

Freek L. Bakker / Mathilde van Dijk / Leo van der Tuin /
Marjeet Verbeek (eds.)

**Blessed are the Eyes that Catch Divine
Whispering...**
Silence and Religion in Film

SCHÜREN

Contents

Freek L. Bakker / Mathilde van Dijk / Leo van der Tuin / Marjeet Verbeek

Blessed are the Eyes that Catch Divine Whispering

Silence and Religion in Film

7

Part One Framing Silence and Religion

Heidi de Mare

Salient Silence

Some Principles of the Visual Formation in CRASH (2004)

21

Christian Wessely

Wagner at the Movie Theatre

Classical Music as Supporting Diegetic Technique in Contemporary Cinema,
Illustrated by means of Lars von Trier's MELANCHOLIA

36

Sylvain De Bleeckere

Silence Resonating in the Cinematographic Space

52

Frank Blaakmeer

Towards a Non-Symbolic Use of Silence

Bergman's WINTER LIGHT

68

Kutter Callaway

The Sound of Silence

Westerns, Wisdom, and Myth

80

Jonneke Bekkenkamp

The Silence of Flowers

A Gender-specific Analysis of Mystical Moments in HANA-BI (Takeshi Kitano,
1998) and BRIGHT STAR (Jane Campion, 2009)

92

Lucien van Liere

Going to the Movies in Indonesia

Cultural Memory and Silence in Indonesian Movies after the Atrocities of 1965–1966

108

Part Two Attributing Meaning to Silence

R. Ruard Ganzevoort

Silence Speaks: Theological Musings on Silence in Religion and Film

123

Alyda Faber

Silence-effects

Frederick Wiseman's Films as Parables

138

Tjeu van den Berk

**The Threefold Silence after the Death of God Filmed by Bergman (1963),
Campion (1993) and Von Trier (2011)**

153

Jean-Marie Weber

Silence and Desire in Psychoanalysis

Approach by Way of the Film PERSONA by Bergman

165

Frank G. Bosman

Silent Adam

Silence and Religion in Film in WALL-E

174

David H. Pereyra

Wholehearted Silences Complete a Meaningful Conversation

186

Freek L. Bakker / Mathilde van Dijk / Leo van der Tuin / Marjeet Verbeek

Some Final Observations

196

Biodoc

205

Index of Films

209

Freek L. Bakker / Mathilde van Dijk / Leo van der Tuin /
Marjeet Verbeek

Blessed are the Eyes that Catch Divine Whispering...¹

Silence and Religion in Film

Introduction

This book is the result of a conference held in Groningen, The Netherlands, on 30 and 31 May and 1 June 2013. This meeting was also the annual conference of the German-speaking research group 'Film und Theologie'. That is the reason why this book is included in the series 'Film und Theologie' published by Schüren Verlag in Marburg, Germany. The official language of the conference was English, therefore the language of this volume is English as well.

The theme of the conference was 'Silence and Religion in Film'. The participants listened to presentations given by fifteen scholars and saw four films, *TYSTNADEN*², *TRUE GRIT*³, *NOTHING PERSONAL*⁴ and *MELANCHOLIA*⁵. They also met filmmaker Urszula Antoniak, who gave an interview.

The scholars approached the subject from various perspectives and through divergent methods. Here, however, we attempt to create one framework in which the various prospects included in these contributions will be allocated a certain position. This introduction will give the initial impetus and at the end of the book a final chapter will look back and make an attempt to come to some general conclusions.

The theme of the conference, which is, in fact also the main theme of this publication, includes three important terms that need further clarification: film, silence and

1 Inspired by Thomas à Kempis: *De Imitatione Christi*. Edited by T. Lupo. Rome 1982, volume 1.3, p. 133.

2 (*THE SILENCE*, direction: Ingmar Bergman; Sweden 1963).

3 (Direction: Ethan and Joel Coen; USA 2010).

4 (Direction: Urszula Antoniak; Ireland and the Netherlands 2009).

