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## ENCOUNTERING THE SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS: THE ROLES OF ART IN RELIGIOUS LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

Inspired by the aesthetic philosophies of José Vasconcelos and Friedrich Nietzsche, this paper reflects on the roles of art in religious learning through a consideration of two works of art, the films *Mary Poppins* and *Pleasantville*. It elaborates on three roles in particular: art as religious presentation, art as religious representation, and art as religious education.

Mexican statesman and philosopher José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) referred to his system of thought as “monismo estético,” aesthetic monism (Haddox 12), and described the perspective in a book by the same name published in 1918:

I believe that we are entering the era of the aesthetic philosophies, philosophies grounded no longer in pure reason, nor in practical reason, but in the mystery of aesthetic judgment. It is in the *special pathos of beauty* that I look for the unifying principle, capable of participating in the three forms of action, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. (Goizueta 1994, 13)

Cuban-American theologian Roberto Goizueta explains that:

By the “special pathos of beauty,” Vasconcelos means the “empathic fusion” between subject and object that takes place in the aesthetic experience (i.e. the experience of beauty, or a work of art), wherein the person, or subject, loses him or herself in the experience... (Goizueta 2001, 91-92)

Vasconcelos argues that aesthetic sensibility integrates human being, knowing, and acting in a way that abstract rationality cannot. By “participating in the three modes of action” (similar to Aristotle’s categories of *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*), aesthetic experience draws together heart, hand, and mind and also, in Goizueta’s words, “makes possible an authentic inter-subjectivity” because, “only through the aesthetic pathos, which in turn makes possible the empathic fusion of subjects, can we relate to others as ‘others’ rather than as merely objects of knowledge or action” (1994, 13, 19). Vasconcelos’ elegant description of the “special pathos of beauty” conceals a

strikingly ambitious epistemological claim: not only that aesthetic modes of knowing are inherently synthetic, but also that all truly or fully synthetic modes of knowing are necessarily aesthetic and that, therefore, “only the aesthetic emotion is capable of penetrating to the heart of reality” (Haddox 20).

Vasconcelos’ concern for “the heart of reality” led him to explore the link between aesthetic knowing and religious knowing and to claim that, “aesthetics ends in the mystical” (Haddox 36). In his later works, Vasconcelos draws on Nietzsche’s distinction between *Apollinarian* and *Dionysian* approaches to beauty, adding a third category of his own, the *Mystical* (Haddox 34-35). Because it speaks of a sense of reality that includes but transcends rational understanding, and because it views mysticism and aesthetic experience as being not only optional but *superlative* ways of knowing, Vasconcelos’ epistemological framework seems particularly relevant and useful to the work of religious educators, but the task of exploring the relevance of his framework to religious education presents a methodological challenge: how to contemplate “the special pathos of beauty” in a way that is not purely theoretical, or purely practical, but that in some way participates “in the three forms of action, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic” (Goizueta 1994, 13). Starting with Vasconcelos’ claims, then, and also addressing the relevance of Nietzsche’s aesthetic categories, this paper will reflect on the roles of art in religious learning through a consideration of two works of art, the films *Mary Poppins* (1964)<sup>1</sup> and *Pleasantville* (1998). Its case will depend not only on the support of facts and arguments, but also (and primarily) on the possibility of “empathic fusion” with stories and characters, as it elaborates on art as religious presentation, as religious representation, and as religious education.

### THE SPECIAL PATHOS OF POPPINS

*Jane:*            *Mary Poppins taught us the most wonderful words.*  
*Michael:*       *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*  
*Mr. Banks:*    *What on earth are you talking about? Supercali—super-- or*  
                         *whatever the infernal thing is.*  
*Jane:*            *It's something to say when you don't know what to say.*

Cherry Tree Lane appears to be “shipshape and Bristol fashion at all times” but, in the words of the famously punctual Admiral Boom, “storm signals are up at number 17.”<sup>2</sup> Jane and Michael, the children of Winifred and George Banks, Esquire, have disappeared for the fourth time in a week (while chasing their kite on a strong wind) and their most recent caregiver has declared that she is, “done with this house forever.” The servants are in an uproar as Mrs. Banks returns home around 6 p.m., but she takes little notice. She is exultant, just off the heels of a “most glorious meeting,” and overpowers the servants’ protests with a resolute anthem:

We're clearly soldiers in petticoats  
and dauntless crusaders for women's votes...  
Cast off the shackles of yesterday.  
Shoulder to shoulder into the fray.

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<sup>1</sup> As presented in the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary DVD edition, released in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Except where noted otherwise, all quotes in this section are from the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary DVD edition of the film *Mary Poppins*.

Our daughters' daughters will adore us  
and they'll sing in grateful chorus  
"Well done, Sister Suffragette..."

