

The Work of a Film Historian

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William Park. (Education): A.B.1951 Princeton University. A.M. 1954 Columbia University. Major field: Modern American Literature. Ph.D. 1962 Columbia University. Major field: Eighteenth-Century English Literature. Dissertation topic: "The Mid-Eighteenth-Century Novel." Advisor: James L. Clifford. (Military): 1951-53. United States Marine Corps, released from active duty as a First Lieutenant. Honorably discharged from the Reserves in 1959 as a Captain. Letter of Commendation with Combat "V." (Employment): 1954-57 Instructor in English, Hamilton College. 1957-62 Lecturer and Instructor in English, Columbia University. 1962-2000 Faculty of Literature, Sarah Lawrence College. (Administrative): 1965-66 Initiated and taught in the Sarah Lawrence Upward Bound Program. 1967 Chairman, Division of Literature, Language, and Writing. 1969, 1977-80 Chairman, Division of Literature, Language, and Writing. 1966-70, Founder and Co-Director, Sarah Lawrence Summer School in London. (Award Publications): "The College Anthology of British and American Poetry" (1964, 1972), "The Idea of Rococo" (1993), and numerous articles on the eighteenth-century novel and on film.

I am a Professor of English Literature who also became a Film Historian and Critic while teaching at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville NY. Last year my wife and I retired to Santa Cruz, California, where I continue to study, to write, and to spend a great deal of time with my grandchildren.

In 1967 the Motion Pictures Producers Association, better known as "Hollywood," abandoned the Production Code, which had regulated the content of the movies since 1934, and adopted the current rating system. That change, so disastrous to the moral level of the movies, also had a profound influence on my own life. Although all my formal education had been devoted to literature, like many other English teachers, I spent a good part of my recreational life at the cinema. In fact, I grew up on the movies, which, next to my mother, had provided me with a spotty but genuine moral formation. For under the Code, devised and supervised by Catholics, the movies, on the whole, presented a Christian perspective on life, a positive perspective characterized by love and sacrifice. But in 1967 all that changed and very quickly a new vision dominated

the screen, a vision consisting of blasphemy, unhampered violence, explicit sex, confrontation and self-assertion, all under the banner of freedom and enlightenment, what has been ironically dubbed as the “Malibu Enlightenment.”

At that time I had begun teaching film at Sarah Lawrence College, then an all-woman’s college. In fact, along with Wilford Leach, who later became Artistic Director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, I had introduced film history and film making into the curriculum. This was an era of great filmmaking: the Italian Neo-Realists, the French New Wave, the English Angry Young Men, Ingmar Bergman in Sweden, as well as Kurosawa, Ozu, and Mizoguchi in Japan, and Ray in India. Even the academic world was catching on to the fact that film was the major art of the twentieth century. Serious film criticism and film programs were springing up everywhere. I was very happy with my work and the courses were very popular. In fact, the program grew to such an extent that I seriously contemplated abandoning the teaching of literature to devote all my time to it. Sarah Lawrence, a great seminar of the arts in the USA, whose students went on to fame (e.g. Barbara Walters, Yoko Ono, Linda McCartney, Jill Clayburgh, Brian DePalma) and who often came from families already famous (eg. Widmark, Poitier, Robards, Cleese) deserved no less. I should also add that at that time I was a non-church going Protestant, intellectually unable to fathom atheism and mildly assenting to the truths of Christianity, but unable to associate with those practicing religion, whom I regarded as misguided and pious hypocrites.

At first, I welcomed the change, writing favorably about the sexual ethic of James Bond and admiring the work of Sam Peckinpah, particularly *The Wild Bunch*, as genuinely “Homeric.” But then the sexual content of the new films became problematic. As a new “professional” in this new field, I felt obliged to “keep up,” to be abreast of all the latest “developments,” and to comment intelligently upon them. Such an attitude took me not only into the world of Andy Warhol and R. W. Fassbinder but also into the soft-porn world of Russ Meyer and Radley Metzger. Anything less would have been irresponsible. Yet as a middle aged man, surrounded by young women who looked to me for at least aesthetic guidance, I started to yearn for the life of sexual license, the “license to love” as I had called it, which almost daily appeared before me on the screen. Why not live what I taught? Why not imitate the movies, which had all my life provided me with role models?

