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Simon J. Taylor
taylor@fish.co.uk

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'It all happens here:' Locating Salvation in Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*

Abstract

Bad Lieutenant offers a both a narrative and a theology of salvation. Both are focussed on the death of the Lieutenant at the end of the film. This essay traces these accounts of salvation and finds that they are both flawed, in nature and scope. These flaws derive from an exclusive focus on the death of the Lieutenant and the cross of Christ as the loci of salvation. The value of Ferrara's work is in the articulation of these flaws, as they point to dangers for Christian theology as it seeks to articulate the salvation offered by Christ.

At the end of Abel Ferrara's film *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), the Lieutenant (never named and referred to in the credits simply as Lt) sits in his car in front of a sign that reads 'It all happens here'. Another car pulls up, a man calls 'Hey, cop' and a single gunshot is heard. The car pulls away and the film ends as the noise of life in Manhattan goes on and Lt's death is discovered. All this takes place in one wide-angle camera shot, so that we do not see Lt, but the car in the street. The film closes as those standing in the street hear the gunfire and investigate the murder that has just occurred.¹ This scene is the culmination of a whole series of imagery linking Lt with Christ and is intended to represent the salvation of Lt. In this essay, I am concerned with the nature of the salvation depicted by *Bad Lieutenant*.

Summary

Ferrara's film traces Lt's passage through a world of violence, murder, sex, drugs and gambling. Lt is supposed to police this world but instead is involved in all aspects of it. We see him stealing and trading drugs, threatening others for money and sex, using drugs and prostitutes and abusing his position as a policeman. Above all we see him gambling and involving others in gambling as he places bets on the World Series. The debts accrued from this gambling ultimately lead to his death. In the midst of this world, Lt comes across a nun (also unnamed) who is raped in church by two young men who also steal a chalice. Her refusal to name her attackers (although she knows them) and forgiveness of them are

incomprehensible to Lt, but ultimately lead him to a vision of Christ. After this vision, Lt is given the stolen chalice by the mother of one of the rapists. This leads him to the criminals. Yet instead of turning them in for the reward money, which would have gone some way towards paying his gambling debts, Lt puts them onto a bus telling them 'Your life ain't worth shit in this town.' They are given a chance to start a new life elsewhere, while he parks his car to await his inevitable death. Throughout *Bad Lieutenant*, religious imagery and scenes of violence combine to form a powerful piece of filmmaking. Harvey Keitel's performance in the title role is a superb piece of acting, and gives an authority and seriousness to the film that help prevent it becoming either farcical or voyeuristic.

Lt and Christ

The title of the film itself is an unambiguous reference to Lt's moral qualities, and one of Ferrara's preferred strategies is to combine a religious image, specifically a cross or crucifix, with an instance of Lt's 'bad' behaviour. Thus the first piece of religious imagery we see is also the first instance of Lt's badness - a crucifix on a rosary hung over the rear-view mirror of Lt's car seen as he snorts drugs. Later in the film, a girl driver that Lt stops wears a ring with a large cross on it. We see this most clearly when he intimidates her into miming oral sex whilst he masturbates. When he first enters the church in which the nun was raped, we see Lt framed by a crucifix and one of the pictures of the stations of the cross on the wall.

He stands next to a processional crucifix to eavesdrop on the nun being interrogated. This seemingly blasphemous conjunction is actually Ferrara's means of telling us that in his behaviour, Lt is 'crucifying again the Son of God.'² This is reinforced by an image of Lt in a cruciform pose, his body forming the image. Here Lt is naked (nakedness itself, perhaps an echo of Christ on the cross), drunk, in the company of two prostitutes, possibly impotent in that there is no suggestion of sex here, and howling like an animal. This is Lt at his very lowest. If he is re-crucifying Christ, he is also crucifying himself.

As his daughter receives her first Communion, Lt does not receive the sacrament but discusses his betting. Again we have the conjunction of Lt's bad behaviour and a crucifix. Here, however, Ferrara frames Lt in the same way as he frames the Christ on the crucifix. Ferrara is going further than a simple conjunction of religious imagery and Lt and begins to suggest an identification between Lt and Christ. We can see this elsewhere in the film. Lt goes to the home of a young dealer to whom he has sold drugs in order to collect the money he is owed. There are a number of religious pictures in this apartment, including a picture of Jesus' face woven into a sofa. Lt sits on the sofa right over the face of Jesus, as it were, in his place. Just as Ferrara has Lt body form the image of the cross (itself suggesting some identification with Christ), so Lt bodily takes the place of Christ. This occurs in the church. Lt picks up the statue of the Madonna that the rapists knocked over

and lies down next to it. There is something of the cross in this pose, but most of all it resembles a pièta (Mary receiving the body of Jesus from the cross, the most famous example of which is Michaelangelo's sculpture in St Peter's, Rome).

