
Robert E. Lauder

Creative Intuition in American Film: Maritain at the Movies

One of the more important tasks that Jacques Maritain set for himself was to apply the insights and principles of St. Thomas to contemporary problems. Believing that the vision of St. Thomas was sufficiently profound to lend itself to widespread and continual application, Maritain set his sights at commenting on and developing the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor. One area in which Maritain is judged to have made an original contribution is the philosophy of art. I am going to try to mimic Maritain's use of Thomas: just as Maritain applied the doctrine of St. Thomas to topics with which Thomas had not specifically dealt, I am going to extend Maritain's insights to an area about which the Frenchman did not write. Maritain's philosophy of art and especially his doctrine of creative intuition can be very helpful in looking at cinema. In this article I will limit myself to contemporary American cinema, to two films, each created by a cinematic genius and one other film that illustrates by contrast what Maritain thought about art.

Art can be considered as a virtue possessed by the artist or as a finished product.¹ Following Thomas, Maritain identifies the virtue of art as an intellectual virtue. It is a habit of the intellect by which the intellect knows how to make things. The habit is acquired through frequent acts. This habit of making can produce two types of product, two types of art. One has come to be called servile art; the other has come to be known as fine art.² Servile art is a product that is made for some practical purpose.

¹Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 9-11.

²*Ibid.*, 18, 32-35.

An automobile is a servile work of art, as are knives and forks. The artist who knows how to make servile works of art knows how to produce things that have a practical use. Fine art does not have any use. It is its own reason for being. The motto over the world-famous Metro Goldwyn Mayer Lion states the nature of fine art succinctly: *ars gratia artis* (art for art's sake). We do not use a Michelangelo statue as a doorstop or a Picasso as a kind of paper weight. Beauty has no practical use. However, this is not to say that fine art does not affect us. It can affect us profoundly. It can touch the deepest reaches of our souls. In a metaphysics such as St. Thomas's and Maritain's, why this should be is not difficult to understand. All beings are imitations of God. Each being is one, good, true, and beautiful to the extent that it is. In creating a fine work of art the artist is imitating the freedom of God in creating persons: neither the divine artist nor the human artist is making realities that are to be functional or used. The fine artist can make something beautiful. With typical directness Maritain writes:

St. Thomas, who was as simple as he was wise, defined the beautiful as what gives pleasure on sight, *id quod visum placet*. The four words say all that is necessary: a vision, that is to say an intuitive *knowledge* and a *joy*. The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but joy in knowledge; not the joy peculiar to the act of knowing, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act because of the object known. If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the bare fact of its being given to the intuition of the soul, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful. Beauty is essentially the object of intelligence, for what *knows* in the full meaning of the word is the mind, which alone is open to the infinity of being.³

Discussing beauty Maritain goes on to point out that beauty delights the mind because beauty reveals a certain proportion of things to the mind. He notes that the three characteristics that St. Thomas assigns to beauty are "integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion because the mind likes order and unity, lastly and above all brightness or clarity,

³*Ibid.*, 23.

because the mind likes light and intelligibility."⁴ The fine artist has a marvelous vocation: to make the beautiful.

Just as any virtue, the virtue of art can be strengthened by frequent acts of making. A person might produce a work of art without having the virtue of art, and so the work of art would not be very good. Also, a person might have the virtue of art and might no longer be able to make any works of art. I am thinking of examples of an artist experiencing physical problems such as a painter losing his sight or a sculptor suffering from arthritis. Such artists would still have the virtue, they would still know intellectually how to produce a work, but they would no longer be able to execute what they know should be done.

In discussing works of fine art I find it helpful to use analogously the notions of matter and form from Aristotle's hylomorphic theory. These notions can illuminate the two key ingredients that go to make up a work of art. The matter is the particular type of material that the artist is using, for example, canvas and oil for painting, rock for sculpture, wood for carving, words for stories and novels. A person who has the virtue of art knows how to use a particular type of matter in order to produce some work. The other component, which is analogous to form in the hylomorphic theory, is what Maritain calls the *creative intuition*. By this he means a profound experience of reality. This experience has strong emotional overtones, but it is not merely an emotional experience. It is an insight, but it is not only intellectual; and it is certainly not conceptual. Maritain writes of it:

...the part of intuitive reason becomes absolutely predominant. Then, as our further analyses will show, we are confronted with an intuition of emotive origin, and we enter the nocturnal empire of a primeval activity of the intellect which, far beyond concepts and logic, exercises itself in vital connection with imagination and emotion. We have quit logical reason, and even conceptual reason, yet we have to do more than ever with intuitive reason...⁵

⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

⁵Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 55. In applying Maritain's theory to film I am extending what Maritain calls poetic intuition to the intuition of any creative artist, such as a filmmaker.

