

The Fantastic of the Everyday: Re-Forming Definitions of Cinematic Parables with Paul Ricoeur

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Recent publications on theology and film attempting to explain what a parable is remain less clear about how or why a parable works for cinema, and many definitions do not fully take into account the formal dynamics of film qua film nor parable qua parable. I seek to demonstrate the benefits of a more precise conception of cinematic parables by utilizing philosopher Paul Ricoeur's understanding of "parable" to make theological interpretations of film that take audio-visual aesthetics into consideration. I conclude with three recent examples of cinematic parables in order to demonstrate this Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic: Asghar Farhadi's Iranian melodrama, A Separation (2011), American filmmaker Anna Rose Holmer's enigmatic The Fits (2016), and Aki Kaurismäki's droll Finnish comedy, The Other Side of Hope (2017). Ultimately, I make a case for film as theology, what I am calling "theocinematics."

Keywords: film and theology, Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics, parable, allegory, metaphor, theological aesthetics, theocinematics

Everyone that is dreaming of a parable, of using the genre of fantasy to tell the stories about the things that are real in the world today, you can do it. This is a door; kick it open and come in.

—Guillermo del Toro

Introduction: Film and Parable

THE epigraph above comes from Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro's 2018 Academy Awards acceptance speech after his fantasy film, *The Shape of Water*, won Best Picture. While one can appreciate del Toro's enthusiasm, is "parable" truly congruent with

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such allegorical fairy tales? The question exemplifies the many debatable links made between film and parable. Recent publications from Robert Johnston, Richard Walsh, and Matthew Rindge on theology and film—what I am calling the academic subfield of “film-theology”—attempting to explain *what* a parable is remain less clear about *how* or *why* a parable works in their filmic examples.¹ Though many theologians (as well as film critics) attribute “parable” to the religious or moral narrative content in film, critical consideration is often lacking for audio-visual formal dimensions. As just one such example, in John May’s otherwise excellent article published in *Horizons* forty years ago, he describes films as “visual stories” ranging from myth to parable, and thus worthy of religious interpretation. Yet he admits in his conclusion that he has “emphasized the structure of story” (the filmic content) and thus “presumed that the elements of film themselves and their aesthetic effects (the visual and aural forms) have been adequately treated elsewhere.”² In other words, the content matters most for theology, whereas the cinematic form is regarded as secondary.

As “parable” is typically used to describe an allegorical story with a moral or religious message, the term applied to the medium of film has often generated vague definitions, many of which do not fully take into account the formal dynamics of film *qua* film nor parable *qua* parable. In this article, I seek to demonstrate the benefits of a more precise conception of cinematic parables by utilizing philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of “parable” to make theological interpretations of film that take into consideration cinema’s distinct audio-visual aesthetics. I will present three recent examples of cinematic parables in order to demonstrate this Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic, ultimately making a case for viewing film *as* theology, what I am calling “theocinematics.”³ Before turning to Ricoeur’s description and the three films, we first need to address a common problematic approach to defining and interpreting cinematic parables: conflating “parable” and “allegory.”

¹ See Robert Johnston, “Film as Parable: What Might This Mean?,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 3 no. 4 (2014): 19–32; Richard Walsh, “Now That Was a Nice Hanging: The Hateful Eight as Parable?,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 2 (2017): 1–20; and Matthew Rindge, *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

² John R. May, “Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film,” *Horizons* 7 no. 2 (1980): 264.

³ I have previously published on this Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic: see Joel Mayward, “The Borders of Wakanda: Otherworlding, Immigration, and Alterity in *Black Panther* as Cinematic Parable,” *ARTS* 2 (2019): 54–71; and Joel Mayward, “Parabolic Transcendence in Time and Narrative: Shane Carruth’s PRIMER (US 2004) and UPSTREAM COLOR (US 2013) as Post-Secular Sci-Fi Parables,” *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 6 no. 1 (2020): 17–36.

Parable or Allegory?

In considering definitions of “parable,” we may first turn to the biblical text, where the Greek word *parabolē* (παροβολή) is found at least fifty times in the New Testament. The Greek preposition *para* subtly changes meaning according to the case, though all definitions give a sense of “alongside” or “from nearby.” The Greek noun *bolē* means “a throw” or “a stroke.” So, quite literally, a *parabolē* is a throw or a projectile that comes at or from the side. Etymologically, beyond mere side-by-side comparisons, the word “*parabolē*” suggests indirect speech, eliciting the sense of being “blindsided” or “sucker punched,” a subversive and surprising rhetorical attack that successfully penetrates emotional and logical defenses through its aesthetic form of indirection.

A brief, nonexhaustive look at biblical scholarship reveals a variety of possible meanings for parable. In his classic work, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, Adolf Jülicher rejected any allegorical interpretation of the parables of Jesus, positing that the parables were primarily similes.⁴ Also rejecting allegorical approaches, C. H. Dodd’s helpful classic definition is one of the more influential contributions from early modern parable studies: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”⁵ In contrast, and more contemporarily, Klyne Snodgrass suggests that parables may be better classified as analogies, even fables,⁶ and the purpose of parables is not to *raise* questions for an audience, but to *answer* the implied question contained within the parable itself.⁷ He argues not only that parables can be allegorical, but that any attempt to distinguish between the two forms is unnecessary: “Parables are allegorical, some more so than others. Parables refer outside themselves, or they ... are not parables.”⁸ Snodgrass thus offers a simple rhetorical definition: “A parable is an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade.”⁹ Similar to Snodgrass, renowned New Testament scholar N. T. Wright adopts a view of parable as allegory, defining parables as “apocalyptic allegories” within the Jewish prophetic

⁴ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vol. (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1888, 1899).

⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935), 16.

⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

tradition¹⁰ while locating the genre under the mantle of apocalyptic literature and arguing that “we must give up the false distinction between allegory and parable.”¹¹

These few nonexhaustive examples suggest that a conflation of forms, where parable is equated with or subsumed under another genre, occurs with enough frequency in literary and biblical scholarship (and, subsequently, film-theology) to prompt critical investigation. In particular, “parable” is often assumed to be synonymous with “allegory,” a genre utilizing symbolic or metaphoric elements for its principal didactic purpose of illustrating an idea or truth for its audience. Yet this formal conflation ignores the unique dynamic structure and function of the parable; misinterpreting the form alters the parable’s meaning. This is not to judge the benefits or detriments of such forms, but simply to state that they are, in fact, different in meaningful ways. The key distinctions can be summarized as follows: “allegory” requires an *external* referent to *clearly* communicate its *singular* intended meaning through *individual* coded narrative elements, whereas “parable” contains an *internal* coherence that *indirectly* provokes a *multiplicity* of possible meanings by way of the narrative *as a whole*. I shall unpack these distinctions in detail below, briefly using a few cinematic examples to demonstrate the differences before focusing on Ricoeur and the three main films I aim to analyze.

In an allegory, characters, objects, and situations intentionally stand for some other figure or concept; they are avatars and ciphers for illustrating the author’s ideas. There is a direct, often obvious correlation between the elements within the allegory and the concepts they represent; allegory rises and falls on the audience’s ability to recognize and draw the parallels intended by the author. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* describes this function: “Although sometimes difficult to penetrate, allegory is generally intended to elucidate rather than obscure, its original purpose being to make universal or divine mysteries accessible to human understanding.”¹² Indeed, such allegories tend to utilize common convention in order to

¹⁰ Parables “can and must be understood as falling within precisely the *Jewish prophetic tradition* ... And sometimes, particularly but not exclusively within ‘apocalyptic,’ we find what we can only call allegories.” N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 178. For example, on page 133, Wright states that the Parable of the Prodigal Son “points to the hypothesis of the prophetic son: the son, Israel-in-person, who will himself go into the far country, who will take upon himself the shame of Israel’s exile, so that the kingdom may come, the covenant be renewed, and the prodigal welcome of Israel’s god, the creator, be extended to the ends of the earth.”

