

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Theology, Religion and Myth

During the twentieth century, much attention was paid to the role of myth. The phenomenologist Mercea Eliade noted that because it is usually concerned with how things were 'in the beginning', myth enables people both to come to terms with reality (either through juxtaposing the present and the past or by using the mythical origins to judge the present) and also giving a pattern for living in the present. But myth is not merely didactic, it offers a means of experiencing the mystical, it enables someone to be transported from the present 'profane time' to the 'sacred time' in which reality was formed. Religious ritual and festivals accomplish this. In a secular world, Eliade suggested that people could have an analogous experience through fiction and even film (though he tended to emphasize literature rather than the cinema). Other thinkers have tended to emphasize an existential quality in myth. They deal with the fundamental problems of life (Levi-Strauss) and enable people to contact the 'great foundational forces, powers that generate and govern the world' (Martin and Ostwalt).

If this is the case, then it is true to say that all films to some extent fulfil this myth-like function. But fantasy film, particularly those of mythical proportions, possibly fulfil it in a more complete way. In recent years, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* have all fulfilled this role to some degree (though we could equally draw on *Star Wars*, for example, as myth expressed in the genre of science fiction).

Both Lewis and Tolkien have written on myth and fantasy as literary genres. Tolkien was instrumental in Lewis's conversion to Christianity because of the fascination both shared in ancient mythology, especially that of northern Europe. Tolkien explained that the story of the dying and rising god found consistently in these mythologies was God's communication in poetry, preparing people to hear the story in history, the Christ story which is 'real' and 'true'.

As a result, Tolkien tended to reject analogy and allegory in favour of myth. His *Lord of the Rings* is clearly mythical for while each part is in itself a

complete story its *meaning* is only revealed in the context of the complex and epic mythology which was posthumously published as *The Silmarillion*. Lewis recognized this too, and saw the imaginative journey into fantasy as a means of experiencing the other. *Harry Potter* is slightly different, but these stories too form part of a grander narrative and will only make final sense when the final installment is published.

Contemporary myth, then, may now be found at the cinema encouraging audiences (through imaginative journeys) to consider the meaning of life and reality itself. This is aided by the escapism of fantasy. Because they often echo the biblical narrative of redemption they can be conceived of as '*praeparatio evangelica*', though they rarely, if ever, become the *evangelium* itself.