

Bill—thank you for this paper, which has first of all provided us with a solid theological foundation for an understanding for some Protestant assumptions about images and their proper use, and secondly, has offered a hypothesis to initiate the investigation of our larger project. The thesis you outline here certainly describes my experience growing up in the 1970s and 80s in a Christian Reformed Church replete with felt banners emblazoned with Christian imperatives: “Rejoice!” and “Hope!” and “Give Thanks!” In imagining anything that might depart from the dynamic you describe, the only imagery I could think of was the annual round of seasonal decorations—the piles of pumpkins, the sneeze inducing banks of lilies, the poinsettias, garlands and Christmas trees. Aside from these, there was only one other visual that came and went, according to season or persuasion, and that was the American Flag.

In contemplating this response over the last weeks, I am struck with the difficulty of transcending one’s own experience, or—to use a metaphor—of becoming a “fish out of water” so as to recognize one’s own pond. It seemed that every example I could think of could be interpreted in this very Protestant way. Maybe, I began to wonder, I don’t even know how to ask any different questions? This is a difficulty we encounter as academics too, historians and theologians, for example taking deeply engrained habits of thought to any set of phenomena. So, considering the task outlined for this research project, and thinking about the points made today, a 1995 essay by W.T.J. Mitchell came to mind.

This piece, written for the *Art Bulletin on interdisciplinary and visual culture*¹ sketches a preliminary map of what Mitchell sees as the terrain of visual culture—phenomena that cross the boundaries of several disciplines and communities of inquiry (in our case, theology, history, aesthetics, art history, economics, etc.)

In surveying the field, Mitchell sketched out three sets of motivations for an interdisciplinary study of visual culture (which he defines as the social construction of visual experience.) The first is “top down.” It “seeks a structural formation that aims to know the overarching system or conceptual totality” which relates different realms one to the other. The second is “bottom-up.” This sort of questioning “emerges on the shop-floor in response to emergencies and opportunities.” It calls on different disciplines as necessary in order to address the question at hand. Mitchell calls the third type of inquiry “inside-out,” which occurs when a scholar pushes the implications of a particular discipline so far, and so deep, that something looking quite different emerges from the other side. He offers the work of Edward Said and Jacques Lacan as examples of “inside-out” interdisciplinarity (I might add something like David Freedburg’s Power of Images as an example of “inside-out” interdisciplinarity with respect to my own field of art history.²

¹ *Art Bulletin* 77 (December 1995): 540-544. I am personally drawn to Mitchell’s confession that “I’ve never felt that it was a point of pride to claim interdisciplinarity as a crucial feature of what I do. My usual reflex, on the contrary, is a kind of escalating shame at the increasing number of disciplines in which I find myself certifiably incompetent” (541).

² Mitchell discusses visual culture as art-history’s version of “inside-out” interdisciplinarity. The field’s emphasis on popular rather than elite cultural imagery represents the “outside” limits of the field, and its emphasis on visuality the deep “inside” of the field.

Mitchell proposes that the study of visual cultures is predominantly “a convergence and an outgrowth of ... two kinds of disciplines, which correspond roughly to the ‘shop-floor, bottom-up’ and the ‘top-down’ models of modern knowledge.” I think you can see where I am headed with this. The trajectory just outlined for us in Bill’s paper seems to me a “top-down” perspective on the phenomena under investigation--essential to identify and map, foundational to any larger project. My own questions seem to be “bottom-up” kinds of questions. So, my remarks will be organized around these rubrics: comments on the trajectory mapped by Bill’s presentation interspersed with some wonderings about what the “bottom-up” view might contribute to this interdisciplinary endeavor.

Images and Theophany

As I read Bill’s paper, I was struck most forcefully by its starting point: the theology of John Calvin. After stating the opening question “Is the [Protestant] tradition...under the influence of the contemporary explosion of visual media, undergoing a subtle transformation?” He provides his thesis—no. Rather, the “logo-centrism of this tradition [is] adapting itself to this new culture, coexisting with it, without being transformed in any fundamental way.”

Key to the thesis is that for most Protestants, the proclamation of the word is the locus of “theophanic” activity—this view is exemplified in the writings of Calvin where the emphasis is on the drama of the salvation narrative presented in scripture and animated by inspired reading and preaching. Within this framework, visual elements are

“parasitic” on the word—they are seen to depend on the word for comprehensibility and they are valued by viewers for their ability to recall or enact “the word.”

First question, within this theological framework, I would like to hear more about how this intersects or doesn't intersect with two other forms of theophanic revelation to which Calvin gives considerable weight: The *imago dei*, and especially general revelation.

Maybe what's at issue here is how “theophanic” imagery relates to knowledge of God versus saving knowledge of God, or presence versus incarnation.

When I hear my students talk about nature imagery, the photographs of Ansel Adams, for example, I hear lots of language about the majesty of God—not so much about the drama of salvation. Occasionally people will cite a scriptural verse. But is this genuinely parasitic on the word? Or, when piously inclined viewers use nature images for devotion (or worship) do they experience something of God that transcends the creation narration in Genesis and the words of some of the Psalms? In these cases, does the scriptural tag merely provide the conventional protestant “legitimization” for an experience that is properly theophanic, but not fundamentally dependent on the verse? To put the question differently, when are images truly parasitic on the word, and when might the words of scripture be the Protestant's habitual way of trying to understand what is happening?

