

WHAT ARE COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS TELLING US ABOUT THE SOURCE AND ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION?

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

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This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrasts with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression.

– Marshall McLuhan

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

– Luke 10:18

If agriculture is the root of all metaphor, then the Kingdom of God is like an earthy story. It’s a parable that you haven’t heard yet, but that feels very familiar because it makes use of all the signs and signifiers of your current life, while asking you to consider your situation in the here and now, and make a choice regarding where you will be at the outcome of the story. When Jesus tells his parables in Matthew 13, they are all stories about what the kingdom of God is like, yet they all address the question of life, in reality, here and now, and not of the ideal state of heaven in the sweet by and by. They all pose an implicit question to the listener: who are *you* in this story? They all demand an answer because of the promise and warning of the final judgment to come. In this way, all of Christ’s “Kingdom of God” parables convert the audience members into characters in the story, whose choices and attitudes have a present, real, and significant

role to play in the outcome of the story, in determining whether the story is ultimately a comedy or a tragedy. Here is Jesus' list of qualifications necessary to understand, believe, and participate in his parables, from Matthew 11:15: "He who has ears, let him hear." No Ph.D. required. No terminal degree. No sophistication. In fact, in the same chapter, Jesus goes on to say (Matthew 11:25-26) ... "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

And yet, Christians have gone a long way in adding to, supplementing, and sophisticating Christ's message so as to be relevant, authentic, and impactful as possible to today's jaded, bored, distracted, and attention-deficit-disordered potential parishioners.

Put another way, here we find ourselves in 2008, with 250 channels on television, 21,500 television stations and 44,000 radio stations¹, most of which can be accessed either directly or, if not, indirectly through 30 billion² web pages residing on 108 million websites. This in a world in which nearly 300,000 new book titles come out each year³, 413 films came out last year (155 of which saw wide release)⁴, one of which, *What Would Jesus Buy*, claims that in 2006 Americans spent \$455 billion during the Holidays.

This is in a world with 1.5 billion Christians, 800 million of whom are Protestants, and which are divided into, at last count, over 33,000 denominations in 238 countries with between 270 and 300 new denominations added each year, according to Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson's 2nd edition (2001) of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. Which, if accurate, means that as of right now, there are roughly just under 35,000

¹ http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/34318

² <http://www.boutell.com/newfaq/misc/sizeofweb.html>

³ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_books_are_published_yearly_in_the_US

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_in_film

Protestant denominations communicating the gospel through their chosen medium to Christians worldwide. So on the surface, that's a lot of storytelling. A lot of parables. A lot of imagination to go around. Big numbers are always impressive, especially since they mean nothing and we can't do anything with them, except be impressed by their size.

For while Protestant denominations are growing by 300 per year, media of communication are shrinking year by year. Or to be more precise, while the channels are growing, the owners are shrinking. Fewer and fewer movie companies put out more and more movies. Fewer and fewer media companies produce more and more television programming. Fewer and fewer magazine and book publishers produce more and more magazines and books. Or, put another way, the medium is growing, but the message is shrinking. By this I mean the fact that in 1983, according to media scholar Ben Bagdikian, "warned that 50 multinational corporations, 'all interlocked in common financial interest with other massive industries and with a few dominant international banks,' controlled the majority of publishing outlets. By 2006, those 50 had consolidated into 5."⁵ Harper's Magazine points out in its May (2008) issue that the "chances that a story in a British newspaper is a reprinted or rewritten press release" is "3 in 5."

Now if the word *communicate* has the same root as the words *communion* and *community* does - to make many one - then perhaps something is getting lost in translation. In other words, what I want to question, and have us consider today, is what, if any, is the relationship between the medium of communication and the message of the gospel, between the increase in media channels, and corollary increase in Protestant

⁵ "Media Democracy On The March," Eric Klineberg, *Adbusters*, May/June 2008

audiences, and between these elements and their relationship to the imagination. So rather than give either a form or content analysis of these things, I want to explore together with you a context analysis. This doesn't mean we'll be focusing on context to the exclusion of the other two, form and content. But it means we'll be using *context* as the third axis with which to triangulate and flush out our quarry of understanding. For believers in a Trinitarian godhead, this should come naturally.

