

## **AFTERIMAGE: THE INDELIBLE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION OF SIX AMERICAN FILMMAKERS**

RICHARD A. BLAKE, S.J., LOYOLA PRESS, 2000.

*Reviewed by Sorin Engelland-Spohn*

**A***fterimage* examines how Catholicism is revealed in the work of Martin Scorsese, Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra, John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, and Brian De Palma. The author uses a broad definition of Catholicism, which takes into account theological and cultural aspects. The text differentiates well between Catholic and Protestant worldviews in a way that yields a clearer understanding of the Christian faith. The introduction serves as a kind of disclaimer that explains the modest nature of his thesis, yet he then proceeds deftly to explain how each artist includes a worldview marked by Catholicism. His purpose is to show the viewer what is actually there in order to better understand the whole picture. He admits that “overt” Catholicism does not appear in these works, yet a Catholic imagination need not be overt to manifest itself meaningfully.

The key to understanding this book hinges on the fascinating notion of afterimage. “Afterimage” is a “psychological term for an image or sensation that remains or returns after the external stimulus has been withdrawn” (p. xiii). Blake offers a common example of how most of us have experienced this phenomenon: when a photographer’s flashbulb came too close and left a momentarily blinding result that obscured the vision when looking at another subject afterward. Relating the idea further, Blake adds that, “a positive [afterimage] occurs rarely, lasts a few seconds.... A negative [afterimage] is more common, often more intense and lasts longer; it is usually complementary to the original stimulus in color and brightness” (p. xv). Afterimage functions as an appropriate term that allows Blake to accurately encompass his subjects without pigeonholing them with distorted ideological motives.

The author’s understanding of Catholicism is explained theologically and culturally. Theologically, Blake successfully draws on the ideas of Fr. Richard McBrien to name the “Catholic” nature within the films of his subjects. These “Theological Footprints,” as he titles them, are: sacramentality, that God is present in the world through creation; mediation, that God works in our lives through people and things; and communion, that people find salvation through and with others or meet their end via isolation or the rejection of the community. Culturally, Blake draws on the work of James Keenan, S.J. According to Keenan, Catholics value and emphasize traits like mentoring, conscience, moral growth, devotional activities, and the physical.

For an understanding of imagination, the author employs the wide-ranging concept articulated by William Lynch, S.J., that describes the nature of this wonderful human faculty:

Imagination refers to the total resources in us which go into the making of our images of the world. It is, therefore, all the faculties of man, all his resources, not only his seeing and hearing and touching but also his history, his education, his feelings, his wishes, his love, hate, faith and unfaith, insofar as they all go into the making of his images of the world. The simplest of our images, therefore, are quite complicated, and nothing comes nearer to defining human beings than their images of the world—than, shall we not then say, their imaginations. By what and for what shall we be judged more than by and for our images? (pp. 5-6)

Given this view of imagination, one can better see how one of these directors' early contacts with Catholicism could have colored their views, seeped into the psyche only to emerge again in the workings of such a personal craft. Imagination thus described permits Blake to look for, find, and name the Catholic aspects of their works.

After defining the scope of his endeavor, Blake provides a chapter on each filmmaker that includes a biographical background and a thorough, insightful analysis of a few works. He arranges the filmmakers according to the degree to which they exhibit the Catholic criteria. His individual film analyses vary in their specificity with regard to details. Blake includes what he presumes the reader needs to know based on how much is probably familiar about the plot lines of the films.

If there is a weakness in the book, it can be a questioning as to whether or not the many themes are just simply universal goods, no more Catholic than they might be Protestant or Jewish. The scrutiny at times can make connections feel tenuous. Thankfully, such instances are rare and far outweighed by the exhaustive research, solid foundational premise, and provocative clarity of most reviews.

In the *Godfather* epic series, Blake points out how Coppola's Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) invites his own demise by alienating his blood family and its powerful culture, the very community that can confer life. In *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese shows us the mediation of Travis Bickel (Robert DeNiro) that, while physically violent, secures the salvation of Iris (Jodi Foster), who has been the victim of Sport's (Harvey Keitel) sinful exploitation. His examples simply bring the thesis alive.