¹² “Allegory,” in *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. Ian Ousby, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

be deliberately clear in meaning. As Gisela Kreglinger notes in her study of George MacDonald's use of parable, "in allegory the message is encoded and the reader's task is to decode it. The code is usually known and transmitted socially through usage in social contexts."¹³ Should the audience miss the contextual referent, they have essentially missed the point, and the allegory has not done its task *as allegory*. However, a nonallegorical story might be read as allegory by an audience if they discern coincidental parallels to a familiar external reference, even if such allegorical interpretations were never intended. We may call this latter interpretive approach "allegorization" (e.g., N. T. Wright's approach discussed previously), where an allegorical reading is imposed onto the story. This is what often occurs regarding the application of "parable" to film—a true cinematic parable is reduced to a singular illustrative interpretation through a hermeneutic of allegorization, thus imposing an allegorical reading when the film formally operates in a different way.

Indeed, a key distinction between parable and allegory lies in this interpretive process; as Amy-Jill Levine concisely puts it, a parable "requires no external key to explain what its elements mean; an allegory does."¹⁴ As we shall see, Ricoeur suggests that parables do have an external referent (human existential experience), but this referent is discerned from *within* the parable itself—the interpretive meaning *emerges* from the parabolic metaphor rather than being *externally* placed upon the emplotted elements or overtly explained by the author. Allegory also avoids polyvalence as it offers a singular "correct" interpretation of its various elements, while parable intentionally remains enigmatic in order to invite a multiplicity of interpretations. Functionally, allegory directly aims to illustrate or represent, while parable indirectly strives to subvert and transform. John Dominic Crossan puts it well: "A parable which has to be explained is, like a joke in similar circumstances, a parable which has been ruined *as parable*."¹⁵

Recent cinematic examples of allegory include Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017), Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017), and Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019). Recall del Toro's quote from the epigraph: he seems to view his allegorical fantasy film as a parable. But is it functioning in this way? The film presents a mythic forbidden love story between a

¹³ Gisela H. Kreglinger, *Storied Revelations: Parables, Imagination, and George MacDonald's Christian Fiction* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 40.

¹⁴ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 8.

¹⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988), 83.

beautiful mute woman and an amphibious humanoid, a reimagined “frog prince” fable. A villainous conservative government agent fights to prevent their relationship, resorting to gruesome violence to keep the lovers apart. Del Toro utilizes recognizable cinematic tropes and archetypes in order to create an aesthetic that is both fantastical and universal for his contemporary filmic fairytale. With a gay man and a Black woman as heroic supporting characters, we can discern the progressive message del Toro intends in critiquing the historical oppression of marginalized people—namely women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community—by conservative American institutions. Darren Aronofsky’s horror film *mother!* is another cinematic example of allegory: with the book of Genesis as the interpretive code, the eponymous Mother (Jennifer Lawrence) stands for Mother Nature, Javier Bardem’s husband character stands for God, their large farmhouse stands for the natural world, their uninvited guests (Ed Harris and Michelle Pfeiffer) represent Adam and Eve, and so on. We remember and understand the story best when we recognize the substitutionary dynamic at play, when we “break the code,” so to speak.¹⁶

In contrast, for parables, the *entire narrative* (rather than its individual elements) functions as a provocative and polysemic metaphor. A cinematic example of parabolic metaphor is Sean Baker’s *The Florida Project* (2017), a sympathetic tale of individuals living in poverty in the shadow of Disney World as seen almost entirely from a child’s perspective. On the surface, the story follows young Moonee (Brooklynn Prince), Sooty (Christopher Rivera), and Jancey (Valeria Cotto) on various escapades in and around the Magic Castle Inn, a run-down lavender-walled motel where they reside. Yet on a deeper level, the film confronts us with questions of systemic poverty, the economic effects of American capitalism and consumerism, generational abandonment, moral responsibility for one’s neighbor, and the meaning(s) of faith, hope, and love. The story can stand alone on its own merits, yet symbolic gestures within the narrative—particularly its quasi-fantastical final moments jumping from 35 mm film to an iPhone-shot scene of Moonee and Jancey running into Disney World—suggest that the entire story is “about” something more than a literal surface interpretation. In this, the metaphor cannot be reduced to explanatory prose of its content; reading the aforementioned plot synopsis for *The Florida Project* can never replace actually viewing and considering the film for oneself. Upon entering the film-world’s realm, the cinematic story-as-metaphor provides a lens for seeing

¹⁶ For further analysis of *mother!* as allegory instead of parable, see Joel Mayward, “Darren Aronofsky’s *mother!* and Cinematic Parables,” *Transpositions*, November 20, 2017, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/darren-aronofskys-mother-cinematic-parables/>.

our existence in a new light, offering insights that could not be achieved in the same way by text- or proposition-based approaches. Parabolic metaphor does not merely ornament old ways of perceiving the world; it creates new portals of knowledge by juxtaposing two seemingly unrelated images and ideas.¹⁷

In summary, allegory is essentially didactic and mnemonic, helping the audience remember a truth by way of illustrative substitution, whereas parabolic metaphor is employed to create new descriptions and interpretations of reality itself. Indeed, the metaphor is not dispensable from its meaning; it is a new way of knowing.¹⁸ Ultimately, even as parables may employ allegorical elements (and vice versa), I contend that allegory should not be directly equated with parable, either in terms of form or function.

By way of transition to Paul Ricoeur's description of parable, I conclude with a substantial quote from Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* summarizing the distinction between symbol (or metaphor) and allegory:

In an allegory what is primarily signified—that is to say, the literal meaning—is contingent, and what is signified secondarily, the symbolic meaning itself, is external enough to be directly accessible. Hence, there is a relation of translation between the two meanings; once the translation is made, the henceforth useless allegory can be dropped.... To interpret is then to penetrate the [allegory's] disguise and thereby to render it useless.... Symbol [or metaphor] and allegory, then, are not on the same footing: symbols precede hermeneutics; allegories are already hermeneutic. This is so because the symbol presents its meaning transparently in an entirely different way than by translation. One would say rather that it evokes its meaning or suggests it.... It presents its meaning in the opaque transparency of an enigma and not by translation.¹⁹

Ricoeurian Narrative-Metaphors

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and description of "parable" are useful for defining the form, yet underutilized in both film-theology and film theory. In his 1975 article "Biblical Hermeneutics," Ricoeur describes parable as the conjunction of a *narrative form* and a *metaphorical process*. As such, parable encompasses two of Ricoeur's larger philosophical projects, as narrative and metaphor are explored in great detail in *Time and Narrative*

¹⁷ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1975), 49.

¹⁸ Metaphor "is a way of *knowing*, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same; there is no way around the metaphor, it is not expendable." See McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 4.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 16.

and *The Rule of Metaphor*, respectively—it is as if Ricoeur’s entire philosophical theology could be considered parabolic. This narrative-metaphor points to a third element, an external referent beyond the parable that Ricoeur calls “limit-experiences.”²⁰ Limit-experiences are human encounters with the horizon of knowledge and material reality, or immanence colliding with transcendence. Ricoeur’s limit-experiences can be viewed as being similar to Richard Kearney’s “epiphanies,” so-called impossible possibilities of experienced revelation.²¹ In this, a parable is a transformative short story that re-describes the religious dimension of human existence without resorting to overtly religious discourse.²² It theologically refers to something beyond what was literally told in the narrative, even as the story remains coherent in itself. Ricoeur suggests that this external referent is “human reality in its wholeness,” that is, our existential being-in-the-world.²³ Moreover, as parables *describe* such limit-experiences they may *become* limit-experiences in and of themselves through their evocative and affecting narratives—they are potentially both theological reflections and modes of divine revelation.

Parable’s realism is an essential element in Ricoeur’s description. For Ricoeur, this realism gives the parable its distinct rhetorical strength; something surprising, shocking, or scandalous arises in the midst of the ordinary. Parables are “narratives of normalcy,” or “radically profane stories” in which “there are no gods, no demons, no angels, no miracles, no time before time ... nothing like that, but precisely people like us.”²⁴ Ricoeur contends that parables are stories that could have actually occurred to typical people in everyday life, yet contain a peculiarity or eccentricity, not through fantastical or magical elements but precisely because of the parable’s realism; as Ricoeur puts it elsewhere, parables depict “the extraordinary within the ordinary.”²⁵ This quality “remains a fantastic of the everyday, without the supernatural, as it appears in fairy tales or in myths.”²⁶ Ricoeur describes the structure underlying this peculiarity: “Parables are ordinary stories whose entire metaphorical power is concentrated in a moment of crisis and in a denouement that is

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975): 30, 33.

