

Sin in the Cinema

Michael E. Williams

1. *The medium of film: truth or deceit?*

To begin, we need to say something in general about the cinema as a medium. To do this, let's throw away the packaging, the ice cream, the popcorn, the advertisements. We are not dealing with television, so there are to be no advertising breaks within the film, no welcome or unwelcome intrusions from other people; we pay our money, settle in our place, the lights are lowered. We can't escape, it is us and the film. We are in the dark or semi-dark, but around us there are others, an anonymous collectivity drawn together in the watching of a film. Film makes its appeal to a mass audience, so we laugh, we weep, we are scared, or we are just bored, with others. Afterwards we can talk about the experience, agree or disagree with the critics. Yet besides all this shared experience, those images on the screen can stir personal memories, stimulates desires, bring up from the subconscious dreams and fantasies, we can identify with the characters and with the situations. It is a way to escape from our everyday life. Like Wittgenstein, we can sit in the front row of the stalls and let the film take over, cleanse and purify us like a shower bath. It is a way in which we can indulge ourselves, let our imagination have free scope. Pope Pius XII in two allocutions in 1955, to the Italian Film Industry (June 21) and to the Congress of the International Union of Theatre Owners and Film Distributors (October 28) was eloquent about this power of the cinema to transfer the spectator to an imaginary world and so produce an effect of emancipation and liberation. Another Italian put it rather differently. Federico Fellini in his film *The City of Women*, recalling his visits to the cinema in his youth, shows us a row of schoolboys in the stalls who become a host of individuals in one vast bed, each fantasizing and masturbating.

Is there any justification for the escapism of film? Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae Q 168 justifies 'ludus' (entertainment) on the grounds that men and women need rest and relaxation and this is permitted as long as the pleasure is not sought in acts or words that are base or harmful and as long as the time, place and persons are appropriate and the entertainment does not distract us from our duties and obligations. It is possible to over-indulge in entertainment; it is commendable on occasion to restrict or even shun entertainment, not so as to spoil the enjoyment of others but as a reminder that it should be used sparingly, like a condiment giving added taste to the basic food of everyday life. Aquinas here offers us valuable criteria for our attitude to film as entertainment. But is this all there is to the cinema? Is film more than just a pastime? Is it one of the

arts? There are certainly places known as Arts Cinemas. This medium has an extraordinary power to take people out of themselves which in certain cases resembles the experience of viewing a painting or hearing a piece of music. The legitimacy of evoking such emotion and the corresponding enjoyment of a work of art has been generally accepted by most Christians whenever they speak about the arts. But when it comes to giving reasons and justifying the artistic experience on moral grounds there is a gap. Perhaps this is because, traditionally, morality is associated with the *voluntarium* and in the artistic experience something else takes over and we are no longer in charge.

Something similar goes for dreams. These can be a reflection of one's own hidden impulses and desires and a source of temptation. But usually we are consoled with the statement that one cannot be held responsible for one's actions in dreams. So is there no such thing as a good or bad dream? Is the world of dreams inferior or superior to morality? Are we our real self in dreams or are we taken over by something else? A daimon?

Cinema has a lot to do with dreams, day dreams and night dreams. As for the artistic experience, it is important to recognise that it cannot be dealt with simply in terms of entertainment, neither does it find its justification solely in being a vehicle for moral instruction. In some way it is autonomous. Art has a value in itself, it does not need anything else to justify it. Beauty is to be sought and loved for its own sake, created beauty as well as uncreated (whatever that means). This is not to deny that the artist and those who admire his works have their responsibilities as human beings.

This matter of the morality of art is compounded in cinema by reason of its chief instrument, the camera, and the power of the photographic image. Visual scenes and images can remain in the mind for a long time even when we have left the cinema. They can block out all else. A particular angle shot, the lightening on a human face, can bring out a hitherto neglected aspect of reality. Sometimes these effects are due to the deliberate intention of the man with the camera, but they can also be quite unplanned and as pleasing a surprise to him as they are to us. But there is deception too. We talk about the moving picture but in reality nothing moves at all. Twenty four frames are projected each second, but the optic nerve is incapable of registering the darkness between the frames and cannot distinguish each sufficiently, so that things appear to move. But it is we who create the motion. It is the inadequacy of the human eye that banishes the dark and sets the still in motion; the creative and redemptive quality of cinema that brings light out of darkness!

