Ricoeur’s Theory of Narrative as a Theory of Popular Cultural Religion

Ricoeur’s Theory of Narrative as a

Theory of Popular Cultural Religion

Although Ricoeur developed his theory of narrative with literary novels in mind, I would argue that it can also be read as a theory of religion, and as a theory of popular culture. Moreover, it can illuminate the connection between the two, the ways popular culture can function as religion.[13] We shall see that popular culture functions as religion in the way it represents reality, similar to the way a narrative represents reality. We shall explore parallels between popular culture, religion, and narrative as I lay out a précis of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative as a threefold mimesis, using a group of women who read romance novels as an illustration throughout. Later, I will apply this perspective on another example, a 1980s London dance club. Finally, I will offer some conclusions and some possible directions for a deeper engagement between Christians and popular culture.

Mimesis and Emplotment

Ricoeur’s theory begins as a theory of representation, that is, how we interpret reality and re-display it to ourselves. As such, this theory has applicability to all sorts of cultural products and actions: art, religion, popular culture—wherever humans try to show themselves what life is like. Ricoeur calls this process “mimesis,” imitation.

In considering different theories of mimesis, Ricoeur rejects the Platonic, “specular” model, where representation is judged according to how realistically it mirrors reality.[14] The specular model leaves no room for human interpretation, for art. In other words, the humanness of the human reflection of reality in mimesis is ignored. So Ricoeur turns instead to Aristotle’s Poetics for a model of representation where human agency is necessary for mimesis. For Aristotle, mimesis is always a creative and interpretive representation. Aristotle is most interested in the mimesis of human action and suffering,[15] and that happens through a process of “emplotment”: the arrangement of events into an ordered narrative whole, a plot.[16] In this way, narrative actually augments the meaning of the world of human action and suffering by creating a fictional “world” with its own intelligibility, its own coherence.[17]

Already we can begin to see how this theory might clarify some of the functional connections between popular culture and religion. Once we start talking about ordering the meaning of the world of action and suffering, we are beginning to enter religious territory. Religion, in many cases, concerns interpreting our world, our actions, and our suffering.[18] And this kind of religious activity happens in popular culture. Consider the experience of going to a good movie, the experience of being drawn into a “world” apart, a separate reality where human action and suffering is augmented, and the feeling of returning to the everyday world once the credits roll. All of a sudden, Johnson’s description of the movie theater as cathedral that I quoted in the epigraph starts making more sense, because what happens in the dark is akin to a sacred experience, the ephemeral creation of a world of meaning, a quasi-holy mimesis. Or consider how youths can find a metaphysical focal point in a rock ‘n’ roll song, using it to express their discontent with the world as it is, and expressing a vision of the world as it should be. All of a sudden, Sam Phillips’ statement about rock ‘n’ roll changing the world (also in the epigraph) does not seem quite so overblown, for just there a religious mimesis occurs. When considered in this way, popular culture clearly encroaches on themes such as the suppressed knowledge of God and idolatry—territory that Paul addresses in Romans 1:18-25 (more on that below).

The Threefold Mimesis

But the connections, I believe, become even clearer once we consider Ricoeur's theory of narrative in more detail. Ricoeur analyzes the way narrative mimesis mediates our experience of time in terms of three dialectically connected moments that he calls $mimesis_1$, $mimesis_2$, and $mimesis_3$; or prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration respectively.[19]

$Mimesis_1$: Narrative Prefiguration as Revelational Provocation

$Mimesis_1$ has to do with the network of structures of everyday life that call forth narrative and make story-telling possible: the symbolic rules for interpreting action, social and ethical norms, even the way our experience of time changes subtly when we are practically engaged (what Heidegger calls "within-time-ness").[20] This pre-narrative network of structures gives our lives a quality of stories-not-yet-told, the "living imbrication from which the told story emerges."[21] This life-context provokes stories and renders such stories intelligible. Further, Ricoeur says, "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated."[22] Ricoeur brings to his theory a presupposition about the worth of human lives, that they are worthy of attention, worthy of storytelling.

