

Article

“God Smiles”: The Rhythm of Revelation in Sorrentino’s “The Young Pope”

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Abstract: The classic problematic of divine absence and presence is a familiar theological trope (deus absconditus). It achieves new life, however, in the work of contemporary Italian filmmaker Paolo Sorrentino (b. 1970), who explores the theme in his recent television miniseries *The Young Pope* (2016). I “read” Sorrentino as part of a trajectory in contemporary Italian theory (Vattimo, Agamben, etc.) that deconstructs-as-a-way-of-receiving certain traditional (especially Catholic) problematics. However, Sorrentino is to be distinguished from these others by what we might call a postmodern sincerity, whereby he manages to twist without breaking an orthodox understanding of divine invisibility. Importantly, Sorrentino emphasizes the interpersonal and ongoing nature of revelation, and thus situates the absconditus problem in a broader account of dialogical divine love. “Reading” Sorrentino in this way suggests that deus absconditus and deus revelatus are not concepts in tension but rather dynamic parts of an integral, integrating dialectic. It also suggests that visual storytelling remains a powerful medium for raising and indeed enacting fundamental theological questions to do with belief and unbelief.

Keywords: Paolo Sorrentino; *The Young Pope*; deus absconditus; rhythm; prestige television



Citation: LaCouter, Travis. 2021. “God Smiles”: The Rhythm of Revelation in Sorrentino’s “The Young Pope”. *Religions* 12: 806. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100806>

Academic Editors: Frank G. Bosman, Margaret Steenbakker and Raphaël Koers

Received: 9 August 2021

Accepted: 22 September 2021

Published: 26 September 2021

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Pope Pius XIII: Since your country never thaws, I have to wonder: What’s under all that ice?

Prime Minister of Greenland: The experts believe that Greenland is not an island but an archipelago of islands, but that’s strictly a matter of supposition. As you say, the country never thaws, and no one can see what’s under there.

Pope Pius XIII: [. . .] Under all that ice could be God.

After offering this cryptic supposition, the titular young pope, Pius XIII (Jude Law), sits stone-faced, inscrutable. A bewildered Greenlandic prime minister (Carolina Carlsson) desperately searches his expression for any indication of his intentions: Is he joking? Is he deranged? Is he mocking her? Then, a tidy smile breaks the pope’s handsome face and the prime minister looks relieved—thrilled, even. Some understanding seems to have passed between them. After a moment of silence, an attendant carts in a turntable and a song by the Italian singer Nada begins to play: “*Lei non parla mai/lei non dice mai niente/ha bisogno d’affetto*” (“She never speaks/she never ever says/that she needs love”).

Paolo Sorrentino’s ten-part television miniseries *The Young Pope* (2016) is filled with such scenes. Richly written, visually luscious, and shot in Sorrentino’s inimitable cinematic style, *The Young Pope* constitutes the celebrated Italian filmmaker’s first serious effort on the small screen. As is indicated by the scene with the Prime Minister of Greenland, a running theme of the show is God’s invisibility or hiddenness. Pius XIII’s suggestion that God may be found under the Greenland’s thick permafrost is no offhand jest but expresses the troubled pope’s restless conviction—part article of faith, part bitter protest—that God hides God’s face, even from the vicar of Christ. Of course, divine hiddenness is an evergreen topic in fundamental theology, raising as it does questions not only about the human capacity to perceive, know, or otherwise experience God’s revelation but also the nature of the God who purports to reveal Godself as hiddenness (cf. Becker 2015; O’Collins 2011). In other words, there are both “doxastic” (Rea 2018) and ontological issues at stake

in the various theological reflections on the topic. My contention in this paper is that Sorrentino represents one such form of reflection, and that *The Young Pope* can be “read” as a theologically sensitive meditation on divine hiddenness from the perspective of a filmmaker who, while firmly rooted in the “Catholic imagination”, nevertheless insists on his own intensification of the hiddenness theme in ways that befit a visual medium such as television.

In what follows, I first consider and contextualize Sorrentino and his filmic style to the extent that this is possible and necessary in a paper primarily concerned with theological themes (Section 1). Sorrentino’s filmic style is presented as bearing the stamp of (at least) three distinct but related identities: Catholic, Italian, and postmodern. None of these labels, either on their own or in combination, exhaust Sorrentino’s style, but they are the aspects that are necessary to highlight here. Second, I introduce the theological notion of divine hiddenness (*deus absconditus*) and consider some of the related problems that it brings in tow; I also mention some other prominent examples of this theme from popular culture and especially film (Section 2). Next, I present *The Young Pope* as Sorrentino’s own reflection on the question of divine hiddenness, focusing particular attention on a set of key scenes in which Pius XIII addresses large crowds, allowing himself to be seen—or not (Section 3). Finally, I offer a few remarks on how the medium of television (and in particular so-called “prestige television”) is suitable to an exploration of the *absconditus* theme (Section 4).

1. Sorrentino’s Sincere Postmodern Catholic Imagination

Scholarly appraisals of Sorrentino’s oeuvre have been proliferating for several years in Italian (Vigni 2017; Salvestroni 2017; De Santis et al. 2010; Tenaglia 2019) yet remain rare in English (Kilbourn 2020; see also Uva 2016). Among the English-language treatments, the most recent, comprehensive, and effective effort by far is Russell Kilbourn’s book-length study *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style*. There, Kilbourn identifies an “evident preoccupation with specific character types and traits” in Sorrentino’s work in terms of what he calls the “Sorrentinian subject” (Kilbourn 2020, pp. xiii, xvii–xviii). Kilbourn cites the affect-theory-inflected insight of Alex Marlow-Mann, who notes how Sorrentino’s films consistently center around “ambiguous or downright unsympathetic protagonists” with whom the viewer “is, or is not, encouraged to ‘identify’” (Marlow-Mann 2010, p. 162). At work here are deeper issues to do with “identification” and the “male gaze” in cinema, dating back to Laura Mulvey’s seminal 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Mulvey 1975; see also McGowan 2007), which need not divert us at this point. My lens is not primarily psychoanalytic but theological. Nevertheless, one relevant idea here is Vigni’s notion (affirmed by Kilbourn) of the (social, emotional, sometimes literal) “masks” worn by Sorrentino’s characters before, inevitably, cracking to reveal a true(r) nature (cf. Vigni 2017, pp. 13–14). Sorrentino’s frequent use of certain cinematic techniques—such as extreme closeup—underlines the point: the viewer is often confronted with the face of a man (and it is almost always a man) who is at once charismatic and brittle, powerful yet petty, mysterious and (therefore) magnetic. Thus confronted, the viewer cannot help but stare—like the prime minister of Greenland staring intently at the handsome face of Pius XIII. That Sorrentino often breaks the tension by a sudden unexpected twist (Pius’s sudden smile, for instance) displays a ludic sensibility typical of “postmodern” filmmaking.

