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The Eyes Have it: Film, Editing, and Postmodern Theological Hermeneutics

Abstract

This article attempts to show the fruitful dialogue which exists when one cross-pollinates hermeneutics and the task of film editing. Though seemingly unrelated, their engagement is a rich collaboration that brings a deeper appreciation for the cinematic process as well as an alternative way of looking at the interpretive process as it relates to Scripture. This article traces the history of and approaches to cinematic editing in hopes that it might provide a significant interlocutor to the burgeoning field of hermeneutical studies.

Keywords

Film, Editing, Hermeneutics, AKM Adam, Kevin Vanhoozer, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Walter Murch

Author Notes

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the fruitful collaboration of Christian theology and the cultural medium of film since the first edition of Robert K. Johnston's clarion book, *Reel Spirituality*, was released in 2000. Certainly his work was not the first to break ground on the subject, but his careful analysis and perceptive partnering of two distinct disciplines from a Christian perspective helped to open a floodgate of various books, articles, and blogs regarding this interdisciplinary endeavor. Next, Johnston served as editor to a 2007 companion text, *Reframing Theology and Film*, a work which spent less time on theological critiques of particular movies and more focused dialogue between theology, philosophy, filmmaking and film studies. While taking nothing away from his earlier work, Johnston's later approach may prove to be more rewarding. I contend that the most meaningful contributions made in this ongoing dialogue will not come primarily from theological assessments of particular films or by using the cinematic medium simply for illustrative purposes; it will come through a rigorous engagement with the actual process of filmmaking as well as the effects film has on the viewer. With this framework, and for the purposes of this article, I will show that hermeneutical studies in a postmodern, theological context not only expose peoples' interpretive presuppositions, but also yield a significant harvest when cross-pollinated with cinema, film theory, and the editorial process.

Formalist film theory makes the case that significant contributions to any given film are made by a large swath of individuals, be they actors, musical composers, or lighting technicians. And though it may take a village to raise a movie, one of the key participants in taking a film from infancy to full maturity is the editor. It is the editor (or editorial team) who assembles scattered frames together, erases mistakes, and splices footage into a coherent whole.

KULESHOV AND CONSTRAINED FREEDOM

Lev Kuleshov (d.1970) was one such artist, a Russian film theorist whose focused work on film editing helped to revolutionize the cinematic process. For Kuleshov, editing was the heart and soul of the film-making process; the juxtaposition of one shot with another is what brought meaning to the medium for audiences.

While the original version from the 1920s has been lost, his trail-blazing experiment in editing has been widely duplicated and studied for decades in film schools. Kuleshov used footage of a man staring blankly into the camera; his expressionless features shot in close-up were followed by an image of a bowl of steaming soup. The man's enigmatic face was then shown again to an audience unaware of Kuleshov's intentions.

Next, the audience was shown the same opening footage of the man, but this time the image that followed was not a bowl of soup; it was a casket. This

segment ends with the same exact scene the first vignette did, a man blankly staring. Finally, the audience was shown the exact same clip of the expressionless man, but here the image that he is apparently looking at was not soup or a casket, it was a young girl playing with a teddy bear.

Through this experiment (known as the “Kuleshov Effect”), the Russian film theorist showed that audiences interpreted the man’s face, demeanor and state of mind differently based upon what they believed he was viewing. With the soup, audiences felt that he looked hungry. With the casket, they believed him to be in mourning. And with the young girl, they thought that he had an unspoken pride and admiration for his daughter. What Kuleshov did, in essence, was to show that through the controlled juxtaposition of images, audiences invariably assign meaning to given scenes based upon their own expectations and emotions. The man’s face remained impassive, steady and stoic, but the audience believed the actor was portraying different emotions with each object he supposedly stared at. In fact, as famed Soviet director, Vsevolod Pudovkin would later remark, the audience actually marveled at the sensitivity and range of the actor.¹

This heuristic experiment has significant implications for hermeneutics, the most apparent being the question of what meaning the reader brings when coming to any given text. Is it possible that some in the audience could have thought that the man was staring at the soup not because he was hungry and longed for a simple meal, but because he had become suddenly ill during lunch and was wondering if

it was the soup or the chicken that unsettled his stomach? Might he have been looking at the casket enigmatically not because he was in mourning, but because his job was to construct caskets and he was surveying his workmanship? Did he gaze at the girl because he was proud of her as his daughter, or was he staring at a stranger and only thinking about his own daughter who had been tragically killed earlier that year? Any of these other possible interpretations would speak more about the viewer than some definitive, latent meaning in the film.

The Kuleshov Effect, therefore, is not foolproof. Audiences really don't have enough information in these short vignettes to provide the context for this man's malleable gaze. But the fact that the same shots of him were used throughout the entire experiment indicates that viewers at least played some role in the interpretive process. With each vignette, they viewed the man with certain expectations, assigning meaning to a particular text that may or may not have been based on correct assumptions.

