

Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Film

II Timothy 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

Jeremiah 6:16: "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you said: 'We will not walk in it.'"

Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. "

2 Thess 2:13-16: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."

I. Beginning with a Community of Interpretation

"Hermeneutics" can simply be defined as the method by which we interpret texts, including visual texts such as paintings or films. Hermeneutics concerns itself with many of the issues we have raised in this course: *How can we know what a director means? How do I respond to a film? What is the social context of the material I am viewing?*

As a field of knowledge, hermeneutics arose out of Jewish and Christian concern with rightly interpreting the Word of God. Yet today, in addition to religion, hermeneutical issues are researched in fields as diverse as law, literature, history, philosophy, art, film, and medicine. Wherever people have to understand texts, questions of interpretation come up. Of late, this field of inquiry has been divided between those who suggest that interpretation is simply a set of rules, free from our contexts, that once perfected offer an air-tight, guaranteed right interpretation, and those who believe that interpretation is completely relative, that no common ground of understanding can be found because interpretation is too subjective and individualistic to ever offer definitive meanings. What is often overlooked in this debate is the role that *mutual* interpretation plays: namely, the sense that we depend on working together to understand a text.

The authors of a recent work on the subject argue:

"[I]nterpretation is an activity that Christians engage in within the context of the promises of God. More important than the question of human certainty is that of divine fidelity. For the sake of human understanding and the future of the Christian church, it is more important for God to be seen as the maker and keeper of promises than it is for us to perfect the procedures we employ as we interpret texts and the world about us" (xii *The Promise of Hermeneutics*)

When we understand God as a keeper of promises, we learn to put our hope in communication. God has promised us understanding within the context of relationships. We learn and grow and argue inseparably tied to those around us. The issues we raise, the questions we ask, even the words we use arise out of a specified time and place in history. Christ the Word offers us a world where community is possible because communication is possible, and paradoxically because community is possible, communication is.

II. A Community Implies a Tradition

The way we interpret a film is deeply a part of our communities and traditions. This is something to be proud of. We aren't required to make sense of everything on our own. We have a heritage of response that shapes our own questions. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted, "To think is to thank." In a very real sense, we are dependent on all who have gone before us for understanding. Too often tradition has gotten a bad name. If something isn't new, original, or modern, we think we can't trust it, or worse, we think that what is new and contemporary must always be better. If something is "traditional" it must be out-dated; it can't possibly apply to today. Tradition, many seem to believe, is stunted, unacceptable, even dead. Of course, tradition can be all of these things. Paul warns against accepting something simply because it has its origins in a received pattern of human thinking. There can be deceptive false traditions that promote attitudes and behaviors which compromise the gospel. However, Paul was not rejecting the very manner and method of tradition itself. Tradition can also be what gives us our moorings, as Jeremiah understood. It can provide us with a sense of direction. It can give shape to our identity and can help us resist contemporary temptations. A tradition doesn't have to be *static*. The very Greek word, *tradatio*, suggests an exchange from one person to another, a living process of continuity and change. The ancient paths, the good ways, are not dead ends. Instead, they can impart to us a pattern, and they can adapt to new circumstances.

In fact as Christians, we are often part of a tradition whether we are aware of it or not. Anyone who has been a Christian for very long has already adopted and is likely practicing the language and attitudes and doctrines of the church he or she fellowships with. This isn't to say that many of us still don't hold beliefs and act in ways that violate or deny our church traditions. Too often either we simply aren't educated in what we are doing or we are so individualistic that we refuse to enter into the larger life of community. Tradition is something that you have to work at. A guitar player who wants to play the blues first has to study other great blues musicians. A talented player may expand on that training, making it her own, but she starts within the tradition. In the same way, it is wise for us to submit ourselves to that treasure of the Church which is larger than we are.