²¹ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 103.

²² Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 239.

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “The ‘Kingdom’ in the Parables of Jesus,” *Anglican Theological Review* 2 (1981): 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

either tragic or comic.”²⁷ The revelation or epiphany occurs because the parable’s world appears to be quite conventional and quotidian, even mundane. This parabolic realism is congruent with the cinematic realism of classical film theorists André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, namely that parables (cinematic and otherwise) have the capacity to create an aesthetic representation of recognizable reality,²⁸ what Kracauer called the “redemption of physical reality” by means of the photographic image.²⁹ In contrast to formalist and neo-formalist film theories, realist cinema “tends to give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of the real” by showing the world *as is* within the frame of the film and allowing for wider interpretation on the part of the film viewer.³⁰ It is precisely in this contrast between the realism of the narrative and the extravagance of the denouement that gives rise to the metaphoric interpretation, where the plot and meaning of the narrative suggest the transcendent. This is the paradox of the parabolic structure: it begins in a realistic ordinary circumstance that the audience recognizes as the “real world,” only to upend the audience’s expectations through an affective crisis and subsequent coda, prompting reactions that are more of a lingering “hmm ...” than a sudden “aha!” Ricoeur thus proposes a basic parabolic narrative structure: *ordinary-extraordinary-denouement*, or *encounter-reversal-engagement*; elsewhere, Ricoeur describes this structure as *event-reversal-decision*.³¹ For Ricoeur, the form and content remain intertwined, and parables are not empty vessels for the audience to fill with just any interpretation. Instead, parable’s *ordinary-extraordinary-denouement* pattern opens up possibilities of interpretation while maintaining a generic boundary around the narrative meaning. This narrative structure is akin to the rules of a game, allowing players clear guidelines and limits even as those players are able to move around and make decisions freely and creatively. That is, the structural form allows for a polyvalence of interpretations while its simple-yet-complex story resists distortive hermeneutical approaches, such as allegorization. In searching for “signs of metaphoricity,” Ricoeur suggests that the dimension of “extravagance” in the “ordinary” realism of the parable “delivers the openness of the metaphorical process from the closure of the narrative

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (London: University of California Press, 1971), 16.

²⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28.

³⁰ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (London: University of California Press, 1967), 37.

³¹ Ricoeur, “The ‘Kingdom’ in the Parables of Jesus,” 168; Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” 241–42.

form.”³² This collision of the ordinary with the extraordinary elicits a crisis of response as the parable is received and appropriated by the audience—parables “*disorient* only in order to *reorient* us.”³³ What is specifically reoriented? Ricoeur declares that is it our *imagination*, “the power to open us to new possibilities, to discover another way of seeing, or acceding to a new rule in receiving the instruction of exception.”³⁴ Thus, within this formal structure, parables display a “metaphorical network which contains, potentially, several theologies.”³⁵ In other words, true parables may generate a diversity of theological interpretations and applications out of a single narrative-metaphor, reorienting and re-forming our theological and ethical imagination, yet without resorting to overtly religious language (or, in the case of film, religious imagery). As we shall see in the three film examples below, a multiplicity of theological questions and themes can be drawn forth from each cinematic parable.

To summarize, Ricoeurian parables are (1) a realist narrative in conjunction with (2) a metaphorical process referring to, and possibly generating, (3) an existential limit-experience that provokes a theological and moral reorientation. Although Ricoeur applies this description to literature instead of motion pictures, the transposition from text to cinema is evident within the application. As Alberto Baracco has demonstrated the relevance of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics for film-philosophy, I am implementing Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics for film-theology.³⁶ This Ricoeurian description of parable is best understood when applied to specific films within the realist cinema tradition that employ the parabolic narrative structure and contain a metaphoricity that indirectly subverts the greater cultural mythos and engenders a theological response. “Parable” is distinct enough to limit its application while open enough for a variety of cinematic genres. For example, the expressionistic film genres of musicals (*West Side Story*, *La La Land*) or fantasy (*Lord of the Rings*, *The Shape of Water*) often strongly conflict with necessary parabolic realism—in our everyday real world, people do not typically break into choreographed song-and-dance numbers or go on quests with magical elves and hobbits, and the formal dynamics of such films are

³² Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 99.

³³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 281.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ricoeur, “The ‘Kingdom’ in the Parables of Jesus,” 168.

³⁶ Alberto Baracco, *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricoeurian Method for Film Interpretation* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

more formalist than realist (recall the aforementioned realist film theory of Bazin and Kracauer).

We may now return to the film-theology publications briefly mentioned in the introduction to evaluate whether the given films are truly “parables” according to Ricoeur’s description. Robert Johnston’s reliance on Klyne Snodgrass for defining film as parable is worth noting here, although Johnston’s criteria actually align closer to Dodd than Snodgrass’ “stories with intent”: a film parable is (1) an everyday story, (2) that grabs the viewer’s attention, (3) inviting a metaphoric interpretation that challenges regnant understandings, and (4) opens viewers to transformative and at times transcendent insight.³⁷ This definition appears congruent with Ricoeur’s description. Yet Johnston’s primary example is the fantasy comedy-drama *Stranger than Fiction*. This film’s fantastical elements and fable-like moralistic message directly conflict with the necessary realism, indirection, and subversion of the parabolic form; Johnston appears to conflate “magical realism” with parable.³⁸ *Stranger than Fiction* may be parable-like in some ways, but it is not a *true* parable. Matthew Rindge and Richard Walsh’s considerations of parable contain similar aesthetic oversights: Rindge posits that three films, *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, and *About Schmidt*, are scathing parables deconstructing the American cultural ethos, and Walsh wonders if the use of a crucifix in Quentin Tarantino’s *The Hateful Eight* should be considered parabolic instead of parody.³⁹ Even as Rindge and Walsh highlight how the *content* of these films subvert the American dream, the chosen films’ bombastic, satirical forms are neither realistic nor indirect, two key elements for true parables per Ricoeur’s description. The fourth-wall-breaking narrators of *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* are about as overt and instructive as it gets: the characters speak directly to the film audience to hammer home their singular deconstructive messages.⁴⁰ Moreover, the shock of a parable emerges not from the gratuitous or

³⁷ See Johnston, “Film as Parable,” 25–28. See also Robert Johnston, Craig Detweiler, and Kutter Callaway, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 136–41.

³⁸ “Magical realism” is a distinct mode which employs a “matter-of-fact realist tone ... when presenting magical [supernatural] happenings.” See Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic (al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

³⁹ It’s worth noting here that Walsh structures his whole assessment of *The Hateful Eight* upon a misquote: Walsh titles his 2017 article and builds his argument upon Samuel L. Jackson’s character saying “now that was a nice *hanging*,” when the actual line is, “now that was a nice *dance*.”

⁴⁰ I concede that *About Schmidt* may be considered a cinematic parable using the Ricoeurian definition I’ve proposed.

hyper-stylized pastiche that Tarantino relishes, but *indirectly* through subtly-affecting realist forms. We must appreciate not only *that* a parable subverts, but *how* it subverts.

Still, cinematic parables can be both comic and tragic, uplifting and heartbreaking. Thus, I will focus on three recent films from distinct genres and cultures to demonstrate the applicability of the Ricoeurian description, as well as the diversity of cinematic parables evident within world cinema: Asghar Farhadi's Iranian family melodrama, *A Separation* (2011); American filmmaker Anna Rose Holmer's enigmatic coming-of-age dance drama, *The Fits* (2016); and Aki Kaurismäki's droll Finnish comedy, *The Other Side of Hope* (2017). To be clear, the following films do not illustrate or demonstrate Ricoeur's philosophical theology; indeed, such an "applicationist" approach is precisely the film-theology methodology I wish to avoid.⁴¹ Instead, the Ricoeurian parabolic hermeneutic above serves as a lens for revealing the theological insights contained within these three ostensibly nonreligious films, making us more aware of how cinema's unique aesthetic dimensions may re-form or transform our theological and moral imaginations.