Is this not true of hermeneutical endeavors as well? Do readers have enough information in the biblical text to be certain that their interpretations are correct? Given that readers bring their own particular narrative to the narrative of Scripture, can they be sure that even having the proper context of any given Scriptural passage will lead them, as subjective individuals, to the right conclusions? In the triumvirate of "author/text/reader," do truth and meaning reside with the author and text, the text and reader, or with a combination of the three?

Clive Marsh has offered his own hermeneutical assessment of such questions:

The experience of film-watching thus supports the importance of reader-response criticism. Watching a film heavily qualifies the quest for the author's intention. The experience of watching makes it clear that whatever the director intended, this is not all that the film becomes. Space is opened up for examining how a film works in its interaction with the viewer.²

Most people understand this anecdotally. Some people are deeply moved by a particular film and others find the same one to be overly melodramatic. Certain movies depicting the graphic violence of war can be viewed easily by some, but others, based upon personal history, taste, or their visual threshold of pain, simply can't stomach them. Film-going may frequently be a communal event, but film-watching is often a personal one.

When Disney released *Aladdin*, most viewers saw it as nothing more than a family-friendly animated musical. But others saw it as a cultural and historical breakthrough for the ubiquitously marketed company. With a starring cast free from Caucasians, Disney had broken its twenty-five-year slump. It had been a quarter of a century since they had brought the young, affable Mowgli to the screen in *The Jungle Book*, and even then he was only part of a human-animal ensemble

cast. Ironically, other film-goers took great offense at *Aladdin*, noting Disney's stereotyping and ethnic insensitivity as seen in the caricatured facial features of the Arabic villains and the anglicized voices and appearance of Aladdin and Princess Jasmine.

Or, take *Star Wars*. Meant to be a science-fiction thriller, this culturally significant film has spawned numerous interpretations ranging from the political, the mythic, and ethnographic to everything in between. A smaller, albeit more dedicated, set of interpreters have even taken this film series so seriously that they have embraced the Jedi's ways as viable, non-theistic religious practice. Undoubtedly, there are those who claim to practice Jediism only as a joke, a protest thought to undermine the gravity of religious practice and affiliation. However, for those who are sincere about this film-inspired philosophy, they have fused Eastern mysticism, pop-culture and cinema into a new spiritual concoction.

These are only a few examples to underscore that the percipient, whether she is an engaged viewer or reader, is critical in the interpretive process. This "space" that Marsh suggests is precisely what Merold Westphal has questioned when discussing textual hermeneutics. He asks:

Might not the meaning(s) of a text be coproduced by author and reader, the product of their interaction? Might not both contribute to the determinacy of meaning without requiring that it be absolutely determinate? ³

And regarding the interpretive boundaries between author and percipient, Westphal has concluded, "...if the reader also plays a role, these boundaries will be sufficiently generous that a given text might legitimately mean somewhat different things to different people in different circumstances."⁴

THE EDITORIAL WORK OF THE DIRECTOR

It is here where the work of the late Gilles Deleuze may add yet another layer to the discussion. First published in France in 1983, his book, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, stands as a testament to the interrelated nature of film and philosophy. Deleuze sought to plumb the depths of movement within the cinematic medium. His insights came at a time before CGI and digital cinema, so his impressions are aligned more with classical filmmaking and production. However, his philosophical assessment of what would today be considered archaic technology need not put his writing on the cutting room floor. Rather, Deleuze's two books on cinema remain a challenge for those who work in any form of film making, be it classic or contemporary.

Though his philosophical work on film is most concerned with time and movement, Deleuze also gave consideration to the editing process, noting that:

The set cannot divide into parts without qualitatively changing each time: it is neither divisible nor indivisible, but ‘dividual’ [*dividuel*]...the cinematographic image is always dividual. This is because, in the final analysis, the screen, as the frame of frames, gives a common standard of measurement to things which do not have one- long shots of countryside and close-ups of the face, an astronomical system and a single drop of water- parts which do not have the same denominator of distance, relief or light. In all these senses the frame ensures a deterritorialisation of the image.⁵

Alain Badiou offers a similar sentiment:

A film operates through what it withdraws from the visible. The image is first cut from the visible. Movement is held up, suspended, inverted, arrested. Cutting is more essential than presence- not only through the effect of editing, but already, from the start, both by framing and by the controlled purge of the visible.⁶

Here, Deleuze and Badiou are addressing not only the work of the editor but also the role of the director in framing certain shots for the viewer. We see what the director and editor intend for us to see. Matters are only complicated when we also consider that in addition to directorial framing and editorial splicing, the

viewer also performs such acts when engaging film. Deleuze addresses such self-imposed editing, proposing that:

We perceive the thing, minus that which does not interest us as a function of our needs. By need or interest we mean the lines and points that we retain from the thing as a function of our receptive facet, and the actions that we select as a function of the delayed reactions of which we are capable. Which is a way of defining the first material moment of subjectivity: it is subtractive. It subtracts from the thing whatever does not interest it.⁷

