

Silence Speaks.

Theological Musings on Silence in Religion and Film

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1. Introduction

Over the past ten years or so, the interest in the intersections of religion and cinema has grown significantly. Where theological engagement with movies used to be considered an obscure pastime, it is now gaining academic respectability.¹ Often this means that the world of movies is used to explore or discuss specific theological themes.² In other cases theologians truly endeavor to understand the implicit theologies of contemporary cinema.³ This last approach seems especially meaningful for a theology that understands itself as the hermeneutical study of the ways in which people relate to the sacred. In this perspective, popular cultural arenas like cinema function as *topoi theologikoi*, sources for reflection on the sacred.⁴ The production and reception of films and other forms of popular culture function as a tradition of wisdom, offering the audience a variety of possible worlds, meanings, and experiences to engage with. This tradition interacts and interferes with other traditions of wisdom, notably religious ones. Studying cinema in this way therefore teaches us much not only about the *Zeitgeist* or the cultural climate, but also about the changing faces of religion.

The study of religion and cinema rests on more than the simple observation that there are religious films as well as films about religion (two categories not to

¹ Albert J. Bergesen and Andrew M. Greeley: *God in the Movies*. New Brunswick 2003; Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz: *Theology and Film. Challenging the Sacred / Secular Divide*. Oxford 2008; Robert K. Johnstone: *Reel Spirituality. Theology and film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids 2006; Robert K. Johnston (ed.): *Reframing Theology and Film*. Grand Rapids 2007; William D. Romanowski: *Eyes Wide Open. Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids 2007.

² Clive Marsh: *Theology Goes to the Movies. An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking*. Abingdon, 2007.

³ Jörg Herrmann: *Sinnmaschine Kino. Sinndeutung und Religion im populären Film*. Gütersloh 2001.

⁴ R. Ruard Ganzevoort: Framing the Gods. The Public Significance of Religion from a Cultural Point of View. In: Leslie J. Francis and Hans-Georg Ziebertz (eds.): *The Public Significance of Religion*. Leiden 2011, p. 95-120.

be confused). It starts with the working hypothesis that in some ways and at least partly and potentially cinema and religion have similar functions. Gordon Lynch, for example, distinguishes between a social function of religion, a hermeneutical function of religion, and a transcendent function of religion.⁵ It would certainly overstate the case to say that popular culture in general or cinema in particular serves these functions in the same way or to the same degree as traditional religion or that people go to the movies in the same way they used to go to church. Yet, the parallels between these worlds are so helpful in interpreting both religion and cinema that our working hypothesis merits attention.⁶

To be true, the field of religion is widely diverse in its meanings, actions, traditions, and structures. The same holds for the field of cinema with its genres, techniques, experiences, and meanings. Any comparison between the two is therefore by necessity a fragmentary one. That is, however, only a problem if we aim at an integrated systematic theory of the relation between cinema and religion, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. The aim here is to explore how both in religion and cinema transcending patterns of action and meaning are produced and perceived, which facilitate and foster a relation to the sacred. This phrase refers to how I define religion⁷ and thus how cinema can be understood at least in some ways as a form of implicit religion.⁸

In this contribution to the exploration of silence *and* religion *in* film, as the title goes, I therefore want to focus on silence *in* religion *and* film. I will explore some of the functions and meanings that silence may have in movies and religion and reflect on their theological implications. This may serve to answer two related questions: how does a theological and religious studies perspective help us to interpret popular culture (notably cinema)? And what does popular culture (notably cinema) express regarding theological issues?

2. Silence

Theologians generally have a preoccupation with the Word and are easily tempted to focus their attention on the verbal dimension of the movie's narrative. A more anthropological or even better cinematographic perspective challenges us to look at all the other dimensions that make film such a rich art form. Sound, color, mise-en-scène, movement – and nowadays all the extras that can be found on DVDs where deleted scenes, alternative endings, commentary tracks, stills, interviews, and so on create a form of installation art the viewer can navigate. The storyscape of a book, the soundscape of a piece of music, the movement of games, the composition of a painting; all work together to make the cinematic experience potentially overwhelming and rich in meaning.