Is this pre-narrative context simply the neutral background noise of our lives? A Christian theory of popular culture as religion would have to say, "No." In fact, the language Ricoeur uses is strongly reminiscent of the kind of "background noise" that Paul talks about in Romans 1:18-25, what theologians call general revelation: the knowledge of God that is built into the cosmos. It is a passage that is worth quoting at length:

> The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the beginning of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
>
> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.
> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

In this remarkable passage, Paul asserts that God has built into the universe a dynamic whereby he is continually being revealed , but also where that knowledge is continually being suppressed by sinful humans as we reorient our core desires towards substitute gods.[23] Though Paul does not tell us exactly how this knowledge is communicated, he does point us in the general direction: the arena of creation that displays God's "eternal power and divine nature." Paul sees a significant connection between this revelation that comes through creation and the tragic foolishness of exchanging the worship of God for the worship of the creature. Idolatry, then, is a willful confusion over the significance of creation. In idolatry, we short-circuit creation's job of gesturing toward its Creator, and find instead something in creation itself that is worthy of service and worship. Note the bitter irony here: it is in creation that God's power and character are displayed, and that is why it serves as such choice source material for the sinful, twisted interpretation of idolatry.[24] The overall picture that Paul paints for us, then, is of false worship that springs from the context of a creation that is structured to be intensely meaningful (though sinful humans constantly, willfully misconstrue that meaning).[25]

It is here that Ricoeur's account of $mimesis_1$ as a life-context that provokes narrative and enables stories to be told resonates with Christian theology. Indeed, without these biblical presuppositions, Ricoeur's theory ultimately makes little sense. His theory insists that life is structured to be both

intelligible and significant, but why should it be? Life is intelligible because God made the world as a backdrop of a meaningful story ready to unfold. Ricoeur emphasizes the way humans care about motivations and how to interpret each other's actions. Doesn't that point to God's lovingkindness towards his creatures and the communitarian character of the Trinity reflected in our lives? Ricoeur asserts that we all know, finally, that human lives are worthy of storytelling rather than silence. But he never says why. A Christian approach would point to the knowledge of our own dignity because we have been created in God's image.[26] Finally, Ricoeur claims that these pre-narrative structures provoke a response. But why should they? A biblical perspective provides an answer: they provoke a response just because they are revelation. Revelation always provokes a religious response—we are provoked either to covenant submission to or rebellion against God. This is the pattern that Paul describes in Romans 1:18-25: God reveals himself in various ways, and humans, apart from God's grace, respond religiously, that is, in idolatry.

Let us be more concrete: what do these "pre-narrative structures" that serve as general revelation look like? Doubtless, we need to keep a functional perspective and ask, "What can act as general revelation?" Any natural, cultural, social, or temporal structures could be used as general revelation, and therefore would provoke a religious response. The "living imbrication from which the told story emerges"[27] to which Ricoeur refers is potentially as broad as life itself: the beauty of nature, romantic love, a concern for social justice—anything. Even sinful structures, such as social oppression, can be provocative in just this way. The experience of oppression holds a mirror to our fallenness and God's wrath revealed from heaven—it spurs people to look beyond what is immediately given them to something more deeply meaningful within their experience.

Let me give an example of a pre-narrative/revelational context in action. In 1984, Janice Radway published her justly celebrated ethnographic study of a group of middle-aged women from a small city in the mid-western United States (a town she calls "Smithton") who all bought romance novels from the same bookstore during the 1980s.[28] Radway investigated the romance novel industry, the way these books were used, why any given novel was liked or disliked, and the impact these books had upon the Smithton women. For these women, romance novel reading is a "world," a sort of quasi-religion (as we shall see later).

What was the pre-narrative context out of which this world arose? What was the general revelational context that provoked their particular religious response? Radway notes that these readers all shared a similar experience and background. All were female, most were married with children under the age of eighteen, and most did not work outside the home, or only worked in part-time jobs.[29] Further, all of them shared a need for "escape"—not from their families per se, but from the dull routine of housework and errands, of being emotionally and physically drained by the needs of children and husbands (who often showed little gratitude, assistance or affirmation).[30] In other words, their experience of patriarchal society as expecting much and giving little in return provided the provocation to which the romance novel served as a religious answer, the text-world that they would inhabit through the ritual of reading. The tensions these women experienced everyday is their "mimesis1." But how is this experience of patriarchy general revelation? From a biblical perspective, these women experience life on a fallen planet and alienation from God in terms of isolation and lack of appreciation and affirmation. Such women feel, through patriarchy, the "wrath of God that is being revealed" (Ro 1:18), the way the creation-order groans under the weight of futility after the Fall (Ro 8:20-22).[31]

In this way, popular culture (in this case, the act of reading romance novels) responds to the provocation of the pre-narrative, revelational context that surrounds us. Let us turn our attention from the pre-narrative context to the narrative response (for our purposes, the religious response), which Ricoeur calls mimesis$_2$.