A metaphorical reading of Deleuze, here, might suggest that the world in which we live has certain constraints, some of which are inherent and others which are imposed. It is both ordered and structured. Yet, within this structure there is freedom for its inhabitants, freedom to engage or disengage, freedom to jump in or sit out. It is this selective, visual framing and editing which is partially echoed in the work of James Elkins, who has concluded that we, as viewers, do not focus on anything which isn't connected in some way with our own desires and actions.⁸ Put simply, we freely engage and exclude in every facet of our lives, hermeneutics being no exception. Our lives, philosophically and practically, are not like a film whose coercive director incessantly imposes his or her perspective on audiences. We have, as Deleuze has considered, the ability to let our eyes roam within the

structure and confines that the director and editor pre-determine we see. There is freedom inside the guard-rails.

Unless one is dealing with an experimental film (I am thinking of one particular short film that had been shot with multiple cameras to achieve a 360-degree perspective, thus allowing a standing audience to freely rotate and watch what they desired), films are structured in such a way that audiences are faced with what the director wants them to see. Viewers aren't privy to what is happening out of frame or what the director deems superfluous. Frankly, we are accustomed to this. If we see a boom mike sloppily fall into frame we are reminded that there is a world outside of what we are supposed to see. Not only is continuity ruptured and the movie magic tarnished, but we are now aware that the film is just as "this-worldly" as the theatre in which we are sitting. The frame is supposed to bring us into a cinematic world where the cares of this life and the film crew are forgotten.

In the biblical narrative, I understand that despite having lived roughly thirty-three years, the life of Jesus was redacted amongst all four Gospel writers to roughly sixty days combined. That means there is a lot missing from the Jesus story. But being incomplete is not the same as being insufficient. Without having a detailed, biographical account of Christ for us to read, we still have enough to know about his work, his words and his character. We may want additional details, but John and the Synoptics only included what they wanted us to see. And yet, within any Biblical narrative, readers can choose to view the grand story or they

can dissect a given passage linguistically, culturally, theologically, etc. They can focus on a primary character or a tangential one. With the frame they have been given, readers are still treated to a seemingly inexhaustible well, for there are a thousand sermons in every verse.

Though editorial choices will undoubtedly set the table for the audience, it is not the job of the editor to force feed those at the cinematic table. This overly controlling proclivity amongst some film makers is a vocational pet peeve of famed film editor, Walter Murch. Writing to fledgling editors, he cautions, “Your job is to anticipate, partly to control the thought processes of the audience. To give them what they want and/or what they need just before they have to ‘ask’ for it- to be surprising yet self-evident at the same time.”⁹ He warns, “If you are too far behind or ahead of them, you create problems, but if you are right with them, leading them ever so slightly, the flow of events feels natural and exciting at the same time.”¹⁰

In a personal letter written to the now-deceased film-critic, Roger Ebert, Murch noted why he believed 3-D films were ultimately destined for failure. While his primary arguments against this technology were biologically based, he also stated that, “3D films remind the audience that they are in a certain ‘perspective’ relationship to the image.”¹¹

As an editor, Murch is far more at home with the audience’s constrained freedom than he is with their manipulation. He seems uncomfortable with forcing people to see exactly what the editor mandates them to see. He likens such

cinematic coercion to a tour guide who points out every possible detail and fact about an area without letting people pause, reflect, or allow their imagination to meander a bit.¹² Essentially, one can never forget the human element. Forcing one particular perspective, be it on the movie theatre screen or in a philosophy class, is usually met with resistance. After all, people would rather walk a mile freely than be forced to take one step.

Deleuze and Murch each remind us not of the *primacy*, but of the *participation* of the viewer. If we want to gaze at the beauty of Grace Kelly in the closing scene of *Rear Window*, that is perfectly acceptable. But if we want to look at the blurry background and review L. B. Jefferies' liquor selection on the cabinet behind her, or turn our attention to the foreground where we see what sort of jewelry she's wearing, these are our prerogatives as participatory viewers. We may not be able to interact with that which is outside the director's frame, but there is freedom within the limited space we've been afforded to engage on multiple levels. It goes for Hitchcock, and it goes for Scripture. As the poet, Vachel Lindsay, wrote of the cinema nearly a century ago: "We in the audience are privileged characters."¹³

To expand upon this thought, if the viewer truly has constrained freedom, does this not suggest that every individual may, based upon their own personal history, have slightly different interpretations about any given text? If Scripture functions like the man in the Kuleshov Effect, are multiple interpretations to be expected or even encouraged based upon the cultures, theological backgrounds, and

denominational affiliations of the interpreters? James K. A. Smith might think so.