5 (Direction: Lars von Trier, Denmark 2011).

religion. The section about religion will be followed by a section about the relationship between film and myth, in view of the common contention that films are in fact the new myths.⁶

Film

We refer to film as everything present or expressed in the movies. Since 1895, the year the first films were shown to a paying audience, movies have become very important. Today almost everyone has seen, sees or will see a movie. In particular the invention and dissemination of television has enlarged the impact of movies, as the TV boxes enabled people to see movies at home.

Since the second half of the 1920s sound has become an important element of films, although it must not be forgotten that in previous years sound was also important. But at that time it was living sound created by musicians and technicians present in the cinemas and other halls, rooms and tents where movies were projected. On 6 October 1927 the first sound film was released, *THE JAZZ SINGER* produced by Alan Crosland.⁷ Since then sound has become an indispensable element of a movie. However, now there was sound, silence became something special, something catching special attention among the audience. Yet, there was more that was remarkable about silence in film.

Already in the first decades after the production of the first movies watching films became an alternative for visiting theatre performances, which is reflected in the American term “movie theater” to denote a cinema. In the long run filmmaking was increasingly accepted as separate form of art in addition to traditional arts such as painting, writing novels, composing music and theatre plays.⁸ So, film – and also creating silence and playing with stillness in films – has also become an art form.

Silence

In one of the meetings preparing the conference, on 23 January 2013, the Dutch sound designer Kees Went, a teacher at the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU), gave some insight in the specialties of sound in film. He made the following observations.

- 6 As argued by several scholars of film, including Asbjorn Gronstadt: *Transfigurations: Violence, Death and Masculinity in American Cinema*. Amsterdam 2008, p. 49–62; S. Brent Plate: *Film and Religion: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. London 2008, p. 20 and 31.
- 7 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell: *Film History: An Introduction*. New York, 2nd edition 2003, p. 194.
- 8 James Monaco: *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*. New York et al., 3rd edition 2000, p. 38–65.

Just before Went started his lecture Jonneke Bekkenkamp had given a presentation about the film HANA-BI⁹. Went was amazed at the discussion that followed this presentation: all people present spoke about silence in a figurative sense. He wanted to speak about real silence. But first he explained what a sound designer does and related that sound designing is not only about the music in film but about all sound. For all sound in a film is constructed, even what may be called ordinary sound, since this is the sound a filmmaker wishes to be heard by the audience. Ordinary sound also has its codes. So we hear glass crashing when two cars collide, although this is not heard when two cars crash today. The windows of modern cars are constructed in such a way that they do not crash in a collision, or only with great difficulty. So there exists a sound culture which includes certain codes, and a sound designer has to reckon with them. Our feeling for rhythm and language is probably innate, Went said, but representation is determined by the culture we live in. To give an example, Westerners hear the sea in Debussy's *La Mer* (1904), Indians don't.

Went claimed that complete silence does not exist in film. If it is completely silent, we hear our blood circulation and a soft bleep created by the electricity of our nervous system. Silence means hearing yourself. Went believed that we feel uncomfortable when we hear ourselves in this way and that therefore many people start to contemplate, as we feel ourselves more comfortable in meditation.

Went stated that in film silence mostly is used as contrast. Music generates emotions. Although sound has to be something unconscious, Went said, it is the sound that guides the spectators by 'emotional threads' through the movie. The articles of Kutter Callaway, R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Christian Wessely, which follow later in this volume, will elaborate further on this theme.