I won’t say the tensions of this situation caused a nervous breakdown, but by some grace of God, I realized that I was heading for a disaster that would ruin my marriage and my family. I did break down and weep at what was happening to me; I realized I had to quit teaching film, indeed, to flee film, and to seek some spiritual structure to sustain me during this “crisis”. So I returned to the

Protestant church of my childhood. That was in 1976. Instead of the movies, I decided to teach religious literature and began by offering a course in the Bible, at that time not taught at Sarah Lawrence. From here I branched out to a course in Spiritual Autobiography, in which I included Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, a work that completely undercut any intellectual basis for Protestantism. Yet I decided to remain in my Protestant church because I was then very much under the influence of Simone Weil, the brilliant but heterodox French philosopher, who advised that one should stay in the religion into which God had placed one, advice which she, herself, born a Jew and raised as an atheist, did not follow.

But then, one of my sons fell into big troubles. I wanted to fly to Oregon, where he was living, in order to help him, but he not only refused my help but also denounced me, saying I was no longer his father. I did not know what to do or where to turn. But on a Saturday morning, I went into St. Joseph's, the local Catholic church where I had never been before, and knelt down before the image of Our Lady, and implored her help. She had a son who suffered; she would understand. «Our Lady of Sorrows, When you contemplate her, look into her heart: she is a Mother with two sons, face to face: him...and you» (*The Way*, 506). I have no memory of how long I was there. But the next morning, I received a telephone call from my son's girlfriend, telling me she was pregnant with his baby and that she was going to have this child no matter what my son did. Others may see this as a "coincidence" having no particular signification, but I *knew* it was the answer to my prayers. And sure enough, my son's troubles went away; he and his girlfriend married; they since have succeeded in the world, and they have two lovely teenage daughters. As soon as I hung up the phone, I knew I could never return to my Protestant church.

By another "coincidence" the Associate Pastor of St. Joseph's Church at that time was Father George Rutler, who has since become a famous Catholic TV evangelist. One of my colleagues at Sarah Lawrence told me he used to be an Anglican priest but had been converted, as I had, by reading Cardinal Newman. That day on walking home from work, I saw a priest approaching me and asked if he was Father Rutler. He said he was and took me to the Rectory, where I asked to be received into the Church and began that process. As Father Rutler is also a Priest of Opus Dei (specifically of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross), he directed me toward Opus Dei, suggesting that I receive some spiritual direction from another priest of Opus Dei that he knew, who was then living in New Rochelle NY, only four miles from my home! Even in retelling this story, I am overcome by the graces offered to me by the hands of Divine Providence!

Some twelve years later, I resumed the teaching of film. In the interim, thanks to the order which spiritual direction helped me to have — distributing better my periods of study and work, and attempts at cheerfulness — I had fin-

ished a book on eighteenth-century culture over which I had been dawdling for more than a decade. Sarah Lawrence now boasted as my successor in film history the noted critic and author, Gilberto Perez. He and I became friends, and he encouraged me to join him in the ever-expanding film program. From 1966 to 1976 I had kept a journal of my film going, writing up, sometimes at great length, every film I saw. When I ceased teaching film, I abandoned the journal, though I did continue, though much less frequently, to attend the movies. But after several years of regular church going and the reading of spiritual literature, I found I could resume the journal, as kind of hobby not unlike collecting stamps. But now I was being asked, challenged in a way, once more to take up film history as a *profession!*

Nothing seemed more *natural!* Archimedes said, «Give me but a place to stand, and I can move the world». Now I had a place to stand, given me by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. «Culture, culture! Good! Don't let anyone get ahead of us in striving for it and possessing it. But remember that culture is a means, not an end»(*The Way*, 345). With the sacraments and some practices of Christian life, with all the aids which Christ and His Church mercifully grant us, and with the system perfected by Blessed Josemaría to take advantage of those means now at my disposal, not only could I attend movies once more without risking moral disintegration, but I could actually profess them as a means of sanctifying my work and my life in the world! It was as though I had been vaccinated or immunized to walk amidst sickness. Not that I was really immune from sin, but I discovered in myself a new detachment that enabled me to work on film, to be in the world, without being merely of the world and suffering moral torments and anxieties at each turn of events. Now the movies, rather than being an end in themselves, occasions for my own ambition or pride, or simply aphrodisiacs, they became the means for serving God. They became no more dangerous than any other secular pursuit, for we always risk falling, no matter what we undertake.

