

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Imaging or Imagining God?

Hitherto on this course we have concentrated on recognizing film as (1) a means of expressing existential angst and thus the primary concerns of a particular age and (2) as providing modern analogies for biblical stories and concepts or possibly for theological categories (as seen in the idea of film as 'text', for example). In this class we will suggest a role for imagination in theology and film. To an extent, imagination will be seen as having played a part in the two arguments already listed. However, the following argument will also open up a wider basis for conceptualizing the field.

In a rather technical argument, David Hume argued that the imagination is fed by ideas which are the result of the mind thinking about previous sense experiences recalled to it by the memory. Unlike the memory, the imagination is able to impose a new order on the original experiences and in that way it is the creative faculty within human beings. For Immanuel Kant, the imagination draws mental concepts into conversation with empirical experiences. It can be 'empirical', which enables us to cope with the world around us, or 'transcendental' or 'productive' which is the creative or constructive faculty.

We can conclude from this that, philosophically, (1) there the imagination plays an important role in ordinary cognition, in understanding or making sense of ourselves and the world around us; (2) imagination not only enables us to understand the world in which we live but in some senses to create and re-create it.

As far as theology goes, we could view imagination in terms of natural law or of 'sacramentalism' which recognizes that the Creator, in creating the universe, has left an indelible mark on the creation which can be discerned through the imagination. David Tracy, Andrew Greeley and Richard Blake have all suggested the possibility of an 'analogical imagination' based on a sacramental sense of God's presence in creation. The Reformed view would be that 'natural law' is untrustworthy (cf. the debate between Brunner and Barth). Thus John McIntyre suggests that the Holy Spirit is the 'point of contact' between humankind and God, provided by the prevenient, gracious activity of God, and it is to be seen as part of the human imagination. Garrett Green has also suggested that the imagination ought to be identified as the

point of divine-human contact. He suggests the category of the 'paradigmatic imagination' which, because it is faithful to the Christian paradigms as revealed in scripture, can be posited as the 'point of contact' in human beings.

In brief, then, while the field of theology and film is in a general sense interested in the way in which the imagination is stimulated by cinematic imagery (and, to an extent, the cinematic imagery is the result of imagination), it must recognize that it is only the paradigmatic imagination, primarily in the viewer but possibly also in the director, which will make the necessary connections in order that theological meaning and significance be located in, or extracted from, any given film.