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Cinematic Illustrations in Christian Theology

Abstract

Three recent films, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Matrix*, and *American Beauty*, richly illustrate numerous classical Christian doctrines, including themes in ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and aesthetics. *The Sixth Sense* offers powerful metaphors for original sin and conversion. *The Matrix* portrays an Ecclesiastes-like linkage between wisdom and sorrow and features a potential model for a strong view of divine providence. And belief in strong providence is actually endorsed in *American Beauty* in the form of a Leibnizian aesthetic theodicy. Whether consciously or not, the makers of these films develop themes that have significant potential for illuminating key elements of Christian theology.

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Introduction

Hollywood is not the first place most Christians look for theological insight. But the last few years have seen the release of several films that are not only aesthetically pleasing but theologically provocative, at least for those who, like me, look to glean from the arts insights about God's nature and relationship to the world. This is often a difficult and precarious venture. It takes work to see all that can be seen in a work of art, especially film. And the hazards one faces in doing so are appreciable, especially when making theological applications. But the payoff in terms of enriching one's perspective can be great. My own theology has been enhanced as I have viewed, discussed, and meditated upon some recent films. I shall discuss several of these, noting how their themes apply, or might be applied, to the major doctrinal domains of Christian theology, specifically views about human nature, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics.

Christian Ethics and Moral Anthropology: *The Sixth Sense*

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* is the story of a frightened and confused little boy named Cole Sear, who is troubled by his unique ability to perceive a spiritual dimension invisible to the rest of us. "I see dead people," he confides to psychologist Malcolm Crowe, and the audience soon shares in Cole's terror through numerous encounters with deceased individuals who search him out

in order to receive help from him. About the deceased whom the boy encounters, we learn two important facts: they do not know they are dead and they only see what they want to see. The latter accounts for the former. Because they are able to falsely reinterpret the clear signs of their death their delusion is maintained. So they really don't realize that they are lost ghosts "walking around like regular people."

This film tantalized me at several levels. On even the most cursory viewing *The Sixth Sense* is captivating as a simple human drama. But, at a deeper level, the plot's potential for illustrating elements of Christian theology is significant. In particular, as I reflected on the film's premise I discovered a powerful metaphor for the doctrine of original sin. According to this tenet of classical Christian theology, some people are indeed dead but don't know it. Moreover, they see what they want to see. The doctrine of original sin teaches that all of us have an innate propensity to fail morally, to rebel against our Creator, and to seek our own way.¹ The New Testament portrays this as a sort of living death in need of remedy by a second birth, as Jesus figuratively put it.² *The Sixth Sense* provides a stark, unforgettable image to match this view of the human condition. In this film the dead are entirely unaware of their state of being, and they ignore or misinterpret the plain signs of their situation. They suffer a deception at the most fundamental level, from which no escape is possible without outside intervention.

Closely related to this theme is the film's implicit picture of conversion as a "gestalt" switch. Those who finally come to recognize they are dead do not do so gradually over time. Rather, their awakening is sudden, shocking, and life-changing. Triggered by some unexpected event that forces them to see their actual condition, they awaken all at once to the truth. Similarly, the Christian view is that one's spiritual condition of death is not something one slowly comes to see. This realization, too, is usually sudden, shocking, and life-changing. And while the movie provides only hints of spiritual renewal to go with its picture of spiritual death, there is enough redemption to complete the illustration: When spiritual change comes, it arrives with a gestalt switch of one's perspective on the world, as Paul notes a Christian is "a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come."³ Everything has changed. The new convert is, so to speak, a different person with a wholly different view of the world.

Two other biblical themes are also evident in *The Sixth Sense*. Cole's ability to perceive disembodied spirits is special and potentially useful. But it is also the source of severe and constant torment for the boy. Since it is not something he can turn on and off at will, he knows that at any moment he may encounter another ghost. This nearly drives him mad, until he receives help from Dr. Crowe, who encourages him to use this gift to help others. Cole proceeds to do so, and it is

precisely then that he begins to find relief from his torment. Still, the boy possesses an ability that is both a blessing and a curse.

