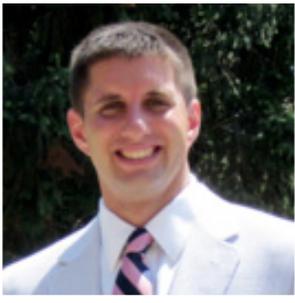




THE SPACE BETWEEN

ON FILM AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

BY LEONARD DELORENZO



Leonard DeLorenzo is the director of Notre Dame Vision, Institute for Church Life and a doctoral student in systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame.

LEFT
Photo by Kirstin McKee

“James Cameron is trying to do all the work for me.”

I had this thought while watching *Avatar* in theaters a few years ago. Since then, I have thought back to some of Cameron’s other wildly successful films—especially the first two *Terminators*, *The Abyss*, *Aliens*, *True Lies*—and I started to notice a developing trend. I refrain from including *Titanic* for fear of emotionally-charged reprisals. These films seem to give me as much as possible. They want to surround me with images, inundate me with sounds, create realistic dimensions, and absorb my attention to the point that I come to live in the thick environment they create... at least for a couple of hours. Other films operate in similar ways, though perhaps luring my emotions, sensitivities, or fears into their domains instead. By one or another method, films have a tendency to want to do the work for me, and some more than others.

Films like those mentioned above seem like great works of the imagination. Cameron’s films are replete with innovative technologies and cutting-edge cinematic strategies, which demand specially equipped theaters for their showings. His creations are often so overwhelming that it is difficult not to get lost in them. Typically, the more successful the film is at enveloping the viewer, the less activity is required for viewing.

If I were a film scholar (which I am certainly not), I would claim that James Cameron stands at the end of a developing achievement in the

history of film: that of the “close-up.” As employed here, the “close-up” concerns more than the camera focusing in on a character’s face or zooming in on a landscape. It concerns the development of the sensation of immediacy that many filmmakers have been striving to create for decades. In this sense, the goal of the “close-up” is to create an experience whereby the viewer forgets that she is a viewer. Amid the sights, sounds, and atmosphere of the film, this prompted forgetfulness fosters the illusion that this one scene or film is a self-contained experience. In this experience, the viewer herself is contained. If I were a film scholar, I would further assert that James Cameron has distinguished himself as one of the—if not *the*—most accomplished “close-up” artists in the history of film. Of course, I am not a film scholar; I am a theologian. Though I suppose it is not terribly uncommon for a theologian to claim more than he is entitled to.

Therefore, as a theologian masquerading as a *pseudo* film scholar, I contend that the “close-up” drives towards immediacy, not imagination. It may take a great deal of imaginative power on the part of the filmmaker to produce the effect of immediacy, but the purpose of the “close-up” is to bring the viewer so close that there is very little-to-nothing left for her to imagine. As the viewer, one is given all there is to find: enjoy! As I consider film *and* theology—as I hope to do here—this claim bears upon the prospect of a “theological imagination.”

This brings me to my central point: while theological imagination is not something that films can provide, it is something that films can exercise. A theological imagination can only properly come from experience in and through the life of faith. For Catholics, this imagination is given and nurtured most richly through participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The Sacraments teach us and train us to

believe that more is promised *here* than what appears present. Sacraments are first a gift and then an invitation: what is given does not overwhelm us, but rather beckons us as it heals us. The one who gives us the Sacraments exercises restraint: we are not meant to lose ourselves in the encounter; we are meant to find ourselves.

Theological imagination is born of this ‘seeing beyond seeing.’ A theological imagination works diligently upon what is present in whatever area of life and tries to understand how it refers, in its own distinctive way, to God. If the Sacraments bestow and strengthen the ways in which we see, we might then come to see all things differently.

Even if film cannot produce theological imagination, at least this much can be said: One of the great gifts of film is that it creates ample opportunities to exercise the theological imagination. Conversely, one of the great dangers is that film can also make it incredibly easy to *not* exercise the theological imagination.

As compared to literature or even theater, films demand very little of the viewer. Literature requires at least the act of reading. Even if a book is read aloud—as is often the case with children—one must create the scene in one’s mind in order to “see” what is happening. Illustrated literature still leaves the audience to work out the motion of what is happening. By its very nature, literature requires a good deal of effort.