Or more problematic—and I hate to even bring him up—but all those Thomas Kinkade paintings with their tamer view of Nature's grandeur, legitimated by the Bible verse affixed to the frame on a little brass plaque. There is clearly an attempt at parasitism

here. But I would want to know—for those viewers who find these pictures inspiring, refreshing, and restful—how active a part of their imaginative engagement is that bible verse? Or is it the white gazebo next to the trickling brook in a manicured garden that the viewer could only dream of achieving in his or her own suburban backyard? People do use Kinkade pictures as devotional aids. Is there an attempt at Protestant parasitism here that seeks to mask something deeply culturally specific and profoundly theologically problematic? (And would an Orthodox or Catholic Kinkade fan be inclined to respond to these images in confessionally distinct ways? But kitch always complicates things....)

So, are there in fact ways in which images may be functioning in a non-parasitic way, but are still legitimated with a biblical gloss—for good or for ill (Ansel Adams vs. Thomas Kinkade) and, more challenging, how would we ever get at this, given our human and academic dependence on language?

The Uses of Parasitism

Second Question: let's imagine for a moment that in fact, virtually all imagery circulating in Protestant contexts is in fact parasitic on the word. I think the next question to ask, is what are all these parasitic images doing? I've been thinking about what's up with all the painting being done in church these days. An artist at an easel, painting away during the worship service. Personally, I've only seen it once. But my students tell me this is going on in lots of churches. If the painting is understood to be a representation of the sermon—that's clearly parasitic. If the painting represents one individual's response to the sermon—well, that's parasitic, too. But what intrigues me, here, is not so much that

it's parasitic—as that it is an individual's response to the word. You wouldn't (I don't think) see this happening in a Catholic church, and I can't imagine this happening in an Orthodox church. But it does happen in a Protestant church because Protestants, typically, emphasize an individual response to the word. The popular notion of art as “personal expression” resonates deeply with protestant inclination toward a highly individual experience of faith—resulting in something that I think is new, and notable—even if it is parasitic on the word.

A slightly different example. Last fall I attended a church in Santa Barbara on “Mission Emphasis” Sunday. The walls of the sanctuary in this very white congregation were hung with beautiful, enormous (5' x 7') head-shots of various non-white people from Asia, Africa and South America. Certainly an example of the use of imagery in worship. One might also say that these were parasitic on the word—representative of all the people encompassed in the great commission. Beyond that, I would say that these parasitic images were problematic—reinforcing stereotypes of who has the gospel and who needs the gospel. (Though, to return to an earlier point, one might see them as potential theophanic encounters with the *imago dei* in others, initiations to collaborate with the saints around the world—but they didn't!)

So, if, in the case that it is concluded that the overwhelming majority of images in protestant contexts are parasitic on the word—what then? Do we want to begin asking what they doing for the church, for good or ill. Reinforcing the importance of personal,

emotional response—fine (if it's not at the expense of the larger body of Christ).

Reinforcing cultural stereotypes—not so good.

Images, Expression and Worship

A third cluster of wonderings, less well defined for me, has to do with the relationship between “theophany” and worship. Though this paper uses as its rubric “experiencing God” the larger project is about “sacred imagery.” In developing the trajectory of the authority of the inspired word for Protestant experiences of God's presence, we also need to consider how that fits into the spectrum of activities encompassed in private and public Worship. Is worship all theophany? In addition to mediating God's presence, worship requires individual and communal response, and creates a sense of shared identity as Christ's body. Are visual phenomena that participate in “response” and “identity” as parasitic on the word as “theophanic” images that seek to mediate God?

One last example: A saintly woman in a particular Calvinist congregation dies. A close friend of hers makes a quilt—white on white with a wheat-sheaf pattern. This quilt is used as the pall for the funeral. It is so beautiful, and so fitting a work (a quilt to embrace the beloved dead), that soon other families in the congregation ask to use the quilt for burials. The quilt eventually becomes associated with that church. After functioning for some time as the congregation's common funeral pall, someone proposes that the quilt be hung in the front of the church during Lent, with a purple background, and into Easter with a White background, year after year.

Taking this quilt at face value, its symbolism is clearly scriptural. But the instincts that generated it—the convergence of medium and use—the impact of multiple encounters at funeral homes, funeral services—the resonance of repeated insertions into the Liturgical calendar—seem to me to go beyond a parasitic relationship to the word. A piece like this embraces concrete human experience—dozens of individual lives—and yes, it does, when inserted into the church calendar insert those lives into the drama of salvation. This seems more an act of faith to me, than a mere illustration of the gospel.

Thus, this lovely quilt--that creates identity, links life to worship, and locates the grief of individual passings in the larger cycle of the church's remembering--brings me back to those pumpkins, poinsettias, and flags I mentioned at the beginning. Those paltry substitutes for the stately turning of the Church Year are not acts of faith, nor are they parasitic on the word—rather they are parasitic on the commercially driven round of holidays hyped in the culture at large. Nonetheless, they are present in some way, in most Protestant churches, and they do shape our sense of God, the church, and our neighbor. I've never liked them. Perhaps it is because they are rooted in commercial culture rather than in the word. Which would, in the end, support your point. Thus, the “bottom-up” perspective, and the “top-down” do meet, and perhaps have discovered not only a tool to see what is habitual—but also a diagnostic to begin considering what is proper and fitting for the use of the Church.