Religion

The second term that needs some clarification is religion. It is widely known that many bookshelves are filled with books and other publications about religion. Therefore it is unnecessary to repeat the contents of these works within the scope of this volume. Yet it remains unavoidable to give at least some indications about what is meant by religion in this book. Since it is a book about film and most movies discussed in this publication are released in the West, the definition of religion has to be valid both for the last century and for Western culture. One of characteristics of this culture is that large sections of this society are affected by a process of secu-

9 (Direction: Takeshi Kitano; Japan 1997).

larisation, which is understood here as a development in which religion seems to disappear. So the description of religion used in this volume has to be applicable to a civilisation in which religion appears to fade away. In his book, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*, Edward I. Bailey attempts to formulate a definition which does justice to this situation. He starts with a statement made by the British Biblical scholar Stephen Cook, who suggested that religion was “not so much different from the rest of life, as life at its most intense”.¹⁰ Subsequently Bailey comes to a delineation of religion presenting itself in two different manifestations: one displaying itself as a conscious, or unconscious, dimension of life; and the other as a conscious, or self-conscious, relationship within life. The core of the first form of religion is related to a sense of the sacred found mostly in small-scale societies, while the second form of religion is about an encounter with a (the) holy in historical societies.¹¹ But the “relational is the dimensional, focussed and brought to a more personalised point, which in turn enhances the potentiality for conscious relationship.”¹² Therefore these two forms are not mutually exclusive.

Subsequently Bailey turns his attention to what he calls contemporary society and consequently also to what is meant by secularisation. After some discussion he comes to the conclusion that, in Western society, the main meaning of secularisation is “the opposite of religion”.¹³ Of course, this is a very specific conception of secularisation. There are also other views of secularisation possible. Here we, however, continue to follow Bailey, who subsequently turns his mind to the distinction Emil Durkheim made between the sacred and the profane. He explains that it is said that in the ideal-typical small-scale society the whole of human experience falls within the category either of the sacred or of the profane, while in historical societies this is ideal rather than typical.¹⁴

“In contemporary society, however, room has to be found for a middle ground between the sacred and the profane. For most of life is neither specially sacred, nor positively profane (anti-sacred), but simply – ordinary. It is the prevalence of this third reality that has led to the development of another ideal-type, which sees contemporary society as (totally) secular.”¹⁵

10 Edward I. Bailey: *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Kampen 1997, p. 2.

11 Bailey, p. 2–3.

12 Bailey, p. 3.

13 Bailey, p. 6.

14 Bailey, p. 6.

15 Bailey, p. 6–7.

According to Bailey the dichotomy has become a trichotomy. Next he analyses the difference between sacred and religious and concludes that anthropologists, who start from human experience, prefer to use the term sacred, while the sociologists, who begin with the institutional, prefer to speak about religious. Then Bailey points out that these two terms are not to be treated synonymously and that each is appropriate in its own context. This raises the possibility that that both are distinguishable in contemporary society, while at the same time the third concept (of the secular) is suitable as well. Initially he conceptualised this in terms of the possibility of a “secular religion”, but later he preferred to speak about “implicit religion” to avoid obfuscation with irreligion.¹⁶ Implicit religion refers to the interior, of which explicit religion can be the vehicle.¹⁷ “A single-word definition of “implicit religion”, would be *commitment*.”¹⁸ Commitment is the concept or content underlying the many aspects of the life someone lives. It is what integrates the various facets of human life including the sacred, profane, religious and secular elements it contains.

Film, and Myth

We have already noted that the invention and dissemination of television enabled people to see movies at home thus increasing the impact of movies considerably. Films have become so important that many of the stories they show have become points of reference for the spectators helping them to lead a good life. In this way movies took over the role ancient myths have had over the centuries.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss located the origin of myths in the cultures of the past, in which human being as a *bricoleur*, as someone using “second-hand” material to construct new things, created narratives in answer to the phenomena he encountered.¹⁹ The American film theorist S. Brent Plate (fig. 1) also pointed out that in myths frequently material is used de-



1 S. Brent Plate

¹⁶ Bailey, p. 7.

¹⁷ Bailey, p. 7.

¹⁸ Bailey, p. 8.

¹⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Savage Mind*, The Nature of Human Society Series. London 1968, p. 16–22.