Mimesis$_2$: Narrative Configuration as Religious World-building

In Ricoeur's narrative theory, mimesis1 prepares for and provokes narrative. In mimesis$_2$, or configuration, the focus shifts to the narrative response to that provocation. Here we reach emplotment proper, the creation of a "world of the text." Mimesis$_2$ for Ricoeur is Janus-faced, a moment of mediation or connection between the pre-narrative context (mimesis$_1$) and the effects of the narrative text-world in the reader's world (mimesis$_3$).

So on the one hand, mimesis2 takes the raw material from the pre-narrative context and shapes it, combining the elements of a story (events, characters, circumstances, etc.) into a tensive whole, a "concordant discordance."[32] In this way, narrative configuration draws from its context to create a "world of the text," a sphere of meaning with its own peculiar sense of time. Time in a text-world is both linear (one event after another) and synoptic (a purpose-filled sense of the whole story throughout).[33]

On the other hand, mimesis2 also reaches forward in the dialectic and influences experience and perspective of the reader (mimesis3) by shaping the experience of reading itself. The world of the text generates schemata, rules that governing its own interpretation (that is, how the point of the story relates to the way the characters, episodes, and circumstances are portrayed).[34] These schemata in turn generate specific literary histories, what Ricoeur calls "traditionality." Each work has its own "traditionality," an existence that draws on the tension between "sedimentation" (solidifying the tradition) or "innovation" (breaking away from the tradition).[35]

I would argue that this creation of a text-world describes what happens in religion as well. Religions create (or, to use Ricoeur's term, "configure") a separate world of meaning, a world with its own sense of space and time. The great "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are quite obviously text-worlds, but a similar creative (or better, re-creative) dynamic is at work in all religions. They all create their own text-worlds, networks of symbols for habitation with their own sense of time and space. People collectively create these worlds in response to the wonders and/or tensions of lived experience (what I called earlier revelational provocation). Like narrative text-worlds, these religious text-worlds combine disparate elements (symbols, doctrines, stories) into a meaningful whole, a concordant dissonance. And like the narrative text-worlds of mimesis$_2$, religious text-worlds generate schemata, traditions for how they are to be understood.

Such text-worlds arise not only in the great world religions, but in popular culture as well. Every day, popular culture offers us various worlds for habitation, and I would argue that these worlds have a specifically religious significance—that is, they function as ways of groping towards transcendence through created structures. Let us consider again our example of the Smithton women. We saw their "revelational provocation": the experience of patriarchal oppression. We should then expect a religious response to that provocation, à la Romans 1. What, then, is their creative-religious response to that provocation? How do these women create or appropriate a religious text-world? This is the question posed by mimesis$_2$.

Obviously, the world of the romance novel constitutes their functional religious text-world. But not just any romance novel will do. These women have very particular expectations of what the ideal romance novel contains. Using survey and interview data, Radway sketched what the Smithton women expect out of an ideal romance—that is, how their religious text-world must be shaped.[36] The ideal romance must focus on a monogamous heterosexual relationship (no love triangles to confuse things).[37] The heroine must be beautiful, fiercely intelligent, and have a fiery disposition that rebels against the expectations of her parents and society—and all this without losing her tenderhearted femininity.[38] She must be sexually innocent (at the beginning of the book), but not for moral reasons, but only because she refuses to be used by men: she does not live for their wishes.[39] In other words, the heroine, as the site of reader identification, is a projection of the desire to be realized as a fully independent, interesting, and significant human subject (as opposed to being an object, whether as a domestic or sex-object).[40]

The ideal romantic hero must be masculine, a leader, at first seemingly harsh and uncaring, but with hints of compassion, and sexually experienced (because he has not yet found the right woman).[41] Further, there must be a variety of "foils," rivals that serve merely to highlight the ideal characteristics of the heroine and hero.[42] There must of course be villains who threaten the relationship (the sexually manipulative female, or the controlling, predatory male who wants only sex, not relationship).[43]

