

# **Revelation of God through Film: Theological Aesthetics and Beauty as Transcendental Applied to Films of Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev**

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God cannot be viewed and cannot be comprehended, but is there a possibility of God being revealed through a film? There are several ways used by the Church to represent God in worship: worship through singing or music, visual worship through icons, and participation in dramatic performance. In this study, the methodology of finding God in films is suggested and applied to some films. It is based on works on theological aesthetics by John Panteleimon Manoussakis and David Bentley Hart. The films of Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev are used as examples. One of the main ideas of this study is related to viewing God through Jesus as God who can be comprehended (in some way) and incorporating Christological reading of reality into film analysis. There is also a strong emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of film experience as theological aesthetic experience.

## **Keywords**

Aesthetic theology; beauty; God in film; interpersonal

## **Introduction**

The topic of addressing ways through which we might comprehend God is not new, yet new media forms raise new questions of how God can be comprehended. There are many ways that have been used by the Church to represent God in worship. We perform worship through singing or using musical accompaniment; visual worship by contemplating through icons, paintings, and statues; and worship through participation in dramatic performance. On the other hand, the relatively young field of film making is still in the process of finding its way into the Christian worship experience. Can it be integrated into our worship – if not in public, then at least personally? Can film be a place for the revelation of God?

## **Films, Beauty, and Transcendence**

The correlation of film studies and theology is not something completely new, as the dialogue has begun from the works (to mention a few) of André

Bazin with his sacramental dimension,<sup>1</sup> John May and his narrative approach,<sup>2</sup> and the transcendental approach of Paul Schrader.<sup>3</sup> Recently some scholars have used the works of Paul Tillich to approach film from a theological perspective.<sup>4</sup> John Lyden,<sup>5</sup> Robert K. Johnston,<sup>6</sup> Clive Marsh,<sup>7</sup> and Craig Detweiler<sup>8</sup> have also published books on the role of theology for the film, and of the film for theology (or religious experience), popularising and facilitating broader discussion about the role of film in the Church. Some authors like Elijah Lynn Davidson<sup>9</sup> and Josh Larsen<sup>10</sup> suggest that films may be incorporated in our prayer life and be considered as a spiritual exercise. This may seem to be the answer to the question raised by this study, but these books rather call for a critical dialogue with film and a topical connection of certain films to certain modes of prayer. This seems to be useful and enriching, yet it does not create a space for further theological engagement.

There is an old theological perspective that takes the transcendentals seriously and develops the theological discourse on them. Hans Urs von Balthasar revived the interest in transcendentals in the twentieth century and reinstated the importance of theological aesthetics and the study of beauty.<sup>11</sup> Recently two Orthodox theologians, John Panteleimon Manoussakis and David Bentley Hart, addressed the topic of theological aesthetics in their works and brought some Eastern perspective to the developing tradition of theological aesthetics in the West. Their input may be seen as a unique interpretation of theological aesthetics and may be enriched by applying some ideas to film studies. Manoussakis describes

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<sup>1</sup> André Bazin and Bert Cardullo, *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> John R. May, ed., *New Image of Religious Film, Communication, Culture & Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film: A Theoretical Account Grounded by Empirical Research into the Experiences of Filmgoers*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd edn, Rev. and expanded, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Elijah Lynn Davidson and Kutter Callaway, *How to Talk to a Movie: Movie-Watching as a Spiritual Exercise*, Reel Spirituality Monograph Series (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Josh Larsen, *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Fessio, and John Kenneth Riches, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco; New York: Ignatius Press; Crossroad Publications, 1983).

theological aesthetics in terms of interpersonal relations.<sup>12</sup> Hart sees theological aesthetics in the context of beauty (as transcendental) and understands it as an event.<sup>13</sup>