By reference to Sorrentino’s “ludic sensibility”—much less his postmodernism—I do not mean to confuse the issue. Even though “readings of the postmodern are legion” (Bauerschmidt 1998), and the larger definitional questions remain necessarily uncertain, *The Young Pope* clearly operates within a specific cinematic form of postmodernism, even one particular to Rome and its environs. On the one hand, the show displays what Holdaway and Trentin call a “metahistorical” postmodern “mood”, one that stresses paradox, playfulness, and parody; but more significantly, there is an “historico-materialist” meaning of postmodernism that is specific to the “ambivalent and dialectical territory” that is contemporary Rome, layered and overlayed by more than two millennia of

classical and capitalist contradictions (Holdaway and Trentin 2013, pp. 7–8). While the former sense (of postmodernism as a “mood”) is neatly conveyed in Sorrentino’s use of certain filmic techniques such as extreme closeup (already mentioned), surprising cuts, and “virtuosic [camera] movement” (cf. Sbragia 2020), it is the second, more specific form of postmodernism that proves determinative for his portrait of the papacy an institution caught between the first and twenty-first centuries. Pius embodies these contradictions in himself, and thus the viewer’s identification with him is an identification with his indeterminacy. As soon as we feel we have Pius “figured out”, he seems to slip away from view: there is a hiddenness to his character that is not even necessarily overcome by the inordinate amount of time he spends on screen. And yet just as postmodern Rome “presents itself” as a site of “cohabit[ation] and coexist[ence]” rather than exclusive or singular meaning (Holdaway and Trentin 2013, p. 9), so too does Pius seem to *invite us into* his indeterminacy—for instance by his knowing smile to the Prime Minister of Greenland.

Sticking rather closely to our theme of hiddenness, then, the first thing to note about Sorrentino’s particular style as a filmmaker is its dialogic nature. The viewer is engaged with the Sorrentinian subject in an interplay of word and silence, veiling and unveiling, and it is in the context of this dialogue relationship that the viewer’s own freedom is implicated—the freedom of choosing how to respond. I call this a sincere postmodernism because whatever “playful” techniques of veiling Sorrentino employs, they are consistently deployed not to erase but rather reveal the authentic interplay of subjectivity between two characters, or between a character and the viewer, rather than to signal or assert some overarching sense of futility or endless questioning.

For instance, in one notable scene from *The Young Pope* in which Pius XIII dons his elaborate papal regalia to the song “I’m Sexy and I Know It” by LMFAO, Sorrentino’s ironic juxtaposition serves not primarily as a send-up of preening prelates (already done so effectively by Fellini’s ecclesiastical fashion show in *Roma* (1972)), but rather as a window into Pius’s inner tensions and contradictions—his desire to be both invisible and unmissable. Kilbourn’s discussion of this scene is instructive (see Kilbourn 2020, pp. 128–29). It is this invitation into contradiction that I want to highlight as the second significant feature of Sorrentino’s style for our purposes here: He is patient with ambiguity. In a discussion of the oft-invoked concept of a “Catholic imagination”, Michael Murphy identifies its distinguishing characteristic as the willingness to “negotiate such wide ‘opposites’ [such as, for instance, ‘grace/nature’, ‘sacred/mundane’, etc.] so as to reveal the mysterious harmonies that often dwell in such tensions” (Murphy 2008, p. 6). This is often captured prosaically in the difference between an “either/or” mentality and a “both/and” one. The emphasis on a mysterious harmony of opposites provides one way to understand Sorrentino’s visual and thematic repertoire, which can otherwise seem schizophrenic. Indeed, this notion of “Catholic imagination” serves to situate the contradictions that Sorrentino repeatedly surfaces within a broader unfolding of reality. In *The Young Pope*, this theme of harmony-in-tension, or paradox, is not just subtext but text (indeed, it is contained in the title of the show!).¹

We should already anticipate, then, that whatever “solution” Sorrentino winds up proposing to the “problem” of divine invisibility will not be one that simply resolves the tensions inherent therein. He will rather strive to preserve some sense of the living rhythm of the question itself (I have more to say about the notion of rhythm I have in mind shortly). In fact, Sorrentino’s tendency is to continually amplify the problem, raising it to higher and louder registers (in a way evocative of the Catholic Baroque) as a way of foreclosing easy resolution. In other words, Sorrentino’s stylistic maximalism is a way of affirming the ambiguity of his subject matter.

It is hopefully not flippant to say that this Catholic sensibility should come as no surprise in an Italian filmmaker like Sorrentino. And yet it is perhaps just this same Italian perspective that gives Sorrentino a keen sense of the Church’s fraught position in the (post-)secular context. Writing about what they called the “Italian difference”, Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano identified this amidst-and-between nature as a defining charac-

teristic of contemporary Italian thought, which has a peculiar tendency to simultaneously de- and reconstruct received thought-forms in furtherance of a new critical discourse (Chiesa and Toscano 2009). Commenting on this same fact, Roberto Esposito notes that, “Unlike the tradition between Descartes and Kant, which was founded in the constitution of subjectivity or [a] theory of knowledge, Italian thought came into the world turned upside down and inside out” (Esposito 2012, p. 10). The reasons for this can be traced, for one, to Italy’s decentralized and highly contested nature for much of its history as a nation always “potentially universal” and continually in the process of “cross[ing] over its own boundaries” (Esposito 2012, p. 20). Here the association with Catholicism—with its theological claims to universality existing alongside its centralization in a particular city-state (i.e., the Vatican)—is pertinent. There is something of this same indeterminacy in Sorrentino’s style which, after all, sits amidst a number of cultural, filmographic, and philosophical interstices (one of the most important being the space between Golden Age *neorealismo* and postmodern surrealism). It is for precisely this reason, however, that Sorrentino’s films lend themselves to theological readings, not only since Catholicism is part and parcel of the cultural patrimony that Sorrentino finds himself de-/reconstructing, but since theology is likewise a discourse that must always testify to its own incompleteness, likewise de-/reconstructing itself so as to keep finding ways to make coherent and meaningful claims about the God who is beyond all language, form, and concepts (for a concurrent account of theological speech, see Williams 1991). The fact that this conceptual tension (which is, of course, also an existential tension) becomes the explicit theme of Sorrentino’s work in *The Young Pope* makes it a natural subject for the kind of engagement I stage in this paper.

To recapitulate: Sorrentino is a *dialogic* artist, inviting the viewer into a situation in which they are confronted by formidable characters who seem larger than life and persistently inscrutable; moreover, his tendency is to maintain the *tension* inherent in such a confrontation, rather than resolving it too quickly; and ultimately, he is an artist who seeks to give *new expression* to old problems, especially those within the remit of his distinctively Catholic patrilineage. Having noted these three traits, we are in a better position to understand Sorrentino’s engagement with the question of divine hiddenness.

2. Deus Absconditus in Theology and Popular Culture

I would now like to introduce the theological theme of hiddenness in its own right and mention some noteworthy examples of how it has been handled in popular culture by other artists.

