

## THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF CINEMA: READING FILM WITH THE RULE OF FAITH<sup>1</sup>

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This saying is true, and worthy of full acceptance: people love movies. Given the prominence movies play in the contemporary culture, being conversant with them is a necessary skill for the Christian theologian. According to Craig Detweiler, “The next generation of pastors, teachers, and therapists must not only learn the language of film but also develop the art of interpretation – seeing and hearing what’s happening on big (and small) screens.”<sup>2</sup> One way to do this effectively is to attempt to utilize a kind of “theological interpretation of cinema” which takes cues from the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS). While there have been recent critiques of TIS,<sup>3</sup> as a general approach it has much to offer pastors and theologians. Because Scripture is a theologically rich text, how one interprets this text must also be theologically rich. This applies to theologically rich texts elsewhere. The purpose of this particular paper is sketch

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a reduced and rearranged version of “Hollywood, Geneva, and Athens: Toward A Reformed Philosophy of Film.” (unpublished Th.M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary)

<sup>2</sup> Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 29.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Stanley E. Porter, “What Exactly Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture, and Is It Hermeneutically Robust Enough For The Task to Which It Has Been Appointed?,” in *Horizons In Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honor of Anthony C. Thiselton*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Stanley E. Porter, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Theological Responsibility,” in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 29–50; D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But...,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen, T&T Clark Theology (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

out an approach to theologically interpreting modern movies. In doing so, the general contours of TIS will not be sketched out. Rather a general familiarity with the movement is assumed, in full view of what is said about those who assume.<sup>4</sup> This paper will first offer a theological reading of film in general, and second apply a fourfold theological interpretation to the film *Inception* in particular.

### Background

Historically, a wide variety of Christian approaches to film have existed.<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Reel Spirituality*, Robert Johnston presents a continuum of five different approaches that Christians have typically taken with film.<sup>6</sup> They range from total avoidance all the way to viewing film as a place for divine encounter. In the middle are the postures of caution, dialogue, and appropriation.<sup>7</sup> A recent model proposed by Ted Turnau in his book *Popogetics: Popular Culture In Christian Perspective* helps to appropriate insights from these various approaches. Though mainly concerned with approaching pop culture in general, Turnau's work is particularly helpful in film analysis. He first outlines five unhelpful approaches<sup>8</sup> before proposing five key

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<sup>4</sup> A good entry point that clarifies what theological interpretation is and is not is found in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Theological Interpretation of The Bible?," in *Dictionary For Theological Interpretation of The Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). A full length treatment is found in Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering A Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a brief historical overview, see Brett McCracken, *Gray Matters: Navigating The Space Between Legalism & Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 135-150. The only approach really ruled out is passivity. See Steve Turner, *Popcultured: Thinking Christianly About Style, Media and Entertainment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Robert K Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, 2nd ed., *Engaging Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 55-85.

<sup>7</sup> These five categories roughly correspond to the views of culture in general outlined in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

<sup>8</sup> These are: (1) ignoring the culture, (2) treating it all as dirty and sinful, (3) pretentiously looking down on pop culture, (4) obsessing over images, and (5) uncritically accepting most aspects of pop culture. Ted Turnau, *Popogetics: Popular Culture In Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 83-205.

questions for interpreting a popular-cultural text: (1) What's the story? (2) Where am I (the world of the text)? (3) What's good and true and beautiful about it? (4) What's false and ugly and perverse about it (and how do I subvert that)? (5) How does the gospel apply here?<sup>9</sup> This range of questions allows Turnau to both commend and critique, which also helps him to unite divergent postures within the mainstream of Christian film analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, what Turnau is offering is a step toward a theological interpretation of pop culture.<sup>11</sup> As seen in the questions above, he is utilizing theological aesthetics, story analysis, and gospel connections. His approach could be augmented further by relying on the rule of faith for the interpretation of movies. According to Timothy George, the rule of faith is “the apostolic summary of the Bible’s storyline.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, J. Todd Billings calls it “a summary of the church’s confession about the basic story of the Christian faith, as informed by the Bible.”<sup>13</sup> In his book, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, Joel Green suggests that “coherence with the rule of faith” serves as a criterion of a Christian reading of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> In this context of this paper, I am proposing that this can serve as a criterion of a Christian reading of cinema as well. Since it is certainly not part of this paper to argue that film enjoys a kind of canonical

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 215. He elaborates on each of these and later applies this rubric to a reading of several popular-cultural texts.