As I have already mentioned, there is quite a history of so-called transcendental cinema and transcendental style in film introduced by Paul Schrader.<sup>14</sup> Though his perspective is not the only one, it is interesting that one of the features of his approach is hiddenness of the transcendental in film and representation of reality with the intense givenness of an arbitrary experience. I have chosen to focus on Terrence Malick and Andrey Zvyagintsev because they are addressing the challenge of representing God through the intensity of the real in their movies and they produce their films with some kind of theological perspective.<sup>15</sup> It may even be suggested that many of the directors who can be defined by this approach try to portray the presence of God by his absence. Among those who have recently directed films that can be related to the transcendence approach, Andrey Zvyagintsev stands out. Zvyagintsev mentions in one of his lectures that he is eager to create mythic reality through his art, and for him myth is a true meaning of the world we live in.<sup>16</sup> He also thinks that we can communicate the transcendental only through a paradox and correlates myth and paradox.<sup>17</sup> Andrey does not address the question of transcendental beauty directly; in his opinion it is something he would describe as poetic. It is peculiar that in a similar way David Bentley Hart describes beauty: ‘the truth of being is ‘poetic’ before it is ‘rational’... Beauty is the beginning and end of all true knowledge.’<sup>18</sup>

Terrence Malick also addresses the presence of God through the distance in his films. Malick does not explain much concerning his latest films, but we can easily see that they relate directly to the comprehension of God through reality. In *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder*

<sup>12</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 45-46, 67-70.

<sup>13</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 283.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, pp. 40-44.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*, Routledge Studies in Religion and Film 8 (New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); Robert Sinnerbrink, *Terrence Malick: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, Philosophical Filmmakers (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); James Batcho, *Terrence Malick's Unseeing Cinema: Memory, Time and Audibility* (New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2018); Denys Kondyuk, ‘Sensing And Longing For God In Andrey Zvyagintsev’s The Return And Leviathan’, *Religions*, 7 (7) (2016), p. 82 < <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/7/7/82/htm> > [accessed 20 October 2019]

<sup>16</sup> *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andrey Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]* (Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2014), pp. 148-151.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

<sup>18</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 132.

(2012), he reveals God through prayerful communication of his characters, a kind of a worshipping testimony mixed with a narrative.<sup>19</sup> He does it in quite a different way than Lars von Trier in his *Breaking the Waves* (1996), not using self-talk, which stands for God, nor using theological inserts commented by a narrator (thus Trier rejects the tension and unity of the transcendent and the immanent and chooses totality of form and being over difference in unity).<sup>20</sup> Malick uses the beauty of creation and presents it also as the beauty of relations. His films concentrate on interpersonal relations, love, joy, drama, and the meaning of life. For him there is a possibility of depicting transcendence as interpersonal reality and as reality of movement and change in film form.

These two directors are worth noting, not only because they try to show God through film form (this has been done by many other filmmakers), but also because their film-art interestingly correlates with a theological aesthetics approach and works of Manoussakis and Hart. Malick depicts many paradoxes, inviting to participate in a direct life experience, and almost imposing this experience on the viewer. His film language is close to Manoussakis' idea of us being seen by others and the experience of being as an inter-subjective experience.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the whole puzzling Malick creates in his films corresponds to the idea of limited knowledge:

...the *recognition* of this very limit constitutes, at the same time, the highest point of our knowledge of God. In other words, in our falling short in knowing God, at the moment of reason's failure, knowledge is given. We get to know what we are looking for once we are forced to the painful and humbling realization of our inadequacy to know.<sup>22</sup>

This awareness does not seem to be alien in current film studies as Kathleen E. Urda emphasises some aspects of contemplation in the works of Terrence Malick, and believes that his films can invite the viewer to see reality as beauty and be an invitation to see God.<sup>23</sup> She also describes the possibility of knowledge as intuition and wonder, that are provoked by what one sees, connecting Malick's films to the suggested theological aesthetic approach.

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<sup>19</sup> Damon Linker, *Terrence Malick's moving Christian message — and film critics' failure to engage with it*, 26 April 2013 <<http://theweek.com/article/index/243353/terrence-malicks-moving-christian-message-mdash-and-film-critics-failure-to-engage-with-it>> [accessed 21 October 2019]

<sup>20</sup> Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema, Film Culture in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 109, 118-121, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen E. Urda, 'Eros and Contemplation: The Catholic Vision of Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder*', *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2016): 130-147, doi:10.1353/log.2016.0001.

