HOW TO CREATE A HOLLYWOOD CHRIST-FIGURE: SACRED STORYTELLING AS APPLIED THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This is the second century of the age of Hollywood, yet, the pedagogic utilisation of popular feature films as a legitimate extra-ecclesiastical resource for the study of theology is frequently ignored, unappreciated or under-utilised. However, to remain culturally relevant in the post-Millennial period, the profession needs to integrate movies into the curricula that go beyond their traditional deployment as visual aides, diversionary entertainment or student pacification.

Cinematic Christ-figures are a legitimate sub-genre of the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film, and so learning what constitutes their structural characteristics for narrative storytelling is an exciting area of applied theology that resonates with the proverbial children-of-the-media who already consider movies their natural cultural turf. Utilising humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens, the Hollywood cinema and critical literature was briefly scanned and twenty-five structural elements of the Christ-figure were identified and illustrated herein using copious inter-genre exemplars to demonstrate their richness and diversity. It is concluded that religion-and-film studies is warranted and will became an increasingly valuable tool in the theologian's toolbox.

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Introduction

Narrative storytelling is an art-form older than the Bible, which is itself an honourable cultural precursor to cinematic storytelling, especially in this second century of the "Age of Hollywood" (Paglia, 1994, p. 12) wherein movies have become the *lingua franca* of the video generation. Indeed, "cinema and television are our culture's fireside storytellers. In place of Samson, Apollo and Beowulf, we have Batman, Captain Kirk and Indiana Jones" (Merryman, 1994, p. 300). The popular cinema, in addition to being the technological heir of the industrial revolution and an indelible cultural resource, is a primary aesthetic bearer of our 20th and now 21st century civilization. As Todd A. Kappelman (2002) argued:

> Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture in which we live than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series (pp. 119-120).

One can only agree with him wholeheartedly. Not surprisingly, the widespread proliferation of movies means that it is an easily accessible resource for storytelling within our postmodern, post-Millennial and increasingly post-print culture. Given this techno-social fact, coupled with the pervasiveness of Judeo-Christianity throughout the West, it is not too surprising to discover that the popular Hollywood cinema contains numerous sacred stories. Biblical epics of the Cecil B. DeMille ilk such as *The Ten Commandments* (silent), *The King of Kings* (silent), *Samson and Delilah* (sound) and *The Ten Commandments* (sound) are well-known and much loved (Campbell & Pitts, 1981; Christianson, Francis & Telford, 2005), but less appreciated and even more prolific are the "hidden" holy stories packaged as sacred subtexts in apparently non-religious cinematic fare.

What are Sacred Subtexts?

A sacred subtext (aka holy subtext; divine infranarrative) is basically "anonymous religiousness" (Gallagher, 1997, p. 151), alternatively defined as the pursuit of "overtly religious themes in a secular 'wrapper'" (Ellis, 2001, p. 304), which at first glance hides their true ontological status. Popular films are able to do this storytelling task very easily because any film narrative can have two independent natures working simultaneously. Namely, an *overt* plot and a *covert* storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature. As Bernard Dick (1998, p. 129) described this intimate interlocking relationship: "the narrative and infranarrative (or text and subtext) are not two separate entities (there is, after all, only one film); think of them, rather, as two concentric circles, the infranarrative being *within* the narrative." Because of this dual arrangement, seemingly secular films can engage in profound religious storytelling *without* appearing religious. Moreover, a "character needn't be consciously aware of his shadings of the truth or the hidden meanings in his words or actions for there to be subtext or for us to become aware of it" (Howard, 2004, p. 189).

Of all the sacred subtexts hidden within the popular cinema, one of the most famous and prolific is the Christ-figure, that is, the cinematic transfiguration of Jesus Christ from page to projected image. Not only are Christ-figures important

subtexts, but as a living genre, their existence, re-discovery and scholarly criticism grows yearly (Baugh, 1997; Deacy, 2001; Kozlovic, 2006; Kreitzer, 1993, 2002; Scott, 1994; Scully, 1997). Hunting for them can be likened to an adult's version of a Where's Waldo adventure, and whose discovery and explication can be sheer joy, in addition to being intellectually illuminating, theologically insightful and dramatically engaging. However, Christ-figures are *not* to be confused with Jesus-figures.

What is the Difference between Christ-figures and Jesus-figures?