This ironic theme is as old as story-telling itself, but it is also a deeply biblical teaching: In many respects, our blessings are our curses, and our curses are our blessings. The theme is portrayed in the history of ancient Israel, which proved faithful when in bondage and in the wilderness but became spiritually lazy and rebellious after entering the promised land of plenty. It is portrayed in the life of David, whose moral-spiritual peak occurred during his time of torment with Saul but who rebelled when he had been blessed with kingship. And it is portrayed in the life of Judas Iscariot, whose intimacy with Jesus was converted into a temptation to rebellion. In these and countless other biblical narratives, the blessings of wealth, political power, and personal intimacy metamorphose into curses through the temptations they create. David, Judas, and the Israelites could not (or did not) withstand this temptation, and their stories serve as implicit warnings to the rest of us. We all have been blessed in various ways, endowed with significant gifts that constitute the blessings that can curse.

A final biblical theme in *The Sixth Sense* is the idea that our gifts create obligations. Cole's gift is not merely a fortunate or unfortunate quality to be coped with, but an ability which, because of its power, bestows an implicit duty upon him to use it for good and useful ends. As Jesus notes, "from everyone who has been

given much, much will be demanded."⁴ Or, to use a political phrase, noblesse oblige (nobility obligates). Even as young as he is, Cole is obligated to use his peculiar ability to help others. Not until he does so can he find freedom from his torment. More importantly, it is only when he acts on this duty that the needy around him find relief from their own torment. So Cole's mercy towards others redounds as mercy upon himself. The two go hand in hand. This, too, is a significant Christian theme.

Theistic Metaphysics and Epistemology: *The Matrix*

The theme of appearance versus reality is as old as Plato's *Republic*. And while perhaps no writer or artist has improved upon his cave allegory in presenting this theme, the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* might be as effective an attempt as any since Plato, in cinematic history anyway. This is the story of one Thomas Anderson, a mild-mannered, if quirky, program writer for a software company, who is also an expert computer hacker, alias "Neo." One day someone begins to communicate to him through his computer, in ways that suggest an intimate knowledge of his life and personal environment. These messages lead Neo to a mysterious woman, named Trinity, who proceeds to inform him that he is a very important person to certain powerful people and that he is somehow in grave danger because of this. After some close calls with some of those powerful people, Trinity leads Neo to another mysterious individual, Morpheus, who offers to explain these

strange events and to let Neo in on a deep and profound secret, the ultimate truth about reality.

But first Morpheus must inform Neo of the gravity of what he is about to hear. Before Morpheus can reveal the terrible truth, Neo must make a choice between the life he has been living and a life forever changed by knowledge of the truth. Morpheus presents him with two pills, one blue and one red, which represent the choice between the former and latter, respectively. Neo takes the red pill without hesitating, and Morpheus proceeds to reveal to him, and the viewer, the disturbing truth: The world as we know it is really "a computer-generated dream world," constructed by artificial intelligences who have taken over the real world. They breed and harvest humans for the electrical energy our bodies provide. Humans now serve as biological batteries for the very machines they made. To keep our brains active and maintain the illusion that all is well, the AI's provide us with a "neural interactive simulation," which we take to be the real world. This is the Matrix. All we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, every single perception we have is just so much data fed to our brains by computers. It is all artificial, a wholesale illusion. But it is all we have known, so we think it is reality.

This premise, a technologically up-to-date application of Plato's cave allegory (and Descartes' "evil genius" hypothesis), is especially thought-provoking, because it is so plausible. Say what you will about the prospects of AI - and the

very idea of getting machines to have genuine thoughts, let alone to act autonomously and even take over human civilization - the premise of *The Matrix* is chilling because it is at least a conceptual possibility. The world of *The Matrix* could happen, could be happening now, in fact. If for no other reason, this movie is important because it is a piece of science fiction that, for all we know, could describe historical fact. And to that extent it serves as a serious caution regarding our production and use of technology. The things we make do bite back and could, to extend the metaphor, swallow us whole.

