

Article

“Nothing Sacred”: Violence, Time and Meaning in the Cinema of Possibilities

Sam B. Girgus

Department of English, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235, USA; sam.b.girgus@vanderbilt.edu

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Abstract: Hemingway’s disenchantment with the idea of the sacred as expressed in *A Farewell to Arms* became a defining aspect of the modern experience including in some Hollywood films such as *Nothing Sacred* and *Twentieth Century*. An attempt for a return to the sacred can be found in the philosophies of such figures as Levinas and Kristeva, among others. Cinema can help in this movement to a return to the sacred through film’s ability to manipulate time.

Keywords: sacred; existential; time; ethics; presence

1. Hemingway and the Cult of Disbelief: The Loss of the Sacred

Hemingway spoke for more than one “lost generation.” In his second novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, a classic story of modern love, war and death, Hemingway’s hero-protagonist American Frederick Henry deserts as a volunteer ambulance driver for the Italians in World War I. He flees in disgust over the senseless loss of life and the mindless dereliction of duty by commanders. Escaping from a mountainous battlefield as Italian police fire on their own troops, Henry makes his “separate peace,” declaring “You were out of it now (Hemingway 1957).”¹ Henry’s disillusionment expresses the thoughts and feelings of many from all fronts and all sides of the war during and after the fighting. Hemingway famously writes, “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain . . . I had seen nothing sacred and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it” (pp. 184, 185).

Such disbelief and disenchantment dramatize more than the reaction to the slaughter and horrors of modern mechanized warfare. Going back to the nihilism and alienation of at least the previous century, Hemingway’s expression of disaffection and disengagement constitutes an attack against abstraction and generalization. Hemingway’s connection to deep strains of modern consciousness and sensibility can be found in his well-known prayer to “nada” in his short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” He writes, “Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee (Hemingway 1966).” As Robert Penn Warren stated decades ago, Hemingway gives us “the God-abandoned world, the world of Nature-as-all . . . the world with nothing at center (Warren 1966, pp. 89, 90).”

Warren also brilliantly delineates the irony of how Hemingway’s fiercely masculine code of sensation and immediate experience soon transmogrifies in the novel into its own set of beliefs and abstractions in the form of a new religion of love in the relationship between Henry and his nurse Catherine Barkley. Warren writes, “The initiates of the cult of love are those who are aware of nada but

¹ All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.

their effort, as members of the cult, is to find a meaning to put in place of the nada. That is, there is an attempt to make the relationship of love take on a religious significance in so far as it can give meaning to life (Warren 1966, p. 96).” Thus, the novel transforms Catherine Barkley into “Your lovely cool goddess. English goddess. My God what would a man do with a woman like that except worship her?” (p. 67) Henry’s cynical friend Rinaldi continues his assault on Henry’s sentimentality by accusing him of turning Catherine into a “sacred” subject (p. 169). Catherine reciprocates such worship and adoration, telling Frederick, “You’re my religion” (p. 116).

Unfortunately for Henry, turning a human being into an icon and religion guarantees its loss and demise. Upon Catherine’s death in child birth, Henry leaves the hospital alone in the rain with nada.

Hemingway’s language and sensibility in *A Farewell to Arms* marks a sea change at the time of its publication in 1929 in the emergence of transformative impulses in American thought and life regarding belief and values. It stands on a liminal historic point between the post-World War I cynicism, self-indulgence and death wish of the time of Gatsby and the collapse of the American system in the Great Depression. Thus, in terms of literary and cultural history, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* proffers a powerful platform from which to open a discussion on the loss and then the search for the sacred, a quest that resonates with similar impulses and movements in the West.

The crisis and challenge to the sacred in modern thought and life that Hemingway and his novel represent can be explained in part by what Mark Lilla’s describes as the West’s centuries-long division between the secular and the sacred. Lilla maintains “a revolution in Western thinking that began roughly four centuries ago” instigated an unprecedented break in human history that “challenged the basic principles on which authority had been justified in most societies in history.” Lilla writes, “The ambition of the new philosophy was to develop habits of thinking and talking about politics exclusively in human terms, without appeal to divine revelation or cosmological speculation. The hope was to wean Western societies from all political theology and cross to the other shore. What began as a thought-experiment thus became an experiment in living that we inherited” (Lilla 2008).

