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# The Catholic Imagination in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*

## **Abstract**

The author examines Martin Scorsese's rockumentary *The Last Waltz* of 1978 as an encounter between the communitarian focus of the Catholic imagination (cf. Greeley Catholic Imagination) and the more individualistic ethos dominant in contemporary society (cf. Taylor Ethics of Authenticity). He claims the encounter not only shapes Scorsese's fiction films but also exhibit's his notion of the filmmaker's mission. The subject matter of the film lends itself to this examination because a rock band balances between the individuality of its performers and the communality of its form. Moreover, overt religious values and themes of the film are explored in relation to the above questions.

Near the end of the anti-Western *Little Big Man* of 1970 there is the memorable scene where the aged Native American character played by Chief Dan George proclaims that it is a good day for him to die. He chooses an appropriate spot, delivers a moving farewell speech, lies down and ... it starts to rain. The good natured Native American takes the setback in stride and accepts that another day will be better for meeting his ancestors.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1976, The Band staged its farewell concert at the Winterland auditorium in San Francisco, inviting to the occasion the cream of rock performers from what some consider the Golden Age of the genre. The film which celebrates the event is permeated with "a sense of an ending", to use Frank Kermode's expression. Even Bob Dylan sings his anthem-like "For Ever Young" in an ironic note that hardly anyone can miss.

Yet rock and roll did not die. Many of the performers, e.g. Neil Young, Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, the incomparable Bob Dylan, or The Band's own Robbie Robertson, continued to create vital recordings. Thanks largely, but not exclusively, to the auteur Italian-American filmmaker Martin Scorsese, the event itself lives on as perhaps the best rock film of all times. It lives on under the title of the concert, *The Last Waltz*,<sup>1</sup> and it lives in accordance with the above feeling: another day will be better.

A number of authors stress that the work of Scorsese is imbued with the sensibility of his Catholic upbringing.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Andrew Greeley feels that although Scorsese is rather a lapsed Catholic, his imagination gravitates toward Catholic concerns, such as "an intense family life, intricate extended family relations, and a close-knit neighborhood community." (112)

"The Catholic imagination," according to Greeley, "tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of God" (6) and stress the enchanted, sacramental nature of the world.<sup>3</sup> In his book of the same title, Greeley discusses how the Catholic imagination interacts with diverse religious narratives and worldviews. For instance, he presents a sociological model of the factors which help young women with strong feminist views integrate these into a new acceptance of their church. If, for instance, their husbands are devout members of the church while the women are simultaneously feminists, then an incorporation of the feminist worldview with traditional church is greatly facilitated.

The rockumentary *The Last Waltz* of 1978, however, does not really bear witness to the problem of accommodation. Rather the Catholic imagination focus of close-knit community interacts with what Charles Taylor<sup>4</sup> calls the ethics of authenticity. Taylor holds this to be the predominant ethic in contemporary culture: a largely unarticulated ethic of an individualistic society. Taylor is careful to distinguish between various individualisms, claiming that modes of self-fulfillment

that "are in opposition to the demands of society, or nature, which shut out history and the bonds of solidarity" (40) are ultimately self-defeating. In contrast, authenticity might be seen as individualism's ethical ideal, "but one that doesn't itself license its self-centered modes" (55). Presented in this balanced manner, authenticity is not at opposite poles with the Catholic imagination; both can be viewed as modalities that place different stresses on - potentially! - a common good.

As an individualistic and responsible artist, Scorsese fits such a definition of authenticity. From the above perspective, both forces are at work in the subject of the film as well. First, it is certainly not difficult to look at a rock band as a quasi-family unit. On the other hand, the contemporary artist must project an aura of authenticity and individualism: the sense that, in Taylor's words, "each of our voices has something of its own to say" (29). How is he or she to do so in a virtually communal artform? A rock band, critic Greil Marcus observes, is usually a marriage of convenience, yet, in rare instances, "[a]n identity comes into being that transcends individual personalities, but does not obscure them - in fact, it is the group, sometimes only the group, that makes individuals visible."<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the volatile nature of this mix cannot be gainsaid, witnessed by the temporary life of most rock bands. And - after all - the subject of the film is the final concert, i.e. the implied breakup of *The Band*.

Who are The Band as artists? They are probably best known as the rock group that assisted Bob Dylan in his controversial switch from folk singer to rock artist. The musicians accompanied the latter in his famous tour of England in 1965 and together they were involved in the recording sessions collectively known as the "Basement Tapes" (circa 1967),<sup>6</sup> when both artistic entities entered a period of creative seclusion. However, for many fans their own music transcends that footnote to rock history. Marcus gives a succinct description of the group: "four Canadian rockers held together by an Arkansas drummer" (43). Despite the Canadian majority, the Band developed a distinctly American sound. Marcus plausibly suggests their conscious settlement in America may have proffered the musicians an outsider's advantage to see the country in a new light.

During the course of the film the viewer/listener is treated to a traditional guitar duel between the renowned virtuoso of that instrument, Eric Clapton, and the hardly less capable Robbie Robertson of The Band. At another level, a much more profound duel occurs between the musicians hosting the event and Scorsese the filmmaker. What few viewers realize is that the latter was an old hand at rock documentaries, including work on the best known one of the genre, that on the Woodstock festival.