***A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011)**

Described as "the most successful Iranian filmmaker" inside and outside of Iran, director Asghar Farhadi has successfully bridged the gap between art house and mainstream cinema with global audiences.⁴² Farhadi's use of melodrama to examine Iranian familial and political life through affective moral crises is parabolic in its invitational capacity to consider theological and ethical concerns, as well as subtly critique cultural ideologies. Indeed, Farhadi's films' capacity to engage both Iranian and

⁴¹ Gordon Lynch describes an "applicationist" approach as the following: "Popular culture is subjected to a critique on the basis of certain fixed theological beliefs. A basic assumption of this approach is that it is possible to identify core theological truths from a particular source (e.g., the Bible or Church tradition) and then apply these critically to the beliefs and values of popular culture." See *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 101. In response to an early draft of this article, one anonymous reviewer repeatedly insisted that I should "Stay. With. Ricoeur." in the analysis of the three films, suggesting an anticipation of an applicationist method. I am not using the films to illustrate Ricoeur's thought. Rather, I am employing a Ricoeurian hermeneutic to make audiences more aware of how the films generate their own theological insights.

⁴² Tina Hassannia, *Asghar Farhadi: Life and Cinema* (Raleigh, NC: The Critical Press, 2014), loc. 69 of 1821, Kindle.

non-Iranian audiences is in itself a subversive theo-political act, his way of fostering a liberative democratic cinema:

In all my films, I have tried to multiply the points of view, rather than imposing my own. To enable the viewer to have different angles of the story.... I don't think it's important for the audience to know my intention. I'd rather they left the cinema with questions. I believe that the world today needs more questions than answers. Answers prevent you from questioning, from thinking.⁴³

Film critic Tina Hassannia observes that Farhadi's "ideology remains ambiguous or invisible, buried underneath a myriad of interpretations that are more informative about the viewer than the work itself" as she considers his "pluralistic perspective on morality" to be refreshing within the Iranian cinema culture of censorship. For Hassannia, Farhadi's films "reveal the moral depravity deeply embedded within all of us—Iranian or not, old or young, rich or poor, male or female."⁴⁴ Although many of his major works distributed overseas (*About Elly*, *The Past*, *The Salesman*) may be viewed as cinematic parables, my analysis focuses on Farhadi's Academy Award-winning magnum opus, *A Separation*, a moral melodrama making an "aesthetic attempt to reveal the 'moral legibility' of a secular social order that is both riven by social contradictions and no longer unified by shared (religious or theological) moral foundations."⁴⁵ Farhadi describes the film as "a detective story without any detectives. The audience is the one in charge of solving the puzzles; there will be as many answers as audiences."⁴⁶

A Separation opens with a static shot of a photocopier scanning government documents, immediately drawing the audience into the film's rhythm and attention to detail—we are invited to scan this film-world carefully, to look closely at its terrestrial transcendence. What we see next is Nader and Simin (Payman Maadi and Leila Hatami), a married couple requesting a divorce from the court. The audience sits in the perspective of the judge's seat in a medium close-up, face-to-face with the shoulder-to-shoulder pair as they pour out their complaints in a long, uncut shot (figure 1). She wants to leave Iran to give better opportunities to their eleven-year-old

⁴³ Quoted in Joseph Burke, "Rediscovering Morality through Ashgar [sic] Farhadi's *A Separation*," *Senses of Cinema* 61 (2011), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/rediscovering-morality-through-ashgar-farhadi%E2%80%99s-a-separation/>.

⁴⁴ Hassannia, *Asghar Farhadi*, loc. 84–97.

⁴⁵ Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London: Routledge, 2016), 114.

⁴⁶ Asghar Farhadi, "Director's Statement," *A Separation* Press Kit, Sony Pictures Classics, <https://www.sonyclassics.com/aseparation/>.



Figure 1: Before the judge. Promotional still, A Separation (Asghar Farhadi, 2011), ©Memento Films.

daughter, Termeh (Sarina Farhadi, Asghar's real-life daughter), while he refuses to abandon his elderly senile father. One looks to the future generation; the other feels responsible for the past.

The judge denies their rationale for divorce, prompting the couple to informally separate. Simin leaves to stay with her mother while Termeh chooses to live with Nader, hoping her choice will prompt her mother's return. Nader hires a caregiver, Razieh (Sareh Bayat), to look after his father. Devoutly religious and working-class, Razieh brings her young daughter, Somayeh (Kimia Hosseini), along for her taxing commute and unglamorous work. On the third day, Razieh loses track of Nader's father when he wanders outside after Somayeh leaves the apartment door ajar. The following day, Razieh inexplicably leaves work early and ties the feeble man to the bed, where Nader and Termeh later find him bruised and traumatized. When Nader also discovers money missing, his suspicion erupts into anger as he throws Razieh out of the apartment, resulting in her slipping on the staircase. Razieh later suffers a miscarriage—she had concealed a pregnancy, and her volatile conservative husband, Hojjat (Shahab Hosseini), blames Nader for the loss, taking him to court and charging him with murder.

What follows is a series of escalating confrontations and confessions as characters blame one another and reveal hidden knowledge (for instance, Nader's awareness of Razieh's pregnancy, or Razieh's revelation that she

was hit by a car while fetching Nader's father). The tension between individuals, couples, and families culminates in a final scene parallel to the first as Termeh is asked by the court judge if she knows which parent she'd prefer to live with. In a shot from the judge's perspective, the camera lingers on Termeh's emotional face as she requests that her parents wait outside so she can speak. We watch Simin and Nader anxiously tarrying in the gray-hued hallway at opposite sides of the frame, a glass-paneled barrier between them as we await Termeh's never-disclosed decision. In this open-ended Ricoeurian denouement, the parable lingers in our mind's eye, prompting us to imagine the possible choices characters will make.

In looking for Ricoeurian "signs of metaphoricity,"⁴⁷ the titular separation may refer to any number of divides: marital, familial, generational, socio-economic, and religious, as well as past/future, public/private, guilty/innocent, conservative/progressive, and, indeed, audience/film. Farhadi navigates these schisms and their knotty narrative complexity with a steady formal approach inspired by documentary veracity, the camera scanning characters and environments with an intimate-yet-encompassing view by means of handheld cinematography, striving to see and show every angle even as most actions are deliberately obscured by the editing and framing. Such bodily cinematography suggests a hovering haptic spirituality, a God's-eye view not from "above" but dwelling among us.

Characters' faces are often viewed through glass windows, partially concealed by doorframes, or placed on opposite sides of the frame, fostering a sense of relational fragility and making tangible the invisible barriers that separate people (figure 2). For instance, when Nader pushes Razieh out of the apartment, the camera remains inside the unit; we see Razieh through the opaque glass door, then hear a fall and Somayeh crying. The camera placement makes it unclear how directly responsible Nader is for her fall, let alone the miscarriage. In later argument scenes, we see long close-ups of facial expressions and a steady rhythm of shot-reverse shots, evoking a strong affective and empathic response for each character involved, what philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink calls "cinempathy."⁴⁸ In this way, the film never privileges any one person, evoking our sympathy for every character; there are no simplistic dualities of right and wrong as judicious grace permeates each scene. Children are present as observant judges (the kingdom belongs to such as these) as each adult—equally guilty and innocent—conceals his or her motives in ethical dilemmas.

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 99.

⁴⁸ Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 95–102.



Figure 2: *Visual divisions. Promotional still, A Separation (Asghar Farhadi, 2011), ©Memento Films.*

This concealment alludes to Iran's strict censorship system, where what is displayed or concealed changes the very perception of reality. Farhadi indirectly and subversively calls attention to this censorship culture in the film's cinematography and editing. For instance, because the scene where Razieh is hit by a car is omitted, we are perplexed as to her subsequent actions and experiences (e.g., her exhaustion on the bus ride home, her reasons for tying up Nader's father to leave for an urgent appointment). Scenes have been deliberately censored from our view, and thus our urgent ethical judgments about human mortality are impaired by ignorance. Indeed, the powerful ambiguous ending puts the viewer, as it did in the beginning, in the responsible position of a transcendent judge receiving and interpreting the presented evidence as the cinematic parable aesthetically and ethically reveals the complexities of social, moral, and theological contradictions and conundrums. To discern—to judge—is itself a form of separation, requiring wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong. Perhaps *A Separation* may be interpreted as a cinematic commentary on Micah 4:3, fostering human yearning for a divine judge who wisely settles disputes between many peoples? Or, to draw a firmer link between the film's cinematography of concealment and its placing of the audience's perspective into a position of making ethical judgments, *A Separation* is a type of cinematic moral theology: in its censorship and hiddenness, the film's aesthetic

prompts us to consider moral goods in light of God's apparent absence. Such parabolic ethics do not exist in abstract propositional terms or as an illustration of an overarching ethical norm, but rather are particular and polyvalent *within* the affective cinematic narrative. Ruben Zimmermann says it well: "The impact of the [parable's] ethics originates not in the imperative but in the emotional participation and even in the story that is not told.... Instead of using imperatives that engender opposition, parabolic ethics rely upon the vibrancy of a scene; moralistic finger-wagging yields to the beauty of the story."⁴⁹ The audience is thus prompted to observe, weigh in, evaluate, and decide about the particular situation presented in *A Separation*, to come to their own conclusions and make wider applications within their own real-world praxis. In its nonprogrammatic and highly particular approach to ethics, *A Separation* as parable requires a humble posture to make the necessary ethical judgments, ones that may ultimately be graciously judged by God.