The apparent reluctance today to discuss the sacred in public discourse can be attributed in part to this historic rupture that Lilla identifies as the rigid demarcation between the sacred and the secular, especially in Western thought and life. Of course, this absence of a realm of special meaning for the sacred has been addressed by serious thinkers in our times. In the face of the accelerating sexualization of the culture and the pervasive commodification of all aspects of private and personal life, some thinkers return to the idea of the sacred to consider what it means today to be human. Thus, celebrated ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues for an ethics based on transcendence in relationships to others that can be considered a “secularization of the sacred.” He writes, “Now ethics, when proposed as a modality of transcendence, can be thought on the basis of the secularization of the sacred.” Controversial on the sacred and on other subjects as well, Levinas proffers a new subjectivity based on ethical relationships and transcendence that reach for “the untouchable: the sacred” (Levinas 2000).²

A reaffirmation of the sacred without deference to a traditional paternalistic deity has been a key project for Julia Kristeva, the French psychoanalyst, feminist and philosopher. Ironically, as she awakens awareness of the need for the sacred, Kristeva reorganizes subjects and redefines terms that engender crisis and disillusionment in *A Farewell to Arms*. Rethinking Freud and the unconscious and focusing on the maternal body, Kristeva emphasizes the transformation of “semiotic” bodily drives and instincts into symbolic forms of language for meaning and relationships. She avers the sacred by embracing the feminine and the maternal as the means for creating meaning in life. Instead of finding only disillusionment and death in the sacred and the maternal, Kristeva in *The Feminine and the Sacred* says that “what comes back to us as ‘sacred’ in the experience of a woman is the impossible and nevertheless sustained connection between life and meaning” (Clément and Kristeva 2001).

² All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as GDT.

For Kristeva death and loss without meaning constitute a dominant sign of modern times, pervading diverse aspects of life and becoming a potent source of psychological and spiritual illness. She associates a “nonsymbolized death drive” with “evil” (Kristeva and Revolt 2002, p. 79).³ She has argued, therefore, for the importance of language in articulating a symbolism that bridges body and soul, a new order that incorporates sacrifice and the sacred. She writes, “All religions, using the trenchant effects of language in various and less conscious ways, celebrate the sacred as a sacrifice: that of a plant, an animal, or a man. Judaism and then Christianity, admit that this sacrifice is the one that inscribes language in the body, meaning in life (Clément and Kristeva 2001, p. 15).”

Kristeva believes the sacrifices of all kinds—psychological, ethical, physical, emotional, mental—that go into creating and sustaining the sacred ultimately must occur on multiple aesthetic and cultural levels to endow experience and life with sustainable meaning. This demand for action on a variety of fronts means challenging what she sees as the “culture of the image” and “the society of the spectacle” (IR: 4, 5, 169) that overwhelm and robotize people into mindless consumers. She maintains that “man has become a simple conglomerate of organs, no longer a subject but a patrimonial person, a person belonging to the patrimony, financially, genetically and physiologically, a person barely free enough to use a remote control to choose a channel” (IR: 4). For Kristeva, in the culture and society of the spectacle, images seduce and manipulate, destroying any remnant of a European inspired “culture fashioned by doubt and critique” (IR: 4). She says, “We are inundated with images, some of which resonate with our fantasies and appease us but which, for lack of interpretative words, do not liberate us. Moreover, the stereotype of these images deprives us of the possibility of creating our own imagery, our own imaginary scenarios” (IR: 67). Such a society, she feels, “is losing its moral and aesthetic impact” (IR: 4).⁴

In this engagement with a culture of images and spectacle that stultifies imagination, independence and true regeneration, Kristeva sees cinema as certainly complicit in the perpetuation of meaninglessness. At its worst, film as part of mass and popular culture cultivates self-destructive forces of self-indulgence, narcissism and nihilism.

Cinema, however, also contains the means and resources to engage and counter its own destructiveness.⁵ In terms of reimagining and reconstructing the sacred for individual and cultural meaning, Kristeva maintains cinema can go “beyond the image-referential sign” to the “borders of the unrepresentable” to become “a support of the transcendental quest” (IR: 76, 77, 78). Thus, the cinematic image can achieve more than simply reducing film to the audio-visual representation of existence and reality. What Kristeva considers a cinema of revolt and thought can intimate a spiritual realm of meaning. She associates the image in this cinema of the “thought specular” with St. Augustine’s words, “Man walks in the image” (IR: 69, 78–79).⁶

³ All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as IR.

⁴ See also *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1983) and *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (McLuhan 1951).

⁵ In a comparatively brief but intense and compact discussion and critique, she proffers a cinema of “revolt” to help create a space for emerging “soul” and meaning. Accordingly, Kristeva identifies “great filmmakers” (IR: 75) who deemphasize the denotative “flat images” of immediate referentiality that predominate in much cinema (IR: 74). Such great filmmakers develop what she terms from the Greek stoics “lekton” or “expressible” images that resonate on interconnected levels of meaning (IR: 74). For Kristeva, the lektonic image propels an art of filmmaking that she calls a cinema of “the thought specular,” a form of creative thinking constituted and energized by cinematic images (IR: 74–75). She says, “We might call this second type of image the thought specular. Cinema—when it is great art, from Eisenstein to Godard and not a universal journalistic style or more or less dramatized stereotypes—seizes us precisely in this place” (IR: 69). Kristeva associates the cinema of the “thought specular” of lektonic images with “modern art—painting, sculpture, music.” For Kristeva, the lektonic incorporates into the “raw image” the “tones, rhythms, colors, figures” of primary drives and impulses that Freud deems processes and she terms the semiotic (IR: 74–75).