2.1. In Theology

The notion of a “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*) has deep roots in the theological tradition. The phrase is meant to evoke the idea of a God whose true nature (or “face”) remains unknown to mankind. In one broad sense a tenet of the specifically Jewish conception of God, and indeed throughout the Hebrew Bible one finds many instances of a God who resolves to “hide His face” (Deut 31:17; 32:20, e.g.) from Israel. The prophets often pointed to God’s hiddenness as a form of punishment for Israel’s unfaithfulness: “Then [the rulers of Israel] will cry out to the Lord but he will not answer them. At that time he will *hide his face from them* because of the evil they have done” (Micah 3:4; cf. Ezek 39:23; Hos 5:6; Job 13:24; Is 64:7; etc.). This view of punitive hiddenness was sometimes picked up by Orthodox Jewish theologians, though this trend was ably challenged in the post-Holocaust era by Berkovits (1973), among others.

Likely the most famous source text in question is Isaiah 45:15, where the fact of God’s hiddenness is not posed so much as a form of punishment but as a positive description of God: “Truly *You are a God who hides himself*, the God and Savior of Israel” (see the discussion in Pilkington 1995). In lines such as these, it is clearer that God’s hiddenness is being presented as a positive aspect part of God’s nature in se rather than as a negative trait or a form of punitive withdrawal. Another crucial source text here is the Book of Job, wherein, as Habel (2016) points out, Elihu expounds a form of traditional *absconditus* theology:

“We cannot find Him out” (Job 37:23). Later, the pivotal scene in which God descends in a cloud and asserts His supreme authority in the face of Job’s cosmological ignorance of divine workings (Job 38), represents not a resolution to but a paradoxical escalation of the absconditus rhythm: God does not remain simply hidden (he *does* descend), but God’s proximity does not guarantee Job’s comprehension. Importantly, these rhythms are maintained in the move from the Old Covenant to the New. As [Przanowski \(2018\)](#) has recently shown, even a strong Christology such as Aquinas’s relies to a significant extent on the concept of deus absconditus, since “[Christ’s] divine nature remains immutable and transcends [. . .] creation even in its hypostatic union with the human nature” ([Przanowski 2018](#), p. 883).

Other scriptural examples could well be cited. The point to keep in mind, however, is that, as [Carroll \(1991\)](#) has argued, the absconditus theme is a “biblical metaphor” with its own semantic “range” (p. 59). In other words, it expresses something of the human “enquiry” towards God (*ibid.*, p. 36) and it should not necessarily be taken as the foundation for a positive theology, especially a systematic theology that must, necessarily, operate as an explication of revelation. Nevertheless, Martin Luther is often named as the first to thematize the absconditus metaphor, most notably in *The Bondage of the Will*, where he emphasizes God’s hiddenness in order to safeguard God’s sovereign freedom and, consequently, the gratuity of grace (see [Paulson 2014](#); [Gerrish 1973](#); and the classic treatment by [Dillenberger 1953](#)). Luther’s insistence on God’s unknowability apart from God’s definitive self-revelation on the Cross introduces something of an ontological–epistemological caesura for theology, which Karl Barth sought to revise in the 20th century with his “actualistic ontology” (cf. [Stratis 2010](#)). For Barth, especially in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, revelation “contains within itself the cognizance that God is knowable, and that He is knowable on the strength of His own being and activity” ([Barth 1957](#), p. 67). For Barth, if this knowledge of God includes a degree of nescience, then this is not at the expense of God’s revelation but a constitutive aspect of it.

In any event, *revelation* is the controlling concept for Barth (and Luther). Within natural theology, the hiddenness problem has been deployed more forcefully to ground rather fundamental challenges to theism as such—most recently and notably by [Schellenberg \(1993, 2007\)](#). Schellenberg’s argument turns on the notion of what he calls “nonresistant nonbelief”, by which he means to refer to an individual who, though capable of and in principle open to rational belief in a personal God, fails to believe. Such individuals, per Schellenberg’s argument, testify against the existence of theism’s traditional God (omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent), since such a God would self-evidently will to be in loving (i.e., conscious, explicit) relation to any given individual. Notice that in Schellenberg’s deceptively simple argument it is the first premise—that individuals must be in principle *capable* of knowing God—that creates the basis for the claim against the existence of God: Any such “nonresistant” person who wills a relationship with God must “never [. . .] find the door to such relationship closed” ([Schellenberg 2016](#), p. 21). Critics of Schellenberg, such as [Vandergriff \(2018\)](#), have argued that this somewhat univocal understanding of divine–human relationship does not in fact represent the fullness of human flourishing, which must necessarily include the *freedom* to love, and that a perfectly loving God “might derivatively desire to permit various types and tokens of nonresistant nonbelief for some time” out of an intrinsic respect for the individual’s capacity to love in freedom ([Vandergriff 2018](#), p. 196). Such arguments bear some relation to John Hick’s famous “soul-making” argument regarding the opacity of suffering (see [Hick \[1957\] 1966, 1977](#)). As Trakakis puts it, summarizing Hick’s position, “God must [. . .] be *deus absconditus*—he must stand back and hide himself behind his creation, leaving us the freedom to recognize or fail to recognize his dealings with us” ([Trakakis 2007](#), p. 216).

Clearly, the absconditus problem raises a slew of fundamental questions for theology regarding everything from biblical interpretation to ontology, epistemology, and theodicy. Also, quite clearly, it is beyond the scope of this paper to treat all these topics in full. I am concerned here only to indicate that the theme is a rich and persistent source of theological

reflection. In the next section of this paper, I examine Sorrentino's particular enactment of the *absconditus* problem through an analysis of particular scenes from *The Young Pope*. We can see Sorrentino's show as a further entry to the literary tradition inaugurated by the Book of Job, in which an individual navigates the dark, deep waters of faith through a confrontational dialogue with God Himself—a dialogue that includes silence. I am thus especially interested in the *absconditus* theme as it relates to questions of belief (and so necessarily will not pursue the ontologically probative questions associated with the issue to any great extent here). We might think of Pius XIII as one of Schellenberg's "nonresistant" individuals, deeply desirous of a personal, loving relationship with God but beset by doubts arising from God's apparent hiddenness to him. We will see how, within the context of the show, Sorrentino provides a version of the argument for faith already alluded to—namely, that the type of relationship God wills to have with any given individual is one in which dynamics of freedom and trust are present. Ultimately, the "vision" of God that Pius comes to—and to which he directs the faithful in a series of key speeches—is one in which God reveals Godself as love. These dynamics combine to provide a certain "rhythm" to the divine–human relationship, one that a visual medium such as television can arguably express more eloquently than theological treatise. Eikelboom (2018) recently argued for understanding rhythm theologically as "an interface between harmony and interruption [. . .] over time" (p. 18). It is in order to discern the particular (theological) rhythm of *The Young Pope* that I highlight three key scenes in Section 3 below.

2.2. In Popular Culture

As in the last section, an exhaustive survey is by no means possible here. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight several significant examples of the *absconditus* theme from film and popular culture so as to provide some points of comparison for our analysis of *The Young Pope*.

