It is always an honor to have one’s work taken seriously and read with care, so I want to express my sincere gratitude to Matt Jenson and Ray Lubeck for engaging my article. The theological conversation regarding film and pop culture is an important one today. I thank the editors of Cultural Encounters for the opportunity to have an honest and charitable dialogue about these issues.

Both Jenson and Lubeck have one overriding concern: in what sense is del Toro’s cinematic vision in any meaningful sense “Christian?” Let me begin by pointing out that I only once refer to del Toro’s imagination as “Christian,” and that comes in a heavily qualified passage near the end of the article. Elsewhere, I only say that his films have significance for Christian theology or that his imagination is theological in character. The latter word has a broad semantic range, exemplified by the fact that Cavanaugh uses it to describe the imagination of the state to which the church is opposed. This important clarification aside, I want to express my deep sympathy for this critique. I have long felt that much, if not most, theological engagement with film consists of simply trying to find Christ-figures in Hollywood movies. There is a tendency to want to make every meaningful film into a “Christian” one simply by finding analogies to stories or characters in the Bible, however weak those analogies may be. This kind of engagement with film ends up doing justice neither to the Christian faith nor to the movies under discussion.

Whether or not I was finally successful, I sought in my article to avoid this practice of “Christianizing” film. Instead of finding a Christ-figure in Ophelia or interpreting del Toro’s myths as disguised passion narratives, as tempting as that is, I instead looked at specific motifs and ideas highlighted by del Toro himself in interviews, and I compared them with motifs and ideas articulated by Cavanaugh. The goal is not to say that del Toro is, in fact, a Christian filmmaker or that his films are straightforwardly Christian (though what this adjective means is problematic). Instead, my intention was to see that, when armed with Cavanaugh’s theological insights, we can find in these films a “secular parable of the kingdom,” to borrow a phrase from Karl Barth. Del Toro’s vision constitutes a provocative challenge to

1. The juxtaposition of the adjective “Christian” with words like “art” or “film” should always be read as having ‘scare quotes,’ even when I do not use them for stylistic reasons.

2. See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/3.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 117: “We can and must be prepared to encounter ‘parables of the kingdom’ in the full biblical sense, not merely in the witness of the Bible and the various arrangements, works and words of the Christian Church, but also in the secular sphere, i.e., in the strange interruption of the secularism of life in
a church that has all too often sided with the Establishment. For this reason, del Toro’s cinematic mythologies can and should speak volumes to Christians who are seeking a more liberating praxis within the world. In order to flesh this out, let me address some of the specific critiques.

Jenson suggests that for something to be identified as Christian or theopolitical, the author/creator of the work must intend such a reading. On the contrary, I want to say precisely the opposite: viz. that because of del Toro’s non-intentionality, we can find in these works a parable of the truth. Again, I am not suggesting that del Toro’s films are themselves Christian, but rather, that as a Christian disciple, I can see and hear in his works and words a distinct analogy to the truth of the gospel. Here I again refer to Barth, who famously wrote: “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog.”³ Barth’s point is that God can speak to the church through these and any other means. The *viva vox Dei* is not limited to Scripture or authorized Christian witnesses. Of course, these worldly objects and realities do not in themselves have the capacity to witness to the truth; that is something only God can actualize through an act of grace. In short, the music of Mozart and the films of del Toro only *become* witnesses or parables of the truth for those who have the eyes of faith. I am most definitely not advocating a “natural theology” of art. When Jenson says that “it may be precisely by not being a Christian vision that del Toro’s films may serve the kingdom of Christ,” I agree wholeheartedly—except that I view this “non-Christian vision” as, in fact, truly Christian in character, though only in light of God’s revelation. As I said near the end of the article, “I am claiming that [del Toro’s] political imagination is, in essence, a theological one, when properly viewed from the perspective of faith.” In retrospect, I should have made this point clearer in the essay itself.

