

**Schillebeeckx and Third Cinema:
Causing the Signs of the Times to Speak**

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I teach the Schillebeeckx course here at the Catholic Theological Union and an important part of the Day 1 lesson is how to pronounce the Dutch theologian's name correctly— "Sh-kill-a-bakes." As difficult as his name is to pronounce let alone spell, it is his actual written legacy that not a few have found to be a bit of a challenge to read. During my doctoral research in the former Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands (now re-named Radboud University) from 2000 to 2004, I had my own reservations and struggles with Schillebeeckx's formidable corpus of works. Over a couple of months, however, a breakthrough ensues and the texts finally begin to "speak" to me. I was hearing the voice of someone who is trying to initiate a conversation about God because he is in conversation *with* God. And meaningfully, as someone who was born and raised in the Philippines, I was also beginning to hear the voice of a prophetic theologian preaching the good news of the poor of a world that is ranked "Third," to his own constituents in a world that is ranked "First."

My research work is an interdisciplinary project, one that involves bringing Schillebeeckx's theology into dialogue with a cinema of Third World liberation known as "Third Cinema." I will first discuss the liberative stream of Schillebeeckx's theology as a discursive framework, and then offer a brief

description of its creative crossings with Third Cinema, as well as what this project means for my context.

Schillebeeckx stands unique among his contemporaries in that he devotes serious theological attention to the plight of the Third World. His sensitivity for a sociopolitical context external to his own Western European milieu is rooted in his epistemological project of addressing what he terms as the “ecumene of suffering,” the scandalous reality of human suffering on a global scale that continues to persist notwithstanding the salvific claims of scientific advancement and economic progress. This liberative stream is characteristic of Schillebeeckx’s later theology, the result of a theological turnabout that took place in the advent of the Second Vatican Council. This further deepened in the years following, when, over and above his engagement with hermeneutics and critical theory, he assumed the role of western dialogue partner to Latin American liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, and the Boff brothers, Clodovis and Leonardo. At this juncture in his theological formation, Schillebeeckx would follow a decisively praxis-oriented trajectory. If, as Schillebeeckx asserts, the experience of suffering is the “scarlet thread” that runs through human history, he would, in response, configure human liberation as the “golden thread” of his theology, as he asserts in an interview I conducted in 2002 (Sison, 144).

Central to Schillebeeckx’s conception of human liberation is his understanding of *imago dei*, the biblical anthropological vision of the human being as the image-bearer of God, or what he terms as the *humanum*. Schillebeeckx takes an optimistic view of the human, undergirded by his belief

that in addition to Scripture and tradition, God is revealed in human experience. In Schreiter's imaginative description, "Indeed, for Schillebeeckx, it is the human that is the royal road to God." (Schreiter, 17) This optimistic anthropological valuation, however, triggers an inevitable problematic— if the human is indeed the royal road to God, what is certain is that the royal road map is missing. There is no theological "MapQuest" that we can resort to for specific directions to destination *humanum*. Thus, for Schillebeeckx, full, authentic humanity is not served to us on a silver platter, it is a dialectical reality, a goal to be sought after and struggled for amid the various sociopolitical asymmetries and injustices that persist inherently in our finitude. That said, Schillebeeckx proposes seven coordinates to a "livable humanity," or "anthropological constants" that may serve as heuristic signposts in the quest for the *humanum*. Limitations of time preclude us from getting into a detailed discussion but the seven anthropological constants are as follows: 1) The relationship between human corporeality, nature, and the ecological environment, 2) Being human involves fellow human beings, 3) The connection with social and institutional structures, 4) The conditioning of people and culture by time and space, 5) Mutual relationship of theory and praxis, 6) The Religious and Para-religious consciousness of human beings, and 7) The irreducible synthesis of these six dimensions. (Schillebeeckx 1980, 733-43).

The quest for the elusive *humanum* meaningfully angles Schillebeeckx towards a practical-critical soteriology that emphasizes salvation as "human, social, and societal liberation in which the ethical is assumed in our relationship

with God.” (Sison, 143) For Schillebeeckx, living within the ecumene of suffering where the *humanum* is constantly threatened offers cognitive value and liberative potential. This is not a romantic notion of suffering as a way of scoring imagined heavenly points that are redeemable in the hereafter, Schillebeeckx clearly names suffering as a “negative mis-experience.” What he is proposing is that there is an implicit appeal to the *humanum* within the experience of suffering when it “creates a bridge toward a possible praxis, which wishes to remove both the suffering and its causes.” In this paradox, which Schillebeeckx calls a “negative contrast experience,” (Schreiter, 55) the positive moment found within the crucible of human suffering becomes the very oil for the rekindling of human hope and the possibility of praxis. Thus, to the question– “Where is God in the experience of suffering?” –Schillebeeckx’s conception of negative contrast experiences would offer the reply– “God is in our protest, in our refusal to acquiesce to situations of suffering and injustice.” Or as Mary Catherine Hilbert eloquently puts it, “God is the source of creative dissatisfaction with all that is less than God’s vision of humanity.” (Hilbert, 220)

