



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Belief in Film

**Citation for published version:**

Sorfa, D 2018, 'Belief in Film: A Defence of False Emotion and Brother Sun, Sister Moon' Film and Philosophy, vol. 22, pp. 36-57.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Film and Philosophy

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **Belief in Film: A Defense of False Emotion and *Brother Sun, Sister Moon***

In one of his few pronouncements on the subject, Jacques Derrida addresses the issue of belief in cinema by saying that, “There is an altogether singular mode of believing in cinema: a century ago, an unprecedented experience of belief was invented [...]. At the movies, you believe without believing, but this believing without believing remains a believing” (Derrida 2001, 27). In what follows, I explore this tantalising definition of cinematic belief as a belief without belief by briefly considering the way in which film theory and film-philosophy have engaged with the question of belief in cinema. I also take into account Simon Critchley’s discussion of religious belief in *The Faith of the Faithless* (2012) within the context of anthropological studies of religion such as that by Émile Durkheim. In addition, I discuss Sigmund Freud’s 1927 reflection on religion in “The Future of an Illusion”. I then show that this line of thought can be linked to the philosophical discussion around the so-called paradox of fiction and introduce the idea that belief can be understood itself as an emotion or mood. I argue in favour of the solution to the paradox that claims that emotions experienced in response to fictional entities are quasi-emotions but radicalise this claim by showing that this must imply that all emotions are in fact structured like quasi-emotions and that we do not require an essentialist understanding of emotion in the first place. Throughout I use the example of the various cinematic representations of the life of St Francis to flesh out the argument, including Roberto Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio / Francesco, God’s Jester / The Flowers of St Francis* (1950) but particularly Franco Zeffirelli’s much maligned *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972).

### **Zeffirelli Rediscovered God**

Franco Zeffirelli (b. 1923) began his career in the arts with an interest in theatre and particularly opera, but also worked extensively in his youth with

the Italian filmmakers associated with Italian neo-realism, especially Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti. In 1957, he was given the opportunity to direct a film called *Camping*, “about the adventures of two young lovers on motorcycles” (Zeffirelli 1986, 140), and, as with many of his future films, this proved popular with audiences but was damned by critics. Following a near ten year hiatus, Zeffirelli became an international sensation with his two Shakespeare adaptations, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). The former, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, was a particularly popular success (Zeffirelli, 224), as was *Romeo and Juliet*, which was nominated for a number of Oscars in 1969, including for best film and best director.

However, Zeffirelli was involved in a serious car crash on 17 January 1969 (Zeffirelli, 232) which precluded him from helping with the promotion of the film which, according to him, resulted in *Romeo and Juliet* only winning awards for costumes and cinematography at the Academy Awards. In his eyes, this “was a setback, as that year had really established me as an international film director” (Zeffirelli, 240). Nevertheless, Paramount, which had distributed the film in the United States, were happy to offer him an “excellent five-year film contract” (Zeffirelli, 240) which allowed him to propose filming a life of the medieval Catholic saint, Francis of Assisi (b. 1182 - d. 1226).

While it is clear that Zeffirelli’s turn to such an overt religious subject was in part due to his personal experience of a near-fatal accident and encroaching middle-age (cf. Zeffirelli, 246), he was nevertheless very aware of the political echoes of the story of a rich young man who decides to cast off his material possessions and live a simple life close to nature. Zeffirelli explains:

The tale was simple enough, though clearly the emphasis would be on its contemporary relevance. St Francis was a holy revolutionary: his concept of a non-violent, pacific reversal of the greed and laziness that he felt had crept into the church and indeed the world of his day was obviously akin to the spirit of the 1960s. If peace and love was the slogan of the decade then here was a

story to match it. (Zeffirelli, 240-241)

*Brother Sun, Sister Moon* takes its title from the single piece of extant writing attributed to Francis, his “Canticle of the Sun” written in Umbrian dialect rather than the more usual Latin (see Robert Steele’s translation in “The Mirror of Perfection” 1910, 294-295), in which Francis famously praises God for the elements of the natural world:

Be Thou praised, my Lord, with all Thy  
creatures, above all Brother Sun,  
who gives the day and lightens us therewith.

[...]

Be Thou praised, my Lord, of Sister Moon and the stars, in the heaven has  
Thou formed them, clear and precious and comely.

Zeffirelli’s reversion to a fairly direct experience of faith (“If, before, I had often considered that the role of destiny was important in my life, now I began to reinterpret this as providence, *as if* there was a guiding hand directing my decisions” [Zeffirelli 1986, 246: my emphasis] was couched within a quaint Catholic hypocrisy. Zeffirelli saw his homosexuality (unacknowledged as yet in his 1986 autobiography) as an unequivocal sin: “My private life is what it is, but my religious convictions are unwavering. I believe totally in the teachings of the Church and this means admitting that my way of life is sinful.” (Zeffirelli 1986, 241)

The director therefore absolutely believes, but still acts in a way contrary to the apparent implications of that belief. Zeffirelli draws comfort from the consideration that, according to Catholic doctrine, such “sins of the flesh” are not “mortal sins” (241), and are therefore subject to forgiveness via confession. Such theological sophistry is gently humorous in Zeffirelli’s account,<sup>t</sup> but it is important that the rediscovery of his religious faith is couched in emotional terms, rather than expressed through doctrinal adherence. We might say that Zeffirelli rediscovers belief, rather than religion. Belief, then, is an experience

in and of itself and, following his car crash, Zeffirelli finds belief, not God. This particular structure of thinking about belief can be found in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*.