***The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2016)**

Anna Rose Holmer's debut feature film, *The Fits*, centers on eleven-year-old Toni (Royalty Hightower), a tomboy boxer who joins an elite all-girls dance team at the local community center in urban Cincinnati, where she trains alongside her brother. Intrigued by the powerful bodily movements and collaborative sport, a quietly observant Toni assimilates into the team, learning the choreographed dance moves through discipline and practice, and making friends along the way. When a mysterious outbreak of seizure-like symptoms plagues the girls, Toni's adolescent desire for affinity and acceptance is put to the test.

The film was produced in part through the Venice Biennale Cinema College program and debuted in Venice in 2015 before appearing at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2016; it won the 2016 Golden Brick Award given annually by the popular Chicago-based *Filmspotting* podcast to a nonmainstream film made by a newly established filmmaker that shows clear directorial vision/artistic ambition.⁵⁰ During the production, Holmer collaborated with a real-life local Cincinnati dance team to cast actual teenagers; she and the film crew lived on location and invited the girls to view themselves as "coauthors" of their characters. Inspired by historical cases of female mass hysteria and with a background in documentary

⁴⁹ Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 177–78.

⁵⁰ "Golden Bricks," *Filmspotting.net*, <https://www.filmspotting.net/bricks>.

filmmaking, Holmer describes her film as a “meditation on movement” that “juxtaposes the precise, powerful, and intentional movements of drill with subconscious, spontaneous, and uncontrolled movements of collective hysterics.”⁵¹ Efficient with its seventy-two minutes, *The Fits*’ pacing is methodical, the dialogue sparse, eschewing exposition or explanations; we see little of the exterior world outside the community center and hear little of the girls’ interior worlds, particularly the muted Toni. The story is told through movement and action, a choreography between characters and the camera’s eye. Each “fit” was designed between the individual actress and the choreographer, making each episode unique in symptoms and depiction. The framing is formally deliberate even as the film maintains realist characteristics: on-location setting in the urban margins, nonprofessional actors, documentary-like cinematography, and a lingering focus on mundane objects and spaces. The community center setting is at once expansive and claustrophobic, its large echoing gymnasiums and tight concrete hallways creating a cavernous tension between freedom and imprisonment. *The Fits* imbues its rich material world with transcendent significance; bodies and buildings, hair and hallways, muscles and music, all seem spiritually haunted by what film theorist Henri Agel describes as a “spiritual realism,” akin to Bazin and Kracauer’s realist film theory—this is an extraordinariness of the ordinary world made visible by means of the cinematic medium, as if the mechanical eye of the camera has mystically given us access to the spiritual realm, generating an awareness of the holy within the profane.⁵²

The Fits is interested in bodies, both physical and sociopolitical. The film opens with a medium shot of Toni doing sit-ups, staring directly into the camera with her wide, observant eyes (figure 3); we realize later she is looking into a gymnasium mirror, a symbol of the film’s exploration of gaze and self-awareness. She later undresses privately in a bathroom stall, unwilling to disrobe in front of the older girls in the locker room, but listening intently as they talk about boys and periods. She pierces her own ears at the encouragement of her tween friends, only to later take the earrings out, uncomfortable with the feminine adornment. Though rarely speaking, she communicates a great deal with her eyes and posture; *The Fits* is, at times, like a silent film, with the diegetic noises originating mainly from breathing bodies. The soundtrack—a mixture of unnerving strings and horns in jazzy, free-form bursts—gives *The Fits* the underlying tone of a thriller or horror

⁵¹ Anna Rose Holmer, “Director’s Statement,” *The Fits* Press Notes, Oscilloscope Laboratories, <http://thefits.oscilloscope.net/>.

⁵² See Sarah Cooper, *The Soul of Film Theory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 39–40, 72–74.



Figure 3: Toni's gaze. Promotional still, *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2016), ©Oscilloscope Laboratories.

film. Indeed, there are apt comparisons to be made between *The Fits* and horror films about female sexuality and mysterious mass hysteria (e.g. *Carrie*, *The Birds*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*). That is, there appears to be a link between societal anxiety and burgeoning female sexuality, between the fits and the unique pains (both physical and social) of feminine maturation. Such films examine and critique this anxiety via horror and thriller tropes. As Brittany Stigler notes in reviewing *The Fits*, drawing appropriate parallels to Robert Eggers' 2015 religious horror film *The Witch*, "in a patriarchal society the young girl, unlike the male (as seen in a beautiful montage of men being bloodied in the ring), must hide her fluids and any sign of pain ... The fits ... are a subversive and public way of announcing this arrival into sexuality."⁵³

With no clear explanation for the fits' origins, the underlying anxiety builds to a boil in the final scene—the Ricoeurian denouement—as the camera circles Toni while she stands outside and looks upward to the heavens, birds flying in natural rhythmic formation above her. The shot cuts to a close-up of her bare feet slowly walking the concrete hallways, a synth-filled soundtrack of feminine voices querying "Must we choose to be slaves to gravity?" as Toni's feet slowly levitate into the air. A frisson-inducing montage follows: Toni's fit before the dance team filmed in slow motion (figure 4); Toni removing her gray sweatshirt on a familiar overpass to

⁵³ Brittany Stigler, "What Do You Know about It? Anna Rose Holmer's *The Fits*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/06/film/what-do-you-know-about-it-anna-rose-holmers-the-fits>.



Figure 4: *Toni's fit*. Promotional still, *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2016), ©Oscilloscope Laboratories.

reveal a glittery dance uniform as the team joins her in formation; the team performing a routine in various locations with Toni's smiling face in the mix (figure 5); culminating with Toni falling backward and staring directly into the camera, an enigmatic gaze with a hint of a smile on her face framed upside-down and off-center in close-up as an inversion of the opening shot. In this fantastic disequilibrating sequence, prior realism and reality are called into question, touching the horizon of the transcendent-



Figure 5: *In formation*. Promotional still, *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2016), ©Oscilloscope Laboratories.

immanent limit-experience. Are these scenes subjectively within Toni's mind or objectively visible to others? Is Toni's fit authentic or faked, a sign of liberation or enslavement? With evidence inviting a wide variety of interpretations, it is only clear that Toni's world (and ours) has been turned upside down. Parabolically, *The Fits* "[refuses] to settle down and privilege a single reading ... instead [taking] flight in Toni's gaze, her gait, her gravity."⁵⁴

As a cinematic parable of adolescence, sexual awakening, gender, and race, *The Fits* has divided audiences and provoked myriad interpretations. The fits themselves appear akin to ecstatic religious experiences, bodies swooning and convulsing in a manner not unlike Pentecostal worship services. Theologically, the film invites anthropological queries and feminist readings, particularly in its portrayal of human social dynamics and Black female bodies inhabiting a specific contextual space. In her rigorous work on theological anthropology, *Enfleshing Freedom*, M. Shawn Copeland privileges Black women's bodies, arguing that "the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation" and "the body provokes theology."⁵⁵ Similarly, the filmmakers "approached storytelling from the physical performance first" to explore thematic questions like "How do girls use their bodies as a mode of communication?"⁵⁶ Like *The Fits*, Copeland's work considers "the theological anthropological relation between the social body and the physical body" through Black female bodies as a hermeneutical "prism."⁵⁷ Indeed, both Copeland and *The Fits* affirm Black girls matter (and Black girls' matter, that is, their bodies). In this dynamic between individual human bodies and the larger social constructs where they reside, *The Fits* is the disruptive irruption of Black female bodies upending cultural and theological expectations, an aesthetics of contagion indirectly confronting racial hegemonies and patriarchal paradigms.⁵⁸ As a parable, *The Fits* creates a fresh cinematic space to address the theo-political problem of whiteness by way of "narrating being beyond race" and breaking free of the captivity of white supremacy's "ontology of forgetfulness."⁵⁹ Elsewhere, J. Kameron Carter has spoken of a theo-political imagination freed from the binary gravity of whiteness and Blackness via what he calls "Black malpractice," a subversive counter-myth

⁵⁴ Patricia White, "Bodies that Matter: Black Girlhood in *The Fits*," *Film Quarterly* 3 (2017), 31.

