

<CN>6</CN>

<CT>The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ Figures in Film</CT>

<CA>Christopher Deacy</CA>

When is theology an integral part of a film, and when is it brought to a film? To help answer these questions I offer a critique of the increasing tendency among a number of theologians and religious studies practitioners to examine the interface between religion and film by forging superficial correlations between the New Testament Jesus and so-called cinematic Christ figures. While acknowledging that such an approach has undoubted missiological or confessional value, its uncritical appropriation in the classroom is not only theologically unsophisticated but has limited pedagogical utility as well. After teaching an undergraduate course on religion and film for three consecutive years, I have learned that students tend to use the Christ-figure typology (Kozlovic 2004) in their work, not least when they are required to write a twenty-five-hundred-word theological interpretation of a film of their choice. Even though in such instances students may be able to discern parallels between, for example, Keanu Reeves's character Neo in *The Matrix* (1999) or John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile* (1999) and Jesus of Nazareth, there is a degree to which Christian symbolism and values are being imposed on films. These movies are accordingly judged not qua film or for the quality of filmic properties such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, editing, or direction but solely for their structural and (all-too-frequently) alleged narrative convergences with biblical passages. Such films are thus examined for the extent to which they either do or do not have the necessary definitional properties and, whether consciously or otherwise, students are categorizing them as manifestly "Christian" products. The assumption is that, in a gnostic-type scenario, these themes are present

<sup>A</sup> Abstract deleted per OUP style.

- Formatted: Font: Italic
- Formatted: Font: Italic
- Deleted: ABSTRACT:¶ While identifying Christ-figures in films can be a provocative and productive classroom tool, seeing such films as a mere illustration of theology can be ultimately superficial and misleading. When is theology in a film and when is theology brought to a film? Although there has been a lot of academic writing on identifying Christ-figures in the movies, this chapter takes a step back and examines the interplay between film and theology more generally around the theme of the Christ-figure, with implications for both teaching and theory.
- Deleted: ¶ The aim of this paper is to
- Deleted: module
- Deleted: &
- Deleted: the third
- Deleted: it is apparent
- Deleted: are especially predilected
- Deleted: , as exemplified in a 2004 article by Anton Karl Kozlovic in the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*,
- Deleted: not
- Deleted: at
- Deleted: 2,500
- Deleted: (Kozlovic 2004)
- Deleted: which
- Formatted: Font: Not Italic, English (U.S.)
- Deleted: , and
- Deleted: such
- Formatted: Font: Not Italic, English (U.S.)
- Deleted: interrogated
- Deleted: (
- Deleted: )
- Deleted: they are being baptized by

in the film—albeit hidden, disguised, or camouflaged to the uninitiated—and that it is the theologian's special prerogative to analyze the film in order to reveal its purported Christological core. Indeed, in Kozlovic's words, “innumerable Christ-figures and other holy subtexts are hidden within the popular cinema” (2004, <sup>\*5</sup>), to the point that “secular films can engage in religious storytelling about biblical characters, ideas, and themes without appearing ‘religious’ ” (ibid.).

Deleted: non

Deleted: of the theologian

Deleted: prize

Deleted: open

Deleted: their

Deleted: ¶

It is my contention, however, that nobody functions in a cultural vacuum, and there is no such thing as a definitive, normative, or objective theological lens through which one may embark upon a theological conversation. There are a multiplicity of ways of “doing theology,” depending on whether one is a liberal or an evangelical, Protestant or Catholic, believer or nonbeliever, atheist or agnostic, to name just some of the available options. Moreover, as Melanie Wright correctly discerns, “a consideration of a film's religious qualities, like that of its meanings more generally, is not something that an individual critic can determine once and for all” (2007, 78).

Deleted: As this article will suggest

Deleted: d

Deleted: ant

Deleted: —and

Deleted: in a recent publication

It can thus be somewhat disquieting when a student claims in an essay, to paraphrase an example from one of my own students, that a particular film—in this instance, the ostensibly satirical *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (1979)—“could displease Christians” or that “Christians could see this film as insulting to their faith,” as if there is something innately homogeneous about how anybody who subscribes to a particular faith affiliation will respond to a given text. Unless attention is accorded to wider questions such as the filmmaker's motivations in creating a film, whether a movie is indeed a satire (and, if so, what it satirizes), and how successful the filmmaker has been to this end, then there is clearly more work to be done.

Deleted: recent

Deleted: such

Deleted: of the filmmakers

Deleted: a

Deleted: and

Deleted: , if it

Deleted: of

Deleted: (in the case of *Life of Brian*, suburban England in the 1970s perhaps?)