### ***Brother Sun, Sister Moon***

Taking seriously the insight that the story of St Francis reflected in some way the *zeitgeist* of the late 1960s, Zeffirelli first approached the Beatles to appear as monks in the film, and in his typically insouciant name-dropping style, explains:

I suppose at a human level I found Ringo the most open and friendly, but I soon saw that to get anywhere you had first to convince Paul of an idea, and then get John to deal with the practical problems. I managed eventually to get that far, but as soon as John and I began to work out a schedule, it was instantly clear how impossible the whole thing was. (Zeffirelli 1986, 241)

Before eventually settling on unknowns Judi Bowker and Graham Faulkner for the roles of Clare and Francis, Zeffirelli considered Al Pacino (who apparently passed on the screen test to Francis Ford Coppola for *The Godfather*) and Isabella Rossellini, and this imaginary film, including the Beatles, must surely be one of the great never-realised projects in cinema history. Nevertheless, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* presents an emotionally innocent, if not naive, experience; that, according to Zeffirelli, was one of the reasons that the film was so derided critically outside of Italy:

As 1971 began and the film took shape, I started to have niggling doubts about what would become of it. Watching the various scenes cut together, I realised just how much the film was rooted in the 1960s, yet now that the 1970s were unfolding it was clear that a massive change had taken place. Young people were no longer espousing peace and love; they were out on the streets protesting against the Vietnam War, throwing bricks, burning draft cards and fighting with the police. Since the events in Paris in 1968 a creeping mood of anger and violence had spread through the major cities. *Brother Sun* began to look almost naïve in the face of such cynicism. (Zeffirelli 1986, 256-257)

The film opened in New York in 1972 and was met with “mocking

laughter at the idea of love and gentleness” (265) while its Easter 1973 release in London was “greeted with no more enthusiasm, though with less derision” (266). While critically disastrous, the film has gone on to become a perennial success, especially with religious believers (267).<sup>1</sup> Zeffirelli’s unabashed sentimentality has often been criticised but he is astute in recognizing the contradiction between popular acceptance and political savaging. Speaking of the “sentimental horror,” *The Champ* (1979), Zeffirelli complained: “Once again I was confronted by the ludicrous contradiction that the radical tradition ought to be a popular one and yet, if one tries to create a work for the mass audience which honestly appeals to their best instincts, the Leftists, of all people, can’t resist the temptation to be snobbish about such a work”. (Zeffirelli 1986, 308)

It is this appeal to the emotional that Zeffirelli sees at the core of cinema itself. He writes early on in his memoirs, “I am still very vulnerable to cinema; even today I laugh and cry openly and believe quite passionately in what is taking place on screen” (Zeffirelli 1986, 15: my emphasis). The cinema is a place of belief, and that belief is a passionate emotional experience. *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* is a film that celebrates emotion, and is unabashed in wearing this sentimentality on its sleeve.

### **The Life of St Francis in Cinema**

The biography of Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone (commonly known as Francesco, and later as St Francis of Assisi) is particularly well served by three relatively contemporary biographical accounts. *The Life of St Francis*, written in support of Francis’s beatification thirty-four years after his death by St Bonaventure (himself canonised a few hundred years later), was published in 1260 and is a fairly straightforward account of the life and miracles of Francis. *The Little Flowers* (Fioretti) and *Mirror of Perfection* are collections of vignettes originally written in Latin during or shortly after Francis’s life but only translated into Italian and published in the 1300s.

While *The Life* is a fairly dry ecclesiastical account, the *Fioretti* and *Mirror* read more like folk tales. As Okey puts it, “The Life by St. Bonaventura is the *Vita at Miracula* of a conventional hagiographer, and the real St. Francis shines but dimly through its ornate periods; but the *Fioretti* and the *Speculum*, later in date though they be, are based on the ingenuous records, written and oral, of the saint’s intimate, faithful, and steadfast followers” (Okey et al. 1911, xx).

Born in 1182 in the Italian region of Umbria, not far north of Rome, Francis was brought up in a wealthy home supported by his father’s dye works. In 1202, Francis joined the conflict with the neighbouring district of Perugia, and was held captive for a year before returning to Assisi. Between 1204 and 1209 he was taken ill, and during a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis, “at prayer before the crucifix at St. Damian’s, the mysterious voices called him, like St. Augustine of old, to the service of a Lord and ideals far removed from those with which the troubadours of Provence had fired the minds of the youth of Italy” (Okey et al. 1911, viii). Francis then denounced his worldly privileges and left to restore “the forsaken little Benedictine oratory of St. Mary of Porziuncula (the Little Portion)” (Okey et al., viii), even now visible from Assisi itself (although cloaked by the Renaissance Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels). Francis was quickly joined by a group of friars and also inspired his childhood friend, Chiara Offreduccio, to form the Poor Clares, a Franciscan order of nuns. In later life, Francis gave up his official duties within the Order, retired as a virtual hermit and was apparently afflicted or blessed with the physical stigmata of Christ. He died at the age of forty-four in 1226. This later period of his life is not covered in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* since Zeffirelli saw the later Francis as “a rather tortured mystic, uncompromising and tetchy” (Zeffirelli 1986, 255), the portrayal of which would have altered the tone of the film.