Explaining his prelapsarian, creational hermeneutic, he has written:

The hermeneutical structure of creation is good; it produces goods: a plurality of interpretations and a diversity of readings. The sin of Babel was its quest for unity- one interpretation, one reading, one people- which was an abandonment of creational diversity and plurality in favor of exclusion and violence;...Plurality in interpretation is not the original sin; it is, on the contrary, the original goodness of creation...¹⁴

In other words, theologians who have traditionally viewed hermeneutics as a consequence of the fall (a postlapsarian approach), have often failed to consider that multiple interpretations in communication may have been God's desire from the beginning. Smith concludes that the Fall did not create the need for hermeneutics because people somehow lost the immediacy of understanding in their communication; rather, immediacy was never a facet of humanity. We were born to dialogue and interpret; the fall affected yet never fully corrupted that.¹⁵ Consequently, Smith is arguing for the goodness and benefit of distinct voices in the life of the Church because that was a generous gift given at creation to those bearing the *imago Dei*. To be sure, there are certain interpretive restraints ("cactus"

doesn't mean "table"), but it is the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that indelibly mark Smith's vibrant, Pentecostal/Reformed ecclesiology.¹⁶

Such a communitarian hermeneutic, one that lends an ear to the voice of the other, is amplified in the interpretive methodology of A.K.M. Adam, an approach he terms *differential hermeneutics*. He frames it this way:

Instead of supposing that the nature of textuality involves a hermeneutical trinity of author, text, and reader such that all readers must strive to articulate an author's intentional meaning in the text, practitioners of differential hermeneutics observe that the act of offering an interpretation involves not only the author and the text, but also one's interpretive colleagues and the audience of the interpretation. Hence, interpreters must devise interpretations that are accountable not only to text and author, but also to rival interpreters and audiences.¹⁷

But do Smith's creational hermeneutic or Adam's differential hermeneutic find sympathetic interlocutors in the editorial work of Kuleshov and Murch? The answer may not be as clear-cut as one would like. Kuleshov (as author) ingeniously orchestrated his desired response from the audience (as readers) in his film (as text). In this respect, there was one, true interpretation: the author's intention, not the

multiplicity of options from the percipients. Hence, the audience received the communication he wanted them to have throughout the montage.

On the other hand, might we propose that while Kuleshov's intention was for coherent unanimity of interpretation, there may have been various meanings ascribed to each of his cinematic pericopes that were unforeseen? This would not dismantle the "one meaning/multiple application" approach embraced by many traditional Evangelical interpreters. It would simply state that given the limited contextual information presented to the viewers, there was one primary interpretation (which may or may not have various layers).

To this explanation, we turn to Kevin Vanhoozer who suggests:

...neither interpreters nor hermeneutics should be prolific. The reader is not the begetter of meaning but rather a wet nurse who nurtures a discourse not of her own making. The text is a child of authorial discourse yet, precisely as begotten by authors, it can grow. As Gadamer says, 'only the performance brings out everything that is in the play'...Interpreters who discern previously unseen meaning potential in the text are not the begetters of this meaning but its witnesses.¹⁸

Written from what some might consider a more traditionally-centered Evangelical framework, Vanhoozer originally put forth his interpretive theory of

“Pentecostal Plurality” in his seminal work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Pentecostal Plurality maintains that the one true interpretation of the Text is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods, contexts of reading, and interpretive communities, affirming that: “The Word remains the interpretive norm, but no one culture or interpretive scheme is sufficient to exhaust its meaning, much less its significance.”¹⁹

For Vanhoozer, Scripture is God’s constructed communication, and as such, ought to be received and interpreted in light of the amount of information given. If certain passages are contextually ambiguous, there is more permissible liberty of interpretation provided the hermeneutical methodology does not violate or radically alter the perspicuity of Scripture as a whole. Therefore, the more contextual, cultural and linguistic information one has in any given passage, the more confidence (not objective certainty) one can have that their interpretive decisions are what the author sought to communicate.

It must be stated emphatically that Vanhoozer’s insistence on authorial intent does not negate the participatory work of the reader, but requires humility on their part to acknowledge that they are not omniscient interpreters. But it goes beyond this. The telos of hermeneutics is to embody the Word, to make it flesh, so to speak. His recent work, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, likens the theological task to theatre where we all must participate in the grand drama of God’s revealed Word. Theology, and therefore, hermeneutics,

cannot remain a sterilized and sanitized endeavor fit only for those who want to know how much of the angelic host can dance on the top of an iPad.

Theological hermeneutics must lead the reader to action, to embodiment, to performance. Vanhoozer understands the authority of the Text and the reader's disadvantage of distancing, but after all of the interpretive work has been done in humility, he believes it still must lead readers somewhere, and that somewhere is the stage of the world. As Kuleshov and Murch harnessed the power of the editing room to generate (not manipulate) a response from their viewers, a theological hermeneutics could claim that God has used the soteriological narrative throughout Scripture to form, inform, conform and transform His readers. I think of Alain Badiou's comment, "I write about film because *it has produced some effect on me.*"²⁰ Kuleshov and Murch may have used it for emotional effect, but believers can hold that God has constructively edited His work to evoke a far more serious response, one which requires us to change our minds, change our behavior, and then change our world.

