PLACES OF HOPE: A CINEMATIC AND THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract: Christian theology distinguishes between cardinal virtues and theological virtues. Hope (*spes*) is one of the three theological virtues, along with faith (*fidei*) and love (*caritas*). Contrary to cardinal virtues, theological virtues are not humanly acquired, but divinely infused. This article considers the representation of the theological virtue of hope in contemporary cinema. It argues that the theological virtue of hope is represented in film through its placement in the daily existence of film characters. This is a way for hope to become a virtue that allows human life to partake in divine life. Yet this raises a generic question: what links exist between a virtue and a place? More specifically: what connections does cinema explore between the virtue of hope and places or spaces? I develop this reflection through the analysis of two films with significant differences: *Silent Light* (*Stellet Licht*, 2007), directed by Mexican Carlos Reygadas, with strong religious references, and the more secular *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), directed by Italian Gianfranco Rosi.

Keywords: Christian theology; hope; place; theological virtues.

1 INTRODUCTION

Christian theology distinguishes between cardinal virtues and theological virtues. Cardinal virtues, as the adjective indicates, are main or fundamental virtues. No wonder, therefore, that Christianity does not claim to have discovered or articulated them. We already find them in the form of values, for example, in Plato's *Republic* (1993): prudence (*prudentia*), justice (*justitia*), fortitude (*fortitudo*), and temperance (*temperantia*). The so-called Church Fathers like Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory developed these virtues from a Christian perspective. However, theological virtues are distinct from cardinal virtues. They are not humanly acquired, but divinely infused. As Thomas Aquinas writes in his *Summa Theologica*: "These virtues are called Divine, not as though God were virtuous by reason of them, but because of them God makes us virtuous, and directs us to Himself" (2017, I-II, Q62, A1). Hope (*spes*) is one of the three theological virtues, along with faith (*fidei*) and love (*caritas*).

The three theological virtues are so called because they have God as the origin, motive, and object. Still, some aspects of God are ultimately unknowable as apophatic or negative theology has expressed time and again. Rowan Williams argues that negative theology and artistic creativity are similar (2021, sec. 5). The negative way unsettles human desires that limit the imagined possibilities of the world. Artistic creativity

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unsettles what a community imagines to be the limits of human sense perception. For Williams, both open human beings to imaginative and abundant possibilities before and beyond one's self and the world. In considering theological virtues, divine unknowability and the wealth of imagination disclosed by negative theology and artistic creativity call attention to what separates these virtues from a supposed science of morality — because their vividness is combined with their inscrutable nature. Virtues understood in this way are distinguishable from moral actions, insofar as they underlie and encourage such actions but are not detachable from them. Without actions and without places where these actions unfold, virtues cannot be put *on the scene* within human existence. This connection with *mise-en-scène* suggests the study of how contemporary cinema has engaged with theological virtues as a thematic and figurative element within the internal dynamics of what a film projects and sets in motion.

Paul's commentary on the theological virtues in First Corinthians 13:11-13 provides a strong foundation for their importance in Christian theology. In this New Testament letter, Paul insists that these virtues persist without fading or being lost, but also that one them is greater than the other two: love, *agape*. He writes: "So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (First Corinthians 13:13). These three virtues "are not exemplar but exemplate virtues" (Aquinas, 2017, I-II, Q62, A1). An *exemplate* virtue means that it is a form that imitates and participates in the divine model. In this sense, the theological virtues are participations in divine life. In light of Christian tradition: faith means being faithful to God; hope means being hopeful in God; love means being with God.

This article considers the representation of the theological virtue of hope in contemporary cinema. This research is framed within the area of theological aesthetics. Definitions of this field abound, but a simple and encompassing way to characterise it is to say that theological aesthetics considers "God, religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, and feeling), the beautiful, and the arts" (Viladesau, 1999, p. 11). This definition mobilises different meanings of aesthetics as possibilities when studying particular objects such as films. Beauty is here understood as having a transcendental nature, but also an earthly presence, since God may be understood as beauty (Wojtyla, 2021). Sensible knowledge and its role in cinematic art calls attention to the ability of cinema to express lived moments in the form of impressions, imaginings, and feelings of characters and those elicited by the film itself.