Francis has been frequently portrayed in cinema since the silent era,

including *Il Poverello d'Assisi* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1911), *Frate sole* (Ugo Falena and Mario Corsi, 1918) and *Frate Francesco* (Giulio Antamoro, 1927). In 1950, following the successes, of *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città apart*, 1945), *Paisá* (1946) and *Stromboli, Land of God* (*Stromboli, terra di Dio*, 1949), among others, Roberto Rossellini directed *Francis, God's Jester* (*The Little Flowers of St Francis; Francesco, giullare di Dio*). The film, as its American title suggests, is based on the various escapades of the early Franciscan monks at the Porziuncula before they disperse to preach to the rest of the world.

Rossellini concentrates more on the life of one of brothers, Juniper (*Ginepro*), who has a section of the original *Fioretti* dedicated to him. Juniper is somewhat of an idiot savant, who plays the role of the simply unquestioning follower of Francis and his teachings. The subject was an odd choice for Rossellini at the height of his fame, but, as Peter Brunette explains: “postwar Europe was rapidly losing the spiritual values that had brought it through the terrors of war, and it is his urge to resuscitate this lost faith that accounts for the strong religious strain of the films of this period” (Brunette 1987, 96).

Crucially, for the argument developed in this article, Brunette says that, “for Rossellini the mere existence of faith is finally more important than its object” (Brunette, 96). Thus Rossellini “unashamedly offers Saint Francis and his philosophy as answers, as a way back to an essential wholeness” (Brunette, 131), and this wholeness is one predicated on faith, but not on belief in a specific theological doctrine. This faith, as we will see in our discussion of Crichtley, is really a faith in the possibility of a future, rather than in any sort of divinity.<sup>2</sup>

Hollywood has only come calling once on this revered Saint. Michael Curtiz, of *Casablanca* (1942) fame, directed *Francis of Assisi* in 1961, a rather theatrically bland production. The Italian director Liliana Cavani, an



avowed atheist, has produced three filmed versions of St Francis over a span of fifty years. In 1966, she directed *Francesco di Assisi* for RAI Radiotelevisione which followed Rossellini's sparse black and white style in *Jester*, although Cavani's framing is more stylised, and gives a Marxist spin to the story as Francis radicalises the poor. After her most well known film outside of Italy, *The Night Porter* (1974), Cavani, somewhat incredibly, returned to Francis in 1989 with *Francesco* starring Mickey Rourke as the titular saint and Helena Bonham-Carter as Clare. Moving on from this unmitigated disaster, Cavani has made a further version of *Francesco* (2014), inspired by the election of Ramón José Castellano to the papacy in 2013 and his adoption of the title Pope Francis. A recent French, Belgian and Italian production, *The Dream of Francis (Il sogno di Francesco)*, Renaud Fely and Arnaud Louvet, (2016) follows the life of Elias of Cortona, the friar chosen by Francis to administer the Order in his stead on his retirement.

However, my main interest here is Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, which is by far the most sentimental of the St Francis films. As discussed above, it is this very sentimentality that Zeffirelli sees as contributing to the film's critical failure, since it was no longer in tune with the cynicism of the 1970s. Perhaps most obviously, Donovan's faux medieval and "hideously sickly" (Milne 1973, 76) songs, with their literal lyrics sung in an affected, mournful tone, make too overt a call to emotional reaction. The film's images are almost parodic in their evocation of natural beauty, and, in particular, Clare's backlighting (Fig. 1) is difficult to take seriously. Such overdetermined signification seems to call for ironic laughter.

This problem of taste and reaction is difficult to police, but an audience could, and perhaps should, react to the film on that film's own terms. We should try to eradicate the ironic distance that would make us think of 1970s shampoo adverts; rather, we should understand and experience these images

as if they were being offered to us in good faith. Clare is beautiful, and nature is wonderful and it is, as Donovan sings, a “lovely day”. The film asks us to believe in its sentimental depiction of the world, and if we are able to react with the proper emotional force, then, and only then, will we experience the film fully, and feel the belief that is the core emotion of the religious world depicted in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*.

Sequences throughout the film ask audiences to believe in the unbelievable. Francis is both beautiful and good. Animals trust him, as do humans. The Umbrian countryside is gorgeous, in a way that seems impossible. The film gives us an awe inspiring vision of the world of medieval Italy, and only if the spectator succumbs to this emotional blackmail can one truly experience the film *as a film*. We still know that this is a fiction (and a quite implausible one at that), but, nevertheless, we can experience the emotion of believing that such a world is possible. This is what I call false emotion, or quasi-emotion, without any negative connotations. Just because my emotion is “false” does not mean that I do not truly experience it. This is the paradox of fiction.