2 Joseph Campbell

rived from older mythical stories to create new ones, a process being copied in the making of films.²⁰ “Originality is not the key to mythic tellings; rather, what is important is a unique way of combining old forms in new fashions.”²¹ However, according to Lévi-Strauss, a story only became a myth if it found response within the collective the narrator lived in,

which makes clear that his contemporaries had to experience a certain truth in his narration, and it is this truth that makes that myths are told to next generations.²² But when these generations do no longer recognise this truth, myths run the risk to relegate to oblivion. Lévi-Strauss already pointed out that myths can ‘die’.²³ The French anthropologist also indicated that myths are closely related to rituals. He compared the relationship between myth and ritual to one between thinking and living. Rituals are representations of myths and therefore have the same global structure as the myths they reproduce.²⁴ Plate elaborates on this and shows that something similar is also the case with regard to film, firstly, because watching films itself can have a ritual nature; secondly, because both rituals and films re-enact ancient myths,²⁵ and thirdly, because today peoples hold so-called theme-parties where the guests act as if they are figuring in a certain film.²⁶

The American mythologist Joseph Campbell (fig. 2) elaborated on the views developed by Lévi-Strauss and started to distinguish between four various functions or prospects of myths being:

1. the metaphysical function: evocation of awe for the numinous;
2. the cosmological function: explanation of the form of the universe;
3. the sociological function: appreciation and support of the existing social order;
4. the psychological function: being a guide for the individual through the stages of human life.²⁷

20 Plate, p. 20 and 31.

21 Plate, p. 31.

22 Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Naked Man: Mythologiques 4*. Chicago 1990, p. 626–627.

23 Lévi-Strauss 1990, p. 675.

24 Lévi-Strauss 1990, p. 674–675.

25 Plate, p. 41–43.

26 Plate, p. 80–89, where he relates about TITANIC, TERMINATOR and DECONSTRUCTING HARRY parties.

27 Joseph Campbell: *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*. New York 1968, p. 608–624.

In addition Campbell designated the cultural history of myths. In the hunter and gatherer societies myths revealed the ways of animals. In agrarian societies they disclosed how the earth was fertilised. In the early civilisations of Mesopotamia and Babylonia they unfolded the ways of the celestial lights. And in the Middle Ages, Romanticism and Modern Times they offer revelations concerning the personal, individual ways of human beings. Yet he adds a disclaimer, since these four forms are not necessarily linked to certain historical periods; they can intermingle so that a myth reveals two or three things at once.²⁸ These four functions can also be discerned in many films.

The Structure of this Book

This book is divided in two parts. The first part entitled ‘Framing Silence and Religion’ includes seven articles concerning the way silence is presented in movies. The second part, ‘Attributing Meaning to Silence’, contains six articles giving certain significance to silence.

Part 1: Framing Silence and Religion

The first article of this section is “Salient Silence. Some Principles of the Visual Formation in CRASH (2004)” written by Heidi de Mare, a Dutch scholar exploring the role of images and imagination. After a meticulous analysis of CRASH²⁹ with careful attention for the relationship between sound and images she attempts to interpret the short moment of silence near the end of this movie. Or to say it in her own words: “A closer look into the audio-visual structure of this film will help us to understand in what way the spectator is invited to take part in this cinematic metamorphosis.” Thus she tries to unravel why such moments touch many spectators so deeply.

Christian Wessely, an Austrian theologian and musician, is responsible for the next article entitled “Wagner at the Movie Theatre”. The subtitle is “Classical Music as Supporting Diegetic Technique in Contemporary Cinema”, a sentence he illustrates with Lars von Trier’s use of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* in his movie MELANCHOLIA³⁰. This method leads to a new interpretation of the end of the film, the scene in which Justine, Claire and Claire’s son Leo sit in a magic hut. This only underscores the importance of sound in films, and of course also of silence, as Kees Went said: “In film silence mostly is used as contrast” [to sound].

28 Video *The Hero’s Journey: A Biographical Portrait*, made shortly before Campbell’s death in 1987.

29 (Direction: Paul Higgis: USA 2004).

30 (Denmark 2011).

