

Meghann Robern

Professor Roland Faber

LPS 3008: Mysticism East and West

16 October 2013

Midterm Art Project: *I Will Live in Her House, Forever*<sup>1</sup>

I struggled for some days over what form this art project should take. Eventually, I came to realize that, like so much of mystical thought, each of my individual ideas was incomplete without one or more of the others alongside it. This final version takes the form of a trinity of films, to be experienced in a particular order. Each is a part of a larger attempt to show how certain pieces of the class readings spoke to me directly and plainly, without need for explication or discussion. As the semester has progressed, I have woven these pieces together in my mind, not as a claim to a mystical experience of my own, but as framework for what a mystical experience might look/feel/sound/smell/taste like to someone like me—Euro-American, white, uncloistered, not-of the traditions which tend to experience mysticisms, tied to a lover and children. This is my attempt to generate what Michael Sells describes as “a sematic intensity that overflows standard linguistic structures and limits,” a “‘kataphatic’ step [that] sets the context, the cultural-linguistic context of a given tradition”<sup>2</sup>—specifically, mine (as made up as it is).

I am also, at a meta-level, ignoring the perfectionist voice in my head in favour of Porete's model of rapture, as described by Sells: “Rapture entails complete abandon—abandon of will, of works, of reason, of self-vulnerability. It can occur only in a context of absolute trust.”<sup>3</sup> While the music and poetry used in the films was specifically chosen, along with photographs, the photos themselves were taken with a randomizer generating film, lens, and flash filters. There is very little more precious to me than capturing a powerful moment on film, and it was an effort of abandon on my

---

1 Bobby McFerrin, “The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (Dedicated to My Mother)” on *Medicine Music* (Capitol Records, 1990) iTunes edition.

2 Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 31.

3 *Ibid.* 130.

part not to control the outcome, and risk losing the perfection of those moments—not out of pride for my ability, but because capturing those moments are one of the ways I glimpse the holy in my life. The, of course, there is the fact that what we make manifest in the world—in this case, the final version of these films that are turned in—more often than not falls short of what we wish for it. Perhaps that in itself is part of the mystical experience: we grasp the infinite in finite ways, and somehow still understand that we are connected to it but cannot express that connection to the fullness of its existence.

As a woman who soundly rejects the notion of body-hate, asceticism, and quite possibly rejects the idea of an embodied soul, for this project I embraced Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible*: “theologies that privilege the body [...] They voice such a confrontational worldliness that their passions appear foreign to the moods and motives of apophatic mysticism. Or obstructive.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, I wanted to maintain awareness of more “traditional” forms of mysticism and apophysis and incorporate them into my design. Sells begins his book on mystical unsaying with the assertion that apophysis *must* be paired with kataphysis: “Every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying.”<sup>5</sup> My trinity of films that uses embodied forms of the World to open up paths to the mystical experience is a direct effort to create what he describes as “performative intensity” that “generates distinctive paradoxes”.<sup>6</sup>

“first” is a film that combines the song “Joan of Arc”<sup>7</sup> with photographs of various worldly elements and surroundings that, to me, took on a sense of both immanence and transcendence. The song is a retelling of the martyrdom of Joan of Arc as she is burned at the stake, presenting it as a love story between her and the fire, and performed by a man and a woman. This was my link to the

---

4 Catherine Keller, “The Cloud of the Impossible,” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 26.

5 Sells 3.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Leonard Cohen, “Joan of Arc,” on *Famous Blue Raincoat*, performed by Jennifer Warnes and Leonard Cohen (BMG Music, 1987).

traditional rapture-annihilation-consumption model of mystical experience, as presented by women mystics of the beguine tradition (like Hadewijch).<sup>8</sup> Marguerite Porete, however, wrote specifically of love's relationship to fire: "Now this soul so burns in the furnace of the fire of love, that she becomes fire itself, through which she no longer senses fire, she who is now the fire itself by virtue of love who has transformed her in the fire of love."<sup>9</sup> The song is part of my modern context of experiencing the rapture which is so integral to the mystical experience, and does so by paradoxically centering on Joan of Arc's longing as a human, embodied woman. She is tired, and hungry, and lonely, and Fire both simultaneously satisfies those bodily wants while freeing her from them. As she is taken up into Fire, he hangs the "ashes of her wedding dress" for all to see; the symbol of their union, burned up, and he takes in her "dust," but the "glory in her eyes" remains. In this case, the kataphasis was not just one of fully constructing an identity, but also of owning that embodiment which makes us human, and asking God (or Fire) to heal us and fill us up before annihilation. This, for me, is a perfect example of what Keller means when she says that "an earthlier embrace of our diversely bodied creatureliness might call the mystical radiance out from under its bushel. The concurrence of apophasis and embodiment might then turn out to be no accident but a coincidence indeed; not an inevitability, not an impossibility, but an aporia turned porous."<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of the film that I felt I needed to address, especially given the use of both Porete and Joan of Arc, is how to use my non-Christian images in the context of the Christian women's experiences without trivializing it. Of course, Leonard Cohen already took one step away from Christianity in Joan's story—God is never even mentioned, and Fire is always personified as the element. I chose to further bridge the gap of Christian to non-Christian context by choosing to overlay images from my direct experience of the holy, and the Worldly-but-not-quite-fully-embodied elements