A number of "crisis of faith" films depict the individual struggling to catch a glimpse of the God who hides His face. The American filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen employ the motif often, most notably in their 2009 retelling of the Job story, *A Serious Man*. In the film, Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a Jewish professor of physics, confronts a number of bewildering circumstances in his personal life—a wife who demands a divorce, an uncertain cancer diagnosis, a pestilential brother, and the threat of professional ruin at the hands of a blackmailing student—that leave him bereft of any sense of meaning. Gopnik, whose faith is above all in the solid and demonstrable rules of mathematics ("That's the real thing", he tells his students), is unable to discern any similar kind of logic in the ways of Hashem. In search of answers he seeks out a series of increasingly inscrutable rabbis, one of whom warns him against "forgetting how to see [God] in the world" and draws his attention to the parking lot outside his window, which apparently radiates Hashem's glory: "Look at the parking lot, Larry!" When another of the rabbis tells Larry that, "Hashem doesn't owe us an answer", Larry's exasperated response is, "Why does he make us aware of the questions if he is not going to give us the answers?" The rabbi counsels apathy: the questions, he suggests, will eventually fade like a bad toothache. In the face of such platitudes and misdirection, Larry is driven ever further into desperation and, eventually, ruin.

Many other films explore the search for knowledge of God, especially from the perspective of a doubtful priest. These include Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963), M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002), John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary* (2014), and Paul Schraeder's *First Reformed* (2017). In Schraeder's *First Reformed*, the tortured priest figure of Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) experiences God exclusively as an absence. Toller prays constantly, and even counsels a kind of apophatic forbearance in the face of suffering ("Who can know the mind of God?" he tells a troubled parishioner), but it is clear he finds little consolation even in his own words. Desolate, he eventually turns to an act of eco-terrorism as he believes this is where he can further "God's plan". As the number and popularity of these films suggests, the trope of the troubled

priest is a familiar one (Bresson's film, of course, was adapted from a 1936 novel of the same name by Georges Bernanos). In many ways, *The Young Pope* works in this same literary–filmic tradition, although Pius XIII's inner life is depicted in many ways more vividly than in these other examples, and his is more rightly described as a struggle *in* faith as opposed to a struggle *for* faith. *The Young Pope* also differs from many entries in this genre by ending not with the restless priest's ruin but with his qualified victory in the search for sight.

As Rosenbaum (2017) has argued, the absconditus theme is particularly prominent within the horror genre, where “the cosmic questions of when, why, and to where God has disappeared” trouble us with the possibility of “our utter irrelevance [. . .] in the eyes of our Creator”. Films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *The Rite* (2011), and *The Wailing* (2016), though more or less effective, all play off these anxieties about being overlooked by God and thus left open to the predations of nefarious spirits and demons. Here the connection between divine hiddenness and theodicy is especially pronounced. Beyond the explicitly theological themes of the films just mentioned, many horror films frequently use absence for effect, as when monsters or killers are kept from view for a large part of the movie in order to build tension, especially through the use of sound rather than direct sight (notable examples of this technique include Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)). In his classic studies of sound in film and television, Michel Chion identifies this type of character—one who is defined by acoustic presence and visual absence—as an *acousmètre* (see e.g., Chion 1994, 1999). The *acousmètre* can be terrifying precisely their power seems limitless and oppressive—whereas sight is necessarily bound and directed, hearing occurs in all directions and can thus overwhelm us (cf. Chion 1994). It is also noteworthy that the characteristics of the *acousmètre* that make it terrifying according to Chion (namely, that it seems to be all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful) are precisely some of the same features attributed to God by classical theism. This power of hiddenness itself to terrify is mentioned again below in regard to a key scene in *The Young Pope*.

If, as Hick argues, God's hiddenness is the result of a necessary “epistemic distance” between God and creature, some films have ventured to depict what happens when humans transgress that distance. This occurs most memorably in the famous “face-melting” scene at the end of Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). When the mercenary Belloq (Paul Freeman) throws open the sacred Ark of the Covenant, he and his Nazi collaborators are destroyed through direct contact with the Almighty. The heroes are spared because they shut their eyes. Spielberg repeats this moment (with the help of more advanced CGI) in the 2008 sequel *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, except this time it is the Soviet scientist Irina Spalko (Kate Blanchett) who is burned up by looking into the eyes of an all-knowing intergalactic alien. In these scenes, Spielberg recalls Exodus 33:20 (“No one can see the face of the Lord and live”) and in doing so deploys the absconditus theme to decidedly moralistic ends. Absconditus here represents not so much a trigger to existential doubt nor an opening for evil spirits, but an outer bound of human knowledge beyond which villainous characters cannot help but trespass.

So, while a number of films have engaged the notion of divine hiddenness, *The Young Pope* deserves some special attention for several reasons. For one, it amplifies the “troubled priest” theme by focusing on a pope rather than a priest. This may seem like a trivial observation, but it is relevant inasmuch as it raises the stakes of the internal drama such that it comes to apply metonymically to the whole Church rather than an individual man. Already Sorrentino is indicating something important, which is that the absconditus “problem” is perhaps not best worked out in isolation. Second, Sorrentino's bravura visual style is distinct from the more restrained alternatives of Bresson, Schraeder, and even the Coens. *The Young Pope* is also more tonally varied than most other treatments (Sorrentino's frequent use of humor is noteworthy here). Third (and in part because of the stylistic features just noted), there is not, in *The Young Pope*, a sense that the absconditus problem is barren, but rather a sense that it is, or can be, a generative source of hope. Sorrentino's

“rhythm” does not fall flat or end in despair or horror, but rather contributes to Pius XIII’s ongoing, revolving growth as a character, one whose restless quest for God does not undo him but eventually brings a certain degree of closure. This marks it as a distinctively eschatological rhythm, a point that I return to at the end of this paper.

3. *The Young Pope* as a Meditation on Divine Hiddenness

3.1. *Introducing The Young Pope*

The Young Pope is an Italian television miniseries released internationally on premium channels Sky Atlantic, Canal+, and HBO. A self-contained season consisting of ten episodes roughly an hour in length each, the show aired from 21 October to 18 November 2016 and received generally positive reviews (e.g., [Vivarelli 2016](#); [Nicholson 2016](#); [Bayles 2017](#); [Faggioli 2017](#)), although some critics found it little more than an entertaining “spectacle” ([Poniewozik 2017](#)) and numerous Catholic reviewers found reason to denounce it as “a simplistic caricature of [priests]” ([Catholic News Service 2017](#)) and “atrocious, appalling, and abhorrent” ([Van Son 2017](#), who admits to not even watching the whole series). It is noteworthy that much of the negative reaction to the show generated by its conservative detractors stems from failing to view it precisely as I am suggesting it must be viewed, i.e., as a revolving, dynamic story in motion with its own spiritual and visual rhythms. Instead, these critics often arrest this rhythm and render judgment on that basis.² Despite the often-graceless literalism of an unimaginative commentariat, however, the show proved hugely popular with viewers, as evidenced by its premiere episodes earning a higher viewership in Italy (950,000 Sky viewers out of a subscriber base of roughly 4.7 million) than *Game of Thrones* or the popular crime drama *Gomorra*.

