does Bernanos, conveys the mystery of a priest who is able to mediate grace in the world in spite of his own infirmity and inner turmoil, a priest who by drawing upon constant prayer as his sole source of strength courageously addresses the spiritual paralysis of a woman consumed by grief over the death of her son and the infidelity of her husband. The film conveys in its own powerful way the deep insight of the final words of the novel, words uttered by the priest-narrator as he is dying: "What does it matter? All is grace."

Bresson's *au hasard Balthazar* (1966) is often named as his best film, and it demonstrates that the religious perspective infused into Bresson's films is neither facile nor sentimental—the participation of faith in dialog with new developments in culture is not merely reactionary. *Balthazar* is a donkey (the name chosen for its biblical associations, according to Bresson), and the film opens with a scene in a pasture as the newly born donkey is suckled by his mother. The

first step in what will be a haphazard journey from birth to death quickly follows as the scene changes to a playful but loving baptism administered by two young children. Years go by (as a subtitle announces) and Balthazar witnesses a variety of sins and forms of suffering, the complex narrative exhibiting a world in which the destructive power of sin accumulates in scenes in which Balthazar is often merely a kind of bystander. Eventually, Balthazar is stolen by a gang and made to carry contraband on a journey, during which he is wounded by a gunshot. We see a scene in the morning in which Balthazar is bleeding, and we hear the sound of bells in the distance. The camera catches a look of deep sadness in Balthazar's eyes; sheep come into the scene, and the sound of the sheep bells fades into the music of Schubert's Piano Sonata no. 20 (the music that also introduces the film), and Balthazar sinks to his solitary but dignified death as the film ends.

As in most of his films, Bresson depicts the intransigence of human sin as it perpetuates itself through the course of time, and here Balthazar is a patient witness—I'm tempted to say a loving witness, based on the impressions made by Bresson's images—to the damage wrought by sin. There are no miracles in the film that disrupt the perpetuation of sin, but the film suggests an underlying miracle in the midst of suffering: the miracle that the dignity of life is not destroyed by sin, that there is a mysterious and abiding dimension in life that prevails even in the face of sin and suffering. French theologian René Maurice offers this interpretation of the film's vision: "Everything happens as if the 'holiness' of Balthazar permitted him to bring to completion the aspirations to the good . . . which exist in the other characters."<sup>4</sup> In this and many others of his films, Bresson finds ways in which a new artistic medium can achieve its fullest artistic form when shaped to illuminate the truths of faith as encountered in experience.

This issue of *Logos* offers a number of potent examples of the dialog of faith and culture as pursued in the world of film and litera-

ture, but the first article provides a compelling account of a fully developed contemporary philosophical dialog of faith and secular culture in **Virgil Nemoianu's** article, "**The Church and the Secular Establishment: A Philosophical Dialog between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas.**" The article sets the stage for an account of an extended dialog between philosopher Habermas and then Cardinal Ratzinger that took place on January 19, 2004, providing first a thorough introduction to the work of each participant in the dialog and then presenting an insightful account of the philosophic exchange. Nemoianu examines the fruitfulness of Habermas's use of the concept of the post-secular, a concept that calls for us to move beyond the ideological assumption that a purely rationalistic account of the world will be sufficient and that opens up new possibilities for the encounter of contemporary political and intellectual worldviews and a religious perspective. Cardinal Ratzinger, in turn, recognized the importance of rational inquiry in religion and called for a "correlation of reason and faith, of reason and religion, both being summoned to mutual cleansing and healing." Readers of this article will be grateful to Professor Nemoianu for providing a thorough, careful, and respectfully critical account of this important exchange and for establishing a wide ranging context in which to understand the exchange. Nemoianu concludes the article with a glance toward the contemporary situation of European Christianity and emphasizes the importance of Christianity finding common ground with secular perspectives: "The dialog with Habermas shows that efforts in this direction are not entirely hopeless; it also exemplifies what some of the strategies and value idioms to be used might be. Nothing short of the survival of the Good in a possible humane and harmonious world is at stake."