The departing nanny eventually interrupts Mrs. Banks to demand her final wages and walks out the front door just as Mr. Banks arrives home, but he is oblivious to the disorder around him and mirrors Mrs. Banks' moral rapture with a rhapsody of his own:

How pleasant is the life I lead.  
I run my home precisely on schedule.  
At 6:01 I march through my door.  
My slippers, sherry and pipe are due at 6:02.  
Consistent is the life I lead...  
It's 6:03 and the heirs to my dominion  
are scrubbed and tubbed and adequately fed,  
and so I'll pat them on the head and send them off to bed.  
Lordly is the life I lead.

Mr. and Mrs. Banks are both, in a sense, reasonable people. Their moral and intellectual faculties are engaged and they have pursued distinct lines of reasoning to firm and satisfying conclusions. Even so, they have both managed to miss "the heart of reality" at hand (Haddox 20). Their household is in chaos, their servants are abandoning them, and their children are missing. Their songs, though internally consistent, do not reflect, and indeed serve to distract them from, their lives.

Mary Poppins descends into this "nasty piece of weather" like an avatar, a divine being who comes down to earth to set things right. From her perch on a cloud, where she sits doing her make-up during the opening credits, she blows in with an east wind, the same wind that blew the children's kite away. From the moment of her appearance, she refuses to explain her origins or actions. When asked for her references (for the post of nanny at the Banks residence,) she replies, "Oh, I make it a point never to give references." Later, when a crowd of chimney sweeps appears in his house, Mr. Banks exclaims, "Will you be good enough to explain all this?" She replies, "I never explain anything." It is her *presence* that changes things at the Banks residence. The only way to *get* Mary Poppins is to be with her and, as we learn from her friend Bert (our sometime narrator, screever, street musician and chimney sweep,) "when you're with Mary Poppins, suddenly you're in places you've never dreamed of."

Mary dismisses Bert's attempts to represent her, saying, "I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," but Bert's descriptions ring true to anyone who has spent time with her. Bert traces Mary's image on the sidewalk as she passes and does his best to explain what it is like to be with her, singing:

It's a jolly holiday with Mary...  
When the day is gray and ordinary  
Mary makes the sun shine bright...  
When Mary holds your hand you feel so grand.  
Your heart starts beatin' like a big brass band...

Bert tries to help others to understand “the Mary Poppins experience,” and each member of the Banks household encounters in that experience a formative power summed up by Mary and Bert in a single word, *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. It is, Jane explains, “something to say when you don't know what to say,” but also represents, to each person who uses it, something specific and worth sharing. It means: there’s something here, but you’ve got to experience it for yourself.

The roles and interactions of the characters in *Mary Poppins* illuminate Vasconcelos’ notion that aesthetic experience, irreducible to any intellectual or moral content that it might convey, is capable of provoking an “empathic fusion” that integrates and reforms human being, knowing and acting (Goizueta 2001, 91-92). They also highlight the roles that art, artist, and aesthetic hearer/viewer can play in learning. Mary Poppins embodies the role of art as presentation, as unexplained entity. Bert personifies the role of artist as representative, as agent of description or explanation. Members of the Banks family animate the drama of art as education as they are drawn out of themselves by repeated encounters with Mary Poppins. Vasconcelos’ reference to Nietzsche’s distinction between *Apollinarian* and *Dionysian* approaches to beauty invites further elaboration on the relationship between these roles and their relevance to religious learning.

### **DIONYSUS IN PLEASANTVILLE**

Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, contrasts two ways of dealing with reality: that of the *theoretical* person, exemplified by the Greek philosophers and identified with the god Apollo, and that of the *aesthetic* listener (or hearer,) exemplified by the tragic poets of ancient Athens and credited with combining the insights or gifts of Apollo with those of the god Dionysus. To Nietzsche,

Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist who in his belief in the fathomability of the nature of things ascribes to knowledge and insight the strength of a panacea and understands error as evil in itself. To... separate true knowledge from appearance and error seemed to the Socratic man to be the noblest, even the sole truly human vocation. (Nietzsche 83)

The tragic poets, by contrast, do not seek to rationalize existence but, “to convince us of the eternal joy of existence,” to lift us out of a detached individual viewpoint and make possible a unified and participatory experience of reality (Nietzsche 91). Nietzsche was critical of Western culture for having lost touch of the aesthetic sense of life and claimed that the Western philosophical tradition has left us with an, “abstract man bereft of guiding myths, with his abstract education, abstract morals, abstract law, abstract state” (Nietzsche 122). Thrown off balance by the aloof optimism of Socratic logic, the West replaced a dynamic cultural fusion of the spirits of Dionysus and Apollo with abstract rationalism, Apollo without Dionysus, intellect without “the fiery magic of music” and myth (Nietzsche 110). Vasconcelos’ belief that, “we are entering the era of the aesthetic philosophies” (Goizueta 1994, 13) is mirrored by Nietzsche’s conviction that, “the age of the Socratic man is over” in light of an imminent, “re-awakening of the Dionysian spirit and the rebirth of tragedy (Nietzsche 109-110). Vasconcelos’ understanding of the crucial epistemological role of the “special pathos of beauty” is complemented by Nietzsche’s conviction that, “the continuing development of art is tied to the duality of the

Apollonian and the Dionysian” (Nietzsche 19). Both Vasconcelos and Nietzsche call attention to the relationship between art and learning, and the dynamics of this relationship are suggested by a contemporary myth of Dionysian rebirth, the tragi-comedy of *Pleasantville* (1998).