---

8 Sells 125.

9 *Ibid.* 137.

10 Keller 29.

that make up the pictures. So in “first,” there are no pictures of people except as large crowds, and a single photo of woman's breast to remind us of who Joan was before her annihilation. My desire to use walking in the World as a visual element is another reason I chose Porete as a personal link to mystic tradition; not only because of her context as a woman, but also because of her context in the beguines and their link to subversive religious expression in their own Christian experience: “They wrote in vernacular what should be kept in Latin. They lived a contemplative life but frequently traveled rather than remaining in the cloister.”<sup>11</sup> By this model, contemplation does not require a life of solitude or silence. In fact, Alfred North Whitehead suggests that “In order to discover some of the major categories under which we can classify the infinitely various components of experience, we must appeal to evidence relating to every variety of occasion.”<sup>12</sup> Of particular note in this film is how many of the photographs actually were not taken with the intent of capturing a specific holy or transcendent-immanent moment, but were then made so by the random photographic elements added on: the texture of the film, the flare of the lens, the colour saturation of the flash. According to Sells, this is also an important aspect of Porete's mystical writing: “Many of Porete's themes may be difficult to capture in their full force, not because they seem alien, but because they seem familiar. [...] The apophatic placement of the extraordinary within the ordinary recurs with Porete as a confluence of mystical apophasis with the most common vocabulary of erotic love.”<sup>13</sup> As Joan of Arc allows herself to become vulnerable to her husband's fire and is transformed into something new, so were mundane elements of the World merged with the will of the universe into something more than ordinary. Returning to Keller, “Lo: bodies appear on the stage of apophasis. Their finitude blazes with the aura of the infinite.”<sup>14</sup>

“second” is a transitional piece, one in which the presentation was crafted by me but not the

---

11 Sells 142.

12 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933) 226.

13 Sells 118.

14 Keller 38.

content. The text of “There Are No Gods” by D.H. Lawrence<sup>15</sup> is offered up, paced for mental inflection but lacking any auditory input. The background for the text is a starscape, an image that can either be a home for the gods or a proof of their non-existence, depending on how one wishes to see it. It is designed to reinforce the subjective nature of experience expressed in the poem, in which a personal experience is also crafted from a sense of there being both gods and not-gods. In the final line, Lawrence's analogy of the pool puts the onus of experiencing gods on the person, who either plunges or does not plunge into the pool. The mystical experience here is proactive, as opposed to receptive in the rapture-ravishing model of sexual union. For this piece of my trinity, I turned to Merton to establish a link back to mystic tradition: “Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him.”<sup>16</sup> Lawrence's speaker in the poem is responding not just to someone else's discussion about the existence and experience of gods, but is also responding to having been touched by something unknown—what Merton describes as the “call”. The imagery of jumping or not jumping into the pool to establish and maintain contact with that unknown element is the response of contemplative life. I chose to leave the film silent to allow the viewer to fill the space with their own voice experiencing the words, and thus to formulate their own response (or not-response) to the call for contemplation. Merton also embraces the paradoxical model, saying that while “But contemplation is beyond aesthetic intuition, beyond art, beyond poetry,” it is also true that “This rejection is of course only apparent. Contemplation is and must be compatible with all these things, for it is their highest fulfillment. But in the actual experience of contemplation all other experiences are momentarily lost. They 'die' to be born again on a higher level of life.”<sup>17</sup>

---

15 D.H. Lawrence, “There Are No Gods” <http://www.kalliope.org/en/digt.pl?longdid=lawrence2001061638>

16 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (class handout) 3.