<sup>10</sup> I.e. those that are only concerned with what’s wrong about a movie, and those who are overly enamored with how awesome movies are.

<sup>11</sup> Similar in this regard is Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Cultural Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Timothy George, *Reading Scripture With The Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 32.

<sup>13</sup> J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God For The People of God: An Entryway to The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts For Faith and Formation*, Theological Explorations For The Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 98.

significance, the rule of faith is employed as a contrastive tool. In sketching out the plotline of the particular film in question, a Christian reading involves comparing and contrasting the redemptive plotline of the film with the redemptive plotline in Scripture. As one offers a ruled reading of a film, one is engaged in theological interpretation of cinema.

While this reading can take many forms, the example offered below utilizes the fourfold method of interpretation, or the *quadriga*. The purpose of this is to understand the film in multiple senses and read it on several levels. Offering a rich theological reading involves not only sketching out the literal sense of the story, but also the allegorical and anagogical resonances. Perhaps most importantly, it helps recover the “tropological” sense of film. In pulling out the embedded moral premise in every film, one is following in the footsteps of the Reformers who “in their zeal to open the Bible to their congregations, emphasized the immediate personal application of the text. Hermeneutically, the Reformation represented a turn to tropology.”<sup>15</sup> Theologians, pastors, and educators would do well to be able to competently read a current film that may “preach” a valid moral premise. This in turn can be used to further illustrate the truth in the classroom or church service. Demonstrating this kind of cinematic literacy will prove useful in ministering understanding to many modern cultural contexts.

### **Film as Creative Response**

Before reading an individual film theologically, a general theological reading of film helps to set the context. As a first step in this direction, the theological interpreter does well to affirm is the genuine creative artistry of film-making. In *The Liberated Imagination*, Leland Ryken observes that “human creativity is rooted in divine creativity.”<sup>16</sup> This he says, “affirms

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<sup>15</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts*, The Wheaton Literary Series (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989), 65.

human creativity as something good since it is an imitation of one of God's own acts and perfections."<sup>17</sup> He then concludes, "the biblical doctrine of the image of God in people is thus the theological reason why people write literature and paint pictures and compose music."<sup>18</sup> If this is true for those activities individually, it is certainly true for film which is "is a rich combination of storytelling, painting, philosophy, history, and politics wrapped in technology."<sup>19</sup> The creation of film is an avenue of evidence for the truth of the Christian worldview, since it embodies an activity that one would expect given the Christian teaching about man's nature. No other worldview provides an adequate justification for why man delights to create.

In another work, Ryken summarizes the general contours of John Calvin's thought about man's creativity.<sup>20</sup> First, because God is creator "all the arts emanate from Him, and therefore ought to be accounted divine inventions."<sup>21</sup> Second, artistic ability is a gift from God and "whatever ability is possessed by any emanates from only one source, and is conferred by God."<sup>22</sup> Third, artistic ability that people have is evidence of God's image.<sup>23</sup> Fourth, because human beings image a creative God, they are capable of genuine creation.<sup>24</sup> These boundaries set

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Grant Horner, *Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Leland Ryken, "Calvinism and Literature," in *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview*, ed. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 102.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, ed. John Bingham and Charles William Bingham, (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010), 3:291.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3:291-92.