As I watched this movie, I thought to myself more than once how ironic it would be if its premise were already true. The film would then amount to the computers "toying" with us by describing our actual condition in fictional form, entertaining us with an idea so bizarre we would never suspect its truth. Wouldn't it be just like the Matrix to do that, I thought. Hmm. Thankfully, I am not a physicalist, so I regard the movie's premise as practically impossible (for reasons I won't delve into here). But that doesn't entirely purge my mind of this nagging thought - a new version of the nagging thought I've had since first reading Plato's *Republic*.

As for theological applications, I think *The Matrix* powerfully illustrates epistemological and metaphysical themes within certain streams of Christian theology. As for the former, Neo's choice between the red and blue pills depicts a

recurrent biblical idea pertaining to the dilemma between knowledge and ignorance, beginning with the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 1 and running all the way through the New Testament. Adam and Eve lived a life of bliss in the garden. Not only were they sinless, they knew nothing of sin, having not even the concept of moral rebellion. But they were endowed with the freedom to eat or not to eat the fruit of a certain tree, which, curiously, was itself the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They made their choice, and the world was changed entirely. With that single act, they exited their blissful ignorance and entered a world in which moral choices and dilemmas would constitute the very fabric of human life. And they could never go back. This was the tragic permanence of their decision, as it was for Neo.

The dualism of blissful ignorance and painful knowledge is succinctly expressed by the writer of Ecclesiastes: "With much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief"⁵ This is a major and recurring biblical theme. Adam and Eve discovered that the truth hurts, a lesson that must be learned every human being. In fact, it is a prerequisite both for theological training (i.e. understanding the tragic truth about human depravity) as well as for personal moral growth (i.e. understanding the humbling truth about one's own moral weakness). The metaphor of the blue and red pills in *The Matrix* is a powerful one for just this reason. It represents something fundamental about the human condition. To each

of us falls the choice to see or not to see, to gain a painful glimpse of the truth or to remain blissfully ignorant. And there is no turning back.

A second theme to be drawn from *The Matrix* is a bit speculative but nonetheless worth considering, if only for the value of theological illustration. But, first, a little background. A significant issue in both Christian theology and philosophy of religion is the matter of God's relationship to the world, metaphysically speaking. More specifically, how ought the providence of God to be conceived? In what way does God control the world? Though Christian theologians and philosophers agree that God created the world and personally directs history, there is still a range of views within the fold about just what this means. Some take a "weak" view of providence, maintaining that God created the world, then let it run on its own, in a sense, intervening now and then to perform miracles, answer prayers, and so on. Others take a "strong" view of providence and affirm God's active governance of every detail of the cosmos. Nothing runs on its own but persists only by continuous divine support.⁶

On the strong view of providence how ought one to conceive of God's constant upholding of the cosmos? It is precisely here that *The Matrix* provides a useful model for illuminating this doctrine. In short, replace the central computer system of *The Matrix* with God and what you get is a picture of God's relationship to the world, according to the strong view of providence. On this way of conceiving

it, the physical world is a sort of three-dimensional hologram that is also tangible. The world came into being and continues to exist because God thought it into being and presently preserves it in existence by this continuing divine mental act. The cosmos just is the thoughts of God made public. The Genesis description of God's creation of the world as occurring "by the word of his mouth" actually recommends such a model, for this is how we, who are made in his image, make our thoughts public - by speaking.⁷

While it is unlikely the film's creators were interested in the theological applications of their premise, this application is no less fruitful. Even for those who reject the strong view of providence, it may serve as a helpful heuristic for discussion of the issue of divine providence.

