

FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE: BIBLICAL SIMILITUDES, CINEMATIC VISIONS

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What benefit – hermeneutical, heuristic, or both – for “reading” the complex relation of biblical text and film can be gained by imposing the words “the kingdom of heaven is like” (or a biblical cognate thereof) as an epigraph to a film... perhaps the final slide of the opening credits? This is the basic itch that this paper intends to scratch by suggesting that there is benefit from, in essence, mimicking many of Jesus’ New Testament parables themselves.

The slice of cinema that I am interested in thinking about are films that project the kingdom of heaven, whether intentionally or not.¹ In an article on *Babette’s Feast* that I wrote for Adele Reinhartz’s volume, *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, I used the language of “ecclesial vision” for such a film (Giere 2013, 19). I am not entirely satisfied with the term, ecclesial vision, which in my imagination is a vision of what the church might be... or what it ought to be. Not being entirely satisfied with this term, what I want to do today is explore such a film from a more biblically rooted (or at least I hope so) interpretive angle.

This angle is anchored in the “is like” that occurs rather frequently in the synoptic “parables of the kingdom.” Interpreting certain films in a manner that mimics the similtudinous function of these New Testament parables of the kingdom provides a window – albeit cracked and smudged – into the complex relationship of bible and film.

¹ I am not interested in putting up scaffolding for an entire new way of exploring the relation of bible and film, nor am I at this point interested in following the interpretive line taken by Aichele and Walsh that “the screening of Scripture is an act of translation.” (Aichele and Walsh 2002, viii) I have no qualms with this interpretive move that they make introducing the essays in their volume, *Screening Scripture*. It works quite well for many encounters between bible and film. Rather, I’m quite confident that there is a way of configuring the “what happens” in the complex relation of bible and film is not exactly “translation.”

Borrowing a couple terms from Paul Ricoeur, I'll begin with a few thoughts on theory, and then move to an exploration of how this might work with the film, *Så som i himmelen*, a 2004 Swedish film directed by Kay Pollak, a film that goes by the English title, *As It Is In Heaven*.

Going to the Movies with Ricoeur: Projecting a World and Calculated Error

For today, I want to employ two terms from Paul Ricoeur for the purpose of this little exploration: **projecting a world** and **calculated error**.²

Whether the text with which we are working is a biblical parable (or any biblical text for that matter) or a film, the text at hand **projects a world** into which the “reader” is invited. The world that a text projects is one that the reader can either take or leave, but if the reader is to understand the text she must imagine, enter, and at some level inhabit the world before her. In one of Ricoeur's more plainspoken sentences, he says this: “The term ‘world’ then has the meaning that we all understand when we say of a new born child that he has come into the world” (Ricoeur 1976, 37).³ Carrying Ricoeur's rather beautiful image on with us to the text and to the movies, we the readers are in a sense born into the world that the text projects – the world that the film creates. Again, Ricoeur in his own words and in some length:

The sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of the discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author and his situation. It [understanding] seeks to grasp the world-propositions opened up by the reference of the text. To understand is to follow its movement from sense to reference; from what it says, to what it talks about... [This] invites us to think of the sense of the text as an injunction coming from the text, as a new way of looking at things, as an injunction to think in a certain manner. (Ricoeur 1976, 87–88)

Biblical texts project a world into which the reader, believer or not, is invited to wander and dwell. Likewise, films project a world into which the audience is invited to wander and dwell. This projected world is the sense of the text, whether biblical text or film.

² Gadamer's **fusion of horizons** should also play a role here (pun intended!), but this will take more time to work out. In addition to the first order back-and-forth of Ricoeur and Gadamer themselves, Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*, provides a clear-headed guide through the complexities of their conversation and disagreements. (2001)

³ Ricoeur repeats this claim elsewhere and nearly verbatim in his 1991 essay, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation.” (Ricoeur 1991, 149)

More specifically, then, the biblical parables of the kingdom⁴ each project a world. A common denominator that these parables often share is that they by nature assert a future reality upon the present. The reign of the God of Israel, whose kingdom is the whole world and who the psalmist praises as “king of all the earth” (Ps 47.7, RSV)... it is concerning the reign of this God that Jesus speaks in his rather odd, little, metaphoric utterances. These little parables by their odd juxtapositions create a world into which the reader is invited – a world related to that of the psalmist’s praise but built upon the quotidian and nonsensical... the kingdom of heaven *is like*... seeds and sowers and bushes and sons and maidens and sheep and coins and such... For Ricoeur, metaphor, built upon the “is like” has the power to redefine reality (Ricoeur 1975, 75) in surprising ways.

