

The universal dimension of the religiously-themed film

The Farel Prize: An original experience

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Overview

In its selection criteria for religiously-themed films, the Farel Prize chooses productions with a *universal dimension, from a specific and respected cultural anchor. This article aims to identify the boundaries of these criteria.*

It begins by distinguishing, in the symbolism of a film, that which is "really universal", the signifier which infallibly connects, from a film which is "universally true", the meaning of which offers an alliance with viewers whom are invited to receive it. The strength of this second category of cinematic symbolism is to give an impression of the unity of being and acting. By being situated resolutely in this category, Farel aims to award films that connect beliefs and specific myths with the universal of man and the divine.

Then, the article examines two approaches which help expertly examine this symbolic decoding of the "universally true". Firstly, the work around archetypal grounds – religious or not – in which the film is rooted. Secondly, the identification of the religious myths whose meaning the film manages to convey. Finally, the article shows that the four 2016 awards cover the range of possible forms of "universally true" religiously-themed films. To conclude, the article refers to a Web application www.contactgps.ch/farel2016 offering an experimental typology of these four forms.

Established in 1967 by the Protestant Churches of French-speaking Switzerland, the Farel Prize celebrated its 26th birthday this fall, giving awards to four films out of the thirty or so productions selected and presented to the public. Based in Neuchâtel since its inception – in memory of the reformer Guillaume Farel, a talented communicator – it is a modest festival, with few resources. Today, even in the diversity of festivals, it has maintained its specificity. Based in Latin cultures, it is managed in a completely ecumenical way¹, with the support of the cultural services of the town of Neuchâtel and the "Radio Télévision Suisse". It offers an inter-faith dimension in its selection.

Since its inception, the Farel Prize has sought to reward films which have a *universal dimension*. This objective was first achieved in French-speaking and Protestant circles. The universal then corresponded to Evangelical forces and the Protestant roots of the values presented in the films. To maintain its relevance, the goal of universality has gone through a series of openings parallel to the evolution of society: integration of Catholic partnership, international productions, "secular" programs, and finally films beyond the scope of Judeo-Christian roots. Today the religious dimension – a criterion for the jury – is defined as: *"winning films must have a universal impact and not be limited to a restricted public or context. They are the reflection of a particular culture and allow the public to respect the images and the language of this culture"*²

True universality or universal truth?

This criterion's formulation reveals a tension at the heart of what we wish to highlight. It is

¹ Two confessional bodies are financing part of the costs : www.mediaspro.ch (reformed) and www.cath-info.ch (roman-catholic)

² Title of the prize regulations, section 5.1 (criteria): <http://www.prixfarel.ch/inscriptions/reglement/>

the "universal impact" of the film, linked to the universal dimension of the beliefs and values associated with it. From another angle, the films selected must be a reflection of a particular culture, with its images and language. So out with Hollywood! That is the challenge: in film mode, make the universal (God?), from the individual (faith?). How can this be done? By a work of symbolization. The contribution of a festival which selects and rewards productions finds itself at this level. What does this mean? The jury aims to highlight religiously-themed films that manage to relate, both mysteriously and symbolically. Namely, the specificity of a belief, a situation, a drama with the human and/or divine universality to which it testifies.

I owe to a French Catholic philosopher a crucial distinction in the field of the symbolic. Yves Labbé³ distinguishes a true symbol (who brings something together), from a real symbol ("gift of a covenant and assimilation with the "being"). I find it relevant to apply this to religiously-themed films. Can't we distinguish between a **truly universal film** and a **universally true film**? In the first category, the film's language and the script (the signifier) are *a priori* universal, certain to appeal to a wide audience. In the second category, the script and the film's language are *a posteriori* universal; meaning that they must find audiences willing to host them, in this universal sense (the meaning). It is in this latter category that I am interested. This is where the Farel prize – and others like it – are mainly positioned. This is by no means a scale of values in cinematic terms, but a scale of means and, especially, of the choice of scenarios, subjects, angles and language.

Let us summarize. What is a universally true religious film? As a true symbol, it is an interaction of *film* between a particular culture (values, faith) and a value, a universal issue. This is the "gift of a convent" that the viewer can link to himself or herself (with God or Man), from the film, the work of the director. The quality of the work of the latter is precisely not to substitute oneself for the viewer, but to provide him with something unique that he can freely appropriate, even at the heart of a personal uniqueness to be revisited. Inside the value of a religiously-themed film is to "think about the unity of being and acting⁴".