<sup>23</sup> "The many pre-eminent gifts with which the human mind is endowed proclaim that something divine has been engraved upon it." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.15.2. For clarification see Michael S. Horton, "A Shattered Vase: The Tragedy of Sin in Calvin's Thought," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 151-67.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.14.

out by Calvin's thought on the arts keep one from deifying man's creative ability on the one hand, and from denying man has genuine creative ability on the other hand.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the mere act of creation, more could be said about how filmmakers specifically image God in their role. John Frame uses a threefold division to describe how man images God.<sup>26</sup> Frame sees the image of God having a physical, official, and ethical dimension. By being physically present, man is able to image God's attribute of control; by ruling and having dominion in an official aspect (as God's vice regent) he is able to image God's authority; by reflecting God ethically in his knowledge, righteousness, and holiness man is able to image God's presence. One finds a similar threefold division in Calvin in "what is perhaps one of the most distinctive features" of his theology: "the threefold office of Christ as prophet, king, and priest or the so-called *munus triplex*."<sup>27</sup> Relating these to Frame's parsing, Christ as prophet images God's authority by bringing the true word of God; as priest he imaged God's presence by becoming the personal sacrifice for our sin and mediating God's presence to us; as king he images God's control by ruling and reigning.<sup>28</sup>

If Christ himself is the express image of the invisible God, then one way in which God's created images image him may be by imitating Christ in this threefold office. As applied

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<sup>25</sup> Ryken, "Calvinism and Literature." 102-3.

<sup>26</sup> John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg N.J.: P&R, 2006). He is relying on Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999). For more on Frame's triperspectival approach, see *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009). For Frame's own account of the development of his thought, see John Frame and John J. Hughes, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, "The Mediator of the Covenant," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 205-225. 220. Calvin's discussion is in *Institutes*, 2.15.1ff.

<sup>28</sup> See Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*.

to filmmakers, first, they image God's attribute of authority<sup>29</sup> and Christ's office as prophet by revealing images of the divine in their films. Additionally, they attempt to proclaim truth in their films. Second, filmmakers image God's attribute of control<sup>30</sup> and Christ's office as king by creatively constructing a world from their imagination that they then "rule." Sometimes the "ruling" is part of a collaborative team of people, but whether singularly or collectively, the creators of a film world are directly involved in creatively exercising control and ruling over that world. Lastly, filmmakers images God's attribute of presence<sup>31</sup> and Christ's office of priest by both investing themselves personally into their creative efforts and trying to mediate to the people a new way to live. By incarnating images from their own imagination onto the screen, filmmakers are putting their own presence into the final product.

### **Film as Culture's Religion**

In addition to affirming the creative artistry of a film, the moral dimension of film-making may also be affirmed. Rather than focusing on the morality of certain content in various films, the focus will center on the moral messages embedded within movies. As stated above, every film has a moral premise. Because of this, movies can take on a role of religious significance in our culture. In *A Matrix of Meanings*, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor draw a comparison between our pop culture and the Old Testament wisdom literature.<sup>32</sup> A more apt comparison is probably between the collected wisdom of our pop culture and the wisdom

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<sup>29</sup> Or one could say omniscience. One who knows all has the authority to speak the truth about reality.

<sup>30</sup> Or one could say omnipotence.

<sup>31</sup> Or to completely the omni- triad, omnipresence.

<sup>32</sup> "Like the Old Testament writings, pop culture is the collected wisdom of our era. It includes explorations of injustice, songs of sorrow, and tributes to women." Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, ed. William Dyrness and Robert K Johnston, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 11.

literature of the Israel's neighbors.<sup>33</sup> Just as in the ancient Near East the wisdom literature of the surrounding cultures shed light on the beliefs and native religion of Israel's neighbors, contemporary film does much the same for us.<sup>34</sup> For many in our popular culture, movies appear to be the "modern arena of ideas."<sup>35</sup> These ideas, rather than being presented in a paper, or are being presented in story form.<sup>36</sup> As Robert McKee notes, "Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence."<sup>37</sup> Stories in our films today retain much of the function that ancient mythology did for Israel's neighbors in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>38</sup> As Brian Godawa observes, "Since the beginning of time, humankind has used story to convey the meaning and purpose of life," which means that, "In essence, story incarnates the myths and values of a culture with the intent of perpetuating them."<sup>39</sup> In this way, the stories in film can provide a window into what our cultures

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<sup>33</sup> For a survey of the surrounding ancient Near East literature see John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). 43-86. On the similarities in wisdom literature, see 287-312.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to imply that our relationship to our surrounding non-Christian culture is exactly similar to that of Israel in Canaan. Pop culture, despite certain evangelical fears, is not the modern Canaan, and we have not been commanded to slaughter it verbally (by denouncing all of its evils) or non-verbally (by pretending most of it does not exist).