How, then, do we distinguish between traditions and practices that are growing and keeping faith with the Spirit of Christ and those that are not? Since the Reformation, there have been five typical answers among Christians, and each of these has a relationship to holy scripture:

1. Jettison all tradition and return to a pristine original.
2. Keep only those aspects of tradition that are explicitly found in scripture.
3. Keep those aspects of tradition that are not explicitly prohibited by scripture.
4. Hold that tradition itself is inspired to some greater or lesser degree and is therefore a reliable source of information and formation.
5. Hold that tradition is reliable if it is an outgrowth of what is nascently already there in scripture.

Many scholars and church leaders hold that the first is simply impossible, while Protestants have traditionally insisted that the fourth position is only valuable in a limited way; namely, tradition can never be equal to scripture. What the other three positions recognize in their own way is that scripture is both the source and the promise of renewal for our traditions.

III. Contemplation and Vision: A Test Case

Charles Péguy, the French poet, called this *ressourcement*, the renewal of a people that comes by a return to their early sources. I want to suggest that the Christian understanding of hermeneutics should shape the way we interpret films, but it should teach us responsibility in drawing from various aspects of the Christian tradition in our viewing and critiquing cinema. This includes the history of Christian reflection on the other arts—verbal, visual, and musical, as well as the recent history of Christian involvement with and reflection on cinema. How might some of the following ancient Christian sources expand our resources for finding truth, goodness, and beauty in film?

“Beauty and strength are noncontemplative virtues, since they follow from the contemplative. From the fitness and harmony of the contemplations of the soul, some wise men have perceived beauty; and from the effectiveness of the suggestions from contemplative virtues, they have become aware of strength. But, for this, namely that beauty may exist in the soul, and also power for the fulfillment of what is proper, we need divine grace. . . . To my beauty, then, which I received from You (God) the beginning of my creation, You added a strength which is appropriate for what is proper. Every soul is beautiful, which is considered by the standard of its own virtues. But beauty, true and most lovely, is that of the divine and blessed nature.”

(Basil, On Psalm 29)

Basil of Caesarea sees both physical and moral beauty, as well as physical and moral strength, as gifts, ultimately gifts from our Creator. While we can locate beauty and power in human persons, these qualities are ultimately oriented to good. As a principle, this opens up the opportunity for us to move back and forth between the ultimately goods of beauty and strength in God, even as we see human manifestations of these in films we love. This is true not only of a character such as Watanabe in Kurosawa’s *Ikiru*, but also a character such as Manon in *Manon of the Spring*, who is both beautiful and yet vengeful.

“[In an icon] the prototype is in the image by similarity of hypostasis, which does not have a different principle of definition for the prototype and for the image. Therefore, we do not understand that the image lacks equality with the prototype and has an inferior glory in respect to similarity, but in respect to its different essence. The essence of the image is not of a nature to be venerated, although the one who is portrayed appears in it for veneration. Therefore, there is no introduction of a different kind of veneration, but the image has one and the same veneration with the prototype, in accordance with the identity of likeness.” (Theodore of Studios, On the Holy Icons)

Theodore of Studios is, of course, talking about Christian icons, not about secular (or even more generally sacred) works of art, so we have to be careful when applying his insights to the study of film. However, there may be insights worth reflecting on here, too. For one thing, he recognizes that our response to a work of art is often intended in some ways to be directed toward what the work of art is making manifest to us. This is not to deny what Carl Plantinga has called artifact emotions, that is our emotional responses to the quality of the art of filmmaking, but nonetheless, the notion of the prototype reminds us that films cut off from some kind of mimetic engagement with the world run the risk of losing the primary source of their power. *Ikiru* is not just a well-made film. We want it to offer us some real hope about the nature of people and surprising goodness. *Manon of the Spring* is not just a revenge tale, but leaves us with some hope that reconciliation is possible in even bitter circumstances.