Archetypal, symbolic foundational issues

To evaluate a film in terms of its "universal truth", the jury raises a series of questions. Among them, two are preliminary to strictly cinematographic assessments. The first can be thus formulated: *in what symbolic or archetypal film grounds is the film rooted?* Is it a ground of a religious nature, or rather a ground of a non religious nature, or even an anti-religious one? In the case of the 2016 edition of the Farel Festival, two awards illustrated the importance of the two possible responses. The Canadian fiction "Divine Strategy⁵" staged a Quebec priest frustrated by the decline of his Church, who appeals to a marketing expert. These are clearly archetypal and religious grounds in nature. The artwork of the directors Martin Forget and Eliot Laprise consists of questioning this supposedly universal salvation, represented by new technologies. And what if the lever for change lies elsewhere?

Another prize-winning film takes place in a non-religious setting. After a baccalauréat in philosophy, Michel Simonet chose to become a street sweeper. It was a job lived with some simplicity, leaving time for reading and writing. Entitled "La balayeur à la rose" ("The sweeper

³ in *the symbolic node*, DDB, Paris, 1977, p.279

⁴ *bid.*, p. 278

⁵ Martin Forget productions, 4 Elements productions, Quebecwood productions

with the roses”⁶), Nicole Weyer's film unfolds the everyday work of this man. A highly symbolic activity, whose universal banality hides a fruitful inner character of this man, drawing from the source of the Evangelical ideal which he professes.

Religious myths (stories) which make sense

Another preliminary question for the jury is the originality of viewpoint that the film offers. *Where is the viewer invited to look for a chance of being moved*, to find a religious, ethical or spiritual sense? Symbolically, does the film tell a story that maintains a deep continuity with the past, the timeless, the divine, despite or through the imprint of time – or on the contrary, does the film summon up a consideration of what has changed, new things which change our understanding of spiritual or religious references? The filmmakers of "Chœurs en exil" ("Choirs in exile"⁷) – a winner in the feature film category illustrates this. An Armenian couple from the diaspora faces a loss of connection with their origins. Their situation has changed radically; they are no longer in Armenia and their culture was partly wiped out. Their challenge is to take these changes on board, while seeking some form of permanent connection with their culture. It is found through ancestral song. The viewer is invited to experience and to participate in what remains, which bears divine harmonies and deep unity, despite the ravages of history.

Jean-Jacques Cunnac took the opposite tack. In a reportage which is both original and touching, he calls on the viewer to revisit a notion which is as old as it is apparently anachronistic: Jinn, those invisible and supernatural spirits which affect humans. An award winner at the Festival, in the short film category, his film "Djinns, les esprits de Patras" ("Jinn, spirits of Patras"⁸) invites the viewer to discover the plight of Afghan refugees, stranded in the port of Patras in Greece. It is impossible to remain untouched by such suffering, and finally, the Jinn's narrative illuminates this. These mythical creatures take a solid meaning when they radiate themselves through the prism of the human faces of these refugees. A continuity with Arab culture is thus symbolically offered to Western viewers. In other words, these supernatural creatures from an ancient culture enlighten a contemporary and tragic fate.

In the 2016 edition, the Farel Prize rewarded four films which offer different forms of the "universally true" in the religious field. We synthesized a typology of the "universally true" in an application (www.contactgps.ch/farel2016). This could be the subject of future research.

Translation from french : Thomas Denby & Andrew Stallybrass

⁶ Aired on the show "Passe-moi les Jumelles" ("Pass me the binoculars"), on April 29, 2016, on RTS 1 (Radio Télévision Suisse – Swiss Radio and Television). See: <http://www.rts.ch/play/tv/passe-moi-les-jumelles/video/le-balayeur-a-la-rose-en-quete-de-pierres?id=7683688>

⁷ Borak Films. <http://www.choeurs-en-exil.com/>

⁸ Les Films du Mas Production (Films of Mass Production), broadcast in the program "Faut pas croire" ("You shouldn't believe it") on RTS 1, on October 18, 2015.

See: <http://www.rts.ch/religion/faut-pas-croire/7178191-reportage-de-nombreux-migrants-echouent-a-patras.html>