

Saving Postmodernism's Soul: Bill Viola's *The Passions*

DAVID PACKWOOD

Bill Viola: The Passions

JOHN WALSH (ED)

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In her article on art in the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, Pamela Tudor-Craig enquired if the modern generation, with its thirst for realism, could not yet recover the Christian story by returning to religious subjects such as the Garden of Eden and the Resurrection. Perhaps the modern video artist Bill Viola could be the answer to Tudor-Craig's prayers for a contemporary art that has not entirely forsaken a Christian view of the world. Yet the issue is not as simple as this, because despite the fact that Viola draws inexhaustibly upon Renaissance paintings of Christ's torment and passion, his way of conveying the agony and the ecstasy is unmistakably his own. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of Viola's art: it is rooted in a recognisable Christian tradition, but uses the hi-tech apparatus of modern video to articulate its message, an art form not really noted for encouraging religious conversion.

Yet, paradoxically, seeing religious images on high definition plasma screens does not neutralise a spiritual response in the viewer. While walking through Viola's *The Passions* in the exhibition space of the National Gallery, I was put in mind of images in indisputably sacred spaces such as monkish cells in Renaissance monasteries, with that strange mixture of the aesthetic and the pious. Indeed, Viola's *The Passions* demonstrates how the white cube, the antiseptic modern display space, can impersonate a place of silent worship. To appreciate this kind of effect outside Viola's exhibition, one need only stand in front of paintings such as Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* housed within the white-walled Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery.

It is doubtful that Viola thinks of his videos as specifically Christian, despite the fact that his titles, such as *Man of Sorrows* (2001), obviously recall that faith.

During a recent interview, the BBC critic John Tusa put it to Viola that there was a strong streak of Christian mysticism in his art, but that he never really directly addressed such scenes as the Resurrection and the Crucifixion.¹ Viola replied that Christians do not own the Resurrection or the Crucifixion, and that the image of Christ the saviour belongs to the whole world. Such universalism reflects the post-modern condition which we now supposedly inhabit, characterised by the collapse of 'grand narratives' such as the Christian story, and the erosion in importance of the Bible itself, which Tudor-Craig was lamenting in her discussion of the neglect of biblical themes in modern art. It is too simplistic to see the 'postmodern condition' as exclusively secular, however, since postmodern art, particularly Viola's videos and installations, renders the Christian message subliminal, barely discernible to the beholder, but nonetheless there for those with faith to see. Bill Viola's exhibition *The Passions*, transferred from the Getty Institute to the National Gallery, London, can be related to this issue of how it is possible to re-interpret and re-energise spiritual themes within postmodern culture for the purpose of moving the estranged, jaded and ultimately spiritually-weary viewer.

Part of the problem of identifying sacred art in the postmodern condition is that most critics believe that a real tradition of religious art is absent, a view perpetuated by Marxist writers such as John Berger, who has completely refused to see any evidence of true religious feeling in the art of the twentieth-century, and beyond. Instead, Berger has renounced the religious in the 'age of mechanical reproduction', and argued instead that the art object is 'enveloped in an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity'.² As Stephen Bann has quite rightly pointed out in a recent discussion on the relevance of the theological to the modernist era, artists such as Malevich, whose *Black Square* could be regarded as the

'ground zero' for modern art, went on to explore the iconography of the Cross and the Crucifixion, and there are many more who followed in Malevich's footsteps. It seems therefore that Bann is absolutely correct in his belief that the 'theological' dimension of modern and contemporary art needs to be reclaimed, and made the subject of a more searching inquiry than Berger's, which sought to expunge it.

Although modernist movements such as abstract expressionism produced artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko whose big colour field paintings were conceived almost as divine manifestations of art, the religious aspects of these creations has been largely underplayed. For Newman, however, abstract art was nonetheless religious since he linked the painter's function to theology, because the renaissance in modern painting represented by styles such as Post-Painterly Abstraction were ways of returning to the prime function of the artist, which Newman put on a par with divine creation. As Bann has also said, although modern and contemporary art may not depend upon a clearly identifiable Christian iconography, it should be possible to see Christian themes emerging 'through the process of painting itself, not least because some artists – such as the Italian Francesco Clemente – come to identify themselves with Christ's suffering.