EISENSTEIN AND EDITORIAL COLLISION

An additional voice, one whose work came a generation before Murch, is Russian filmmaker and theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, who is considered by many in the field of cinema to be the Father of montage. Spanning roughly twenty years, his essays

on aesthetics and the cinematic process were collected in his posthumous book, *Film Form*, which, along with its companion volume, *The Film Sense*, remain two of the industry's standard texts on film theory. Although he only completed six films before his untimely death in 1948, Eisenstein's work is regarded as a masterful assemblage of memorable editing and Soviet propaganda.

At the age of 21, Lev Kuleshov had opened his own film workshop in 1920, providing a place where he could teach courses and run experiments in film montage. Pudovkin, seven years his teacher's senior, attended classes as did Sergei Eisenstein. But Eisenstein had different views of montage than Kuleshov, and after a few brief months, they parted ways.²¹ To distill the difference down, Eisenstein's approach to editing and montage was more aggressive whereas Kuleshov's was processional.

Kuleshov would build shot by shot, brick by brick, constructing a narrative that would be logically concluded by the audience. Eisenstein found this approach to montage "pernicious"²² for it overruled dialectical development. Montage should be regarded as "the most powerful compositional means of telling a story" he would later write.²³ It is the "...basic (and only) means that has brought the cinema to such a powerfully affective strength,"²⁴ and can never be reduced to splicing pieces of film together as "one would mix ready-made recipes for medicine, or pickle cucumbers, or preserve plums, or ferment apples and cranberries together."²⁵

Eisenstein believed that montage was achieved not through juxtaposed images, but through what he termed *collision*; collision being the “conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other.”²⁶ “Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots— shots even opposite to one another: the ‘dramatic principle’” he would emphatically write.²⁷ To state it another way, Kuleshov approached montage like the linking of pieces together as in a chain, and these links were used to *expound* an idea. Eisenstein’s view, on the other hand, was that when two given factors collide, a concept *arises*.²⁸ Montage is an act of conflict²⁹ and produces impressions relative to the percipient. Where Kuleshov began with the mind of the filmmaker being imposed on the audience, Eisenstein sought more interpretive involvement from them.

Eisenstein looked back to the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics in support of his filmic theory of collision. He wrote:

The combination of two hieroglyphs...were not regarded as their sum, but as their product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree; each separately, corresponds to an *object*, to a fact, but their combination corresponds to a *concept*.³⁰

By way of example, a symbol of a dog alongside a picture of a mouth indicates barking. A mouth pictured by a child indicates screaming. And that same

mouth juxtaposed with a bird symbolizes singing. Such is the cinematic experience, where filmmakers “[combine] shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content— into *intellectual* contexts and series.”³¹ Ultimately, Eisenstein argued that the degree of incongruence found in individual pictures determines the intensity of impression experienced by the audience.³² The greater the incongruence, the greater the collision; and the greater the collision, the greater the impression which will be left on the percipient.

While this seems curiously similar to the view espoused by Kuleshov, the *nus* remains discernibly different. Kuleshov’s vision of montage often restricted the viewer’s interpretive options by whittling them down to somewhat confining alternatives: the unnamed man in each successive vignette in the Kuleshov Effect was undoubtedly hungry, then grieved, and then paternally proud. Even if one had alternative interpretations, the vast majority of viewers would have made the hermeneutical assessment Kuleshov had wanted them to.

But Eisenstein’s montage, forged in conflict, was often deeply arresting, more evocative for the percipient. His editing style made an emotional connection with people, and because peoples’ backgrounds vary and their emotional states are dynamic, audiences had more room to interpretively breathe. It wasn’t that he didn’t want viewers to draw certain conclusions, but the intentional juxtaposition of incongruous images allowed their interpretations to be more spacious than Kuleshov would permit.

This methodology can again be seen in the narrative of Scripture. One might consider Judas and a kiss, Satan and the throne room of God, Haman constructing the gallows, or the sexual encounter between Lot and his two daughters as examples of disruptive collision. The same could be said for Jesus' parabolic teaching on the Kingdom of God. After all, a mustard seed, a hidden pearl, and a prodigal son have little in common with God's Kingdom at first blush. But while the abrasive pairing of anomalous images is initially meant to startle, it also has a way of concretizing truth in our minds that will not likely be forgotten. To extend the analogy further, the visual parables of cinema accomplish far more than providing viewers with an indexical storyline. Like their verbal counterparts, film's parabolic nature can allow it to conterminously cut and heal, dismantle and construct. And when that is done well, it usually bypasses the front door and brings truth in through the side window.

Hence, montage requires both editorial savvy and a psychological understanding of humanity. Eisenstein was not interested in an easy-bake recipe that anyone could follow to achieve the same cinematic meal; he sought to create a culinary delight on the screen that would combine an unforgettable, exotic mix of unexpected ingredients. But while the science of editing and the art of understanding the human psyche are certainly necessary elements in filmmaking, there might also be a third element worth inclusion.