Within this framework, I argue that the theological virtue of hope is represented in film through its placement in the daily existence of film characters. This is a way for hope to become a virtue that allows human life to partake in divine life. Yet this raises a generic question: what links exist between a virtue and a place? More specifically: what connections does cinema explore between the virtue of hope and places or spaces? I will develop this reflection through the analysis of two films with significant differences: *Silent Light* (*Stellet Licht*, 2007), directed by Mexican Carlos Reygadas, and *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), directed by Italian Gianfranco Rosi. These works tackle hope without excluding the temptation of despair. I discuss hope as a theological virtue within and outside the religious sphere, questioning the ease, or the appropriateness, of doing so concerning the first film and the difficulty, or the inadequacy, of

doing so about the second film. *Silent Light* has strong religious references and narrates the ramifications of adultery in a Christian Mennonite community in Chihuahua, Mexico. *Fire at Sea* can be classified as secular and records and recreates life on the island of Lampedusa, where many refugees have been arriving barely alive or dead by sea. These films can be examined in multiple ways. My focus is on how these works associate hope as a theological virtue with places and their experience.

2 PLACE AND HOPE

Michel de Certeau distinguishes between place and space. A place "is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" (Certeau, 1984, p. 117). In contrast, a space "[…] exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements" (Certeau, 1984, p. 117). He writes that, "in short, *space is a practiced place*" (Certeau, 1984, p. 117). The street geometrically defined by urban planning is a place that is transformed into space as a practiced place by the transit of cars and pedestrians or any public event. Practiced placing is a fundamental element of mise-en-scène in film directing and style, which allows objects and subjects to be placed relative to the camera and framed by it. Finally, the French thinker adds the following about the articulation of these two concepts with the notion of narrative:

> In our examination of the daily practices that articulate that experience, the opposition between "place" and "space" will rather refer to two sorts of determinations in stories: the first, a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead, the law of a "place" (from the pebble to the cadaver, an inert body always seems, in the West, to found a place and give it the appearance of a tomb); the second, a determination through operations which, when they attributed to a stone, tree, or human being, specify "spaces" by the actions of historical *subjects* (a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history) (Certeau, 1984, p. 118).

Hope can be defined as desiring God and foreseeing union with God. Thomas Aquinas writes that "the virtue of hope is necessary for the perfection of Christian living" (1993, p. 334). More than that, beyond faith, "hope is also necessary for salvation" (Aquinas, 1993, p. 337). Terry Eagleton calls attention to the fact that Augustine and Aquinas count hope as a virtue, not a mere feeling. He writes: "To call it a virtue is to claim among other things that it is conductive to human happiness […]. we should be hopeful because it belongs to our self-fulfillment to be so" (Eagleton, 2015, p. 58). Influenced by Karl Rahner's (see 1973, p. 235-289) understanding of hope as a radical abandonment of the self, Eagleton writes that "[i]n this sense, too, hope resembles faith, and like faith poses a challenge to the ethic of self-possession. It allows one to enter upon the incalculable, as the familiar yields to the unknown" (2015, p. 68).

In order to systematise the analysis of the relation between places, spaces, and storytelling in both films, I draw on Thomas Aquinas's narrative account of hope and its causal structure. He is interested in understanding the causal connections around hope, therefore providing an account that is structured as a kind of narrative. In the discussion of whether hope is a cause of love, Aquinas argues that this virtue has to do with two things:

For it regards as its object, the good which one hopes for. But since the good we hope for is something difficult but possible to obtain; and since it happens sometimes that what is difficult becomes possible to us, not through ourselves but through others; hence it is that hope regards also that by which something becomes possible to us (2017, I-II, Q40, A7).