⁵⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 2, 7.

⁵⁶ Holmer, "Director's Statement."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁸ I borrow the phrase "aesthetics of contagion" from Rizvana Bradley, "Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion," *TDR: The Drama Review* 1 (2018): 14–30.

⁵⁹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 258.

of “underworlding and otherworlding and no-worlding beyond property and sovereignty and toward an ecopoetics of the social whole.”⁶⁰ Such Black malpractice ultimately leads to what Carter calls “Black rapture”:

That malpracticed, atheological godlessness bespeaks an interior, collective aliveness constantly ready, expectantly poised for the unexpectant, the experience of the ek-static—to be moved, to be terrified, to love, to hate, to live magically, drunkenly, wanderously, wonderously, erotically, joyously, childishly, prayerfully, in the radicality of a certain moving stillness, a certain quarreling, in/sovereign quiet. This Black (w)holiness that (in)sovereignly exceeds the concept, we might call *Black rapture*.⁶¹

Is this not what the community center in *The Fits* metaphorically suggests? It is not a white post-Enlightenment realm, but an imaginary enclosed nonwhite world that provokes audiences into active thought about real-world racial constructs. And might Toni’s levitating fit be considered a type of cinematic Black rapture, an “experience of the ek-static”? Indeed, in its amalgamation of seemingly divergent cinematic archetypes and tropes—horror/thriller, coming-of-age, social realism, and the American indie aesthetic—*The Fits* indirectly and subversively prompts questions of race in America and women’s experiences both in front of and beyond the camera. Thus, even as Holmer may be considered the “auteur” of the film, *The Fits* should be allowed to speak for itself as parable, to prompt new revelations and theo-political insights about race, femininity, and sexuality beyond whatever Holmer initially envisioned. Sharing more than the metaphoric image of dance, perhaps *The Fits* is a cinematic womanist theology of the body similar to Karen Baker-Fletcher’s *Dancing with God*, effectively interweaving a variety of seemingly disparate approaches and sources—cinematic for *The Fits*, theological for Baker-Fletcher—and anchoring them in tangible contexts and praxis.⁶²

***The Other Side of Hope* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2017)**

Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki has a distinct auteurist style, crafting lugubrious stories about “middle-class losers” facing poverty, violence, and inequality in the margins of European society. Yet for all of these ostensibly serious descriptors, Kaurismäki’s films are quirky comedies infused with

⁶⁰ J. Kameron Carter, “Black Malpractice (A Poetics of the Sacred),” *Social Text* 37, no. 2 (2019): 91.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶² Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).

a darkly playful humor. They are paradoxically solemn and silly, politically subversive yet utopian, combining social realism with melodrama.⁶³ There is a recognizable “Aki World,” a phenomenon one critic has dubbed “the Kaurismäki effect”: “encountering just one film by the director invariably leaves a viewer puzzled by his style and sensibility, but, upon seeing two or three, things gratifyingly begin to click and fall into place.”⁶⁴ One recognizes a Kaurismäki film by the deadpan performances from the semi-grotesque pallid actors; the absurdly stilted dialogue wrought with irony; the dark blue-gray color palette with bursts of deep crimson in shadowy lighting; an anachronistic *mise-en-scène*; a conspicuous soundtrack of 1960s-era rock and roll mixed with melodramatic classical music; and the presence of dogs as kindly companions for lonely souls trudging through difficult ethical dilemmas. Many could be considered bizarre variations on The Good Samaritan parable as a protagonist is displaced or isolated by a journey or unexpected conflict, leaving the character to struggle in a new context before finally experiencing a “weak, secular redemption.”⁶⁵ Jaakko Seppälä notes that Kaurismäki’s minimalist cinematographic techniques create a duality of irony and empathy, leaving audiences with contradictory experiences and interpretations, thus making it nearly impossible to discern what Kaurismäki truly intends.⁶⁶

Even as Kaurismäki crafts cinematic Foucauldian heterotopias—alternative insular “other” worlds occurring within the margins of sociocultural spaces—where the protagonists strive to create a sense of community in society’s edges, Kaurismäki still exhibits a noticeably utopian perspective, as well as a rich knowledge of film history.⁶⁷ Despite his films’ bleak premises, they generally conclude with an affecting moment of hope accompanied by a rousing musical number. Andrew Nestingen observes that this affective experience emerges via the narrative structure of musical moments; Kaurismäki’s style is an eccentric riff on the film musical.⁶⁸ With this pre-understanding of

⁶³ Thomas Austin, ed., *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki: Ludic Engagements* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1.

⁶⁴ Girish Shambu, “The Other Side of Hope: No-Home Movie,” *Criterion*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5662-the-other-side-of-hope-no-home-movie>.

⁶⁵ Andrew Nestingen, *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki: Contrarian Stories* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 15.

⁶⁶ Jaakko Seppälä, “The Camera’s Ironic Point of View: Notes on Strange and Comic Elements in the Films of Aki Kaurismäki,” in Austin, *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki*, 83–85.

⁶⁷ Aymeric Pantet, “A Constellation of Heterotopias? Qualifying the Concept of Heterotopia in Aki Kaurismäki’s Films,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1 (2018): 53–69.

⁶⁸ Andrew Nestingen, “Kaurismäki’s Musical Moments: Genre, Irony, Utopia, Redemption,” in Austin, *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki*, 137, 141.

Kaurismäki in mind, we can analyze his latest (and possibly final) parabolic film, *The Other Side of Hope*.⁶⁹

The comedy-drama centers on two parallel narratives that intersect as the protagonists' worlds collide. The film opens with patient images of water in Helsinki's harbor as an enormous cargo ship unloads coal. As night falls, a static medium shot of coal evokes the notion of resurrection as a man's soot-covered head emerges from the black depths (figure 6). Khaled (Sherwan Haji) is a young Syrian refugee fleeing war-torn Aleppo and searching for his sister Miriam (Niroz Haji) from whom he was separated while escaping Syria. Khaled's journey runs parallel to that of Wikström (Sakari Kuosmanen), a middle-aged salesman who has recently decided to leave both his business and his alcoholic wife to start afresh as a restaurant owner. Early in the film, as Wikström speeds away from the garage where he stores his merchandise in his anachronistic 1950s-era car, he almost runs into Khaled. Kaurismäki films this face-to-face encounter as a series of close-ups of their deadpan visages, a silent shared look between two strangers passing in the night, each searching for hope.

Unconventionally, the two concurrent stories do not converge again until an hour later into the film when Wikström discovers Khaled hiding behind the restaurant dumpsters. Having been denied asylum and with deportation looming, Khaled fled the prison-like refugee facility in Helsinki, still searching for Miriam. Khaled's initial reaction to Wikström is defensive because he was previously violently accosted by neo-Nazis; he comically punches the much larger man in the nose. Wikström retaliates, knocking Khaled down; then the scene cuts to a black-eyed Khaled hungrily eating soup in the restaurant while a stoic Wikström watches, bloody tissue stuffed into his nose. The three misfit restaurant employees awkwardly linger as Wikström offers Khaled a job and help finding his sister. In Kaurismäki's signature style, the blocking and framing in the medium shot is near-symmetrical and flatly two-dimensional, the cinematography emphasizing the dry humor via the perfectly posed unsmiling characters (figure 7). Such sight gags, such as the cook washing what appears to be a window before leaning through its empty space, allude to the straight-faced slapstick and impeccable camera placement of Buster Keaton or Jacques Tati, while the color and lighting echo Edward Hopper paintings.

