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Belief

In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Søren Kierkegaard introduces a series of classic problems: How do we summon the will to believe when our beliefs pose dangers to ourselves and our loved ones? How can we be sure that we are not misled in faith? How can we believe in a higher power in a world beset by suffering and despair? We are human beings, so we are fallible. The pursuit of faith has the potential to motivate us to embrace unrealizable ideals, stretch our abilities to interpret reality, and reveal our frailties to us. Genuine belief requires patience and fortitude as well as the honesty to meet the world where it actually is.

The best films that deal with the problem of belief recognize that faith is hard-won, initially presented as an unlikely option to the prospective believer. They pay attention to the conflicted context of the human situation, presenting us with reasons why the decision to believe can be so difficult. Where these films diverge is in their assessment of whether the decision to believe is a sound one. For all of the films made which praise the believer for leaping, there are as many in which the leapers are presented as dupes. Films that deal with the problem of belief can be split between those offering a positive perspective of the believer's worldview and those offering a negative one. In both, however, we are meant to identify with the protagonists whose lives hang in the balance. How will we cope in a world replete with suffering and brutality? How do we know when we must surrender to something bigger than ourselves, and what is our own responsibility to bear? The films that deal with the problem of belief capture our attention insofar as they address these perennial questions about our human predicament.

Generally, faith receives a positive treatment in film, even as particular religious traditions often do not. Many filmmakers are attracted to the error of human arrogance, and to the corresponding remedies of humility and belief in something transcendent. Many filmmakers are influenced by Kierkegaard, Blaise Pascal, and William James, who wager that we are better off if we make an earnest attempt to become receptive to the divine. Films that emphasize the positive effects of belief echo Pascal's conviction that human beings are less than God but greater than the

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other animals, unto themselves given to a life of suffering, but beings who have the capacity, through grace, to know to appeal to the heart. Yielding to faith is presented as the only way to resolve the contradictions of human nature. Despair is on display, but it does not have the final word.

The most conspicuous representations of faith present the audience with evidence that there is more to this world than meets the eye. In these films the question of whether or not we should believe is not left hanging: salvation depends on our believing in something. *Breaking the Waves* (1996), for example, controversially depicts the trials of the wife of an injured oil-rig worker who is told by her husband to sleep with other men. His instruction, combined with her successive revelations, lead her to assume terrible risks, each with increasingly violent results. Her decisions seem foolish; they incur the ridicule of her family and the villagers of her small coastal Scottish town. Yet, with each act of self-exploitation her husband's health improves, until he has recovered and she has martyred herself. This film offers a graphic representation of Kierkegaard's notion that faith, if true and strong enough, can supersede morality. Anyone who wonders if it is God and not some other voice that Bess hears receives an unequivocal answer when, upon her burial at sea in the final scene, we witness a bell tolling in the sky to mark the entry of an angel into heaven.

Breaking the Waves is not an isolated instance in which we are furnished with compelling evidence of the supernatural. *Pulp Fiction* (1994) contains a critical scene in which a hit man emerges from a close-range execution unscathed and decides that such an event is too unlikely to be attributed to good luck. Interpreting his good fortune as message from God, he is inspired instantly to change his life and walks away from a long criminal career. He survives the film, while his more skeptical partner, who credits the escape as mere chance, gets gunned down on the job. *Magnolia* (1999) weaves together disparate stories of people who need each other without knowing exactly why. Like the flower, our success as a species depends on our coflourishing despite the sensible reasons that would make us want to turn our backs on one another. A number of the film's characters lose their way; they live lives that are morally suspect and they have become sophisticated at rationalizing away their misdeeds. Is there a threshold of nonvirtuous living beyond which human beings reach a point of no return? Is there anyone watching who can guarantee justice in the long run? Lest we doubt, we are graphically presented with an unmistakable sign that there is a God overseeing our progress, and that that God is disappointed with us. *Magnolia*, like *Breaking the Waves*, declares unequivocally that there is a God watching and taking an interest. The decision to believe is ours to make, and only through belief does salvation become a real possibility. In these films (and many others), the dramatic narrative does not make sense without an explanatory appeal to some higher force.

In the second type of films in which faith receives a positive treatment the existence of the divine is only suggested. The appeal of these films lies in their realism. Drama unfolds plausibly, and closure is not always forthcoming. The interpretation of miracles *as* miracles requires an adjustment of attitude, a movement on the part of the protagonist (as well as the audience). That required movement is not easy. The human situation contains no shortage of suffering; evil abounds. People do terrible things to one another. Redemption requires one to work through these challenges; no simply theodicy will do.

