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Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film

Abstract

This is a book review of *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film* by Jonathan Brant.

Author Notes

Dr. Kutter Callaway is Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. His musings are typically focused on film, music, technology, and contemporary culture. Kutter teaches courses for Fuller's Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts, one of which takes place at the Sundance Film Festival. He is the author of *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience*. He is currently authoring a book on the religious dimensions of televisual media and the poetics of episodic storytelling.

Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film, by Jonathan Brant. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Jonathan Brant has written an important book, one that reflects a subtle but significant shift within the scholarship on religion and film that recognizes the importance of actual ethnographic analyses. Brant's book is particularly helpful for those considering film from a theological perspective, for he seeks to develop a grounded account—a theoretical exploration of the possibility of revelation through the medium of film that is both anchored and refined by empirically generated data.

Brant recognizes the difficulties of such an integrative endeavor and, as a result, makes his methodological priorities explicit from the outset. “[I]n order to achieve the desired ends of this project, the theological, theoretical half of the research needed to be *prioritized* but should not be *privileged*” (8). By developing Paul Tillich's theology of revelation, Brant offers a working theory for both structuring and understanding the audience-based research he conducts. In a parallel fashion, data from a series of qualitative surveys and interviews “ground” Tillich's theological concepts and, in turn, function to expand and refine Tillich's largely theoretical account. Ultimately, by focusing this exploration on the medium of film, Brant does not seek to prove or disprove any particular accounting of revelation or to validate or invalidate any filmgoer's understanding of cinematic phenomena. Rather, Brant attempts to develop and employ a methodological model that can be utilized by researchers interested in on-the-ground cultural realities, where theological concepts intersect with lived experience. While some may question the particular theoretical account he chooses to “ground,” the real strength of the book is the utility of this methodological model for scholars of religion and film.

Part one of the text presents a description and evaluation of the religion and film discourse both in its (brief) historical development and in its contemporary manifestations. The first section concludes by positioning Brandt's research project in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of this emerging discourse. This first section is vital to his project, not simply because it elucidates the larger context in which his research is situated, but also because it calls out some of the problems within the religion and film discourse that his grounded account seeks to remedy or at least address. In particular, Brandt suggests that, in light of the research that has preceded his work, his project should (a) incorporate the voice of the actual viewer, (b) draw upon a range of critical tools and methods of analysis, and (c) not shy away from serious theology as a legitimate (albeit particular) account of filmgoing. His only caveat regarding this final point is that scholars (theologians or otherwise) must be open about their theories and methods so that they can be self-critical about them.

The second part, which includes chapters two and three, offers an analysis of Paul Tillich's theology of culture. Chapter two describes in detail Tillich's particular Christian theology of revelation, highlighting it as one that might serve as the basis of a grounded account. Brandt draws from Tillich's autobiography, his pre-exilic German writings, his *Systematic Theology*, and even his formative encounter with Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels* in order to engage in a more robust construal of Tillich's theoretical understanding of revelation through culture. Chapter three then presents a justification for why, in light of Tillich's interest in high culture and expressionist painting, his theory might also be appropriately applied to a popular cultural form like film.

Part three is concerned with the empirical portion of Brandt's research project. In chapter four he offers an extended argument for the value of qualitative research methods in the

discipline of religion and film, noting the ways in which his “grounded account” is distinct from the “grounded theory” that is prevalent in many qualitative research programs. In chapter five, he bolsters this argument by contextualizing his research project in order to present a more textured background for readers who may be unfamiliar with the cultural context of a Uruguayan cinema club yet still hope to make sense of the findings of his study. The chapter on contextualization leads logically into chapter six, which focuses on the new categories that arise from the data—those that chart different pathways for understanding the possibility of revelation through film.

Brandt concludes the book with an exploration of the ways in which the empirical research challenges Tillich’s theory of revelation through art (and in this case, film). He specifically notes the ways in which new models are called for in the religion and film discourse that might allow researchers to identify and describe the link that seems to exist between the subject matter of the artwork, the content of revelation, and the effect of revelation.