When the pictures have been taken, the incidents and sequences can be put together and arranged in an order of our own choosing. In *The Film Sense* the Russian director Eisenstein said:

Two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition. This is not in the least a circumstance peculiar to the cinema, but it is a phenomenon invariably met with in all

cases where we have to deal with the juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomena, two objects.

Montage generates new meanings, it creates a new dimension. We also speak about the talking picture, but the voice is often dubbed and the sound track need not fit in exactly with the pictures we see. The making of a film calls for a great deal of artifice. The director Ingmar Bergman speaks of it as a work of deceit and of himself as a conjuror or magician. It is indeed a magic lantern. But something similar goes on in the other arts and we can speak of the truth of cinema as we speak of the truth of fiction.

2. *The makers of film: sins of actors, cameramen, directors and producers*
From something about the medium, we now pass on to those engaged in the making of film. The attraction of the cinema goes back to the twenties when there were very many picture houses with two shows a night, when seats were cheap and the cinema provided a safe haven from the streets. One could be transported into another world and escape for a moment from the Great Depression and indulge in dreams of affluence, of beautiful people and unattainable life styles. There was a glimpse of how the other half lives, or was thought to live. No wonder that many were motivated to seek auditions, or, if this proved impossible, to read about the lives and loves of their favourite stars in film magazines and glossy books. The lives of film stars are still popular and find a market today. Most of the books in the 'Film' section of our book stores are about film stars. However, their goings-on no longer scandalise us because infidelity and divorce and even wealth are nearer to our grasp now than they were fifty years ago. But what was our problem once is still a matter of concern in places like India, where the lives of many of the native stars are contrary to traditional values and the bad moral example given by actors and actresses off the screen is a public scandal. But the life of a movie star can be very demanding. Unlike the theatre, cinema does not involve memorising long parts, but there is the drudgery of hanging about inactive for long periods of time and then going through the same scene many times and never being able to see what the whole film is about, or how one's contribution will be used. Like most professions, the life has its specific temptations and moral risks, and there is need for support, encouragement and pastoral care for those engaged in the film industry.

Apart from the actors and actresses, there are the dressers, props men, electricians, set constructors, cameramen, script writers and directors. Script writers, cameramen and directors usually do have an idea of the final result. But what emerges in the finished work is often not exactly what was intended in the first place. Both constraints and improvisations can enter in quite unexpectedly. There is always the element of chance, or surprise. So if at the end of it all the film is thought to be morally objectionable, it is not easy to determine responsibility. Who has sinned? Some film directors have a keen sense of responsibility and are also able to express their intentions clearly in speech or writing; this can be

a great help in understanding their work better. Other directors are only really articulate in their chosen medium—that is why they make films and don't write novels or whatever. Pasolini, a poet and writer as well as a film maker, disowned the films of his 'Trilogy of Life' (*The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Arabian Nights*,) because he considered that they had been exploited by the press and by advertising publicity. He said that when engaged on a work, the artist has to express himself sincerely and say what he feels without any regard or fear of the way in which his work might be used in the future. Here he was asserting the faithfulness of the artist to his vision, another aspect of following his conscience. But, once the work is completed, then the artist has to take into account the way in which his work is received, and if he thinks it has been distorted then he has the right to disown it. He claimed that he had been a victim of the unscrupulous consumer and capitalist society of modern Italy. But not all directors acknowledge their motives and responsibility so explicitly. Some maintain that all they want to do is to amuse and entertain. The director Mike Nichols put it this way in an interview with *The Independent* (25.3.89):

I came to realise that Bergman and Renoir and Kurosawa and Fellini and all those guys confused us about what we were doing. It is as though we were all harmonica players, and went along to a concert to see Larry Adler playing Bach and said, 'Oh, so *that's* what playing the harmonica is about.' But the fact that Larry Adler can play Bach on it, has nothing to do with the harmonica and everything to do with him. Bergman is a great artist, Renoir is a great artist, but there are very few like them; the rest of us make entertainment. And that is an absolutely honourable profession. Straining towards art is confusing and useless: unless you are one of these rare men, you fall into art, you'd better not try to plan it.