⁵ Gordon Lynch: *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford 2005.

⁶ John C. Lyden: *Film as Religion. Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York 2003.

⁷ R. Ruud Ganzevoort: *Encruzilhadas do caminho no rastro do sagrado: a Teologia Prática como hermenêutica da religião vivenciada*. In: *Estudos Teológicos* 49.2, 2009, p. 317-343.

⁸ Edward I. Bailey: *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Kampen 1997.

Silence is one of these features that contributes to the possible meanings of movies. It is a dimension not too far removed from the study of religion, because the exploration the possible meanings and functions of silence can draw upon a history of studying mysticism, prayer, and much more. The topic of silence allows researchers to probe how cinema and religion negotiate the ambiguities of presence and absence, speech and silence, substance and emptiness. It engages us in issues of communication between humans, but also between humans and the divine. It challenges us to reflect on transcendence and the postulation of meaning precisely where meaning is not articulated verbally. And it involves the construction, deconstruction, and transformation of identity.

We need not go far in our explorations to find that silence too comes in a myriad of ways. FROM HELLBOY TO FARGO, the “Silence Supercut” compilation⁹ showed 172 movies with someone asking, often shouting for silence – except perhaps for Fargo’s voluntary “Total fucking silence”. But even that is only a limited perspective: this particular lineup includes mostly authority figures and freaks in situations of conflict or chaos. The call for silence in those circumstances serves primarily to establish or enforce the social order or the power relations. It is the interruption of what is going on by suppressing the voices of the multitude or the voices of the unwanted. The one who calls for silence takes authority to decide who can speak and who cannot. Some of the examples are set in a context of confusion or panic, where the interruption by silence creates the opportunity of coordinated action. Other examples prevent speakers from saying what should not be said. But there are many more shapes of silence: institutional, relational, or personal; enforced or freely chosen; revealing and/or concealing.

3. Types of Silence

This chapter will explore some types of silence that seem powerful candidates for the reflection on cinema and religion. It is neither an exhaustive overview nor a systematic typology, but a heuristic exploration from the starting point that silence relates to or expresses what is not or cannot be said. In that sense, silence always speaks. This paradoxical relation is a direct reminder of the apophatic of *theologia negativa*, the resistance to speak about God because our words could never do justice to the transcendent God. All we can do is deny certain statements about God. In the words of ninth century theologian John Scotus Eriugena: “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.”¹⁰ Similar notions can be found in for example Buddhism and Sufism. But even this silence in speaking about the sacred or about the secret of life immediately implies a positive theology. Silence speaks inasmuch as it interrupts our speaking.

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4lzj8jwdIM> (16.05.14).

¹⁰ John Scotus Eriugena: *Periphyseon*. In: Édouard Jeuneau (ed.): 7 (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievals 162). Turnhout 1997 ch. 2.28, p. 8.

Working inductively from these notions, and admittedly biased by personal observations and preferences, the exploration of possible meanings of silence in cinema and religion led to the following four categories: repressive silence, transforming silence, ominous silence, and transcending silence.

