

Mum, Dad and the Apocalypse: John Lawlor's *Sunday*

ABSTRACT

This article explores how *Sunday* weaves together – through patterns of imagery, sound and silence – forms of catastrophic revelation concerning patriarchal obsession with control that manifests itself through institutional Christianity, enlightenment dreams of cosmic domination or, most shockingly and viscerally, in the private space of the family dining room.

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. 3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
(Genesis 1: 1–4)

The opening words of the Holy Bible gloss the opening sequence of John Lawlor's short film, *Sunday*, subtitled 'Seven words on the seventh day'. The black screen slowly gives way to a blood-red glow that reveals the word 'Sunday' in monumental letters, splitting the screen horizontally. For a moment a red globe seems suspended in the darkness before the screen goes black once more. All the while we hear a deep ominous choral sound that segues into what seems more like a roaring gale. As the shot of three iconic texts – the *Holy Bible*, *Gulliver's Travels* and the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* – comes into view, the sound changes once more, difficult to identify, clacking, snorting, stamping perhaps, merging finally with the click, click of eating utensils which will become, for much of the film, the signature sound.

This brief sequence introduces the unnerving marriage of apocalyptic vision – the revelation of cataclysmic beginnings and endings that have their source beyond human agency – with domestic routine. The family seated at their Sunday meal are framed by images that suggest both the dawn and the end of time, caught between darkneses. When the father's arm reaches ceremoniously towards the radio to switch it on, he appears to resurrect an image out of the void. We now see the tuner that lists, apparently, all the cities of the world. The world is, metaphorically, brought into being. We see into the heart of the radio's darkness as its tubes glow and the red globe seen earlier over the title, takes centre screen, finding its resting place at the centre point of the father's head, as if the muddle of voices that we hear and the unintelligible, even cacophonous, whispering have their source in the mind of the father. His hand giving life to the machine recalls the hand of God in Michelangelo's imagining of the *Creation of Adam*, except that here, in this film, the hand of God is at a diminished – and parodic – remove. All it can bring to life is the babel of technology. Further parody is suggested in the fact that we never see this father's face, just as Moses was warned that he might never look on the face of God and live. Moses might, however, see God's 'back parts' as He passed by (Exodus 33: 18–23). These early scenes in the film propose a critique of patriarchy and its source in the naturalization of the authority of God the Father. Sound and light emerging

from the void will later be recalled by the voice of William Anders as he circled the Moon, declaring *in loco dei* the words that bring light into being. From the technology of radio to the technology of extraterrestrial conquest, the overweening ambition to contain space is figured in the vocal and gestural authority of the male.

Anders' voice is heard at the turning point of the film, over the image of the mother's response to her son's shocking seven words on the seventh day. The number seven, often understood as the symbol of completion, also invokes transformation – both the seven days of Creation and the seven seals of decreation. That these seven words are spoken on Sunday is a reminder of how history and agency (here, Christian) may rewrite custom (here, Jewish). Moreover, they are spoken by the one member of the family who seems filled with energy. His legs swing vigorously up and down underneath the table, animating the frame as the camera pulls back from the close-up on those significant tomes: the word of God, the word of man and, lying subversively between them, the word of the great Irish satirist who was also a 'man of the cloth', Dean Swift. The boy eats his dinner heartily, while the others pick indifferently at their food: one son adds salt; the daughter stares up at the ceiling; the mother exhaustedly samples a tiny forkful. When the young boy asks his question, he flouts the authoritative structure of the dinner table in several ways: he breaks the silence by speaking an embodied word, as opposed to the spectral sounds that emanate from the radio (a tool of the father's power). He asserts the transgressive curiosity of the child about sexual desire, evident in the many children sitting around the table, but here subjected to the utilitarian aims of procreation rather than celebrated for sensual pleasure. Finally, the boy addresses his mother, offering her a space for response, perhaps the most powerful infraction of the father's authority.

Accompanied by a foreboding sound similar to that at the start of the film, the mother's face modulates from impassivity, to sweetness, sadness, anxiety, defeat. Written on the woman's face is the coming of the light and the triumph of the dark. Between anxiety and defeat erupts the brutality of the family patriarch, as he delivers a blow to the head of his child. Rapid cuts to the lamp under the image of the Virgin Mary, the crucifix and the radio tubes climax in the crackle of the radio and the sound of Gaelic, unintelligible to the average viewer, a disruption of communal meaning that echoes the jagged disruption of the fluid rhythm of both narrative and camera that has marked the style of the film up to this point. On cue, the words that become intelligible are those that appear to affirm the Law of the Father (in both Christian and Lacanian terms): 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.' The crisis of image and language in this sequence is reminiscent of the moment in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, where Elisabet cuts her foot on broken glass deliberately left in the path by her nurse, Alma. Bergman reflexively shows the burning of the celluloid and the regression of the images to fragments drawn from his oeuvre, the history of cinema and *Persona* itself. The image slowly reconstitutes itself and Elisabet and Alma come back into focus. The trauma produced by physical and emotional violence produces a wound in time that needs to be sutured in order for the narrative to progress.

In *Sunday*, there is no communal suturing. The father's hand touches the switch that brings back the voice whose Christmas wish now seems viciously ironic. The boy's siblings glare at him accusatorily. The radio comedy that punctuates the silence starts with a parody of 'Sumer is icumen in', progresses through suggestions of comic violence and ends with a comedian mocking his fellow: 'When I hear you sing like that, it makes me want to throw off the trammels of civilisation and belt you one ...' Raucous laughter follows. The radio references move from the Nativity promise of a new world to an anarchic soundscape, while the violent repression of the son and his mother is thrown into sharp relief by the comic trivialization of violence, the father's preferred radio programme.

The final movement of the film returns us to the overtly apocalyptic imagery that ushered in its beginning: the strange, unearthly and beautiful image of two white horses seeming to float across the now colourless spines of the books that support the table next to the young boy's chair. They suggest perhaps the pale horse of death, or the white horse of conquest, or, equally, the white horse of salvation. There is a hint of Peter Schaffer's *Equus* – the drama of a boy, religious and sexual repression, and the love of horses. But there are also those Lawrentian horses full of potent promise:

The youth walks up to the white horse to put its halter on
and the horse looks at him in silence.

They are so silent they are in another world.

This is an image of the restoration of communion between boy and beast, a profoundly anti-apocalyptic one, in keeping with Lawrence's critique of the Book of Revelation, where, in Richard Aldington's words, he

protests against the dehumanizing of men and women by Christianity, which promises them an imaginary heaven after they are dead, 'if they are good'. And it protests against their dehumanizing by 'science', which has taken the gods out of heaven and the heart out of men. (in Lawrence 1974: xxiii)

The drama that plays out in Lawlor's family points up the pain and violence that subtends the apocalyptic view of the world whose centre is not the heart but the head of the house.

REFERENCES

Bergman, I. (1966), *Persona*, Solna: Svensk Filmindustri.

Holy Bible, King James Version.

Lawrence, D. H. (1974), *Apocalypse* (introd. Richard Aldington), Harmondsworth: Penguin.

– – (1994), *The Complete Poems*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

Schaffer, P. (1973), *Equus*, London: Deutsch.

This essay appeared in *Short Film Studies* 1.2 (2011): 299-302