If the director is the person responsible for the film's overall look or style, it is the producer who has raised the money and who is most concerned with the financial and commercial viability of the film. So it is that in the production we find the presence of contemporary capitalist culture. Unless you can find a producer, you'll never get your film made or shown to the general public. There was an interesting feature in *The Independent Magazine* (27.5.89). The headline ran: 'White mischief. Dirt cheap movies for poor black audiences mean big money for South African film makers.' The story tells of the activities of some South African film makers, including a certain Ronnie Isaacs who says 'I don't make movies about the way blacks are. I make movies about the way blacks want to be.' In this enterprise he has the full backing of the government. The main criteria seem to be that the film avoids all contentiousness, does not challenge the *status quo* in any way, and is at least 70 minutes long. The article continues:

Today's low budget black film takes place in Ronni Isaac's nevernever land. Here blacks live in a world removed from politics, engaging in slapstick chases, marital infidelities and

sports. They interact only with other blacks in fictitious black states where blacks occupy positions reserved exclusively for whites in South Africa. Scenes of township life are forbidden. It is ironic that the films are shot mainly in the wealthier white suburbs of South Africa's cities, where the black actors are obliged to use the service entrance to the production locations.

That article is about South Africa but it has a more general application. How many films coming from the USA have a similar mixture of thrills, laughs, sex, moralising and are considered harmless entertainment? Triviality is not all bad, bad taste is not necessarily sinful, but are there any limits? Giving the public something one has decided they want, something to distract them not just from their own everyday cares but from the injustices of the society in which they live, is just another version of the 'bread and circuses' of Roman times and cannot be free from blame somewhere. The extension of commercial television raises similar problems.

3. *The distributors of film: the sins of the system*

A consideration of the producer leads us naturally to the problem of the distribution of film. The films people see and judge the cinema by. One of the features of cinema today is the power that a few large distributors exercise, so that *de facto* the choice before the general public is very limited. In the UK there are two large chains that control most of the cinema screens and this means that the same few films are shown all over the country. Arts cinemas do exist but the clientele is small and they pay their way with difficulty. In London there is a wider choice than in the provinces but even this is inferior to what is on offer in Paris and, at certain times of the year, in Madrid. This state of affairs gives a false impression of what can be done and of what is being done worldwide or even nationwide. The United States does *not* head the list of film-producing countries (this place belongs to India). Nor does it have the largest cinema-going public (this is Taiwan). But the USA does distribute its products throughout the western world so that at this moment it is safe to assume that its latest releases are being shown, dubbed, in Paris, Rome and other capitals of the world. Because of the technical excellence of its cinema and its faithfulness to traditional film genres (thrills, bravery, violence, sex, laughter) its products are in demand and can draw the crowds. This situation may not be sinful but it is a form of cultural colonialism and it is not easy to change. The French have tried unsuccessfully to lay down a quota for European films shown on TV in the EC. In England there is a certain amount of prejudice against a 'foreign' film even if it is dubbed into English. People prefer the familiar, and this is understandable since there is a cultural gap to be bridged if one is going to get any satisfaction from seeing a film set in, say, France or Turkey. But because of the universal language of film and its appeal to all ages, social conditions and levels of education, it has a great potentiality to enlarge the horizons of the audience and promote understanding between cultures. To

some extent this is recognised by the popularity of exotic film locations, but it can be extended to films that portray real-life drama in different social and cultural conditions. Laughter is one of the great levellers and the comic cinema where the comedy is visual and self-explanatory could play a part in the humanising of international relations.

However, cultural differences have to be respected. One has to be careful not to offend against traditional values when one is showing a film from a different milieu. Western film distributors are sometimes quite insensitive to the harm their films do. What is considered innocent fun at home can be viewed in quite a different light abroad. Likewise an African film showing the joyful celebratory ritual in which an animal is slaughtered and the blood drunk, is judged not acceptable by an English public.