3.1. Repressive Silence

The first type of silence in this exploration is the silence of repressive secrets. The enforced silence prevents the other from speaking which leads to hiding the truth or silencing the voice. Many crime and courthouse movies engage with this type of silence. *A FEW GOOD MEN*¹¹ is an interesting example. Military lawyer Daniel Kaffee – played by Tom Cruise – defends two young marines charged with murder. They claim they acted under orders, being given an – officially non-existent – ‘Code Red’. Kaffee sets out to uncover the truth, constantly counteracted by destroyed evidence, fearful and silenced witnesses, and outright obstruction by those in power, especially Jack Nicholson’s character Colonel Nathan Jessup. In the final showdown, alternating between whispering and shouting, Kaffee is able to provoke Jessup and challenge his authority to the point that Jessup has to choose between acknowledging that he is responsible and acknowledging that he is not fully in charge. This tension, central to his repressive regime, was hidden under a veil of secrecy protected by the firm authority structures of the US Navy. In the final confrontation, Jessup disqualifies Kaffee’s quest: “You have the luxury of not knowing what I know.” “You can’t handle the truth.” Pressed by Kaffee’s shouting voice “Did you order the Code Red?”, Jessup eventually speaks out the truth: “You’re Goddamn right I did!”¹²



The contrast of repressive silence is truth. Repressive secrets are not so much about truth as the epistemic category of what is or is not accessible as shared knowledge or as correspondence to historical facts. Repressive secrets oppose the ethical notion of truth over against the authority of those in power to determine the paradigm that defines what can and cannot count as truth, what knowledge can or cannot be made known to others. They entail the liberty of the powers that

¹¹ (Direction: Rob Reiner; USA 1992).

¹² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FnO3igOkOk> (16.05.14).

be to change the evidence in such a way that it matches the story they wish to tell. Finding the truth then becomes the ethical imperative to lend a voice to the marginalized and subvert the structures of silencing. It involves countering the powers that be and unveiling the secrets that hide the evil. In the case of *A FEW GOOD MEN*, it is only when Kaffee challenges Jessup in his power, that the latter is not able to hold together his fabricated truth and its repressive secrets.

In religious terms, this category is most directly involved in the ways in which churches have responded to clergy sexual and physical abuse. Movies like *THE MAGDALENE SISTERS*¹³ and *THE BOYS OF SAINT VINCENT*¹⁴ portray not only the abuse that vulnerable children had to endure at the hands of their so-called caregivers. They also show how this abuse remains well hidden in the repressive secrecy of religious authority. Even when the stories begin to emerge and become subject to police scrutiny, the religious-political powers go at lengths to silence those voices. Obviously the primary aim is to protect their own power at the expense of the victims.

Repressive secrets then belong to a type of silence that is defined by power and the struggle against truth. Silencing the truth is one of the strategies of the evil powers, a notion we also encounter in the gospel of John (8:32): “The truth shall set you free.” Metaphors of enslavement and liberation play a central role here. The traditional interpretation of these verses discusses this under the heading of sin, which seems to hold the “slave” responsible for his or her own misery. Seen from the perspective of repressive secrets, however, the victim will benefit from the truth as it will be the means to be liberated from the oppressor, the liar, the demonic. The silence of repressive secrets thus regards the ethical dimension of truth and power.

There is, however, a further theological reflection to make. The same repressive silence can be part of the religious experience itself, especially in theologically conservative traditions that depict God as a harsh and hidden omnipotent ruler. It would not be too difficult to interpret Colonel Jessup’s role as a metaphor for such a God image. This is the God that protects us from cosmic evil, and is willing – if the job so demands – to sacrifice one of his own. He cannot be questioned because He is above the law. If questioned He would first refuse to answer and ask for gratitude instead. Jessup’s words become all the more interesting when read in this perspective:

“You can’t handle the truth! Son, we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who’s gonna do it? You? You, Lt. Weinburg? I have a greater responsibility than you could possibly fathom. You weep for Santiago, and you curse the Marines. You have that luxury. You have the luxury of not knowing what I know. That Santiago’s death, while tragic, probably saved lives. And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible

¹³ (Direction: Peter Mullan; UK 2002). The German release was titled *DIE UNBARMHERZIGEN SCHWESTERN* (The merciless sisters).

¹⁴ (Direction: John N. Smith; Canada 1992).

to you, saves lives. You don't want the truth because deep down in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall, you need me on that wall. We use words like honour, code, loyalty. We use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something. You use them as a punch line. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said thank you, and went on your way, Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon, and stand a post. Either way, I don't give a damn what you think you are entitled to."