HERMENEUTICS AND THE SYMBOLIC

Louis Dupré has rightly argued that a deep conversance between symbol, sign and signifier plays a central role in the life of the sacred. It would be difficult to imagine where this would apply more acutely than the realm of the visual arts. Here, the relationship between the symbolic, the sign and the signifier can give rise to deeper scrutiny and theological reflection. Such reflection is a necessary part of the hermeneutical process, for the symbolic awakens things beyond what is apparent, thus adding layers to one's interpretive conclusions. And indeed, the most profound visual artwork (for our purposes, film) is not ephemeral; it is illustrative of man's enduring commitments and teleological purposes.

So what relationship does this triumvirate share? Dupré begins in a cursory fashion by asserting, "All symbols are signs, and signs are forms which refer to something that is not directly given. Yet signs may merely *point* to the signified or they may *represent* it." He suggests that symbols are the exclusive property of man; they have embedded meaning, allowing them to *articulate* the signified rather than merely *announcing* it. We who perceive (percipients) are not directly referred to a signified object through symbols. Rather, the symbol represents it in a double sense: by making the signified present, and by taking the place of the signified object.³³

Signs, therefore, become more restrictive than symbols in the sense that they are directly tied to the signified. Symbols are not only more ambiguous, but they, by their very nature, leave the door open for additional insights into the signified. While a sign leaves the signified (referent) unchanged, symbols almost require an alteration (what Dupré calls a “fundamental transmutation”) of the signified in the mind of the percipient. Hence, symbols, as opposed to signs, contain a surplus of meaning.³⁴ In what could be viewed as a form of Ricoeurian hermeneutics, Dupré notes that symbols do more than express sentiment or point to something beyond themselves. They actually *produce* the signified. Put simply, the symbol signifies, expresses, *and realizes*.³⁵

And yet for as open-ended as they can be, symbols, especially those religious in nature, fail to disclose the nature of what they signify. As Dupré acknowledges, they “conceal more than they reveal.”³⁶ This intentional evasiveness lies at the heart of symbol. Like Jesus’ parables which were given so the masses could not quite perceive the essence of His teaching on the Kingdom (Mk.4:10-12), symbols restrict certain access to the referent’s true nature. But even if they are restrictive in a teleological sense, they still allow percipients to immerse themselves into a larger world, to become open to imaging the Divine in alternative ways.

This evasiveness, this “aesthetic deficiency” as David Bentley Hart calls it,³⁷ this inability we have to capture and reify God through rhetoric, picture, or

discourse is what may conversely deepen our desire to know God. Images, whether mental, linguistic or filmic still produce an “epistemological yield of analogy,”³⁸ but they will always leave something to be desired. Creation is beautiful but its iterative proclamation of God’s glory leaves us hungering for more.

Dupré’s aesthetic hermeneutic, however, is not as tightly wound as Hart’s, who agrees that symbols produce fruit, but not a complete harvest. For Dupré, authentic symbols “can never be pinned down to a one-to-one meaning as discursive concept. Nor does the symbol ever relate to its referent by a single-bond of purpose or causality.”³⁹ The imagination of man, therefore, is left to run the course. His alternative to stale exegesis is to recognize that with “...the polyvalence of its symbols, the imagination is able to surpass not only what is directly given but even what can be rationally expressed.”⁴⁰ Perhaps this is one of the things that Badiou was driving at when he wrote, “At the cinema, as in Plato, genuine ideas are mixtures. Every attempt at univocity signals the defeat of the poetic.”⁴¹

This resonates well with the cinematic worldview of Russian director, Andrei Tarkovsky. Gerard Loughlin’s helpful article, “Within the Image: Film as Icon” makes the case that Tarkovsky, under the worldview of Russian Orthodoxy, never believed his craft contained symbolic or metaphorical images because those things serve as substitutes, as signs pointing to something else, rather than leading the viewer inward. In other words, the profoundest of film ought to be viewed

iconographically. It seems that Dupré's theory of fundamental transmutation has found a kindred spirit in Tarkovsky's view of film as icon. As Loughlin notes:

The divine appearing is dependent, codependent, on those who look; but their looking is called forth by that which they are seeking to see. And this circulating gaze finds its parallel in the compelled look of the cinema audience, each individual of which will see the film differently.⁴²

He continues:

...by withholding images from the audience, Tarkovsky obliges his viewers to become coproducers of the film image, the cinematic vision, 'on par with the artist in their perception of the film.' This is a cinema of 'reciprocity' in which the audience comes to share with the author in the 'misery and joy of bringing an image into being.' An audience has to want to see what Tarkovsky has shown in order for it to come into view, just as the devout must pray before the icon if they are to see its wonders, if they are to catch sight of its showing.⁴³