“For whatsoever is ordained by the dispositions of the Divine Providence is good and beautiful and just. For what is more desirable than that the immeasurable glory both of the Universe and its Creator should be manifested by the contrast of opposites? What is more just than that those who have deserved well should occupy the highest place in nature, and those who have deserved will occupy the lowest? What is

more honorable than that the Universe of all things should be adorned by the properties of the individuals it contains?" (John Scotus Eriugena, Periphyseon)

Eriugena's insight can be easily abused, creating a kind of cosmic Yin and Yang to please God's sense of aesthetic. The basic insight still remains: the order of the universe is rich in diversity, including diverse opposites, and these often create a rich texture of meaning for films. The classic buddy film is often predicated on the two seemingly incompatible partners who must learn to respect each other's talents and mesh them together to accomplish their goal. Part of *Ikiru's* power as a film is in following the journey of Watanabe from his infernal mummy-status through his search in the pleasures of decadence and youth to finally discovering a secret in sacrifice and service to others.

"There are six kinds of contemplation in themselves, and within each there are many divisions. The first is in the imagination and according to imagination only. The second is in imagination and according to reason. The third is in reason and according to imagination. The fourth is in reason and according to reason. The fifth is above but not beyond reason. The sixth is above reason and seems to be beyond reason. Without doubt, our contemplation is engaged in imagination when the form and image of those visible things are brought into consideration and we, being amazed, give attention, and in giving attention are amazed how many, how great, how diverse, how beautiful and joyful are these corporeal things that we imbibe by means of corporeal sense. . . . Indeed, with wonder we bring discovery and knowledge into consideration. In the first kind of contemplation we look at, examine and marvel at things themselves; in the second kind we do the same with reason, order, and disposition of these things, and the cause, mode, and benefit of any one thing." (Richard of St. Victor, *The Mystic Ark*)

Richard of St. Victor reminds us that our capacity for image making exist in tandem with our reasoning ability, coming before and after it in various ways. Film by its very nature is image-engaging and offers the possibility of contemplation of the vast field of what is true, good, and beautiful. It can also stimulate our reason to further dwell on and reflect on what all these goods offer and represent. By identifying both imaginative and rational components to the order of contemplation, Richard may have made a case for why film-watching must always be accompanied by film-reflection. I can sense at a number of levels the deep truth and beauty as Watanabe happily swings and sings in the park as the snow falls, but I need to also reflect and discuss and interpret that tacit awareness in more explicit and dialogical ways to increase my responsibility to contemplate truth and beauty.

"Since goodness is that which all things desire, and since this has the aspect of an end, it is clear that goodness implies the aspect of an end. Nevertheless, the idea of goodness presupposes the idea of an efficient cause, and also of a formal cause. For we see that what is first in causing, is last in the thing caused. Fire, e.g. heats first of all before it reproduces the form of fire; though the heat in the fire follows from its substantial form. Now in causing, goodness and the end come first, both of which move the agent to act; secondly, the action of the agent moving to the form; thirdly, comes the form. Hence in that which is caused the converse ought to take place, so that there should be first, the form whereby it is a being; secondly, we consider in it its effective power, whereby it is perfect in being, for a thing is perfect when it can reproduce its like, as the Philosopher says; thirdly, there follows the formality of goodness which is the basic principle of its perfection.

"Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind - because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every cognitive faculty. Now since knowledge is by assimilation,

and similarity relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*)

Aquinas’s technical discussion here perhaps clarifies the kind of thing that Richard of St. Victor was exploring. First, Aquinas tells us that all things desire some perceived goodness and this implies a *telos*, an end to our desires. Goodness has both something that effects our desire and something toward which that desire is pointed. We can uncover in our reflections on a good action or object the goodness in principle that makes it so. We can think on the meaning of sacrifice for others, for example when we reflect on Watanabe’s actions. We can also talk about the particular beauty of those actions, especially as embodied in a pleasing aesthetic form such as *Ikiru*. This can be extended to the craft of film-making. As Aquinas points out, goodness and beauty are in one sense the same thing, though not in another. The formal proportions of the shots, close-ups, lighting, and so on the film are themselves a kind of good with a certain end in mind—the well-made, meaningful film. They can bring us delight, which we can reflect on and unpack in a rational way. The experience of that beauty is something we desire as a good, and we seek it out. We can also examine the form it takes in the film with profit to our imaginations and reasons.