This is a repressive use of power, claiming that only He can know and do, and that we should accept and obey His powers. This parallel is for example explored in the TV-movie *GOD ON TRIAL*¹⁵, in which a group of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz set up a rabbinical court to decide whether God is faithful to the covenant or guilty of their suffering. This is definitely not a new theme in religion or theology. The silent yet omnipotent God is a much older character that probably springs from the ambiguity of life itself¹⁶. The same power that brings life, security, and freedom can turn into a demonic force. Fishermen have always known that the sea is both a source of life and a lethal threat. People living on the slopes of an active volcano know that the mountain is the source of fertile ground and sudden death, only to be appeased by the occasional ritual virgin. This is the ambiguity of the sacred that Rudolf Otto referred to (albeit in a more essentialistic way).¹⁷ When the divine power cannot be held accountable in some kind of "rule of law", all our questions, complaints, and criticisms are fiercely silenced, as history, religion, and cinema testify abundantly.

3.2. Transforming Silence

The second type of silence in these explorations similarly regards the relational dimension, but without the central power dynamics of the first type. Transforming silence, as I would call it, regards the free choice to share or withhold oneself which in turn can transform the other. Ordinary communication requires alternating speaking and listening, which allows for mutual understanding. The concept of "turn-taking" plays an important role in the analysis of conversations, especially when looking at the influence of gender, social status, and cultural differences.¹⁸ If one of the partners in that communication refrains from speaking, we are left to guess about his or her

¹⁵ (Direction: Andy de Emmony; UK 2008).

¹⁶ R. Scott Appleby: *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD 2000.

¹⁷ Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. Munich 1932 (first edition Breslau 1917).

¹⁸ Geoffrey Beattie: *Talk: An Analysis of Speech and Non-Verbal Behaviour in Conversation*. Milton Keynes 1983.

intentions, role, and identity. Because of that, silent characters in movies confuse both the scene in which they appear and the audience. The refusal to speak turns them into mirrors of our own questions and interpretations, fears, and desires. This in itself opens up new ways of understanding oneself and the world. If the silent character is present in the scene without the repressive power of our previous examples, the space is opened for fresh explorations.

There are many intriguing examples of this phenomenon of silent characters. Perhaps one of the more dramatic movies in this regard is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *THEOREM*.¹⁹ The mysterious visitor, played by Terence Stamp, appears in a bourgeois Italian family, giving himself – body and soul – to the pious maid, the sensitive son, the sexually repressed mother, the frightened daughter, and the materialistic yet lonely father. The film suggests sexual encounters with each of them, changing their lives by letting them retrieve their inner self. When the visitor leaves the family, they are freed from their bourgeois prison, but the outcome is more than ambiguous. The maid returns to her native village performing miracles before killing herself. The mother seeks promiscuous encounters with young men. The son becomes an artist, the daughter a psychiatric patient. The father finally strips himself of all worldly belongings, including his clothes, and walks into the silent desert-like environment of Mount Etna's volcanic slopes, nakedly screaming out his primal fear. Filled with recurring strong symbols like the desert and the angelic postman that announces the visitor's appearance and disappearance, *THEOREM* critiques the materialistic society by showing its hollowness. Pasolini however does not portray the overturning of this society as salvation. The loss of clear boundaries brings freedom and creativity, but also despair and destruction. Most importantly for us today, it is the visitor's silent character that allows the others to confront their hidden wishes and desires, fears and questions. In this process, each character follows the path of "seductions", "confessions", and "transformations", facilitated by the visitor's silent presence.

