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The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ-Figures in Film

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.*

The aim of this paper is to 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. After teaching an undergraduate module on Religion & Film for the third consecutive year, it is apparent that students are especially predilected to use the Christ-figure typology, as exemplified in a 2004 article by Anton Karl Kozlovic in the *Journal of*

Religion and Popular Culture, in their work, not least when they are required to write a 2,500-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' 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 which are accordingly judged not *qua* film, and for the quality of such filmic properties 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 interrogated for the extent to which they either do or do not have the necessary definitional properties and, whether consciously or otherwise, they are being baptized by students as manifestly 'Christian' products. The assumption is that, in a Gnostic-type scenario, these themes are present in the film – albeit hidden, disguised or camouflaged to the non-initiated – and that it is the special prerogative of the theologian to prize the film open in order to reveal their purported Christological core. Indeed, in Kozlovic's words, "innumerable Christ-figures and other holy subtexts are hidden within the popular cinema" (Kozlovic, 2004, ¶5), to the point that "secular films can engage in religious storytelling about biblical characters, ideas and themes without appearing 'religious'" (ibid.).

As this article will suggest, however, 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' – dependant on whether one is a liberal or evangelical, Protestant or Catholic, believer or non-believer, atheist or agnostic, to name just some of the available

options – and, as Melanie Wright correctly discerns in a recent publication, "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" (Wright, 2007, p.78). It can thus be somewhat disquieting when a student claims in an essay, to paraphrase a recent 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 such wider questions as the motivations of the filmmakers in creating a film and whether, if it is indeed a satire, of what (in the case of *Life of Brian*, suburban England in the 1970s, perhaps?) and how successful have they been to this end, then there is clearly more work to be done.

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? One of my students recently wrote that 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, there is a sole filmmaker responsible for each individual filmic 'text,' and he or she "consciously decides to make that heroic Christ-figure choice; the script almost writes itself" (Kozlovic, 2004, ¶11). 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" (Wright, 2007, p.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 the Gospels to four discrete, but harmonious, eye-witnesses, 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, p.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" (Barton, 2004, p.18). Within such a context, it appears somewhat obsolete, even pre-critical, to attempt to 'read' Christological content into films without at least looking into whether alternative readings may also contain currency, whether these are expressly theological or not. 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'" (Jasper,

1997, p.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 phoney endeavour, which prompts the inevitable retort: 'So what?'

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 theology comprises an academic discipline that can be practised 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" (Loughlin, 2005, p.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 such ethical issues as stem cell research and debates over when human life begins and ends, there are sometimes closer connections "between Christians and their secular counterparts than there are between opposing Christians" (Gill, 2004, p.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 pre-set 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. Fruitful 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), one of my students recently pointed out that there is a notable discontinuity – that 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. In Kozlovic's 2004 article, "twenty-five structural characteristics of the cinematic Christ-figure" (Kozlovic, 2004, ¶0) are 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), and all manner of cross and resurrection-type allusions. Yet, it is significant that Kozlovic is unable to identify any films which fulfil even half of the structural characteristics that he so painstakingly delineates, with most films he discusses bearing witness to, at most, just three or four.

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 comprising 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* the world (cf. John 1:10). It is worth noting, however, that Kozlovic also distances himself from this reading, on the grounds that Jerome's pathetic lapse as the film proceeds 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 (see Kozlovic, 2004, ¶30). Similarly, despite noting that *The Man Who Fell to Earth* also bears witness to number twelve on his list of structural characteristics – 'A Decisive Death and Resurrection' – Kozlovic's connection to this facet of Christ's life is, at best, tenuous, since in place of a fully-fledged resurrection motif the film contains no more than a precursor to death and resurrection. Kozlovic quotes Loughlin in this regard 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" (qtd in ibid., ¶48). Does this really, though, *reinforce* Newton's Christic nature since, at the end of the film, Newton's 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 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 Christ-figure par excellence" (Skrade, 1970, p.21), yet looking at Kozlovic's article it is curious that only three Christic parallels are made with this film. These links are made in respect of 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 17), and that there is a 'Cross Association' (number 18) 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).