The plot of *The Young Pope* is straightforward enough. At the show’s opening, forty-six-year-old American cardinal Lenny Balardo has just been elected pope, backed by the scheming Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Voiello (Silvio Orlando), who believes Balardo will be a pliable figurehead. Instead, Balardo, who takes the name Pius XIII, proves to be an iconoclast and a revolutionary with his own bold agenda for the Church. Immediately, Pius pursues a disastrous ecclesial program: he empties the seminaries of suspected homosexuals; recalls missionaries; refuses to be seen on TV; and harangues the crowds gathered in St Peter’s Square. For much of the first half of the series, the action is propelled by the subtle and Byzantine machinations of Cardinal Voiello, who emerges as Pius’s primary antagonist. To counteract Voiello’s influence, Pius installs as his personal secretary the American nun who raised him (he is, crucially, an orphan), Sister Mary (Diane Keaton). Other primary characters include the media-savvy head of Vatican Communications, Sofia Dubois (Cécile de France); the devout wife of a Swiss Guard, Esther (Ludivine Sangnier); and Monsignor Bernardo Gutierrez (Javier Cámara) who harbors a less-than-secret drinking problem and is sent to America towards the end of the series to investigate a powerful cardinal suspected of abuse. Part court intrigue, part melodrama, part metaphysical fantasy, the show operates on a number of tonal registers and incorporates an eclectic soundtrack, on-location shooting at iconic settings around the Vatican and Rome, and a meticulously crafted mise-en-scène in nearly every shot.

Unsurprisingly, a show about the pope deals with a number of explicitly theological themes. In “Episode 9”, for instance, Pius debates his old mentor Cardinal Spencer (James Cromwell) on the issue of abortion (notably, it is the conservative Spencer who argues that Lenny is being too “rigid” in his approach). Miracles features prominently in several episodes, such as when a rural Italian farmer claims to have the stigmata or, more significantly, when Pius himself is revealed to have a miraculous power to provoke divine intervention (in “Episode 4”, “Episode 8”, and “Episode 9”). At various points, Pius quotes from St Augustine, St Ignatius of Antioch, St Alphonsus, and other similar authorities, displaying a fluid command of the writings of key Christian thinkers. Furthermore, in “Episode 5”, Pius addresses the College of Cardinals in a long-awaited speech in which he touches on everything from liturgy to Hell to ecumenism.

The show directly engages the *absconditus* theme on several occasions. At different times, Pius claims to not believe in God, or to not be able to look at God in the face, or to experience God as a kind of absence. At first these moments might feel like salacious plot-points, playing up to the idea of an atheist pope, but it becomes clear that the experience of divine absence is for Pius not merely so simple as outright unbelief. It is rather that his desire for God is in large part constituted by this absence, marked by it. Absence is the predominant mode of Pius's closeness to God: between them lies *a distance that draws them closer*.³

In a key scene from "Episode 2", Pius explains the allure of absence to his frustrated communications director. He insists that Salinger is the most important contemporary author, Kubrick the most important director, and Daft Punk the most important electronic music group of the past several decades because "none of them let themselves be seen" (in the case of Kubrick, Pius' description is not quite apt, but the director was, at least, a notable recluse). It is by being "inaccessible [and] mysterious", Pius believes, that something becomes "desirable". It is for this reason that one of the new pope's first official acts is to fire the papal photographer, and this is why he first appears to news cameras only under the shroud of darkness: "*I do not exist*", he explains, "*only Christ*". However, the revolving, rhythmic nature of Sorrentino's themes is again important here, for it is not just in withdrawing Church's visible face from the world that Pius hopes to make it (i.e., the Church) desirable once more, nor even that God's felt absence in Pius's own life makes God all the more desirable to him; it is rather, as Sister Mary acutely notes, that Pius has made himself distant from God in the hopes that this will make Pius desirable *to God*. "The truth is you've never searched [for God]", Sr. Mary tells the pope; "you've been hiding yourself". At issue here are Pius's own feelings of worthlessness and insignificance, which stem from his having been abandoned as a child by careless parents. Here the psychological dimensions deepen the theological ones, since they prompt us to consider what it means to imagine God as "Father" for a man whose father has discarded him, and what kind of affective undertones might be associated with absence for such a man. Over the course of the series, Pius' journey, and the one he leads his flock on, consists in learning to see God in the invisible promptings of mercy, rather than in extravagant displays of grandeur.

To concretely grasp the rhythm of revelation and divine absence/presence in *The Young Pope*, however, I think it is best to consider three related scenes: first, Pius XIII's "invisible" address to the assembled crowd at St. Peter's after his election to the papacy (from "Episode 2"); second, his address in Africa from "Episode 8", in which he again refuses to appear to his audience but, this time, brings a message of consolation rather than desolation; and third, the address from the piazza San Marco in Venice in the final episode of the series ("Episode 10"), in which he finally shows his face. In this triptych, we have a miniature vignette of Sorrentinian grace.

3.2. "I Am No One"

The first scene to consider is Pius's first public address from "Episode 2". It comes after an imaginary version of the same speech in "Episode 1", in which Pius appeared before the faithful and urged them to embrace masturbation, contraception, gay marriage, and euthanasia while horrified cardinals faint all around him. If that earlier dream sequence was meant to suggest a version of the speech Pius wishes he could give, or feels tempted to give, when the time comes to actually address the crowd, he swerves from this exaggerated and imagined 'liberalism' to an exaggerated conservatism. Appearing at night, and with no lighting to illuminate his face, Pius thunders like an Old Testament prophet: "We have forgotten God! *You* have forgotten God!" This time the assembled cardinals do not faint, but their faces fall as they realize the terror they have unleashed upon the Church. In fact, if we recall the earlier remarks about the *absconditus* theme's resonance within the horror genre (2.2 *supra*), we can identify Pius in this first balcony speech a kind of monstrous *acousmêtre*, a terrible and upsetting presence whose voice seems to haunt St. Peter's Square like an angry ghost.

Pius continues, invoking a spatial metaphor: “You have to be closer to God than to each other. I am closer to God than I am to you. You need to know I will never be close to you, because everyone is alone before God”. The use of the spatial metaphor is significant because it presents the divine–human relation as something fixed, like coordinates on a map, and implies moreover that proximity to the divine must necessarily come at the expense of proximity with humanity. Here Pius is both enacting the metaphysical gap between God and creature—by (dis-)appearing and withholding his countenance—and at the same time exacerbating the anxiety that this distance can inspire in the individual by offering his audience no clear means of overcoming this distance. No clear means, that is, except one: single-minded devotion. “He [i.e., God] isn’t interested in us until we become interested in Him—*exclusively*”. The spatial metaphor reappears again when Pius explains to the faithful that there should be “no room for anything else” in their hearts besides God (“no room for free will, no room for liberty, no room for emancipation”). The onus is put squarely on the individual, not on God, to overcome the distance between them. God’s hiddenness implies deficiency not in God, but in those who are unable to see God, since their failure to perceive is down to a failure of love (understood here as single-mindedness). The only “problem” generated by *deus absconditus* is on the human side, and in this sense, the absence that Pius enacts at the first speech is an indictment of his audience, a call to repentance.