Zvyagintsev, on the other hand, describes the encounter with God not in a direct way. Quite often, the character does not see God literally, being blind to something we as viewers can recognise – a representation of the transcendental. This could be seen in the actions and attitude of Ivan towards his father in *The Return* (2003) or Alex's relations with Vera in *The Banishment* (2007). Zvyagintsev also shows the inability to grasp and hold the divine: as we may observe in *The Return* (2003), sons could not keep the father's body, and there are no pictures of him in the end credits scene, except from their past before the trip (as if he were not there during the trip). They also needed a photo to recognise him at the beginning of the film. In a similar way Ivan calls his father 'daddy' only after his father's death. So, in losing the possibility to communicate with his father, Ivan discovers his father as 'father'. Zvyagintsev emphasises human inability to see God, yet he still shows his presence in all his stories through different signs or dialogues (and most often in retrospective). His films emphasise our inability to comprehend God: we can only have glimpses and moments of illumination that allow us to experience God in daily things. Zvyagintsev also teaches the importance of 'trustful' attitude and the role of compassion in his films. All of these characteristics of Zvyagintsev's films correspond to the definition of beauty and the transcendent experience by the aforementioned theologians.

Films combine some qualities of visual, some auditory, and are related to theatrical play and storytelling. Most theologians, however, address the aesthetics of painting or music but not film; for example, Manoussakis in his work *God after Metaphysics*.<sup>24</sup> Hart likes to use the example of polyphonic music to illustrate beauty.<sup>25</sup> But what approach could we use in relation to art that combines the static features of painting and dynamics of music, and goes beyond concentrating on a literature kind of storytelling? What could be said of an art form that builds heavily on visual narrative and uses different and multiple forms of communication? It seems that their theological suggestions have more in common with films than they may think.

## **Narrative, Visual, and Transcendental**

As I have already stated, all films have a narrative structure, even those that have non-conventional plots or unusual visual language. Yet theological aesthetics suggest that it is not topical narrative aspects that should be taken into account, but the nature of presented narrative and its form. There are

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<sup>24</sup> He describes three ways of experiencing transcendent: through sight, hearing, and touch (based on a metaphor of three paintings by Rubens and Brueghel).

<sup>25</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 282-285.

several qualities of beauty, according to David Bentley Hart, that help us to identify it when presented by the narrative:

1. the transcendent and beautiful precede our reaction, and we do not find them – they are revealed;
2. by manifestation of beauty, a distance to the transcendent is created (beauty shows that there is not enough means to present God, yet we comprehend that God was communicated);
3. it awakens desire for transcendental God (most prominent examples are in *The Tree of Life* and *The Return*);
4. it crosses boundaries of the transcendent and immanent (a common life story becomes God's story and vice versa);
5. it transcends rational comprehension (it evokes marvel, not description, which is mostly presented in Malick's films);
6. it presents generous and winning life through death and sacrifice (not dramatising its vulnerability, so beauty is not Christian sentimentality);
7. Theologically beautiful narratives lead to some kind of peaceful resolution; they always keep faith and hope (and justice).<sup>26</sup>

In Manoussakis the very important concept of his theological aesthetics (based on *God after Metaphysics*) is the concept of *prosopon* ('being-in-front-of-another' or, as he redefines it, 'being-in-relation'). This may also be seen as a key theological theme in his works (and corresponds to the personalised reality of Malick's films, where the experience of being is the experience of the Other and by the Other).<sup>27</sup> Manoussakis places all of our experiences in phenomenological *relatedness* and 'existence as relational infinity' of our being (as Zvyagintsev pushes us into relational collapse in his films, he also confesses the relational nature of being through his characters).<sup>28</sup> All these ideas may be grouped into several common vectors that may be used as lenses of a theological aesthetic approach to films (Malick's and Zvyagintsev's films in particular), and these are:

1. *hymnal* form (interpersonal and beyond cognitive communication of God);
2. reversed knowledge (which is also interpersonal knowledge of God);
3. difference in the Trinity and mediation of Christ (interpersonal mode of the trinitarian life communicated through Christ-likeness and experienced as the beauty of the infinite);
4. unexpected givenness of the transcendental experience of God;
5. awakening of the desire for God, by the experience of beauty (formative nature of the *theo-aesthetic* experience).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-28, 399-402, 436-438.