⁶ Also of considerable importance for a systematic argument for film and the sacred, Kristeva’s theory of the image and cinema can be read to address Levinas’ concern for the potential of the visual image to degenerate into “idolatry” (IR: 78). Levinas worried in “Reality and Its Shadow” that a “represented object” becomes a “disincarnation of reality” and a “caricature.” See *The Levinas Reader* (Levinas 1989) and *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics and the Feminine* (Girgus 2010, p. 77). For Kristeva, great filmmakers accommodate the concerns Levinas expresses through the power of film art to go beyond the referential and superficial. She suggests the possibility of a cinema of the imaginary and the regenerative that reaches for that domain of transcendence that Levinas calls the “saying.”

In fact, Kristeva proposes the possibility for cinema art and thought to manifest the inexpressible and ineffable, what Levinas considers the domain of true ethical subjectivity and meaning. Levinas directly confronts the challenge of finding the language to express his ethical project of transcendence. Levinas writes, “We are attempting here to describe thoughts that cannot be reduced to containing what is thought by them but which should allow us to think properly what the word ‘transcendence’ means. It is *ethics* that must make this investigation possible—concretely possible” (*GDT*: 163). For Kristeva, the ethical concreteness that Levinas seeks can be formed and found in the cinema of revolt and the “thought specular,” what she sees as a new art form of creative thinking constituted and energized by cinematic images (*IR*: 75, 74). This artistic cinema projects a saving cultural alternative to the pervasive cinema of mass conformity and thoughtlessness that Kristeva anathematizes as the society of the spectacle and image. Kristeva fights fire with fire, so to speak, one kind of image versus another.

2. Possibilities: The Sacred in Cinematic Time

Levinas’ ethical phenomenology of transcendence and Kristeva’s psychoanalysis of a culture of spiritually sick souls provide a valuable context to rethink the search for the sacred, including in the current cinema. Their understanding of the work of time as a crucial force in their ethical thought can be seen to inform the unique relationship of time to film in perceiving and constructing the sacred.

Time opens the cinema to the sacred, filling film with meaning. The promise of the sacred inheres in film, not necessarily in content, iconic images, religious symbolism or inspired narrative but in the very ontology of film itself as a singularly unique art form and medium of time. Cinema accentuates and motivates the intrinsic violence of time and its potential for sacrifice and the sacred. Exploiting the inexorable loss of the present and the moment in time, cinema enacts in its structure the violence of endings and beginnings through time that in turn enable the possible realization of loss and sacrifice for the sacred. The rupturing and reconstruction of image and sound in the filmic process parallel and articulate temporal experience.

Complicating matters, the violence of a temporal regime of non-linear, diachronic time engages the violence of the procession and disruption of synchronic, linear time. Both forms of time—the diachronic and synchronic—engender a cinema of possibilities. The different temporal regimes clash while informing and defining each other. The infinite encounters the finite. As Levinas says, “Time is not the limitation of being but its relationship with the infinite . . . A deference of the immemorial to the unforeseeable” (*GDT*: 19). The mysteries and aporias of time introduce an exterior dimension of transcendence into film. The cinema of possibilities empowers the filmmaker to strive for the unspeakable and invisible of ethical responsibility. To appreciate the special relationship of time and film to the sacred, it helps to understand how film is made out of time, how time makes film possible and how this possible of time becomes a possible for the sacred.

It is not, therefore, just what cinema says, shows and dramatizes about time in a particular film but what film does with time that also requires further study and elucidation. Thus, Mary Ann Doane describes film as a literal time “machine.” She writes, “The imprint of the real was automatically guaranteed by the known capability of the machine. For the first time, an aesthetic representation—previously chained to the idea of human control—could be made by accident” (Doane 2002, p. 22). Film became equated with time. She writes, “Film was perceived as the imprint of time itself . . . a time unharnessed from rationalization, a nonteleological time in which each moment can produce the unexpected, the unpredictable and temporality ratifies indeterminacy. Film, in its mechanical and unrelenting forward movement, appears as the incarnation of the thermodynamic law of irreversibility and as such gives witness to time as the erosion of organization and the free field of chance” (pp. 22–23). Similarly, Andrey Tarkovsky, the great film director and philosopher of film, proposes that “the virtue of cinema is that it appropriates time.” Tarkovsky goes so far as to assert that time becomes the actual material of cinema. He asks, “What is the essence of the director’s work? We could define it as sculpting in time” (Tarkovsky 1986).