One of the greatest strengths of Brandt’s project has to do not so much with the results of his study, but with the simple fact that he grounds his critical reflection in empirical research. Much has been made in the religion and film discourse concerning the “turn toward the audience” and the importance of accounting for how actual viewers “make use” of media texts. However, the great bulk of scholarly work that continues to be produced in this ever-emerging discipline remains decidedly theoretical—abstracted even. There are a number of scholars in the field who have sought in earnest to incorporate audience-focused analyses into their work, including Chris Deacy (*Screen Christologies*), Melanie Wright (*Religion and Film*), and Craig Detweiler (*Into the Dark*). However, these books focus their energies primarily on the ways in which filmgoers articulate the value and meaning of their filmgoing in online forums, which, while often interesting, has significant limitations. Namely, the sample is heavily skewed toward

those who are not only avid filmgoers, but are also active in online discussion forums. “Average” viewers who represent the bulk of the population are far more sporadic in their movie watching, and far less involved in online fan discussions.

There are also those scholars who are fundamentally suspicious of empirical studies because of the prior commitments of their theoretical frameworks (e.g. Marxist, psychoanalytic, or critical theory). A classic example is the “cultural studies” approach of Margaret R. Miles’ *Seeing and Believing*, which goes to great lengths to emphasize the role of the audience in “meaning-making,” but nevertheless has to “theorize” the ways in which filmgoers might be responding to the ideological work of film. Because the “viewer” is a theoretical construct rather than an actual human being, audience surveys and questionnaires are thought to be unhelpful if not downright misleading and deceptive. Why ask someone what a film “means” when what really matters takes place either in the inarticulate realm of the individual’s subconscious or the invisible realm of society’s superstructures?

Brandt’s work thus offers a helpful way forward for scholars interested in religion and film. While recognizing the limitations of any qualitative research program, especially as it concerns questions of generalizability, Brandt presents a strong case for considering the ways in which filmgoers consciously understand and make use of their filmgoing. What is more, the book demonstrates the value of allowing empirical data to actively re-shape and re-frame the theoretical models that are often employed in the religion and film discipline. This approach reflects a broader shift toward qualitative research paradigms within the social sciences, which call upon empirical data to “ground” or otherwise act upon certain theoretical accounts. For this reason alone, Brandt’s book is worthwhile reading for scholars interested in the role that audiences play in the construction of cinematic meaning. But it is also a useful text insofar as it

identifies a compelling methodology that scholars of religion and film might employ in their attempts to understand more fully the religious significance of filmgoing as a cultural practice.

It should be noted that Brandt is not attempting to develop a “grounded theory” per se, but rather a “grounded account.” He actually starts with a fully elaborated theory, which first organizes the empirical data analytically, and then later becomes the object of his data-driven analysis. So Brandt’s is more of a “mixed-methods” form of qualitative research. And it is here that one of the key difficulties with Brandt’s approach comes to light. That is, his theoretical construct is wholly derived from the work of a single theologian—Paul Tillich. As Brandt rightly argues, Tillich is a significant figure within the Protestant Christian tradition and his work has exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent theologies of culture. However, given the tremendous amount of recent scholarship being produced in the fields of theological aesthetics, theology and culture, and analytic theology, all of which address the possibility of revelation in and through cultural forms, it would seem that developing a theoretical framework upon the work of a single theologian is rather limiting. This is not to say that Tillich’s theory is unhelpful or unimportant. In fact, the focus that Tillich’s particular theology brings to the analysis of Brandt’s empirical research is at times quite generative. Rather, it is simply to say that a study of this sort seems to cry out for a broader theoretical construct, one that draws upon the resources of other thinkers and, perhaps more importantly, other traditions of thought.

In the final analysis, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation Through Film* is a substantive text that is as compelling as it is insightful. In terms of its use in the classroom, the first chapter, which gives a descriptive and critical overview of the religion and film discipline, could be on the required reading list for any introductory religion and film class. However, the text as a whole is ideally suited for classes more specifically focused on the theological

significance of film and filmgoing. While it certainly offers a substantive contribution to the broader conversations concerning film that are taking place within the domain of religious studies, it will be most helpful for scholars and educators engaged in constructive or systematic theology.