### **The Paradox of Fiction**

Cinema is often discussed in terms of its emotional effects. Because of the (supposed) close analogy between film and the structure of consciousness, it is considered to be a privileged medium, uniquely able to elicit emotions (Plantinga 2009, 48-49). I wish to remain agnostic about privileging cinema over other fictional forms in this regard. Theorists and philosophers interested in literature or music make equally strong claims for their chosen media (see for instance, Hogan 2011; Juslin and Sloboda 2010), and it seems clear to me that issues of taste and happenstance have a large part to play in such contentions.

In addition, I stress the fictional aspect of narrative cinema because I wish to sidestep the issue of the indexical relationship, in C.S. Peirce’s sense,

between film's recording capacity and the real world.<sup>3</sup> While there may be an argument to be made about the way in which the perceived prior existence, in the real world, of certain objects or actions in the filmed world has an impact on the emotional reaction of viewers.<sup>4</sup> Such an investigation would have to make use of empirical experimentation and explanation<sup>5</sup> in order to move beyond psychological guesswork. Nevertheless, let us assume that when we watch a good<sup>6</sup> fiction feature film we experience something that we would probably call an emotional response. This fairly common-sense observation is the subject of the so-called "paradox of fiction" which was first formulated by Colin Radford in his 1975 discussion, "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?".

Radford argues that in order to empathize when we perceive another person's joy or distress, we have to believe that the circumstances affecting that person are real. Radford explains: "It would seem then that I can only be moved by someone's plight if I believe that something terrible has happened to him. If I do not believe that he has not and is not suffering or whatever, I cannot grieve or be moved to tears" (Radford 1975, 68). While it is unsurprising that we are moved by depictions of real events (such as wars, and other historical occurrences), Radford worries about our (apparently) emotional reactions to fictional characters, while nevertheless acknowledging that we do indeed seem to react emotionally to such fictions.

When I watch *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and experience the emotion of Francesco's grandiose renunciation of his personal belongings in front of the Bishop, his parents and the whole town as if it were my own, what exactly is happening? Radford would not deny that I feel something, perhaps something like belief or faith, as the naked Francesco stands in the archway of the town looking out over the Umbrian countryside and stretching out in a homoerotic Christ pose. But he is right that I might feel embarrassed at reacting in such a way to an obviously calculated and overdetermined

cinematic manipulation (it is a sign of Radford's times that he quite easily calls such sentimental reactions "unmanly" [70]). Radford accepts that such emotions do occur in reaction to fictional narratives, and offers six possible solutions for his paradox.

In his first solution, Radford imagines that we might simply forget that we are watching a fiction, and dismisses this as infantile. In the second, we "suspend our disbelief" (Radford, 71), but he finds that such suspension would never be sufficiently total to be of help. Thirdly, he considers the possibility that such responses may be a "brute fact of human nature" (Radford, 72) but that others, who do not enjoy fictions, are not moved in such ways. He denies that this is not a universal experience, since everyone reacts to lies or other misapprehensions.

In the fourth solution, we call up possibilities in our mind and react emotionally to these imaginings, but this is too close to original problem. Developing this somewhat, Radford then suggests that perhaps we react to a fictional character by imagining or remembering similar situations that have befallen real people. This seems unlikely since, perhaps tautologically, "when we weep for Anna Karenina [...], we] weep for *her*" (Radford, 75).

In his sixth and final solution, Radford says that,

being moved when reading a novel or watching a play is not exactly like being moved by what one believes happens in real life and, indeed, it is very different. So there are two sorts of being moved and, perhaps, two senses of 'being moved'. There is being moved (Sense 1) in real life and 'being moved' (Sense 2) by what happens to fictional characters. (Radford, 75)

We thus then have *emotions* (S.1), those responses to events that we believe and know to be real, and *quasi-emotions* (S.2), those feelings we have when we react to situations that we know are fictional. S.1 emotions may have a quality of intensity that distinguishes them from S.2 quasi-emotions, since "our response to [a] real death is likely to be more massive, more intense and longer in duration" (Radford, 77). Thus, finally, we see that there is a

“necessary presence of belief in the one case and its puzzling absence in the other” (Radford, 77), since I need to believe in the reality of the situation in order to feel an S. 1 emotion, but do not require such a belief to experience an S. 2 emotion.

But a niggling problem remains: if we require belief in order to feel emotions, then what do we need in order to feel quasi-emotions (S. 2)? Something like quasi-belief? I q-believe the fiction (which we might call a q-reality) and then experience q-emotions. The problem here is that we now have **two** completely different systems: belief, reality, emotion on the one side, and running independently across the way, q-belief, q-reality and q-emotion. It seems unlikely that we would have such similar processes that are necessarily unrelated to each other. If they *are* related, the problem then is to explain the nature of this relationship.<sup>7</sup>

The solution might be to reverse the order of the hierarchy that Radford implicitly sets up. Instead of imagining that our real emotions respond to reality in some sort of innate way (underpinned by our belief, which is really a knowledge, in and of that reality), we could imagine that we learn to respond emotionally to situations through our understanding of various narratives about the way in which humans respond to the world. This line of thought undermines any sense of natural emotions and proposes that our reactions to the real world (r-world) are based on our experience and knowledge of the q-world, the world of fiction and imagination.