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 which 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 Kozlovic's unqualified claim 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 justify 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 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). In place of suggesting that Truman is a Christ-figure, there needs to be a critical, scholarly dissection of the properties that are being cited as functionally equivalent. I

have read many student essays which 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 enterprise is not as rewarding as it might have been. 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" (Swinburne, 1993, p.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 comprise a specific testimony to his divinity. When a film is not seen *qua* film, but only for its affinity with scriptural accounts of Jesus' divinity, then it is inevitable that there are limitations to the ensuing exploration.

Similar deficiencies in drawing up 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 comprises 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" (Malone, 1997, p.83). But, unlike Judas in the Gospels who, according to 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) which he did not commit. Writing in 1997, Clive Marsh 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" (Marsh, 1997, p.32). Turning this claim around, we could just as easily claim that we would be unwise to try and conduct a filmic conversation with 'bad theology': that is, with a theology which 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 being 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" (Lyden, 2003, p.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?

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 St. Paul's treatise on the topic in 1 Corinthians 13, such an endeavour must be seen 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 queries 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 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, p.53) – Jewett is keen to highlight the differences between them. In his words, "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., p.55). There is no doubt that films are capable of wrestling with such ideals as love, kindness, compassion, morality and marriage, but the question should also be asked whether it is ever really possible to appropriate a Christian ideal through popular film. To what extent do the qualities of *agape* – unconditional love – manage to 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 behaviour 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 labelled as deficient because Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" in Matthew 22:39 does not appear to have made any direct impression on the characters in this film? Are there ever any occasions where a film actually poses a challenge to the New Testament understanding of Jesus and initiates a conversation around which theologians need to engage? In other words, is it only a one-way or a two-way street?

To give an example, the film *Sin City* (2005) is potentially theologically rich, not least from a cursory examination of the film's title which might be thought to call to mind, firstly, in its reference to sin, St. 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" (qtd in Deacy, 2001, p.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 posterity, liable to sin and subject to death" (qtd in ibid.). Secondly, 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 *The Secular City*) concerning the composition of the Church as a mixed body of brethren. Yet, whatever superficial links one may be inclined to forge, it is the case that, as one of my students was quick to point out in an assignment, *Sin City* is an unapologetically misogynistic film, and the sexist behaviour and violence that is meted out to women in any context does 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,' wherein although the Church is *in* the world, it is not *of* the inexorably sinful and fallen world, and that 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 be deemed to comprise 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, in this case, being violated by a dangerous sadist) and who is beaten and punished for a crime he did not commit and whose forgiveness and self-sacrificial love provides one of the film's few grace notes. But, a more suitable classroom discussion would fit around the efficacy of always having women being '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 being advanced in these films about the dangers of non-conformity or institutionalization, in the case of the former, or the adequacy of the Death Penalty as an instrument of justice, in the case of the latter, which have enormous implications for the pursuit of theology? The same could be said of *The Godfather Part Three* (1990) in which many ideological questions are raised concerning the sanctity of family, the glorification of criminality, and about 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 which merely looks for Biblical prototypes. To this end, a useful discussion was generated by one of my students over the tendency to find Christ-figure motifs in cinematic adaptations of comic book superheroes, to the point that the *X-Men* (2000-6) franchise could be seen as more of a study of prejudice and social ostracism than about liberators and redeemers, and that *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 suggests, theology and religious studies benefits from the quest for cinematic Christ-figures. It is easy in a classroom context 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 amenable to some kind of religious reading" (Wright, 2007, p.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 unnoticed by the back door.

If this is so, wider questions need to be raised 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," in order that they can thereby "proverbially snowball their audiences into accepting their covert religious argument without the need for blatantly overt arguments" (Kozlovic, 2004, ¶19). There are serious implications here, however. Underlying Kozlovic's argument is the implicit suggestion that one of the roles of the filmmaker is to hoodwink and manipulate an audience, under the guise of serving up escapist entertainment. As 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" (Johnston, 2000, p.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" (qtd in Lynch, 2005, p.83). Earlier in the twentieth century, Theodor Adorno, a leading figure from the Frankfurt School of social and cultural analysis took the line that popular culture, not least the machinations of Hollywood, was a serious threat to human welfare, providing people, as it did, with, in Lynch's words, "a range of manufactured entertainments and distractions," but whose ultimate goal was to "generate profit rather than promote human well-being" (Lynch, 2005, p.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 – duplicitous theologically-minded filmmakers whose mission is to dupe 'secular' audiences by immersing them with implicitly theological images and narratives.