**Michael P. Foley** finds intriguing moral and theological implications in some of the films of a relatively popular contemporary filmmaker in "**Plato, Christianity, and the Cinematic Craft of Andrew Niccol.**" Niccol's best known film is *The Truman Show*, but Foley also

explores Niccol's earlier film, *Gattaca*, and a later film, *SI mOne*. *Gattaca* presents a false utopia in which the promise of genetic manipulation for the perfection of the human species is pursued, and Foley's analysis demonstrates that "*Gattaca* exposes the bankruptcy of this thinking and celebrates the preeminence of the human mind and heart, though it is by no means an encomium to atomic individualism triumphing alone and unaided." He brings to light the deep resonance between this film and Catholic Christianity while also linking the film to Plato's *Republic*. Foley's analysis of *The Truman Show* expands the connection between Niccol and the work of Plato, finding Niccol's film to be a powerful presentation of the Allegory of the Cave offered in *The Republic*. Foley is careful to acknowledge that he is not claiming a "perfect parity" between Niccol's film and Plato's text, but his close examination of the parallels proves to be illuminating of both the film and *The Republic*. Foley places Niccol's work in the broader context of thinkers who have engaged issues raised by Plato's *Republic*, from Cicero through Aldous Huxley, and assesses Niccol's ability to bring together Christian themes with Platonic dimensions of thought: "The result is not Christian apologetics or even Christian allegory but something akin to the Catholic intellectual tradition's engagement of political philosophy—an examination of man's political nature on its own native terms yet informed to some degree by supernatural principles."

Our second article on cinema in this issue is by **Catherine Craft-Fairchild**, who offers a fresh contribution to discussions of Christian and Catholic responsibility for anti-Semitism and the Holocaust by examining several films with themes related to the Holocaust that were commended by the Pontifical Council for Social Communication in 1996. Her article, "**Do We Remember? The Catholic Church and the Holocaust,**" provides a brief (but well documented) review of the controversy surrounding *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* and then argues in depth that the films commended by the Pontifical Council distort the historical role of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust by presenting a fully positive vision of

the Catholic Church's wartime role—a view not supported by the historical evidence, she argues.

The article examines three films that appeared on the Pontifical Council's list of "best films of the century": Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants* (1987), and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). *Rome, Open City* presents a fictional story that is "built from history" but it is "a highly selective history," according to Craft-Fairchild's analysis. The film is set in Rome in the winter of 1943–44, but omits mention of incidents such as the roundup and deportation of over a thousand Jews on October 16–18, for instance. "*Rome, Open City* makes no effort to treat this incident or the Holocaust more generally, its silence on the subject being essential to its purpose of redeeming both Italians and the Roman Church. . . . The guilt and complicity of the Catholic Church is never addressed in Rossellini's film." Craft-Fairchild then describes Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants* as "a treatment of the harboring then exposure and arrest of Jewish boys hidden at a Catholic boarding school" in France during the war. This film includes some "elements of ambiguity and questioning" in its view of Catholic complicity in the Holocaust but focuses primarily on a depiction of heroic efforts by a Catholic priest to rescue Jews, again providing a distorted view of that period of history. *Schindler's List*, according to Craft-Fairchild's account, suffers from some of the same faults for which the Vatican Commission's document *We Remember* has been criticized: "Just as *We Remember* gives undue prominence to the few Catholic clergy who spoke out against the Holocaust or endeavored to save Jewish lives, *Schindler's List* in some ways falsifies the historical record by according too great an emphasis to an anomalous event." The film, according to a number of critics cited by Craft-Fairchild, transforms Schindler until he "attains a nearly Christ-like status" in the final scenes, marking a departure from the text from which the film was drawn: "Spielberg's film version alters Thomas Keneally's nonfiction novel *Schindler's List* in order to produce a clear, linear narrative of Christian redemption." While

the Pontifical Council for Social Communication commended these three particular films dealing with the Holocaust, it omitted a celebrated film that portrays the role of the Catholic Church in “a more honest, less favorable light”: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. Lanzmann’s film does not focus on an exculpatory view of the Holocaust: “He does not dwell long upon the ways the Jewish survivors he interviews managed to stay alive, he does not let them speak of their lives following the Holocaust, and he does not (the very opposite of Spielberg) tell the stories of rescues or rescuers. *Shoah* is, as its title proclaims, about annihilation, about the death of six million, the death that remains with the living and shapes the present.” The article concludes that it is essential for the Catholic Church to face up to full historical accounts of the Church’s role during this dark period of history.