William Blake, in an epigram for an illustration entitled *The Laocoon as Jehovah with Satan and Adam*, once wrote, "A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect – the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." Blake was two out of four of these things, and yet his statement is, I believe, descriptive and not prescriptive for how Christians should be engaged in works of the creative imagination. Blake himself equated the imagination and its creative outpouring with "the body of God" or "human existence itself," one reason, perhaps, why of his contemporaries thought him mad, and even found him heretical for his selective reverence of the Bible coupled with his hostility towards the established Church. In his biography on Blake, the Catholic apologist G.K. Chesterton defended Blake on the grounds that, "If every human being lived a thousand years, every human being would end up either in utter pessimistic scepticism or in the Catholic creed." Chesterton claimed that the way to judge a man most charitably was to see, upon his death, in which of the two directions he was headed. Blake, for all his faults, was headed towards the church, and away from utter pessimistic skepticism.

"A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect – the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian." In a cultural vacuum, this makes a certain sense. In our

context, however, with the torrent of media flooding and reworking our psyches on an hourly basis with creative works of the imagination, the experience is something more like hell. Prior to the invention of and documented effects of modern media, George McDonald wrote clearly that, “*imagination* means an *imaging* or a making of likeness, and “the imagination is that faculty which gives form to thought” and is “therefore, that faculty in man which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has therefore, been called the creative power, and its exercise creation.” Marshall McLuhan points out that whereas Adam was an observer and namer, Christ, the second Adam was actually a maker, a carpenter. McDonald points out that “Poet means maker.” And then goes on to say that

We must not forget, however, that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes – far be it from us to say divides – all that is God’s from all that is man’s; between that which makes in its own image and that which is made in that image.”⁶

And so on the one hand, being careful of the distinction McDonald makes, Christians should be in the creative arts. We are made in God’s image. We should remake the world in that image. That much, I think we perhaps all agree on to some degree. McLuhan himself, the coiner of my field, media ecology, said of himself that he was never a scholar or academic, but only an artist. “The serious artist,” McLuhan claimed, “is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.”⁷

On the other hand, if we are to be artists, to be image-makers while being cognizant of our unique role as Image-bearers (and the attendant obligation of not

⁶ McDonald quotes from Ryken, Leland, The Christian Imagination, p.101, Shaw Books.

⁷ Understanding Media, 1964, p. 33.

distorting or corrupting the true Image), then perhaps of great significance is the universal question we ask of every artist: *What's your medium?* And I don't mean to be coy or naïve about this question. I think it is both worthy of a careful investigation from a Biblical perspective, and equally worthy of a careful consideration from the perspective of our current context in history. The answer that is naïve, I believe, is the one that says, "Any medium is fine, so long as it is done to the glory of God." This strikes me as the road of good intentions, a road whose destination we're all familiar with. It is the world all around us. It is the world in which the classical arts are increasingly overwhelmed by and drowned out of the culture by electronically driven economic media, for whom profit and marketability are the highest arbiters of beauty, truth, and goodness. Jacques Ellul replies, "a statement by the church that it is placing the media at the service of Christ, is not a logical or ethical explanation, but a pious formula without content." It is all too easy, and we make the jump naturally, to thinking that electronic media, under electronic capital conditions, are but a newer form of Blake's painter, poet, artist and architect. But the context changes everything. What does not change is our need to have a consistent and timeless principle upon which to engage our times. Ellul's claim was this: "What is in the service of Jesus Christ receives its character and effectiveness from Jesus Christ." And so how that character and that effectiveness translates down through two thousand years of technological, scientific and economic innovation at the seeming expense of moral or religious progress seems like something that we should consider seriously. This is not to suggest that we must limit ourselves to Christ's known mediums of word, deed, and architecture. But it is to say that there is wisdom in learning from the master, and especially, I would argue, from learning how He contextualized everything he

encountered first, before choosing his response. What Christ was a master at, from an artistic perspective, was looking *through* a situation before deciding what to give his audience to look *at*. To use the art history terms, also borrowed by Gestalt psychology, we might say he was a master at understanding and subverting figure/ground relationships. We see this in almost every encounter he has, whether with the woman at the well, the rich man, the soldier, the disciples, the Pharisees, or Pontius Pilate. Perhaps the closest Christ came to an “artist’s statement” is the moment he chooses to remain silent in answer to Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” It is at that moment that Christ chooses to reveal the medium, and not the message, as the answer. It is unclear from John 18:38 if Pilate understood or took offense at Jesus’ silence, but his response to the situation is telling. Pilate goes out to the chief priests and says, “I find no basis for a charge against him.”