The strength of this position is that it does not lock us into an essentialism around emotion - there are no necessary and predetermined natural emotional responses and this would allow us to account for culturally different emotions, or emotions that have historically fallen away or might fall away in the future. It also accounts for the way in which different people react to different fictions and to different real situations. Since there is no natural emotional reaction, our emotional responses are the result of a

complex personal and cultural history that is probably more susceptible to psychoanalytic explanation than to any sort of emotional cognitivism. The primacy of q-emotion gives us the freedom to respond to the world without the tyranny of pre-ordination and also to know that our emotions are subject to change. However, I am probably now entering the field of experimental psychology with such claims and I will stick to arguing that it is fiction that allows us to understand our emotions and even to have them in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

### **Belief and Faith as Emotions**

In the paradox of fiction, belief is the foundation on which the structure of the problem exists. It is important to know whether or not we believe in something, in order to know whether we can have emotional responses to it. I have addressed the issue above, but we can complicate this notion even further by thinking more carefully about what belief itself might be. Belief may be succinctly defined as, “the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true” (Schwitzgebel 2015). Without delving further into epistemology, I’d like to emphasise the “attitude” in this definition. An attitude might be understood as an emotion or mood, or even as an “attunement” (*Stimmung*), if we were to move into a more Heideggerian mode (see Sinnerbrink 2012b). Emotions are usually understood as being intentional in the phenomenological sense that they have an object to which they are necessarily connected: I must fear *something* or be in love with *someone*. Moods, on the other hand, tend to be considered as more formless and not necessarily linked to a particular object. Belief, then, could be understood an emotion if it is directed at a particular object: I believe that I live in Edinburgh, or I believe in God. Such beliefs would have the same structure as an emotion and therefore might be considered as such, although belief is not generally listed in the various taxonomies of possible emotions (see, for instance, Plantinga 2009, 69).

It may be difficult to consider belief to be an emotional state while carrying out a phenomenological *epochē*, or bracketing, exercise (see Donald Ihde [1986] on the practice of phenomenological reduction). If I am watching *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and believe that I am in fact seeing a television screen with moving images on it, it is tricky to separate out the sensation of “belief” from the experience of watching that film. I believe that I am watching that film because I am experiencing such a viewing. If I were hallucinating that I was watching the film, that would make it clearer that the “belief” that I am experiencing something is in fact a certain mode of engaging with the world. When I experience the world, I am really experiencing my belief in experiencing that world. This would mean that “belief”, like fear or joy, is an emotional reaction to an experience, in this case, an engagement with the world. The phenomenological texture of belief would then be something like “easy certainty”. I know that I am watching Zeffirelli’s film because, obviously, here I am, watching the film. Belief is then also a crucial emotion for scepticism, since if an evil demon has indeed created the illusion that I am watching a film, then the mechanism that the demon has to use in order to create such an illusion is belief itself. The demon does not need to create a virtual world in which I experience the watching of a film about medieval monks, but merely needs to create the belief that I am doing so. This would only be possible if belief had itself a phenomenological existence, that it exists as an “attitude”.<sup>9</sup>

It may be easier to accept this line of argument if we were to substitute the term “faith” for “belief”. Faith clearly seems to be an emotional state. In his classic study *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim states that:

It is true that religious life cannot reach a certain degree of intensity without involving a psychic exaltation that is in some way akin to delirium. For this reason prophets, founders of religions, great saints—men with an unusually sensitive religious consciousness—very often show signs of excessive and even pathological

excitability. (Durkheim 1912, 171)

If faith is understood as a form of religious ecstasy, then it seems quite uncontroversial to argue that faith is an emotion rather than a reasoned position. In a paper from around the same time as Durkheim's book, A. C. Armstrong made the argument that it is incorrect to assimilate "religious consciousness" entirely with emotion, since religious thought "contains cognitive as well as emotional (and volitional) elements. The affective factors depend upon the cognitive, and vary with them" (Armstrong 1911, 75). Armstrong is keen to defend the rational basis of religion, admitting that faith is indeed a form of feeling, while (following William James) contending that emotion "is not mere feeling; [...] it is feeling related to ideas" (Armstrong, 74). Such a claim for a certain modernity in contemporary religion accepts that in "its beginnings the religious feeling no doubt manifested itself in the simpler and less developed forms of the affective life" (Armstrong, 72), but that such "primitive" phases have been, or ought to be, superseded. Armstrong is wary of the chaos that a complete assimilation of religious faith to sentiment might bring about and so concludes that, "Religious faith includes elements of knowledge and of feeling" (Armstrong, 79), with the belief that it is knowledge that keeps the excesses of feeling at bay.

Sigmund Freud presents similar ideas in "The Future of an Illusion", when he argues that "religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature" (Freud 1927, 21). Religion thus has a rational basis which, for Freud, ultimately rests on an analogy with childhood psychology, as the gods replace the father in adulthood (Freud, 24). He questions, however, any proof of the truth of a religion based on "inner experience", since there are clearly many people who never have such a "rare experience" (Freud, 28). He asks: "If one man has gained an unshakeable conviction of the true reality of religious doctrines from a state



of ecstasy which has deeply moved him, of what significance is that to others?" (Freud, 28).