I want to spend just a little time with the term, **calculated error**, a fundamental element of metaphor’s “semantic innovation” (Ricoeur 1975, 75). Metaphor is a function of language that creates. It is language that massages the imagination. It does so by the absurd juxtaposition of two unrelated things with (for my purpose today) the “is like” creating new meaning, invoking new vision. To quote Ricoeur again:

What is at stake in the metaphorical utterance... is the appearance of kinship where ordinary vision does not perceive any relationship.... [The metaphor] is, in effect, a calculated error, which brings together things that do not go together and by means of this apparent misunderstanding it causes a new, hitherto unnoticed, relation of meaning to spring up between the terms that previous systems of classification had ignored or not allowed.” (Ricoeur 1976, 51)

Metaphors function necessarily... they remain alive⁵ by maintaining the tension that the “calculated error” causes. The tension creates meaning (52) by way of absurd juxtaposition. One must be very careful, then, not to gut the parable or the film of meaning by explaining away tension. With Ricoeur, I want to stress that (in his words) “metaphor is not an ornament of discourse.” (52) It’s not a superfluous figure of speech, a linguistic garnish. Rather, metaphor is an essential element of creative discourse because (again to quote Ricoeur), “a metaphor... tells us something new about reality.” (53)

The biblical parables of the kingdom, then, create a new reality by means of calculated error. When we read the kingdom of heaven is like “a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field” (Mt 13.31), we don’t read the kingdom of heaven *is* a mustard seed, for this would be to

⁴ A list that may well be partial: “For the kingdom of heaven is like” – Mt 13.33 (Leaven), Mt 13.44 (Treasure in the field), Mt 13.45-46 (Pearl of Great Price), Mt 13.47-50 (Dragnet), Mt 20.1-16 (Workers in the Vineyard) [Thomas 107 (Lost Sheep)]; “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to” – Mt 13.24-30 (Weeds in the Wheat), Mt 22.1-14 (Wedding Feast); “the kingdom of heaven has become like” – Mt 18.23-35 (The Unforgiving Slave); “the kingdom of heaven will be like” Mt 25.1-13 (Ten Bridesmaids); “the kingdom of God is like” – Mk 4.26-29 (Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly); “with what can we compare the kingdom of God” – Mk 4.30-32 / Mt 13.31-32 (k. of heaven) / Lk 13.18-19 (Mustard Seed), Lk 13.20-21 (Leaven); and *kind of* – in the explanation of the parable of the sower “secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Mt) / God (Lk) – Mt 13.3-23 / Lk 8.5-15; “tax collectors and sinners may precede you into the kingdom of God” – Mt 21.28-32 (Two Sons); inherit the kingdom – Mt 25.31-46 (Final Judgment).

⁵ “Live metaphors are metaphors of invention within which the response to the discordance in the sentence is a new extension of meaning, although it is certainly true that such inventive metaphors tend to become dead metaphors through repetition. In such cases, the extended meaning becomes part of our lexicon and contributes to the polysemy of words in question whose everyday meanings are thereby augmented. There are no live metaphors in a dictionary.” (Ricoeur 1976, 52)

misunderstand what is before us. The calculated error of the “is like” is essential, as it is in the juxtaposition of the unrelated that something new is created.

What has this to do with film? I suggest that it is beneficial to interpret certain films within this “is like” structure that mimics the biblical parables and leans toward the form and function of metaphor wherein calculated error is essential. A means of testing this is to introduce a film with an epitaph, “the kingdom of heaven is like,” with the expectation that what comes next is neither a simple repetition of religious niceties or predictable religious conventions nor even a dramatic portrayal of any particular biblical parable. Rather, with the absurd juxtaposition that the “is like” facilitates, in this case between biblical text and film, something new is available – new vision. Here again, we’re at the central itch of the paper. What benefit is there from placing “the kingdom of heaven is like” at the opening credits of a film?