Let me explain. First, the perspective given me by Opus Dei, which is a Catholic perspective, liberated me from being a slave of the times, of conforming to the fashion of the moment, like old men who wear pony tails or pierce their ears. No longer subject to the mores of the times, I could see exactly what those mores were, not all of them bad by the way, and write about them more objectively. Sustained by Christ, I lost any concerns about “keeping up” with the phantasms of the moment. I now had a standard, not one created by mere men, but a universal standard, which was also a natural one. Next, I realized more fully than ever before that art really was a *medium*. It was not an end in itself, a false idol, but another of the many means God has given us to bring us closer to Him. For that reason, all great art, whether intentionally or not, was truly religious not

only in promoting genuine morals but in linking time with eternity. And in so doing it was worthy of our attention and study. Then too, I found that I could discriminate, that I was free to choose what films I wished to see and what films I wished to write about. No longer did I require myself to see everything, no matter how dull or viscous, in order to be *au courant* and to have a clever opinion about it. And no longer did I feel that I should see nothing in order to avoid the contamination of the world. I had no qualms about avoiding films like *The Cider House Rules*, which though winning an Academy Award boastfully argued for abortion. But I also had no qualms about praising films such as *Almost Famous*, which despite its dreary sexual mores, dramatized the trial of a young man who chose truth over success. Nor was I shattered when other Catholic film critics, and who is not a film critic, disagreed with my opinions or judgments. In short, I found a new freedom to pursue my profession, a freedom that was aided, paradoxically, by the sympathetic direction of my spiritual advisors. In other words my efforts to live according to the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, together with the pastoral help I received from Opus Dei enabled me to study, enjoy, and to help others understand and recognize the values in the secular art of the movies. I did not have to renounce the world, as I felt in 1976, in order to be a Christian. I could passionately love it without succumbing to all of its allure, which is to say without falling into idolatry and sin. I wince at the pride of this last statement, but I trust that through prayer God will provide me with enough Christian armor to protect me from myself.

Now, what were the results? Almost at once, I discovered that writing came easier to me. A friend suggested that I send him reviews of films I thought worth seeing, or worth commenting upon, and that practice led to my becoming the film reviewer for *Position Papers*, the superb Irish monthly edited with genuine apostolic outlook. Professional journals received my work, and I even won the Catholic Press Association's national award for the best review of 1998, given for an article in *Crisis* designating the 50 Best Catholic Films. What distinguished the piece was precisely its secular approach, for my favorite films, which I found profoundly Catholic, were not the superficial Bing Crosby favorites, but works of deep moral and spiritual import, such as *Ikiru* and *Groundhog Day*. One dissenting reader complained to the magazine, «But *Ikiru* is a Japanese film». Others thought I was joking in taking a comedy such as *Groundhog Day* seriously. But to confine one's critical attention only to explicitly Catholic films in explicitly Catholic settings would be a form of critical clericalism, which I more than suspect would be frowned upon by Blessed Josemaría.

The three greatest Hollywood directors of the last century were Frank Capra, John Ford, and Alfred Hitchcock. Much to the amazement of those false secularists who think Catholicism is dead and an immovable oppressive weight

to creative artists, all three were practicing Catholics. Seldom did any of them make films dealing directly with religion, yet all their greatest works, which deal with the secular world and its human dramas, are shaped by a genuine Christian sensibility, by the synthesis of loving the world and God, by the discovery that one could do both, which lies at the heart of Blessed Josemaría's work. «Before God, no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything gains the value of the Love with which it is done» (*Furrow*, 487).