In terms of psychotherapy this silent character is directly related to the containment function or, in Winnicott's terms the "holding environment":

"The quality of setting in which the patient is free from environmental impingement and the provision by the analyst of what is required by the patient: be it abstention from intrusion by interpretation, and/or a sensitive body-presence in his person, and/or letting the patient move around and just be and do what he needs to do."²⁰

That is, the therapeutic environment offers a safe space that is not filled with the presence of the counselor. In a sense, the counselor takes a step back, discloses

¹⁹ (Direction: Pier Paolo Pasolini; Italy 1968).

²⁰ From the foreword by Masud R. Khan in: Donald W. Winnicott: *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis*. London 1958. See also Storm Swain: *Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero*. Minneapolis 2011.

less of his or her personal beliefs or experiences than would be the case in any other conversation. The warm, stable, and somewhat neutral presence creates an availability in which the client does not have to worry about the feelings of the counselor. The mutuality of the encounter is set aside thus facilitating the client to forego the ordinary social roles, cultural norms, standard convictions, and everything that is needed to survive in the outside world. Freed from all those pressures and expectations, the soul-searching can begin. The client can explore her or his inner world with all its threatening emotions without fear of falling apart or being judged, thanks to the safe containment by the counselor. It is inevitable that the somewhat neutralized presence of the counselor invites projection or transference. The client relives experiences of the past and casts the counselor in roles to match that past – constructively or destructively. It is by virtue of the silent character that psychotherapy allows the deconstruction of a crippling and repressing narrative and the construction of a new possibility of living. Transformation is enabled in the encounter with the silent other.

This is not far from the religious process at work in the ritual of confession. The design of the confessional hides the priest and invites the penitent to sit or kneel and speak his heart to this silent, hidden representative of God. This aesthetic repertoire of liminality allows the penitent to be released from guilt feelings and transformed into a free person.

Again, our theological reflections can be expanded beyond the phenomenological parallels between psychotherapy and the ritual of confession. On a more fundamental level, divine silence evokes projection which may be needed for transformation. This relates to the starting point of Ludwig Feuerbach's well known interpretation of religion as the outward projection of human's inward nature.²¹ Projection – an interesting term by the way when we speak of cinema and religion – creates a correspondence between the internal world of needs and desires, thoughts and fears, and the external world of the divine. As Feuerbach put it:

“The object of any subject is nothing else than the subject's own nature taken objectively. Such as are a man's thoughts and dispositions, such is his God; so much worth as a man has, so much and no more has his God. Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical. Whatever is God to a man, that is his heart and soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man; religion the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love-secrets.”²²

²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach: *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Leipzig 1841.

²² Quoted after the translated version: Ludwig Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by George Eliot. London 1854, p. 12

God images in this interpretation primarily reflect, “mirror”, the person or community that claims to believe or not-believe in God. In that sense, the God-image a person holds tells us more about that person than about God, as research about God representation and personality has shown repeatedly.²³ Obviously, the projection only works when we are able to believe it, which implies the need to mystify the projection itself. The awareness that we are projecting undermines the experience of a direct relation. The make-believe of a film or a religious performance works by the grace of denying or at least forgetting the fact of projection. Well-crafted movies use a variety of techniques to achieve this, as do well-crafted religious rituals. At this point, however, we need to differentiate between projection and performance: the first refers to the Ricoeurian notion of a “world behind the text”, the second refers to a “world in front of the text” that is evoked by the performance and invites the audience to contemplate its potential for living. As mere projection religion and cinema cannot really affect us. As performance they let us enter a different world in which we can be changed, and that is the part Feuerbach probably overlooked.

The silence of the sacred can be transformative if it allows projection and performatively invites a twist of meaning. Because the hidden, silent divine can be anything to anyone, religious traditions develop a variety of names, attributes, incarnations, and so on that we can relate to. This provides ample space to connect our own experiences to a wider, validating frame of reference. But that is not enough. If religion is merely a projection, one would need to wonder why so many people engage in its practices. Why spend time, efforts, and money on a simple replication of what is already there? It is probably the performance-based option of transformation that makes this make-believe so important. Fear is projected and transformed into hope, sorrow into consolation, love into faith. This transformation can take place because of the liminality that silence entails.