The Belgian philosopher Sylvain De Bleekere is the author of the third article, “Silence Resonating in the Cinematographic Space” about silence in *INTO GREAT SILENCE* (2005)³¹ and *DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX* (2010)³². He demonstrates that the meaning of silence of these two films reflect completely different theologies. Both monasteries originate in the Christian tradition, but they give expression to completely divergent interpretations of this tradition. These movies show the poly-interpretability of silence. The feeling of the audience after having seen one of these films differs completely from what he senses after having looked at the other movie.

The fourth article, “Towards a Non-Symbolic Use of Silence: Bergman’s *WINTER LIGHT*” is written by the Dutch theologian and philosopher Frank Blaakmeer. He refers to the fact that *WINTER LIGHT*³³ is “unusually silent”, although this is often overlooked in many publications about this movie. The strong emphasis on silence is moreover underscored by showing scenes in which the viewers see two persons talking to each other but do not hear anything. The last words of this article are *WINTER LIGHT*’s “silence must not be interpreted, it must be heard”. In the section just before these words Blaakmeer comes to a new interpretation in which he asks whether this silence expresses the absolute non-existence of God or the wrath of the Hidden God (*deus absconditus*) found in Lutheran theology.

The American theologian and film theorist Kutter Callaway wrote the fifth article of this section entitled “The Sound of Silence: Westerns, Wisdom, and Myth”. It has a surprising focus: Westerns, movies that mostly are not associated with silence, although Callaway points out that they include many taciturn main protagonists. Reflecting on the “hovering silence” found in 1 Kings 19: 12 he also points out that silence in movies may offer “an imaginative construal of that mystical, epiphanic space where sound and silence provide the necessary conditions from which the other springs forth.” Therefore silence may refer to God. But films have two tracks, a soundtrack and an “image-track”. So silence is not only about the interplay between sound and silence, but also about images evoking silence, for example, the wide landscapes presented in many Westerns, which lead Callaway to coin the term “visual silence”.

In the next article, “The Silence of Flowers: A Gender-specific Analysis of Mystical Moments in *HANA-BI* (Takeshi Kitano, 1998) and *BRIGHT STAR* (Jane Campion, 2009)”, the Dutch theologian Jonneke Bekkenkamp discusses the concept of silence as ex-

31 (Direction: Philip Gröning; Germany 2005).

32 (OF GODS AND MEN, direction: Xavier Beauvois; Morocco and France 2010).

33 (NATTVARDGÄSTERNA, direction: Ingmar Bergman; Sweden 1963).

pression of the ineffable. The Dutch know the expression “*Zeg het met bloemen*” (Say it with flowers), meaning that flowers can express what cannot be uttered in words. A gift of flowers moreover is almost always regarded as a positive gesture in the Netherlands. HANA-BI literally means “fire flowers”, but it is the Japanese word for fireworks. Yet, in this movie it also can refer to the paintings of flowers of one of the main protagonists. After having pointed out that flowers are mostly associated with women, Bekkenkamp attempts to show that the “language of flowers” in films, literature and other cultural artefacts is shifting from being mainly symbolic to being a bit more magical and much more mystical.

The last article of this part is authored by the Dutch theologian and philosopher Lucien M. van Liere. He has taught in Jakarta, Indonesia, for five years. The title of his contribution is “Cultural Memory and Silence in Indonesian Movies”. His writing analyses how Indonesian films dealt with the events of the so-called 30 September Movement, the people who attempted a coup d'état on 30 September 1965, and the mass-killings in the wake of this putsch. During these killings the victims were identified as Communists and atheists and therefore enemies of religion, so that it became a religious duty to take their lives and cleanse the country by putting them to death. Until 1998, the year of the fall of President Suharto, the general who quelled the revolt, the experiences of the victims were silenced. The killings were never denied; on the contrary, the executors were proud of their actions. But since the end of the last century the atmosphere is altering, which is shown in particular in Joshua Oppenheimer's *THE ACT OF KILLING* (2012)³⁴.