Theater may require less effort than literature, though perhaps still more than film demands. For one, theater cannot just happen anywhere: the audience must share a space with the performers. Insofar as they share a space, the audience becomes part of the performance. The audience’s laughs, silences, squirms,

coughs, and applause—these all become part of the material with which the performers must reckon. Moreover, though the stage may be set and reset to create the appearance of certain kinds of scenes, the audience must work with the cast and crew through an act of assent. Everyone knows that they are not in Verona as they watch these two star-struck lovers, yet all agree to imagine that they are.

Now consider what happens in film. When one goes to see a film, one encounters a finished product. Sure, the way in which you interpret or experience the film may depend somewhat on those with whom you see it, but the facticity of the film is secured. It is prepared for you; it is just there. Some films require more attentiveness than others depending on the amount of dialogue, subtleties, nuance, etc., but, on the whole, film requires less attentiveness than literature might.

Perhaps most interestingly, the present and growing accessibility of film is further reducing the demands placed upon the viewer. This particular form of art is becoming increasingly portable, individualized, and accessible. Once upon a time, you had to go to a theater to see what had been created. Today, you can watch almost whatever you want—even in 3-D!—on your phone, which fits into your pocket. Of course, books have become that accessible, too, though you still have to read them.

In short, films give you a lot. They give you a visual, they give you audio, and they give you motion. They are finished before you arrive, and they will remain the same after you leave. They are there. All of the meticulous work has been done in advance and, in many instances, that work has been done so you will not have to do much—if any—yourself. You can just be there to take it in. (There may be some interesting parallels here with the performance of liturgical celebrations, but that is best left to another article.)

But imagining is itself an activity. No one can imagine for us. One does work when one imagines. Idle daydreaming is only barely imagining, and passive movie watching is almost never so. Imagination is what enables us to look at the brute fact of existence and see more than a brute fact.

Is it wrong to escape into a movie from time to time? I hope not, because sometimes that is about all I care to do at the end of a long week. What is dangerous, though, is to think that just by watching films I am exercising a theological imagination—stretching and strengthening the ways in which I see all things according to how I learn to see in the Sacraments. Without exercise, the spiritual muscles for this kind of seeing will atrophy. Only when engaged rightly do many films serve as opportunities for such exercise.

I would like to offer three examples of film scenes that allow for this sort of exercise. These scenes give you something, but they do not try to do all the work for you. Even though they may say a lot, they don't say everything, and that restraint creates the space for the free activity of the theological imagination.

Scene 1: Good Will Hunting

I think *Good Will Hunting* may have been running on a loop in my dorm room all four years of college. I know this film inside and out. I have carried on lengthy conversations simply by stringing together quotes from this movie. Some would consider me a subpar conversationalist.

One the one hand, it may not come as a surprise that I would choose to highlight a film that I know so well and like so much. On the other hand, perhaps we might consider it even more unlikely that, despite my thorough familiarity with the story of this

boy genius from Southie, I still find myself delightfully puzzled when I remember one particular scene.

In this particular scene, Will (Matt Damon) is sitting in a counseling session with Sean (Robin Williams). By this point, the recalcitrant Will has started to open up to Sean. That is, instead of literally counting the seconds until the session ends, he is actually engaging in conversation. In the course of only moderately personal dialogue, Will asks Sean when he knew that his late wife was “you know, like, that she was the one.”

“October 21st, 1975... it was game six of the World Series. Biggest game in Red Sox history... My friends and I had, you know, slept out on the sidewalk all night to get tickets.”

“You got tickets!”

“Yep... I was sitting in a bar, waiting for the game to start, and in walks this girl. Oh it was an amazing game... Bottom of the 12th, in stepped Carlton Fisk. Old Pudge. Steps up to the plate... And BAM! He clocks it... it HITS the foul pole! Oh, he goes [crazy], and 35,000 fans, you know, they charge the field!”

“I can’t believe you had a ticket to that game!”

“Yeah!”

“Did you rush the field!”

“No... I didn’t rush the field. I wasn’t there.”

“What?!”

“No. I was in a bar having a drink with my future wife.”