Another problem that arises with the fixation on parallels is when a film is deemed to contain either more than one Christ-figure or where an alleged Christ-figure is found to bear a striking resemblance to other gospel (or extra-scriptural) 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" (Fitch, 2005, ¶14). Larry Kreitzer falls into the trap of suggesting, in his analysis of the classic Western *High Noon* (1952),

both that "the story-line seems to parallel the biblical story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ" (Kreitzer, 2002, p.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., p.129) – while at the same time construing Kane as "the embodiment of Elijah, exhorting the people to face the judgment that is on the horizon" (ibid., p.134), and thus as an "Elijah-figure" (ibid., p.129). There is no suggestion as to how a character can – or ought – to be seen as both a Christ-figure and an Elijah-figure, and, if anything, it diminishes, rather than enhances, the efficacy of a Christ-figure typology if the exclusivity of Christ-figures is compromised in this way. Taken to extremes, one of the manifestations of this position is when students will look at the etymology behind a character's name. In the case of *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, one of my students recently 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 in which he resides, and prompts him to leave this world behind in favour of freedom in the 'real' world, away from the constant glare of the TV cameras and where his life will no longer be scripted and manufactured according to the designs of a reality TV programme. Yet, while making some instructive points about how Sylvia stands for 'Tree' and Lauren means 'Guardian Spirit,' it could also be said that, in tempting Truman to want to exit the self-contained Eden, Sylvia/Lauren is a serpent-figure. In this sense, something needs to be said about the dangers of reading too much into superficial designations. The same could be said in respect of *The Godfather* in which one of my students made a rigorous case for seeing Michael Corleone as a Christ-figure, an Adam-figure and also an advocate of Satan.

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), with the links between Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) and Jesus often described as 'undeniable'. But, are they? Does it not depend on one's knowledge or apprehension of the roles that both Jesus and Andy carry? 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 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 non-violent 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 comprise a 'Gandhi-figure'? The problem with making links between Christ and Dufresne on the basis that both were innocent, wrongly convicted teachers and saviours 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 all people who are 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 work? If this is so, is such a film alienating to non-Christian audience members, or may they be able to derive something else – comparable – out of the film viewing experience?

Pedagogically, one of the lessons that can be learned, here, is 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 can be put down to pragmatic reasons. For example, as she suggests, courses "need to be attractive and intelligible to students with increasingly diverse educational and cultural backgrounds" (Wright, 2007, p.13). Within this marketplace, a module on Religion & 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 module on, say, Sanskrit, then religion-film courses make good strategic sense. The downside, however, is that those teaching these modules are not sufficiently versed in the vocabulary of film studies, and it is easy to see how, if Wright's critique is correct, it 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., p.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., p.23) is thus a serious one and may go some way towards ensuring against 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 comprises a misreading of the many complex processes at work in the creation of a cinematic product.

In its place, classroom discussions should be more productively spent looking at wider debates between theology and film than ones which 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, on Kozlovic's criteria, they are intrinsically efficacious – 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" (Aichele & Walsh, 2002, p.viii), and so to assume that there is something straightforwardly transferable about Christ's activity to the realm of modern day cinematic Christ-figures is to necessitate an insupportable leap of faith. Rather than see Jesus as pre-eminent, students should be encouraged to investigate whether a more reciprocal relationship between Christ and 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 re-negotiated 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, p.9). It would therefore be absurd to suggest that the

biblical text should be treated with a degree of reverence which 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 programme is not to proselytize but to educate, teachers of theology should be welcoming the fresh and innovative ways of 'doing theology' which freedom from the restrictions of conforming to a pre-established typology of twenty-five structural characteristics is able to engender.

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