<sup>35</sup> Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment*, 2nd ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 254. This is certainly true to an extent, but it is downstream from where the actual ideas are themselves being formulated. As one critic explains, "The filmmaking process is slow and expensive, so movies always the last idiom to respond to social evolution; the finest films from the seventies were really just manifestation of how art and life had changed in the sixties." Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (New York: Scribner, 2003). 163.

<sup>36</sup> Consider Vanhoozer's take on this: "Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation." Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 50.

<sup>37</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 12.

<sup>38</sup> On mythology being used in this way, see Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*.

<sup>39</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 61.



believes and how it thinks we should live in light of that. The focal point here will be on the moral dimension of film and seeing that as an expression of people's religion.<sup>40</sup>

In his book, *The Moral Premise*, Stanley Williams observes that “a cursory examination will affirm that psychological moral dilemmas are at the heart of every successful story.”<sup>41</sup> He goes on to say that “Good stories tell us something that rings true about our experience as human beings.”<sup>42</sup> From this perspective, “the goal of the storyteller is to take the audience through an emotional and psychological journey that reveals a poignant truth about the human experience.”<sup>43</sup> What this journey reveals about how we should then live is the film's moral premise. It is essentially the practical lesson of a particular story.<sup>44</sup> It has been recognized to some degree by other film critics before Williams, but he is the first to do systematic research to validate the connection between a film's moral premise and its box office success.<sup>45</sup>

Other writers have expressed the idea differently, for instance as Robert McKee does in *Story*: “the story's ultimate meaning expressed through the action and aesthetic emotion of the last act's climax.”<sup>46</sup> For McKee this is called the “controlling idea.” Elsewhere, McKee has said “Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the

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<sup>40</sup> On culture as “lived religion” and an more in depth discussion see Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 25-45. This Van Til is the elder Van Til's nephew.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley D. Williams, *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue & Vice For Box Office Success* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006), 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> This was essentially his Ph.D dissertation and a brief summary of the research formula is included in *Ibid.*, 163-64. What he argues is that if a film refuses to integrate a sound moral premise into its plotline, it will not do well at the box office. A similar note could be said about movies with non-redemptive plot lines.

<sup>46</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 115

conversion of idea to action. A story's structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea...without explanation."<sup>47</sup> In Christopher Vogler's analysis, explained below, the equivalent of a moral premise is the Elixir that the Hero brings back to the Ordinary World.<sup>48</sup> The Elixir can be a physical object as well, and those objects would then be considered metaphorical for a lesson learned, which is what Williams argues the moral premise is. As Williams sees it, the moral premise is a kind of natural law of storytelling, and it reflects the natural laws about morality that are wired into the universe.<sup>49</sup>

Typically the moral premise "is comprised of four parts: a virtue, a vice, desirable consequences (success), and undesirable consequences (defeat)."<sup>50</sup> As Williams concludes, "these four parts can be used to create a statement that describes precisely what a movie is really about, on both physical and psychological levels."<sup>51</sup> In this structure, a comedy is where the protagonist is confronted with the virtue in a "moment of grace" and embraces it to find the success he has been seeking. A tragedy is where the protagonist is similarly confronted with the virtue in a moment of grace, but embraces the vice instead, leading to defeat.<sup>52</sup> These elements can be brought out by taking note of the story's spine, which connects the physical quest with the psychological quest of a particular story.<sup>53</sup> In a way, the visible story is a metaphor for the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 113. As Williams notes, McKee is "trying to tell us...that storytelling is basically a philosophical pursuit wherein we explore what is true and false, and how to live our lives better and happier." Williams, *The Moral Premise*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> This is detailed in Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *The Moral Premise*, 49-50.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 68. In the particular analysis pursued here, the physical quest is detailed more explicitly under the Story heading, while here under Ethics we are dealing with the psychological quest.

invisible story; or the psychological goal of the protagonist is revealed by the physical goal; or again, “the protagonist’s inner journey is shown to us in the protagonist’s outer journey.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, the journey to redemption as noted in the last chapter contains a practical application for the here and now. Since “The redemption in a particular worldview or belief system is its proposal for how to fix what is wrong with us,”<sup>55</sup> it necessarily implies some kind of action on part of the audience. That action, or the moral premise of the film, sheds light on how our culture believes we should live in our world.