“A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect – the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.” As “maker”, Christ was also two of these, since he was both the one “Through [whom] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:3) and since he was not, as is commonly misunderstood, simply a “carpenter” but is described by the Greek term of *tekton*, or “master builder” (which is also part of the etymology of the word *architecture*, from *architekton*) – which means he would have been a stone mason, a carpenter, and likely an excellent architect who understood Pythagorean geometry at a master level. Yet Blake’s words were written in 1820, just nineteen years before the birth of electricity and photography, two discoveries that permanently altered the context into which all words and images would thereafter arise. Within eleven years of photography’s invention, the word *pornographer* entered

the dictionary. Within fifty-seven years of electricity's invention, capital crimes were met with capital sentences in which men were put to death by electrocution. As McLuhan puts it, we make our media and in turn, our media remake us. Psalm 115, 3-8 tells us this same story in regards to the gods among the true God:

Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

If we become what we behold, then it may make a spiritual difference what we choose for our physical mediums. This is certainly what Neil Postman was referring to when he wrote of the second commandment, that,

It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*. We may hazard a guess that a people who are being asked to embrace an abstract, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas in any concrete, iconographic forms. (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985, p. 9)

In our current context, what scholars refer to as the glut of media, the torrent of media, the flood of media, and the great age of excess, I think it is fairly safe to say, along with Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Mitchell Stephens, Leonard Shlain, and a host of others, that the image has triumphed over the word. One of the key reasons for this is that as supply of media goes up, people try to keep up by using further media technology to store and later retrieve their media surplus – Tivo, for example. But consumers of media also try to maintain their omniscience by becoming media omnivores, and discover that they can't read even a percentage of the 300,000 books published each year. And happily we don't have to, since half of them are Romance

Novels, Cookbooks, and Computer Repair manuals, and since reading one book per month puts you in the world's top one percent of intellectuals. (This may seem shocking, but not when you consider that one in four Americans read no books at all last year, according to an AP-Ipsos poll⁸). So instead of storing or consuming it all, one shorthand method is to prefer consuming images, which are both easier and faster to consume than words, and which can providing us with the sensation of keeping up. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then maybe 52 movies and 1900 hours of television per year can equal 300,000 books. No one actually makes such calculations, consciously, of course, but unconsciously we watch the evening news over reading the newspaper, which is why newspapers are both in decline and why more and more newspapers are imitating USA Today, the first newspaper to understand that television was both its true competitor and therefore its only model of inspiration. Knowing that all the words of a half-hour news program can be read in a ¼ page of newsprint doesn't help us reverse the trend, if only because it's the moving pictures that keep us awake, keep us from falling asleep, since our eyes have themselves become completely addicted to average shot lengths of less than two seconds.

So rather than cudgel you with all the statistics and facts and research that strongly suggest that images are killing our culture and that salvation lies in the word and through the word, I'd like to merely gently annoy you with some of these things while simultaneously offering what I hope is a more helpful means for us to understand our role as image bearers and imaginative transmitters of the gospel today.

⁸ <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/21/america/NA-GEN-US-Reading-Habits-AP-Poll.php>

The first is to say that the decalogue's prohibition on images may indeed be limited to images of God. In that case, then the field is wide open to all things that are not explicitly representations of the deity. But I do not share this interpretation, and I find it facile in its application. Like the distinction between Rowling's and Tolkien's understanding of power in *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* respectively, Rowling thinks power is a neutral thing to be desired so that it can be used for good, whereas Tolkien has, I believe, the deeper truth in claiming that the acquisition of power is itself the thing most likely to cause it to be used for evil. As regards images, and I say this as a movie critic, movie fan, and as a writer who has published more pieces on film than any other subject, I nevertheless maintain that the second commandment's prohibition on images, when read in the context of scripture, does include in its spiritual wisdom a distinct warning against images as themselves being inherently likely to increase the tendency to idolatry. The version you read on this question matters, as creative translation still never quite makes the problem go away. Here is the King James Version (Exodus 20:4-5):

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them

Here is the New International Version:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...