For Doane, the relationship between film and time also turns the film machine into “a philosophical machine for the demonstration of duration in its truth—for the presentation of ‘time in the pure state’” (Doane 2002, p. 175).⁷ The temporal nature of film that shoots and projects at a usual speed of 16–24 frames a second makes time into film art in its representation of time.

The relationship between film and time, however, manifests in film form the inexorable crises of time. Film articulates the aporetic nature of time. Doane develops the insights of some of film’s most influential thinkers in analyzing the paradoxes of “the experience of presence” in film. She writes, “Once the present as contingency has been seized and stored, it ineluctably becomes the past” (Doane 2002, p. 23). The tension between presence and absence helps to structure film. Doane says that in film cuts, gaps, breaks, intervals and off-screen dynamics make the representation of time possible and visible. She writes, “The representational struggles over temporality are fought on the terrain of the visible versus the invisible” (p. 190).

Jacques Derrida expatiates upon such issues so close to the ontology of film in ways that deepen understanding of the complexity of the relationship of time to film. He asks, “Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence?”⁸ Derrida writes, “There is no experience which can be lived other than in the present. The absolute impossibility of living other than in the present, this eternal impossibility, defines the unthinkable as the limit of reason” (WD: 132).

The inevitable engagement of the present with the past and the future and the other leads to the conclusion that “then time is violence.” Derrida writes, “The living present is originally marked by death. Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude, the meaning of meaning as history” (WD: 133). Similarly, he says that “time is that which erases . . . time.” Derrida maintains, “Time already has been suppressed at the moment one asks the question of its meaning, when one relates it to appearing, truth, presence, or essence in general.”⁹ In this context of time, death, loss and paradox, Derrida describes “the Sacred” as belonging “neither to religion in general, nor to a particular theology and thus cannot be determined by any history of religion.” He says, “It is first the essential experience of divinity or of deity” (WD: 145).

The relationship of time and film to death, sacrifice and loss creates a cinema of possibilities for the sacred and transcendent. Film embodies Derrida’s notion that “Time is a name for this impossible possibility” (MP: 55). Film as a time machine, a philosophical machine and even “a Freudian time machine” (Doane 2002, p. 224) reimagines, restructures and reorganizes time, meaning spatially organized, linear time and diachronic time as well as the interaction between them. Film, thereby, also transforms into a transcendence machine, an apparatus with the potential to incorporate the sacred.

Levinas like Derrida also discusses time, death and the possible in ways that enlighten the importance of time in its relationship to the sacred in film. Levinas emphasizes a possible time that differs radically in nature from ordinary, regulated linear time. Challenging Heidegger’s notion of time as determined by mortality and the end of being, Levinas asserts that “there is therefore a more profound, or originary, time behind linear time” (GDT: 54). He seeks a time that is “not the not-yet of linear time” but a “possible” time as “the most properly possible” (GDT: 54).

Accordingly, Levinas looks for a possibility of time beyond being, a time of ethics before and greater than being. In “God and Philosophy,” he writes, “Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond” (Levinas 1996). Such ethical time operates “without recourse to quantitative notions of time” so that “the future and an originary notion of time” can be seen as a time “more properly time than was everyday time” (GDT: 55).

⁷ The quote from *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Deleuze 1986).

⁸ See “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 1978). All subsequent references to these works will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as WD.

⁹ See *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida 1982). All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as MP.

Time and film operate to suggest an invisible realm of transcendent relationships. Film projects the “invisible” of breaks, cuts, gaps and off-screen space that Doane discusses. In a different context of the invisible, Derrida says, “There is a visible in-visible, an invisible of the order of the visible that I can keep secret by keeping it out of sight” (Derrida 2008, p. 90). Derrida’s invisible nurtures a profound secret inner ethical subjectivity. When presciently imagined in film, this Derridean invisible in the cinema engages Derrida’s own skepticism about “the cinematographic concept of time” (MP: 57) as linear and spatially-organized time and Julia Kristeva’s issues with conventional, pre-fabricated film images.¹⁰ Non-linear diachronic time in cinema becomes part of the art form itself, often without verbal, dramatic or rhetorical recognition in the text of a film and also often without directly addressing spectator awareness or consciousness.¹¹

Kristeva’s approach to time adds to the potency of her criticism of the media of images and spectacles and strengthens her project for a cinema of revolt of dynamic images. The domain of the invisible, the hidden, the time of renewal that breaks with linear, regulated time goes, for Kristeva, through the unconscious. She assiduously rethinks Freud’s time of the unconscious that she describes as the *zeitloss* of lost time. She writes, “The term *timeless*, which I analyzed in *Intimate Revolt*, is a Freudian notion that applies to the time of the unconscious: the unconscious is not aware of time; it is *zeitlos*, timeless, outside time” (Kristeva 2010).¹²