It will be according to these two lines of thought that I will organize the analysis of the two films. First, hope as the pacifying good that is sought. Secondly, hope as that by which the good is obtained, in particular, how merciful human acts reflect God's mercy and compassion. Dominic Doyle claims that Aquinas does not exhaust everything that can be said about hope as a theological virtue and that what he provides is an ordered and clear map (2012, p. 23; *cf.* 2011). To get to the mystical experience of journeying through what the Thomistic map depicts, Doyle turns to John of the Cross (2012, p. 24-29). He is particularly interested in how "John's focus on memory calls attention to the concrete, particular experience of the individual over time" (Doyle, 2012, p. 27). This is a useful reminder to frame the following readings of the two films from the perspective of hope and place, since cinema is built on memory and provides examples of characters living concrete, particular experiences over time.

3 PACIFYING HOPE

On 8 July 2013, Pope Francis was in Lampedusa and presided over a Mass for the victims of the wrecks. This is how his homily began:

Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart (Francis, 2013, par. 1).

The first response articulated by Francis is a strong painful emotion. This gesture is linked to the rest of the text, which is structured as a commentary on the two questions that God addresses to humanity in the book of Genesis. At first, to the disoriented humanity, personified by Adam to whom God asks "Where are you?" (Holy Bible, 2004, Gn 3, 9). Later, to the guilty humanity, personified by Cain to whom God asks "Where is your brother Abel?" (Holy Bible, 2004, Gn 4, 9). Since these questions are put in the infancy of humanity, at a moment when humanity has become aware of itself, of its freedom and its responsibility, they can be put at any time in human history. To these two questions, Francis (2013, par. 8) adds a third that refers to the acknowledgment of the death of many who tried to reach Lampedusa: "Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were

looking for a means of supporting their families?" His point is that unlearning, rejecting, and forgetting the experience of crying, suffering from the suffering of others, is a way of globalizing indifference. This indifference is shocking, particularly in people who "make social and economic decisions which open the door to tragic situations like this" (Francis, 2013, par. 8). Let us see how this relates to two scenes from the films.

The refugees that *Fire at Sea* portrays more attentively fled from Nigeria in Africa. The places they go through have a quasi-clinical function for receiving and processing forced migrants. In each of these places, they use the area that has been strictly assigned to them, but there are times when they have the opportunity to turn these impersonal places into personal spaces, for example, when they play football or when they pray. Beyond this experience of isolation that the film has to offer, it also shows the need to transcend it through actions associated with hope. I am thinking, in particular, of the moving narration of their long and arduous journey to Lampedusa. It is through their voice that other places at war, such as Libya, are evoked so that the apparent despair that remains in the present situation can be rethought, revised, or re-read. One of them, tells their story with a rhythm akin to a spoken word poem, while some of his fellow refugees provide the background choir. This is a collective narration of an arduous and long trip produced by many voices that is worth quoting in full, preserving its bouncy rhythm:

> This is my testimony.
> We could no longer stay in Nigeria.
> Many were dying, most were bombed.
> We were bombed,
> and we flee from Nigeria,
> we ran to the desert,
> we went Sahara Desert and many died.
> In Sahara Desert many were dying.
> Raping and killing many people
> and we could not stay.
> We flee to Libya.
> And Libya was a city of ISIS
> and Libya was a place not to stay.
> We cried on our knees,
> "What shall we do?"
> The mountains could not hide us,
> the people could not hide us
> and we ran to the sea.
> On the journey on the sea,
> too many passengers died.
> They got lost in the sea.
> A boat was carrying 90 passengers.
> Only 30 were rescued
> and the rest died.
> Today we are alive.