Other versions use the term "carved gods" or in the case of the New Life Version, "Do not make for yourselves a god to look like anything that is in heaven above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth." And the argument goes that because this is strictly a reference to images of God, and since the Hebrews are elsewhere given explicit

ornamentation rules for the adornment of the Temple, then clearly God is not against images per se, but against the use of any image that might make its viewer confuse the difference between the creator and the creation. This is all well and good, and is the story I tell myself after sitting through three movies back to back in a darkened theater. But now let's look at the broader context. If the word "worship" actually means "to ascribe worth to", and if Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21 that "where our heart is, there our treasure will be" then is it possible that, on evidence of media consumption alone, our culture has by default made image-bearing media the primary object to which we ascribe worth? The Ball State University study of 2005 points out that Americans spend 11.7 hour per day attending to mass media, which is more than daily work hours and more than daily sleep requirements. Of these hours, 5.3 of them were devoted to television. I say devoted because time is money in the capitalist context, and because sociologists have long noted that the television physically occupies the place of the former family altar in the living room. Now let's try to quantify this economically. If the median annual income for an American family is a two-income earning family making \$48,000 per year, with the median income of an individual at \$26,036.00 (2006 figures), then the labor value of an individual's time is \$12.52. By ascribing 1,934 hours per year to watching television, the individual is foregoing, or we might say, sacrificing, \$24, 213.56 of his potential earnings to his TV habit. If this potential salary is taken seriously and added to his actual salary, suggests that the individual is voluntarily tithing 48% of his total income to his television altar on a daily basis. At the church I go to, 10% is all they ask of me. I cannot hardly imagine the faith, devotion, and love for television that would prompt a man to voluntarily give up that much of his psychic, actual, or time income to

anything unless he ascribed to it a god-like status. Thus, in the ecology of media, image-bearing media consumes most of our time. And in the ecology of our years on earth, the god we worship may in fact be the god we serve with the most time. If we are known by our fruits, then I find it hard to make the case that a life devoted to God is compatible with a life in which one-third of our waking life is spent devoted to television. And it is here, primarily, that I think we see just how powerful graven images are in their ability to woo us, seduce us, and have us fall almost hopelessly at their feet, by lying on our couches, in a reclining position, and obeying their command, “Don’t Touch That Dial.” The proof of this assertion lies in its corollary: time devoted to television is nearly triple the amount of time devoted to radio, a majority of which comes in our unavoidable commute under current conditions. Thus, we involuntarily choose word-based media when there is nothing else to do, but given the choice will prefer image-based media. You see this in children who are homeschooled without a television; they become good readers not because their parents are great teachers, but simply because there’s little other media to go to for stimulation of the imagination. You can also see this principle when going out to eat. Most restaurants these days have televisions at viewing angles from all possible seating locations. If you enter one with the intention of speaking to your spouse, you may find yourself frustrated, and find that you have to look harder and harder to find either a seat, or a restaurant, in which this automatic visual distraction won’t be present. It’s temptation is almost overwhelming in comparison to a restaurant with a loud radio playing, which you can tune out selectively by speaking louder and/or leaning in close. The irony is that our eyes really can look away or close by choice, whereas our ears

cannot, and yet the paradox remains that the visual stimulus is much harder to resist than the aural stimulus.

And yet, as Christians, we are to spread the gospel, through word and example, as the Book of Common Prayer tells us. Or, as imitators of Christ, who spoke only in word and example. He drew in the sand once, but those were words, we are told, not images, that he drew. And Romans 10:17 makes the case for a sensory hierarchy that privileges the ear over the eye: “For faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” If we are to know God through Christ, and if Christ is the logos or Word of John 1, then it should come as no surprise that there is a literal dimension to this claim: in America, only 2% of the deaf community are Christian. Perhaps it’s as simple as the fact that they can’t hear the message, and thus are literally without ears to hear. Or is it possible that the message, by any other means, is not in fact the same?

When you consider sight in the gospel, and media of sight or vision, you also encounter some interesting corroboration of these ideas. Doubting Thomas in John 20:24-29 is perhaps the most widely held up example of our modern day aphorism that “seeing is believing.” But remember what Christ actually says to Thomas in Verse 29: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” In this context, it seems that hearing is faith, and that seeing is merely proof. And I think that holds for much of the rest of Scripture. Perhaps the key distinction between sight and sound is the location and involvement of the perceiver. In seeing, the perceiver is always outside of the event, as a voyeur peering in. Perhaps this is why the crowds kept asking for more signs from Jesus. It’s hard to believe just once, and like a scientific experiment, you want repeatability and predictability to guarantee

what you've seen. In sound, the perceiver is in the middle of the action, and the sound is all around him. As such, sight involves a distancing whereas sound involves an immediacy. This means that sight is always anticipatory of the future, while sound always resides in the present tense. For a God who is timeless, and is the great I AM, the present tense is the only tense, which may be why Christ's parables in Matthew 13 are so evocative of the listener's real-time response.