There is another issue regarding intentionality that bears mentioning. To put it simply, authorial intention tells us little to nothing of significance regarding how a work ought to be interpreted. On this point, I refer to Umberto Eco, who reflected on this topic in the “Postscript” to his novel, *The Name of the Rose*. In words that I think ought to be read before every English 101 and Exegesis 101 course, he writes: “The text is there, and produces its own effects.... The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text.”⁴ Del Toro could have intended these films to support some pagan theology of earth-worship

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for all I care (though, of course, that is not the case). It makes no difference to me as an interpreter of these films. I should add: the emphasis on authorial intention has had its most devastating effects in the field of biblical exegesis. As Hans Frei showed in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, it was an idea imposed on Scripture by the Enlightenment and the church would do well to abandon it.

Now, I am in complete agreement with Jenson that we ought not to water down the content of the Christian faith in order to establish connections where none exist. Here I need to clarify my article’s thesis: I am not claiming that del Toro’s vision is *exhaustively* theopolitical. Instead, I am only claiming that his work embodies a few elements that are necessary, *but not alone sufficient*, to any Christian theopolitics. Again, this is a point I should have emphasized. Thus, when I say that we can find in his work a secular parable of the kingdom, I am not suggesting that his work exhaustively constitutes the essence of what it means to be a Christian disciple in the world.

Obviously, there is no Trinity in *Pan’s Labyrinth* (although an overly eager interpreter could argue that there is, in fact, a kind of Trinity in the closing throne room scene at the end); clearly, there is no fully-formed gospel attested in del Toro’s movies. But I do not see why a work of art must contain the entirety of the Christian story in order to count as a significant parable/analogy for Christian faith and theology. Such a restriction makes any meaningful engagement with the arts nearly impossible. It would seem that an artist would have to be a confessing Christian intentionally making art that tries to portray the full gospel narrative. While that might have worked in certain cases with medieval iconography, I daresay almost every modern attempt to do this has resulted in inferior art. I much prefer Madeleine L’Engle’s rejection of the category of “Christian art” altogether: “Art is art; painting is painting; music is music; a story is a story. If it’s bad art, it’s bad religion, no matter how pious the subject.” The inverse, I want to say, is also true: if it is good art, if it is an honest engagement with the world, then it has significance for Christian faith and practice. Such a work can serve as an icon or parable of the truth.

Much of what I have said so far applies to Lubeck’s criticisms as well, but he makes some additional points that require attention. First, he critiques the “abnormal” use of the word “anarchy.” This is an understandable criticism, but the word is del Toro’s, not mine. He wants to emphasize the rebellion against the Establishment in as strong a way as possible, and I see no reason not to let him define it on his terms. Having said that, the reader familiar with current trends in continental political philosophy will no doubt hear in the use of the word “anarchy” echoes of the political nihilism articulated by Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, and others, and that is intentional on my part. By that I mean a theological exposition of

Christian discipleship as sociopolitical “anarchy” would profit from appropriating some of the insights of these European philosophers.

Second, Lubeck objects to the notion of a “liberating individual responsibility” on two grounds: first, the lack in del Toro of a corporate ecclesiology and second, the lack of a divine command that we must obey and a model that we can follow. It seems to me that the critique is unwarranted. Regarding the first point, I made it clear throughout my essay that responsibility as del Toro portrays it is always on behalf of another; it is never self-liberation, but always liberation with and for another. Ophelia is never an autonomous individual agent; her agency is intertwined with her mother, her brother, Mercedes, and the Republican rebels. That was one of the central contrasts between Captain Vidal and Ophelia: the former is turned inward, while the latter lives in self-donating love for others. Her imagination is responsive to the needs of those around her. To call this a “personal” or “individual” liberation would be to miss the point. Ophelia acts to liberate others at the expense of herself. She displays a martyrological praxis. But precisely in this self-giving love, she is a responsible individual agent. There is no contradiction between individual responsibility and communal identity. In fact, the two necessarily go together. If one loses the dimension of individual responsibility, one ends up with a fascist collective—precisely what del Toro is rebelling against.