Kristeva on time provides a psychoanalytical basis to argue for the importance of non-spatialized time in the search for the sacred and regeneration. She therefore concentrates on “the timeless of the intrapsychical drive and the prepsychical” (IR: 39). Like Levinas, for Kristeva the idea of the infinite proves important in articulating a new ethical subjectivity based on a fresh understanding of time. While Levinas proclaims “We must pass beyond Heidegger” in seeing time in relation to the infinite and the death of the other, (GDT: 43), Kristeva thinks of “unbound time: *Zeitlos*” (IR: 40) as part of the experience of the death of the other, in particular the analyst. This experience, she says, “situates me in this temporality of a double infinity—an infinity of impossibility and openness” (IR: 40). She writes, “With Freud, death takes its time in time (death wastes its time in time) and, by being absorbed in unbound time, becomes a source of serenity and indulgence” (IR: 40). For Kristeva, “the epistemological paradox of the timeless” in the relationship of multiple “infinities” proves “indispensable to this analysis of intimate revolt” (IR: 41).

3. Cinematic Time: A Sacred Optics

In film as a time machine of philosophy, transcendence and the unconscious, a crucial form of the Sacred’s return occurs through the insinuation of non-linear diachronic time into the regulated regime of linear time. In this and other ways, the cinema of possibilities structures and works with different perplexities of time to engender the sacred as the outcome of the relationship of time to love, death and sacrifice. In this order of multiple temporalities of the finite and infinite, the sacred reaches toward the temporal horizon for transcendence beyond immediate experience. The cinema of possibilities expresses the sacred in Derrida’s “visible in-visible” in the relationship of responsibility through time to the other. In cinema, the possibility of the impossibility of a new time opens a path toward a new ethics of relationships to the other.

For Levinas, the relation to the infinite becomes possible through an awakened vision, a special ethical optics. Following Augustine, he considers vision as the “very possibility” of an ethics, arguing “ethics is an optics.” He writes, “The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it

¹⁰ See “Fantasy and Cinema” in *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (Kristeva 2002, pp. 63–80 and notes 11–12 above).

¹¹ See *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics and the Feminine* (Girgus 2010) and *Clint Eastwood’s America* (Girgus 2013).

¹² See *Hatred and Forgiveness* (Kristeva 2010). All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as HF.

consummates this vision; ethics is an optics.”¹³ Levinas’ vision “institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality” (TI: 23). He writes, “The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires in which one does not speak” (TI: 23). For Levinas, ethical vision fulfills the messianic impulse that transforms ordinary time into infinite time and transcendence.¹⁴ He says, “Ethics is the spiritual optics” (TI: 78). Similarly, he persists, “The vision of God is a moral act. This optics is an ethics” (Levinas 1990).

In spite of Levinas’ qualms and reservations about images, cinematic time creates the ineluctable possibility of dramatizing his ethical vision. Embodying and enacting the temporal aporetics of presence, loss and absence, cinema also encounters the non-synchronic time of the other that compels ethical engagement. Built on a vaporously volatile foundation of the violent interaction of the visible and invisible, cinematic time opens to the possibility of the infinite and transcendent.

Accordingly, cinematic time can perpetuate the mindless robotization of consumerism and the spectacle in a culture of commodification or it can instigate a shocking de-familiarization of the same and a displacement of the self as a prologue for a new subjectivity and relationship to the other. Kristeva, Levinas and Derrida provide conceptual instruments and structured epistemological methodologies for understanding this possibility of revolt and renewal, especially in the context of a reawakening to the sacred, transcendence and the infinite. Regarding the relationship of cinema and time to the sacred, their work on time and ethics suggests multiple possibilities for the ethical encounter in film, including narrative structures that employ Kristeva’s radicalized Freudianism of *Verneinung* or negation and *Verleugnung* or denial along with Levinas’ ethical vision of redemption. Their writings inform the struggle to understand the loss and the search for the sacred as represented in the cinema. As the work of these thinkers would suggest, interesting movements and trends in world and American cinema as well as provocative and enlightening parallels and contrasts between films and cinemas can be discerned and studied in light of the tensions in the relationship of cinematic time to the sacred. Several subject areas seem especially enlightening on cinematic time and ethics.

Thus, over the century-long history of cinema, the attempt by some of the most successful and talented directors in film history to translate Shakespeare onto the screen constitutes something of a case study of the effort to make cinematic time create new meaning. The mid-century Shakespeare films of Laurence Olivier famously demonstrate the use of cinematic art to dramatize passage through mysterious interior psychological spaces of Kristevian “zeitlos” or lost time in *Hamlet* (1947) as well as the power of the “gaze” to transform linear historic time to a realm of transcendence in *Henry V* (1944) and *Richard III* (1955). While Orson Welles and Roman Polanski also famously work creatively with time in their films of Shakespeare, the great Russian director and scholar Grigori Kozintsev studied time and conscience in Shakespeare noting, “Time is not an abstract idea in Shakespeare; it is, rather, an aggregate of circumstances (Kozintsev 1966).” Kozintsev put his ideas into practice in his classic films of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1975).