Because man is by nature an image bearer of God and because he knows certain things to be right and wrong (Rom. 1:32), the moral premise of most films, if it is to achieve the natural law status that Williams sees as necessary, will actually be in accord with the teachings of Scripture. Many films can usually be applauded as upholding biblical virtues, albeit from a non-Christian standpoint. There will usually be a tension given the worldview that informs the moral premise. While the moral premise may be exemplary and even fit well into a Christian worldview, it may often contradict the philosophical vantage point of the actual film. The fact that many people will still find the moral premise compelling, given the worldview of the film, suggests further confirmation of Scripture’s teaching in Romans 1 and 2. When God has been jettisoned from the picture, there is no inherent reason why anyone should have to follow an exemplary virtue, other than the desirable results offered. But people still want to live the good life (for the most part) and look to film either explicitly or implicitly for guidance on how to make sense of living in the world. What they see on the screen is the embodied morals of the surrounding culture.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 24.

### Film as Copying Redemption

To complete the theological contextual triad, the redemptive aspect of film can be highlighted. As a leading screenwriter in Hollywood puts it, “The art of story is the dominant culture force in the world, and the art of film is the dominant medium of this grand enterprise.”<sup>56</sup> Robert Johnston concurs stating, “the nature of film is story,” and “we go to the movies to see stories.”<sup>57</sup> Stories however, are rarely *just* stories, but rather, “Storytelling from its inception was expected to be more than entertainment. Through their craft, the first storytellers were expected to teach the culture how to live and behave in their world.”<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, this quite often takes the form of a character going on a quest to achieve some kind of redemption. As Craig Detweiler observes, “The most timely, relevant, and haunting films resonate with the shaping story of Scripture: from the beauty of creation, through the tragedy of self-destruction, to the wonder of restoration.”<sup>59</sup> One could easily say that “The essence of storytelling in movies is about redemption,”<sup>60</sup> and, “Movies are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily *only* about story. And those stories are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily *mostly* about redemption.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 15.

<sup>57</sup> Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*.

<sup>58</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 76. If one takes biblical history seriously, then this observation makes sense of the purpose the first story would have had. In Genesis 2-3 one is presented with what would have been the first story ever told, and it would have presumably been passed on from family to family as a means of explaining how to live in the world they all found themselves inhabiting.

<sup>59</sup> Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 257.

<sup>60</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 86.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. Emphasis original. Humanity has an innate longing for redemption from the conflicts we find ourselves embedded in, and movies, as the stories of our day, are one way of expressing that longing. Cultures may differ on the nature of the conflict or what the fall (either the literal one or a metaphorical one) produced within man, but all cultures tell stories of redemption to satisfy a seemingly innate longing all humanity shares.

Stories are “universally perceived as the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.”<sup>62</sup> This in turn implies something about reality itself: “Storytelling is meaningless gibberish unless reality itself is narratable. And reality is unnarratable in a universe without a transcendent narrator.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, the prevalence of storytelling across cultures is an apologetic for the existence of God. Without a being who fits the description of the biblical God, there is no unity that makes sense of the diversity of storytellers, nor is there a unity of world history itself. Assuming a grand narrator, it would make sense that there is also a grand narrative of which all the individual narratives told by human storytellers are analogical reflections.<sup>64</sup> Joseph Campbell, who formulated the idea of the Monomyth underlying all mythologies, was certainly on to something, but in the absence of a Christian perspective, he failed to notice that “Christianity is itself the true incarnation of the Monomyth in history, and other mythologies reflect and distort it like dirty or broken mirrors.”<sup>65</sup> This being the case, the story of redemption as exemplified in the Christian gospel is the ultimate story of redemption that the redemptive storylines in the movies analogically reflect.

The individual redemptive stories that are displayed in the movies follow the same trajectory as the grand narrative of redemption told in Scripture. They are situational reflections of the divine norm of how redemption really works. As the blueprint for all other redemptive storylines, “The Bible narrates the story of God’s journey on that long road of redemption. It is a

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<sup>62</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and The People of God*, Christian Origins and The Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>63</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 70.