The sea is not a place to pass by.
The sea is not a road.
Oh, but today we are alive.
It is risky in life
not to take a risk,
because life itself is a risk.
We stayed for many weeks
in Sahara Desert.
Many were dying with hunger,
many were drinking their piss.
All, to survive,
we drank our piss to survive
because that was the journey of life.
We stayed in the desert,
the water finished.
We began to drink our piss.
We said, "God,
don't let us die in the desert."
And we got to Libya
and Libyans would not pity us.
They would not save us
because we are Africans.
And they locked us in their prisons.
Many went to prison for one year.
Many went to prison for six years,
many died in the prison.
Libya prison was very terrible.
No food in the prison.
Every day beating, no water
and many of us escape.
And today we are here, God rescue us.
Without risk we enter the sea.
If we cannot die in Libyan prison,
we cannot die in the sea.
And we went to sea and did not die.

As a docudrama, the film parallels the storyline of the refugees with another one that focuses on a set of island inhabitants. The local doctor who has repeatedly treated refugees or the news heard through the radio insularity are some of the few points of actual contact between the two storylines. Insularity, the dominant theme of the film, also defines the relationship between its parts almost entirely, since they rarely come together. The two storylines often intersect at this thematic level. Samuele, the kid who appears in the opening scene as he wanders the vast landscape, is a fisherman's nephew who gets seasick. The community has been built and sustains itself from a

strong relationship with the sea and with what the sea offers to it. It is a deeply rooted geographical and material issue. This means that there is no idyllic view of the sea or nature on the part of Lampedusa's inhabitants. They know that the sea offers them nourishment, but it also brings them dangers. Their everyday lives are hard because of the harsh conditions of living on an isolated place, an island, battered by the natural elements. They are therefore able to recognise the difficulties that refugees have faced and continue to face as well as to feel compassion for them.

We find a comparable appeasing movement from distress to hope in *Silent Light*. In the sex scene between Johan (Cornelio Wall) and his lover Marianne (Maria Pankratz), crying plays a fundamental role, as it also plays in the final scene that I will analyse later. Here the scope of place is defined by two aspects. The first aspect is detachment and proximity — or better yet unknowingness and intimacy — and the way it goes from one to the other and vice versa, disarranging boundaries that never completely fade. The second aspect is closure — more precisely, spatial closing — when Johan closes the curtain and tries to separate them from the world, making a remote nook for them. Yet it is not that simple. Marianne cries during the sexual encounter because she is deeply sad and thinking about his wife, Esther (Miriam Toews). As he lies over her, their bodies almost become a single body, one atop the other, one extending beyond the other, and, at the same time, she feels his weight over her. Johan says he feels her heart. For her part, Marianne says this was the last time between them and that peace is stronger than love. "Poor Esther", she concludes before getting up. The scene makes it clear that Marianne is not at peace with herself, even though Esther knows about the affair, probably because she knows that Esther knows and suffers because of it. The good she hopes to obtain is the peace of which she speaks to Johan, a hope that is the fruit of her compassion for his betrayed wife.

How to reconcile Marianne's loving, compassionate concern about Esther with the passion that binds her to Johan is the film's big question. In Biblical texts, compassion is the common suffering that forms a community of feelings. We find a parallel in the episode of the death and resurrection of Lazarus as told in the Gospel of John. Mary, the sister of Martha, and a group of Jews who are crying approach Jesus and "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (Holy Bible, 2004, Jo 11:33) and later "began to weep" (Holy Bible, 2004, Jo 11:35). Through her crying, which anticipates Esther's torrential weeping before her death when heavy rain pours from the sky, Marianne participates spiritually in Esther's misfortune and looks at her with the tenderness owed to a sufferer. As in *Fire at Sea*, hope appears in *Silent Light* as the pacifying good to be obtained. The difference is that, even though there are characters like the doctor in *Fire at Sea* who want this good for the refugees, most of the characters want it for themselves. In *Silent Light*, however, Marianne compassionately desires it for Esther, which at the same time would have a peaceful effect on herself.