These two holy figures are ontologically unique, although intimately connected. As Father Peter Malone (1997) explained concerning their essential differences:

> "Jesus-figure" refers to any representation of Jesus himself. "Christ-figure" describes any figure in the arts who resembles Jesus. The personal name of Jesus (in line with contemporary spirituality, thought and practice) is used for the Jesus-figure. The title "Christ" - the "Messiah," or the "Anointed One" - is used for those who are seen to reflect his mission. In cinema, writers and directors present both Jesus-figures and Christ-figures (pp. 59-60).

Jesus-figures are therefore aesthetically limited to a specific external form and are historically locked into its related social, political, religious, physical, geographical, cultural and temporal contexts. The filmmakers' aesthetic aim is to approximate the historical-archaeological Jesus very closely, albeit, with differing stylistics and focuses, as aptly demonstrated by the youthful Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings*, the majestic Max Von Sydow in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, the tortured Jim Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ* and the numerous other Jesus-figures that have filled our screens since the birth of the cinema in 1895, and which itself has become a cottage industry (Humphries-Brooks, 2006; Reinhartz, 2007; Staley & Walsh, 2007; Stern, Jefford & DeBona, 1999; Tatum, 2004; Walsh, 2003).

Conversely, Christ-figures are not as aesthetically restricted or locked into historically limited settings. Why? Because they can take on *any* external form, whether male or female, human or alien, animal or insect, biological or mechanical, living or dead, and they still remain legitimate christic figurations regardless of the milieu, context or narrative parameters. Since "'the Christ-

figure' seeks to counter the straitjacketing of Jesus in physical correspondence to a stereotype" (Coates, 2003, p. 80):

> …Jesus is not portrayed directly but is represented symbolically or at times allegorically. Christ figures can be identified either by particular actions that link them with Jesus, such as being crucified symbolically (*Pleasantville*, 1998), walking on water (*The Truman Show*, 1998) or wearing a cross (*Nell*, 1994; *Babette's Feast*, 1987). Indeed, any film that has redemption as a major theme (and this includes many, if not most, recent Hollywood movies) is liable to use some Jesus symbolism in connection with the redemptive hero figure (Reinhartz, 2003, p. 189).

However, it is precisely this vast diversity of filmmaking choices that makes revealing the true identity of a Christ-figure potentially difficult, and why many viewers have not recognised sacred characters "hidden" within their secular film fare beforehand. Yet, the Christ-figure posses many distinctive structural elements that can help one more readily identify them. Of course, not all of these elements must exist in the one character, or in the one film, or at any one time to qualify as a legitimate Christ-figure, but the more of them, the stronger the christic construction, the more profound their holy resonance and the better the sacred storytelling parallels.

The identification of sacred subtexts is a much-welcomed addition to the traditional exegesis of biblical blockbusters (Babington & Evans, 1993; Forshey, 1992; Lang, 2007), theological analyses (Arrandale, 2007; Bowman, 2006; Deacy & Ortiz, 2007; Johnston, 2001, 2007; Marsh, 2004, 2007; Marsh & Ortiz, 1997; Pope, 2007), religion-and-film studies (Flesher & Torry, 2007; Lindvall, 2007; Mitchell & Plate, 2007; Wright, 2006), and its religious education applications and teaching (Goldburg, 1998, 2004; Kozlovic, 2001; Mercadante, 2007). It also provides a very useful checklist for writers wishing to engineer the same into their stories, whether film scripts, novels, plays or oral renditions.

Consequently, utilising textually-based, humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (i.e., examining the world *inside* the frame, but not the world *outside* the frame—Bywater & Sobchack, 1989), the popular Hollywood cinema and related critical literature was selectively reviewed and twenty-five structural elements of the cinematic Christ-figure were identified and explicated herein.

Copious inter-genre exemplars were employed to demonstrate their richness and legitimacy within the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film (aka celluloid religion; cinematic theology; cinematheology; theo-film; film-and-faith; film-faith dialogue).

Twenty-five Structural Elements of the Cinematic Christ-figure: The Hidden Jesus Out in the Open

#1. Christ-figures are usually tangible, visible and colourful characters, even if physically absent on-screen, as in *Central Station* (Bowman, 2001). Their initially secret identity is partially exposed or delayed in progressive revelation fashion to provide mystery and dramatic suspense to engage the viewer. These characters frequently have odd, unexpected and obscure births or otherwise strange origins and arrivals. This is similar to the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:23 NRSV and hereafter) and his obscure upbringing before the adult activation of his cosmic mission (Luke 3:23). For example, in the science fiction (SF) cop film, *God Told Me To*, the police were hunting a presumed serial killer that looked like Jesus wearing hippie garb. They eventually tracked down Bernard Phillips (Richard Lynch), a sexually androgynous alien interloper, along with his twelve "Apostles," an inner circle Judasean betrayer, and the dramatic revelation of his virgin birth by his hapless and husband-less, human mother. Bernard was a human-alien hybrid just like Jesus, another human-alien hybrid conceived by Mary the virgin (Matt. 1:23) and the Holy Ghost (Matt. 1:20).