Grand Canyon (1991) bombards us with terrible and wonderful occurrences. Miracles are not obvious but must be gleaned from the wreckage of everyday life. Every character in the film, from the vice-ridden to the virtue-laden to the person who displays elements of both, is someone with whom we can identify. We meet one purely good person, Simon, an African American tow truck driver, who saves Mac, a compassionate (if adulterous) lawyer, from a crisis. Simon brings out the best in everyone he meets through his humility and good nature. The film dwells not on the God of Glory but on the subtle spirit within that directs us in unorthodox ways, which places the humans it inhabits at critical crossroads. Will we respond with righteousness at the decisive moment? At one juncture Mac is afflicted by a fantastic headache in response to the pressure of pending decisions. His wife, Claire, rejects the headache as an inappropriate response to have in the presence of miracles, miracles, she says, which in today's world we have become "slow to recognize." The sacred is to be found in the mundane. Procuring the epiphany of revelation is our responsibility too.

Grand Canyon spawned a series of films in the early 1990s devoted to exploring the theme that one must suffer to be redeemed. A condition of genuine faith is that it occurs without proof, and even when evidence accumulates in favor of one not leaping. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) proposes the counterintuitive thesis that it is in our best interests to retain hope despite the preponderance of evidence suggesting there is none. The main character, Andy Dufresne, is sent to prison even though he is innocent. There he endures a series of brutal rapes, and his gestures of good will only invite punishment. Through all of it, he manages to keep himself oriented toward the future. Andy exhibits a faith that makes something more likely to be true. When the chips are down, the attitude of a single individual can counter the ill effects of despair, but only if that individual is strong enough to reinterpret misfortune as opportunity. Faith has the power to redeem, but it is hard-won and does not always please.

Films in the third category are often mainstream productions that invoke a "good versus bad" formula intended to reveal the power of belief. Those on the side of good, in spite of being at some initial disadvantage, ultimately triumph because of their ability to harness and retain a belief in something "more." The

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appeal of these films is nonintellectual and direct: there is an undeniable and positive effect that the cultivation of one's faith has on one's goals and ambitions, and sometimes even on the fate of humanity. In *Star Wars* (1977), for example, Luke Skywalker comes into his own as a Jedi knight once he is able to let go of the constraints of his conventional senses and trust "the Force." Spiritually, the Force is a metaphor for how goodness comes to those who channel the good energy that is to be found in the universe. The Jedi's decisive act, in the original *Star Wars* and its sequels, is to rise above the divisive states of fear and cynicism and choose goodness. In *The Apostle* (1997), an embattled Pentecostal preacher leaves his Texas town in disgrace to find himself led by God to rural Louisiana. There, touched by grace, he resurrects a small church and breathes life into an African American community that had spiritually stagnated. In a compelling scene, the preacher places himself between a bulldozer and the small church towards which the bulldozer is headed. The gesture moves the racist driving the vehicle to tears, transforming the hatred and ignorance with which he had been consumed into agapic love. In these films, the claims of the characters to deliver those for whom they care from their living hells seem exaggerated until we take a closer look at the ways in which their faith acts through them.

By contrast, a number of films make the case against faith. Some of them portray protagonists for whom desire overwhelms reason. These characters have evidence at their disposal that they ought *not* to leap but so yearn for salvation that they ignore the evidence. Other films close off the religious option entirely. They advocate an atheistic worldview, construing as naïve those who cling to the notion that some higher power will be there to save them from themselves. Still others press the viewer to acknowledge the difficulty of distinguishing a genuine from a false relationship. In this case, the "false leap" has disastrous consequences for the protagonist and the lives he touches. In each of the three cases, the intended message is not a happy one: we are thrown into the world under circumstances not of our choosing, and we must cope with our fate without recourse to any supernatural entity that could redeem us.

Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche figure prominently in these variations of the "false faith" theme. God is either dead or has left the scene. People let us down; we must rely on ourselves. These films argue that there is no such thing as an objective standard of conduct or belief to which we ought to conform. Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) represents an apt case in point, as the main character, Judah, realizes in the climactic scene: "No higher power is going to punish us for our misdeeds if we get away with them. . . . People carry sins around with them all the time." Judah would know best, for prior to this utterance he has gotten away with murdering his lover, who threatened to expose him as a fraud for embezzling and cheating on his wife. Judah exits the film poised to

enjoy the second chance life has given him—or rather, that he has given himself. Nowhere by film's end appears a Supreme Being to ensure that the tale will assume tragic proportions by righting the wrongs of those who have suffered injustice. Although it feels nice to believe in something, "faith" is in the end no more than the product of wishful thinking.

One set of films critical of the subjective decision to believe construes redemption as illusory. In *Vanilla Sky* (2001), the main character, David Aames, opts to avail himself of technology that enables him spend an indefinite future concealing from himself the catastrophic effects of a car accident. He does this despite the fact that his life will essentially be, from that point forth, a lie. The lie protects him from the sight of himself, the experience of being ostracized by others, and, most significantly, the pedagogical burden of having to reflect on the poor decision making that led to his predicament. Aames's is the easy way out, though not any less tempting. Distraction and evasion are cast as alternatives to courage and decision. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), two lovers have at their disposal their own recorded voices, which tell them not to proceed in a relationship with one another. There is no doubt that the advice is sound, or that the ones giving it are legitimate authorities. The lovers ignore the warnings, choosing instead to renew a cycle guaranteed to fuel their mutual intolerance. The rush into each other's arms is at once romantic and foolish, but the message of the film is less ambiguous: we are so desperate to believe in something that we will choose to march into the fire rather than muster the courage to face reality on our own. As a whole, these films argue that faith is the cheap way out, a "passing of the buck" of our responsibility to some other party. If we were more accountable, we would choose reality over pleasure when the two clash. Faith is an escape, a fairy tale bound to disappoint us. This would become clearer if we looked at ourselves with greater accuracy.