You might think that Pop Art with its objects of everyday life offered no opportunity for transcending the reality of the commonplace, or for the artist to fulfil a divine function. Yet, the spiritual was not absent from even Pop Art, since its greatest exponent Andy Warhol was quietly producing silk-screens of details of paintings by devout Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca and Uccello. More surprisingly, in the 1980s – long after the initial explosion of Pop Art – Warhol created astonishing images of large bright red, blue and yellow crosses which culminated in a series of silkscreen paintings of what look like flickering candles against the void, entitled 'shadows'.³ These initial

¹ Interview with John Tusa, BBC, on their website: bbc.co.uk

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth, 1972.

³ Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, New York, 1998.

religious paintings of 'crosses and shadows' by Warhol have to be placed within the hidden tradition of religion in modern and postmodern art, which includes Viola's own visions of the divine.

'Vision' might seem an odd word to characterise the productions of somebody who is, after all, a contemporary video director and not a Counter-Reformation painter seeking to inspire seekers after Christian truth. If anything, however, Viola's art shows us that the gap between a traditional idea of vision and a modern one is not unbridgeable, a theme that is touched on in the accompanying catalogue to *The Passions*. Here, Hans Belting, in conversation with Viola, considers how the nature of religious vision in the baroque era evolved into the kind of negotiation between the mundane and the supernatural that is present in Viola's art. Vision in earlier religious paintings of saints and martyrs took the form of clouds of swirling angels who seemed to be opening a door or window upon some

spiritual realm, but this idea of vision became rationalised in the work of such Caravaggiesque painters as Ribera, who dispensed with the supernatural machinery of the vision and displaced it off stage. Viola's work in video can be seen within this evolution of making things visible beyond normal sight, of using video to suggest the arrival and passing of divine beings, of creating epiphanies of the postmodern. Sometimes these epiphanies are violent and fearful as in the case of the ethereal light that breaks into the calm, underwater world of Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001). And sometimes Viola's epiphanies are the result of a long wait, what Peter Sellars calls in the catalogue 'waiting for God', a vigil that culminates in the sudden, dramatic appearance of the divine. For this obsession with the moment of realisation, of knowledge of a supreme power capable of shocking the soul into a state of awareness, one has to look to a childhood experience of the artist. Whilst

jumping off a raft, Viola forgot to hold on to a water ring, and sunk straight down, but luckily for him the tragedy of a drowning accident was averted by his uncle's hand reaching down like the hand of God into the submarine world, to snatch Viola back to reality. Thus the motif of the man immersed in water came to figure centrally in Viola's art, virtually a calling card for the artist.

It is interesting that Viola's work deals with the idea of representing the invisible, and his ideas are easily applicable to postmodernism's arch-theorist Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. According to Lyotard, postmodernism 'imparts a stronger sense of the unrepresentable', i.e. that representation never conveys things completely, but only partially. Theologians interested in postmodernism believe in the idea of seeing God in 'glimpses', never knowing him

Bill Viola, *The Passions*.



completely, but only in part, an idea that has connections with Viola's epiphanies of the postmodern. In many ways Bill Viola is concerned with creating these epiphanies, unlike most postmodern artists and critics, who still celebrate a complete disappearance of the spiritual dimension in art. Perhaps epiphany is best demonstrated by Viola's understandable fixation with water, which he frequently uses in his work to convey themes of birth and death. This communication of spiritual epiphany through the use of water as metaphor can best be seen in *Emergence* (2002), a short video which captures the appearance, out of a well, of a naked young man. Clearly, notwithstanding Viola's espousal of a universal religion, his inspiration for this piece was specifically Christian, a painting of a *Pietà* by the fifteenth-century Italian artist Masolino. Viola updated the look of the Masolino figures, however, by clothing his own actors in modern dress, although he still left the sign of the cross on the well from which the man emerges, a decision entirely consistent with the artist's ambiguous attitude towards Christian iconography. Or perhaps one should read Viola's retention of the symbol of the Cross within *Emergence* as an example of the re-emergence of the suppressed theological dimension in contemporary art.