Scripture also gives us a visual anticipation of the future in 1 Corinthians 13:12. And it is in the distinction between the translation of the New International Version and the King James Version that I think we find our most accurate lens through which to understand God's call on our imagination, and its dangers and pitfalls in being unwary.

The New International Version of the verse reads:

12Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

The older King James version of the same verse reads:

12For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And it is here, in the distinction between a *mirror* and a *glass*, between *seeing in* and *seeing through*, that I think we come to the parable for our times. In our actual image-bearing roles, whether we are present (*as image*) or speaking (*as word*), we are faithful witnesses to the gospel so long as we remain true to its teaching. But as soon as we mediate, through our imagination's creative use of the arts, then the form of the symbol begins to work its magic on us. Protestants have traditionally been favorers of the mediated word (in the form of the printed Bible, Calvin's *sola scriptura*, and the

inerrancy doctrine) at the expense of the mediated image (and icons, which they see as idols) because of this very distinction. The form of abstract letters on a page which are, technically speaking, images, are themselves so abstract that we do not see in them any discernible shape; we must peer through them to the mental construction of their sounds, and from their to the mental construction of the sound's meaning, in order to arrive at words that make sentences that give us mentally constructed images of the divine.

Images, however, bypass all that and have the tendency to arrest our vision at the surface of the symbol, rather than allowing us to peer above, beneath, or beyond it. Even with an old-fashioned Germanic font, our eyes naturally look through, or beyond the image of the printed words in order to assess their mental meaning. Whereas, by contrast, the old-fashioned German woodcut illustrating the verse naturally tends to stop our eyes short and make us equate the symbol with the thing symbolized. This distinction, what communication scholars call the difference between an analogic and a digital symbol, is the difference between the printed out turn-by-turn directions to your destination and the map itself. It is easier to understand "I took a wrong turn" when reading directions than when viewing a map, because we are so automatically inclined, by the nature of the medium, to confuse the map with the territory. And so, as any frustrated driver knows, we have to always remind our navigator that the map and the territory are not precise equivalents, though they try very hard to be analogues of each other. This is the same reason why the filmed adaptation is *always* better than the book on which it was based; we read the book as the territory and see the film as a carelessly drawn map. The only time this does not occur is when you have the happy accident of seeing the movie without reading the book first, one reason I love Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings Trilogy while

my daughter finds it seriously flawed. I think we will “see” fully, with God’s eyes, when we are fully known. Until then, however, both Scripture and experience has made it very apparent that certain media forms favor certain outcomes over others in ways that are remarkably consistent, predictable, and unsettling in their indicator of how often we fall for the same trap. At the same time, Marshall McLuhan states that nothing is inevitable, as long as we are willing to pay attention. Or, as William Blake put it, ““I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.”⁹

In the history of the alphabet, the mediated word, we find the curious fact that all alphabets began as pictographic symbol systems. The Aleph in Hebrew was an Ox. The Bet was a house. Over time, the images became abstract enough to no longer be recognizable to a first-time viewer as an analogical symbol. And so it is, in a way, with all visual art: what does it mean when we leave a movie or an art gallery and proclaim with a sigh, “Seen it before!” Clichéd visual images bother us precisely because, through duplication and replication, we are forced to see only their surface, and can only look *at* rather than *through* them. Thus, a clichéd visual image, shiny though it may be, is on the way to becoming abstracted in our heads while simultaneously disallowing us from encountering its deeper meaning beneath, the way we see the Macintosh computer icon every day and yet rarely think of it as a religious symbol of the Garden of Eden. Words have the power to resurrect this meaning in a way that muted images do not, one reason why I argue that the soundtrack and dialogue is the most important part of any film. Abstract art itself may simply be an attempt to immediately deliver us from analogical

⁹ Blake, A Vision of the Last Judgment

symbol recognition and place us on the higher plane of going above, beneath, and beyond the merely visual.

I would like to close by pointing you to two scenes in the 1999 film, *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes. I want to show you some pictures at the end so that you don't think I'm a reactionary Calvinistic word snob, and so that you can see how much I'm in favor of the arts, the imagination, and its power in promoting the gospel to a world gone both deaf and blind by overmediation. And yet as it relates the visual to the aural, and reveals beauty, truth, and goodness in that contextual reversal, is something I think is of profound importance to Christians attempting to engage the world.