Theological Aesthetics: *American Beauty*

If the title of 1999's *American Beauty* is ambiguous, the film's actual theme is straightforward and clear, uniquely embodying a significant thesis regarding theological aesthetics. The story centers around one Lester Burnham, a bored forty-something businessman whose archetypal mid-life crisis is the catalyst for the film's central conflicts. Lester and his workaholic wife, Carolyn, have drifted apart, and both are estranged from their self-possessed teenage daughter, Jane. Things really begin to unwind when Lester meets Jane's young friend Angela and falls headlong

into an adolescent-style crush, complete with daydream fantasies and nervous stuttering. From here most of the main characters plunge into various forms of vice and debauchery, and their relationships with one another deteriorate accordingly. Lester quits his job but maintains his salary through the use of blackmail. His wife has a seamy affair with a business associate, and Jane indulges in an affair of her own with a voyeuristic boyfriend, Ricky Fitz.

Not the typical boy-next-door, Ricky has a fascination with homemade films, which he finances by dealing drugs. Among his new customers is Lester Burnham, whose rediscovered and mid-life-crisis-inspired marijuana habit is happily fed by Ricky, even while he fornicates with Lester's daughter. The whole sordid tale is tragically complicated by Ricky's stern military father Frank, who suspects his son is having a homosexual affair with Lester. It is with this apparent revelation that the film crescendos. But if the viewer has not gotten the film's point by this time, she will not get it all. The theme of the film is revealed mid-way through, and to miss it is necessarily to walk away from the movie with the impression that one has witnessed two hours of moral absurdity and meaningless tragedy. But to get the point of the film is not only to see the movie itself from a proper perspective but - and I don't think this is an overstatement - to see life itself from an enhanced point of view. No wonder viewers were so sharply divided on

this film, for either it is absurd or ingenious, a waste of time or utterly inspired, depending upon whether one gets it.

The theme of the film, and the interpretive linchpin for understanding the reason for all of the plot's chaos, emerges in a pivotal scene involving Jane and Ricky. While walking together they encounter a funeral procession, at which point the conversation turns to the subject of death. Ricky remarks that he once filmed a homeless woman who froze to death. Here is the exchange that follows:

Jane: "Why would you film something like that?"

Ricky: "Because it's amazing. When you see something like that, it's like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you're careful, you can look right back."

Jane: "And what do you see?"

Ricky: "Beauty."

Next, Ricky invites Jane to view "the most beautiful thing I ever filmed." He proceeds to show her a tape he made of a white plastic bag blown about in an alley.

Swirling up and down, to the right and to the left, this bag, he notes,

was just dancing with me, like a little kid begging me to play with it. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there is no reason to be afraid, ever ... Sometimes there is so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it. And my heart is going to cave in.

That this theme is expressed by Ricky is especially poignant, for he is the most tortured of the characters, oppressed by a tyrannical father, who regularly beats him. But at the film's conclusion we hear a reiteration of the same point, this time from the film's central character, Lester, who declares "it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once. And it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst ... and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life."

Film portrayals of human depravity are too numerous to count, and the alleged attempt to faithfully "show" just how bestial we can sometimes be has served as the rationale behind the most vile and obscene scenes on celluloid. The reason most such attempts fail as works of art is simple. The films themselves have nothing significant to say about the immorality they depict. Nor do they transcend the apparent absurdity of human life. *American Beauty* succeeds because it does have something significant to say and it does transcend the depravity depicted. But more than this, the film's very thesis is about this transcendence. Superficially, it shows us several confused people colliding in ridiculous and devastating ways. But the film's real focus is the purpose behind the chaos, the meaning amidst apparent meaninglessness. The bag metaphor is the film's central image, the lens through which the audience must view the moral chaos of the lives it visits. And to take this metaphor out of the theater into real life is to see the world in a whole new way

(assuming one does not already see things this way). The most tawdry and filthy details of our lives, we are told, somehow contribute to an overarching beauty. Because we are part of the mess, rather than standing above and beyond it, we cannot expect to see how this is so. But it is true nonetheless, and it is a truth that is worth our believing it even if we cannot argue for it. There might be no other way to salvage ultimate meaning.