4 MERCIFUL HOPE

The scene of the resurrection in *Silent Light* brings to mind the famous return to life of Inger, mother and wife, at the end of *Ordet* (1955), directed by Danish director

Carl Theodor Dreyer. Yet there are notorious differences in dramatic context. In the Mexican film, Esther's death, literally heartbroken, is a clear consequence of her husband's adultery. It should be noted that in the previously analysed scene of the film, there is a deciduous leaf that falls on the bed. In the last scene of the film, there is also an outer element that penetrates the chamber where Esther's body lies during the wake in an open casket, but then comes out of the room again: a butterfly, a living being, not a dead plant organ such as a deciduous leaf. *Silent Light* closes as it opens, but in reverse, from the trees to the sky. It ends with a splendid image of a vast natural landscape, with a similar shot with which it begins. The connection between nature and human drama is thus established from the beginning and restated in the end. The natural is the place where the supernatural erupts.

The supernatural in Christianity has a precise meaning related to the notion of grace, the divine overflow of the love of God the Father toward the Son, Jesus Christ. This love flows to humankind most clearly through Jesus and his selfless giving in love to enable people to enter into a loving relationship with God as enabled by the Holy Spirit. As the Dominican Herbert McCabe wrote: "We do share in the divine nature, we do behave like God, but not by nature. We can do what God does, but in God it is natural, in us it is not — we call it supernatural" (2007, p. 21). This means that "our divinity must always come as a surprise" (McCabe, 2007, p. 21). This is because divinity in humans is not inherent, not really ours, strictly speaking, but a free gift offered by God as grace.

All the drama in *Silent Light* involves a strong physical dimension that expresses the convulsions of the spirit. That is why the sex scene between Johan and Marianne visually highlights the skin, the touch, the heart, the sweat, and the crying. In the resurrection scene, Esther seems to shed a tear after she has just received a kiss on the mouth from Marianne, and next opens her mouth, then her eyes, returning to life. The tear may have been transferred from Marianne to Esther and the kiss looks more as if Marianne is blowing air into Esther's mouth and returning her breath. The resuscitating kiss and breath evoke the book of Genesis, where it is said that God formed man "from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Holy Bible, 2004, Gn 2:7). The tear is accompanied by Esther's eyes becoming wet after she opens them. In various Biblical texts, tears are shed, for example, out of concern with sinners (Holy Bible, 2004, Is 22:4) and due to disappointment and grief (Holy Bible, 2004, Sal 80:5; Holy Bible, 2004, Job 30:31). Luke recounts that Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (Holy Bible, 2004, Luke 22:62) for denying the Lord. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as he comes near the city, as told in Luke 19:41 (Holy Bible, 2004). Jesus responds to what he sees as a present tragedy, but he is the only one crying; we could say that he is the only one who could cry in that instance. Both this passage and the previous one from John mentioned in the previous section show him as fully divine and fully human with different emphases. The story of Lazarus reveals that his compassion goes hand in hand with being close to those in need, which exposes him to suffer together, to feel compassion, and brings him to tears. All this is to say that a tearful hope is a joyful hope, which does not mean that living hope must involve tears. In a community of tears, perhaps shared crying, even when it is not simultaneous, mixes tears as it unites lives when bodies and souls

contact. Marianne's hope is that Johan becomes well, and stops being tormented and confused. She, who leaves the scene as if she has already fulfilled her role and no longer belongs in this place, is the decisive vehicle of hope as virtue. Not on account of resurrecting Esther, but because she approaches her with the same compassion that she already had expressed in words, forgetting about herself and her passion for Johan. This is what is truly supernatural. Marianne is so hopeful in God that her mercy is divine in nature and re-creates the world. Maybe that is why a man sets the clock in the house as if time had begun to be counted again.