<sup>64</sup> Were Van Til available for comment, he would characterize this distinction by saying that the story of redemption history is archetypal, while human stories of redemption are ectypal. “God is the archetype, while we are the ectypes. God’s knowledge is archetypal, and ours ectypal.” Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 324.

<sup>65</sup> Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 70. On the Monomyth in Campbell, see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series XVII (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

unified and progressively unfolding of God's action in history for the salvation of the whole world."<sup>66</sup> This is not to suggest that film-makers are consciously modeling their stories after God's story of redemption. It is simply to observe that the prevalence of redemptive stories found in movies indicates not only that this type of story is the most satisfying, but that there is an innate human desire for redemption that leads to the creation of "gospel stories" that mimic *the Gospel*.<sup>67</sup>

To see this clearly, consider the stages of Christopher Vogler's adaption of Campbell's Monomyth that is used by numerous screenwriters.<sup>68</sup> In the first act, called Separation, there are several stages. They are: (1) Ordinary World, (2) Call to Adventure, (3) Refusal of the Call, (4) Meeting with the Mentor, (5) Crossing the Threshold, (6) Tests, Allies, Enemies, (7) Approach. In the second act, which can be split into two parts itself, Descent and Initiation, there is the single stage: (8) Central Ordeal. In the last act, called Return, the stages are: (9) Reward, (10) The Road Back, (11) Resurrection, (12) Return with Elixir.<sup>69</sup> In his analysis of story, Vern Poythress breaks the story of redemption accomplish by Christ into three acts as well.<sup>70</sup> In the initial act (Challenge), Christ is in heaven (his Ordinary World) and is sent by the

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<sup>66</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 12.

<sup>67</sup> On this point, see Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 902.

<sup>68</sup> This is particularly amplified in Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*. And illustrated in numerous films by Stuart Voytilla, *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1999).

<sup>69</sup>"The reason for walking through these elements of the craft of storytelling used in movies is to illustrate how the essence of storytelling in movies is about redemption." Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> I am synthesizing Poythress' analysis with Vogler's. For the original, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language - A God Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 206-208. Poythress does not use Vogler, but rather Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Father to redeem the world (a Call to Adventure that lacks a Refusal of the Call).<sup>71</sup> At the outset of Christ's public ministry there is a Crossing of the Threshold.<sup>72</sup> From there Christ makes Allies (the disciples) and Enemies (Satan, the Pharisees) and amidst the many Tests (challenges from Pharisees and demons) he breaks away often to meet with his Mentor (God the Father). All the while, Christ has set his face to Approach Jerusalem.<sup>73</sup> In the second act, it is not a stretch at all to see Jesus' crucifixion and death as the Central Ordeal of the gospel story.<sup>74</sup> In his death though, Jesus was vindicated and received the Reward, completed the Road Back and was Resurrected from the dead. He then returned to his Ordinary World (heaven) having accomplished redemption and made the Elixir available to all who would believe.<sup>75</sup> From a Christian perspective, even though it happened in the middle of history, the Gospel is the archetype for all stories with a redemptive trajectory. Film is no exception.

As God acts on the stage of world history to accomplish his purposes, so man acts on the stage of his own personal history to accomplish his purposes. Stories in their basic form are accounts of a main character's purpose, action, and the result. In this basic sense, all stories are accounts of a man imaging God, who as Scripture teaches has purposes, acts in history, and brings about his intended results.<sup>76</sup> In a more specific sense though, God does not just act randomly in history, but as stated before, acts to accomplish redemption. This redemption "is at the heart of God's purposes for the world, it is *the* one central story."<sup>77</sup> If this is true, then "in the

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<sup>71</sup> Gal. 4:4-5; 1 John 4:14

<sup>72</sup> The wilderness temptation, Matt. 4:1-11

<sup>73</sup> Most clearly brought out in the Gospel of Luke.