3.3. Ominous Silence

Whereas the first two types discussed in this chapter are relational, the next two types are more impersonal. Like with the first two, one is dominated by (destructive) powerful presence while the other tends toward openness and absence.

The third type of silence then is the ominous silence of impending disaster, the proverbial silence before the storm. Many movies use silence to increase viewer tension as they anticipate a natural disaster, a forceful enemy, aliens and so on. The fact that this danger is not heard and seen yet makes it all the more difficult to be prepared. After all, if we don't know what will hit us and when, we cannot anticipate what our proper response should be. Lurking beneath the surface is a clear and imminent danger. Sometimes as viewers we see glimpses of the nature of this danger before the characters can see it, which only adds to the sense of urgency. Whether it is alien machines from *WAR OF THE WORLDS* that are hiding

²³ Ana-Maria Rizzuto: *The Birth of the Living God, a Psycho-Analytic Study*. Chicago 1979.

under the ground²⁴, a dam that is about to break or a message someone is about to hear that will tear her world apart, the ominous silence makes us wait with trepidation.

There is often also a sense of ambiguity. The fact of silence, of not revealing itself, implies that it might turn out to be dangerous or benign. In Otto's terms, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* attracts us and scares us at the same time.²⁵ This of course is the power of thrillers, adventure movies and the like. The INDIANA JONES-movies always play with the idea of a hidden secret, usually connected to religious cults and political extremists, Nazis for example. The hero has to find his way into the deepest caverns of the Temple of Doom²⁶, looking for the Ark of the Covenant²⁷, the Holy Grail²⁸, or the Crystal Skull²⁹. As a specialist in ancient cultures, Indiana Jones has to decipher yet another shape of silence: unreadable texts and epigraphs from languages that have lost their voice.

An unexpected yet interesting example of this ambiguous silent presence is found in THE BLUE LAGOON, according to film critic Roger Ebert the "dumbest movie of the year 1980."³⁰ This romantic adventure movie tells the story of two children shipwrecked on a paradise-like island. Central to the movie is the children's innocence as they explore the island, themselves, each other – a conventional nature versus nurture theme. But there is also a subplot that may suit our reflections here. Triggered by the sound of drums they sometimes hear, they enter the forbidden half of the Island, a typical case of taboo. There they discover a silent sanctuary used by the Island's natives for their rituals that include human sacrifice. Everything in THE BLUE LAGOON is connected to the coming of age theme, sexuality, and innocence. In that respect it is interesting that this metaphor of life and death, ritual and sacrifice is introduced, with alternating drums and silence. This hidden, silent, ominous sanctuary is probably best understood as a symbolization of the sexual powers that are life-giving and deeply dangerous at the same time. As the Song of Songs puts it: "For love is strong as death; Passion is cruel as Sheol; The flashes thereof are flashes of fire, A very flame of Jehovah."³¹

Ominous is also the silent world that attracts well achieved student and athlete Christopher McCandless in INTO THE WILD.³² He doesn't want to acquire material possessions or societal approval. He abandons everything, donates his savings to charity, and wanders off. His journey brings meaningful encounters and experiences, but his final aim is to find himself in the natural surroundings of Alaska, distanced from human society. Although initially successful, it proves

²⁴ (Direction: Steven Spielberg; USA 2005).

²⁵ Otto, p. 13-30; 43-58.

²⁶ INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM (Direction: Steven Spielberg; USA 1984).

²⁷ RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (Direction: Steven Spielberg; USA 1981).

²⁸ INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE (Direction: Steven Spielberg; USA 1989).

²⁹ Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (Direction: Steven Spielberg; USA 2008).

³⁰ (Direction: Randal Kleiser; USA 1980). See <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-blue-lagoon-1980> (16.05.14).

³¹ Song of Songs 8:6, American Standard Version.