The pandemonium of Fenway Park, which temporarily erupted in this psychologist's office, is now subdued under stupefied shock. It's like Pudge's homer had just been called foul after all. Why wasn't Sean *there*? Why was he in some bar with some girl he didn't even know, missing the biggest event in Red Sox history (pre-2004) and thus the biggest event in Boston history (post-1773 and pre-2004)?

Will is shocked. Sean had the thing everyone wanted—a ticket to THE GAME—and he just slid it across the table because he had to “go see about a girl?! You're kidding me.”

“No, I'm not kidding you, Will. That's why I'm not talking right now about some girl I saw at a bar twenty years ago and how I always regretted not going over and talking to her. I don't regret the 18 years I was married to Nancy. I don't regret the six years I had to give up counseling when she got sick. And I don't regret the last years when she got really sick. And I sure as hell don't regret missing the damn game.”

And with those last six lines, something happens. What happens is not just in the film; something happens to you—or, as it were, to me—the viewer. The scene has not given me so much that it absorbs me, yet it does give me something significant. The scene has shocked me. In the shock, I remember myself. A space is created: a space for exercising the imagination.

As I return to this scene over and over again in my memory, I find myself asking: What do I cling to? What am I willing or unwilling to give away? What would I be willing to pay for a truly meaningful life? Would I slide that ticket across the table on the hunch that there was something worth exploring? Would I really do it just because of a hunch?

Game 6 loomed so large on October 21, 1975. Giving away that ticket was Sean's price of admission.

Twenty-plus years later, that foolhardy act was merely the turnstile for the real story.

The real story was a life given over as self-giving love. It meant six years with a spouse with cancer, constant care, ignoring the end of visiting hours. It meant breaking all the conventional rules because of a fiercely faithful love. It meant watching someone die and refusing to look away. It meant 18 years of marriage to a woman who, apparently, “used to fart in her sleep.” It meant embracing an idiosyncratic life with an idiosyncratic person who loved him with all of his own idiosyncrasies.

For Matt Damon's character in the film, this was a pivotal moment. He was afraid of committing to someone—to anything really—because he was afraid of getting hurt. He was afraid of losing his already fragile sense of security. Yet here, sitting across from him, was a man who lived and loved and lost. He paid a price and what he got was real life. He wasn't perfect, but he was real.

For me, as I have recalled this scene innumerable times over the years, I find myself challenged to imagine a love like that. Do I *really* desire to love like that? Forget for the moment whether I think I am capable of loving like that or not... do I at least *desire* it? Do I want to be that real? Would I be willing to pay the immeasurable cost of love for a shot at its immeasurable value—the value of being someone? What do I cling to that keeps me from that? That scene invites me to imagine.

Scene 2: Up in the Air

A second film scene that beckons the theological imagination is from *Up in the Air* (2009).

This is a peculiarly charming movie. I would guess that I am not the only one who found myself almost immediately liking Ryan Bingham (George Clooney), though I cannot exactly explain why. Here is a guy who gets paid to tell people that they're being fired... during a recession. He is a professional hitman for careers and livelihoods. At times it seems like he has made this into an art form, when perhaps he's actually performing something more like a surgical air strike.

According to Ryan, the secret to success and happiness in life is having an “empty backpack.” This means that one should not be attached, should not have baggage, should not be tied down. Whatever is in your backpack—“your couch, your car, ... acquaintances, friends... your husband, your wife”—weighs you down. But life is movement and weight is an impediment to living. Relationships are the weightiest parts of who we are, and these inhibit us from maintaining lightness to our being (compare to Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). “We are sharks,” Ryan proclaims. We go it alone and we must travel lightly.

The proof of Ryan's movement through life is his travel all over the map doing his job. He is a true professional and an expert traveler. In fact, he has moved around so much that he is close to entering the 10 million mile club on American Airlines: this is his major life goal.

This is Ryan's complete profile, until he makes a certain acquaintance in a frequent flyer lounge. Ryan is in-between flights, abiding in that nowhere space that is the closest thing he has to a home. Here, he

finds a woman who is, by all appearances, his mirror image. Alex (Vera Farmiga) is a “60,000 mile a year” traveler. She's uncomplicated. She's moving from place to place without attachments. And she's available, as he is, for a highly casual relationship. “The slower we move, the faster we die... we're sharks, we have to keep moving.”