As well as this identification between Lt and Christ, we twice see Christ himself during the film. Christ is never fully present in the film, only seen as a vision. The Christ we see is stripped to the waist, wounded and bleeding. He is the Christ of the crucifix. This visionary appearance of Christ is a departure from the realism that characterises the rest of the film, and is unique to *Bad Lieutenant* in the whole of Ferrara's body of work.³ The first time we see Christ is as the nun is raped on the altar of a church. As we watch this crime, the film cuts between the rape and an image of Christ on the cross, screaming in agony. The suggestion is that this is as if it were happening to Christ, or at the least that Christ shares her pain. It later transpires that the boys used a cross to penetrate the nun. Lt meets (or sees) Christ in the same church, where he has gone to plead with the nun for the names of her assailants. She refuses, saying that she has already forgiven them. The nun then leaves him, silently, giving him her rosary. She quite literally hands her cross to Lt. He then drops to the floor and howls. It is at this point that Lt sees Christ, just as we saw Christ during the rape. Lt curses Christ at first and throws at him the rosary he has been given. Finally he breaks down and begs for forgiveness. 'What am I going to do? You've got to say something. You want me to do everything. Where

were you? Where the fuck were you? I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I did some bad things, I'm sorry. I tried to do ... tried to do the right thing, but I'm weak. I'm too fucking weak. I need you to help me. Help me. Forgive me, forgive me. Forgive me, please. Forgive me father'. As Lt crawls towards Christ and kisses his feet, we see that in fact it is an old woman that has entered the church. It is she who has the stolen chalice and gives Lt enough information to find the rapists. The vision of Christ thus leads directly to Lt's most significant identification with Christ as he takes the place of Christ in forgiving and setting free the two rapists. This identification is compounded by the fact that this costs Lt his life.

Locating a narrative of salvation

Lt, like Christ, dies to save others from their sin. It is this final scene that provides the notion of salvation within the film's narrative. The two boys are saved by Lt who gives them money and a chance to start again in another city. The portrayal of Lt as a Christ figure reaches its climax at this point, but this salvific outcome is itself enabled by that portrayal. Paradoxically, we are also, I think, meant to understand this as the salvation of the 'Bad' Lieutenant. Zoë Lund, Ferrara's co-writer, described the film as showing 'how far he [Lt] goes to seek redemption⁴ and one critic sees Lt as 'like one of the trespassers on the cross crucified together with Jesus who shows remorse and is save⁵ Lt is 'saved' as he

saves others, his final and ultimate identification with Christ releases him from the problems he has heaped upon himself and his sacrifice for the boys redeems him.

Yet the ending of the film, in which Lt makes this final sacrifice, has a different tone to that which precedes it. The wide-angle frame, the distance of the action and the continuation of life around the dead Lt is much more open than the rest of the film. Previously the religious imagery was stark and determinative, but here there is space. Ferrara's intent here may be to draw the world into the salvific action of Lt's death, but equally it allows us to draw out from this action and to ask some wider questions. Did Lt have to die, could he not have admitted his own culpability and sought to live with the consequences of his actions? And what of the two boys, sent to another city without any help or family support? Are they made to face what they have done? Will they, as Lt suggests to the nun, do it again? These are serious questions concerning the nature of the salvation that Lt and the boys achieve in the narrative of *Bad Lieutenant*.

If we can question the nature of salvation offered in the film, we can also question the scope of salvation presented in the narrative. Thus we can ask about the incidental characters in the film, such as Lt's family and the mother of the boys. Would they see Lt and the boys as 'saved' by the final events? The boys' mother now has less chance of seeing her sons than she would have had done had the police found them. Lt's family are not considered, but have lost a husband and father, and

their breadwinner. They may even be targeted by Lt's killers to complete their reprisals. Salvation seems very limited within Ferrara's narrative. It is focused on certain individuals, Lt and the boys, and excludes others: victims, families, community.