American Beauty, like all great art, is a teacher. It teaches that moral ugliness can be part of something that is beautiful on the whole. More generally, but equally profound, is its claim that the world is an aesthetic phenomenon. And this is the theological lesson. Since artistry demands an artist, the film beckons us to see the entire cosmos as a work of art, continuously performed by God, the "benevolent force" to which Ricky Fitz refers. Fittingly, this insight comforted him and helped him to withstand the abuse he suffered at the hands of a cruel father. The film reminds the Christian that given divine providence and special concern for those who trust God, there really is nothing to fear long-term. There is, indeed, purpose in every detail and beauty to be found everywhere.

Seventeenth century philosopher G.W. Leibniz affirmed that ours is the best of all possible worlds.⁸ His reasoning was that since God is a perfectly rational being and perfect rationality always makes the best choices, then the world that God created had to be the best one. Thus, all appearances notwithstanding, ours

must be the best of all the possible worlds. Leibniz conceived this thesis in response to the persistent problem of evil, which has plagued Christian theology for most of the last two millennia. And he stood by his claim, despite the ridicule he received for defending it.⁹

American Beauty might be the best statement of Leibniz's thesis (or something like it) in the history of film (though some other fine recent films feature similar themes, including *Magnolia*, *Beautiful People*, and *Life is Beautiful*). There is an overarching beauty to the world to which even particularly ugly events contribute. Leibniz was far from alone among leading Christian thinkers who embraced this idea, though he was perhaps the most frank in his statement of it. The notion traces back at least as far as Augustine, and variants of the claim can be found in the works of Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, George Berkeley, and Jonathan Edwards, among others. Together these thinkers maintained that the beauty of God's plan supervenes over the details of the world's drama, however insignificant or absurd those details might appear. To put it another way, beauty is an "emergent" property, a characteristic that emerges at the macro-level of a thing, though it may not be present in all (or any) of the component parts. A human life, or community of human lives, may be appreciated for its aesthetic quality, if not for its moral goodness. And the beauty of a particular life or community may only be discernible when one steps back and adopts a "macro" perspective which sees

its narratives as a whole. The creators of *American Beauty* not only understood this point but were able to communicate it compellingly through film. For this reason it is a significant statement for the Christian, who believes in the transcendent beauty of historical narrative governed by God. For the theologian, it is a reminder that the aesthetic is a potentially fruitful category in the development of the doctrine of God, as well as other theological doctrines. And for all of us, it is a reminder that, as Solomon says, God "has made everything beautiful in its time."¹⁰

Conclusion

In addition to being superb instances of cinematic art, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Matrix*, and *American Beauty* provide significant food for theological thought. For those who are suspicious of my particular applications, perhaps this discussion can still be a useful model for how one might use cinematic themes to illustrate theological doctrines. As a discipline, theology does not advance in the same way that, say, the sciences and history do. Progress, rather, comes in the form of conceptual discoveries that highlight old truths in revealing ways or in finding new and helpful avenues for illustrating and illuminating the verities of the faith. Meditation on the arts, be it film or any other genre, is one legitimate, and largely untapped, resource for achieving theological progress. If, as Christians believe, it is true that God is the source of all that is, then we have a mandate to look just about everywhere to enhance our perspective. That includes the silver screen.

¹ The doctrine of original sin was first articulated by Augustine. See his *Confessions*, I.vii and *On Free Choice of the Will*, III.xx.

² John 3:3.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17. All biblical references taken from the New International Version of the Bible

⁴ Luke 12:48.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:18.

⁶ For a helpful discussion of these two models of providence, see Thomas P. Flint's "Two Accounts of Providence" in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, Thomas V. Morris, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 147-181.

⁷ For a further development of this model, see my "The Theological Orthodoxy of Berkeley's Immaterialism," *Faith and Philosophy*, 13:2 (April 1996).

⁸ See, for example, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*, trans. Daniel Garber and Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1991).

⁹ Voltaire's *Candide* is essentially a satire of Leibniz's thesis.

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 3:11.