

## TRADITIONAL STORY AND CONTEMPORARY SEEING

*In the beginning, Biblical stories were told, orally or in writing, but it is their written form which has largely captured Protestant imagination. They found other shapes in the middle ages, through sculpture or paint or colored glass or mystery play, but the Reformation, influenced by the great traditions of classical learning, reestablished the theological primacy of the word and relegated these alternative tellings to the margin, or in some cases, well beyond. Film theorist Bela Balasz sadly observed that this development finally shattered the unity of the medieval church, previously expressed visually by the cathedral, just as the printing press "tore the church into a thousand books."*

*Yet these stories not only live but continue to call forth visual response, and in each generation find artists who respond to them in fresh and compelling ways. Why should this be? Are there dimensions to these narratives not exhausted by traditional storytelling, song, sermon?*

*One clue may be found in an interesting imaginative connection between notions of religious inspiration and some of the words we use to refer to sight. The term "vision," used generically, refers to the capacity to see. But "a vision" connotes a quality of seeing which moves toward a conception with religious dimensions, and "visionaries" are persons who look beyond practical immediacies toward larger ideal patterns. Again, in a parallel example, the verb "to see" has a general meaning, but "I see," unless one's sight has just been*

*suddenly restored, generally means "I understand," and the "seers" among us are often our prophets.*

*Behind this play of language lies broad cultural experience: religious dimensions of experience find a variety of forms of expression, of which the visual forms are both unique and powerful. And in our culture, the special custodians, practitioners, and creators of these forms are our artists— they call us to see, help us to see, teach us to see. Painter Audrey Flack says "Artists are the shamans, the priests and priestesses, the magicians of society." And even the youngest visual art has discovered something similar, as witness film director V. I. Pudovkin: "The basic aim of cinema is to teach people to see all things new..."*

*Thus contemporary artists engaged by these stories often find themselves employing this revelatory power of seeing to construct visual corollaries beyond the resources of language. When they do this, and especially when in doing so they approach the stories not to update them or translate them, nor least of all to illustrate them, but rather to be grasped by them, inspired by them, to bring them into dialog or conflict with their own life experience and their own way of seeing, they can often forge for all of us new ways of conceiving and understanding not only these stories, but ourselves as well.*

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