4. *The films we see: our judgement of them*

A consideration of 'sin in the cinema' has to say something about the situation of the Church in society and the scope and validity of its judgement on that society, including film.

Once the Church was able to control the flow of information. Its voice was authoritative and powerful. It played a big part in education and its position was supported by society and it helped to support society. Its privileged position meant that it was able to keep a high profile and maintain its image unsullied. After the Reformation there was close harmony between Church and State in both Catholic and Protestant countries of Europe.

With the fall of the *ancien régime* a new form of society emerged; democratic, liberal, industrial. It was no longer a matter of being fed all one's information from above, of being controlled by one's betters. Because people were being torn from their roots by industrialisation and were gaining greater mobility, much of the old traditional wisdom handed on by the elders was forgotten. In its place there arose new channels of information, or perhaps more accurately some older channels gained in importance. These channels were the successors of the gossip and rumour that had always gone on in neighbourhoods, in alehouses and over the garden fence—stories about crimes, scandals, disasters and how public events like war were affecting private lives. The first cheap newspapers provided a common source of information for the masses; they did not speak with the didactic authority of Church or State but they presented facts that interested people in their day-to-day lives, they entertained. In order to keep the attention of their public they had to be always ready with new information. What this emerging culture wanted to hear was NEWS. Popular cinema came much later but it belongs to this context. It is one of the mass media. As Bob White put it in an article in *The Way* (Supplement 57 Autumn 1986):

People come to the media with worries, questions and confusion in the back of their minds; the media present ordered formats of meaning which leave us reassured about the ultimate orderly

meaning of the world. Popular moralistic and religious symbolism and popular conceptions of the meaning of life have always been profoundly influenced by folk-tale and myth. Today the popular religious imagination draws much of its symbolism from the mass media.

Naturally the Church, which had been dethroned along with the *ancien régime*, found it hard to accept this situation. Matters began to come to a head in the early nineteenth century and the reaction is well expressed by Pope Gregory XVI in the encyclical *Mirari Vos* (15.8.1832):

Here belongs that vile and never sufficiently execrated and detestable freedom of the press for the diffusion of all sorts of writings; a freedom which, with so much insistence, they dare to demand and promote. We are horrified, venerable brethren, contemplating what monstrosities of doctrine, or better what monstrosities of error, are everywhere disseminated in a great multitude of books, pamphlets, written documents—small certainly in their size but enormous in their malice—from which goes out over the face of the earth that curse which we lament.

How much of this attitude was a straightforward denunciation of evil, and how much was it a case of anger and frustration now warping and distorting the Church's judgment, as it had been deprived of that control over information which it had once possessed?

Similar sentiments to those of Pope Gregory are to be found today, those out-and-out condemnations of television and cinema as base and not worthy of consideration. One can and must agree that there are times when one has to speak out against pornography and sadistic violence. Recently (in the spring of 1989) there was a document issued through the Pontifical Council for Social Communication arguing that freedom of expression cannot come at the expense of public decency or the moral welfare of the young. But one can detect a change in attitude, since the document called on the media for self-regulation and on legislators worldwide to strengthen existing laws. It did not attempt to lay down laws of its own and it was wise enough not to cite any specific cases or name any countries that transgressed. There seems to be here a recognition that left to itself society can and does legislate, it does recognise a moral code.

The general principles of morality in the matter are clear enough, but in practice there are difficulties. In passing judgment one has to be aware of the prevailing social morality, of the conventions of media language, and how people react in given situations which are often unpredictable and not the logical way supposed by some moral textbooks. Too often the Church has appeared in a solely censorious role concerning the media and some of its condemnations have made it look rather foolish. Censorship in our modern society is a tricky business. Years ago the League of Decency was able to make itself a force in the USA. The hope was that Catholics would heed its warnings and stay away from certain films. Because of the number of loyal Catholics it was thought that this boycott would affect the box office takings and the makers of bad and immoral films would go

bankrupt and decency would be saved. More recently there was the example of Franco Spain, which tried to save the public from the evil influences of foreign (i.e. American) films by censorship. This involved not only the suppression of certain scenes but tampering with those that were shown. There was the famous case of the John Ford film *Mogambo* (1953) with Clark Gable, Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly. The triangular situation between man, wife and the other woman was unacceptable as it attacked family values and so, in the dubbing of the film into Spanish, the lover became the sister of the hero. The authorities evidently were more prepared to allow a suggestion of incest than a statement of an extramarital affair.