These stock characters inhabit a highly standardized narrative structure. The story always begins with an isolated, emotionally empty heroine, who develops relational conflict with the seemingly distant hero (though his distance and even cruelty are later revealed as the scars of a past hurt). The

heroine, through her feminine will and tenderness, is able to start to bring out the hidden compassion in the hero. The two are separated by certain events, and later reunited, finally resulting in an open declaration of the hero's love for the heroine. The heroine responds with emotional and sexual passion, which leads to the "happy ending" and an implied future marriage, and perhaps children.[44]

Notice how exquisitely tailored this popular text-world is: it meets the specific pre-narrative provocation in a most elegant manner. The typical Smithton woman faces the emotionally unsatisfying existence of a housewife in a patriarchal society. She feels neither appreciated nor relationally nurtured.[45] This popular text-world responds with a salvation story of sorts. The heroine in these novels successfully transforms the harsh, uncaring male into a caring lover: the perfect combination of "fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love."[46] The heroine experiences both sexual passion and parental nurturing from the same individual.[47] Thus the structure of the narrative world works as a "utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy," a dream-world that offers substitute satisfactions and makes her feel worthy and alive.[48] Here is where the Smithton women encounter the sacred. The world of the romance novel serves as a functional religion.

But our analysis remains incomplete if we merely note the contours of the religious popular cultural text-world. We must also consider how such worlds are inhabited. So we turn to Ricoeur's account of mimesis$_3$, or "refiguration," where the world of the text and the world of the reader meet.

Mimesis$_3$: Narrative Refiguration as Religious Ritual

In Ricoeur's theory, mimesis$_3$ marks the completion of narrative representation in reading, "the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader."[49] Here the narrative traditions and patterns generated in mimesis$_2$ are made concrete, brought to life through reading. In reading, we enter and inhabit narrative worlds and bring them to life. In this sense, the reader completes the story—the imaginative world generated by the story is actually a "joint work of the text and reader."[50]

Therefore, Ricoeur spends quite a bit of time laying out a phenomenology of reading, that is, how inhabiting the world of the text through reading actually transforms the reader.[51] Ricoeur draws upon the work of Wolfgang Iser. In Iser's understanding of reading, the reader processes the text gradually, organizing the information received from the text, selecting familiar patterns, rejecting unfamiliar ones.[52] But the unfamiliar soon overwhelms the familiar as the reader becomes entangled in alien patterns that resist the reader's patterning activity.[53] The result is an ever more complex, ever richer network of connections that solidifies an imaginative world. The reader becomes familiarized into the unfamiliar, awakened to a new perspective, as his or her old perspective sinks into the background.[54] The reader is compelled to see life through other eyes, through the eyes of the text, and this alien perspective becomes the reader's (a sort of "fusion of horizons," to borrow Anthony Thiselton's memorable phrase).[55] This negotiation between the familiar and the unfamiliar changes us. We are "refigured" by the world of the text, and we return to the everyday world with an altered perspective.

Obviously, this account of reading also applies to the way worshippers enter into the world of their sacred text through reading the Bible, the Koran, the Gita, etc. But couldn't we also see ritual as a kind of "reading" the world of the sacred? Through symbolic performances, worshippers enter into the world of religious meanings, combining performance with sacred stories to bring that world of meaning to life. Ritual makes the unfamiliar more familiar. It can profoundly refigure the participant, returning him or her to the everyday world with an altered perspective. In fact, ritual is more like reading (in Ricoeurean terms) than simple visual reading, since ritual is more enveloping, involving the body, and oftentimes community as well. Think of the Passover meal, the Lord's Supper, or of Hindu dances to Krishna.

But there are popular cultural rituals, too, such as the ritual of going to a dance club, or to the ballpark, or to a movie on a date. Are these somehow less religious? In God in the Details, a recent collection of essays on religion in American popular culture, the editors Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy single out four effects that emerge from various popular cultural rituals, and each of these resonates with Ricoeur's analysis of reading narrative:[56]

1. Ritual creates a sense of sacred time and space, just as reading allows us to inhabit a text-world with its own unique sense of time and place. We dwell in a text-world with its own sense of purpose-filled time.

2. Ritual transforms personal identity, often suspending ordinary social identities to create an intimate community of equals, or what Victor Turner calls *communitas*.[57] In Ricoeur's theory too, inhabiting a text-world "refigures" our identity—purpose-filled narrative time changes those who bathe in it.