This is the situation in which Francis find himself when God speaks to him directly. In Michael Curtiz's *Francis of Assisi* (1961), Francis (Bradford Dillman) literally hears God's voice, although the actor speaking the part of the divinity is not credited. Bonaventura's *Life of St Francis*, written shortly after the saint's death, endorses this particular version of events: "Francis trembled, being alone in the church, and was astonished [sic] at the sound of such a wondrous Voice, and perceiving in his heart the might of the divine speech, was carried out of himself in ecstasy." (Okey et al. 1911, 311) But Curtiz's film does not provide a very convincing portrayal of faith; the spectator has to already believe in the possibility of supernatural voices to find these scenes at all moving. The film itself does little to try to persuade us of a divine presence.

In *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, Francis is initially dismissed as suffering a psychotic breakdown before his personal revelation is made palpable through his actions to his various converts. The film underwrites the veracity of his faith through the orchestration of the audience's emotional reaction, in its use of soft-focus cinematography, close-ups of emotionally charged faces, panoramic shots of nature, and mawkish music. It attempts to instill in its viewer an emotional experience that will in some way act as a proxy for the "state of ecstasy" felt by Francis. Thus, even if one does not *really* believe in an omnipresent God, one is able to *feel* that belief in the experience of watching a film that creates such a similar emotion in the spectator. This is the experience of the *quale* of a belief, without necessarily having that belief as such.

### **Belief without Belief at the Cinema**

It is at this point that we might return to Derrida's thought at the beginning of this article that, "At the movies, you believe without believing,

but this believing without believing remains a believing” (Derrida, 27).

Samuel Weber identifies two implications here:

If I understand the interview, the specific link between “believing without believing” and cinema implies (1) specters and (2) the *déliation* that separates one not just from others in the immediate vicinity but from oneself, especially insofar as this Self is habitually, routinely constituted—i.e. through repetition of the Same *qua* Identical. (Weber and Kamuf 2015, 152).

Weber highlights the internal differentiation of the supposedly present subject that is figured by the metaphor of the ghost. The subject both is and is not itself. Weber is also careful not to put too much emphasis on the singularity of cinema here. He says that, “Without ceasing to be committed to such a Self, one ‘believes’ oneself projected into a spectral reality that is cut off from the world of habitual identity” (Weber and Kamuf, 153). In other words, the spectator’s belief that he or she is a self-identical subject persists, even when that spectator understands this identity to be an illusion. However, Weber says, “This is supposed to be distinctive of cinema. But once again, this does not seem to be exclusive to cinema” (Weber and Kamuf, 153). However, this does not in itself mean that we should *not* pay attention to cinema and its specificities.

Weber also moves the analysis of belief to intersect with emotion, by substituting “feeling” for “believing”. He tentatively says, “I think what I want to suggest by this substitution is that the experience of believing without believing is experienced through feelings, which paradoxically supplement the lack of actual physical contact in the relation to film” (Weber and Kamuf, 154). Weber defines “belief without belief” as an emotion, a feeling, and so gives us a way of understanding this self-cancelling formulation in a less gnomic fashion. If “belief without belief” is, in fact, a felt emotion, this asks us to explore the issue of emotional response in more detail. Weber concludes that the “way ‘belief’ is solicited in and by cinema reveals its dependence on both desire and feelings, such as anxiety, which is the feeling that seeks

to overcome and control the heterogeneity of feeling itself ” (Weber and Kamuf, 154). Anxiety, then, becomes the central emotion in our experience of the fetishistic disavowal at the centre of the cinematic experience and this accords very neatly with Freud’s formulation (although Freud does note that fetishists in general are quite happy).<sup>10</sup> The believer-without-belief, like the fetishist, knows very well that there is no God, but nevertheless feels as if there is indeed a God.

Frank Jackson explains that there is something that he calls the *qualia* of experience, those things that cannot be accounted for by a physicalist description. He thinks “that there are certain features of the bodily sensations especially, but also of certain perceptual experiences, which no amount of purely physical information include”. (Jackson 1982, 127) Jackson develops his theory about *qualia* when he imagines Mary, stuck in a black and white room, who learns everything there is to learn about the colour red, but when released from her lab, actually sees something red and learns something new. For Jackson, “The contention about Mary is not that, despite her fantastic grasp of neurophysiology and everything else physical, she *could not imagine* what it is like to sense red; it is that, as a matter of fact, she *would not know*” (Jackson 1986, 292). If belief has or is a *quale*, then even if I study religion (by reading the various scriptures and anthropological discussions, speaking to many believers, and coming to understand everything there is to know about religion), it is only if I suddenly find myself in a world where I *believe* in a religious teaching, that I will *know* what religion is. However, in the fictional world of *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* I am able to experience the *quale* of belief, without having to believe that God exists.

Perhaps, then, belief without belief could be better formulated as: [Quale of] Belief (QB) without [Content of] Belief (CB). This implies that QB is non-intentional — I can experience belief without having a specific belief about anything in the world. QB is therefore something like a mood

rather than an emotion (which would require an intentional object).