For Ferrara, it seems, death is the ultimate moment of life. It is the end of Lt's problems, and thus his salvation, just as leaving the city is salvation for the two rapists. 'Your life ain't worth shit in this town', Lt says to the boys - they are dead to New York. The statement at the end of the film that 'It all happens here' suggests that Lt's death is the only significant moment of redemption or salvation. Ferrara's concentration on death as the moment of salvation, reflected in his use of the image of the cross throughout the film, closes down the salvation available to his characters. Nor is there any new life for any of the characters in the film. For the two boys who are sent away, 'salvation' lies in exile. Lt is dead. The police force remains a mixture of good and bad. Lt's killers simply drive away. This is a very bleak picture (which may, of course, be Ferrara's point). Salvation does not change the nature of the world in which we live. There is a fatalism about the narrative of salvation that Ferrara articulates. There is no struggle, no attempt to redeem the wider world. Ferrara's salvation is about death, not life.

Locating a theology of salvation

Within its narrative framework, *Bad Lieutenant* locates salvation in the death of Lt. 'It all happens here.' But behind and alongside the narrative, Ferrara is articulating a theology of salvation. This theology concentrates on the cross as the locus of salvation. This is reflected in the way that the film shows Lt's death as the culmination of a whole series of images identifying Lt with the crucified Christ. Lt is saved by his imitation of the crucified Christ. The boys are saved by the effects of Lt's death. For Ferrara, the cross is the site of salvation. It all happened there. Yet, just as the salvation within the narrative is flawed, so is this theology of salvation. Both the nature and scope of the theology of salvation offered by *Bad Lieutenant* show this.

The nature of salvation has become escape, away from the city or away from this life. If salvation is located purely in a death, then once the saving death is achieved, the story must end. This is the weakness of the presentation of the 'salvation' of the two rapists. Precisely because their lives do not end, the nature of their 'salvation' must be questioned. Their salvation comes exclusively from a death, and hence is narrowly about their crimes and can say nothing more. An exclusive focus on the cross can leave us (to use some traditional language) justified, but can say nothing of our sanctification. Such a theology can speak only of death, life asks too many questions.

The scope of salvation is equally impoverished, for *Bad Lieutenant* can speak only of the individual, not of the wider ecology of relationships in which that individual is placed. Ferrara's characters are left like the disciples on Good Friday, scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Those saved are taken out of these relationships, those who remain in a form of relation to others are not saved. Thus these relationships are, in the final reckoning, disregarded. Rowan Williams suggests that people who have been saved should be transformed themselves, and that this transformation should affect their relationships. 'The "saved" man or woman' is one with sufficient sense of his or her own dignity, selfhood and resourcefulness to love generously.⁶ There is little love, generous or otherwise, to be seen in the saving conclusion to Ferrara's work.

Conclusion

Bad Lieutenant, then, offers an inadequate theology of salvation, and this inadequate theology is both rooted and reflected in an inadequate narrative of salvation. Yet this should not prevent us from seeing the film as a serious and important contribution to the theological task of articulating salvation. It is a real virtue of *Bad Lieutenant* that it enables us to articulate a fault-line that the film shares with much Christian theology.

Of course to state a problem is not to solve it. Absent from *Bad Lieutenant* is any concept of resurrection, of salvation as restoration to new life. It is the resurrection that offers a means of speaking of our transformation. Death alone cannot offer this, there must be the new life of resurrection. As Williams notes, 'to speak of the resurrection of Jesus is also to speak of one's own humanity as healed, renewed and restored, re-centred in God.'⁷ What we have seen in *Bad Lieutenant*, and the theology of salvation it presents, calls for a fuller articulation of the role of the resurrection in Christian soteriology. But that is a task for another day.⁸

¹ One report suggests that this scene was filmed surreptitiously, so that what we see on the screen is real people reacting to the death. See <http://mondofausto.com/interview-abelferrara.htm>

² Hebrews 6: 6.

³ Kent Jones describes Ferrara as a 'great realist of modern cinema' (Kent Jones, 'Abel Ferrara. The Man - Who Cares', www.hardpress.com/newhp/lingo/authors/ferrara.html).

⁴ Cited in Nick Johnstone, *Abel Ferrara: The King of New York* (London: Omnibus, 1999), p. 19.

⁵ Peter Hasenberg, "Pain and Redemption: Images of Christ in the Films of Abel Ferrara", in Gerhard Larcher, Franz Grabner and Christian Wessely (eds), *Visible Violence: Sichtbare und verschleiert Gewalt im Film* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1998), pp. 59-76. Quotation from p. 64.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: DLT, 1982), p. 48.

⁷ Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 120.

⁸ Tim Robbins' film *Dead Man Walking* has a much richer account of salvation for both the dead and the living within the narrative of that film. See Simon J. Taylor, " 'A Searching Experience': Salvation in the film *Dead Man Walking* and R. C. Moberly," *Theology* 101 (1998), pp. 104-111. My thanks to Jacky Humphreys for her comments on earlier drafts of the present essay.