Unsurprisingly, what starts out as casual sex between acquaintances in Hilton Hotels slowly becomes something of an attachment, despite all intentions to the contrary. He takes her home to his sister's wedding, he starts to think about her when he's not with her, and, ultimately, he finds that he no longer wants to be in that nowhere space in-between definite places. He is beginning to want to be somewhere—that is, with her.

So Ryan is standing at the podium in a conference center, going through his well-rehearsed backpack spiel, when the weight of this unexpected relationship bears down on him. He has a moment of clarity and courage, so he goes. Right then and there, in the middle of a speech, he walks away, hops on a plane, lands in Chicago, knocks on Alex's front door holding a bouquet of flowers and waits to take a chance. He is waiting to take a chance on being attached to someone, defined by something, grounded in some way.

When the door opens, Alex's kids are running around in the midst of a chaotic evening ritual, while her husband is somewhere out of sight, calling to her. Standing well back on the stoop, Ryan peers into a life already in motion. *Here*, it appears, Alex is already grounded. Ryan met her *up there*, in the sky, where an empty backpack got him far.

Photo by Sergio Calleja,
View from Airplane, 2007.



Watching this scene is like seeing someone totally stripped down, completely exposed. You shift your focus back and forth from him to her to see one, then the other, exposed. He, for all he never was and never pretended to be. She, for all that she pretended not to be but actually was. Here is a hollow man standing before the embodiment of hollow lies.

When Alex later calls to excoriate Ryan for showing up in her “real life,” she utters one of the most profoundly accurate lines in film history. It is also brutal: “I thought our relationship was perfectly clear. You are an escape. You’re a break from our normal lives. You’re a parenthesis.”

You’re a parenthesis. That is exactly what he was. This is what his whole life had become, and it was in his parenthetical existence that he met her. He lived in a bracketed space, between places, between gates, between meetings. This enclosed space was devoid of any connections to greater meaning. He set his heart on this non-space and desired only what it had to offer: maximum mobility, 10 million miles, no strings attached. He was a weightless traveler with a fast-moving life, abiding nowhere and going nowhere in particular.

The scene is so appropriate to the film and yet so unexpected. It is shocking, really. The man that was inexplicably likable now stands as a subject to be pitied. Why did I like him in the first place? The charm, the confidence, and the certainty were all appealing when he was content. Now that he is brokenhearted, it is frankly pathetic.

I have only seen *Up in the Air* once, and yet that scene still haunts me. There was George Clooney—the man who gives meaning to the phrase “put together”—standing on the doorstep of an illusion, completely unmasked, startlingly exposed. I have wondered more than once: Why did I like him to begin with? I cannot help but ponder whether there is something of that ungrounded life that is just so alluring. It just seems so much like freedom. Moving around, 10 million miles, empty backpack, brimming with self-confidence. If that is so alluring, why do I pity the logical conclusion of this perpetual motion? Why do I pity him as he stands there as a man who moved so fast that nothing stuck? Why did I want to say “Yes!” to his beginning but not to his end?

I suppose I am not the only one who has had moments like his, when the truth unveils the illusions I pretended were realities. I have had them in hard conversations as well as during private examinations of conscience. More than a few trips to the confessional have resembled that moment on the stoop. And when those falsehoods are stripped away, what is left? I struggle, yet I try to believe that I am what I have been given. In my better moments, I hope I can become what I have received.

Scene 3: Shrek



ABOVE
Shrek, Madame Tussauds, London

The first two film scenes are ones that have remained with me over time; they are present to me in my memory and they continue to give me opportunities for exercising my theological imagination. As I think about films these days, though, I cannot help but think about my kids.

My kids like to watch movies... a lot. My wife and I do not let them watch movies too often because we can see how they get lured in to them. I am pretty sure their eyeballs are physically sucked towards the television whenever they are watching one of their "shows." In fact, this parental observation prompted me to start thinking about the distinction between immediacy and imagination in the first place.

Like them, I loved watching movies as a kid, especially the *Star Wars* trilogy (and *Annie* before that, but let's keep that between us, okay?). Besides the thrill of light sabers and Storm Troopers, I wonder how *Star Wars* exercised—or blocked up—my imagination. It is hard for me to know. What I can ask about, though, is what I hope my kids might see in some of the movies they watch. And so I think of the one they have watched more than any other: *Shrek*.

