

## “The Goodness of Creation in Film”

### I. Sub-Creation as an Analogy to Divine Creation

Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them."

Colossians 1:15-17 "He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together."

Ephesians 2:10 "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

One of the most basic claims of the Christian faith is that when God created the world, he formed it and shaped it, not out of need or necessity, but simply out of joy and love. This same joy in creation found highest expression in God's creation of humanity, whom he formed in his image. To be the image of God (*imago dei*) implies in part that God has given us certain abilities not exactly like his but analogous, that is in a fashion that can be meaningfully compared to his. Thus, Paul tells us that we are "God's workmanship." The Greek for this is *poesis*, from which we derive our word "poem." God the Creator, who created the world and called it good, has created us to do good works as well.

Sometimes people speak of artistic creation, comparing painting, music, and literature to a kind of creation not unlike God's because these art works originate something new and different. The author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, called the human ability to imagine and design stories with fictional histories, languages, and geographies, a "subcreation," an ability that creates after God's design. Others have been reluctant to use this term, preferring to save the term "creation" for what God does and the term "making" for what humans do because only God creates out of nothing, while we must always base our pictures and stories on what already exists. This notion can certainly be extended to the crafting of films, which employ not only story, but image, movement, and sound.

Whatever term we use, "creation," "subcreation," or "making," all suggest that God's design and joy and love are models for our own constructions. When we look at the creativity that goes into a work of cinema, we learn to see part of how God has blessed human beings. Just as God bestowed his intelligence, care, and beauty on what he makes, so should we. We begin, then, with a basic trust on the value and goodness of artistic creativity and making before we critique for its faults and sinfulness. For some Christians this may seem problematic. Shouldn't we begin with a fundamental mistrust? Aren't most films by non-Christians with monetary or/even base motives? I hope this course will show otherwise. I hope we will see that even filmmakers that have had to work within the system of standard production, such as most American directors, can create works of power and insight that tell us something not only about human beings, but also about the world's truth, goodness, and beauty. This doesn't mean these aren't subject to human failures and sinfulness, but we can still look for things from which we may learn and profit.

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## II. Rationality and Filmmaking

John 1:1-4, 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. [. . .] The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The original term translated as "Word" in this passage is the Greek word *logos*. When John (under the Holy Spirit's inspiration) applied this concept to Christ, he was making a radical claim. *Logos* in Greek philosophy is an impersonal rational order that directs and controls the universe. Thus, John can claim that through the Word "all things were made." But he can also state that "The Word became flesh." That impersonal force, he tells us, is actually a personal Being who entered history. Jesus came to show us what God is like. John is also invoking the ancient Hebrew notion of wisdom. To be "full of grace and truth" is to express all that Jewish tradition claimed for *sophia*.

The concept of a *logos* suggests that reality is inherently linguistic in structure, that we need words to relate to, understand, and exist with the world. Certainly, words are not the only way to do this, as we shall see this semester, the image-making capacity of films asks us to sense meaning and value in other ways than language. But films are still often tied to language at some level of plot and development. Even when a film uses montage, even a montage of seemingly unrelated images, we seldom experience these without imparting to them some kind of connective framework. Indeed, most films rely on our ability to make the narrational connections between various shots.

The Logos equally implies that an order and harmony exists in creation that is uncoverable, and for this too, we need words. In film, this means that what we intuit and experience in a non-linguistic way will still have to be unpacked in verbal manners—oral and written. I may walk away from a film with minimal dialogue like Terence Malick's *The Tree of Life* realizing that most of its meaning is visual rather than verbal, yet to work through my understanding of the film requires me to voice what I understood and did not, what I appreciated and did not, what I can learn from and can't.

The notion of the Logos has a number of affinities with the wisdom tradition of scripture, too. Wisdom is found in abiding by this structure and harmony, and for the apostle John, in Christ alone is this experienced. Furthermore, it is Christ the *Logos* who shows us the pattern by which we relate to the cosmos and more importantly to the cosmos' Creator. Language (or image or narrative) only has meaning in the end because God has ordered the creation. Narrative can only offer us wisdom because God has designed it as part of the order of the universe. We are designed to learn from others' stories. Watching a film like *The Mission* about the heroism and ethical conflict of French Jesuits in 18<sup>th</sup>-century South America may stir in us a desire to do likewise in our own context.

Yet Christians also believe that humans are partially out of phase with our world. Sin has clouded our ability to name correctly what is there. We often use images and words in a fragmented, halting, cursory way. We misunderstand, misname, and miss the point. Sometimes, our names and pictures and sounds are even out-flat lies. Film, as we shall discuss further on, is often part of this mistaken signification. We will need to question whether a gorgeous film like *The Red Shoes* is telling us the entire truth about human creativity, marriage, and the demands of art.