Deleted: have

Deleted: y

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 5? [PARAGRAPH](#)

Broader questions are also raised in any attempt to claw from a film a specific understanding of how it harmonizes (or not) with what we can glean from the New Testament record of Jesus. How do we really know who or what Jesus was? What sources are at our disposal? We can never really know whether characters that have been likened to Jesus were in fact intended that way, and this raises important questions about who is actually involved in the creation and dissemination of films. How paramount, for example, is the director's intentionality in creating a given film? The way Kozlovic sees it, a sole filmmaker is responsible for each individual filmic "text," and that person "consciously decides to make that heroic Christ-figure choice; the script almost writes itself" (2004, 11).

Deleted: One of my students recently wrote that w

Deleted: there is

Deleted: he or she

Deleted: ¶

As Wright points out, however, contemporary emphases in cinema studies "query auteurism, foregrounding the collaborative, industrial nature of film-making and challenging the notion that any film has a single, intrinsic meaning" (2007, 60). The situation may not be so very different from the tendency (less common in academic circles but nonetheless prevalent in more evangelical contexts) to accord authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses or of the Gospels to four discrete but harmonious eyewitnesses rather than see the likes of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as "shorthand labels for the various contributors and processes" (ibid.) that are believed to stand behind a gospel text. Some see John's Gospel, for instance, as based on the Synoptics—to form what Clement of Alexandria in the second century called a spiritual gospel—while the majority of scholars tend to see the Fourth Gospel as independent of the other three and resting on "its own complicated prehistory of many sources" (Barton 2004, 20).

There is thus no certainty in this debate, and, in John Barton's words, "In the last twenty years or so there has been a major shift in biblical studies," in which "Consensus even about method has broken down, and the field is now a battleground of conflicting approaches, with no

agreed conclusions any longer” (*ibid.*, 18). Within such a context, it appears somewhat obsolete, even precritical, to attempt to “read” Christological content into films without at least looking into whether alternative readings may also contain currency and whether these are expressly theological. As David Jasper suggests, for example, with respect to *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), in a savage indictment of this kind of approach, gospel comparisons may actually be a distraction from what is really a “rather slight modern fairy story that draws on a range of mythic antecedents from *Frankenstein* and *Peter Pan* to ‘Beauty and the Beast’ ” (1997, 239). Attempts to bring the gospels and film together in this way do no more, according to Jasper, than underline “the universal nature of biblical texts” (*ibid.*). A mere illustration of theology is thus a somewhat phony endeavor, which prompts the inevitable retort: So what?

Deleted: Barton, 2004, p.

Deleted: or not

It is not surprising, therefore, that conversations between theologians and scholars who work in film and cinema studies are few and far between when film interpretations are predicated upon this kind of leap of faith in order to be efficacious. Even where points of affinity are discerned between film characters and the New Testament Jesus, the question must be raised as to whether this really resembles a theological activity. This is not of course to say that theology is an easily defined activity. Debates are manifold, for example, as to whether it comprises an academic discipline that can be practiced irrespective of one’s personal beliefs or whether, as Gerald Loughlin sees it, “theology can only really be undertaken in faith, the communities and cultures of those who understand themselves to stand in relation to a transcendent source, and recognize and seek to understand such a relationship” (2005, 3). Theologians are also often unsure where, if at all, the line of demarcation exists between theology and secular culture, to the point that, when it comes to ethical issues such as stem cell research and debates over when human life begins and ends, there are sometimes closer connections “between Christians and

Deleted: theology

Deleted: such

their secular counterparts than there are between opposing Christians” (Gill 2004, 13). The idea that a clearly defined “theological” sphere of activity exists is thus a fallacy, and, when it comes to the Christ-figures debate, there can be no preset rules or norms as to what should or should not be construed as comprising a legitimate area of theological exploration.

Nevertheless, it remains a little too wide of the mark to look merely for points of convergence and correlation between “Christ” and “Christ figure” when there are, equally, occasions in which a point of *departure* exists between a film and a scriptural text. Productive though it may be forge a link between the figure at the heart of a two-thousand-year-old tradition and, to cite a familiar example, the alien at the heart of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* (1982), as one of my students recently pointed out, there is a notable discontinuity—for in the Christian story *Jesus* teaches the disciples (in the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:14, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them”), whereas in the film it is the *children* who teach E.T. This raises wider questions about whether an alleged Christ figure needs to bear witness to all of the facets of Christ’s life in order to be properly designated a Christ figure. According to Kozlovic (2004, 66\*), “twenty-five structural characteristics of the cinematic Christ-figure” have been identified, ranging from the willingness of film characters to perform a sacrifice for the benefit of often unworthy and ungrateful individuals, to the presence of twelve associates or disciples, the existence of a betrayer or Judas figure, and a sexually identified woman (in the manner of Mary Magdalene), as well as all manner of cross and resurrection-type allusions. Yet, it is significant that Kozlovic is unable to identify any films that fulfill even half of the structural characteristics that he so painstakingly delineates, with most of the films he discusses bearing witness to, at most, just three or four.

