

## “The End of Justice in Film”

### I. Eschatological Justice and Filmmaking

Read Isaiah 65:17-25. "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. [ . . . ] No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. [ . . . ] The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. (Verses 20, 22, 25)

Rev 21:1-5a: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

In a world like ours, rift with cultural genocide, racial hatred, class divisions, and sexual abuse, what can we confidently hope for? And in what do we hope? Christianity holds out the promise of a better future, a time where perfect personal and social harmony and justice are carried out under the benevolent oversight of our Heavenly Father. It teaches that the *eschaton*, or the end of all things, is fulfilled in Christ's kingdom, in the perfect peace, or better said, the perfect *shalom* of God. It prophesies that our present disruption and decay will be revitalized by the work of the Spirit into complete newness. Furthermore, Christ has set up his Church as an (albeit fallible) testimony to that future harmony and perfection. He has begun in us now what will be completely revealed only in the New Heaven and New Earth.

Because of such a vision and hope, Christianity respects the work of humanity for social justice, racial and ethnic peace-making, and the healing of human structures and persons. Because God intends for the world to be healed of its ancient hatreds and divisions, we are to be a firstfruits, a sign of what God in Christ has promised us. This is not to say that any political or cultural work can bring in God's kingdom, for no human system can replicate what God alone by his Spirit can work, yet nonetheless we are to work in lieu of that prophesied time. We are to continually hope, and hope requires action.

Cinema is often animated by the themes of protest and justice. Works such as Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D.*, or *Shoeshine* sensitively examine the lives of the poor and abandoned, forcing us to ask questions not just about their individual lives, but also the social evils that plague their existences. Others such as Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* use humor to explore similar issues, the troubles of prison, the modern industrial plant, or family life and poverty. Some films take us into the more personal elements of these struggles, but they are still set against conditions that call for reform and justice. Rene Clement's lyrical *Forbidden Games* examine the struggle of two children to come to terms with the death and abuse in occupied rural France in WWII. Alaim Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* examines the challenges and tragedy of an interracial affair between a French woman and a Japanese man in light of the bombing of Hiroshima. Robert Bresson's *L'argent* explores the disturbing and violent impact of the culture of 1980s greed on one man and his family. The Christian hope of the *eschaton* can effectively interact with such cinema, seeking to refine our understanding and practice. De Sica, for instance, can teach Christians how to better cross divisions of class and color by seeing the humanity of those on the

“other side,” as well as by reforming unjust laws. Bresson and Chaplin might cause us to ask what the spiritual cost is to people in an economy that bases self-worth on what one owns.

+ + + + +

## II. The Cultural Other and Global Film

II Cor 5:17: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Jn 17:15-19: My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

When social, ethical, cultural, or literary critics use the term "Other" they are thinking about the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone "Other," persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images. It also extends to political decisions and cultural practices. In the recent past of the United States, Anglo-Americans made African-Americans into cultural Others through the use of minstrel shows in blackface, popular figures like Sambo and Aunt Jemima, and separatist policies like the Jim Crow laws. Similar practices can be traced in practically (if not) every culture in the globe. The recent genocidal wars in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, as do the continued struggles in Ireland and Israel, remind us that Othering is an instrument of terror that results in multi-generational hatred and violence.

Films, being part of the fallen world, play a part in Othering. One only needs to look at representations of blackness in works like the blackface scenes in *Swing Time* or the infamous *The Birth of a Nation* that valorizes the Klu Klux Klan, or the numerous female roles in films that treat women as objects for lust and objectification to realize that cinematic representations of race and gender influence how others are perceived. Yet they can also be offered to counter such notions, e.g., John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* or Lee Isaac Chung's *Munyangabo*, a study of the Rwanda genocide acted by Rwandans themselves. Tragically, artistic works with no intent to oppress or marginalize another group can be misappropriated to such ends--even scripture.

The practice of generalizing representation is not in and of itself evil. Indeed, it is part of the human process of thinking. This is how mathematical theorems are constructed, after all. And perhaps because of this pattern, when such normal human methods and perceptions are married to cultural and gender differences, the resulting behaviors are particularly hard to eradicate. We find ourselves passing on the stereotypes and judgments of our parents' generation to our children. This becomes particularly insidious in the presence of multi-generational racism and hatred.

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, coming from just such an environment, has written on the particular "Catholic" (or universal) personality that Christianity affords its followers. The Church, in Christian teaching, will be made up of every *ethnoi*, every identity group. In this sense, Christianity practices what Volf calls "exclusion and embrace." It has its own particular identity, yet it also is inclusive of all -- "whosoever will may come." Volf suggests that our identity in Christ then transcends those of our particular cultural commitments without necessarily forgetting them. We are, as Jesus prayed, "in the world but not of it." As such, we are given the opportunity to see beyond our practices of Othering. We are given a space in which to cross boundaries, revise stereotypes, and most important,

forgive past abuses. Too often Christendom has perpetuated the very practices that God's embrace seeks to overcome. Indeed, Volf suggests that it is only in a practice of forgiveness, which nonetheless respects justice and judgment, that we can reverse the cycle of false representations.

Christians should participate in calling attention to Othering through literary representation by a balanced critique of cultural context and authorial intentionality:

1. We should seek to understand what the filmmaker sought to suggest, as well as what the result may have been.
2. Equally, we should seek to correct misrepresentations of films. Often, older films which strike us as too stereotypical were actually seeking to reverse injustices.
3. We should celebrate those pictures that expand our understanding of the particular uniqueness of each people, while rejecting those visions that would discourage bridge-building between groups.
4. And we should work to create new representations that point to the forgiveness and justice that God affords all persons.