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like: Så som i himmelen

Director Kay Pollak’s 2004 *Så som i himmelen* (in English, *As It Is In Heaven*) with its titular nod to the Lord’s Prayer⁶ now provides us a text to explore more concretely. In the interest of “thick description” (Aichele and Walsh 2002, ix), we move into the film with some depth.

The central character of the film is world renowned conductor, Daniel Darius (Michael Nyqvist). The demands of his work... his art have taken their toll. After a heart attack at the conclusion of a concert, his manager pulls him from the circuit of stress, basically retiring him. Daniel returns to the north of Sweden and the small fictional village of Ljusåker, the village of his early childhood years. There he purchases for his home the old, no-longer-used Folkskola - a one room elementary schoolhouse.

The larger arc of this homecoming is seasoned with irony. Daniel has gone back to Ljusåker to escape stress, but from the very outset of the film, we are initiated into the reality that this small northern village is not a place of warm fuzzies for Daniel or for anyone else. The fictional town is not called Hemkomst (Homecoming) but Ljusåker (Light Field) for throughout the course of the film the dark corners of people’s lives are illuminated. A subtle punctuation of this placename Ljusåker comes as Daniel walks through the Folkskola for the first time as an adult, when he looks at the sink and on the tap there is a sign that reads: “Remember to let the tap run before drinking. The water comes from our own well.” (8’15”)

As the film opens, young Daniel, perhaps eleven or twelve years old, is practicing his violin in the middle of a mature wheat field. We hear the music playing through the breeze that gently moves

⁶ Vår fader som är i Himmelen.
Helgat varde Ditt namn.
Tillkomme Ditt Rike.
Ske Din vilja, **såsom i Himmelen**
så ock på Jorden.
Vårt dagliga bröd giv oss idag
Och förlåt oss våra skulder
såsom ock vi förlåta dem oss skyldiga äro
och inled oss icke i frestelse
utan fräls oss ifrån ondo.
Ty Riket är Ditt och Makten och Härligheten
i Evighet. Amen. (Modern, 1981)

the full heads of grain. The piece is Vivaldi's Violin Concerto in A minor, Opus 3, No. 6, RV 536 (1711). (We'll return to Vivaldi in just a while.) As Daniel practices with his music clothes-pinned to the stalks of wheat, we see the heads of three boys emerge from the wheat like foxes scoping out a chicken coop. As these three boys chase Daniel through the wheat, the intensity of the music surges from a single practicing violin to a full orchestra, and the scene begins to oscillate between the wheat field of childhood and an orchestra hall of adulthood. In the former, Daniel is caught and beaten. In the latter, adult Daniel is conducting, sweating profusely, and suffering from a nose bleed that turns his white tuxedo shirt into a crimson mess. With cinematic deftness, Pollak here ties the full story of Daniel's person – his childhood and his adulthood – with this little place.

We learn other important and tragic bits about Daniel at the outset as well. We learn that his mother moved him away from Ljusåker. We see Daniel, slightly older, playing before a room of admirers, as he narrates, "Ever since I was a little boy, I had a dream to create music that would open people's hearts." (2'43") And most tragic, we see Daniel, again a little older still, preparing for a prestigious music competition. As he practices his violin, he looks out the window to the street below, where he sees his mother exiting a taxi. As she begins to cross the street, smiling and waving at her son in the window above, she is run over and dies.

So, this orphaned, bullied boy genius now global celebrity, after a heart attack, returns to his hometown. His mother had changed his name when he was young. So, while the townspeople know who he is they don't know who he is at the same time.

Daniel eventually accepts a position as choirmaster for the local church choir. The choir, with Daniel's rather exotic methods of instruction, becomes more popular and more life-giving than the church itself. The local priest, Stig (Niklas Falk), is increasingly tormented with jealousy as this unfolds. His jealousy is accentuated as his wife, Inger (Ingela Olsson), loosens up and begins feeling free as a result of her experience in the choir.