Deleted: Fruitful

Deleted: that

Deleted: that

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Font: Italic

Deleted: In

Deleted: 's 2004 article

Deleted: (Kozlovic, 2004, ¶0) are

Deleted: and

Deleted: which

\* AU: Is 66 the correct page number? [CORRECT PARAGRAPH NUMBER](#)

One of the most cited films in Kozlovic's list is Nicolas Roeg's science fiction parable *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), which conforms to just four of the twenty-five structural characteristics. For example, Kozlovic sees the protagonist, the alien visitor Thomas Jerome Newton (David Bowie), as an "Outsider Figure" (number three in his list) because he comes from a realm that is above, beyond, or "out there" and is thus, like Christ, *in* the world but not *of* it (cf. John 1:10). However, Kozlovic also distances himself from this reading, on the grounds that Jerome's pathetic lapse into a dissolute and drunken lifestyle such that he is no longer set apart from the rest of humankind as "holy" or "other," diminishes the Christ-figure attribution (\*30). Similarly, despite Kozlovic's noting that *The Man Who Fell to Earth* also corresponds to number twelve on his list of structural characteristics—"a decisive death and resurrection"—his connection to this facet of Christ's life is at best tenuous since, in place of a full-fledged resurrection motif, the film contains no more than a precursor to death and resurrection. In this regard Kozlovic quotes Loughlin, who says that "As Newton lies prostrate and naked on the bed, in a room suddenly grown dark, he has become the deposed Christ, lying in his tomb, awaiting his anointing for burial" (quoted in *ibid.*, \*48).

However, does this really reinforce Newton's Christic nature since, at the end of the film, his mission to rescue his dying planet from extinction has failed and he finds himself stuck on earth, powerless to effect change? Moreover, his agelessness and increasingly self-indulgent and disinterested existence seriously undermines any attempt to read into this film any notion of either a decisive death (Newton does not die) or resurrection (he has lost interest in any form of salvation or new life or even present life). To give another example, Carl Skrade wrote in 1970 that Paul Newman's protagonist, Lucas Jackson, in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) was "the filmic

Deleted: comprising

Deleted: the world

Deleted: It is worth noting,

Deleted: that

Deleted: as the film proceeds

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: bears witness

Deleted: Kozlovic's

Deleted: y

Deleted: in this regard

Deleted: qtd

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: , though,

Deleted: Newton's

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 30? [PARAGRAPH](#)

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 48? [PARAGRAPH](#)

Christ-figure par excellence” (1970, 21), yet it is curious that Kozlovic’s article draws only three Christic parallels with this film. These links are made with regard to Luke’s “alter ego” (number five in Kozlovic’s list of structural characteristics) in that he is both a Christ figure and a prison inmate (admittedly not the most concrete of correlations), the fact that he stands at one point in a “cruciform pose” (number seventeen), and that there is a “cross association” (number eighteen) at the end of the picture, where “the filmmakers artistically fuse an actual crossroad with a cross image as seen from a heavenly viewpoint, and link it with Luke, the Christ-figure, at the time of his undeserved death” (Kozlovic 2004, \*57).

Deleted: looking at Kozlovic’s article

Deleted: are made

Deleted: in respect of

Deleted: ¶

The pedagogical utility of this needs, however, to be questioned. The vast majority of my students have seen Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show* (1998), for instance, and it is not uncommon for a seminar discussion to revolve around Kozlovic’s claim that the scene at the end of the picture when Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) “walks on water as he steps into the ocean” (ibid., \*58) signals Truman’s Christ-like status. But, since Kozlovic’s own thesis is predicated on the claim that there are twenty-five structural characteristics that make up a Christ figure, it is hard to see how an overly literal reading of one small visual ingredient of a much larger film is sufficient to justify his unqualified claims that “religious themes should be pointed out in the secular pulpit of the cinema during traditional film appreciation classes” (ibid., \*71) and that “feature films should be employed as part of a postmodern religious education” (ibid.). It seems difficult to rationalize the showing of a film for no better reason than that a visual motif within the last five minutes happens to coincide, in the eyes of one interpreter, with a passage contained

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: which

Deleted: Kozlovic’s

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: justify

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 57? [PARAGRAPH](#)

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 58? [PARAGRAPH](#)

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 71? [PARAGRAPH](#)

in the Fourth Gospel, written some two thousand years ago, in which the disciples “saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to [their] boat” (John 6:19).