³² (Direction: Sean Penn; USA 2007).

more and more difficult to find enough to eat and he finds himself trapped in the situation. As he is no longer able to hunt, he resorts to eating plants, accidentally chooses a poisonous plant, and dies. This movie plays with the related theme of nature versus culture and the innocence of the wild, which is portrayed as more real than the make believe world of human society. INTO THE WILD however offers the tragic version of this narrative with the main character finding himself unable to survive in this dramatically real, wild, world. The silence that is paramount in this movie – visually even more than acoustically – is again ominous in that it shows how harsh life can be outside the secure structures of the cultural taken-for-grantedness. The profound experience of life that McCandless is searching, turns out to become his demise.

In theological terms, this ambiguity of silence is reflected in the metaphorical use of the term. On the one hand, silence relates to peace of mind, the restful quiet existence in which no outer threats or inner tensions undermine or distract us. On the other hand, silence refers to death, the end of existence when no communication is possible anymore. The one silence speaks about consolation and wisdom, the other of isolation and loss. The profundity of this ominous ambiguity of silence is carefully retained in various religious traditions' conceptions of the afterlife, speaking of continuity and/or discontinuity, individual existence and/or becoming part of the whole, and so on.

3.4. Transcending Silence

The fourth and final type of silence discussed in this chapter is transcending silence. Here silence takes its most explicitly religious shape, although this can be expressed by means of various religious traditions, eco-spirituality, art and nature. Movies that come to mind when thinking of this type of silence are for example SEVEN YEARS IN TIBET³³, DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX³⁴ and INTO GREAT SILENCE³⁵.

This last movie, technically a documentary but really a meditation itself, portrays the life in a Carthusian monastery in the French Alps. This contemplative order devotes its time to a life in which silence plays a major role. We see the monks eat, work, pray, play even. We see time passing away. We see introspection and reflection. Silence here carries the specific notion of spending time with God. The monastic aesthetics serves to allow for the experience of the sacred, a space and time away from the worldly demands. It is this openness to the sacred, this receptivity of silence that in our own days attracts many people to abbeys, retreats, and pilgrimages, attending "ordoid" (monastic) places where one can step outside regular life, leave behind the bustling pace of city life and enter into the great silence.³⁶

³³ (Direction: Jean-Jacques Annaud; France 1997).

³⁴ (Direction: Xavier Beauvois; France 2010).

³⁵ Orig. DIE GROBE STILLE (Direction: Philip Gröning; Germany 2005).

³⁶ Ton Zondervan: Auf dem Weg zu einer post-modernen Netzwerk-Kirche, Über Transformationen, ordoide Orte und Siddharta. In: Thomas Eggenesperger, Ulrich Engel and Leo

Psychology of religion has given quite some attention to mysticism and peak experiences and one of the factors that seems to be important in facilitating mystical experiences is sensory deprivation, which relates directly to silence. William James even considered the essence of religion to be found in “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”³⁷ This focus on solitude related to his personal mystical experiences. Interestingly, this deliberate reduction of stimuli for one or more of the senses is not only found in the spiritual domain. It is also a powerful method in torture, as well as in alternative medicine. In all three domains the aim is to facilitate altered states of consciousness. Ralph Hood has shown in his research that mystical experiences relate not only with sensory deprivation, but also with religious interpretation, which suggests that it is not a completely autonomous process but an interplay of senses and interpretations.³⁸ The life of devotion that the monks live provides both: a reduction of sensory stimuli – silence – and a religious frame of reference. The power of INTO GREAT SILENCE is that it departs from a documentary description and then offers the viewer some of this sensory deprivation and religious framing, thus allowing for a mystical or at least transcending experience her- or himself.

