"Wisdom in Film Viewing"

Prov 8:10-17: Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her. I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.

Job 38:1-3: Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me."

Ecc 1:13, 16-18**:** I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! [. . .] I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

I Cor 1:18-25: For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

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I. Practical Wisdom

Wisdom, in all its variations, invites us to find a fit between our behavior and the divine order of the world we live in. Christians believe that God constructed the world with Wisdom at his side and, therefore, that there is a continuum between our personal lives and that of creation. Certain behavior leads to success, and other behavior leads to failure. However, it is not quite so simple to say that we easily understand what success and failure add up to. Wisdom also teaches us what our limits are--what we do not understand, how blind we may be to God's true wisdom for our lives.

There is more than one kind of wisdom. The kind of wisdom praised by *Proverbs* is practical. It amounts to a skill in living, an insight into varying circumstances, and a certain shrewdness in dealing with a variety of personalities. This method of wisdom at its best is discipleship. More than the technical mastery of a few key insights, practical wisdom cultivates an internalized habit, a way of living in the world. Wisdom grows into a cultivated good-sense that sizes up situations. *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*, on the other hand, teach us that wisdom has a limited potential. It cannot solve everything. God may leave us with questions, or we may discover that what we thought was wisdom breaks apart before the circumstances. These aspects of wisdom, then, are more interrogative in nature.

Because of wisdom's practical side, some have suggested that the wisdom tradition of Ancient Israel is essentially secular. There is some truth to this suggestion because many of the proverbs of Israel share the same kinds of concerns that other ancient wisdom traditions share. *Proverbs*' God-inspired editor was quite willing to adapt several Egyptian proverbs (cf. Prov 22:17ff.) Like its other Near eastern counterparts, the later chapters of *Proverbs* mainly teach ethical maxims and day-to-day management of circumstances. Take, for example, the biblical portrait of the foolish and the wise. The fool is one who refuses apt words, who is lazy, and who is always undercutting others. The wise are those who speak fitting words, who care for others in the community, and who know how to avoid misunderstandings. These are observations that can be found in almost any culture. However, it would be a mistake to understand this wisdom as finally secular. Israel's wisdom ultimately begins in the fear of God and has its confirmation in the Torah. Even supposedly "secular" insights are recontextualized within the worship and service of God. This suggests a manner for us in approaching the limited wisdom of literature.

Practical wisdom is both inductive and deductive. It works by observing specific cases in life and applying general maxims to those circumstances, yet it also begins with a sense of divine revelation, for Yahweh has spoken to what is good and evil. Cinema, as a source of wisdom, can be evaluated from two complementary directions: 1) we can take an inductive approach that seeks to gather together principles for living from the films we watch, and 2) we can take a deductive approach that tests these examples by scripture. The human condition—from birth to death, in love and family, work and war, community and solitude, land and city—is the stuff of cinema, so while we never forget the perspectives and limitations of films, their directors, and their production crews, films nonetheless often effectively explore the way people respond to each other and the consequences of their good and bad choices.

In Leo McCarey's screwball comedy *The Awful Truth* (1937) most of the main characters transcend their stereotypes. A cynical "modern" couple indulging in marital dalliances almost casually end in divorce. But Jerry and Lucy grow beyond their initial distrust and disgust with each other to a rediscovery of their love. The final scene is worth the whole movie, for it is affine lesson I human psychology. Jerry and Lucy say more by what they do not say, and the ending, also has a subtle open-endedness. This is a movie that seems to be making fun of marriage only to end in seriously affirming it. McCarey's *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1937) offers similar lessons in human motivation and their consequences. This film has been closely studied for its emotional impact, for McCarey's way of keeping the right amount of distance to avoid the sentimental or melodramatic, yet keeping us close enough to the characters to feel their weaknesses and strengths, as well as to ask of us genuine empathy. There is humor, even on occasion irony, but never sarcasm or bitterness. The film centers around the dilemmas that adult children face in knowing what to do when their aging parents lose their home. The problem is that none of the children is willing to take in both parents, so the couple is divided between their children, across the country from each other. To me this is a powerfully moral movie, as well. It asks us to take seriously the honor due our parents against the temptation to treat them as impositions in their "golden" years. I appreciate McCarey's choice for the ending. We are not left to know if Bark and Lucy will finally be brought back together. We sense the injustice and the selfishness of their children, even if we can at points be partially sympathetic with their motives. In both films, we can learn from their characters' behavior about what makes humans tick; at the same time, to be truly wise, we must also test their behavior against scriptural standards and principles.

II. Interrogative Wisdom

This practice of practical wisdom can become rather reductive if we do not keep in mind, however, that wisdom also has an interrogative side. It asks questions to bring us to the end of our easy answers. We

run the risk of a kind of "wisdom" that treats literature as ethical material to evaluate but then dispose of, as if literature were simply content to master. The impulse to wisdom, if it is shorn from its foundation in God, can prize itself for *technique*, for the ability to manipulate situations and manage persons. The author of *Ecclesiastes* reminds us that such an approach is finally empty; it is but grasping wind. Our attempts at achieving success are vain, for the end of the matter is to fear God. There is much film that brings this theme home to us in varying ways. We end only too aware of our limits. Film is often wise when it raises questions without attempting to answer them perfectly. Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring* (1960), along with an exploration of a medieval miracle, is a fine study of the pride and revenge of a Nordic father and landowner. It explores the mixture of pagan and Christian faith in the Norse culture, and it also looks sensitively at how both can be invoked in self-serving ways. *Virgin Spring* explores this questioning side of wisdom, for with the death of his daughter the father cries out to God: ""You saw it. . . the death of an innocent child and my vengeance. . . I don't understand you. . . Yet I still ask forgiveness." There is no other way for him to live or make meaning of his world, so he vows to build a stone and mortar church on this very spot. Then comes the unexpected miracle—the spring comes forth where the dead daughter's head had lain. Ingeri the servant who had allowed the murder to happen washes her face and her guilt away in its waters, and the mother bathes the face of her dead child. We are left to infer its meaning, but how can it be anything less than healing?

