

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

What kind of films can be used?

Before answering the question set, it will be instructive to look at one of the more popular methods within theology and film, namely the understanding of film as 'text'.

When film is understood as a 'text' it is possible to set it alongside other 'texts' in order to see how the one throws light on the other. While any 'text' would enable a dialogue (or 'conversation', David Tracy), the primary 'text' for theology and film is the Bible. Several New Testament scholars have engaged in such a dialogue. Bernard Brandon Scott believes that film represents a contemporary attempt to articulate myth (we will return to myth later in the module). However, while he juxtaposes film with what he sees as an ancient myth (i.e. the biblical text), he tends to see the outcome as shedding light on contemporary culture rather than on scripture or on theological truth.

Larry Kreitzer's volumes all tend to follow a similar pattern. Films based on classic literature are juxtaposed with biblical texts. A 'hermeneutical circle' is established where the interpreter actively engages with the text bringing his or her own convictions to an attempt to discover a text's original historical and cultural meaning. Kreitzer begins with a film, then looks at the literature behind the film and then analyses the biblical text by using the hermeneutical insights gained on the way. Thus he seeks to gain insight into the biblical text from modern literature and contemporary film but he also seeks a better understanding of the hermeneutical process itself.

Robert Jewett has a similar approach to that of Kreitzer, but he uses different terminology. He speaks of an 'interpretive arch' linking ancient texts of scripture with modern 'texts' (i.e. film). When this occurs, the association of biblical text with film enables a *new* understanding of both. Nevertheless, the biblical text remains explicitly, for Jewett, *primus inter pares*.

While not explicitly expressed by Scott, Kreitzer and Jewett, there seems to be an implicit recognition in their methodologies that *any* film could be used in dialogue with the biblical text. However, Some have suggested that it is only those films which lend themselves to critical analysis that should be viewed

(Richard A. Blake, but also Kreitzer's identification of 'classic' literature and films).

The problem is one of criteria: how should one identify a film worthy of theological engagement? It could be that only explicitly religious films should be used, or perhaps just those that can be identified as 'works of art'. While in recent years there has been a turn towards popular film as feeding theological reflection, there remains a consensus that not any film will do, though not all arguments about this are convincing. Furthermore, such criteria neglect the fact that various interpretations of the same film are possible. Can we really restrict theology and film to those films that can be identified as dealing with existential issues and 'ultimate concern'? This seems inappropriate when we consider that film is primarily a form of entertainment.