The extreme attitude of Gregory XVI led to the Church being accused of obscurantism, of trying to restrict human freedom and creativity and of trying to regain control of all information. It was realised that this was a losing battle because the old society had passed away forever. One way out of the difficulty was for the Church not just to be negative but to recreate its own culture, to run parallel to the secular culture of the day. There would be a Catholic version of modernity. There would be a Catholic political party, a Catholic newspaper and when the time came Catholic films or at least religious films. The good media would be an alternative and eventually perhaps drive out the bad. This was taken up by some film makers because they realised that religion was an important factor in people's lives and so there emerged the religious film. This was often a biblical blockbuster like Cecil B. de Mille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923, with a remake in 1956). For many, religion in the cinema became identified with films that had a specifically religious theme. But few of these attracted audiences for purely religious motives and many failed to attract at all because they so idealised good and denigrated evil that the ordinary person did not recognise his own experience of real life in these presentations. Any film on a specifically religious topic made by believers will not have a wide appeal even to other believers. When the setting up of a Catholic Film Society was first mooted in the UK in the 1930s it was considered that it might be possible to produce Catholic films to challenge the rest. But this is beyond the financial and technical resources of any Christian organisation in this country, and in any case things have now changed.

New theologies of culture see God's redeeming action as working through the processes of secular change, and many find the expressions of popular culture contained in novels, film and TV to be related to the contemporary religious imagination and consequently a possible point of departure in the of evangelisation. The Second Vatican Council encouraged the involvement of Christians in the human and social development of the larger society and so, rather than construct a culture parallel to the secular one, the Church was summoned to seek a place in the mass-media culture itself—not with the idea of accepting it totally, nor with the idea of controlling it, but of finding a place from which to deliver its message. It is the same impulse that motivated the Church in Latin America. Just as Christians in the Third World see themselves as powerless and as identifying

themselves with the poor, so in the media the Church must realise that its riches do not lie in the possession of its own technical resources but in the values it proclaims and in its solidarity with the human race. This means giving up a theology of communication based on a concept of the Church as a self-sufficient, authoritarian teacher with obedient and compliant listeners responding noddingly to words and concepts of a past age. In place of this it has to admit the hesitations and doubts and criticisms of religion that film directors often manifest in their films, because these are often the doubts and hesitations of the age.

It is in the light of this that we have to judge the portrayal of wrongdoing on the screen. Any film that purports to deal with the human situation will have to treat of sin in one way or another and there is always the danger of overstepping the mark when confronted with the attraction and universality of evil. The less skilled directors run the risk of producing effects contrary to their original intentions. Perhaps believers can learn most from those directors who were brought up within a Christian system but have now lapsed. This is because such directors often retain enough of the old language to be understood even though the memories of their childhood religion appear as caricature. They are not always totally wrong in their view of what went on at school and in the home. Nor are they all bitter in their rejection. An amused sardonic smile mixed with nostalgia is sometimes found in Bergman, Fellini and Buñuel and we can be warned by them not to make the same mistakes as the preceptors of their youth did.

Holiness and Sin*

Anthony Baxter

Do you, when speaking informally in your own words, talk of particular other people as 'holy', or say you desire 'holiness'? Christians today vary widely on this—from omission of the word 'holiness', through assorted hesitations, to unselfconsciously terming certain others holy and voicing a wish to be holy themselves. People may often have deep down a lot more inklings regarding holiness than commonly become explicit. But faced here with an invitation to consider how 'our perceptions' of holiness relate to 'our perceptions' of sin, it is wise to note that initial reactions on the former front as well as the latter can prove less than clear-cut. In my own case, I tend to be fairly reticent in singling out specific individuals as markedly holy, while quick—amidst theologizing—to state that all are called to holiness, and that *some* growth towards it is widespread.