



Review of *An Orthodox Monk Watching Films*

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Book Review

The text reviews the book of Daniel Cornea: *Cinema: A Reading inside the Church. For an Orthodox Theology of Culture* (Romanian: *Cinema-ul, o lectură îmbisericită. Pentru o teologie ortodoxă a culturii*), Christiana Publishing House, 2017.



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Review of *An Orthodox Monk Watching Films* Ioan Buteanu

By its original title, *Cinema-ul, o lectură îmbisericită. Pentru o teologie ortodoxă a culturii*, this book is as an important initiative that intersects the Christian Orthodox theology with film as a part of contemporary culture. On purpose or not, this work continues the idea of Elena Dulgheru according to which the Church must not separate itself from the worldly existence and from the artistic preoccupations of the people (Dulgheru 193). In his review of the book, Marian Rădulescu also underlines as the main attitude of monk Daniel the refusal to “accept the divorce between culture and faith” (Rădulescu no page).

The author, whose second and last book is this, died at 45, in 2017. He was known as icon painter and writer concerned about the presence of the Orthodox Church message in the contemporary world. This book, written in a free essayistic style, is divided into three chapters: the first entitled "Man, World, Culture", the second named "Culture, Creativity, Cinema" and the third called "Some movies". These three chapters represent three concentric circles that go from abstract and general to concrete and particular, from definitions of man, culture and creativity to the very personal notes about the films mentioned in the last chapter. This work is rather an essay, it does not cite the authors in a scientific manner (for example, at page 19, Ludwig von Bertalanffi is paraphrased without mentioning the work and page). Daniel Cornea makes many personal considerations, unsupported by bibliography, some interesting, others quite confusingly expressed, and others quite banal.

In the first chapter man is defined through his humanity, and this humanity is "what is communicated and the main instrument of the act of communication" (Cornea 20) and culture is what gathers these two functions (Cornea 20-21). For the author, "culture is not an external object

that man accesses or not, but an elemental constituent of man's humanity, <<The Operational System>> of the Human Condition" (Cornea 22). The definition continues by describing the human being as a "psychosomatic mechanism", but also as "something else/somebody else that (...) can do what he/she wishes, with a sovereign unpredictability and bringing to life absolutely new things". This is a "person". This concept expresses "the absolutely unique and unrepeatable identity of every human being" (Cornea 29). In Daniel Cornea's understanding, man is "a being (body and soul)" and "a potentially full person called toward a permanent updating process through love" (Cornea 31).

The world is understood as "a text and life (as a) reading" (Cornea 47). The world is "objective, intelligible to an undefined number of other people", but it is also "*my own*, because my participation determines it to some extent" (Cornea 48). Very important and beautiful is the observation that "the signifying process of the world, the discovery of meanings, of the importance of things, read in the light of Grace, seems to have been Adam's main occupation. Here the origins of human creativity should be sought. Prior to Fall, Adam knew things in a certain wholeness, in hypostasis. It has to do with them personally, with all together and with each one separately. (...) their names (...) were not just a caprice (...), but rather (...) a summary of (...) their presence (Cornea 48-49). It is said that there is a "true world, the one in God's project", but "we never get to completely <<unpack>> the gift of God" (Cornea 49-50). The unveiling of this true world seems to be one of the purposes of true knowledge. Worth to be remembered is the definition of creativity as "the fundamental criterion of value" (Cornea 52). If a work of art, a movie, does not bring anything new to the world, a way of saying things in a true and somehow unique manner, it is not valuable.

From the beginning of the second chapter, we note the statement that "routine and creativity are the two poles of the deed" (Cornea 53) and especially the one that says "that the act of creation is the absolute expression of the person" (Cornea 53). The author points out that, in fact, creativity and the person, defined one through another, are two ineffable and indefinable notions (Cornea 53). Daniel Cornea returns to the nuanced defining of the work of art and of the masterpiece. He says that 'an artwork' "brings to the horizon of our existence an important cognitive content" (Cornea 61). It means that people preoccupied by culture and art have access to a richer universe than others. He proposes the understanding of art as a meditation on reality. Art can educate us in the sense of a deeper and essential understanding of the world as amazing beauty: "It was necessary to meet the work of art to awaken in us that different, original way of looking at things seen in their non-utilitarian simplicity" (Cornea 65).