<sup>27</sup> Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 34, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

These rather general descriptions of Manoussakis' and Hart's projects may help us develop an approach that will lead to incorporation of the film experience into our worship. Let us see what can be seen through these theological lenses.

### 1. *Hymnal Form*

For Manoussakis music and hymn are things that cannot be conceptualised and differ from rhetoric and rational concepts, so they fit well the intention of turning to God and 'knowing' him by their means.<sup>29</sup> Hymn is an icon in a word form, a form that allows meeting the Other, so it is not just a song and not an informing performance.<sup>30</sup> Hymn is something in which we participate and, in the process of this participation, we discover both the other and ourselves. Hymn presents the *relatedness* that is so important for Manoussakis' theological aesthetics. The 'hymnal form' is what Malick used in his latest films, and, especially in *The Tree of Life* (2011), as much of its narrative is a conversation with God, we could even say it is a prayer. But it is not just a recording of a prayer, the meeting experience is expressed not only through a character's or narrator's voice, it is presented visually as much as audibly. It is also not descriptive, but representative. Similar communication and a search for the other/Other may be noted in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017). This form of a confession, prayer, search in a dialogue with the other/Other may define Malick's recent film-works almost as his personal directorial style. Thus, Malick's film language could be described as 'hymnal' (in the sense that Manoussakis uses it) or interpersonal and perceived as appropriate for depicting God. Mark S. M. Scott sees in the films of Terrence Malick application of the concept of beauty and theological aesthetics.<sup>31</sup> Scott also sees the importance of relationships and sacrificial love depicted in his films as ways of uncovering the beauty. But also, he sees the beauty in visual and cinematographic presentation of the story, through the light itself and created order that participates in the cinematic representation of the film-story.

But this interpersonal (beyond cognitive) effect is made not only by what is said in the film, but also by the way the narrative (both visual and audial) is presented (as a hymn is something open for participation). Hart's idea of beauty as that which invites us to experience itself and transcends rational comprehension corresponds to the hymn concept. The narrative invites us not only to observe what is happening; it asks with Jack's voice

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 101-102.

<sup>31</sup> Mark S. M. Scott, 'Light in the Darkness: The Problem of Evil in *The Thin Red Line*', in Barnett and Elliston, *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*., pp. 173-186 (pp. 180-181).

in *The Tree of Life* (2011), “How do you come to me? In what shape? In what disguise?” It invites to the search of God’s form in the film. Maybe it is because the whole universe, any situation, a flock of birds or a blow of wind could be seen as theophany, but of course interpersonal encounters are the most important. The citation from Job 38.4,7 at the beginning of *The Tree of Life* (2011) is a description of worship at the creation moment itself. It would be hard to dismiss it as a hermeneutical key to viewing this film. Therefore, if a narrative does not impose a single meaning on a viewer and does not pretend to speak from an objective perspective, it could be called a beautiful narrative, such that could represent God through created forms that invite a viewer to see and participate.

## 2. Reversed Personalised Knowledge

Manoussakis also states that we can know because we are known, and our experience is an answer to God’s call.<sup>32</sup> It corresponds well with *To the Wonder*, which ends with a confession by Marina: “Love that loves us... Thank you.” The whole movie leads to the understanding of the importance of God’s love as a source of any love and happiness.<sup>33</sup> Hart describes longing for beauty as an ‘existential wonder’, which ironically corresponds to the title of Malick’s last film.<sup>34</sup> This introduces another area of theological-aesthetic interpretation, namely openness of characters and the viewer to some kind of a sign of the transcendent as being loved and seen. Viewing of a film becomes a state of being viewed by the One who is supposed to be presented (in a similar way to perceiving an icon).<sup>35</sup>

Hart, following Gregory of Nyssa, sees this principle also in light of our understanding of the Trinity, as ‘We can become images of God because God is always already, in himself, Image.’<sup>36</sup> Our growth in self-discovery is ultimately connected to trinitarian love and interrelatedness, so by discovering God’s love to ourselves we discover both God and ourselves (as we are images of the Image). Thus, both Hart and Manoussakis see the knowledge of ourselves through the lenses of being known by God, and experiencing it in particularity of being and in wonder at the experience of being.