17 Merton 2.

“third” is the culmination of the trinity, presenting my primary mode of contemplative life in the search for mystical experience: my children. It is in this film that I am attempting to bring together multiple concepts (from different authors) into a whole that is still only a part of something of which I cannot grasp the entirety. I will do my best to trace my thought pattern here with words, but the ability to combine words + pictures + music manifests a film that is, for me, both insufficient to truly express my intent and at the same time more than the sum of its parts as I can explain with just words. Initially, the pictures were going to be set against an instrumental piece, as the third and final act of “unsaying” in the trinity; “first” includes words heard but not seen, while “second” includes words seen but not heard. “third” was not supposed to have any words at all, and rely just on the positive embodiment and proactive response portrayed in the previous films. Once work began on “third,” however, and I struggled with picking a piece of music, I had another meta-experience of surrendering to the project's intentions that were and were not my own. My intellectual desire to craft a cohesive project was failing to meet my personal need for expressing an emotional experience intended to be represented by the project itself. I decided to channel Porete's abandon-rapture and sacrifice craft for resonance. I have brought up Bobby McFerrin's adaptation of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm<sup>18</sup> before in class, but I don't believe I fully expressed what it means to me as a religious experience.

Like Cohen's “Joan of Arc,” “The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm” is a modern iteration of a work steeped in its own context and tradition. I struggle with my love for Christian and Jewish scripture while hating most of the gendered theology and theological language that seeks to cut me off from my connection to the divine. I have known the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm for most of my life and could intellectually understand why some people might find it comforting, but could never find it that way myself. The first time I heard McFerrin, version, however, my experience of the psalm changed. Not only were all the pronouns for God female, but he kept “Lord” as the honorific—linking women not only to divinity but also to

---

18 McFerrin.

Worldly seats of power. On top of that, he did not bring in female voices, either as lead or backup. The song presents as a choir of males singing about a woman in power, modelled after human hierarchies, providing strength, comfort, and protection. In discussing the mystical experience, Alexander Golitzin describes how “God is subject to absolutely none of our conceptions. Even the revealed names—Father, Son, Spirit—are finally icons, images, drawn from human experience. They are given to us in order to point to a reality in the Godhead, indeed, to a community, but that community in and for itself escapes definition.”<sup>19</sup> For me, this recording is one of the best examples of subverting patriarchy without limiting women to things that are female—a concept which I find to be more patriarchy in the guise of empowerment. It pointed to “reality in the Godhead” that I had not been able to find in Christianity before then and provided a direct connection as opposed to having to go through stories about Jesus and other men. It has been an emotional touchstone for me for many years and was, in hindsight, the most obvious choice to underscore my final film about embodied-transcendent-immanent experiences of God.

The first thing I must do is state that I am rejecting the concept that Whitehead describes as “For them, God was eminently real, and the World was derivatively real. God was necessary to the World, but the World was not necessary to God. There was a gulf between them.”<sup>20</sup> There is most definitely a gulf between our experiences of God and our ability to (1) hold on to them and (2) express our experience to others with any true sense of the magnitude. I believe this is due to the uncreated nature of that which we have reached back to touch, even for the briefest of moments—the moment we put words or images or any other sensibilities to it, it has become a creation and is no longer the unformed primordial deep from Genesis. But, at the same time, the fact that we can reach back at all means that we are connected to it, and that therefore it must also be a part of us. When it comes to God's part in

---

19 Alexander Golitzin, “‘Suddenly, Christ’: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites,” in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. By Michael Kessler and Christian Shepperd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 12.

20 Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* 169.

this connection, Keller says that “if God is infinite [...] how can we conceive of any boundary where God ends and the world begins?”<sup>21</sup> The universe, therefore, as we experience it, is “*unfolded*, in not-God; but as *enfolded* in God *is* God.”<sup>22</sup> She quotes Nicholas Cusa to emphasize her point: “The infinite form is received [unfolded] only in a finite way.”<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that I am not arguing for pantheism, but rather *panentheism*—in fact, that were this mystical vision be pantheistic we would have no trouble expressing it fully because they would be nothing of God beyond our experience and comprehension. It is the very difficulty of expression that gives God the paradox of simultaneous transcendence and immanence. Sells argues that Plotinus was also in favour of this dual construction that refuses to put a gulf between us and God:

“‘It is beyond all things’ is a statement that delimits. If it is beyond all things, then there is a conceptual ‘space’ (all things) from which it is excluded, and another conceptual ‘space’ (the beyond all things) in which it is confined.” and “Each proposition taken alone is self-contradictory, analytically incoherent. Meaning is generated between the two propositions: it is within all things—it is beyond all things. In effect, the smallest semantic unit is not the sentence or proposition, but the double sentence or dual proposition.”<sup>24</sup>