Shrek is hilarious for both kids and parents, albeit not always for the same reasons. I know my kids have learned that "parfaits are delicious" and that "Duloc is a perfect place." I wonder, though, what they make of the film as a whole, especially in light of the ending. It is fitting, of course, that the fairy tale is completely subverted in the last scene, where the princess is turned into an ogre rather than the ogre turning into a prince. But isn't there something even more remarkable about that occurrence than just the

thwarting of the fairy tale status quo? Seen with a theological imagination, perhaps there is.

What do fairy tales about princesses usually reveal? The princess is beautiful, something ugly has happened to her, and ultimately the ugliness needs to be removed so that full beauty can be restored. *Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast*: check, check, check, check, check.

In *Shrek*, Princess Fiona is basically cut from the same cloth as the other princesses. She is desperate for “true love’s first kiss” and pining for her “happily ever after.” Predictably, she’s cursed. She turns into an ogre in the darkness of the night, under the cover of which she hides her ugliness. “I’m a princess! And this is not how a princess is supposed to look!” She wants to be beautiful, and she wants everything else in her life to be beautiful, too. Typical princess stuff.

En route to this happily ever after, she happens to fall in love with an ogre. This is unfortunate for a princess. “Princess and ugly just don’t go together.” According to the paradigms of the fairy tale narrative, she is absolutely right. These are polar opposites. The princess is supposed to be freed from whatever is ugly so as to be made secure in a state of beauty. Only those things that are beautiful are loveable in fairy tale land. She cannot love something ugly. Fairy tale logic would dictate that the full-time ogre, Shrek, must be changed into something beautiful in the end in order for Fiona to truly love him. “That’ll do, Donkey... that’ll do.”

What would serve as a shock to the casual observer is that this narrative logic is foiled at the end of *Shrek*. While Princess Fiona does kiss her true love, the transfiguration does not happen as conventionally scripted. In another film, we would have expected the ogre to become a handsome prince. At the very least, we would expect the princess’s beauty to stabilize. To the contrary, what emerges from the luminous transfiguration cloud is Princess Fiona, the ogre. “But... I was supposed to be beautiful.” “You are beautiful,” Shrek responds.

This is not a sappy scene. It is rather a fitting ending to a smart and overtly subversive story.

The question for me, though, is what do I hope my kids see? If the regular fairy tales about princesses would teach them that ugliness is the opposite of beauty and thus a hindrance to being loveable, then what might this film show them? There is no summary message at the end: it is left to their imaginations.

What I hope they are able to see is something akin to what a lifetime of receiving Communion is meant to teach them: God does not love you *because* you are beautiful; God loves you, and that makes you beautiful. God loves you, warts and all. I don’t know if my kids see that yet, but if they live a life that flows from and returns to the Eucharist, I hope they might remember the “show” they watched umpteen times as kids and imagine how God must love them.

Memory

This brings me to just one concluding remark: films exercise our imaginations mostly in our memory. It is hard to think about a movie scene very long or very hard while watching it. Unless you pause the film—and you better be the only one in the room if you do!—this scene is going to fade away as the next one hastens to the screen.

I, for one, remember movie scenes (as shown above, I also retain movie quotes like I am getting paid by the word to do so). Because they give me so much—sight, sound, motion, etc.—the impression upon the memory can be pretty vivid. Of course, if I just passively float through a film without actively engaging it at all, I will forget everything but the self-contained experience. But if I pay attention, if I remember myself as the viewer, and if I try to work through the story as it is unfolding, more enters my memory and remains with me to work on later.

I never fully know why one particular scene or line or image stays with me, but I find that I am most curious about those scenes or characters or lines that are enigmatic in some way:

Did you rush the field?

You're a parenthesis.

Princess and ugly just don't go together.

In moments like these, there is more promised than appears present at first glance. These scenes make me wonder.

The response of wonder testifies to what I believe to be creative restraint on the part of the filmmaker. The filmmaker has respected me as a viewer. Oftentimes, those moments of shock—those occasions for wonder—are what snap me back to a conscious awareness of myself as a viewer. Even though I am watching closely, I am not in the scene. There is a space between. I am not trapped in or absorbed by what is given. In this free exchange of give-and-take, a genuine act of communication occurs. Ultimately, the space between art and audience is the condition of the possibility of exercising the theological imagination.