Instead of a suggestion that Truman is a Christ figure, we need a critical, scholarly dissection of the properties that are being cited as functionally equivalent. I have read many student essays that take the line, for instance, that John Coffey in *The Green Mile* is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, but without a subsequent exploration of how these classic characteristics of God’s identity impinge on the film, the idea is not as rewarding as it might be.

According to Richard Swinburne, God is “present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a free agent, able to do everything . . . knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy and worthy of worship” (1993, 2),

but it is difficult to see how all of these qualities are interchangeable with this particular character in Darabont’s film. Is Coffey really omniscient or just wise, astute, and sagacious? He may be able to cure Paul Edgcomb’s (Tom Hanks) urinary infection, but does this make him omnipotent or a miracle worker? That he is a healer is not in question, but does he actually possess supernatural, transcendental powers? It may be that he is reputed, in the film, to have

“fallen out of the sky,” but this may say more about his mysterious origins than constitute a specific testimony to his divinity. When a film is not seen qua film but only for its affinity with scriptural accounts of Jesus’s divinity, then limitations to the ensuing exploration are inevitable.

Similar deficiencies in developing a convincing or workable typology also arise in the case of other biblical prototypes. In the case of *Edward Scissorhands*, for example, it has been alleged that one of the characters is a Judas figure. In Peter Malone’s words, “Jim, Kim’s boyfriend, is the betrayer, even persuading Kim for some time to be part of his scheme” and offering “Edward his mock kiss” (1997, 83). But, unlike Judas in the Gospels, who, according to

Deleted: place

Deleted: ng

Deleted: there needs to be

Deleted: which

Deleted: enterprise

Deleted: have been

Deleted: comprise

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: it is inevitable that there are

Deleted: drawing up

Deleted: comprises

Matthew 27:5, “went and hanged himself,” Jim does not take his own life after realizing the enormity of his crime. Indeed, there is not even a suggestion that Jim feels any sense of guilt about betraying Edward and implicating him in a crime (breaking and entering) that he did not commit. Clive Marsh has argued that “We would be unwise to try and conduct a theological conversation, however useful its subject matter may be, with a ‘bad film’: a film which people simply would not want to watch” (1997, 32). Turning this claim around, we could just as easily claim that we would be unwise to try to conduct a filmic conversation with “bad theology.” that is, with a theology that relies solely on visual correlations in order to be instructive. The fact that a film is deemed to bear witness to certain Christ-like characteristics is not by itself theologically valuable, and we end up with the situation whereby there is no film in which one cannot forge a theological connection. The net result is that this will, in Lyden’s words, “stretch the interpretation of such films to the breaking point and do an injustice both to Christianity and to the films in question” (2003, 24). Indeed, it becomes difficult for a film to be heard *in its own right*, and ultimately it becomes a dishonest—not to mention exasperating—enterprise if no consideration is given to the context within which the alleged Christ figure appears. Where, indeed, does one draw the line?

Deleted: which

Deleted: Writing in 1997,

Deleted: and

Deleted: which

Deleted: being

Furthermore, useful though it may be in a classroom context to compare, say, what a romantic comedy, such as *Love Actually* (2003), has to say on the subject of love with Saint Paul’s treatise on the topic in 1 Corinthians 13, we must consider such an endeavor in the light of the work of Robert Jewett, for instance, who looks at a range of contemporary films through the lens of Paul’s epistles and asks whether films actually do subscribe to a Pauline paradigm. Despite finding a number of pertinent parallels between *Forrest Gump* (1994) and the celebration of love in Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth—“Only Gump remains true to

Deleted: must be seen

Deleted: queries

these simple virtues of belief in God, doing one's best with one's abilities, loving one's family

and friends, and expecting the best of others" (Jewett 1999, 53)—Jewett readily highlights the

differences between them: "Although unworthy misfits were given equal honor in [early

Christian] love feasts, there is no presumption of a Forrest-Gump-type of innocence in 1

Corinthians 13 or anywhere else in Paul's writings" (ibid., 55). Films are undoubtedly capable of

wrestling with ideals such as love, kindness, compassion, morality, and marriage, but we should

also ask whether it is ever really possible to appropriate a Christian ideal through popular film.

To what extent do the qualities of agape—unconditional love—shed light on the dynamics that

lie at the core of any given motion picture? What sacrifices are involved? Is theology diluted in

the process? Is the theologian expected to read the motivations and behavior of film characters

through a specifically Christian lens so that, in the case of the racial drama *Crash* (2005), for

instance, the film must be labeled as deficient because Jesus's commandment to "love your

neighbor as yourself" in Matthew 22:39 does not appear to have made any direct impression on

the characters in this film? Do any films actually pose a challenge to the New Testament

understanding of Jesus and initiate a conversation in which theologians need to participate? In

other words, is it a one-way or a two-way street?