Also in American film, both Sam Peckinpah’s classic western *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Tommy Lee Jones’ *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) evidence the lasting flexibility and durability of the genre of the American Western to articulate depths of psychological realism and profound moral conflict.¹⁵ Both films exhibit the power of the Western to dramatize social and cultural complexities that challenge the geographic boundaries of the genre. While Peckinpah suggests an ending to the historical sense of absolute certainty about American values, purpose and hegemony that parallels a collapse of

¹³ See *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Levinas 1969, p. 23). All subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text as TI.

¹⁴ For additional discussion of Levinas and messianic time, see my *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption*, (Girgus 2010, pp. 20–22).

¹⁵ For my discussion of the major Eastwood films that fit into this category see Clint Eastwood’s America (Girgus 2013) and for a recent argument about Allen’s developing nihilism over the years see my “Afterword: The Abyss: Woody Allen on Love, Death and God” in *A Companion to Woody Allen* (Girgus 2013). Also see “Which Woody Allen?” in *A Companion to Woody Allen* (Glenn 2013).

codes of masculine authority, responsibility and integrity, Jones' more recent film intimates the vitality of a form of ethical and moral transcendence, responsibility and redemption. Both films position women as at the core of the crisis of modern values and meaning.

Two very different French films from different eras represent the psyches, intellects and bodies of women as scenes of contrasting forms of transformation through time. Patrice Chéreau's *Queen Margot* (1994) presents an historic melodrama of violence and sacrifice in which the body of la Reine Margot (Isabelle Adjani) provides the means for religious, national and individual redemption. The sacrificial body overcomes the profanity of the historical period and the obscene conditions at court to achieve an experience of moral transcendence. In marked contrast, the controversial film *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) by Abdellatif Kechiche concentrates on developing the phenomenological and psychological potential power of cinematic time to convey the *jouissance* and pain of love as a sexual, emotional and spiritual experience of the forces of renewal and the hope for redemption as opposed to loss and abandonment. Kechiche brilliantly parallels the interior time and psyche of a vibrant and engaging French teenager named Adèle, who is portrayed to near perfection by Adèle Exarchopoulos, with the daily, ordinary time of just about everyone else in the film, unfortunately including her older, sophisticated lover, seducer and mentor, the artist Emma (Léa Seydoux). Love as an experience of different meanings in time in *Blue is the Warmest Color* compares to expressions of the relationship of time and love to meaning and responsibility in such films as Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1966), Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Lover* (1992) and Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

Several of these French films suggest the challenge of finding meaning and fulfillment within temporal boundaries restricted to immanent experience. Such films tend to confront the possibility of temporal alterity with varying degrees of denial or negation. Thus, the question of the commensurability between internal ethical belief and behavior and external social and cultural demands often focuses on consequences, sentiment, character and social fairness, thereby sometimes leaving aside the issue of a deeper, ineffable ethical subjectivity of belief and commitment.

In contrast to such works of self-absorption, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and a considerable body of work by Alejandro González Iñárritu reemphasize the power of cinema to employ multiple temporalities, most especially a temporal dimension of transcendence, to suggest meaning beyond the narrow boundaries of the existential self. Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006) and *Biutiful* (2010) project a different time that concentrates on the other as a means for positioning and understanding the self. Time in these films as the relationship of the immediate and finite to the infinite extends the horizons of meaning to place priority upon love and regeneration as absolute responsibility to the other. The films proffer the potential power of the sacred in the condition of modernity.

Cinema's special condition as a unique temporal art suggests a vital relationship for film to the infinite, to the invisible that opens possibilities for transcendence and the sacred. The question then becomes what kind of relationship to the sacred would be most preferable for film. It soon becomes apparent that film and life share the same possibilities and questions regarding time and the sacred.

4. *Nothing Sacred* (1937) and *Twentieth Century* (1934)

Interestingly, recognizing the economic, social and intellectual malaise of their times, one way Hollywood in the mid-1930s dealt with the crises of belief in modernity involved the invention of madcap, screwball comedy. With remarkably acute prescience, a gathering of brilliant, irreverent, iconoclastic and sophisticated writers, including Charles MacArthur, Ben Hecht, Ring Lardner, Jr. and Budd Schulberg, among others, encapsulated the significance of the crisis of belief in the very titles, art form, structure and content of some of their best films.