The playful title of the article by **H. Wendell Howard**, “**Roman Catholicism in the Oscar Wilde-R-Ness**,” indicates the tone as well as the topic of Howard’s exploration of Wilde’s life and writings as they pertain to Catholicism. Tracing the stages of Wilde’s writings, Howard brings to the surface Wilde’s “youthful bent toward and delight in Roman Catholicism,” and he follows Wilde’s journey throughout his work as this attraction continued to exert itself in various forms. In the early period of his writing, Wilde displays a “suspension between the Hellenic and the Christian,” although revised versions of some of the early poems tend to emphasize the sacred more fully. In the second stage of his writings, the “tension between the exotic and the Christian” continues to be at play. His late poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” exhibits a notable artistic maturity, and Howard speculates that Wilde “might have become a major poet if the accidents of his life had not driven him in so many different directions.” Howard offers an extensive account of Wilde’s ideas in the area of literary criticism, finding much to commend here. At the end of his life, after the time he spent in prison, Wilde applies to a Jesuit retreat house in London for asylum, and Howard recounts a number of events over the final months of Wilde’s life

that indicate his serious turn to Roman Catholicism at the end of his life. Controversy remains about Wilde's conversion to Catholicism at the end of his life, but Howard asserts in conclusion: "The point to emphasize here is that the events associated with Wilde's death have been as controversial as the varied dimensions of his life. The one point that can be made without fear of contradiction, however, is that both his life and his death were inextricably connected to Roman Catholicism."

**Kathleen Curran Sweeney** in "**The Perfection of Women as Maternal and the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła**" examines a number of works by John Paul II that illuminate our "understanding of woman in her modality as maternal." Sweeney is careful to point out at the beginning of the article that "this study of the maternal in women refers to spiritual and cultural motherhood as well as to physical/familiar motherhood," because the concept is not a purely biological one in this context. Sweeney examines a number of contemporary views of women that approach motherhood as a threat to the autonomy of women, and shows that the view developed by John Paul II recognizes and upholds the dignity of women while recognizing the importance of integrating innate maternal realities within a fully actualized life. "The woman's special orientation to the human person does not depend on physical/familiar motherhood, but precedes it and appears as an innate quality of the feminine. It is expressed in cultural and spiritual motherliness in a great variety of forms." Sweeney points to the degradation of the human community that results from inadequate recognition of the maternal dimension in this extended sense: "By downplaying the maternal in woman in favor of production, the pay check, and worldly status, our society loses its spiritual grounding in the intangibles of joy, delight, wonder, play, beauty, contemplation, and love."

In "**The Beauty that Saves: *Brideshead Revisited* as a Counter-Portrait of the Artist,"** **Dominic Manganiello** examines the great novel by Evelyn Waugh as an artistic response to the James Joyce novel, focusing on the progression of Charles Ryder in *Brideshead*

*Revisited* toward conversion to Roman Catholicism as a kind of reversal of the conversion to “secular beauty” depicted by the life of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s novel. The article first follows Stephen Dedalus’s movement toward the elevation of art to the position of highest end, exhibiting what is characteristically modernist in such a development. He then demonstrates Waugh’s response: “In Waugh’s view, the project of modern novelists like Joyce to represent the whole person failed precisely because they omitted his ‘determining character—that of being God’s creature with a defined purpose,’” (that final phrase quoted from an essay by Waugh). Charles Ryder and Julia Flyte come to recognize the danger of artistic and sexual idolatry, and through repentance and through “the ‘twitch upon the thread’ of grace,” Charles is able to complete his journey to Christ. The article enables us to see Waugh engaged in a dialog with the dominant artistic tendencies of his time, and his artistic response shows his ability to integrate a grasp of the truth of faith within a fully accomplished work of art that exhibits the beauty of that truth.

Our **Reconsiderations** feature in this issue presents two reprinted articles: the first is a chapter by **Ian Ker** on “**The Dickensian Catholicism of G.K. Chesterton**” from the book *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961* (2003), and then we offer **G. K. Chesterton’s** essay on Dickens “**The Great Dickens Characters**” from his book *Charles Dickens*. Ker, a member of the *Logos* Editorial Board, introduces Chesterton’s book on Dickens as “probably Chesterton’s greatest work—the work in which more than in any other he expressed his own self and his philosophy of life—and the book that explains most clearly and fully his Catholicism—his Roman Catholicism—and the sense in which he is a Catholic writer in his most creative works.”

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*Notes*

1. Interviewed in “Un metteur en ordre: Robert Bresson,” a 1966 French television show about the film included in the recently released Criterion DVD: *au hasard Balthazar*, The Criterion Collection 297, 2005.
2. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 224.
3. *Ibid.*, 221.
4. Robert Bresson, interview in *Le Figaro littéraire*, March 16, 1967, as cited in Joseph Cunneen, *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 45.
5. René Maurice, “De Lucifer à Balthazar, en suivant Robert Bresson,” *Lumière et vie* 78 (1966): 46, as cited in Cunneen, *Robert Bresson*, 107.