To give an example, the film *Sin City* (2005) is potentially theologically rich, at least

from a cursory examination of its title, which one might think calls to mind, first, in its reference

to sin, Saint Augustine's famous treatise on the fallenness, depravity, and sinful nature of the

human race, from which "no one can escape without the toll of toils and tears and fears" (quoted

in Deacy 2001, 38). Indeed, believing that Adam's sin and spiritual death had been inherited

through concupiscence from generation to generation, Augustine claimed that "so great a sin was

committed, that by it the human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted to their

Deleted: is keen to

Deleted: . In his words,

Deleted: There is no doubt that

Deleted: such

Deleted: the question

Deleted: be

Deleted: ed

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: manage to

Deleted: "

Deleted: "

Deleted: Are there ever

Deleted: occasions where a

Deleted: s

Deleted: s

Deleted: around

Deleted: engage

Deleted: only

Deleted: not

Deleted: the film's

Deleted: be thought to

Deleted: ly

posterity, liable to sin and subject to death” (quoted in *ibid.*). Second, the title evokes the “city” in Augustine’s *City of God*, which constituted the last and greatest apologetic work of the early Christian Church and gave rise to much political thought in the Middle Ages and beyond (including the publication in the mid-1960s of Harvey Cox’s seminal *Secular City*) concerning the composition of the church as a mixed body of people.

Yet, whatever superficial links one may be inclined to forge, *Sin City* is an unapologetically misogynistic film, as one of my students pointed out, and the sexist behavior and violence that are meted out to women in any context do\* not lie outside the province of the theologian. In a classroom context, therefore, such a film should not be viewed through the lens of whether links may be forged with Augustine’s own early fifth-century understanding of a “sin city.” In his view, although the church is *in* the world, it is not *of* the inexorably sinful and fallen world, and only at the Last Day will this tension between the earthly and heavenly “cities” be resolved. Nor, indeed, is it appropriate to examine the film through the lens of whether any of its leading heroes and villains might constitute Christ figures (or, for that matter, in this context Eve figures).

Rather, the pressing matter concerns the way in which women are dehumanized and viewed as objects rather than subjects, which has a detrimental effect on women’s humanity. The most obvious Christ-figure referent in the film is the Bruce Willis character, Hartigan, whose mission is, Travis Bickle–style, to save the life of a prostitute (whose life is being violated by a dangerous sadist) and who is beaten and punished for a crime he did not commit. Hartigan’s forgiveness and self-sacrificial love provides one of the film’s few grace notes. However, a more suitable classroom discussion would center on the efficacy of always having women being

Deleted: ly

Deleted: The

Deleted: brethren

Deleted: it is the case that, as one of my students was quick to point out in an assignment,

Deleted: is

Deleted: does

Deleted: that

Deleted: be deemed to comprise

Deleted: , in this case,

Deleted: and whose

Deleted: Bickle’s

Deleted: But

Deleted: fit around

\* AU: The subject is plural (sexist behavior and violence), so I’ve changed the verbs accordingly. FINE.

“redeemed” and rescued by men. What effect does this have on women’s dignity, autonomy, and sense of personhood?

In a similar way, what is the point of looking at the likes of *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) or *The Life of David Gale* (2002) for Christ-figure resonances if one is thereby

overlooking wider theological positions these films advance about the dangers of nonconformity or institutionalization (in the former) or the adequacy of the death penalty as an instrument of

justice (in the latter), which have enormous implications for the pursuit of theology? The same

can be said of *The Godfather, Part Three* (1990), which raises many ideological questions about the sanctity of family, the glorification of criminality, and theology and economics in the light of

Michael Corleone’s (Al Pacino) attempt to “buy” his pardon through the purifying power of

money, with the complicity of the Catholic Church. These are all more profitable portals into a

theological discussion of the film than one that merely looks for biblical prototypes. To this end,

one of my students generated a useful discussion on the tendency to find Christ-figure motifs in

cinematic adaptations of comic book superheroes, to the point that the *X-Men* (2000–2006)

franchise seemed more of a study of prejudice and social ostracism than a story about liberators

and redeemers; in the same vein, *Batman Begins* (2005) is more about fear and the need to stand

up for one’s own beliefs than about Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) being a modern-day Jesus.