Dupré's fundamental transmutation celebrates the symbiotic impact that the clay has on the potter. The free interplay between symbol, signified and percipient

begs more questions than provides answers, and in many respects, that is the way he likes it. But in the end, might we run the risk of creating God in our own image? Call it symbolism or filmic iconography, this is the double-edged sword which both edifies and reifies. Faith without symbol is impoverished, but an unrestrained multiplicity of meanings derived from those symbols doesn't necessarily enrich the faith either. In describing this potentially problematic interplay, Edgar McKnight has noted that employing reader-response criticism does not ignore the author or authorial intent, but believes it to be "only a penultimate strategy" in the hermeneutical endeavor.⁴⁴

For some Christian exegetes, there is concern that the reader, as co-pilot, will take over the wheel in the interpretive cock-pit. When the camel of subjectivity gets into the hermeneutical tent, the fear is that there is no way to stop interpretive destruction from taking place; subjectivity and spit will happen. But is hermeneutical anarchy inevitable?

Merold Westphal isn't convinced that this has to be the case. Here are just two of his mitigating remarks meant to talk such tempered exegetes off the high-rise window sill: "Interpretations must be supported by evidence from the text...we [are not] dealing with authorial irrelevance."⁴⁵ "Does this mean that anything goes, that a text can mean anything whatever any audience takes it to mean? Hardly!"⁴⁶

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS: ALL THE WORLD IS A STAGE

Westphal's hermeneutic might be likened to Eisenstein's theory of montage and audience reception. Viewers are not (or at least shouldn't be) passive spectators. Scripture is meant to arrest us where we are, and where we are is distinct for each believer. Like Vanhoozer, Westphal uses a theatrical illustration to make his point. But where Vanhoozer is addressing the reader's responsibility to put into practice the dramatic narrative of Scripture on the world's stage, Westphal is focused on the act of interpretation itself.

Using Gadamer as a philosophical muse, Westphal speaks of hermeneutics in terms of performance. Some actors (interpreters) will undoubtedly get the performance (interpretation) wrong; there is nothing salvageable about what they've done. Others may get all the words right, but deliver them so poorly that you could say their performance was right but regrettable. Still, other performances are judged by the most experienced and knowledgeable critics to be magnificent. He writes:

The important point here is obvious. There will be a plurality of performances that will fall into this third category, each *different* from the others although they are presentations of the *same* work...Because interpretation is always also productive, there will be a variety of 'correct'

interpretations that differ from one another, for example [Laurence] Olivier's Hamlet and Kenneth Branagh's...⁴⁷

Olivier and Branagh are, of course, different actors with different upbringing who were trained at different schools and who worked at different times. Though each brought his own particular interpretive strengths to the role of Hamlet, one must question how far Westphal's performative example can be pushed. Is it truly analogous or simply illustrative of the process? Olivier's broodiness and Branagh's frightful movements are indeed interpretive decisions made by each actor, but would we go so far to say their distinct approach to their character has the same weight or implications as doctrinal differences do amongst theologians running across denominational lines? After all, thespians and theologians are not reading from the same script. Westphal, however, rightly points out that humility, dialogue, and community remain baselines in our interpretations, and these things are indeed necessary. In fact, I appreciate him citing the real-world example of the sincere, albeit ecumenical, friendship between Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright.

But Westphal's communitarian hermeneutic, for all that it has to commend it, spends the right amount of time on methodology and not quite enough on the implications to real-world interpretive differences. How can we know when (or if) anyone has "gone too far"? Is it a bad performance, or a brilliant adaptation for a new generation (think of Baz Luhrmann's re-envisioned setting for *Romeo and*

Juliet)? Has the Church misread passages for decades, or are “new” interpretations only the novel inclinations of the well-meaning, yet biblically-illiterate? One only has to consider the cacophonous voices in the Church today regarding the inclusion of homosexual couples into membership for us to realize that the divide can be wide and the interpretive stakes can be high.

Yet, where Westphal begins, Vanhoozer ends. Vanhoozer’s performative hermeneutic focuses not on the process of interpretation as much as its product. Yes, there will be certain interpretive differences amongst readers, just as many viewers will take something different away from the same film they have watched together. And though for Vanhoozer percipients do not co-produce the meaning of a given text, they certainly are to put into performative practice the authorial intent of the director. Each performance may look a little different, depending on whether the stage is set amongst an indigenous people group in South America or an urban hotspot in Chicago. Hence, the performance of those in the inspired Text is the very narrative that we seek to embody today. It has been framed and edited for our information, formation, conformation and transformation. Our constrained freedom ought to produce a performance that not only honors directorial intent but also contextualizes the Script to our ever-changing stage.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the editorial process is really threefold. First, the director frames the shot. The world beyond this framing is bypassed and blocked, attenuating the director's vision for what should or should not be seen. Second, the formal editor selects, splices and then sequences these shots in post-production. They choose, ultimately with the director's consent, how best to juxtapose these images into a coherent narrative that will produce the director's desired effect. And third, the viewer becomes, in a way, the final editor. Will their editorial choices be aligned with the director's? When moved by a particular film, will they juxtapose the signs and symbols into their own lives, or edit them out completely?

