Making theology cinematic: Connections: ‘Bulworth’ and ‘Mickey One’

by James M. Wall in the August 12, 1998 issue

Novelist John Irving quotes François Mauriac: “God doesn’t care at all--what we write--but when we do it right, He can use it.” I have a story I want to relate, but Mauriac’s admonition is intimidating. How do we know we are getting it right? We can’t, so all we can do is try--and hope that the story’s merits will nevertheless emerge, whatever the limitations of the storyteller. This story is true, and while it begins with a sermon, it ends without a conclusion--other than the assertion that connections are gifts from

God, which is another way of saying that God works in mysterious ways. The connections in this story keep bumping into one another; the task of the storyteller is to get out of the way and let them bump.

It started earlier this year on Pentecost Sunday when Jesse Jackson Sr. preached at the Chicago Temple, the major downtown church of United Methodism in Chicago. The pastor, Eugene Winkler, had reached Jackson through one of Winkler’s parishioners, David Wilhelm, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee and a friend of mine, who is now in the investment and consulting business in Chicago.

Jackson eagerly accepted the invitation to preach in the pulpit of that church, located across the street from City Hall. One Chicago columnist pointed out that Jackson has been “preaching” to City Hall much of his public career, usually in opposition to incumbent mayors; now he was preaching to the faithful in a church across the street.

Wilhelm urged me to invite Garry Wills to hear Jackson. Wills is a Northwestern University professor and the author of many scholarly books on personalities and topics ranging from Abraham Lincoln to John Wayne (and one in the works on St. Augustine). He later wrote an essay about the movie *Bulworth* for the *New York Review of Books*--which picks up the story at this point:

Wills notes in his essay that *Bulworth*, directed by and starring Warren Beatty, had been described by one writer as “a movie espousing Jesse Jackson’s politics.” Wills

continues: “That sounds plausible. After all, an early pan shot finds a Jackson sticker among the title character’s political memorabilia. Before long, Senator Jay Billington Bulworth starts speaking in rhymed political slogans, which used to be a Jackson trademark. And some of the ideological points made sound like Jackson’s--e.g., that economic disparity is growing in America while jobs drain off to other countries.” It seems, adds Wills, that Jackson does not go to movies very often, but he had heard of *Bulworth* from his son, Illinois Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., who had given it an unfavorable review on television.

Wills goes on to say:

> A Chicago publicist arranged for Beatty to lend the senior Jackson a print of the film so they could discuss it. The special screening was set up for Pentecost Sunday. My wife and I attended the First Methodist Church in Chicago, a large structure just across from the city’s signature Picasso sculpture, to hear Jackson preach. After the service, he invited a group of us to go with him to the screening room. Jim Wall, the editor of The Christian Century, was in the group. . . . Since Wall is a movie reviewer as well as his magazine’s general editor, he gave me an important tip. Others have referred to Beatty’s earlier political film, Reds, in discussing Bulworth. Wall said I should think, instead, of Mickey One, the Arthur Penn movie Beatty starred in back in 1965.

Wills then summarizes the plot of *Mickey One*, in which Beatty plays a stand-up comic and jazz musician who believes he is being pursued by the mob for a gambling debt. Says Mickey: “All I know is I’m guilty.” Asked what he is guilty of, he replies, “Guilty of not being innocent.” Wills reports that after the *Bulworth* screening, Jackson “spoke more in sorrow than in anger, saying he respected Beatty’s record in progressive politics.” But he was disappointed by the many negative images of African-Americans in the film. Jackson later spoke with Beatty, and “they have apparently agreed, respectfully, to disagree [about the film].”

After Wills’s essay appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, I received a package from Hollywood. In it was a script of Mickey One, along with a letter from Alan Surgal, which began: “As the writer of *Mickey One*, I was struck in a special way that you remembered that 1965 film enough to clue Garry Wills on its ‘apparent’ relevance to *Bulworth*.”