The danger with simply forging superficial correlations is that such wider issues tend to

go untreated and unnoticed, and it is hard to see how, as Kozlovic (2004) suggests, theology and

religious studies benefit\* from the quest for cinematic Christ figures. In a classroom context it is

easy to apply the syllogism that since religion and film are involved in related quests, such as

that both “are about ‘life’ and its meaning,” then, by definition, “all films are ‘religious,’ or are

Deleted: being

Deleted: d in these films

Deleted: case of the

Deleted: case of the

Deleted: could

Deleted: in

Deleted: are raised concerning

Deleted: about

Deleted: which

Deleted: was generated by one of my students over

Deleted: could be seen as

Deleted: , and that

Deleted: s

Deleted: It is easy

\* AU: The subject is plural—(1) theology and (2) religious studies—so I’ve changed the verb accordingly. [FINE](#)

amenable to some kind of religious reading” (Wright 2007, 16). However, as Wright argues, this kind of hypothesis “is effectively meaningless—so broad that it can be neither proved nor disproved” (ibid.). The tendency is to fall into the trap of suggesting that religion and film are functionally equivalent agencies, so that, by watching a film with a Christ-figure referent, religion is in some way able to sneak past the back door unnoticed.

Deleted: unnoticed by

Deleted: need to be raised

If this is so, we need to raise wider questions about what films are actually doing to audiences. Is it some kind of propaganda tool for making them “more religious”? This is the position Kozlovic appears to have adopted, as shown in his attestation that the Christ-figure typology “can be fruitfully employed in a prescriptive, cookbook fashion by filmmakers who want to engineer powerful Christ-figures into their productions” so that they can thereby

Deleted: in order

“proverbially snowball their audiences into accepting their covert religious argument without the need for blatantly overt arguments” (2004, \*19). There are serious implications here, however.

Deleted: ¶

Underlying Kozlovic’s argument is the implicit suggestion that one of the filmmaker’s roles is to hoodwink and manipulate an audience under the guise of presenting escapist entertainment. As

Deleted: of the filmmaker

Deleted: serving up

Rob Johnston puts it, “All too frequently, movies are controlled by crass commercial interests.

They merely provide escape or indulge our prejudices and fantasies, oversimplifying life in the process” (2000, 87). For bell hooks, similarly, “most of us, no matter how sophisticated our strategies of critique and intervention, are usually seduced, at least for a time, by the images we see on the screen. They have power over us and we have no power over them” (quoted in Lynch

2005, 83). Earlier in the twentieth century, Theodor Adorno, a leading figure from the Frankfurt

School of social and cultural analysis, suggested that popular culture, at least the machinations of Hollywood, was a serious threat to human welfare because it provided people with, in Lynch’s

Deleted: took the line

Deleted: not

Deleted: ing

Deleted: , as it did,

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 19?

words, “a range of manufactured entertainments and distractions” but whose ultimate goal was to “generate profit rather than promote human well-being” (ibid., 71). While Kozlovic’s talk of “snowballing” an audience lacks the same ideological scaffold that is intrinsic to Adorno’s talk of the way in which popular culture has the capacity to co-opt “the vast majority of society into an exploitative cultural system over which they had no control” and to “preserve the basic structures of global capitalism and to pacify any attempts to challenge the way in which this system operates” (ibid.), there is a similar underlying suggestion that viewers are pawns of—in this case—duplicious, theologically minded filmmakers whose mission is to dupe “secular” audiences by overwhelming them with implicitly theological images and narratives.

Deleted: Lynch, 2005

Another problem that arises with the fixation on parallels is that sometimes a film is believed to contain either more than one Christ figure or an alleged Christ figure is found to bear a striking resemblance to other gospel (or extrascriptural) characters. In the words of John Fitch, “In many cases, on-screen characters take on the traits of Jesus, St. Paul, King David, Odysseus, and Judas all at once” (2005, \*14). Larry Kreitzer falls into the trap of suggesting, in his analysis of the classic Western *High Noon* (1952), that “the story-line seems to parallel the biblical story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ” (2002, 127), to the point that the protagonist, Will Kane (Gary Cooper), amounts to “a Christ-figure” who calls “others to face judgment by his example” (ibid., 129). At the same time he construes Kane as “the embodiment of Elijah, exhorting the people to face the judgment that is on the horizon” (ibid., 134) and thus as an “Elijah-figure” (ibid., 129). However, he does not suggest how a character can—or ought—to be seen as both a Christ figure and an Elijah figure, and, if anything, the efficacy of a Christ-figure typology is diminished if the exclusivity of Christ figures is compromised in this way.

Deleted: immersing

Deleted: when

Deleted: deemed

Deleted: where

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: both

Deleted: —while

Deleted: ing

Deleted: There is no suggestion as to

Deleted: it diminishes, rather than enhances.

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 14? [PARAGRAPH](#)

Taken to extremes, one of the manifestations of this position occurs when students look at the etymology of a character's name. In the case of *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, one of my students looked up the meaning of the two names, Sylvia and Lauren, of the Natascha McElhone character, who both reveals to Truman the limitations of the fake, commodified environment of Seahaven, where he resides, and prompts him to leave this world behind in favor of the freedom of the "real" world, away from the constant glare of TV cameras. There his life will no longer be scripted and manufactured according to the designs of a reality TV program. Yet, while making some instructive points about how Sylvia stands for "tree" and Lauren means "guardian spirit," one could also say that, in tempting Truman to want to exit the self-contained Eden, Sylvia/Lauren is a serpent figure. In this sense, one needs to say something about the dangers of reading too much into superficial designations. The same could apply to *The Godfather*, for which one of my students made a strong case for seeing Michael Corleone as a Christ figure, an Adam figure, and an advocate of Satan.