Part 2: Attributing Meaning to Silence

The Dutch theologian and film expert R. Ruard Ganzevoort is responsible for the first article of this section. His writing entitled “Silence Speaks: Theological Musings on Silence in Religion and Film” presents four types of silence: repressive silence, transforming silence, ominous silence and transcending silence. In his view these types of silence reflect a relationship with the other, with oneself, with the outside world and with the sacred respectively. Furthermore silence is a powerful generator of an anti-structure inviting for a construction or deconstruction of meanings. It creates gaps and fissures, in which we encounter a sphere of liminality where our existing world is deconstructed and a transition to another world is made possible. This makes cinema akin to religion. In other words, studying cinema helps to understand religion.

The second article in this part of the study, “Silence-effects: Frederick Wiseman's

34 (Direction: Joshua Oppenheimer; Indonesia 2012).

Films as Parables”, has come from the Canadian theologian Alyda Faber. After a discussion about the ideas of other scholars who regard films as parables, she focuses on the movies produced by Frederick Wiseman. Faber follows Seamus Heaney who defines the parables of Jesus as “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances”. One of the main qualities of Wiseman’s films is that they give voice to the voiceless. These voiceless can be the fishes in the production process of a fish factory or the lambs becoming a “product” in a factory preparing lamb meat. The address of these films is intense.

The Dutch theologian Tjeu van den Berk wrote the third article entitled “The Threefold Silence after the Death of God Filmed by Bergman (1963), Campion (1993) and Von Trier (2011)”. Beginning with the exclamation of Nietzsche’s madman “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” Van den Berk reflects on Bergman’s *SILENCE*, Von Trier’s *MELANCHOLIA* and Campion’s *THE PIANO*³⁵, three movies, which in his opinion represent what may occur in a world without God. “In *THE SILENCE* and *MELANCHOLIA* one smells the decay; in *THE PIANO* these disintegrating forces create new life. It is the eternal law of the kernel of wheat that has to die to produce fruits,” Van den Berk concludes thus indicating the difference in dealing with the silence of God in these three films. Here silence means a total absence of God, a position differing from the one taken by Frank Blaakmeer.

The next article, “Silences and Desire in Psychoanalysis: Approach by Way of the Film *PERSONA* by Bergman”, is a contribution of Jean-Marie Weber, a theologian coming from Luxembourg. One of the two main protagonists in *PERSONA*³⁶, Elisabeth Vogler, a famous actress, has fallen mute and stays in a solitary cottage with Alma, a nurse who accompanies her. Alma does her utmost to make Elisabeth speak again, but in the end Elisabeth’s taciturnity drives her to despair. In this movie silence is always the silence of the listener, Elisabeth who listens to the words of Alma, but later also Alma who starts to listen to her own and then is delivered from her reverence for the famous actress she is living with. This reminds of the silence of the psychiatrist, who listens and by his listening helps others to overcome the traumas and blockades they suffer from.

Frank G. Bosman, a Dutch theologian, contributed the fifth article of this section: “Silent Adam. Silence and Religion in the film *WALL-E*”. *WALL-E*³⁷ is an animation-film about two almost voiceless robots called Wall-E and Eve. Their relationship recalls

35 (Direction: Jane Campion; New Zealand 1993).

36 (Direction: Ingmar Bergman; Sweden 1966).

37 (Direction: Andrew Stanton; USA 2008)

the relationship between Adam and Eve in Genesis. WALL-E can be regarded a silent movie not because there is no sound in it but because of the lack of speech. Yet the robots communicate. It seems that silence is the new universal Adamic language.

The final article, “Wholehearted Silences Complete a Meaningful Conversation”, written by the Canadian theologian David H. Pereyra is also about the role of silence in communication. In this case, however, it is about the periods of silence between Philippe and Driss, the two main protagonists of *INTOUCHABLES*³⁸. Pereyra uses the hermeneutical method of Gadamer to analyze these silences. In this way he shows how silence can become an important means of communication.

The final chapter provides general observations and conclusions made on the basis of all these articles.

38 (Direction: Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano; France 2011)