At one point we see Inger dancing ecstatically at a choir party with the strap of her tank top slipping off her shoulder. The following morning there is a row between her and her husband. She has crossed a line in his mind. She is not acting like a priest's wife ought to act. The scene builds to a confrontation between husband and wife.

When Stig, the priest, screams at Inger, his wife, that she has sinned on church grounds, she fires back, saying: "Now I'm going to say something I've wanted to say for a long time. Something that's plagued me for 20 years. There is no sin. All this damn talk of sin! It only exists in your head." This of course angers the priest further, but Inger presses her point: "I have thought the church invented sin. Handing out guilt with one hand then offering redemption with the other. It's all a lie, hot air, to suppress people, to gain power." The priest screams: "Silence! Ask for God's

forgiveness!" Inger replies: "God doesn't forgive, don't you get that! Because he's never condemned."⁷

Of course, this is not only a dialogue between the priest and his wife. It is the world into which the film invites the viewer. In this world the church and its pious judgmentalism are a problem. The choir, their music-making, and the relationships that build within this musical framework are more aligned with a community of agape than is the church and its piety. The church controls. The choir frees. The church excludes. The choir welcomes. The church depresses. The choir offers joy. The church conceals in shame. The choir reveals in honesty.

In short, Daniel's childhood dream to create music that opens people's hearts is fulfilled in the choir – the music they produce and the community that develops. The transformations that happen throughout the film happen to everyone, even the priest and perhaps even the bully from wheat field of Daniel's childhood who as an adult badly abuses his wife for whom the choir and its music becomes salvation.

The film ends at a choir competition in Austria.

Upon entering the registration area for the concert, Daniel, the choir master from the small, remote town of Ljusåker is recognized as the global celebrity that he also is. As he's mobbed by admirers, his attention is drawn elsewhere to his manager looking down from the mezzanine above. Daniel makes his way to the manager, who asks him:

...have you fulfilled what you've always dreamed of?

Daniel: Yes, I think so.

Manager: But how? Why with these people?

Daniel: They love me and I love them. (111' 37")

On the morning of the choir competition Daniel heads out for a joy-filled bicycle ride through the streets of Innsbruck. He loses himself and almost doesn't make it back to the concert hall. As the Ljusåker Choir assembles on this micro-global stage, there is anxiety among them as they do not know where Daniel is. We, the viewers, see him covered with sweat staggering into the building. It is evident that he is not well. He stumbles into a water closet and crashes to the floor hitting his head on the edge of the sink on the way down.

At this point, Pollak moves us back and forth between the anxious choir in the concert hall and the dying Daniel for whom a loudspeaker in the WC provides a live feed of the sound from the hall.

⁷ Inger: Nothing happened.
Stig: You expose your breasts in the congregation hall and this is nothing?
Inger: I was a bit tipsy, dancing...
Stig: Sin has descended...
Inger: Stop it!
Stig: Inger, you have sinned! On church premises!
Inger: Now I'm going to say something I've wanted to say for a long time. Something that's plagued me for 20 years. There is no sin. All this damn talk of sin! It only exists in your head.
Stig: What!
Inger: There is no sin.
Stig: "There is no sin?" Think of what you're saying.
Inger: I have thought. The church invented sin. Handing out guilt with one hand then offering redemption with the other. It's all a lie, hot air, to suppress people, to gain power.
Stig: Silence! Ask for God's forgiveness!
Inger: God doesn't forgive, don't you get that! Because he's never condemned.
Stig: Shut up! (55'20")

As the lifeblood pumps out of his temple, one among the choir, a developmentally challenged young man named Tore (André Sjöberg) begins to hum a single note – a note which eventually invites the Ljusåker choir and ultimately the whole assembly to join – a singular note upon which are built harmonies and a mantra of sorts, “I love. I love. I love. I love.”⁸ At this point, back in the WC Daniel dies his shirt soaked in blood – a blood-stained bookend referring back to the beating and nose bleed at the outset.

While this shorthand synopsis of the film doesn’t do it justice, I trust that it provides an entry point and/or a refresher.

Evaluating the “is like”

Now I return to evaluate this little proposition about “reading” film in a manner that mimics the biblical parables of the kingdom by placing “for the kingdom of heaven is like” at the outset of the film.