Deleted: is

Deleted: will

Deleted: behind

Deleted: recently

Deleted: in which

Deleted: in

Deleted: the

Deleted: and where

Deleted: med

Deleted: it

Deleted: be said

Deleted: needs to be said

Deleted: be said in respect of

Deleted: in

Deleted: rigorous

Deleted: also

In a similar way, one of the most popular films that my students choose to look at in their theological interpretation is *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), in which the links between Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) and Jesus are often described as "undeniable." But are they? Does this analysis not depend on one's knowledge or understanding of the roles that both Jesus and Andy play? There are a number of different interpretations as to whether Jesus accepted his ignominious punishment and death stoically, with calmness and acceptance, as reflected cinematically in Max von Sydow's performance in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), or whether, as Willem Dafoe's somewhat schizophrenic and tortured Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) suggests, Jesus was unable to bear the sacrifice that was expected of him on behalf of a sinful humanity. Is any film therefore capable of bearing witness to easily identifiable

Deleted: with

Deleted: it

Deleted: apprehension

Deleted: carry

facets of Christ's life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension when there are so many Christological positions in existence?

Perhaps there are even other figures besides Jesus Christ who would make a more fitting correlation with the nonviolent suffering Dufresne experiences in *The Shawshank Redemption* at the hands of a corrupt and sadistic prison warden. Might Mahatma Gandhi make a more suitable point of reference than Jesus in this regard, so that Andy could be said to be a "Gandhi figure"?

The problem with making associations between Christ and Dufresne on the basis that both were innocent, wrongly convicted teachers and saviors and perfect role models (along the lines of

Immanuel Kant's claim that Christ was a perfect moral exemplar) is that the floodgates are

opened to allow for everyone who is wrongly accused of a crime (or indeed all teachers) to be

categorized as Christ figures. Might non-Christian role models or exemplars thus function no less rigorously than Christian ones? Or must the film be deemed to have some kind of Christianizing

agenda at work in order for the Christian correlations to succeed? If this is so, is such a film

alienating to non-Christian audience members, or may they be able to derive something

comparable from the film-viewing experience?

Pedagogically, it is important to ensure that students are encouraged to look at a film's entire range of interpretations rather than concentrate solely on narrative and textual points of

convergence. As Wright sees it, some of this unsophistication has a pragmatic basis. For

example, she suggests that courses "need to be attractive and intelligible to students with

increasingly diverse educational and cultural backgrounds" (2007, 13). Within this marketplace,

a course on religion and film could be an attempt "to appear legitimate in the eyes of university

administrators and external agencies" (ibid.). Since film is perceived as being both popular and

relevant (and more sellable than a course on, say, Sanskrit), then religion-film courses make

Deleted: comprise

Deleted: links

Deleted: all people

Deleted: are

Deleted: work

Deleted: else—

Deleted: —out of

Deleted: one of the lessons that can be learned, here,

Deleted: can be put down to

Deleted: reasons

Deleted: as

Deleted: module

Deleted: module

good strategic sense. The problem, however, is that those teaching these classes are not sufficiently versed in the vocabulary of film studies, and it is easy to see how, if Wright's critique is correct, this can result in some rather naïve instances of theological interpretation. Indeed, despite the "growing bibliography and plethora of courses," it may be the case that "*film* is not really being studied at all" (ibid., 22). Her call for a "decent course on film within a theology and/or religious studies programme" to consist of "familiarising students with key areas of film-studies practice as one of its aims" (ibid., 23) is thus a serious one and may help to reduce the existing tendency to go through a film scene by scene, identify a number of possible biblical parallels, and provide the relevant scriptural references, the downside of which is that what ensues is not so much a theological critique or engagement as a list of surface allusions. When Kozlovic therefore claims that "One simply cinematically retells the Jesus story and mechanically connects the plot dots" (Kozlovic 2004, \*11), it is apparent that this constitutes a misreading of the many complex processes at work in the creation of a cinematic product.

In its place, classroom discussions would be more productively spent looking at wider debates between theology and film than ones that see cinematic characters as little more than ciphers whose existence is predicated upon the existence of the New Testament Jesus and who are accordingly not instrumental in their own right. If there is anything theologically significant about the likes of E.T. and John Coffey, it is not because they are intrinsically efficacious—on Kozlovic's criteria, if they perform miracles, die, and are born again, any redemptive value that exists is necessarily credited to Jesus Christ, who alone supplies the point of connection.