The film's Ricoeurian parabolic dynamic emerges via its disparate, disorienting aesthetic, an intentional tension between form and content. In *The Other Side of Hope* and his 2011 film *Le Havre*, Kaurismäki addresses the

⁶⁹ At the 2017 Berlin Film Festival, where he won the Best Director award, Kaurismäki stated that this will be his last film, leaving incomplete the planned "ports" or "refugee" trilogy he began with *Le Havre* in 2011.



Figure 6: *Khaled's resurrection. Promotional still, The Other Side of Hope (Aki Kaurismäki, 2017), ©Sputnik Oy.*

global refugee crisis, European colonialist history, and anti-immigrant white nationalist ideologies—all decidedly serious topics—via goofy deadpan humor. Anachronisms abound to create contrasts between past and future, nostalgia and hope. For example, typewriters sit beside laptops in the police station, and the soundtrack ranges from classical symphonies to classic rock. Kaurismäki neither glorifies nor vilifies either the refugees or the Europeans; he simply presents them in a blend of real-world political



Figure 7: *Khaled meets Wikström. Promotional still, The Other Side of Hope (Aki Kaurismäki, 2017), ©Sputnik Oy.*

issues and other-worldly ironic formalism. The impassive performances and stilted dialogue prompts affective dissonance within the audience. The film is patiently paced, taking time to build each individual narrative arc before their inevitable collision occurs two-thirds through the film. Each man must survive not only the drama of painful separations (civil war and a failed marriage, respectively), but also the painfully slow bureaucratic systems that impede their freedom. In this, *The Other Side of Hope* is about enduring and subverting the hegemonic impersonal systems of Western society via what Richard Kearney calls “sacramental action,” a welcoming of the divine Stranger in radical hospitality instead of hostility.⁷⁰ There is a Levinasian trace, too, a face-to-face confrontation with the Other whose very alterity generates ethical responsibility. As “ethics is the spiritual optics” for Levinas, all personal encounters with the face of the human Other—such as Wikström coming face to face with Khaled—are also encounters with the transcendent: “the Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.”⁷¹ In other words, suggested by the film’s title, there is a direct connection between the “Other Person” (immanence) and the “Other Side” (transcendence) through ethical responsibility for one’s neighbor. As Khaled and Wikström work the angles, moving between and beyond the rules of law, their alterity is overcome as their supposed self-preservation leads them to serve the Other out of mercy, not unlike Miroslav Volf’s demand to “place identity and otherness at the center of theological reflection on social realities.”⁷² Per Ricoeur, this is a story of ordinary people aiming at “the good life” with and for others as they hope for just institutions.⁷³

The film’s ending—the Ricoeurian denouement—is ambiguous yet hopeful: having been stabbed by a neo-Nazi, Khaled meets with Miriam outside the Helsinki police station and encourages her to apply for asylum (a strange exhortation, after being denied asylum himself). The final shot is of Khaled sitting on a riverbank leaned up against a tree; we see the hint of a smile as he looks out over the water toward the other embankment, still bleeding from his side (a possible Christ-figure motif). As he smokes a cigarette, an almost unnoticeable light gradually glows from off-screen, subtly brightening his face. A rock-and-roll song kicks in on the soundtrack as the

⁷⁰ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 129–30.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 78–79.

⁷² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 17.

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

small dog adopted by the restaurant employees suddenly appears and happily licks Khaled's face before the scene cuts to black and the credits roll. Will Khaled live or die? Will Miriam find asylum? Is this moment real or a fantasy? As parable, *The Other Side of Hope* raises more questions than definitive answers; like *A Separation* and *The Fits*, it purposefully allows an openness for divergent valid interpretations. The elegiac denouement is deeply affecting not due to the melodrama of performances (like *A Separation*), but rather a combination of nondiegetic music and hints of the fantastical (like *The Fits*); it is a cinematic limit-experience on the horizon of mortality. In this, there is an eschatological dimension to the final scene, a future-oriented promise directed toward the as-yet-unknown "other side of hope." This eschatology is not an apocalyptic vision of the future culmination of time; instead, it is a potential divine in-breaking into present-day history, a cinematic realized eschatology that displays an anticipatory openness and expectancy in decidedly "realistic" ways.⁷⁴ Recall that such nonfantastical realism is essential to the Ricoeurian parabolic aesthetic. Yet this is not to discount the possibility of the divine presence or theological significance in these final scenes, especially in the mysterious off-screen radiance on Khaled's face or even through the semi-miraculous appearance of the dog to comfort Khaled.⁷⁵ Even as most of the parables of Christ lack explicit references to God, instead using common everyday metaphors and narrative structures in their own "fantastic of the everyday," so too *The Other Side of Hope* may connote the hopeful eschatological nature of human history without having to make direct reference to Christian systematic theology.⁷⁶

Conclusion: Theocinematics and "Secular Parables"

As I mentioned earlier, Ricoeur states that parables potentially contain several theologies, so revisiting these films may generate fresh theological

⁷⁴ For further consideration of a cinematic realized eschatology, see Christopher Deacy, *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (London: Routledge, 2012), 77–98.

⁷⁵ For a fascinating theological inquiry into the spiritual significance of our canine friends, see Andrew Root, *The Grace of Dogs: A Boy, a Black Lab, and a Father's Search for the Canine Soul* (New York: Convergent Books, 2017).

⁷⁶ "Avoiding overt 'God-talk' is an important strategy that Jesus employs [in parables]. By luring the reader into thinking the parable is just about everyday life, the defense mechanisms of Jesus' religious audience are down, and they are tricked into an understanding of God that is at least surprising, but often shocking and seemingly unacceptable." See Kreglinger, *Storied Revelations*, 48. Of course, a few of Christ's parables have cosmic or divine aspects (e.g., the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31), but actual "God-talk" is still strikingly absent.

insights and meanings. Ricoeur elsewhere declares that the parables “allow no translation in conceptual language ... There is more to *think through* the richness of the images than in the coherence of a simple concept.”⁷⁷ As narrative-metaphors, parables cannot be dissected and reduced via scientific rationalization or systematic propositions. Indeed, parables “say more than any rational theology. At the very moment that they call for theological clarification, they start shattering the theological simplifications which we attempt to put in their place.”⁷⁸ In this way, the above theological interpretations of *A Separation*, *The Fits*, and *The Other Side of Hope* are not exhaustive, nor does my theological film criticism adequately summarize or supersede the cinematic experience—even as I am striving to translate the experience of moving images into a publishable word-based form within an academic journal, this can never replace experiencing the actual films for oneself (which I would encourage readers to do). To be clear, by drawing connections among the three chosen cinematic parables and various theologians and philosophers, I am not suggesting that these films’ theological merits are limited to such direct connections with theological writings, as if the films were merely illustrating theologians’ ideas. Instead, I am suggesting that these films in themselves can operate as constructive theologies that affirm, challenge, and reimagine traditional systematic word-based approaches to theology. Just as a substantial number of philosophers—such as Stanley Cavell, Stephen Mulhall, and Robert Sinnerbrink—have successfully argued for “film as philosophy,”⁷⁹ I am arguing for film as theology, a view similar to (yet slightly distinct from) the “cinematic theology” put forward by Gerard Loughlin.⁸⁰ My approach appreciates the “sacramentality” of cinema, which is more akin to the theological aesthetics of David Brown and the film theory of André Bazin. Brown defines the sacramental as “the symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material.” For Brown, this mediation is

⁷⁷ Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” 242.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁷⁹ See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (London: Harvard University Press, 1979); Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016); and Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (London: Continuum, 2011). For more examples of film as philosophy (film-philosophy), see Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower, 2006); Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007); Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough, eds., *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (Basingstok, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁸⁰ See Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

not strictly instrumental or illustrative, but rather “the material symbol says something about God in its own right.”⁸¹ Similarly, Bazin viewed cinematic techniques—particularly editing, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*—as being linked to the theological concept of revelation: through its unique formal attributes, cinema allows us to become more aware of the presence of the divine in all things. In this sacramental sense, cinematic parables are truly *doing* (not merely depicting) theology through the moving image, and thus may offer fresh insights for the wider theological discourse.