The association of the *absconditus* problem with questions of sin and punishment is, as we have already seen, well established in both Jewish and Christian traditions. What has long been referred to as an Augustinian theodicy paradigm, for instance, stresses that evil is not a failure of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God, but the result of misused creaturely freedom (for discussion, see [Allen 2003](#) or [Metz 1998](#), pp. 58–63). Inasmuch as Pius is presenting God’s absence as an evil linked to a moral failing in his audience, he is drawing on this same theodicy paradigm. Crucially, the issue of freedom is integral to Pius’s message in the first speech, since it is freedom (as the cause of the sin that makes us forgetful of God) that must be overcome if we are to move close to God yet again. “The pain of liberation is unbearable, sharp enough to kill”, Pius says. Absence is distance, then, and distance is a result of sin—a false “liberation” from God.

The speech creates shockwaves throughout the Church and the world. In a later episode, as a desperate Voiello plots with Spencer about how to force Pius to resign, we learn that the pope’s actions have led to a drop in vocations, worsening relations with other churches, and shrinking numbers of Catholics the world over. By putting himself, and thus the Church, at such a distance, Pius has managed not to draw the masses back to the mystery and “romance” of faith, but merely to alienate them. Defending his speech to Spencer in “Episode 3”, Lenny insists that he has a “plan”. Spencer accuses Pius of projecting his own psychological distortions upon the whole Church and of confusing mystery for a “marketing strategy”. Assuming that Pius does have a “plan”, however, we should look at the next high-profile public speech he gives, which comes several episodes later during an official trip to a large African mission.

3.3. Learning to See “with Eyes of Joy”

Between “Episode 2” and “Episode 8”, several important plot points have developed. For one, Voiello has gradually gone from an antagonist to an ally of the pope, having been won over by the loyalty of Sister Mary and outmaneuvered by Pius himself. It is as a unified front, then, that Voiello, Sister Mary, Sofia, and Pius head to visit the Villages of Goodness, a large network of charities and orphanages run by Sister Antonia (Milvia Marigliano) in an unspecified African country. As the pope explains upon their arrival, however, they are not there to honor Sister Antonia but investigate her: She is, it turns out, complicit with the country’s dictatorial regime and abusive towards her underlings at the mission, withholding access to water in exchange for sexual favors. Before leaving the country, Pius is scheduled to appear at a parade alongside the country’s president and deliver a speech. The journalists traveling with the papal entourage are all eagerly

awaiting this address, keen to see if it repeats or undoes the damage of the first speech on the balcony at St. Peter's. Since that first speech, Pius has sparred with Sofia about how best to appeal to the faithful: she has encouraged him to try to kindle something of their childlike wonder, to speak to their imagination rather than their fear of abandonment.

But when the time comes, Pius's chair remains empty. He refuses to be seen next to the corrupt president and alongside Sr Antonia, and instead his voice rings out over loudspeakers. Again, his appearance is a disappearance, but this time, his message is different than it was in Rome. He denounces the "hunger, bloodthirst, and poverty" that have resulted from over a decade of civil war in the country. And Pius blames these social ills not only on political leaders or the military junta sitting on the dais, but on collective, structurally ingrained patterns of mercilessness in which his whole audience participates: "We are *all* guilty of war", he says. Pius has a real-world papal referent here in John Paul II (who, notably, exists in the universe of *The Young Pope*, as we learn from a throwaway line in "Episode 1"), who taught that "structures of sin" are some of the primary obstacles to the furtherance of the common good (see, e.g., [John Paul II 1987](#)). Notice here that the cruel individualism Pius had insisted upon in the first speech—"everyone is alone before God"—is already being replaced by a sense of collective responsibility. If we are "all guilty of war", then presumably we "could all be guilty of peace", as Pius exhorts his crowd a few moments later. Nor does our location in such structures of injustice prevent our work as peacebuilders: Pius, for one, has shown his own unwillingness to further build up such structures by absenting himself from the dais, which serves as a public indictment of the corrupt authorities on stage. By this absence he makes a claim upon his audience, prompting them to ask themselves in what ways they perform their own everyday compromises with a violent society. In what ways might they opt out? In what ways might they be "guilty of peace"?

The differences between Pius's nonappearance between the Rome speech and the African speech are significant. In the first, his invisibility was an indictment; in the second, it is an invitation to join him in the task of peacebuilding. The hiddenness theme is not resolved here but amplified. Pius (still hidden from view) promises his audience "I [. . .] will not speak to you [again] about God until there's peace [. . .] Give me peace and I'll give you God". Importantly, Pius does not exalt himself above his audience as he did in the Rome speech; on the contrary he humbles himself: "I'm ready to die for you, if only you will become guilty of peace". Paradoxically (since he is still absent from them), Pius expresses solidarity with and closeness to his audience. He also starts to undercut the apparent omnipotence of his acousmatic absence by presenting himself as vulnerable ("I'm ready to die for you . . . "). Nor does he leave it unsaid how to proceed in this task of waging peace. Quoting from Augustine's sermon on love, Pius tells the crowd, "If you want to see God, you have the means to do it: God is love". Though Pius does not finish the quote, Augustine goes on to explain that, "God is invisible, and must be looked for not with the eye but with the heart". Our absconditus problematic is thus recast and made productive by being put in the service of mission: act in love, and you will see God.

It is the shift to "seeing" with the heart, rather than the eyes, that Pius is trying to move his audience towards. This shift is worth dwelling on a moment. The eyes take in information, process visual data, and send signals to the brain to make into finished images that can be stored and reaccessed in the future. Seeing with the eyes, then, is in some loose sense a calculative process in which an object is made intelligible. It is this kind of "seeing" that is often presumed to pertain within formulations of the absconditus problem. "Seeing" with the heart, however, is an affective response that starts with mercy—*misericordia*, or a movement of the heart—and thus already presumes some likeness between the one seeing and the one being seen. The eyes of the heart do not squint but recognize the humanity of the other. Crucially, it is this movement of the heart that Pius suggests here is a *trustworthy insight* into who God is. "Think about all the things you like", Pius tells the crowd, "That is God". He does not mean to imply here a kind of vague pantheism, but rather a profound affective point: God comforts. As he will do again in the third speech, Pius invokes the

simplicity of children to make his point: “Children like all sorts of things, but none has ever written [to me] that they like war [. . .] God is peace”. Pius had previously shown himself to be sensitive to the affective dimensions of faith by deploying fear as the evidence of sin in the Rome speech. Now, however, he turns to peacebuilding as a form of consolation, one to which every heart is called to both benefit from and participate in. Likewise reflecting on the affective dimensions of religious experience, Simeon Zahl concludes that whatever is experienced “over time” as “abidingly joyless, frustrating, or impossible” should not be interpreted as an instrument of God’s grace (Zahl 2020, p. 214). In the Africa speech, then, Pius provides the necessary counterpart to his Rome speech, and in so doing, escalates the rhythm of invisibility to a higher and more bearable register.