Having painted in broad strokes the relevant threads of Schillebeeckx’s praxis-oriented theology, I set out to explore how this is brought to bear in my own cultural context as represented in Third Cinema. The “Third” in Third Cinema does not so much allude to the geographical origins of a given film as it does the film’s dedication to an authentic representation of Third World peoples who struggle to become agents of their own history in the postcolonial aftermath. Third Cinema began as a Latin American social and artistic movement in the late

1960s, which aimed to create a "guerilla cinema" that would run counter to the colonialist mindset and aesthetic choices represented by the dominant American and European Cinemas. Later scholarly developments, credited largely to the work of Ethiopian film scholar Teshome Gabriel, had re-configured Third Cinema as a critical theory of film, the only one emanating from outside a Euro-American context. Gabriel's groundbreaking book *Third Cinema in the Third World* speaks of an "Aesthetics of Liberation" where an ideology of Third World liberation is linked with a film's stylistic strategies. Third Cinema then evinces a different function for film, one that goes beyond an escapist weekend diversion over soda and popcorn. Third Cinema plays the role of custodian and emissary of cultural memory; it offers a revisionist re-telling of the collective deep stories of the vanquished who have suffered the sentence of colonial history, and who continue to seek fuller humanity through the re-imagining of a postcolonial soul and identity. Examples of titles in the Third Cinema canon include *La Ultima Cena* ("The Last Supper," Tomas Gutierrez Alea/Cuba, 1976), *Perfumed Nightmare* (Kidlat Tahimik/Philippines, 1976), *Xala* ("Spell," Ousmane Sembene/Senegal, 1975), and more recent titles such as *Diarios de Motocicleta* ("Motorcycle Diaries," Walter Salles/Argentina, 2004), and *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George/UK, South Africa, 2004).

The epistemological resonances between Schillebeeckx's praxis-oriented theology on one hand, and Third Cinema's aesthetics of liberation on the other hand, lay down a bridge for a mutually enriching intertextual dialogue. Specific examples are in order. In a pivotal scene in *Hotel Rwanda*, wide-angle shots

capture the unfolding drama when Rwandans are left in the lurch by UNAMIR forces amid the impending genocide of the Tutsis. The scandalous scene of a predominantly Euro-American exodus and the abandonment of Rwandans essays how the ecumene of suffering is, from the perspective of geopolitics, an ecumene of Third World suffering. Here, the Rwandan quest for fuller humanity is symbolized by the sanctuary they find in an abandoned Belgian hotel– a postcolonial allusion to Rwanda’s former colonial masters who are historically implicated for the worsening of the tribal wars –which gives them a chance for them to affirm dignity and life in a virtual “hotel humanum.” In the Filipino film *Perfumed Nightmare*, Schillebeeckx’s conception of negative contrast experiences finds cinematic rendering in magic realism, when the Filipino protagonist surrealistically blows away the masked phantoms that continue to haunt his colonized imagination. The film represents how the divine is imbricated in the protest and resistance against what has been identified as “not-God.” Finally, the Cuban film *La Ultima Cena* critiques the oppressive master-slave dualism in a poignant scene when the character of the Count, a cruel member of the rich and powerful neo-colonial class, organizes a lavish formal dinner for twelve of his severely exploited African slaves in a twisted re-enactment of Jesus’ Last Supper. As the oppressed slaves gorge on the rich food, the Count theatrically appropriates Biblical rhetoric to legitimize and sacralize the master-slave equation. The supper rouses mutinous thoughts among the slaves, who detect the disjunction between the Count’s words and deeds. The epistemological resonance to Schillebeeckx’s praxis-oriented theology is

unmistakable. In *God Among Us*, which is a collection of his homilies, Schillebeeckx issues a prophetic critique of an unequal Eucharist, "...the intercommunion of rich Christians who remain rich and poor Christians who remain poor while celebrating the same Eucharist, taking no notice of the Christian model of sharing possessions: the sharing of the one cup of salvation among one another." (Schillebeeckx 1983, 178)

While Schillebeeckx's theology provides a lucid and nuanced discursive framework by which to study Third Cinema; Third Cinema offers an imaginative way of exploring the continuing relevance of Schillebeeckx's theology for a Third World that continues to exist, though the zeitgeist would like to think otherwise. To borrow a blurb written for my book by noted Religion and Film scholar Brent Plate, the "crossing and colliding of the cinematic and the theological produces an 'explosion of meaning.'"

This interdisciplinary project is a personal tribute to a Western theologian who dared to preach the God of the Edge, the God who is bent toward humanity. It also represents a meaningful and creative response to the prophetic challenge posed by Schillebeeckx who writes, "For the signs of the times do not speak, we must cause them to do so." (Schreiter, 273)

References

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