Lubeck, I assume, would agree, so perhaps it is the lack of a “transcendent mandate” that really concerns him. Here I must confess my confusion. For starters, as I stress in the article, Ophelia does not fabricate her “spiritual reality,” but instead it comes to her from without (extra nos). In that sense, her “individual responsibility” is indeed an obedient response to an identity and calling that confronts her as grace. Again, there is no self-liberation here. She is compelled into a liberating life of self-giving love. What else does Lubeck want? Does he believe that a film cannot be a parable or icon of a “Christ-follower’s imagination” unless there is a “voice from above,” a divine commission, made present and palpable in the film’s narrative? If so, then movies—along with all visual art—are inherently incapable of bearing witness to the life of discipleship because the divine commission and human faith are not objectifiable entities that one can capture visually. The literal inclusion of a God-figure would be even worse (cf. the second commandment). God is not one actor or agent among others—not in the world, and therefore not on the stage, where God inevitably becomes a deus ex machina. In my opinion, the more a movie leaves God and religion out of the picture, the better chance it has of actually being a parable of the truth.

But I do not think Lubeck is concerned about art and filmmaking at all. His concern is really with my theology: he sees in my essay a problematic soteriology, one that reduces reconciliation to ethics and thus misses the true “essence” of the gospel, viz. Jesus Christ. All I can do at this point is assure him that I am a confessing Christian who adheres to the gospel of our salvation in Christ. But this is not an essay about my soteriology; it is an exposition of del Toro’s cinematic vision, which I see as capturing certain crucial aspects of the Christian faith in a way that
may prove theologically insightful. I did not mean to imply that del Toro's films articulate or embody the totality of Christian soteriology. Rather, I was attempting to show that his films parallel themes and ideas in Cavanaugh, such that, with the eyes of faith, one can find in them a witness to truths perhaps ignored or forgotten. My exposition of del Toro's vision is meant to be suggestive about the theological possibilities in his movies, not reductionistic about the Christian faith. Lubeck is, I think, simply overstating his case. He's right to criticize my un-nuanced use of the word “essence,” but he goes too far in identifying my position, or at least my exposition of del Toro's vision, as an “anti-gospel.”

Moreover, the jab at liberation theology is unfortunate. While some exponents of liberation theology may articulate a kind of “self-liberation,” that is by no means definitive of all liberation theologians. If he wanted a better example, he should have targeted process theology, which makes God and creation interdependent and thus completely undermines the liberating message of the gospel. For my part, I am not a “liberation theologian,” but I do believe that every properly Christian theology has to be a theology of liberation—grounded in God's liberation of the world from sin and death in Jesus Christ, for sure, but never without the corresponding emancipatory struggle against the institutional powers and principalities (i.e., the Establishment).

I would even put this more strongly. To use biblical language, it would seem from Lubeck's response that faith and love are for him logically and chronologically ordered, with faith coming first and then love coming second. My position, by contrast, sees the two as occurring simultaneously: faith and love are paradoxically identical, and they take place as a single event. Faith in God is only truly faith when it takes the concrete form of loving my neighbor and enemy. My response of faith to God is thus at the same time the act of love toward another. Both occur anew every day. I therefore want to resist or at least qualify the notion that our ethical life of obedience to Christ falls into the secondary category of “impact” or “consequence,” as Lubeck puts it. The word “logic” is better. My point is that the gospel is not an objective datum (“given”) that we can observe in a detached and neutral manner before deciding whether or not to follow in faithful obedience. No, the gospel is rather an ongoing and ever new dandum (“to be given”) through God's Word and Spirit that engenders faith (as love) in those in whom it encounters. The objective christological event includes the subjective, ethical, and political action within it. This insight leads me to object to Lubeck's binary opposition: "For Christians, ethics flows from soteriology, while for del Toro ethics is the basis of soteriology." Besides the fact that del Toro doesn't have a soteriology, the problem is that these are not the only two options. Though this is not the place to explore such a topic, I will simply say that we need to simultaneously (1) conceive of the saving event in Jesus Christ as continually meeting us here and now as a summons to obedient action in the world, and (2) conceive of this obedient action as occurring within the soteriological space of God's reconciling mission in Jesus Christ.
Whether Lubeck agrees or disagrees with my soteriological claims, my central point is that del Toro captures an aspect of the essence of Christian faith. I cannot stress that point enough. Lubeck is right that del Toro and Cavanaugh view the basis for sociopolitical action in starkly different ways. But, again, I am not interested in del Toro’s intentions, nor am I claiming that del Toro actually portrays the full gospel. Instead, he emphasizes elements that are indispensable to a theological account of Christian faith: counter-imagination, rebellion against the powers and principalities, sociopolitical action, and loving self-donation. Of course, del Toro’s vision is insufficient on its own. If it was sufficient on its own, it would not be a secular parable but the actual truth itself.