*Pleasantville* begins with an outlandish premise: two teenagers are transported by a magically-engineered television remote control *into* the reality of a 1950s-style, black-and-white sitcom named Pleasantville. They are brother and sister, David and Jennifer. Jennifer is a cool airhead and David is a sensitive nerd who likes to watch reruns of Pleasantville on cable TV. Once *in* Pleasantville, though, they are thrust into the roles of Bud and Mary Sue Parker, perfect children of a perfect couple in a perfect, fictional town. David, as a long-time fan of the show, knows the lay of the land, but he and his sister begin to notice things that were not apparent on the other end of late-night television: it never rains, nothing burns, no signs point out of town, restroom stalls lack toilets, everything is black, white or gray, and books are blank. Pleasantville is only an abstract. Fire and rain don’t exist because they have never been used as plot elements. Books are just *theoretical* books because no one on the show reads them. Behind a pleasing image of reality, there is no substance. Life is pleasant, but partial and illusory. This is Nietzsche’s Apollinarian world, but Dionysus is hiding behind the masks of Bud and Mary Sue.

It is not clear, at first, why colors start appearing in the midst of Pleasantville’s black-and-white townscape, but it begins with the teenagers. One by one, they discover that they have red tongues and sweaters, green cars and blue shirts. The first adult to change is Betty Parker, and her explosive colorization causes the tree outside of her house to burst into flames. David, because he has known a world where fire exists, is able to show the Pleasantville fire department how to put it out but, by this point, the upheaval has spread too far for anyone to contain. To Pleasantville’s mayor, Big Bob, and other civic leaders, the newly arrived “colored people” represent a dangerous, chaotic force that must be controlled or eliminated, so they introduce a code of conduct designed to put the “pleasant” back in Pleasantville, but the new creative class resists it successfully. They do not want to go back to a black-and-white world.

What does color mean and why does it emerge in Pleasantville one citizen or object at a time? The film employs imagery of Eden to suggest that the transition to color involves a loss of innocence or a coming to knowledge, but different people change for different reasons. The first trigger, as one might expect of a Dionysian rebirth (or any birth, for that matter,) is sexuality, which Jennifer **presents** to the captain of the Pleasantville High School basketball team, but sexuality does not change Jennifer because it is not new for her. The second trigger is music associated with sexuality, which begins to play from the soda shop jukebox. The third is a series of books which begin to “fill in” as David **represents** them from memory, and a book changes Jennifer but not David, because they are not new for him. David is changed by a show of strength. Mr. Johnson at the soda shop is changed by painting. Betty’s husband is changed by love. Big Bob is changed by anger. Different things change different people, but behind each force of change is something new, previously unknown but real, sometimes delightful and sometimes disturbing but always a surprise.

## THE POWER OF STRANGENESS

Both education and religion depend, like the changes that occur at 17 Cherry Tree Lane and in Pleasantville, on what Richard Rorty calls, “the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (Rorty 360). Both require not only intellectual assent and moral consent but also the courage to encounter realities for which one has, as yet, no words – that which Mary Poppins

calls the *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*. Religious educators, more so than general educators, stand in a position to observe and facilitate encounters with the unknown, the strange or ineffable. The aesthetic philosophies of Vasconcelos and Nietzsche, as viewed through the lenses of *Mary Poppins* and *Pleasantville*, suggest that art may play three crucial roles in this work:

- **As religious presentation**, art may embody the supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, evoke the special pathos of beauty, reawaken the Dionysian spirit, trigger dramatic and colorful changes in individuals, communities, cultures.
- **As religious representation**, art may describe the supercalifragilisticexpialidocious as Bert describes Mary Poppins, as Bud describes a book, as Vasconcelos described the special pathos of beauty, as Nietzsche described the birth and rebirth of tragedy.
- **As religious education**, art may emerge in response to the supercalifragilisticexpialidocious like George Banks' kite or Bill's soda shop window painting, not to represent or explain but to live out and to share.

The presence and interaction of these three roles is evident in the simple case of a congregational hymn or choral performance:

- **as religious presentation**, it may bring synthetic pathos to otherwise abstract intellectual and moral content
- **as religious representation**, it may point beyond itself to a greater reality or experience
- **as religious education**, it may lift one out of a detached individual viewpoint and make possible a unified, participatory experience of life.

Though it is possible to imagine worship without music, religion without beauty, education and culture without art, Vasconcelos, Nietzsche, Poppins and Pleasantville suggest that, without the "special pathos of beauty" (Goizueta 1994, 13), without "the fiery magic of music" and myth (Nietzsche 110), worship, religion, education and culture would be incapable of "penetrating to the heart" of a colorful, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious reality (Haddox 20).

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