I had been impressed the first time I saw *Mickey One* with the obvious--to me--religious sensibility behind the film. To the best of my recollection, I was alone in this reading. Certainly no secular critic ever mentioned it. I wrote about it at the time and have subsequently used the film in teaching courses on film and religion. In his letter to me, Surgal wrote: “The actual theme, unburied, is really quite comprehensible and it goes, I think, with the go of your mind.”

I called immediately. He told me that the script he had sent me was the original play, which he and Arthur Penn had planned to produce on Broadway. Columbia Pictures offered Penn a contract for a film, and he proposed to Surgal that they turn *Mickey One* into a movie, with Surgal writing the script.

Mickey One, which got only puzzled critical response and enjoyed very little commercial success, was shot in Chicago. In the story Mickey flees the mob in Detroit to live under a new name in Chicago. Surgal told me that he recalls that both François Truffaut (in Chicago looking for money for his next picture, Fahrenheit 451) and Jean Luc Godard consulted with Penn during the shoot. Surgal believes the two New Wave French directors influenced Penn to incorporate some of the mood of mystery which pervades the finished picture--the sort of mysterious open-ended quality so prominent in European films of the period, but rarely seen in American pictures.

I told Surgal of my initial response to *Mickey One* as a picture with a religious sensibility, which asked theological questions without demanding pat answers. There is, for example, the mysterious performance artist who reappears on several occasions to wave Mickey over to his cart. Near the end of the film a fireworks explosion destroys the man’s art, and he is in despair until he notices a sign that is moving slowly; on it is one word: “Joy.” (A similar character appears and reappears in *Bulworth*, urging the paranoid candidate to “choose the spirit and not the ghost.”)

When Mickey stumbles into a storefront mission in search of food he is handed a bowl of soup, which he eats while a minister, stuttering, reads from Jeremiah 37, concluding with the question, “Is there any word from the Lord?” Still running from what he thinks is imminent danger (there is a Kafkaesque feel to the film), Mickey stops to hear a Salvation Army band playing with a chorus that sings, “Is there any word from the Lord?” In the film’s closing episode, Mickey, with the encouragement of a girl he has met (the same pattern is found in the central character in *Bulworth*, who is “saved” by an African-American girl), decides to stand up to his fears and

perform for what may or may not be a mob producer. On stage at his piano, Mickey stares up at a darkened booth, his eyes blinking from the spotlight, and starts to play. He stops and says, “Is there anyone up there?” Hearing nothing, he continues, “Is there any wor--” and stops. The film ends with a shot of Mickey playing the piano, lifted up on an imaginary platform that floats over the city.

What, I asked Surgal, was the source of his decision to allude in his script to the silence of God, then a prevailing concern in theology? He replied, “At the time I was reading Paul Tillich, and I was trying to write a play, and then a film, about a man who would demonstrate ‘the courage to be.’” Mickey is not a believer, but he makes a courageous decision: to quit running and face his fears. Like so many creative and intellectual people of his generation, Surgal was not overtly religious, but Paul Tillich became for him and others a religious thinker who met them in their existential situation and said, “Have courage to confront this abyss; have the courage to be.”

And what about the theme “Is there any word from the Lord,” which is repeated often enough to become the picture’s prevailing motif? “That’s from the title of one of Tillich’s sermons,” Surgal responded. By this point in the conversation I felt both amazed and grateful that Paul Tillich had been such an influence on this screenwriter so very long ago and that I have been blessed to connect to that writer more than three decades later concerning a film that was so important to me in 1965. Finally, I had to know, “Where did you get that gospel hymn asking, ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’” I could not remember ever hearing it again.

“That’s not a traditional hymn; I wrote it for the script,” Surgal replied.

Surgal did not work again as a writer for a Penn film, though he was invited to write *Little Big Man*, Penn’s big hit starring Dustin Hoffman, and declined. Since 1965, Surgal and his wife have produced and written for television. He still lives in Holly-wood.