An even more pessimistic cluster of films explains religion as the weak or primitive man's gambit. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Woody Allen depicts a dark rejection of the God who supposedly loves and tends to His creation. In the film's comedic subplot, Lester, the smart, successful filmmaker, gets the girl even though she has said that she would never go for a man without substance. Finally (and most tellingly), Judah, the main character, overcomes his pangs of guilt and gets away with a premeditated murder designed to safeguard his personal world. We are presented with a universe in which the righteous are not rewarded, in which God, if He ever did exist, has abandoned us.

In *American Beauty* (1999), evil is presented as an optional "perspective" from which we can wrest ourselves with the right self-reinvention. The character Ricky argues that everything in life can be seen as beautiful once properly appreciated. He puts his theory into practice near the film's end when he discovers

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the murdered body of his girlfriend's father, Lester; he absorbs the scene with a gleeful, knowing glint in his eyes. This sad moment represents the triumph of the esthetic over the normative, of the natural over the supernatural. Beauty can be found in anything if we look at it in the right way. This "glorification of the esthetic" calls into question the relevance of key religious concepts such as guilt, blame, and judgment. It serves as a rebuttal of the message of *Magnolia*, which asserts a clear difference between right and wrong by offering an unmistakable warning about what will ensue should God's law continue to be ignored. π (*Pi*, 1998) is another film in which those who subscribe to the notion of an absolute justice and order are caricatured. As with *American Beauty*, in *Pi* faith in a "deeper meaning" is depicted as an arbitrary choice. Any string of numbers, symbols, or series of events can be made to seem to have significance, but if everything *can* have meaning then nothing really *does* have meaning.

The films *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), *Amores perros* (*Love's a Bitch*, 2000), and *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, 2002), are less encouraging and more suspicious of faith than any film mentioned so far. Each tells the tale of communities vainly searching for self-understanding and forgiveness in the aftermath of terrible tragedies. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, a busload of children perish in an accident caused by inclement weather. When no one is obviously to blame, the townspeople attempt to find a scapegoat, precipitating dysfunctional interactions between characters who display their anger unfruitfully. The audience is left with a feeling of emptiness; we are on our own, bereft of any good, transcendent force that oversees our progress and nurturing.

A third intriguing set of films that raises questions about the veracity of belief asks the audience if it is possible to distinguish God's true voice (if it exists at all) from that of pretenders or from "voices" heard within. *Frailty* (2001) chillingly demonstrates that the intentions of serial killers can be as pure as the biblical patriarch Abraham's were when he was poised to sacrifice his son Isaac. It tells the saga of a man who makes his two sons accomplices in several brutal axe murders by claiming that they have specially been chosen by God to rid the world of certain "demons." What is both intellectually engaging and hard to bear in this film is the fine line drawn between genuine revelation and schizophrenic delusion. Contrast this plot with that of *Breaking the Waves*, which addresses the same premise but issues the opposite verdict. In addition, the taut thriller *Se7en* (1995) presses the controversial characterization of believer-as-criminal in the form of a serial killer bent on ridding the world of perpetrators of the seven deadly sins. Spike Lee's recreation of Sam Berkowitz's deranged killing spree in *Summer of Sam* (1999) explores the culture of fear brought about by the delusory beliefs a resident of Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of 1977. Dozens of films from the horror genre, of which *The Shining* (1980), *Misery* (1990), and *Identity* (2003) are the

most successfully executed, delve into the religiously insane. In contrast to usual horror film, we get to know and even take an interest in the afflicted villains, as their confusion bears at least a structural resemblance to the articulations of faith uttered by such biblical exemplars as Noah, Job, and Abraham, who were no doubt similarly questioned by their contemporaries.

Andrew Flescher

See also: Allen, Woody; Horror; Kubrick, Stanley; Tarantino, Quentin; Trier, Lars von.

Further Reading

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Bergman, Ingmar (1918–2007)

Ingmar Bergman stands in a line of existentialists that extends from Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Søren Kierkegaard in the 19th century through Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the 20th. Although his career began in the theater, Bergman gained much of his fame through film. He also wrote and directed numerous television shows and plays. Through all of his artistic works, Bergman continues to return to issues of God and humanity's isolation and alienation in this world.

Ernst Ingmar Bergman was born in Uppsala, Sweden, on July 14, 1918, to a Lutheran minister and a practicing nurse who shared an often unhappy marriage. As a child, Bergman was attracted to stories and narratives. He has noted that, from an early age, he found fantasy preferable to reality.

Two memories of his childhood proved particularly formative, each affecting his later works by instilling in him an important sense of narrative. The first

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