For the Christian theologian and interpreter, the same editorial triumvirate is apparent. God as the grand Storyteller scripted people and their stories into existence. Biblical authors, governed by the overarching vision of God, redacted and edited those particular stories and scenes into a consistent narrative. Today, readers interface with this doxological and soteriological narrative and bring their own personal history and worldview to the Text. Those like Vanhoozer advance their hermeneutic in the spirit of Kuleshov, harnessing the percipient's options to a pre-determined, pre-authorized interpretation. Others, like Adam, relish the postmodern interplay between text and reader, much the same way that Eisenstein's editorial style sought collaboration between film and viewer.

Yet, the text remains the text no matter how one engages it. A constrained or collaborative approach does not alter the words, only their potential meaning for the reader. Examining different editorial styles in film does not settle the question regarding which interpretive method is correct, but it does shine a necessary light on the epistemological and anthropological assumptions we all have when coming to a sacred text like Scripture. The process of making films, especially in the editorial stage, is a heuristic ally to Christian theology, an unexpected interlocutor reminding us of our hermeneutical presuppositions and limitations.

No matter which pathway one chooses to enter the hermeneutical circle, once inside, does that individual accept the obvious, search out the symbolic, and embody what they believe the narrative requires of them? Interpretive presuppositions aside, will they put into practice what they have concluded is the truth? To rephrase Badiou, “Will we live Scripture because it has produced some effect on us?” These final questions point to the telos of hermeneutics, the place where we as individuals-in-community move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy.

¹ Kuleshov, Lev. 1974. *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov (Translated and Edited with an Introduction by Ronald Levaco)*. Berkley: University of California Press, p.8.

² Marsh, Clive. 2004. *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology*. London: Paternoster, p.36.

³ Westphal, Merold. 2009. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, p.54.

⁴ Westphal, p.54.

⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.14-15.

⁶ Badiou, Alain. 2013. *Cinema*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, p.88.

⁷ Deleuze, p.63

⁸ Elkins, James. 1996. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p.22.

⁹ Murch, Walter. 2001. *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing, 2nd Ed*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, p.69.

¹⁰ Murch, p.69.

¹¹ Ebert, Roger. 2011. *Why 3D Doesn't Work and Never Will. Case Closed*. January 23. Accessed July 14, 2015. rogerebert.com.

¹² Murch, p.16.

¹³ Lindsay, Vachel. 1915 (2000 reprint). *The Art of the Moving Picture*. New York: The Modern Library, p.31.

¹⁴ Smith, James K. A. 2000. *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, p.33.

¹⁵ Smith, p.148.

¹⁶ Smith, pp.183-184.

¹⁷ Adam, A. K. M. 2006. *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp.89-90.

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, Kevin. 2006. "Four Theological Faces of Biblical Interpretation." In *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, by Stephen Fowl, Kevin Vanhoozer, Francis Watson A. K. M. Adam, 131-142. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp.141-142.

¹⁹ Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 1998. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p.419.

²⁰ Badiou, p.20, *italics mine*.

²¹ Kuleshov, p.8.

²² Eisenstein, Sergei. 1949. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (Edited and Translated by Jay Leyda). New York: Barcourt Brace & Company, p.36.

- ²³ Eisenstein, p.111.
- ²⁴ Eisenstein, p.257.
- ²⁵ Eisenstein, p.111.
- ²⁶ Eisenstein, p.37.
- ²⁷ Eisenstein, p.49.
- ²⁸ Eisenstein, p.37, *italics his*.
- ²⁹ Eisenstein, p.38.
- ³⁰ Eisenstein, pp.29-30.
- ³¹ Eisenstein, p.30.
- ³² Eisenstein, p.50.
- ³³ Dupré, Louis. 2000. *Symbols of the Sacred*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p.1.
- ³⁴ Dupré, pp.3, 8.
- ³⁵ Dupré, p.24, *italics his*.
- ³⁶ Dupré, p.6.
- ³⁷ Hart, David Bentley. 2003. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p.315.
- ³⁸ Hart, p.316.
- ³⁹ Dupré, p.8.
- ⁴⁰ Dupré, p.8.
- ⁴¹ Badiou, p.91.
- ⁴² Loughlin, Gerard. 2007. "Within the Image: Film as Icon." In *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, by Ed. Robert K. Johnston, 287-303. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, p.300.
- ⁴³ Loughlin, pp.300-301.
- ⁴⁴ McKnight, Edgar. 1999. "Reader-Response Criticism." In *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application, Revised and Expanded*, by Editors Steven L. McKenzie & Stephen R. Haynes, 230-252. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p.248.

⁴⁵ Westphal, p.51.

⁴⁶ Westphal, p.67.

⁴⁷ Westphal, p.105.

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