Blake identifies Alfred Hitchcock as a man who grew up and remained distinctly Catholic for much of his life. Hitchcock insisted upon his wife's conversion and also raised his daughter to be Catholic as well. Later in life, however, he drifted away from formal faith, though not altogether, as shown by this quote, "I don't think that I can be labeled a Catholic artist, but it may

be that one's early upbringing influences a man's life and guides his instinct" (pp. 49-50). For a boy who was led to regular confession by his mother, is it any wonder that one of his hits is titled *I Confess*? In his classic *The Birds*, Hitchcock confronts an age-old religious question, albeit perhaps implicitly, and that is, how can an omnipotent God of love allow unexplainable evil?

John Ford, a filmmaker of prodigious proportions with 5 decades of experience, 120 films, and 5 Academy Awards, receives ample treatment. As an Irish Catholic, Ford moved away from the Church, but returned with fervor. Prior to his marriage "outside the church" in 1920, he attended Mass weekly and had been a member of the Knights of Columbus. Despite an understandable distance from the faith due to his family's reluctance to accept the marriage, he remained a respectful observer. For instance, he was known to have a priest on site to bless the sets and celebrate the Mass for Catholic crew members. In time, his wife converted and they even had an audience with Pope Pius XII. His film *The Quiet Man*, starring John Wayne, appeared for many years on television around St. Patrick's Day. In that story, Blake traces the topic of a shared Eucharist, preceded by a confession and dramatically performed penance.

The book continues with Frank Capra, director of the much-loved *It's a Wonderful Life*. Themes of communion and repentance emerge as George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) realizes his failure to recognize that others are a gift to him and vice versa. The well-known conclusion has him reconciling with his wife privately and the townsfolk publicly. Capra's credits include over 30 movies and 3 Academy Awards. He, too, had a limited Catholic upbringing, but was known to attend Mass on Christmas and Easter, even while being a regular "Sunday Protestant" (p. 90). He found the stories of saints compelling, especially St. Francis. He once stated, in the *New Yorker* in 1940, that, "It sounds sappy, but the underlying idea of my movies is *The Sermon on the Mount*—a plus value of some kind along with entertainment" (p. 94). Gradually, Capra returned to the faith in earnest, becoming a Knight of Malta in 1972 under the sponsorship of John Ford and serving as a Eucharistic minister for the last 13 years of his life.

Blake's choice of Brian De Palma is perhaps a strange one on the surface, given the graphic nature of much of his work. A contemporary of Coppola and Scorsese, De Palma was raised Presbyterian; still, the family had Catholic roots, and he himself has acknowledged a strong Catholic influence. De Palma employs horror and explicit sex and violence in his films, but not just as ends in themselves. Blake believes, with good reason, that De Palma uses such devices to shock audiences into some kind of examination of conscience. The product becomes a dark kind of Catholic morality play.

This book presents a notable contribution to our collective cultural understanding. Blake intends this project as a challenge to film critics and conventional viewers alike. He hopes that the former will be more willing to see the

potent value of religious dimension in the films themselves and that the latter will discover a religious, sacramental presence in this influential medium. And *Afterimage* just may enable readers to see cinema with a keener eye for the sacred within the mundane and muddled mystery of life's reflection on the silver screen.

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## **BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

ROBERT D. PUTNAM, SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2000

*Reviewed by Melissa Harraka*

Never before has the health of American democracy been measured by pizza and beer sales at bowling alleys. Yet through his portrayal of community and civic engagement in America, Robert Putnam reveals a startling tendency in American life that makes such measurement worthwhile and, in fact, necessary. Putnam's work, *Bowling Alone*, revolves around the notion of social capital and the degree to which its value has changed in American society, particularly during the past 5 decades. The trend is very clearly a downward one, as illustrated by declining rates of participation in some of America's most well-known organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, parent-teacher associations, and even local bowling leagues. Simply stated, today's Americans are showing much less interest in engaging with their fellow citizens over political, social, or religious causes. We are accepting and extending fewer and fewer invitations to join formal and casual communities, indicating that social capital is no longer a valued commodity in our country. Even family dinners in our households have declined at a rate of 33% over the past 25 years (see [www.bowlingalone.com](http://www.bowlingalone.com)). Putnam's findings uncover not only a new perspective on connectedness in America, but moreover, a threat to the success of our democratic ideals. Ironically, the national community, which is the only community with which many Americans identify, might rapidly lose its identity if Putnam's studies and conclusions are not heeded.

*Bowling Alone* is structured around four main objectives. The first is to explore the trend in civic engagement across a variety of frameworks and to relate this trend to social capital. Putnam uses data on voter turnout for government elections, attendance at PTA meetings, church attendance, and

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