Emergence has clear thematic affinities with another piece, *Surrender* (2001), which has two flat-panel mounted screens on the wall, one showing a man and the other a woman. As both figures draw closer, water is revealed, a medium which helps to suggest shifting personality traits, and on a more artistic level issues of creativity, since *Surrender* recalls the myth of Narcissus and hence the origin of painting. One wonders if Viola sees water as a metaphor for artistic creation in Alberti's sense, to describe the function of painting. Possibly, but it is more likely that Viola sees water as an agent of spiritual change, and it is hard not to think of the ritual of baptism when looking at such earlier works as *The Crossing* (1996). This colour video projection shows a man imperceptibly walking towards the viewer, arriving, and sub-

sequently being immersed by a torrent of water; he then lifts up his arms as if to acknowledge the arrival of a spiritual transition.

It is interesting to note Viola's choice of words such as 'crossing' and 'passing', especially in his large installation works which refer explicitly to water, such as *The Crossing* and *The Messenger*, the latter a video of a naked man in water which caused considerable controversy when exhibited at Durham Cathedral. Water in this group of works seems to suggest baptism in the sense of a passage to the afterlife, what the Hebrews called *pascha* or passage, not the act of cleansing itself, but the transition or *transitus* from the corporeal realm to the one beyond. For Viola, this *transitus* is not only encountered in the more pyrotechnical showpieces, but also in the quiet intimate studies of groups and couples, clearly based on the repertoire of the old masters. The best example of this is *Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), a slow-motion film of five people standing together which was inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *Mocking of Christ* in the National Gallery. You sit on a bench in the exhibition and see what you've never seen before: the play of gesture, the in-between of emotion, what Viola says appropriately 'the old masters didn't paint.'

Much of Viola's art is concerned with this moment of seeing for the first time, a heightened perception made all the more possible by the marvel of the slow-motion playback of his pieces. It is as if a secret long kept hidden is being revealed to the observer, but all too quickly it is gone. Perhaps that is why Viola's work is so important and timely; it shows us the hidden dimension of our lives, tragically concealed. There is tragedy because in this world of mayhem, disruption and ceaseless agitation, it is very difficult to find a place of silent contemplation or prayer, or the possibility of seeing into ourselves. Viola's *The Passions* asks us to concentrate, to focus our minds on what the Buddhists call 'the silent life'. On a more pragmatic level, as Viola's friend, the opera director Peter Sellars has declared with great wisdom, Viola's art is about mourning, a

form of artistic expression very much in demand in this age of global terrorism and the arithmetic of mass murder. It is impossible to look at Viola's *Observance* (2002) without thinking of such moments of mourning as the aftermath of the Twin Towers or the despair of a bombarded Baghdad, or even Madrid. In *Observance*, individuals separate from the knot of a crowd, approach the viewer, pausing for a few seconds to gaze upon something that we are not allowed to see. Are they seeing a car accident or a fire, or are they paying their last respects at a funeral, or even acknowledging the leave-taking of something more abstract, such as hope? We are never allowed to discover the object of the witnesses' grief, but *Observance's* gift is that it draws the spectator inexorably into the moment of mourning, and ultimately suggests what may be contemplated within the piece is none other than ourselves, and our times.

Sure, in our very British mindset, we might dismiss Viola as too mystic, and too much of a California dreamer, but I regard him as important today because his use of video, inspired by the painting techniques of the old masters, suggests ways out of the cul-de-sac in which contemporary art now finds itself. Although Viola is certainly not the 'Rembrandt of video art', his struggle with the ineffable offers many creative opportunities to explore the soul of an age in much the same way as Rembrandt did, to lay bare that pervasive sense of homelessness that characterises virtually every cultural enterprise today. Nor is Viola alone, since currently we have explorations of the soul of art exemplified by Ben Lewis's recent BBC 4 programme on Brancusi, and the appearance of religious themes at Tate Modern by Saatchi's *Children*, Hirst, Lucas et al. Rather than losing our religion, in exploring postmodern artists such as Viola, we might actually come to see how art can heighten our awareness of the spiritual, whatever our beliefs. As the late great Dave Allen said: 'May your God go with you'.

DAVID PACKWOOD
University of Warwick