Though space precludes in-depth explanations, these are the constructive beginnings of what I am calling “theocinematics,” a larger project considering the question of God through the audio-visual cinematic medium.⁸² Similar to how Amos Wilder proposed a “theopoetic,” looking to secular literary criticism and mythopoetic language as a means of revitalizing the theological task in the 1970s,⁸³ and, more recently, the resurgence of “theopoetics” as “a way to do religious reflection that gives greater attention to form, genre, and method,”⁸⁴ theocinematics looks to so-called “secular” cinema (such as the three films discussed here), film theory, and cinematic experiences as a way of enriching and opening up new possibilities for our theological imaginations. If *theology* is speech (*logos*) about God, then *theocinematics* is the nonspeech of moving (*kínēma*) images (*eikōn*) about God—God-picture instead of God-talk. Indeed, Christ reveals God to humanity as both the word and the image of God. As Christ is “the image [*eikōn*] of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), and in Christ “we live and move [*kineō*, the root of which is *kínēma*] and have our being” (Acts 17:28), then perhaps the cinematic image has been latent within Christian theology since the Word became flesh and lived among us, allowing us to see, hear, and feel the glorious moving Image of God (cf. John 1:14, 1 John 1:1). It is also pertinent to my

⁸¹ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30. I am indebted to Brown’s work on sacramentality for my theocinematics approach: see also David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸² Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers who requested that “theocinematics” be more extensively explained here. These can only be preliminary remarks on what is ultimately a book-length project on film as theology.

⁸³ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁸⁴ ARC, “What do people mean by ‘theopoetics?’” <https://artsreligionculture.org/definitions>. For a helpful introduction to contemporary theopoetics; see the special “Theopoetics” issue of *Literature and Theology*, ed. Heather Walton, *Literature and Theology* 3 no. 2 (2019).

argument that Paul quotes pagan poets and philosophers in order to communicate his gospel message to the Athenians—theological truth appears to be available in the “secular” arts. As David Brown has argued, with the collapse of dualistic and rationalist theistic arguments in our contemporary world, theology genuinely *needs* the arts (including cinema) as image, symbol, narrative, and metaphor help move us beyond the “exemplarism” of many Christian theological approaches toward richer understandings of God.⁸⁵ In proposing film *as* theology, I suggest that cinema may function simultaneously as both theological reflection and sacramental divine encounter. Put differently, a film can be *about* God’s interaction with our world as well as a means for God’s *actual* interaction with us. This is a twofold conception of cinema’s revelatory capacities, where film operates as a mediation *from humanity to God* (film as theology) as well as *from God to humanity* (film as sacramental experience).

In viewing film this way, I am presenting a different approach than the prevailing methodology of “dialogue” in the film-theology subfield, where theology and film are brought into a back-and-forth dialogue with each other.⁸⁶ Where such “dialogue” often gives theology the first and final word while creating a dichotomy between the two (i.e., film can be *in dialogue with* theology, and thus film cannot be theology *in itself*), I am seeking to overcome this dialogical subordinationism via an egalitarian hermeneutic, one that places the fields of film studies and theology on more equal levels, finding points of agreement while also appreciating disciplinary differences. This theocinematics approach is more akin to cinematic “montage” than dialogue. Although “montage” is synonymous with “editing” in American film terminology, “editing” suggests trimming or removal, whereas the French term “montage” connotes a creative constructive process, an assembly of new meanings between two collocated images. Arguably the essence of the cinematic medium, montage is “the creation of a sense or meaning not proper to the images themselves but derived exclusively from their

⁸⁵ David Brown, “Why Theology Needs the Arts,” in *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology through Symbol, Painting, and Architecture*, eds. Christopher R. Brewer and Robert MacSwain (London: Routledge, 2017), 24–33.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the subtitles for Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Anthony J. Clarke and Paul S. Fiddes, eds., *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2005); and Ulrike Vollmer, *Seeing Film and Reading Feminist Theology: A Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007). See also Stefanie Knauss’ helpful critique of “dialogue” methods in *Religion and Film: Representation, Meaning, Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 82–85.

juxtaposition.”⁸⁷ Such juxtaposition is more imagistic, affective, and semiotic than purely conceptual. In this form of cinematic constructive theology, film and theology are united as fresh meanings are generated via their juxtaposition and overlap. Or, to use Ricoeurian terminology, the dynamic between the diegetic film-world and the life-world of the filmgoer—what Ricoeur calls the “world of the text” and the “world of the reader” for literature—has the power to inform and re-form both our theological imaginations and our appreciation of cinema.⁸⁸ In my analysis of the three cinematic parables, I have sought to demonstrate such a theocinematic montage: this is not film *and* theology, but film *as* theology.

In this consideration of cinematic parables, I am reminded of Karl Barth’s observation about “secular parables” in his *Church Dogmatics*. Barth claims that “true words, parables of the kingdom” can be found within secular culture via the revealed Word in Jesus. Such parables “consist of stories from everyday life,” yet Barth suggests that these stories are more than “merely photographs” of everyday happenings in that a “fashioning and guiding hand ... gives them the mark of the extraordinary.”⁸⁹ This sounds strikingly similar to Ricoeur’s description of parables as “the extraordinary within the ordinary.” Barth goes on to proclaim that the church “can and must be prepared to encounter ‘parables of the kingdom’ in the full biblical sense ... in the secular sphere.”⁹⁰ Could we not discover such parables of the kingdom in the “secular” sphere of cinema? Indeed, if our wider understanding of “cinema” expands to encompass *all* moving-image forms—film, TV, internet- or app-based video, video chat, GIF, and so on—viewed on a type of screen—computer, movie theater, television, smartphone, tablet, and so on—then perhaps cinema has become one of the primary means of human communication in our contemporary age.⁹¹ And if cinema is potentially our global *lingua franca*, then theologians need to be well versed in how theological meaning is conveyed through various audio-visual forms, to understand cinematic “grammar,” as it were. Thus, I encourage

⁸⁷ Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, 25.

⁸⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 157.

⁸⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, eds. T. F. Torrance and G. F. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 113. Barth notes two types of secularism, one “pure and absolute” and another “mixed and relative.” He argues that Christ can raise up witnesses speaking “true words” in both spheres (118–20).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114–17.

⁹¹ At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has led us to rely on screen-based audio-visual (i.e., cinematic) communication perhaps more than ever before in world history.

theologians to not only watch films as escapist distractions or for use as pedagogical illustrations (although there is much merit in such activities), but also as generative sites for theological inquiry, where questions about God, humanity, existence, and belief are explored and determined not through concepts, systems, and propositional statements, but experience, affect, and the moving image. As filmmaker and theologian Craig Detweiler aptly puts it, “Cinema is a *locus theologicus*, a place for divine revelation.”⁹² This does not mean that every film necessarily intends to theologize, and (like other mediums and cultural texts) some are more theologically rich than others. I am merely suggesting that theocinematics—a cinematic theology that takes film *qua* film seriously—is not only possible, but beneficial to our understanding of God. When theologians pay close attention to cinematic form and style, not only religious narrative content, it may engender fresh theological considerations and interpretations from ostensibly nonreligious movies. Again, we must consider not only *that* a cinematic parable subverts and transforms, but also *how* it subverts and transforms.

These cinematic parables all conclude with affecting ambiguous scenes inviting explanation and appropriation. Just as with Christ’s parables in the Gospels, audiences are provoked into active theological engagement, invited not just to observe, but to contemplate, feel, and apply the parable. In our contemporary political climate, we need such vibrant artworks able to evoke theological reflection and potential ethical action regarding the societal status of women and people of color (*A Separation*, *The Fits*) as well as refugees and immigrants (*The Other Side of Hope*). Ultimately, which parent should Termeh choose to live with? What might the mysterious fits signify, and what are their origins? What lies on “the other side of hope” for outcasts living in the margins? Where is God’s presence in these parabolic film-worlds, and thus in our everyday life-worlds? Despite their stylistic and cultural differences, these narrative-metaphors prompt such critical theological and ethical questions without becoming didactic or overtly religious. Indeed, such “secular” Ricoeurian parables open up the possibility of “faith for a postreligious age” through the fantastic of the everyday.⁹³

⁹² Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 42.

⁹³ Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 59.