Where del Toro might see only politics, the Christian can appropriate del Toro’s vision within a broader soteriological narrative. The theologian, I argue, can find in del Toro a filmic analogue, albeit partial and provisional, for what the church ought to embody. The direction of interpretation is key: we must move from the Christian gospel to the work of art, not the other way around, but always without imposing a predetermined thesis upon the artwork. I am not reducing the gospel to what I find in del Toro, but rather explicating what del Toro envisions within the open-ended framework of a “generous orthodoxy” (Hans Frei). The fact that I mostly limit my article to presenting del Toro’s views is a sign of my desire to let him speak for himself without hastily integrating him into a safe, comprehensive systematic theology. All too often, Christians engage art and culture in one of two ways: either they use the work of art like a garnish for their “main course,” or it becomes an insignificant ingredient that gets swallowed up within the melting pot of their dogmatic infrastructure. That is to say, theologians move all too quickly from cultural artifact to theological system. I want to linger with del Toro and let his anarchic imagination fund creative new possibilities for thinking about ecclesiology and ethics today. While his imagination is incomplete, I still want to respectfully and seriously engage his position as instructive for Christian faith in a post-Christian world.

In short, I agree that we cannot settle for del Toro’s cinematic imagination alone. It relies far too much on violence to accomplish its ends and does not acknowledge a universal sinfulness that requires God’s justifying grace. What else should we expect from someone who rejects God and religion tout court? Does this make his vision an “anti-gospel”? I see no reason for this conclusion. Of course, every story or mythology is an anti-gospel in isolation, but when the light of Christ shines upon it, such stories and myths may become witnesses to a truth that the church has forgotten and needs to recover. My article is an attempt to charitably shed this light, refracted through the lens of Cavanaugh, upon the work of del Toro.

One final note: Lubeck misreads my statement that we can see del Toro’s vision as Christian when “armed with a different conception of Christianity.” The context for this statement is quite clear: I am responding to del Toro’s rejection of Christianity due to the “distorted” understanding of religion given to him by his grandmother as a child (and no doubt reinforced a hundred times over by the institutional
churches throughout the world). The “different conception” I am referring to is the one presented by Cavanaugh, which is a vision of Christian theology that I think del Toro would at least find attractive, though perhaps not finally persuasive. I have no intention of redefining Christianity on del Toro’s terms. Instead, I want to look afresh at del Toro in the light of a renewed vision of Christianity, one that sees in the redemptive victory of Christ on the cross a “beautiful anarchy” against the powers of sin and death, which calls us to become beautiful anarchists in response.

To conclude: what counts as “Christian”? Is this word only applicable to those works that display a fully orbed Christian theology? Or is it rather applicable to all good works of art that reflect on our existence in the world with courage, integrity, and wisdom? Can we say, as I believe we must, that all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found? And should we not allow the eyes of faith to look charitably upon the so-called “secular world” in order that we may discover secular parables of the kingdom where we least expect them? I do not accept the premise that an artist must (intend to) articulate the person and work of Christ (or any other doctrine) in order for a work to be appropriately viewed as theologically or theopolitically significant. Instead, I argue that works of art function as icons and parables of the kingdom. They are, as Eberhard Jüngel puts it, “pre-appearances of the truth,” provisional anticipations of the eschatological reality of God’s reign. Through the perspective of faith, even the most secular and profane work can become a witness to the truth of Jesus Christ.