Rene Clément's *Forbidden Games* (1952) offers similar questions that are left somewhat open at the end. A film based on its plot might seem a bit surreal or even pathetic, but in its performance, it reaches lyrical intensity and has an almost poetic power. The opening scene in World War II France with the loss of Paulette's parents and her dog to a plane strafing those trying to flee Paris is matter-of-fact and therefore all the more painful. The film is in many ways about the five-year-old's need to mourn and the older peasant boy Michel's attempt to help her with an animal cemetery built with stolen crosses from the nearby cemetery and from other places. The musical score of classical guitar music adds to the total mise-en-scene, giving it a rural feel. It is strange how Paulette, obviously having been raised secular, is given her first lessons in prayer, yet for her they become ways to try and deal with the loss and shock of death. The peasant family's doesn't even know its prayers, except for Michel. The realism in the film is part of its power; no one is treated heroically. "Here keep this for a hundred years," Michel tells the owl. The end with Paulette goes with the Red Cross nurses, but she is wandering through the train station calling out for Michel. It leaves open the question of what would have been wise in such a heart-breaking situation, and in the face of war and loss if we can truly know with any measure of certainty.

III. The Wisdom of Foolishness

The New Testament also reminds us that human wisdom, conceived of in yet another way, with all its pretensions, may end up seeing God's wisdom as foolishness. Human wisdom has its noetic blindness, after all. Erasmus suggested as much when he noted that those of the world and those of God each believe the other to be insane. To pour out your life on something other than the brightest, richest, and most powerful makes no sense to the person who does not believe in an eternal reward or the one who does not think bliss is possible with God. In some sense, then, human wisdom is also a matter of *control beliefs*, those essential assumptions that shape the rest of the way we see and understand existence. Not everyone will be able to see the wisdom in behavior that the majority of the culture defines as foolish, even irrational. Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) is a good example of this. While I can see why some might interpret this as simply a sentimental *Ordet* with less disturbing challenges and with gentler humor, I think the reading that many Christians have given the film as one of deep sacramentality is justified. The scriptural motif is "Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss (peace) shall kiss each other." The movie several times speaks of the deep regions of the heart

and how the heart should be received. The little sect's pledge not to say anything about the food and drink is silly rather than contemptible and leads to amusing moments, while the general's presence is essential to the effect of the whole dinner scene; he is able to put words to what they are all experiencing, and he functions as a foil to their silence. "That mercy is infinite . . . we need receive it with gratitude." This is a film also about ambition and how both Achille and the general learn the limits of their desires and the infinity of gift. Sound and sight are especially important when they are eating, and their near silence actually helps enhance these. Axel intersects shots of Babette hard at work—great effect. Once we learn that she has spent all her prize winnings on this one meal, we are struck with the bounty of her gift. But as she insists, she is not poor, for "an artist is never poor." In those last moments, Phillippa embraces her and applies Achille's words to Babette's art—that it, too, will bless the angels in heaven. Taken together these things can be seen as sentimental, funny, even contemptible by some audiences, but for followers of Jesus they resonant with something far more transcendent.

This can even be true in films not associated with Christianity. Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* (1939) is a film about the way Japanese culture refuses to tell the truth to someone rather than offend, which is a necessity for a young artist, Kikunosuke, trying to learn to truly act as a Kabuki artist. The background of acting is almost a commentary on these central issues. Under what conditions should one ignore familial and public opinion for a genuine relationship? "Society is important for actors. If you are popular, life is good. If not, not." Otoku the nursemaid is honest with Kikunosuke, who has to live up to his adopted father's reputation as a famous actor, but she is thrown out by the mother. Kikunosuke goes and finds her and must stand against his family to be with her. Mizoguchi doesn't overplay the family tension; he presents it in a somewhat distanced manner that Leo McCarey might admire. "Brother, I don't want my father's reflected glory," he insists. He is reunited with Otoku, but he has to go on the road for four years with an acting troupe, and it changes him toward her; he treats her with some level of contempt, though he still loves her. Yet she willingly sacrifices their relationship so that Kikunosuke can perform in Tokyo with his family again. It's quite powerful when the father finally acknowledges Otoku as Kikunosuke's wife. Kikunsoke and Otoku's bedside meeting and their final scenes are complete tearjerkers. The ending is overwhelming as he must continue on the river boat to bow to his fans even as she passes in their old upstairs room. All of this can be viewed and understood through a measure of Buddhist sadness at the impermanence and perishability of human conscious existence. At the same time as a Christian, much like my response of Kurosawa's *Red Beard*, I cannot help but see in her sacrifice a nobility of transcendent love and sacrifice. She is an example of longsuffering, selfless love in marriage, something that can be held in contempt by many moderns, for she operates from a position of weakness, rather than strength, and humility rather than empowerment. Her foolishness is wisdom.