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The Object

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The Object. Directed by Dub Cornett and Jacob Young.
Afterglow Productions and Synergetic Distribution, 2010.

Reviewed by Ben Phelan

Ordinary Kentucky man Todd Walker, self-proclaimed “discoverer,” “protector,” “guardian,” and “witness” of the eponymous Object, and the focus of this fascinating documentary, is convinced that he has found the Urim and Thummim of the Old Testament. Todd and his two brothers-in-law, Dave Jones and Dale Bloomfield, had stopped by the local Goodwill during a particularly trying day at their tiling job. With fifteen dollars in his pocket, Todd was looking for glassware that he could purchase for cheap and then resell. Something else caught his eye, however. It was a black, oblong, cup-shaped object. “And when I picked it up,” he said, “lo and behold! It was one of the most beautiful pieces I had ever seen in my life.” He bought it for sixty-nine cents.

When he returned home, Todd sat down and examined the Object. He stared at it for hours. “Something kept telling me to look,” he said. Eventually, he found that when light hit the Object at just the right angle, “the most ancient, awesome images was [*sic*] revealed to my eyes, like you’ve never, ever imagined, man.” Todd was not the only one to experience these visions. He wanted to share the gift with others. Dave, Dale, and the rest of Todd’s family initially worried that Todd had gone crazy, but now they too have experienced visions while looking into the Object. Todd knows that he has something special but is not quite sure what it is or why it has been given to him. This is the question that takes up the majority of the film: Todd wondering what he has found and, now that he has found it, just what God wants him to do with it.

The Object suffers from some technical problems that may prevent it from finding a serious audience. For example, in one early scene, Todd’s band is shown playing in a dive bar in Nashville. The scene starts with a close-up and then slowly pans out to show us a wide shot of the entire bar. If you look out the window just behind the band, you can see about

six or seven people walk past it backwards. The scene was filmed from a wide shot to a close-up and was reversed during editing. Nothing is inherently wrong with this technique, but it is surprising that no one in the editing room noticed or cared that it was obviously reversed footage. To viewers and especially film critics, this will appear as lazy filmmaking.

However, some of these apparent filmmaking errors help add to the charm of the film. For instance, during one of Dale's descriptions of his visions, he said that he saw "hell's angels on one side and Satan's angels on the other" and that they were fighting for men's souls. Obviously, Dale meant "Heaven's angels," but Cornett and Young apparently did not ask for another take. At other times, the filmmakers jump-cut between multiple versions of the same story. While this may appear distracting at first, Cornett and Young appear to have edited the interviews to mimic the ineffable, subjective nature of Todd's visions. The retelling of the story—an attempt to grasp it and make sense of it, even when it resists being made sense of—becomes part of the religious experience.

The filmmakers deserve credit for the gentleness and grace with which they handle the difficult subject matter that they have undertaken. It would be easy to ridicule Todd and company, but Cornett and Young never do. The film's technical problems, then, are unfortunate, because they do distract from where *The Object* is strongest: its fascinating exploration of the line between reason and faith, and how Todd ultimately learns to walk on the side of the faith.

Todd, Dale, and Dave recognize that people may perceive them as crazy. After listening to the descriptions of their visions, it is not hard to see why. Dave saw a vision of helicopters, bombs, and war and "got the impression that the whole world was attacking Israel." Dale's experience was more personal. He saw "a castle, or a cave, or a castle, I would say" with a "demoness thing chasing me" that was "part pig body and part evil bat face." Then, God appeared and whatever was chasing him just "fell apart." When Todd tries to explain how the visions work, he says that there are "ancient, microsized images that look like they illuminate at you, and when you turn the object, where once was one image, it'll be another image, perfect to that image and you won't be able to tell where the other image was." If this makes little sense, it is because whatever they are experiencing is highly subjective and hard to describe. But Todd wants the world to understand.

Todd describes himself not as a "prophet" but as an "archaeologist." He sees his discovery as scientific, true without question, and wants the world to also see it rationally. Hoping to capture reliable testimony,

he visits respected people in the community, such as a manager of a local AutoZone; he is also impressed to learn that one of his community members is a two-time Jeopardy champion. His journey ultimately takes him to Vanderbilt, where he asks scholars what they think of the Object. It is here that Cornett and Young structure the moral point of the film. Shai Cherry, rabbi and professor at Vanderbilt, says, “The idea that he’s crazy, and that he doesn’t have any basis for his visions, his perceptions, his judgment—that’s something that is absolutely textbook for religious visionaries.” He confesses that he personally cannot see visions in the Object, but he tells Todd, “I hope that you can get some closure on this issue without consulting experts.”

The rabbi’s advice is a big moment for Todd—it is the point where he realizes that experts, reason, and evidence are ultimately futile in attempting to understand what has been a very subjective experience. Todd is impressed with how each person who experiences the Object has different visions; perhaps, he wonders, it affects different people in different ways. Whatever the Object is, and whatever God wants him to do with it, he finally realizes, is not between Todd and professors, but between him and God. This is ultimately how *The Object* frames religious experience: subjective, unquantifiable, and utterly fascinating.

Ben Phelan received his BA from Brigham Young University in 2008 and is currently finishing up his PhD in theatre history at Louisiana State University. His dissertation is on humanoid automata in the American imagination in the twentieth century. In addition to his academic work, he is also a theatre director and occasional actor.