<sup>32</sup> Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 112-116.

<sup>33</sup> *Souls in Need: The Journey ‘To the Wonder’*, April 2014, <<http://www.bywayofbeauty.com/2013/04/souls-in-need-journey-to-wonder.html>> [accessed 18 July 2019] and W. Bradford Littlejohn, ‘*Show Us How to Seek You*’: *Discovering the Love of God in Terrence Malick’s ‘To The Wonder’*, October 2014, <<http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/show-us-how-to-seek-you-discovering-the-love-of-god-in-terrence-malicks-to-the-w-1.php>> [accessed 18 July 2019]

<sup>34</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, p. 283.

<sup>35</sup> Gerard Loughlin, ‘Within the Image: Film as Icon’, in Robert K. Johnston, ed., *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 287-303 (pp. 294-297, 300).

<sup>36</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), pp. 161-162.



In Zvyagintsev's *The Banishment* (2007) the inability of Alex to see signs is related to another inability to receive and experience love from Vera. This lovelessness as inability for interpersonal relations and a lack in deep connectedness is also important for understanding the most recent films *Leviathan* (2014) and *Loveless* (2017). The walls of inability to be loved and to love seem to play quite an important role in Zvyagintsev's films. Just as hymnal form defines Malick's style, Zvyagintsev's style is defined by the question of seeing the other/Other and being able to receive love and share love with others. The distrust of the other shown by Ivan in *The Return* (2003) is continually presented in Zvyagintsev's films as a cause of inability to meet God, or as a late understanding of the experience of the transcendental. In some way Zvyagintsev's films are films about the hermeneutics of loved/loveless. These films also present characters who are experiencing the crisis of their identity in different ways but deeply understanding the ethical and transcendental dimension of their struggle. So, experience of God in a film creates the space of mirroring our identity, but not only mirroring our own identity, but also challenging our perception of God and ourselves facing him. Zvyagintsev's films are also a good example of films that still present the possibility of experience being interpersonal (even though from a negative side of the presented experience).

### 3. Difference in the Trinity and Mediation of Christ

Following the idea of the trinitarian nature of true knowledge, Hart states that the true image of God reveals the difference and mediation that are present in the Trinity.<sup>37</sup> The beauty which represents God by analogically uniting the transcendent and the immanent resides in these trinitarian relations that are open for creation to join.

In his interview Zvyagintsev mentions that in *The Return* (2003) he was willing to build a model of relationships between God and man.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, for him God could be presented by visualising something common, yet corresponding to the transcendental truths (even the transcendental Being). It is thought-provoking that most parables Jesus uses to illustrate the Kingdom of God are based on common experience available to everybody, but presenting a transcendental dimension to these usual things and situations. This deification of the common comes from the particularity and uniqueness of Christ and his life event in history. This brings us to the idea that, in one way or another, these stories relate to Christ and his mediation role and to understanding that 'Christ is the

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<sup>37</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 208.

<sup>38</sup> *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andrey Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]*, p. 137.

measure of all beauty.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, all kinds of film presentations that show Christ-like figures could be described as a form of beauty in theological terms.<sup>40</sup> Beauty, in Hart's perspective, is an event and it is woven into relationships, in facing the Other.<sup>41</sup> Manoussakis states that the unseen God can be 'seen' through his effects, so we can see God not only in figures that could be associated with Christ but also in Christ-like relations.<sup>42</sup> Relations reveal beauty and only through them Christ-like figures can be identified.