#2. Christ-figures are the central protagonists and/or objects of concern within the narrative, just like Jesus who was the central character within the New Testament, and who can be presented as either a saviour figure or a redeemer figure. Whilst in their saviour mode, Christ-figures represent Jesus' rescuing, liberating, leading, transforming or life saving functions in the spirit of Mark 12:31: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For example, the Jedi knight, Ben "Obi-Wan" Kenobi (Alec Guinness) in *Star Wars* was killed in battle by Darth Vader (David Prowse; voice of James Earl Jones). However, he returned from the dead in spirit form to lead Luke (Mark Hamill) in the ways of the Force (metaphorically divinity), thus helping the resistance win victory over the forces of evil. Conversely, in their redeemer mode, Christ-figures emerge from a context of evil or strife to take on the sinfulness of those around them, usually

through their own troubles, suffering or death. However, they leave behind vastly improved situations in the spirit of John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." For example, Tommy Tyler (Sidney Poitier) in the contemporary American drama, *Edge of the City* personified the theme of redemption through self-sacrificial blood when he died struggling to protect the life of his young friend from a murderous bully.

#3. Jesus said: "I am from above…I am not of this world" (John 8:23) for he had left his heavenly abode to come down to Earth to live among us as one of us. Therefore, Christ-figures are typically outsiders and somewhat vaguely defined as "from above" or "beyond" or "not around here" or "the man who fell to Earth" etc. Thus, they are literally *in* the world but not *of* the world. For example, Kal-El/Clark Kent/Superman (Christopher Reeve) in *Superman: The Movie* literally came from another planet, Krypton (metaphorically heaven), thus making him an intergalactic refugee. He resided amongst humans as one of them, firstly in Smallville, his rural hometown (metaphorically Nazareth, Jesus' rural hometown), and secondly in Metropolis, his big city work site and American-cum-world environ (metaphorically Jerusalem, Jesus' city work site and surrounding Palestine-cum-Middle East-cum-world environ). In the SF film, *K-Pax*, Prot (Kevin Spacey) came from the planet K-Pax to visit Earth as an intergalactic tourist, complete with a trip diary, before mysteriously returning to his heavenly home far, far away. As did the alien Starman (Jeff Bridges) who took on human form and temporarily visited Earth before returning to his otherworldly home in similar mysterious fashion within the SF film, eponymously named *Starman*.

#4. Christ-figures usually arrive onto the scene through some form of deliberate outside intervention, sometimes by a distant God-figure. For example, the biological father-cum-heavenly Father, Jor-El (Marlon Brando) in *Superman: The Movie* sent baby Kal-El (aka Clark Kent/Superman) to Earth to provide a new home for his alien son-cum-cosmic refuge, and to help the planet and humanity to progress socially. As he claimed: "They only need the light to show them the way. For this reason, and this reason only, I have sent you, my only son," thus paraphrasing John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he

gave his only Son," which also resonated with John 8:12 that identified Jesus as "the light of the world."

#5. Christ-figures, like many comic book heroes usually have alter egos or dual identities, one mundane and the other fantastic. For example, Jesus, the technically skilled "carpenter, the son of Mary" (Mark 6:3) was also "the Messiah, the Son of God" (John 20:31). Similarly, the metropolitan newspaperman, Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) was Superman, the son of Jor-El, the God-figure from Krypton within *Superman: The Movie*. Klaatu (Michael Rennie), the intergalactic ambassador in the SF classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* shed his alien uniform, and whilst incognito as a normal-looking human, resided in a local boarding house as the mysterious Mr. Carpenter (i.e., Jesus' trade). He wandered the streets and environs of Washington, DC looking like any other business-suited office worker before eventually donning his distinctive space suit and returning home in his flying saucer at film's end.

#6. Christ-figures are very special, rare and unusual beings although they typically appear as normal humans doing mundane activities throughout their normal working lives. For example, in the SF cyber-thriller, *The Matrix*, its protagonist, Neo (Keanu Reeves) worked as a typical 9-5 office worker and then as a computer hacker after-hours. Later, he was designated "the chosen one" who was destined to free humanity from the illusory computer-generated world that had enslaved humankind and used them as bio-batteries (only to be flushed down the drain when no longer useful). This messianic hero was very special, rare and unusual in his illusionary world, yet he looked normal as he exhibited his fantastic, Matrix penetrating powers. Indeed, in a reversal of the traditional white colour symbolism for Jesus' clothes, Nero donned a black outfit, just like Pasolini's Jesus (Enrique Irazoqui) in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, which was very serviceable for Nero when fighting butt-kicking cyber-enforcers.