<sup>74</sup> Matt. 26-27

<sup>75</sup> 1 Tim. 3:16; Phil. 2:8-11; Rom. 4:24-25

<sup>76</sup> Eph. 1:10-11, 1 Cor. 15:28, Rev. 21:1, 22-27

<sup>77</sup> Poythress, *Language - A God Centered Approach*, 206.

end, all the other stories about working out human purposes derive their meaning from being related to this central story.<sup>778</sup> If man in general derives meaning as a human from imaging God, at the particular level of stories told by man, meaning there would be derived from imaging The Story. All stories then image the Christian story of redemption, which is another way of saying all stories are reflections of the gospel.

### **Inception: A Test Case**

Having offered a theological reading of film in general, it is now time to offer a theological reading of *Inception* in particular. Film-maker Christopher Nolan spent almost a decade developing the story for this film. The general plotline involves Dom Cobb, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, who is a fugitive from his home because of a crime he didn't commit. Cobb is an expert "extractor," that is, someone who is able to enter a shared dream with another person and extract mental information from them that they are not willing to divulge in their waking life. He is such an expert that he is able to enter dreams within dreams, and eventually dreams within dreams within dreams, and eventually limbo, which is unconstructed dream-space. The latter is essentially a hyper-Kantian playground where one is *literally* able to construct one's own reality.

Cobb entered into this unconstructed dream-space with his wife Mal one afternoon and inadvertently spent 50 years there (dream time is compressed further and further at each level of descent). They are a kind of Adam and Eve in a dream world of their own creation. God is noticeably absent, and they are both creator and creature in this alternate reality. Eventually, Cobb wants to return to actual reality, but Mal does not, and has been convinced that the dream world is the real world. In order to escape, he planted the idea that "your reality isn't real" in his

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



wife's mind, which ultimately in her waking life, led to her suicide. This planting of an idea is called "inception," and Cobb is the only individual who has successfully done it, though with disastrous results. In this way the "Adam" of the dream world becomes the serpent whose deception costs "Eve" her life.

This is all backstory to the actual plotline which will be explained further below. In popular culture, *Inception* is mostly known for its "dreams within dreams" motif, as well as an ending that calls into question whether Cobb is still dreaming or whether he has made it back to reality. The reason for the ambiguity is that earlier in the film, Cobb tells one of his colleagues, Ariadne, that everyone uses a "totem" in the dream world. It is an object of a certain size and weight that only the individual who possesses it knows. When one is confused about whether they are in a dream, a dream within a dream, or actual reality, they can use the totem to figure it out. Cobb appears in the film to be using a top for this purpose. In the real world, the top eventually falls over, but in the dream world, it spins continuously. At the end of the film, he spins the top and walks away. The camera focuses in on the top, but cuts to black before the audience can see whether it falls over or not.

In general, discussions about the movie focus on whether or not it ends in reality. In dealing with the question of "the spinning top," using a theological interpretation opens up a way to definitively answer the question of the movie's ending. By focusing on theological themes and moving beyond surface details, the message of the movie is clarified and the ambiguity of the ending is removed. The particular framework that will be employed to organize the theological insights is the four-fold medieval interpretive scheme. Doing so helps to ascend beyond the plot of the movie, the levels of the dream world, and into reality in order to actually understand the film as Nolan conceived it.

### *Literal*

To begin, there is the literal sense of the movie. The plot is essentially a dramatic heist. Cobb has an inner conflict (the psychological spine of the story) that plays out in the physical story-line. The dreams within dreams make things more interesting, but basically this is a story of a guy who had a girl and then lost her through his own mistake. He now needs to gain emotional closure as well exoneration from murder charges. His ultimate motivation is to be reunited with his children. He is given the opportunity to achieve pardon for the charges by performing a heist alongside his team. Whether or not the end is a dream depends on how much weight you give the totems. One could also factor in the fact that Cobb wears a wedding ring only in dreams and note that he isn't wearing it in the final scene. One could also note that his father-in-law in the story (Michael Caine) is only in reality, and he's there at the end. On the literal level, the story involves a successful heist with the byproduct of the protagonist sorting out psychological issues and achieving the one goal he from the start.