3. Ritual exposes and resolves lived tensions and conflicts, very like the way Ricoeur sees narrative and reading as a tensive process, a "concordant discordance."

4. Finally, Mazur and McCarthy note that, unlike traditional rituals, popular rituals lack fixed, coherent meanings. They seem tradition-less. They lack what Ricoeur would call "traditionality" (the way the work lays out patterns for how the text fits into the received tradition of the reading community). But on closer inspection, there does indeed seem to be a looser form of traditionality in popular cultural communities. Witness the outrage on fan internet message boards when television producers mess with the tradition (by, for example, changing the appearance of Klingons in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*),[58] or the outrage of the Smithton women when romance writers take liberties with the genre.[59] There is still a "tradition-mindedness," even within popular culture.[60]

All of this is simply to emphasize that religious ritual is part and parcel of popular culture, especially if we view popular ritual from a Ricoeurean perspective. Not all of these effects emerge from every popular cultural ritual, but some certainly do. And the presence of such ritual effects implies that even in the realm of the popular, powerful symbolic and religious meanings emerge from everyday performances. Rituals in popular culture can serve as gateways into these popular cultural religious text-worlds.

The way narrative refigures readers in $mimesis_3$ strongly suggests the way religion refigures its adherents. Religion never stops at the church, mosque or temple door. It always spills out onto the street, into everyday living.[61] Popular cultural texts and rituals similarly refigure their "readers" (or viewers, or listeners, etc.) through their cumulative impact upon human consciousness.[62] These popular rituals and narratives change people's worldviews and group ethos, their ethical motivations. They affect (or perhaps even effect) identity; that is, they decisively influence the individual's sense of relationship with others, with one's own specific place and time, and with oneself. In this way, $mimesis_3$ also describes the impact of popular text-worlds upon human life and identity in a way that could be described as religious.[63]

Let me illustrate this refiguring power of popular ritual by returning once again to the Smithton women. We saw their revelational provocation ($mimesis_1$), and the religious-creative response offered in the world of the romance novel ($mimesis_2$). What, then, is the Smithton women's ritual means of inhabiting this religious text-world ($mimesis_3$)? Obviously, one enters a romance novel through reading, but for these women, reading itself takes on ritualistic qualities.[64] Ritual creates a sacred space and time. In Radway's interviews, the Smithton women consistently spoke of their reading habits in terms of creating a special space or time for themselves, an opportunity to escape into another world and another time.[65] Reading romance novels became for them a ritual for creating sacred time and space that transcended the drudgery of the everyday.[66]

Ritual provides a sense of personal transformation (or "refiguration") by exposing and resolving the tensions of lived existence. It was no different for the Smithton women's experience of reading. The typical Smithton woman felt herself transformed in reading through her imaginative identification with the heroine and her tensions and experiences. Radway notes:

> [A]ll the women I spoke to . . . admitted that they want to identify with the heroine as she attempts to comprehend, anticipate, and deal with the ambiguous attentions of a man who inevitably cannot understand her feelings at all. The point of the experience is the sense of exquisite tension, anticipation, and excitement created within the reader as she imagines the

> possible resolutions and consequences for a woman of an encounter with a member of the opposite sex and then observes that once again the heroine in question has avoided the ever-present potential for disaster because the hero has fallen helplessly in love with her.[67]

The parallels between the romantic climax (where the hero expresses love for the heroine) and more traditional religious understandings of redemption are obvious: salvation and the promised "life to the full" comes after a pilgrimage from relational emptiness and tension to passionate and sensual release of tension, of being fully appreciated by her partner—heaven on earth. And the Smithton women take that journey with the heroine through the ritual act of reading. From a certain perspective, reading becomes a sacramental exercise, imbibing the experience of redemption over and over again.[68]

Further, the specific way this redemption is configured points to the way ritual exposes and resolves the tensions of the reader's lived experience. The typical Smithton woman lives among the tensions of being wanted and needed, yet not appreciated, of constantly being drained and of being expected to sustain everyone around her. The ritual of romance reading imaginatively resolves those tensions by transporting the reader into a world where she is the center of attention, the object of affection of an intelligent, emotionally caring man. It is, in effect, a desire to be the center of the universe, a form of self-worship, "a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way."[69]

Looking at the overall picture of this type of popular cultural consumption, are the Smithton women really engaged in something religious? From the perspective I have been describing, the answer would have to be "Yes." There is a clear pre-narrative (and general revelational) context in the tensions of their everyday experience (the draining reality of patriarchy). There is a coherent text-world with its own salvific motifs built into the narrative (emotional and sensual validation by the hero). And there are clear ritualistic patterns used to enter this text-world (reading as an escape into another world that transforms the reader). This popular cultural "world" functions as an alternative religion.