A film scholar might perceive Scorsese as the victor in the artistic duel and claim it is he who gives the film the "voice that has something of its own to say".<sup>7</sup>

The filmmaker controls much of the 'text' virtually from beginning to end. In fact, the film begins at the 'end' with footage from The Band's encore at the conclusion of the concert, not too subtly reminding the viewer that the event is actually over, thus detracting from the sense of vicarious participation. Accordingly, and oddly enough for a rock documentary, the presence of the audience is minimized. A non-linear narration is maintained throughout the film. The concert sequences are continually interrupted by interviews with the musicians. Scorsese not infrequently asserts his domination over the musicians by appearing in the corner of the screen and drawing the interviewee's gaze away from the camera; i.e. detracting from the sense of intimacy often projected to viewers when those interviewed seem to be addressing them.

Scorsese carefully controls the photography to enhance the feeling of the artificiality of the event, i.e. in opposition to the comparatively natural feel of the typical documentary. The musicians play virtually no new music, enabling the camera shots to be carefully planned in accordance with the emotional coloring of the music. Rough shots are avoided and thus the sense of visual spontaneity is minimized; even the afore-mentioned guitar duel is quite tight, with strict limits to the drawn-out riffs typical for such a show down. Scorsese likewise adds to the sense of the decadence of the event by selecting the stage decor, taken from the set of *La Traviatta* staged at the San Francisco Opera. Scorsese also stresses the 'sense

of an ending' in the opening out-doors tracking-shot sequence, which is a clear contrasting quote from the opening of the documentary on the Monterrey Pop festival of 1969. The message is fairly legible: this is not a 'beginning' like at the latter event; the hopes for any revolution, for instance, have ended.

In part, it likely also due to Scorsese's personal interests that religious topics play no small role in the portions of the film in which he had the greatest input, the interview sequences. Scorsese has even been suspected of prompting The Band's 'spontaneous' performance of the traditional "Gimme That Old Time Religion"<sup>8</sup> in one of them. Nonetheless, these religious topics are not incongruous with the musical themes of the concert itself. J. P. Telotte detects three themes dominating the songs of the film: one celebrates human energy and expansiveness, another laments the degeneration of these powers, and a third expresses the longing for transcendence and release from the "confining human condition"<sup>9</sup>. Appropriately, the last concert song of the film, stemming back from the Basement Tapes sessions, is "I Shall be Released".

Returning to the impromptu performance of "Gimme That Old Time Religion," Scorsese captures an attitude of the artists that seems to parallel his own. The musicians give a raucous, slightly off-key rendition of the traditional song that leaves them laughing. "It's not like it used to be", concludes Robertson. Whether in



religion or music, tradition cannot be reproduced. Authentic continuation of tradition may require a rupture with the past to avoid its ossification.

During another interview, Garth Hudson talks of the religious quality of music in terms of healing. Hudson refers to religion as therapy offered by the musicians to the marginalized, i.e. a therapy that is outwardly directed. Significantly, the very next song Scorsese places after the Band member's comment has no religious lyrics. Thus not the content of the song, but its emotional quality establishes its religious value. Hudson claims the musicians who offer this "healing" are the "real priests". However we are to understand this "priesthood" (which I shall return to), Scorsese captures the implied critique of organized religion popular at that time, which claimed that it ignores the "here and now" needs of people.

At least in part, the filmmaker appears to respond to this "here and now" need. He blends the Catholic imagination and its sacramentality with his intuition of the contemporary audience, reflecting the paradoxical need for disruption in order to honor tradition.

What do I mean by sacramentality? Greeley sees sacraments - reflections and embodiments of the sacred and transcendent - practically everywhere. He sees them wherever people create something (he uses the example of a "sandwich")

which "becomes enchanted because it is permeated by, dense in, awash with two loves - human and divine" (2). This definition is important, but both loves are difficult to determine in a film. Pertinently, Greeley also discusses the relationship of beauty with the sacred; for instance, he sees the beauty of churches as an integral aspect of their proclamation of Christian truth (33). Beauty in effect contributes to the sacred character of the buildings. In this latter context it is pertinent to view *The Last Waltz* with regards to the beauty both of the film<sup>10</sup> and the music, the latter hardly surpassed in its genre.

Another relevant suggestion on the part of Greeley, and one that is somewhat easier to examine, is the claim that the religious imagination originates in stories. One of the narratives that weaves its way through *The Last Waltz*, both in the interviews and through the songs, is the journey story. A journey has certain sacramental moments, it must be added. One of them is suggested in the film when, after the preceding interviews explore their early experiences as a bar-room band, Richard Manuel and Robertson tell how The Band chose their name for themselves. Community and authenticity combine at this juncture. The Band 'christened' themselves, but earlier their community of 'friends' started referring to them by that particular name. The importance Scorsese attributes to this seminal moment in The Band's journey toward identity awareness can be implied from his selection of "The Weight", an enigmatic song from the Band's first album, *Music From the Big Pink*

(1968), as the song to follow the disclosure. The open-ended lyrics of "The Weight" certainly evoke a pilgrim's quest; a quest carried out in concrete historical circumstances locked within experiences typical for a rock band. The hope that emanates from the song, however, primarily stems from its music, which carries the inconclusive whole to a higher plane.