### *Tropological*

Second, there is the tropological, or more simply, moral sense of the movie. It's really hard to miss since the line is repeated several times, but the "message" of the movie in terms of an action item for the viewer is "Don't end up an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone." This is Cobb's existential dilemma. Saito, the man who initially offers the heist job that will lead to exoneration invites Cobb to overcome his fears and take a leap of faith. Later Cobb will return the favor to Saito in limbo. As the plot unfolds, Cobb has two live options. He can live on racked with guilt about inadvertently causing his wife's death and end up an old man, filled with regret, waiting to die alone (and also never see his kids again). Or, he can deal with his guilt (atone for it maybe?) and move on with life and so become "young again" in a sense. Throughout the movie, Cobb is haunted by the vision of the last memory he has of his kids. He had to flee the country in a hurry when he realized he was going to be charged with the murder of

his wife. He looked out the window at his kids playing, only able to see the back of their heads. This is the last image he has of them, and throughout the film he continues to see be unable to see their faces. In perhaps the most powerful scene of the entire movie, he is reunited with his kids at the end of the movie. He walks into his house in the same position he was when he left, and his father-in-law calls the kids. At once their heads turn and we finally see their faces. This strongly suggests it isn't a dream since up until this point he has only been able to see the memory of kids dimly, but now they behold each other face to face. It is likely Nolan is intentionally invoking 1 Cor. 13:12 here, and if so, is plainly saying Cobb has finally made it home.

### *Allegorical*

Moving up, on an allegorical level, one could look at the entire film as a dream that the viewer participates in. In that sense, the dream is over once the credits roll since at that point one "wakes up" and returns to reality. The movie itself is a kind of metaphor for film-making and each of the characters play a production role. On this level, the whole movie is a dream and so given what one sees in the first two levels above (literal and moral), Cobb escapes the dreamworld, but his whole storyline is itself within our dreamworld. Watching a movie with a whole bunch of people inside a theater is a kind of shared dreaming, so in a way, the film *Inception* is a kind of extended metaphor for how movies work. This is especially true when it comes to planting philosophical ideas in unsuspecting viewer's minds. One of those ideas, in the case of *Inception*, is that our biggest problems in life can be solved by retreating further into our own psyches to deal with unresolved guilt. Cobb had been holding onto an image of his wife and hadn't truly "let her go." He comes to realize that the image he had of her doesn't do justice to how multi-faceted she was in real life. Further, that image was literally "malicious" when he was

submerged in the dream world, and threatened to undo the entire heist. Ultimately, he has to put that image to death, but in order to do so, he has travel deep into his own psychological makeup.

### *Anagogical*

Lastly, on an anagogical level, or spiritual level, we can see that the movie functions much like Plato's cave analogy and raises the question of whether there might be a higher order of reality (*The Matrix* did this as well, as have some other films like *Vanilla Sky*). I think this is why people get caught up trying to analyze whether the end of the movie constitutes a dream or reality. The question at the end of the movie is "have we reached ultimate reality or do we need to keep going?" On the one hand, no, you haven't reached ultimate reality because that's the reality we the viewers inhabit. You don't get to ultimate reality until the movie ends and you get on with your life (and don't end up an old man filled with regret). But it does push us to ponder whether or not reality as we perceive it outside the movie world is in fact ultimate reality, or whether we are still looking at the shadows in Plato's cave, failing to really see face to face in the light of day.

In terms of what the movie suggests we hope for, it is affirming a biblical desire for reconciliation. Throughout the film we long to see Cobb reunited with his children, to see his family receive some kind of restoration. This is a thoroughly biblical hope, and one that we will never see fully realized in this world. Similarly, for Cobb, the hope that he longed for could never be fully realized as long as he inhabited the dream world. In that sense, his dream world corresponds to our waking life, and his waking life to our ultimate life in the new heavens and the new earth. His fall into the dream-world corresponds to our fall from grace in the garden. Though the solution offered in the movie doesn't fit a Christian perspective, the presentation of the consequences of sin and the longing for restoration do. As we offer a theological interpretation of this particular film, we are best able to compare and contrast its latent theology

with Christian theology. This allows for greater clarity, and ultimately, an opportunity to demonstrate cinematic literacy in dialoguing with the culture we find ourselves inhabiting.

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