Yet it has to be clarified that a Christ-like figure could have nothing in common with the historical Jesus, moreover it could be a completely fictional character. What makes a figure Christ-like is the trinitarian interrelatedness in the gift of love and the presence of the transcendent in our common created being. This openness of God in love to creation may be experienced in the Christ-like acts that may be presented and used in films. The father in *The Return* (2003) seems to be a Christ-like figure, and his association with a picture of the dead Christ from Andrea Mantegna's painting stresses that from the beginning. Ivan and Andrey show a different attitude of faith/disbelief, and by following their stories we learn that Andrey grows in maturity and Ivan discovers 'faith'.<sup>43</sup> The father dies for Ivan, so Ivan could meet the father truly in his act of sacrifice and discover his love. It is not an accident that the film starts with an empty drowned boat and ends with this boat drowning with the father's body. In *To the Wonder* (2012) father Quintana overcomes his depression and inability to love others by submitting himself to Christ who loves him and rediscovers God's love in himself. The same kind of transformation may be seen in Neil in his attitude towards Marina (also in *To the Wonder*).

The narrative that presents beauty is the one that allows interpersonal relations, which could reveal relations that are beautiful (seen in light of transcendental beauty) and point to God. In this respect, Malick's depiction of Jack's mother and brother and their relationships in *The Tree of Life* (2011) could be a good example of these beautiful and thus Christ-like relations. The same could be said of Marina and Neil and father Quintana in *To the Wonder*. In Zvyagintsev's films these Christ-like roles are played by Andrey in *The Return* (2003) and by Robert in *The Banishment* (2007) (there are less definitive features of Christ-like characters in his later films).

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<sup>39</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 320.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-340.

<sup>41</sup> Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> *Dyckhaniye kamnia. Mir filmov Andrey Zviagintseva. [A stone breath. The world of Andrey Zvyagintsev's films.]*, pp. 137-138.

#### 4. The Sudden Unexpected Experience of the Transcendental

The difference of being, gratuity of existence, and also experience of the gift of being are important for Hart's understanding of beauty (as transcendental) and wonder (as the experience of the transcendental).<sup>44</sup> Hart points to the fact that experience of beauty calls out our responsibility, and in wonder we cannot escape the ethical and epistemological decision concerning the difference of the other:

It is beauty and wonder that bring intention up short and prevent it from traversing the distance of being in indifference; beauty – the sudden splendor of otherness – forbids both absorption in oneself and the "infiniteist" orientation of an ethical titan. What startles and provokes is glory, in which one finds a coincidence of strangeness and recognition.<sup>45</sup>

This point is vital in Manoussakis' concept of *exaiphnes* (a kind of sudden awakening) too, describing the moment at which one suddenly finds oneself in relationships and being defined by them.<sup>46</sup> *Exaiphnes* also describes a temporal experience of reality, when suddenly one sees through it as if it was transparent for eternity to be present in temporality, God as the wholly Other to appear and for transcendental to be experienced in the immanent.<sup>47</sup>

These experiences of unexpected enlightenment to the personal nature of reality and to the transcendent that may be experienced here and now are particularly important for Malick's filmic narration. As discussed earlier, Malick creates space for contemplation of reality itself in his films. Some critics say that the light is a character in his films, too, and it enlightens characters in different scenes (for instance, Marina in *To the Wonder* (2012) is literally enlightened in the final shot).<sup>48</sup> The same is seen in the experience of 'a spark' that Private Witt and First Sergeant Welsh discuss in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), as they share their perspective on God and love. We may recollect Witt's experience of joy before his death as we can see light and local kids playing (that sends us to the beginning of the film and his peaceful experience in the local village). So, characters in Malick's films like Jack in *The Tree of Life* (2011) suddenly realise their standing in front of the other, which often co-represents God.

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<sup>44</sup> Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>45</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, 'Toward a Fourth Reduction?', in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. ed. by John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham Press, 2006), pp. 21–33 (pp. 27-28).