As two good examples of such films, *Nothing Sacred* names the crisis and *Twentieth Century* indicates the historical, social and cultural dimensions of the situation. These two comedies did more than merely turn uncertainty and disbelief into a concatenation of great one-liners, deliciously insolvable dilemmas, hilarious physical interactions and farcical romantic situations. The form of

the comedies as versions of the sub-genre of screwball comedy suggests the failure to find fixed and stable meaning in a culture and time of disbelief when values become temporary constructs for the moment only to be replaced by other values for the sake of expedience and convenience. The films convey the cynicism, nihilism and narcissism that inevitably accompany such spiritual and ethical opportunism. A successful film comedy and commercial product, *Nothing Sacred*, which was directed by William A. Wellman and written by Hecht, Lardner and Schulberg and starred Carole Lombard and Fredric March, proved less substantial artistically and intellectually than *Twentieth Century* which came first and broke new ground for the screwball comedy form.

Written by Hecht and MacArthur for Howard Hawks as the director and starring John Barrymore and Carole Lombard, *Twentieth Century* drives its comedy over a deep text of caustic cultural and intellectual criticism and analysis. Based on a Broadway play, *Napoleon on Broadway* by Charles Bruce Millholland, Hecht and MacArthur created a stinging penetrating screenplay that excoriates the culture they helped to make. The film's title, of course, also refers to the high-speed, super-efficient, luxury train "The Twentieth-Century Limited" that travelled non-stop between New York City and Chicago, becoming a symbol of the wonders of modern technology and design. The train provides the unlikely but convenient setting for most of the action of the film. The story focuses on the clash of egos and personalities between the film's two main characters, the once-brilliant but fading Broadway genius Oscar Jaffe (Barrymore) and his ingénue and sometime lover Lilly Garland (Lombard). For the aging Broadway icon, the actress' flight from his control to achieve stardom in Hollywood on her own comes as a heart-felt act of betrayal, not only to him personally but to the putative values of the theater that he allegedly cherishes. In fact, the film makes clear that Hollywood represents new times not solely because of its successful application of modern industrial techniques to a new industry of artistic and cultural production; mostly Hollywood epitomizes the psychological and cultural values and characteristics of narcissism and self-obsession that Jaffe and Lombard so entertainingly and charmingly embody.

Twentieth Century even anticipated by several years some of the major fiction of the era such as Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* (1939) in insinuating a transcendent dimension into the narrative that presents the possibility of an apocalyptic ending for the people and culture of the film for their sins, most importantly for the offense of undermining their true talents and gifts with self-inflicted wounds of isolation and immurement in a mindset of self-absorbed sameness that eschews any challenges of alterity and difference. Hecht and MacArthur ingest jeremiad-like warnings of doom and death into the film that acquire sharp pungency from the writers' acerbic wit, charm and irony. Keeping with this apocalyptic theme, the presence in the film of a strangely deranged character Mathew J. Clark (Etienne Girardot), who walks through the train pasting signs all over it that call for redemption and repentance, at first seems to be just another act of comical exaggeration and incoherence until it becomes clear that rather than disparaging religion his actions and character can be taken as the accentuation of the absence of genuine belief and community among the train's passengers. Beneath the man's erratic behavior and eccentric demeanor, the film makes a serious allusion to the very crisis of belief, care and faith in others that haunts this train.

In a culture and society so dominated and characterized by schedules, production, money-measured success, self-centeredness as the sign of identity, it happens that any time beyond the visible and tangible proves important only as a potential obstacle to self-advancement. At one point, Garland confesses to Jaffe that they both have evolved into the same self-obsessed person who can only perform roles without achieving authenticity or originality. The competition between them, as John Belton notes (Belton 2009), sometimes becomes physical even to the point of violence (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Lilly throws Oscar out (*Twentieth Century*, 1934, Howard Hawks, Dir.).

Such exchanges emphasize the submerged intensity that energizes the comedy of their relationship. Some of the emotion derives from Jaffe's pretense of representing a great theatrical tradition as opposed to the meretriciousness of Hollywood. In fact, his ham acting as a superior artist and thinker dissimulates his obsolescence as a has-been in a world changing too fast for him to catch up (Figure 2). The film clearly proposes that Lilly's Hollywood displaces the classic Shakespearean metaphor of the world as a stage for all people with a new paradigm of a manufactured social and cultural reality of mass-produced images for people too self-obsessed to notice anything beside their own personal despair and estrangement.



Figure 2. Oscar imitates a camel (*Twentieth Century*, 1934, Howard Hawks, Dir.).

Both Lilly and Oscar remain prisoners of their own egos and the garish images they create of themselves, mirroring each other in character if not in actual appearance. Interestingly, Jaffe repeatedly uses the idea of the closing of “an iron door” to self-consciously dramatize his intention to shun anyone who challenges him, thereby further demonstrating his self-enclosure. At the same time, the one character who truly challenges him happens to be a Jewish producer, Max Jacobs (Charles Lane). As a representative of a different or outsider point of view with a solid character and his own values and standards, Jacobs presents a true threat, so Jaffe mocks the authenticity of his identity by insinuating that he changed his name to Jacobs from Max Mandelbaum to hide his questionable past.