However, as Aichele and Walsh affirm, a film cannot "transfer the written, biblical text" into the medium of film without "otherwise affecting it" (2002, viii). Thus, to assume that something

Deleted: downside

Deleted: modules

Deleted: it

Deleted: go some way towards ensuring against

Deleted: ¶

Deleted: comprises

Deleted: should

Deleted: which

Deleted: ,

Deleted: on Kozlovic's criteria,

Deleted: , and so

Deleted: there is

\* AU: Are you citing page or paragraph 11? [PARAGRAPH](#)

about Christ's activity is straightforwardly transferable to the realm of modern-day cinematic

Deleted: straightforwardly transferable

Christ figures is to necessitate an insupportable leap of faith. Rather than seeing Jesus as preeminent, students should be encouraged to investigate whether a more reciprocal relationship between Christ and any Christ figure is able to operate. If there is no monolithic or inviolable reading of any text, why should not all texts—scriptural as well as cinematic—be continually negotiated and renegotiated by the interpreter? As George Aichele sees it, no meaning is ever fixed but lies between texts and in “intertextual configurations of texts that intersect one another in a wide variety of ways” (Aichele in Kreitzer 2002, 9). It would therefore be absurd to suggest that the biblical text should be treated with a degree of reverence that no other text could possibly emulate. Unless both sides are treated with parity, it will be difficult to move beyond the superficial classification of religious themes and imagery and engage in more substantial theological reflection. This may take students to new and unexpected places, but on the grounds that the job of the theologian in a university is not to proselytize but to educate, teachers of theology should be welcoming the fresh and innovative ways of “doing theology” that freedom from the restrictions of conforming to a preestablished typology of twenty-five structural characteristics is able to engender.

Deleted: which

Deleted: programmed

Deleted: which

#### <1>References</1>

<R>Aichele, George. 2002. “Foreword.” In *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, ed. Kreitzer, 7–10. London: Sheffield Academic Press.

—————, and Richard Walsh, eds. 2002. “Introduction: Scripture as Precursor.” In *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh, vii–xvi. Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International.

Barton, John. 2004. "Biblical Studies." In *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed.

Gareth Jones, 18–33. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Deleted: MacMillan

Cox, Harvey. 1966. *The Secular City*. New York: Macmillan.

Deacy, Christopher. 2001. *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*. Cardiff:

University of Wales Press.

Fitch, John, III. 2005. "Archetypes on Screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ, and the American

Cinematic Hero and Anti-Hero." *Journal of Religion and Film* 9(1) (April).

[www.unomaha.edu/jrf/V019N01/FitchArchetypes.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/V019N01/FitchArchetypes.htm).\*

Gill, Robin. 2004. "The Practice of Faith." In *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*,

ed. Gareth Jones, 3–17. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Jasper, David. 1997. "On Systematizing the Unsystematic: A Response." In *Explorations in*

*Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 235–44.

Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Jewett, Robert. 1999. *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame*. Grand Rapids,

Mich.: Eerdmans.

Deleted: Eerdsmans

Johnston, Robert. 2000. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, Mich.:

Baker.

Kozlovic, Anton Karl. 2004. "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure."

*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall); [http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html)

[cinematicchrist.html](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html) (accessed November 25, 2007).

Deleted: VIII,

Deleted: 2004

Kreitzer, Larry. 2002. *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical*

*Flow*. London: Sheffield Academic Press.

\* AU: Since this URL is no longer valid, could you please provide the page numbers in the actual journal? [THE URL IS CORRECT, ONLY THE Vol9No1 PART HAS COME OUT IN CAPITAL LETTERS. THE FULL URL IS www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No1/FitchArchetypes.htm](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html)

- Loughlin, Gerard. 2005. "Cinéma Divinité: A Theological Introduction." In *Cinéma Divinité: Readings in Film and Theology*, ed. William Telford, Eric Christianson, and Peter Francis, 1–12. London: SCM.
- Lyden, John C. 2003. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lynch, Gordon. 2005. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Malone, Peter. 1997. "Edward Scissorhands: Christology from a Suburban Fairy-tale." In *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 73–86. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Marsh, Clive. 1997. "Film and Theologies of Culture." In *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 21–34. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Skrade, Carl. 1970. "Theology and Films." In *Celluloid and Symbols*, ed. John C. Cooper and C. Skrade, 1–24. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1993. *The Coherence of Theism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, Melanie J. 2007. *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. London: Taurus.

**Deleted:** Walsh, Richard, and George Aichele. 2002. "Introduction: Scripture as Precursor." In *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh, vii–xvi. Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International.