<sup>47</sup> Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics*, pp. 49, 64-70.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Kerstein, *The Beautiful Light: A contemplation of Terrence Malick*, December 19, 2013, <<https://thefederalist.com/2013/12/19/beautiful-light-contemplation-terrence-malick/>> [accessed 27 July 2019]

Most often this happens in retrospective realisation that he was already there all the time, but only now are we struck by the ethical challenge of this meeting. This may be seen in Ivan's confession of his father after the fact of the father's death in Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003). Suddenly Ivan sees his father as 'daddy', experiencing the wonder of his love and discovering the interpersonal nature of the experience he had, but was not able to process. The understanding that characters have encountered something transcendental comes after the encounter itself. That is why Elena from *Elena* (2011) is scared of God's punishment, seeing a dying horse rider and the lights turned off at her children's home. In a paradoxical way, she 'sees' God after turning away from him.<sup>49</sup> Alex in *The Banishment* (2007) understands what has been happening and a possible 'miracle' of a child that was expected only after reading Vera's letter that Robert gives him at the end of the film. By the time of his enlightenment and some kind of repentance Vera, his unborn child, and Mark are dead.

*Exaiphnes* helps to identify the moments of otherness, when one can see God and his beauty in common things, and some films are leading the viewer to this very experience of being enlightened by God's filmic presence.

## 5. Desire Awakened

As one experiences the enlightenment to the transparency of the created to the transcendent, the desire is awakened. This awakening of a desire is one of the major qualities of the experience of beauty outlined by Hart.<sup>50</sup> After realisation of the interpersonal particularity of our experience of reality and having an *exaiphnes* moment, one is awakened to the experience of the transcendent. It may be said that this experience requires reaction and, even if one tries to ignore its effects, one will still be attracted to the experience of the infinite. This desire becomes the openness for another experience of beauty and another *exaiphnes*, and thus it becomes a hermeneutical key for film experience and experience of the transcendent (mostly of God) in film.

From Malick's films it is most prominently presented in *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017). In *Knight of Cups* (2015) citation from Plato (*Phaedrus*) reminds us that the beauty of people and things we see awakens a desire for heavenly beauty, so our desire is longing beyond what we think we desire. And that seems to be the way the main character Rick is moving as the film progresses. In one scene, a fortune teller shows some Tarot cards with the Knight of Cups and the Sun cards clearly seen

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<sup>49</sup> Andrey Zvyagintsev et al., *Elena: The Making of Andrey Zvyagintsev's Film* (London: Cygnnet, 2014), pp. 56, 92, 101, 121.

<sup>50</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, pp. 17, 19-20.

and tells Rick he is moving along the edge of a cliff (the Sun does not have its own chapter but it does appear in the film, introducing the fashion model Helen, who refuses to have a romantic relationship with Rick, making her special). Helen is introduced in the storyline as an embodiment of beauty and she tells him that he has to wake up to “someone else we get to get to”. There is the original search in Rick, but it is rekindled with his meeting with Helen. In a similar manner, in *Song to Song* (2017) mutual attraction of BV and Faye awakens a desire for true life in both of them. Their search for popularity and success is transformed by the experience of the other, and overturns their original direction of desires and goals in life.

In Zvyagintsev’s films we mostly see the rejection of this experience and thus ‘circular’ movement of his characters who are most often directed in a loop of their untransformed desires. Redirection and openness may be seen in *The Return* (2003), *The Banishment* (2007) and partially in *Elena* (2011) (where the only character that is transformed is Katerina), as their characters discover the different mode of being after experiencing the beauty and the transcendent. But most recent films show the existential loop and blindness to the experience of beauty, which we can see in *Elena* (2011), *Leviathan* (2014), and *Loveless* (2017), where characters try to change their environment or social status but seem to go nowhere or get even worse by losing the opportunity to experience the infinite.

Thus, the films mentioned above create a model and represent an event which may provoke a search for God’s beauty. Even ‘negative’ presentations of experience of beauty and the transcendent may be seen as a ground for the viewer’s experience of God.