Pius ends by telling the crowd to look at the faces of those around them, saying this is where they will find God. Here we see most clearly how the hiddenness theme gets redeployed in an altogether more positive way than in the first speech: God’s apparent absence (and Pius’s own) does not leave us alone and isolated but refocuses our attention on the needy, the suffering, the war-torn, since this is where we can show love, build peace, and thus “see” God. In a characteristic choice, Sorrentino sets this scene to a piece of contemporary music, Lotte Kestner’s melancholy cover of Beyoncé’s “Halo”, which likewise depicts love as a new mode of sight: “Everywhere I’m looking now/I’m surrounded by your embrace/Baby, I can see your halo/You know you’re my saving grace”. Could it be that the “exclusivity” Pius insisted upon in his first speech requires not *only* looking to God (i.e., at the expense of everything else) but *seeing* only God (i.e., seeing with the heart so as to discern God in all things)? Is this the “plan” that Pius pleaded with Spencer to let him carry out?

This speech has the desired effect. Later, on the papal plane back to Rome, while the rest of the cabin sleeps, a cynical journalist finds his heart has been broken of stone and admits to Pius, “It was beautiful”.

3.4. “God Smiles”

After “Episode 8”, the rhythm of divine absence has now been elevated, and we are primed to expect climax—to move from absconditus to revelatus (of sorts). The third speech in our triptych comes from the season finale, “Episode 10”, in which Pius goes to Venice to deliver a sermon on the balcony of the Basilica San Marco. Perhaps Sorrentino is having a bit of metatextual fun, setting Pius’s long-anticipated coming-out speech in the same city in which the show itself would premier (at the 2016 Venice Film Festival); or perhaps, more significantly, a certain kind of resolution is being telegraphed ahead of time, since Venice, as we have learned through prior dialogue, is a spiritual haven for Lenny Balardo. Revelation is thus also a homecoming. Stylistically, this address mirrors the first balcony speech in Rome, except this time Pius *does* appear before the crowd, under a bright noon sun, declaring his wish to “embrace” all those assembled there. The spatial metaphor has therefore been abandoned altogether—the distance bridged—and veiledness, whether in its positive or negative valence, gives way to unveiling. By now, Pius has undergone full “de-acousmatization” by his “descent” into the visual realm (Chion 1994, p. 131). As Chion reminds us, “de-acousmatization can also be called embodiment”, and here, finally, Pius appears to the faithful not as a disembodied voice but in human form.

This is not to say that the rhythm of revelation has simply been flattened, however. In order to be in Venice, Pius has canceled a planned trip to a Guatemalan orphanage where he was to meet with children who had been healed by the miraculous Blessed Juana. Each appearance implies a disappearance, as Pius’s presence in Italy means that he cannot travel to Latin America. And yet, with his speech, Pius brings the poor and sick children of Guatemala with him to Venice and thereby embodies something of the real-world Pope Francis’s injunction to bring the margins to the center (for a useful account, see Riccardi 2018). He does this by centering his address on the story of Blessed Juana, and in particular repeats the child’s claim that, “God is a line that opens”. The cryptic saying confuses his audience as it did Juana’s, but we can relate it to Pius’ prior use of the spatial metaphor

describing God's apparent "distance" from us: Whereas in the first balcony speech, this distance (the "line" between God and man) was depicted as something fixed and univocal, here, God is depicted as existing within the distance itself, which "opens" to reveal a mode of presence. By opening, the line also embraces us, thus overcoming the affective desolation that distance and isolation had previously imposed.

Pius proceeds to recount a series of questions the children asked Blessed Juana. The litany evokes that sense of tension or harmony-in-opposites that Murphy associates with the Catholic imagination:

Are we dead or are we alive? Are we tired or are we vigorous? Are we healthy or are we sick? Are we good or are we bad? Do we still have time or has it run out? Are we young or are we old? Are we clean or are we dirty? Are we fools or are we smart? Are we true or are we false? Are we rich or are we poor? Are we kings or are we servants? Are we good or are we beautiful? Are we warm or are we cold? Are we happy or are we blind? Are we disappointed or are we joyful? Are we lost or are we found? Are we men or are we women?

The dizzying anaphoric litany captures the anxiety of the creature unsure of itself before God. It covers not just questions of ethics ("good" or "bad"?) and social status ("kings" or "servants") but even gender ("men" or "women") and affect ("disappointed" or "joyful"). And in response to these many anxious questions Pius recalls Blessed Juana's answer: "God smiles".

Here, the ever-escalating rhythm of revelation reaches a kind of graced crescendo, one that does not so much resolve these various questions of identity as much as resituate them within the overarching and preexistent reality of divine love. The opposite of blindness in the speech is not sight, but happiness, which comes as grace freely given. Seeing God means being seen by God, recognized as if by a friend who smiles at the sight of our face. No more does Pius present the individual as their own obstacle to God—no more is freedom, with its attendant choices and confusions, the source of our unhappiness and distance from God. Significantly, Pius replaces his earlier emphasis on the individual alone before God with a communal vision of ecclesial solidarity: The Church is not an assemblage of the worthy but the collection of anxious children asking who they are and being told in response that they are loved. The classic Sorrentinian close-up, which had previously been reserved to our major characters, now shows the faces of those in the crowd, smiling and at peace. "One day I will die, and I will finally be able to embrace you all one by one", Pius tells the crowd. He smiles broadly, the same grin that we saw Pius flash the Prime Minister of Greenland now playing wide over his face. Here he appears, in the end, not just *to* them but *with* them, smiling and ready to embrace them. Pius' reference once more to his own death calls to mind Chion's observation that once the *acousmêtre* becomes visible, they also become "vulnerable" (Chion 1994, 131). When Pius then collapses of an apparent heart attack, it appears that the moment of death has in fact come (viewers of the sequel miniseries *The New Pope* (2020), however, will know that this is not the case).

In the end, then, Pius has performed the very revelation that he had denied was possible in that first speech in Rome. He has appeared, not as a reward for the pure nor as the scourge of sinners, but as a smile. In order to be seen as he intended, Pius had to create the conditions of his own absence. This was the "plan" all along—to show that God's mercy appears to us in our distress, and to make this mercy attractive. In terms of our absconditus problem, Pius XIII has enacted one plausible "solution": we "see" God precisely where and when we see mercy.

4. A Postscript on Form

I said above that Sorrentino's treatment of the hiddenness theme usefully intensified it in ways that befit a visual medium like television. Let me bring this allusive paper to a close by highlighting three possible ways in which this might be so.