Whitehead offers a scientific take on this mystical connection that we cannot quantify but still know to exist: “We cannot determine with what molecules the brain begins and the rest of the body ends. Further, we cannot tell with what molecules the body ends and the external world begins. The truth is that the brain is continuous with the body, and the body is continuous with the rest of the natural world.”<sup>25</sup> In this model, the brain is part of the larger body but is still a separate entity within, just as the body is part of the larger world but is a separate entity within the world. They are all simultaneously separate, but within, and when one tried to find the exact point of separation, or gulf, it cannot be found. We can then combine this with more of Golitzin's analysis of Dionysius—“the final

---

21 Keller 35.

22 *Ibid.* 36.

23 *Ibid.* 37.

24 Sells 21.

25 Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* 225.



stage of our ascent is in fact to become vessels for God's presence, to 'suffer divine things'.<sup>26</sup>—and find ourselves once again back at Thomas Merton and the idea that we are God's words made manifest in the world.

This where my children come in. In “third,” I take Porete's concept of rapture, the “union-with-and-in-love” that is “the act and work of love”, and shift the language from one of a “basic sexual metaphor”<sup>27</sup> into one of motherhood. For Porete, in her attempt to bring the female back into the kataphatic, constructive phase of mystical union with God, her reclamation took on the identity of sexual intercourse and foreplay, even as the divine voice itself was female in addition to male. My attempt at original kataphatic construction, after establishing a context with “first” and “second,” is that child-birth (that is, the act of birthing a person through being a parent by any means, not the physical labour of having a biological child) is another iteration of Porete's “triadic formulations for the divine work in the soul (self-seeing, self-knowing, self-loving)”<sup>28</sup> Children are sponges; they take on our mannerisms, they pick up on our swearing, and they treat others as we have treated them. Not only can we not detect the molecular gulf between us and them, but Whitehead says that “In fact, if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity.”<sup>29</sup> I am present in my children, therefore I can construct myself by studying them. And, while God is an eternal occasion and not an actual occasion, “The transcendence of God is not peculiar to him. Every actual entity, in virtue of its novelty, transcends its universe, God included.”<sup>30</sup>

If I choose to plunge into the pool, to abandon my control as “parent” and enter a state of rapture in which I see my children as embodied-transcendent-immanent manifestations of both myself

---

26 Golitzin 13.

27 Sells.

28 *Ibid.* 136.

29 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Free Press, 2010) 50.

30 Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 94.

and of God, I have a pattern of experience based in mystical traditions without the limitations of theologies, gender, and disembodiment that are not a part of my construction. “third” is my attempt to splice together inward emotional needs (the song and what it represents to me personally) with outward manifestations that can be (self)seen/(self)known/(self)loved (my children) and incorporate the random element of that rare glimpse of pure divinity/Godhead/annihilation (the camera itself capturing the moment in a distinctive way). Just as the psalmist will “live in her house forever”<sup>31</sup>, but still be herself, so I live in God's house and be a part of it, and yet still myself. And as I am made manifest in my children while still being separate and whole but not an other, so is God made manifest in me while also being not-me and not-other. And while “third” is, I think sufficient for this minute point in time, I am far more interested in Whitehead's idea of “the upward path towards an ideal of perfection, with the end in sight, gives a thrill keener than any prolonged halt in a stage of attainment with the major variations completely tried out.”<sup>32</sup>

---

31 McFerrin.

32 Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* 258.

Works Cited

- Cohen, Leonard. "Joan of Arc." On *Famous Blue Raincoat*, performed by Jennifer Warnes and Leonard Cohen. BMG Music, 1987.
- Golitzin, Alexander. "Suddenly, Christ': The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites." In *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Shepperd, 8-37. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Keller, Catherine. "The Cloud of the Impossible." In *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, 25-44. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- Lawrence, D.H. "There Are No Gods." <<http://www.kalliope.org/en/digt.pl?longdid=lawrence2001061638>>
- McFerrin, Bobby. "The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (Dedicated to My Mother)." On *Medicine Music*. Capitol Records, 1990. iTunes edition.
- Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Class handout, September 2013.
- Sells, Michael A. *Mystical Languages of Unsayng*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Free Press, 1933.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Process and Reality*. Free Press, 2010. Kindle Edition.