One might question (I do myself from time to time) using *Så som i himmelen* as the text to test this. In fact, I don’t think it would be too difficult to read the film as a Christ-figure film. There are enough touchpoints between the character of Daniel Darius and the story of Christ to make it work and atonement-wise, perhaps the closest resemblance is with John’s gospel. At the same time, we need to return to Baroque composer Antonio Vivaldi (4 Mach 1678 – 28 July 1741), whose biography could as much provide the backbone for the character of Daniel Darius as could Jesus Christ.⁹

Not long after *Father Vivaldi* was ordained a priest he began to complain about a “tightness of chest” when celebrating the mass – a malady that exempted him from performing this central responsibility of his priestly calling. He became a music teacher and director at Ospedale della Pietà, a home for girls – some orphans, others “illegitimate” offspring of nobles. He brought out the musical best of the young women to the point that their ensemble was well known and respected. There are other striking parallels between Daniel Darius and Vivaldi that can be left for another day.¹⁰ For now, let me say that what one viewer might see as an obvious cinematic quotation of New Testament portrayals of Christ might in the eye of another behold be an obvious reference to the life of the “Red Priest,” Father Antonio Vivaldi.

When the film is seen within the horizon of Vivaldi’s life and coupled with the blunt anti-ecclesial and humanistic tones of the film, it is rather clear that *Så som i himmelen* is not so easily categorized as a Jesus-film. To place “for the kingdom of heaven is like” at the outset, then, does not just rubber stamp (so to speak) a slightly cloaked religious film. In terms of calculated error, then, *Så som i himmelen* in spite of its title is rather a surprise... for the kingdom of heaven *is like* something other than the church, at least as portrayed in the film. The world that the film projects, then, is one hostile to the church, its dogmas and judgments.¹¹ For this there is no New

⁸ This single note is a curious thing that could be a reference to the Hindu “om.”

⁹ Vivaldi’s life (?) is the subject of a 2009 film, *Vivaldi, the Red Priest*, directed by Liana Marabini.

¹⁰ It seems that Daniel’s relationship with Lena reminisces on Vivaldi’s relationship with Anna Giraud. Also, Vivaldi’s performance as a priest was unorthodox and questioned For a compact biography of Vivaldi: <http://www.baroquemusic.org/bqxvivaldi.html>.

¹¹ After Inger finds out that Stig has fired Daniel, she says to him, “I pity you, Stig, giving sermons on the crucifixion then crucifying Daniel yourself!” (85’)

Testament analogue,¹² other than the calculated error of the parable, which by way of absurd juxtaposition redefines reality.¹³

Seeing the film in the light of this calculated error reorients the focus of the film from Daniel as the central character to the choir and its collective music. To be more specific, it is the choir's transformation – its individual members and the wider community of Ljusåker – that is the focus. The world projected... created by the film – the world into which we the viewers are born is not a simple alignment with established religion or even orthodox theology. In fact, this rebellious choir sings an alternative community into existence – a community where the dark corners of their lives are illuminated, where often painful honesty makes way for joy. Is this the kingdom of heaven in the here and now? Perhaps an artistic glimpse.¹⁴

This is my little experiment. I look forward to your comments and critiques, as I ponder its value and its application beyond this lovely little Swedish film.

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¹² If anything, the priest and his church as portrayed in the film are more emblematic of Jesus' disciples and the early Christian church reflected in Scripture and/or the religious establishment that sought to rid itself of Jesus' heresy.

¹³ One could also follow Barth's biblically rooted observation: "If the Church is visible, this need not imply that we actually see it in its full compass, that the dimensions of its sphere might not be very different from what we think them to be. God may suddenly be pleased to have Abraham blessed by Melchizedek, or Israel blessed by Balaam or helped by Cyrus." (Barth 1975, I.1.54)

¹⁴ "Neither Christians nor anyone else can build the kingdom. At best, persons can align themselves with the future of God as they see it, but knowing that they must not confuse their convictions with the absolute will of God. God will bring about the kingdom. Waiting in patience does not mean being absolutely passive. But it means that we realize that God's purposes are greater than our own." (Hultgren 2002, 390)