We could also imagine a zombie worshipper, enacting the rituals without feeling any of the “belief”, but nevertheless acting as if there were an omnipotent deity who took an interest in human affairs. Such an adherent would have neither QB nor CB, only the outward appearance of belief (presumably it would be impossible to have CB without QB). We could call this sort of hypocrisy “Ritual Belief” (RitB): when I do not believe in the content of the belief, I do not experience it, but I follow its rituals and strictures since I understand that this is the way in which human societies provide a structure for consensus and group action (we could also call this Mythic Belief, or even Freudian belief). I don’t believe in the gods of the Italians, but, since I live among the Italians in the medieval period, I understand that this way of acting collectively provides an important social structure and may be the best way for me to achieve personal comfort and satisfaction (as long as I stay on the right side of the religious law). This is the pragmatic hypocritical position. I may as well act as if I believe, since the society in which I find myself sees such belief as a moral good. Conversely, if I live in a predominantly secular society, I may as well act as if I do not believe in supernatural elements (even if I do).

We now have three possible types of belief: r-belief (real belief), q-belief (quasi-belief) and rit-belief (ritual belief). R-belief, while apparently prior to the other two forms and possibly foundational for q-belief, suffers from the problem of origin. Where does it come from? How does someone suddenly come to the indisputable knowledge that an unfalsifiable proposition is true? How does Francis come to the understanding that God is real and speaking directly to him? Discounting the possibility that God (as **an** omnipresent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being), has some sort of real existence in the world, Francis must experience belief as an overwhelming emotional state that does not require the real existence of God since his experience is

of that faith and not of that God (*pace* Curtiz's divine voice). In this sense, Francis's belief must, in the first place, be a q-belief. He feels the belief just as I feel it when I watch *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. But then, in some way, Francesco is able to derail his experience and move from off-line belief to on-line belief. We might then need to distinguish between belief, irrational belief and insanity, distinctions that *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* also explores. Approaching the issue from the opposite, secular side of things, Simon Critchley addresses the problem of faith with the question: "Is politics conceivable without religion?" and argues that it is not (Critchley 2012, 24). He sees belief as the central issue here. He asks: "So, can a political collectivity maintain itself in existence, that is, maintain its unity and identity without a moment of the sacred, without religion, rituals, and something that we can only call belief?" (Critchley, 24). The argument is that a particular community needs to believe in its status as a collective community, in order for individuals to act in ways beneficial to the survival and stability of that community which may, in the short term, be deleterious to the individuals themselves. Critchley's project is to set up a secular foundation for sacrifice in the interest of the fictional community (see Critchley, 35-41). After many nuanced explications, Critchley finally comes to the conclusion that: "Faith is the enactment of the self in relation to a demand that exceeds my power, both in relation to my factual thrownness in the world, and the projective movement of freedom achieved as responsibility. Faith is not a like-for-like relationship of equals, but the asymmetry of the like-to-unlike." (Critchley, 251)

Faith and belief by the individual subject in the "unlikely" (the unreal, the fictional, the social) is necessary for politics as such, and, for Critchley following Derrida, an ethical politics must be underpinned by an acknowledgement of the "infinite demand" of never being able to completely resolve the conflict between the individual and the social. Francis attempts

exactly this, by trying, on the one hand, to experience an individual and unhypocritical belief in God, but, on the other, to maintain a respect for the institution of the church and its political organisation. Both Rossellini and Zeffirelli concentrate in their films on the earlier life of the saint, and Rossellini particularly stresses the simple life of the community of the brothers. However, as Francis's sect grew in popularity, he himself became more separated from social life, and eventually gave up his position with the brotherhood and became a hermit, living rather unhappily with his bleeding stigmata until his death at forty-four. It would seem that, even for St Francis, the infinite demand of the world to come is unbearable.

Patrick Hogan makes the common sense observation that, "*Of course*, our emotional response to stories is not the same as our actual engagement with events that have real consequences for our own practical existence" (Hogan 2011, 21: my emphasis). While this would seem uncontroversial, since we clearly understand that there is a difference between seeing or reading about a fictional love affair and actually falling in love with one's fellow scriptwriter (see *Their Finest* [Lone Scherfig, 2016]), I am not convinced that this distinction is as clearly unproblematic as Hogan and many others imagine.

I do not claim that the fictional world exists in the same ontological sense as the everyday world, but rather that our emotional response to reality, as commonly understood, and to fiction are not necessarily different. This does not mean that we cannot tell the difference between reality and fiction, but that our experience of emotion does not make such a difference and, more strongly, that our emotions are, for the most part, learned from fictional narratives.

The thought that our real emotions about real people in our real lives are not necessarily more complex or heartfelt than those experienced fictionally may strike readers as counter-intuitive. However, I wish to argue that, if we

seriously try to experience our emotions in a phenomenological manner, then we might have to admit that there are certain emotions that are far more nuanced in our fictional lives than they are in our real lives. In fact, I would go further and say that there cannot be a strict distinction, on an emotional level, between reality and fiction. When I fall in love with the handsome scriptwriter and his unconvincing moustache, is this a stronger experience than the one I feel when I empathise with a fictional character doing the same? Maybe I will never fall in love, or perhaps there is no such experience as “falling in love” in the real world, and that what we call “love” is merely a product of expectations learned from fictions. I use the word “merely” in the previous sentence ironically, since the upshot of my argument is that *all* of our emotions are learned from fictions.