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### III. Incarnational Understanding

Col 2: 9-10: For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

Heb 2:14-15: Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

The doctrine that God was incarnated as a human being, then, is one of the central beliefs of orthodox Christianity. By it we affirm that Jesus our Messiah became one of us in order to bear our sin and save us. We also affirm that by his incarnation that God has reminded us that Jesus can sympathize, even identify, with our human failings and weakness, though without sin. Likewise, the doctrine of the incarnation stresses that God in Christ valued the physicality and bodily nature of his creation enough to share in it. This is an extension of Christian beliefs about the creation of the world, for what God called "good" he also hallowed by entering into it.

The term "incarnational" is often used by Christian scholars in a number of fields to stress what we as Christians should do in emulation of our Lord's example. Our lives of service should seek to "incarnate" Christian principles in the particular, historical circumstances we have been given. We should not assume that what Christians do in one culture will easily carry over into another. How a church worships in Seattle may not be the same as one in Bombay. This also stresses that history and culture are essential factors to take account of. After all, if God, who is Truth, chose to enter history in a particular place and time, then to ignore our particulars, is to make a fundamental mistake about the very conditions in which truth is received, practiced, and discovered.

This has a number of applications in the field of cinema studies:

1. We should not ignore our own time and place. We should be willing to study and create film within contemporary genres and techniques. Christian truths can be expressed in these milieu, and people of faith can profit from these works. We are born for this time, so to speak. Several filmmakers this semester that we will examine were either confessing Christians or at least deeply shaped by the faith—John Ford, Andrei Tarkovsky, Leo McCarey, and Robert Bresson, for example. Others, such as Roberto Rossellini, Carl Dreyer, Ingmar Bergman, and Federico Fellini, were haunted by the faith. Yet each of these brings a particular context and sensibility; they were influenced by other filmmakers and were themselves in turn influential.
2. We should recognize that we interpret film from a particular historical context. Christians of different eras and cultures, while they are bound to share many of the central doctrines of the faith, are also bound to stress different things, ask different questions, and apply Christian teaching in different ways. What a Christian in Japan notices about a film by Akira Kurosawa or Yasujiro Ozu may be different, likely *will* be, from what a counterpart notices in the U.S. We each have to re-incarnate our practice anew.

3. We need a theory of film that seeks to account for time and eternity, for the body and the soul, for the individual and the community, and for the objective world and the subjective experience of it. Christ's incarnation represents the intersection of time and eternity, history and the universal. As such, we can never make truth wholly personal and subjective or wholly social and objective.

This third point is especially important when thinking about how the artistic process is understood. In western culture, there have been, according to M.H. Abrams, four broad paradigms of art: the mimetic, the expressive, the objective, and the pragmatic.

1. The mimetic, from the word *mimesis*, argues that art derives its power from a representation of the world. Even when that work includes fantastic or mythical elements, it still has to work from what is there.
2. The expressive insists, on the contrary, that art's power derives from the artist's creative expression and not from any relationship to the world.
3. The objective stresses that the work of film, in this case, is a self-contained object with its own properties separate from the author's intentions, the historical context, or readers' responses.
4. The pragmatic, on the other hand, focuses on what the film produces in its readers.

An incarnational theory will seek to appropriate the best in each of these. It will value the world and history as an arena where truth is discovered, so it will look to a mimetic model which takes nature and life seriously, as it will look to a pragmatic model that will take the experience of readers' seriously. It will also recognize the particularity of the film and seek to balance this with the internal intuition and expressivism of its creators. Yet it will also be suspicious of these when they seek to make idols out of human works. It will reject any idea that seeks to divorce itself from history or that seeks to make truth a created thing rather than a holy given.

For example, the objective theory in some formulations seeks to almost escape history, placing the film outside those concerns. Can we really suggest that we can view films, such as Polish director Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, with no appreciation for their Polish context, both seeking to push back against official Communist control and propaganda? The expressive theory tends to put self at the center of knowledge, rather than grounding that knowledge in God. There are several problems here, including trying to navigate a world in which the energy of a work comes from solely its creator or creators. Even an experimental film, such as Jean Cocteau's surreal *The Blood of a Poet* must rely on its power for its juxtaposition, even violation, of a created world beyond that of the poet and filmmaker's imagination. The pragmatic theory in some versions tends to make the same mistake, claiming that human readers and communities "create" truth for themselves. Certainly, the way viewers respond to the emotional sentiments of a film like Leo McCarey's powerful study of how adult children can refuse to respect their aging parents in *Make Way for Tomorrow* is partially about each viewers' emotions, but it is also about certain social and psychological codes that we understand and rely on in daily life, and with which, yes, God created us.

The incarnation reminds us that truth may be found in history but it is not confined to history. God in Christ has come to us from without, even as he speaks a language within. We cannot lay aside either side of this truth.