An interesting idea, albeit expressed in clichés, is that extraordinary works of art contain in them creativity as an element of God's image in man: "only masterpieces adequately illustrate the divine origin of the creative impulse" (Cornea 56). That is why these works "behave like a living organism: they integrate in their uniqueness and coherence even the last detail and promptly remove foreign bodies" (Cornea 56). Masterpieces had been defined as "perfect from the theological point of view" (Cornea 15). From this we understand that they contain a level of deep truth that does not contradict with the revealed truth. At the other pole there are 'bad films' that "are often stereotyped copies, multiplied to the refusal of authentic creations" (Cornea 96). As markers of the value, monk Daniel remarked the mandatory presence of "authenticity" (i.e., truth), "beauty" and "intelligence" (Cornea 78-81). That is why he considers that "the values of culture" can lead us to "the anteroom of faith" (Cornea 83).

The approach to any film is seen as a "honest fight", without "preconceived ideas" (Cornea 84), because "cinema is not an icon but a mirror of humanity" (Cornea 105).

Cinematography deserves respect because it is at the "age of full maturity" and it has become an "industry" that concentrates "huge resources and competencies" (Cornea 93).

The effects of a masterpiece upon its spectators are rendered in a formulation that has didactic tone: "Watching an artistic masterpiece produces euphoric joy and catharsis" (Cornea 109). The idea that good/ important films can open people to "contemplation" (Cornea 120) is reiterated and that they bring "an extraordinary volume of knowledge. It is our task to find (...) the meaning of this knowledge" (Cornea 125). The book goes on with a rather general speech, a kind of cultural guide addressed to those who believe in Christ. From this guide we underline and quote the following dictums: "The wealth of knowledge does not impede upon faith unless we make not an idol out of knowledge" (Cornea 127); "As long as we sail without losing the equilibrium and the azimuth that is Jesus Christ in His Church, the complexity of the world will not enchain our souls" (Cornea 127); "Cultural metabolisms differ probably as body metabolism differs" (Cornea 127). Some (Christians) will use culture, "others will devote themselves only to theology and prayer" (Cornea 127).

A conclusion that targets both church educators and all believers states that it is important to have access to " best-quality knowledge" and to enable everyone to understand their own vocation" (Cornea 127). "In this way we will have both: a hospitable complexity and the full freedom to wander through it as much as we think it is useful to us, as long as we do it for the glory of God and for the good of men!" (Cornea 127). An even more general conclusion that goes beyond culture and opens the discourse of the book to the transcendent tells us that "We are not free when we master the world, when we are doing well and feel comfortable between its borders. We are free to the extent that we decide to step beyond these borders" (Cornea 125).

Chapter 3 proposes a rather surprising selection of films. This lack of preconceived ideas proved by this list may be surprising for an Orthodox monk. Some films on this list are controversial even according to the standards of the secular society. In this selection of movies, although I disagree the selection of some titles and (after that) with some of their interpretation, we discover the free spirit of Father Daniel and the viability of the theological approach to any film.

In the conclusion section, I want to gather some ideas and attitudes that could catch the interest of the future readers of the book. I will list some of these ideas below.

First is the defining of the culture as an “Operational System” of the human being, as an essential element of humanity. The second is the understanding of the human being as a sovereign and unpredictable (meaning “surprisingly free”) being, able to bring “to life absolutely new things” (although the expression “absolutely new” is debatable). The third is the loving attitude with which Father Daniel, following the the perspective of the Orthodox Christian anthropology, regards humans as an infinite and full of unfathomable mystery. This characteristic of humans is also called in the books of theology “the apophatism of the human beings” (Stan 185). The fourth attitude is expressed through the portrayal of man as a reader and discoverer of world’s meanings, a discoverer called to “unpack” the beauty of the world understood as a gift from God (for this topic see also Stăniloae 233). The fifth main idea I underline is that of creativity understood as an element of God’s image in human beings. Father Daniel considers that the truly valuable works of art (meaning the masterpieces) are “perfect” from the theological point of view. This means that the correct and morally pure artistic intuition is oriented in the same direction as the vocation for spiritual perfection seeded by God in humans. The sixth memorable thing is the defining of the Christian approach to any film as an “honest struggle” with cinematography (seen as an art that has already reached its maturity). The seventh idea is that the Christians who are accustomed to

“use” culture can enrich their life experience with quality films, because “the complexity of the culture reflects the complexity of the world” (Cornea 126).

Instead of final conclusions, I would say that, through this book, we have before us a theoretical and applied essay that provides the Church with an instrument of dialogue with the world of films. On the other hand, the book unveils for the “secular” world the loving attitude and openness of the Orthodox Church towards it.

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