This argument is not falsifiable, in a strictly scientific sense. It would probably be impossible to test whether a human being brought up without any experience of fictional narratives would have a similar range of emotional reactions as someone raised in a community. Werner Herzog’s *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971) explores the experience of people born deaf, blind and dumb while his fictionalised bio-pic *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) returns to the perennial story of a child brought up without contact with other human beings. In both films, Herzog presents a low-key romantic picture in which the apparently de-humanised subject finally finds emotion through an experience of nature, not of other human beings. Nevertheless, this is conjecture by Herzog and we must remain silent on what such emotional experiments may or may not reveal.

To conclude, I have been arguing that real emotions are only possible on the basis of quasi-emotions, and without false emotion there can be no real emotional response. A film like *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* allows an experience of faith without faith, of belief without belief, and this experience is fundamental to all cinema.

# David Sorfa

## Notes

See Koslovic (2002, 2) for an overview of the critical reception of the film.

For fuller discussions of *Francis, God's Jester*, see Brunette (1987, 128-137), Millen (2000, 80-94) and Bandy (2003, 71-74).

There is an important strand in film theory and film-philosophy, which takes the problem of belief and cinema as its object and is concerned specifically with film's relationship to the real world, usually, but not always, from a Heideggerian perspective. Siegfried Kracauer argues that film offers a "redemption of physical reality" by which I understand him to mean that film is able to reinvest a corrupted world with hope (Kracauer 1960). In the 1940s and 50s, André Bazin wrote extensively on the relationship between reality and cinema and Robert Sinnerbrink excavates the way in which Bazin understood the photographic nature of cinema as underpinning a *belief* that the image "bears the trace of a former presence" (Sinnerbrink 2012a, 97; see also Rushton 2011, 42-78). Stanley Cavell similarly uses cinema as a means for providing a proof against scepticism since if the world can be photographed and filmed this must then mean that the world does indeed exist (Cavell, 1979). In this tradition, cinema allows the spectator to believe in the world which, since it is so awful and unbelievable, requires the countersignature of film to convince us of its worth. Cinema, then, is the miracle that proves the existence of the world.

Berys Gaut has recently developed this argument in terms of an appreciation of the technological achievement necessary for creating cinematic artworks. While he argues for the validity of considering digital effects as part of a film's achievement, he is also impressed by Tom Cruise performing his own stunts in *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol* (2011). Gaut concludes that, "Appreciating a cinematic artwork depends in part on understanding the technology it incorporates" (Gaut 2016, 13) and this is in fact an argument for appreciating the manipulation of the real world in real ways, whether that be through the skill needed to manipulate technological effects to create a visually perceptible and spectacular image or through the acting talent or foolhardiness of an actor.

Dan Shaw gives a very useful overview of the developments in mirror neuron theory that argues that our brains simulate the emotions perceived in others: "The discovery of the existence and emotive functions of mirror neurons confirms that we simulate other people's emotions in a variety of ways, even in cinematic contexts. This is made possible by these components of the human brain firing identically when we observe others engaged in an activity (or exhibiting a facial expression or body language) and when we do so ourselves" (Shaw 2016, 148). This hypothesis would, I think, support my general claim that there is no substantive difference between "real" and "fictional" emotions.

Noël Carroll's view is that the value of a film can *only* be judged by the quality of our emotional response to it. If we laugh at a comedy and feel fear during a horror film, then that film has been successful and can be evaluated as such (Carroll 2003).

Gregor Currie has proposed the "simulation argument" in which we are able to "run" our emotions in an "off-line" mode when engaging with fictions. Currie says that, "these beliefs and desires, let us call them pretend or imaginary beliefs and desires, differ from my own real beliefs and desires not just in being temporary and cancellable. They are also, unlike my real beliefs and desires, run 'off-line', disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs" (Currie 1995, 253). The distinction I make between real beliefs (r-beliefs) and q-beliefs is very similar to this conception. Currie also warns that it is possible for such off-line emotions to go on-line and that if, "imagining alien values carried with it the possibility that we may actually come to have those values through failure of inhibition, such imaginings expose us and those around us to a real danger, though one we have scarcely begun to quantify" (Currie, 259). Anecdotally, some have worried that my engagement with belief and faith in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* and in this article, might turn me into a believing Christian. See also Berys Gaut on the simulation argument (Gaut 2010, 148-150).

I am aware that there is an issue here if we consider creatures that apparently do not have fictional worlds in their ontology. However, it seems to me clear that animals can imagine the future in one way or another and so, on this minimal definition, I would hold that animals are just as much



fictionally-determined beings as humans. R.M. Sainsbury argues that play, as fictional imagining, is available to mammals and even claims that, “Life begins in play, and play involves pretense, making things up, fiction” (Sainsbury 2010, 1). See also Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1993).

For extensive and somewhat different accounts of philosophical and psychological approaches to definitions of belief, see Lengbeyer (2009) and Wegener and Clark (2009).

Freud explains: “For though no doubt a fetish is recognised by its adherents as an abnormality, it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering” (Freud 1927, 152