The first has to do with the theme of individualism vs. community that runs through the three speeches. The absconditus problematic, as we have seen, can prove to be over-

whelming when it is reduced to a merely individual psychodrama: the individual trying desperately to “see” God faces the prospect of either desolation or annihilation. However, when recontextualized within a loving web of relationality, one’s own searching can be the opportunity for consolation and peacebuilding. Over the course of the three speeches, we see Pius undermine and eventually replace this desperate individualism with a vision of solidarity and closeness. More broadly, an overarching theme of *The Young Pope* seems to be that there really is no sovereign individual: we remain at all times subject to the schemes, desires, interventions, and intercessions of those around us. We are *involved* in one another’s stories, for better or for worse; thus, none of us are ever truly “alone before God”. However, Sorrentino’s show, and indeed most shows in the genre of “prestige television” make the individualism/community dynamic explicit in another metatextual way, namely by presupposing and to a certain extent depending upon a *community of viewers* to receive, discuss, and interpret their meaning. One need only look to the proliferation of podcasts, magazine columns, fan groups, online message boards, and even other television shows devoted to discussing minute details of shows such as *The Leftovers*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and, yes, *The Young Pope* to see these group dynamics at work. This communal mode of reception (which, again, is by now built into the genre of prestige TV itself) is noteworthy—not least since it undercuts the still-commonplace thesis that supposedly “individualizing” technologies like television, the internet, and video games are responsible for the immiseration of (American) civic life (see, most famously, [Putnam 2000](#)). More pertinently for our discussion here, this presumed community of viewers already indicates something of the answer that Sorrentino will give to the absconditus problem: we are not left “on our own” in the search for God any more than we are left “on our own” to receive and ponder such a sprawling and at times bewildering cinematic achievement as Sorrentino presents to his viewers. In this way, the medium of *The Young Pope* conforms to its own message and already guards against the individualistic anxieties that the absconditus theme naturally invites.

The second way that Sorrentino deploys his medium to full effect is, paradoxically, by subverting the power of image itself. Sorrentino’s virtuosity as a maker of images is apparent, and yet the sights that confront us in *The Young Pope* are often not just strange but utterly incomprehensible. He inserts such moments, I suggest, to indicate the incompleteness of a certain type of “seeing”. In the Africa speech, as we saw above, Pius emphasizes the precedence of the affective over the calculatingly rational: God is “seen” not with the eyes but with the heart, and this can be a truer form of seeing than literal perception. Of course, this presents Sorrentino with certain difficulties as a *visual* storyteller—something must go on the screen! But it is indicative of his skill as an artist to be able to conjure images that, although striking and even beautiful, remain resistant to interpretation. For instance, in “Episode Two”, Pius is inspecting gifts from various world leaders and happens upon a live kangaroo still in its crate, sent by Australia’s foreign minister. To the surprise of his entourage, he releases the kangaroo into the Vatican Gardens, where it remains for the rest of the series, appearing fleetingly in future episodes before being seen dead (by some unknown means) in “Episode Eight”. We get the sense Pius is moved by the kangaroo—its arrival and its death seem to affect him deeply—and yet its importance is never explained nor even discussed. A kangaroo at the Vatican is, of course, a strange sight (so unusual in fact that the crew was unable to procure a real animal when filming and had to use CGI for the scene), and Sorrentino is happy to let it remain strange for us. What is clear is that Pius, at least, “sees” the creature with his heart and allows himself to be moved by it. Sorrentino thus draws our attention not *past* such strange images but *through* them to a deeper affective significance. This visual self-subversion can be thought of as a form of absurdism, certainly, but it may also represent one example of the distinctively Catholic imagination as applied to the medium of television. In any case, such moments are meant to train us in the patient, nonacquisitive mode of “seeing” that the absconditus problem calls for.

Finally, there is the question of eschatological endings. At the outset of this paper, I cited Eikelboom's definition of theological "rhythm" as "an interface between harmony and interruption [. . .] over time". I then went on to show how Sorrentino presents Pius as a vehicle of both interruption (the Rome speech) and harmony (the Venice speech) over the course of the series. The sequence here *from desolation to consolation* (what I have also called above the "graced crescendo") is essential. Theological "rhythm" escalates and intensifies (for an account of this "dramatic" escalation in the covenant relationship between God and Israel, see [von Balthasar \[1978\] 1992](#)). Eikelboom goes on to say that a properly eschatological rhythm must "*end well* rather than merely cease" ([Eikelboom 2018](#), p. 210; my italics). Simply put, salvation history aims at narrative closure. Lately, it has been argued ([Thiel 2013](#)) that the contemporary Catholic imagination has lost some sense of this dramatic resolution. Considered as one potential theological genre, television in general—and especially television in syndication—is arguably all too prone to this critique. Often, television shows sacrifice narrative closure for a never-ending repetition of (eventually meaningless) plots and subplots. Soap operas and detective serials neatly represent this trend, although it is only accelerating under the influence of mega-franchises like those connected to Marvel Studios (with their so-called "cinematic universe" representing a hellish eternal-present in which there is neither closure nor progress, just frantic and ongoing activity). Then, however, Sorrentino's achievement as a filmmaker working in television comes even more clearly into focus, since his work maintains shape, structure, and form from beginning to end. Most importantly, it *has* an end. Prestige television has certain structural features that enable satisfying narrative closure; for instance, any given show is more likely to be the product of a singular artistic vision and is typically bought and sold as a limited series (rather than as part of an open-ended franchise deal). Even within this specialized subgenre, however, Sorrentino stands out as an example of a storyteller who understands the "graced crescendo" and the particular ways in which television can give it new voice. This point about endings is, after all, a suitable point to end on. When one considers the difficulties involved in ending other types of theological "texts", the significance of closure becomes apparent: A film or a television show is not an argument—it does not need to indicate avenues for "further research" or address counterarguments. If it is self-assured and purposeful art, it will have the confidence to end where it does, at that "final hour" (1 Jn 2:18) when "all shall be revealed" (Lk 12:2)—all, that is, including the face of the God who smiles.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to James Lorenz and Tatiana Kalveks for organizing the 2018 postgraduate conference ("Theological Tropes in Contemporary Culture", Worcester College, Oxford) out of which this paper first arose.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The average age at election of Catholic popes for the last five hundred years has been about sixty-four; in the show, Pius XIII is said to be forty-six at the time of his election.
- ² They also simply ignore Sorrentino's own judgment on the matter. During a press interview, Sorrentino clarified: "I didn't intend to be irreverent or aggressive toward the Catholic Church. On the opposite, in a world in which every priest is seen as a suspect of some kind of abuse, I try to shine a positive light on the priesthood. In *The New Pope*, we tell a story of priests with all their flaws and weaknesses, but there's more: there's the priest as a human being who strongly believes in the 'good' he's trying to do. I try to be on their side: priests are neither saints nor sinners. They are like any of us" ([Bizio 2020](#)).
- ³ The phrase is from [von Balthasar \(\[1980\] 1994, pp. 82–125\)](#), who is himself drawing on the writings of the mystic Adrienne von Speyr.

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