To sum up: I have argued that Ricoeur's theory of threefold narrative mimesis can be interpreted as a perspective from which to understand religion in general, and the functional religious impact of popular cultural text-worlds in particular. In Ricoeur's theory, pre-narrative lived structures ($mimesis_1$) provoke the configuration of a narrative text-world ($mimesis_2$) that is inhabited by reading, and the effects spill out into the everyday world, having a decisive impact upon the identity and perspective of the reader ($mimesis_3$). In my biblical appropriation of Ricoeur's theory, this three-fold pattern can also describe a religious arc that is grounded in the structures, tensions and wonders of lived experience that function as general revelation ($mimesis_1$). These provoke a religious response, provoking the creation of a religious "text-world" ($mimesis_2$). These worlds are inhabited through various ritual behaviors, and this habitation in turn impacts and alters the worldview, ethics, and identity of its inhabitants ($mimesis_3$).[70] Where we find this pattern, this arc comprised of revelational provocation → world-creating response → ritual habitation, I would argue we find a functional religion. It is religious not simply because of this distinctive pattern, but because from a biblical perspective, God ought to be at the center of this world-making/world-interpreting activity. When he is not, when some created thing or person is substituted for him, even if it is good (and the Bible affirms that creation *is* good), then it must be called idolatry. And idolatry is, by definition, a religious act. The creative interpretation of reality via the threefold mimesis is God's territory, and any usurpation of it by something other than God is necessarily a rival form of worship, a form of idolatry.[71] The next question is, then, can this model of the threefold mimesis contribute to a Christian understanding of popular cultural "worlds" as alternative religions, and what sorts of insights can it illumine?

Notes...

[13] Please note that I am not working from Ricoeur's theological works; these have been set aside. Rather, I want to make the case simply from his language philosophy from the 1980s and early 90s.

[14] Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," in Mario J. Valdés, ed., *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 137-38.

[15] By "suffering," Ricoeur does not mean events that are necessarily painful. Rather, he uses the

word to indicate the opposite of action, that is, being acted upon.
[16]Ricoeur, “Mimesis and Representation,”138.
[17]Ricoeur, “Mimesis and Representation,”139.
[18]See for example Peter Berger’s definition of religion as “the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos [i.e. human suffering],” in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 51.
[19] For a detailed description of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative as a three-fold Mimesis, see Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis,” chap. in Time and Narrative, volume 1, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52-87. For Ricoeur, time is the most basic of human experiences, and he wrote his famous three volume work as an attempt to untangle our experience of time.
[20] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 54-64.
[21] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 75-76.
[22] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 75.
[23] This is how I understand the force of the present participles in verse 18, Ἀποκαλύπτεται (“is being revealed”) and κατεχόνων (“who are suppressing the truth”). It is an ever-present dynamic, more akin to a river current against which we fight than simply static information about God. The unbeliever is continually trying to canoe upstream, and idols serve as convenient paddles.
[24] For more on the dynamic of general revelation and idolatry, see Theodore Turnau, “Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (Nov. 2002): 270-96, especially 286-94.
[25] There are other passages concerning general revelation, such as Ps 19, Isa 28:23-29, and Acts 14:17, but we do not have the space to consider them here. Taken together, however, it is clear that general revelation concerns more than simply revealing God’s wrath. God’s goodness, power, generosity and mercy are also on display through creation. This is why Paul targets ingratitude and failure to worship as being at the center of the sinful response to the knowledge of God in Ro 1:21.
[26]By “knowledge” here I mean the suppressed knowledge of God referred to in Ro 1:18-20, something akin to what Calvin calls the “awareness of divinity” and the “seed of religion”. Such knowledge is essential to the way the structure of life itself provokes a narrative/religious response. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 43-4 (I.3.3).
[27] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 75-6.
[29] Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). For a description of the Smithton women, see Radway, ch. 2.
[29] Radway, 56-57.
[30] Radway, 91-96.
[31] Please note that this does not mean that a biblical worldview somehow supports patriarchy, or oppression of any kind. Christians ought to do what they can to alleviate oppression where they find it, and the Bible is clear about that. The point is, rather, that oppression, where and when it occurs, takes on a revelational weight. The oppression that we sometimes experience here on earth is, in a sense, a small taste the alienation that will be fully realized in hell—a preview of coming attractions for those alienated from God.
[32] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 66.
[33] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 66-68.
[34] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 68.
[35] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 68-70.
[36] For a more detailed description and analysis of the “ideal romance,” see Radway, chapter 4.
[37] Radway, 122-3. In fact, in a survey where Radway asked what the Smithton women found offensive in romance novels, “bed-hopping” topped the list, edging out even rape. See ibid, p. 74, table 2.3.
[38] Radway, 123-4.
[39] Radway, 124.
[40] Radway, 124-5.
[41] Radway, 128-30.
[42] Radway, 131-2,
[43] Radway, 131-3.
[44] Radway’s analysis isolates thirteen narrative functions, and the narrative structure itself is chiastic. See table 4.2 in Radway, 150.
[45] See Radway, 151.
[46] Radway, 149.
[47] Radway goes so far as to call the relationship “regressive,” since it leads to a passive, child-like identity for the heroine. See Radway, 145-6.
[48] Radway, 151.
[49] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 71.
[50] Ricoeur, “Time and Narrative,” 76.
[51] For more a more detailed account, see Ricoeur, “The World of the Text and the World of the Reader,” chap. in *Time and Narrative* vol. 3, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer

(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
[52] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 108-111.
[53] Ricoeur, "The World of the Text," 169.
[54] Iser, 127, 131-32, 140, 148, 155-56.
[55] Iser, 157-59.
[56] On the functions of popular ritual, see Mazur and McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details*, 103-107.
[57] On communitas, see Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), and Mazur and McCarthy, 105.
[58] See, for instance, Henry Jenkins' descriptions of online debates amongst Star Trek fans in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 98-107.
[59] See Radway, chapter 5 on the "failed romance."
[60] Note that these four effects of ritual are not simply registered individually, but also communally as ritual draws members into community.
[61] Or if it does not, then one must question whether this is a person's real religion, or if there isn't a substitute religion behind the official religion (for example, the way consumerism supplants Christianity as the real religion of many Americans).
[62] Some media and cultural analysts call this "intertextuality," the way cultural texts reinforce each other's messages. See Graeme Burton, *More than Meets the Eye: An Introduction to Media Studies*, 3rd ed., (London: Arnold, 2002), 126-27, 141.
[63] We could further explore the parallels implicit in Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity (his application of the threefold mimesis to characters as well as narrative plots), but I am afraid that would lengthen this paper too much for our present purposes.
[64] Radway, chapter 3, "The Act of Reading the Romance: Escape and Instruction."
[65] Radway, 91-2.
[66] Recall the quote by Corduan in the introduction of this paper. He insisted that a key marker of a genuine religion is that it "directs us beyond the mundane routine of everyday existence" toward "transcendence," (see Corduan, 21). According to this marker, reading romance novels, at least for these women, is clearly a *religious* ritual.
[67] Radway, 64-5.
[68] Further, many of the Smithton women reported that they felt a real transformation in terms of identity and outlook. Some became more assertive, like the heroines in romance novels. See Radway, 101-2.
[69] Radway, 83. Recall again Paul's description of idolatry in Romans 1.
[70] Of course, the arc is really a circle (or better, a spiral), since the altered worldview, ethics and identity that emerge from mimesis3 spill into everyday life, affecting the way general revelation is perceived, which affects the next generation of religious text-worlds and ritual, and so on.
[71] Throwing around terms like "idolatry" when talking about popular culture could lead to a misunderstanding. I do not believe that the best way to engage popular culture is simply to reject it as idolatry. That fails to understand the attraction that popular cultural religion holds for many. Another key term that merits discussion in this context is popular culture as common grace. Popular culture can and should also be seen as a collection of texts that reflect God's generosity and lovingkindness (see Acts 14:17). Unfortunately, such a discussion would make this article too long. For those who care to pursue the subject, please see Theodore A. Turnau III, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no 2 (Nov. 2002):270-96, especially 278-81.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/09/2026 - 20:57*): http://www.turnau.cz/node/31