## **Conclusion: Towards the Iconic Cinematography**

Before coming to a conclusion about the potential of theological aesthetics to bring us close to film experience as worship, we need to take note of another dimension of the film experience. This dimension is a problem of interpretation of our experience of film watching. It is obvious that the interpreter of film experience is a part of the interpretation process and thus his/her attitude defines the result of the interpretive outcome. Vivian Sobchack shows that film experience gets beyond filmmaker intentions, as it is personalised by an individual viewer and incorporated in that personal dimension of experience, but it is also a shared sphere in which we all can participate, thus a social experience and a mutual act.<sup>51</sup> She also places the viewer into an active position of film viewing: ‘The viewer, therefore,

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<sup>51</sup> Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 9.

shares cinematic space with the film but must also negotiate it, contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance.’<sup>52</sup> Sobchack’s idea thus seems to propose that a viewer is a co-creator of meaning and film experience, and there is some intentional part to the experience of film and experience of the transcendent in it. In order to see beauty, one must love, and to be able to love, one must be open to be loved. And, according to theologies analysed above, this happens in our experience of God (or at least in openness to this experience). Therefore, the interpreter should admit his passive position and the possibility of unexpected relations in approaching the vision of God. Hart, corresponding to the thought of Jean-Luc Marion, states, ‘Love is necessary first, before beauty can be seen, for love is that essential ‘mood’ that intends the world as beauty and can so receive it.’<sup>53</sup>

We can also see that films model the attitude of a viewer and invite a viewer into the interpretive dialogue with openness to the experience of being. Hart states that things of the senses could not distract our attention from God, rather the viewer is shortsighted, and that ‘to come to see the world as beauty is the moral education of desire, the redemption of vision’.<sup>54</sup> That means that a viewer should come to the act of viewing not as to an object to be analysed, but to a conversation or to a some kind of a revelation. Thus, the first thing in interpreting is the proper attitude towards ‘the object’ and intentional confession of the inter-subjective nature of this interpretation. Following the theological vectors of: *hymnal* form; reversed knowledge; difference in the Trinity and mediation of Christ; unexpected givenness of the transcendental experience of God; awakening of the desire for God, by the experience of beauty, we may conclude that film watching may be seen as formative theological experience. It seems also that love and hunger for God create the basis for film experience that transforms a viewer. Seeing the world and films in love means assuming that they could be a part of God’s initiative of self-revelation. Of course, it would be best if a director intended to present the transcendent, but it does not have to be so. As we have already noted, the beauty of the transcendent is revealed in relations. Christ is the embodiment of the Father’s love, so in order for films to present a transcendental God, they have to present trinitarian love in one way or another. There should be some Christ-likeness. Paradoxically it could be seen in the need for or in the depiction of absence of love (but it should lead to God in the end to be beautiful and Zvyagintsev succeeds in presenting this aspect of beauty in his films).

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, p. 240.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

Sometimes God is revealed in a combination of different art forms that create some kind of a movement and dynamics of relations within a film; for instance, the use of paintings, music, or other films in order to enrich and broaden the meaning of the narrative and make it multilayered. This also relates to the beauty as crossing borders and creating events of God's transcendental glory.

Finally, there is a parallel between the experience of a film and an icon experience, because in both cases we may be in a passive role of being in front of the other, being 'seen' rather than coming to view 'the other' with our own premises and expectations. It is rather the experience of invitation for meeting and of contemplation.

Therefore, can we answer the main question: is there a possibility of God being revealed through films? The answer that theological aesthetics offers is 'yes', but we have to remember that the nature of this communication is dynamic. We should also remember that this communication is possible through beauty, which is related to Christ and trinitarian relations and also cannot be totally rationalised and categorised. We could, rather, describe the premises that allow this communication and even an act of worship. Therefore, these premises could be the following:

1. recognising the limits of any attempt to present God, but confessing positive apprehension of reality (admitting that it is still possible through films);
2. accepting the givenness and iconicity of the filmic experience of God (to be seen in order to see);
3. prioritising participative communal nature of film experience over an individual cognitive analysis of this experience;
4. taking the experience of God as a discovery (that there will be always an existential challenge for openness of a viewer to 'see' and 'receive' this through a film);
5. relational/trinitarian nature of Christ-likeness, both in film and life (valuing difference that allows a communal experience of the gift of love);
6. admitting that a true depiction of God fills a viewer with yearning, willingness to prolong that experience (forms a hunger for God and is a never-ending process).

The final note is that beauty and experience of God are not violent; they leave space for our reaction, or no reaction at all, which means that they may be neglected. There is always a possibility that God may be not seen by the viewer, even though the viewer is seen by God.

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