This type of experience is had by many of us, but what distinguishes it for the artist is the creative component. When the artist has one of these experiences he or she has to incarnate it somehow into an external work. When the artist has such an intuition he or she is driven to *speak* it in a work of art.⁶ For the artist this is the only way that the intuition can be spoken with any degree of adequacy. If the intuition could be articulated verbally, then there would be no need to produce a work of art. Because the intuition can only be incarnated in an external work, the artist might experience a kind of restlessness until the intuition is put into an external form. I suspect that one reason why artists seem to hate to be interviewed is that they find it very difficult to talk about their creative intuitions. I can recall artists such as Graham Greene or Alfred Hitchcock who almost seemed to put the interviewer off and in effect said to any questions they were asked: "If you wish to know, go look at the work. If there is an answer to what you wish to know, it is there in the work." I can think of no exception. As a matter of fact, this response is one of the best descriptions I have seen of a creative intuition. In an interview author/director Ingmar Bergman said:

A film for me begins with something very vague—a chance remark or a bit of conversation, a hazy but agreeable event unrelated to any particular situation. It can be a few bars of music, a shaft of light across the street. Sometimes in my work at the theater I have envisioned actors made up for yet unplayed roles.

These are split-second impressions that disappear as quickly as they come, yet leave behind a mood—like pleasant dreams. They constitute a mental state, not an actual story, but one abounding in fertile associations and images. Most of all, it is a brightly colored thread sticking out of the dark sack of the unconscious. If I begin to wind up this thread, and do it carefully, a complete film will emerge.⁷

For Maritain the entire work is contained in germ in the creative intuition.

⁶*Ibid.*, 98.

⁷Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Melmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), xv.

Everything is already there, contained in poetic intuition, everything is given, all the vitality, all the insight, all the strength of creativity which is now in act, like a dart filled with a power of intellectual direction; and in a certain sense (intensively—whatever part adventitious chance may have in the development) the totality of the work to be engendered was already present in advance, whether this totality is now virtually given in the first line of a poem, as a gift from the preconscious life of the soul, or virtually concentrated in the spiritual germ of a novel or drama.⁸

When there is a successful wedding between a profound creative intuition and the proper use of the matter, we have a great work of art; and great works of art are important revelations to us. Maritain writes that the creative intuition tends toward:

the humble revelation, virtually contained in a small lucid cloud of inescapable intuition, both of the Self of the poet and of some particular flash of reality in the God-made universe; a particular flash of reality bursting forth in its unforgettable individuality, but infinite in its meanings and echoing capacity...⁹

There can be works of art that display a certain skill or facility on the part of the artist with the matter used. However if the creative intuition is missing then the work of art suffers; if an artist has a profound creative intuition but has not developed his skill with the material he is using, then the work of art suffers.¹⁰ The great artists are able to experience reality deeply and to incarnate their intuitions in matter. When we encounter the work of art it is the creative intuition of the artist that we should be encountering. It seems impossible to overemphasize the importance of creative intuition in Maritain's view of art. He wrote:

What I should like to stress is the fact that in creative intuition we have the primary rule to which, in the case of the fine arts, the whole fidelity, obedience and heedfulness of the artist must be

⁸Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 98-99.

⁹*Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 99.

committed. I also should like to stress the fact that between this primary, primordial, primitive rule and all the other rules of making, however indispensable they may be, there exists an essential difference, so to speak infinite, as between heaven and earth. All other rules are of earth, they deal with particular ways of operation in the making of the work. But this primary rule is a heavenly rule, because it deals with the very conception, in the bosom of the spirit, of the work to be engendered in beauty. If creative intuition is lacking, a work can be perfectly made, and it is nothing, the artist has nothing to say. If creative intuition is present, and passes to some extent, into the work, the work exists and speaks to us, even if it is imperfectly made and proceeds from a man.¹¹

Some creative intuitions are so deep and so beautifully enfolded that we can encounter them again and again. I can recall vividly the first time I saw Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. I arrived at the Louvre at about four o'clock and had an appointment with someone in another section of Paris in about half an hour. I knew that I was pressed for time but wanted at least to get a look at the supposedly great masterpiece. My first reaction was that I wondered why this was supposed to be a great painting, but, little by little, the painting seduced me. Finally, after trying to leave the room several times, I wound up late for my appointment--because I could not stop looking at the lady with the haunting smile. The great works of art move us into the mystery of being.

With film we have a special problem. Whose creative intuition is at the heart of a film? There is not one artist who creates a film, but hundreds. There are producers, actors, musicians, lighting crew, make-up, set designers, screenplay writers and more. Any one of these people might have a creative intuition in relation to the making of a particular film and contribute enormously to the artistic success of a film. However, in this article, I am going to settle on the view that, if we are looking for one artist to whom the film might be attributed, it is the director. More than anyone else it is the director's film because he is the artist who must weave together the contributions of all the other artists. The director must allow his creative intuition to guide him throughout the making of

¹¹*Ibid.*, 45.

the film. In effect, this will mean that the director must draw together the creative intuitions of all the other artists who are contributing to the film into a complete work of art. In the actual making of the film what this will involve might range from a pre-shooting discussion with the author of the screenplay and the cinematographer to directing some of the actors or actresses during the shooting to change their performances slightly or significantly. The director might have to supervise the camera man, make-up artists and music conductor. It would seem that the details of making a single film are endless and all of them the director wants to influence by his creative intuition. The two American film directors whom I would like to use to illustrate Maritain's theory are Orson Welles and Woody Allen, both of whom I consider extraordinary cinematic artists. Their personal contributions to their films are especially strong because they not only direct their films but they also are the authors of the screenplays and frequently appear in their own films.