In his encyclical letter on Christian hope, Pope Benedict XVI distinguishes between three settings for leaning and practising hope (2007, p. 32-48). Prayer is the first setting that responds to the need to be listened to — just like Samuele needs someone to listen to him in *Fire at Sea*. In this sense, prayer is "a school of hope" (Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 32-34). Action and suffering are combined in the second setting — especially acting and suffering with the other, for the other, as seen in the path of Marianne facing Esther in *Silent Light*. From this perspective, action and suffering allow human beings to learn hope. Finally, judgment, as related to responsibility, is the third setting — that can be connected with the ending of *Silent Light*. In this regard, judgement is a setting for learning and practising hope. Hope appears in these films as a figure of openness. Something that may seem final at a certain moment for human beings, but they know it is not yet the end. In the Christian perspective, God can only be thought of as the foundation of hope because it appeared with a human face through the Incarnation in Jesus Christ. Therefore, hope is placed in human existence with a focus on the human face and the way it expresses and reveals closeness to God's mercy (see Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 31).

There is a sequence in *Fire at Sea* sequence that begins with a diver looking for sea urchins in the deep dark waters. The coast guard makes a similar search for the refugee boats, namely using helicopters as seen afterwards before a long rescue scene. Searching is a recurrent act in the film. Samuele searches for help from several people and in various contexts throughout the film. He needs to correct a sight problem, amblyopia, also known as lazy eye. He wants to know other languages. The abilities to see and to communicate are at the heart of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, Samuele necessitates his uncle to teach him how to be a sailor because he is aware that everyone in Lampedusa knows how to sail a boat. He also asks the doctor to explain to him very patiently that he does not have health problems, and that his anxiety is a product of hypochondria. In *Fire at Sea*, this child has the opportunity to learn hope through other people. In *Silent Light*, Marianne gives the chance to understand hope as a means of obtaining the good of mercy.

5 CONCLUSION

As they explore hope as divinely peaceful and merciful, in a more secular or religious way, both films recall the inseparability between worldly hope and transcendent hope that Karl Rahner points out:

> Only in the realization of intramundane hope can man realize his hope in the

> absolute future in genuine freedom. And only if he aspires in this theological hope to the intramundane goals of his history, continually to be seized on creatively in hope, does he gain the right attitude to his desired intramundane goals and tasks (1984, p. 271).

More than connecting worldly (or "intramundane") hope and transcendent (or God-directed) hope successively, Rahner posits that the theological connection between these kinds of hope is more dynamic and creative. In human existence, worldliness and transcendence are in tandem and tension, which means that the settings or places of hope have a fundamental significance. *Fire at Sea* and *Silent Light* use cinematic elements and structures to amply demonstrate aspects of the dynamics of hope related to peace and mercy by placing that virtue in densely detailed situations that the characters go through. Theologically, these films substantiate that virtues are habits, that is, ways of inhabiting the world. The Latin root of the word *habitus* refers simultaneously to the state of the body, its movements, and to a way of being — we may say, a way of being that is realised in a way of acting.

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LUGARES DA ESPERANÇA: UMA EXPLORAÇÃO CINEMATOGRÁFICA E TEOLÓGICA

Resumo: A teologia cristã distingue entre as as virtudes cardeais e as virtudes teologais. A esperança (*spes*) é uma das três virtudes teologais, junto com a fé (*fidei*) e o amor (*caritas*). Ao contrário das virtudes cardeais, as virtudes teológicas não são humanamente adquiridas, mas divinamente infundidas. Este artigo considera a representação da virtude teológica da esperança no cinema contemporâneo. Argumenta que a virtude teológica da esperança é representada no cinema através do modo como é colocada na existência quotidiana das personagens dos filmes. Esta é uma maneira da esperança se tornar uma virtude que permite à vida humana participar da vida divina. No entanto, isto levanta uma questão genérica: que ligações existem entre uma virtude e um lugar? Mais especificamente: que ligações explora o cinema entre a virtude da esperança e os lugares ou espaços? Desenvolvo esta reflexão através da análise de dois filmes com diferenças significativas: *Luz Silenciosa* (*Stellet Licht*, 2007), dirigido pelo mexicano Carlos Reygadas, com fortes referências religiosas, e o mais secular *Fogo no Mar* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), dirigido pelo italiano Gianfranco Rosi.

Palavras-chave: Teologia cristã; esperança; lugar; virtudes teologais.