Significant in this context is the fact that in this song The Band is accompanied by the superlative Gospel group, the Staples. "The Weight" indeed has a quasi-religious air to it, justifying the group's presence. Yet in the context of the preceding 'christening' interview sequence, the presence of the religious group adds to the sacramentality of the filmic moment, suggesting the baptism or the blessing of the formative event in the group's identity.

In his film-essay *The Century of Cinema: A Personal Journey* (1996) Scorsese suggests a connection between "a church and a movie-house". If the movie-house is a church, then by extension, the 'movie' is a kind of mass. In *The Last Waltz*, a film about self-conscious artists, the theme of the creative process and its relation to sacramentality can be explored more directly than in his fiction films. The film provides a meta-narrative that forwards the theme of art as religious celebration.

Robertson claims *The Last Waltz* was intended to be a "celebration", which likens it to a mass. A mass is also a feast, and the concert took place on Thanksgiving Day, the most American of feast days. It is also a special "family" day, it might be added, contributing to the communal spirit of the event. A feast has a deep axiological meaning connected with the ideas of sacrifice and community. The theme of the destructive nature of "the Road" that The Band had to endure throughout the journey of their career recurs throughout the interviews and projects the symbolism of sacrifice. The musicians offer themselves and their art to their audience, not to mention the scrupulous gaze of the filmmaker, who mediates their offering in the "church" of the movie-house.

At the climax of *Babette's Feast* of 1989, perhaps the greatest of "feast" films, the unexpected guest at the title feast is General Loewenheim. He expresses the work's profound theme: "the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite." A rock film may or may not be a vehicle of grace, but certainly at peak times the enchantment that Greeley speaks of is palpable. During their complementary performances, The Band, The Staples and Martin Scorsese provide a surprisingly luminous moment. At this sacramental time opposing modalities no longer compete. General Loewenheim claims that truth and mercy have met. In *The Last Waltz* the Christian singers and the rockers are

sublimely wedded. Community and authenticity meet. The aural and the visual experiences create a much larger whole than the sum of their parts.

If the Catholic imagination informs Scorsese's fiction films, *The Last Waltz* provides evidence that it also seems to influence how he sees the mission of the filmmaker. Through his individualistic approach, this in part religiously inspired work reaches out to the marginalized, i.e. those disaffected by institutional religion, and provides, if not grace, a sense of enchantment, an embodiment of something sacred, in vivid dialogue with the religious imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Last Waltz*, directed by Martin Scorsese. With Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson, and Richard Manuel. United Artists, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard A. Blake, *AfterImage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers*. Loyola Press, 2000; Lee Lourdeaux, *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola and Scorsese*. Temple University Press, 1990; Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*. University of California Press, 2000 (All Greeley citations in this text come from this latter source.).

<sup>3</sup> If we discuss the Catholic imagination, then at the very least there must be something like the Protestant imagination (not to mention Orthodox, Judaic, Islamic, etc.). I am following Greeley's understanding of the religious imagination, which tests the theological assumptions of David Tracy's differentiation of the analogical from the dialectical theistic imagination. Put simply, the former (analogical) stresses the presence or immanence of God in Creation, while the latter (the dialectical) stresses the absence or transcendence of God. Tracy finds that classic Catholic texts exhibit the analogical imagination more prominently, while classic Protestant texts bear greater witness to the dialectical. Both Tracy and Greeley stress that for the believer the different tendencies are actually complementary. Greeley examines how this imagination is exhibited in ordinary believers, claiming that while the correlation is low level, it nonetheless exists.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll*. E.P. Dutton, 1982 [1975], p. 44. The Marcus quotes in my article are all from this source

<sup>6</sup> The sessions are the subject/pretext for Greil Marcus' essay: *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Holt, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> I am in fact presenting, in a modified manner, much of Barry W. Sarchett's argument and evidence in the following two paragraphs; see his "'Rockumentary' as Metadocumentary: Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22, No. 1(1994): pp. 28-35.

<sup>8</sup> Sarchett, op. cit., p. 34n.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. Telotte, "Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*' and the Concert Genre." *Film Criticism* 4 (1979): pp. 9-20.

<sup>10</sup> Treating the question of beauty in religion and film is obviously problematic. For instance, in perhaps the best known study that probes the question of aesthetics in relation to the problem, Paul Schrader looks to the moment of 'stasis' in film as the mark of the "transcendental style" in the art (*Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. University of California, 1972). This works if we define religion as primarily contemplative in nature, which is certainly a vital aspect, but not the only one worth study. Not to mention that stasis rather goes against the grain of film, which is a dynamic art. More helpful to my mind is Greeley's suggestion that the religious imagination starts in stories, but that barely opens the subject to further discussion.