An intriguing Biblical narrative in this regard is found in the first book of Kings 19. The prophet Elijah retreats into the wilderness after a theological shoot out with the priests of Baal, searching for the presence of God. The usual indicators of such divine presence, however, are disqualified: God is not in the storm, the earthquake, the fire:

“Behold, Yahweh passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Yahweh; but Yahweh was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but Yahweh was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but Yahweh was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11-12)

The Hebrew text literally speaks of a voice of thin silence. That is: a voice at the lower threshold of perception. It is worth contemplating that according to the story Elijah has just witnessed a storm, an earthquake, and a fire, all experiences of sensory overflow, which makes this “voice of thin silence” practically impossible to hear, yet overwhelming in meaning.

Oosterveen (eds.): *Kirche in Bewegung. Deutsch-niederländische Reflexionen zur Ekklesiologie aus dominikanischer Sicht*. Münster 2007, p. 51-58.

³⁷ William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London 1906 (Lecture 2).

³⁸ Ralph W. Hood: The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience. In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14, 1975, p. 29-41.

The importance of silence for the transcending experience probably lies in its engendering of receptivity³⁹, an attitude that is arguably more essential to religiosity than the indicators we find in much social scientific research which looks primarily at behaviors, convictions, and experiences. The underlying attitude of openness/receptivity is usually essential for these experiences to occur, together with the availability of a spiritual repertoire of a tradition, inviting and validating the experiences. Both in religious rituals and in cinema this interchange is fostered, invoking an attitude of receptivity and offering a repertoire of images, words, meanings, inviting the observer to become a responsive participant. This responsiveness, one could claim, is at the heart of faith.

4. Conclusion

This chapter, as we intimated, has not been a full survey of the functions of silence in religion and cinema. It has not even started to explore for example SILENCE OF THE LAMBS⁴⁰ or one of the other 400 film titles on IMDB that use the word silence or silent. My inductive reflection on the wide variety of silence in religion and film has brought these four preliminary types: repressive, transforming, ominous, and transcending. I am aware that these categories overlap, and some of my examples can easily be discussed under more than one heading. Moreover, I have taken silence in a rather broad sense while one could argue we need to zoom in on much more precise definitions and cases of acoustic silence. But allowing for all these disclaimers, what does this exploration yield?

First, the four types of silence differ along the dimensions of relationality and power. This gives each type a unique focus in how silence can play a role both in cinema and in religion. Repressive silence affects primarily the relation with the other, in which power and ethical truth play a major role. Transforming silence is primarily about the relation with the self, inviting authenticity and introspection. Ominous silence regards the relation with the world, notably in time and space and posing questions of contingency and control. And transcending silence is about the relation with the sacred, creating a liminal space of receptivity. These four categories emerged inductively, but perhaps they can contribute to a more conceptual framework for our explorations of silence in both religion and cinema.

Second, across these types the key factor to silence is ambiguity, which allows for, invites, requires a deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings. Silence is, in Van Gennip's and Turner's anthropological language, an anti-structure that opens up the patterned world of action and meaning by creating gaps and fissures. If we enter these gaps, we encounter a sphere of liminality where our existing world is deconstructed and a transition to another world is made possible. Both religion and cinema offer a performance of such liminal possible worlds that we can inhabit for a while, transitioning to a new understanding of

³⁹ R. Ruard Ganzevoort: Receptivity and the Nature of Religion. In: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 17.1, 1994, p. 115-125.

⁴⁰ (Direction: Jonathan Demme: USA 1991).

ourselves, one another, the world, and the sacred. Silence, it seems, is a powerful generator of the anti-structure needed for such a performance.

Third, reflection on cinema helps us understand religion and *vice versa*. This is not the straightforward application of theories, concepts, and criteria from one domain onto the other. Rather it is a transversal approach that – acknowledging the differences – explores how these two cultural realms reflect on human existence, create possible worlds, explore responses to perennial questions, challenge us to reconsider our morality, console and unsettle us. Both cinema and religious traditions help us to study the transcending patterns of action and meaning emerging from and contributing to the relation with the sacred.