In the movie, the love interest of Jane is a strange kid named Ricky Fitts, who videotapes everything he finds worthwhile as he goes through life. As he shows Jane what he calls "the most beautiful thing he's ever filmed," his voiceover describes the image as we see the moving image of a white plastic bag blown in circles by the wind against the backdrop of a red brick wall. He says,

"It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. And this bag was, like, dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I knew *there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever.* Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember, and I need to remember..."¹⁰ (italics mine).

In a scene just prior to this one, the Ricky Fitts character equates "beauty" with "looking God in the face," and does so in dialogue about his filming the face of a homeless woman who has frozen to death. This conversation takes place as he and Jane are walking home from school and step off the street to make way for a funeral procession.

¹⁰ *American Beauty*, Dreamworks, Dir. Sam Mendes, 1999.

Thus, the structure of the viewer's experience of this cinematic moment is one in which God is described aurally and equated to beauty as death drives by, and then beauty is shown visually as a plastic bag, perhaps the most trivial and valueless element of our consumer culture, is shown on screen. In redeeming all things, the Fitts character reveals with his words the wisdom of both Marshall McLuhan, how the content of the medium is never the content, but always another medium, and the wisdom of the middle ages.

Johan Huizinga describes this wisdom as follows:

The Middle Ages never forgot that all things would be absurd, if their meaning were exhausted in their function and their place in the phenomenal world, if by their essence they did not reach into a world beyond this. This idea of a deeper significance in ordinary things is familiar to us as well, independently of religious convictions: as an indefinite feeling which may be called up at any moment, by the sound of raindrops on the leaves or by the lamplight on a table. Such sensations may take the form of a morbid oppression, so that all things seem to be charged with a menace or a riddle which we must solve at any cost. Or they may be experienced as a source of tranquility and assurance, by filling us with the sense that our own life, too, is involved in this hidden meaning in the world.¹¹

In Art and Beauty In The Middle Ages, Umberto Eco points to the grander scheme into which Ricky Fitts has placed himself:

The Medievals inhabited a world filled with references, reminders, and overtones of Divinity, manifestations of God in things. Nature spoke to them heraldically: lions or nut-trees were more than they seemed; griffins were just as real as lions because, like them, they were signs of a higher truth (Eco, 1986, 52-53).

Ricky's words are the substructure on top of which the visual images make sense. With the film's dialogue muted, both of these scenes lose all of their power, wonder, and beauty. American Beauty was a completely secular film that neither espoused nor represented religiosity in any of its character's lives, yet it won the top honors at the Academy Awards that year, and was consistently called a highly spiritual film. These

¹¹ Huizinga, Johan. The Waning of the Middle Ages. 1924. New York: St. Martins Press, 1967, p.194.

combined facts seem to offer confirmation of Gregor Goethals' insight that "Secular culture is popular, not because it is secular, but perhaps because it is sacramental." (1981, 143) The medievals looked *through* rather than *at* their world as being emblematic of the deeper goodness, beauty, and truth of God. Modern secular Hollywood does this same thing without being labeled religious. Our task then, is to remember that Jesus Christ is, in McLuhan's words, "the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same," and as he reminded us, "the process of perception is that of incarnation." Our visual media and our aural media must work in such a way as not to merely reflect the viewer his own narcissistic image back to himself, as so much art does today, but to refract the light in such a way that he sees something beyond himself, and beyond his imagination, to the image of the one who is invisible, unspeakable, and ineffable, and yet the source of all our imaginings.

If this is valid, then I believe scripture would confirm it. And I think we find confirmation in Exodus 25:18-22

And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover.
19 Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends. **20** The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.
21 Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. **22** There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

God is therefore, framed by art. He is seen not *in* the gold cherubim, but *through* them, or between the two cherubim facing each other. The testimony of His word is underneath the image, the way a caption or title makes sense of a picture. The word *medium* means precisely, "that which goes between." As Christ is our mediator, our medium, and our

maker, and as he points us to the father, so too should all our artwork, all our applications of our God-given imagination, be eternally vigilant in pointing not *at* our art, but *through* it to the invisible between our art, framed by our art, arrived at only through our art. The early church understood this well with its reversal of perspective and other artistic elements when creating icons. There was perhaps the earliest version of Rene Magritte's message who said centuries later, "This is not an apple." This is merely a painting of an apple. The words underneath Magritte's image help us remember. The icon says this same thing implicitly, without using words: Do not look *at* this, for this is not the Christ, this is an icon of the good shepherd, *through* which you may meditate on the one who is the true Christ.

I am now *at* the end, so we can be *through*.