The film also brilliantly hints at the rise of the cult of personality in the twentieth century. True to the original Napoleonic aura of Jaffe’s personality that carries over from the original play, two important secondary characters have subordinate, indeed subservient, roles in the film that they play with devoted deference to Jaffe. The characters are portrayed by two of the Hollywood era’s most venerable, effective and reliable character actors, Walter Connolly (Oliver Webb) as an overworked and over-protective business manager and Roscoe Karns (Owen O’Malley) as an apparently comedically indispensable Irish alcoholic press agent. The two men literally indenture themselves to Jaffe. They work ceaselessly to satisfy his whims, moods and desires. Although Karns often treats the situation with sardonic irony, the demeaning and demoralizing subversion of the lives of these two men to serve Jaffe triggers alarms about individual independence in a historic period that witnessed the emergence of dictatorial figures throughout the world.

Like most great comedies, as Hamlin Hill maintains, *Twentieth Century* triumphs because of the seriousness of its humor.¹⁶ The film speaks to our own times as evidenced by plans announced in May 2014 for a Broadway revival of the 1978 musical comedy version of the film, *On the Twentieth Century*, with Tony Award winner Kristin Chenoweth scheduled to play Lilly opposite Peter Gallagher as Oscar. Such news testifies to the durability of the vision and talent of the people who made the film so many decades ago. In those inter-war years, Hollywood manifested what Thomas Schatz terms the system’s special “genius” through the prescience of writers and filmmakers who saw into the abyss of the soullessness and nihilism of the modern and post-modern condition that occupies so much of the thought and writings of contemporary thinkers.¹⁷ Such Hollywood writers claimed a kind of bohemian, anti-conformist position for themselves in relation to Hollywood culture and to American society. This stance enabled these writers to both scorn any people so shallow as to hold “nothing sacred” while also giving themselves artistic and critical license to consider “nothing sacred” when it came to their own writings, opinions and subjects. Such writers often adopted a kind of hard-boiled Hemingway-esque pose and attitude of “a little irony and pity” toward a broad spectrum of American culture from the most privileged members of the upper-classes to working and laboring class audiences.¹⁸

Nuanced complexities of the theme of “nothing sacred” also resonate in the writings of Kristeva, Levinas and Derrida in the sense of their commitment to what Kristeva considers a European critical consciousness of deeming all ideas and conditions as open to critical scrutiny and analytical examination. In addition, considering their writings, they each appreciate the power and art of humor to hold “nothing sacred” in giving expression and voice to the forces that shape psyches and cultures.

At the same time, the work of these thinkers reflects a profound concern about our era of abandonment and meaninglessness, in which both life itself and hope often seem to be marketable commodities and negotiable values. For Kristeva then, the quest for the sacred continues, taking her to the feminine and motherhood, past organized religion, orthodoxy and dogma to another place she terms *kenosis*, what philosopher Richard Kearney considers to be a post-holocaust, post-modern

¹⁶ See *America’s Humor from Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (Blair and Hill 1978).

¹⁷ See *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Schatz 1988).

¹⁸ See *The Sun Also Rises* (Hemingway [1926] 1954).

sensibility of the sacred as a form of emptying of the self to place priority upon the other as opposed to the historical Western emphasis on the autonomous self.¹⁹ Thus, in *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva writes, “I would therefore say that with *kénose* we are no longer confronted with the religious but with the *sacred*, understood as a traversal, via thought, of the unthinkable: nothingness, the useless, the vain, the absurd. To the *sacred*, which it is modern knowledge’s ambition to approach—fully aware of what is at stake” (Kristeva 2009). For Kristeva, the “stake” in the sacred literally involves giving the entirety of human experience meaning through a new way of thinking that compels transformations on many levels. Re-envisioning the melding of the word and the flesh, transforming the relationship of the body and soul can provide meaning to the suffering and sacrifice that impart power to the sacred. Language finds the divine in the flesh while the body and psyche seek regeneration by seeing and believing in a meaning to life and death that goes beyond the self toward a form of transcendence. For Kristeva, the search and return to the sacred revivifies meaning and life, animating the soul to break free from the spiritual, psychological and social “maladies” that strangle mental and social life today.²⁰ Accordingly, Kristeva’s vision also gives renewed meaning to the idea of a cinema of possibilities for seeing beyond the oppression of a life with “nothing sacred.”

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¹⁹ See *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (Kearney 2010). See also *God and the other: Essays and Politics after the Theological Turn* (Simmons 2011).

²⁰ See *New Maladies of the Soul* (Kristeva 1995). See also *Kristeva Intimate Revolt* (Kristeva 2002).

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