I will use one film of Welles, *Citizen Kane*, and one film of Allen, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, to illustrate Maritain's theory of creative intuition and one other film, *The Sea of Love*, to illustrate the absence of creative intuition in a film. *Citizen Kane*, which Welles co-authored with Herman Mankiewicz, might be the finest film ever made. It is an extraordinarily visual film. Welles learned the various uses of the camera one weekend from cinematographer Gregg Toland, and then, in his film, Welles used just about every camera device that had been employed by movie directors prior to 1941. In illustrating how Welles successfully wedded matter and form, the use of the camera with his creative intuition, I will refer to the brilliant uses of a few camera devices which distinguish *Citizen Kane* from almost all films which preceded it and most films which followed.

In his exceptionally good book, *What Is Cinema?* André Bazin, sometimes referred to as the Aristotle of the cinema, argues persuasively that with *Citizen Kane* film came of age. Prior to talking films, the montage was often used to affect an audience's reaction to a film. Directors knew that by juxtaposing certain images they could profoundly influence the way an audience viewed a film. The most obvious example is the one done by a Russian director. In three different parts of a film the director inserted the same shot of an actor's face. By what preceded and followed the actor's face the impression was given that the actor was emoting differently in each of the three parts of the film when actually it was the same shot each time. Montage illustrated that one and one can equal more than

two.¹² With the coming of sound pictures filmmakers made less use of montage so taken up were they with sound. The ability to use deep focus, the including within a shot figures close to the camera along with figures some distance from the camera was possible for some time prior to 1941, but it took the genius of Welles to use deep focus to capture the ambiguity of the main character. Bazin says that *Citizen Kane* illustrates that it has become possible for the director to write on film.¹³ I will just point out a few of the visual devices Welles uses in *Citizen Kane* to write on film. The magic of Welles's camera fosters the revelation that a creative intuition can convey. In *Citizen Kane* the marriage between technique and intuition, between cinematic signs and philosophy of human nature, is nearly perfect. The film opens and ends with a series of visual metaphors. The opening metaphors include a series of dissolving shots: a sign ("No Trespassing") a wire fence on which the sign is fastened, heavy iron gates, a row of iron bars at the top of the fence, an iron emblem ("K") at the top of the iron bars, a gigantic, uninviting stark mansion. At the start of *Citizen Kane* these shots do not seem to mean much, but when they are repeated at the end of the film, and a puff of smoke is seen climbing from the chimney of the mansion, they are seen to be revelations of the personality and life of Charles Kane. The dead man's unloving and unloved personal existence is symbolized by all the metaphors including the smoke from the burning of the sled, *Rosebud*, which throughout the film has been the clue to the mystery of Charles Kane. That mystery is underlined throughout the film by deep focus shots of Kane in crucially important situations, shots which suggest the complexity and ambiguity of Charles Kane.

So with *Citizen Kane* we have a cinematic masterpiece that illustrates an artist completely at home with his material, confidently and successfully incarnating his creative intuition. Can we articulate the creative intuition? No. We experience it in the film. We might say that it is connected with an insight into the importance of being loved and loving, the danger of not recognizing anything more important than self. So I would suggest that the creative intuition at the heart of the film is related to a moral insight into human nature.

¹²André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Vol. I, essays selected and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 23-40.

¹³*Ibid.*

Woody Allen's film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, though not as visually startling or dazzling as *Citizen Kane*, is an extraordinary film. Critic Richard Blake has suggested that some day Allen may be judged the greatest filmmaker of all time.¹⁴ In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* Allen depicts two groups of people in what appear to be stories that have little overlays. One story seems terribly serious, the other quite amusing. Allen succeeds in weaving them together and posing some profound philosophical questions through the development of the film. With *Crimes and Misdemeanors* we are viewing an artist at the peak of his powers. Allen's creative intuition into what he dramatizes as the absurdity of reality is exceptionally powerful. I suggest that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is Camus with comedy.

The Sea of Love, a contemporary murder mystery, which in the fall of 1989 grossed huge sums of money at the box office, is the antithesis of what Maritain has discussed. If there ever were a creative intuition at the heart of *The Sea of Love*, it was drowned in eroticism. The film is a good example of excessive violence and gratuitous sex. In spite of the sexual gymnastics in the film, *The Sea of Love* paradoxically trivializes sex.

Citizen Kane and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* have integrity, proportion and brightness or clarity. All great cinematic works do. When we view them we can appreciate the intuitions of their creators. The artist looks at things and reveals them to us. In fact the great artist may even reveal more to us than he consciously intends or realizes. Maritain is correct: "The artist, whether he knows it or not, is consulting God when he looks at things."¹⁵

¹⁴Richard Blake, "When, Out of the Past," *America*, March 21, 1987.

¹⁵Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 64.