#7. Just as Jesus had twelve Apostles (Matt. 10:1-5), Christ-figures sometimes have this iconic number of twelve intimate friends-cum-associates, as depicted in *God Told Me To.* Christ-figure films (aka Christ cycle films; Christ event films) usually have a lesser number of Apostle-figures to avoid overly

complicating the storyline, or if they all exist, most take a backseat to the christic hero and the more prominent Apostle-figures (e.g., Peter, Judas, Thomas). In lieu of depicting every Apostle, filmmakers sometimes employ other subtextual characters to highlight the identity, relationship and mission of their subtextual Messiahs via Virgin Mary-figures, Pontius Pilate-figures etc. (see below).

#8. Sometimes, Christ-figures are constructed to match biblical specifications so closely that they begin their "divine" mission when they reach the mystical age of "thirty," that is, the biblical age when Jesus started doing his Father's will (Luke 3:23). For example, in *Superman: The Movie*, Clark Kent (Jeff East) walked into the Fortress of Solitude as a troubled eighteen-year-old teenager. Twelve years later, at age thirty, Superman (Christopher Reeve) flew out and started saving the world as a professional do-gooder, just like Jesus, the cosmic do-gooder (Acts 10:38).

#9. Christ-figures can be identified and their sacred functions buttressed by subtextual characters closely related to them. A particularly famous class of holy associates are the cinematic Judas-figures (i.e., inner circle intimates who betray their friends for essentially unwholesome reasons), just as Judas did to Jesus (Luke 22:47-48). For example, in *The Matrix*, the cyber-warrior Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), a co-worker of Nero-the-Christ-figure (Keanu Reeves) betrayed him to the Matrix's cyber-enforcers in return for a "better" illusionary life, despite knowing the truth about humanity's subjugation. Tom Stevens (Hugh Marlowe) was the Judas-figure in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* who betrayed Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) to the military for fame, power, fortune and the rapidly lessening love of his girlfriend.

#10. Another famous class of holy associates that help identify and buttress Christ-figures are the Mary Magdalene-figures. That is, sexually tagged women who are related to the Christ-figures in some close way, but do not know exactly how to express their sexuality with them. For example, Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) in *Superman: The Movie* was a journalist who was in love with Superman, the Christ-figure (Christopher Reeve). She wrote journalistic pieces about sex maniacs, asked Superman how "big" he was (i.e., not how "tall" he was), and made him tell her what colour her underpants were using his x-ray

vision (i.e., pink—iconic of girls and romance). Sexual consummation of such relationships are denied according to Scripture, or are repeatedly delayed to generate sexual tension until eventually given in too according to the Jesus-Magdalene marriage mythology, as recently evidenced in *The Da Vinci Code*.

#11. Another class of famous holy associates are the John the Baptist-figures who exist to prophetically point the way to the Christ-figures (aka Mark 1:2-4). For example, actor Pascal Berger (Cedric Noel) pointed out a fellow actor who was far greater than himself, Daniel Coulombe (Lothaire Bluteau), the Christ-figure in *Jesus of Montreal*. Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) identified Neo (Keanu Reeves) as "the one" who would free them from their computerised prison in *The Matrix*. Whilst the old Story Teller (Francis J. McDonald) pointed the way to Samson, the DeMille constructed Christ-figure (Victor Mature) within *Samson and Delilah* (Kozlovic, 2006). Good Baptist-figures diminish as the Christ-figures grow in importance in scriptural accordance with John 3:30: "He [Jesus] must increase, but I [John] must decrease."

#12. One of the ultimate and unmistakeable identifiers of Christ-figures is when they "die," frequently cruelly and then miraculously come back to life again as good-as-new, if not better. This dramatic event happened to the intergalactic ambassador Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the alien E.T. (voice of Pat Welsh) in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, and the cyber-hacker-cum-hero Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix*. All three resurrections were deemed miraculous by their peers and other normally reliable, plausible witnesses.

#13. Christ's holy death resulted in triumphal victory, even if it seemed a Pyrrhic victory at the time. As the Apostle Paul claimed: "we believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thess. 4:14), and so do the many crafters of Christ-figures. For example, the alien Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was machine-gunned to death by the military then resurrected on-board his cave-like spaceship. Before leaving for his heavenly home, he gave Earth a second chance to join the galactic federation of peaceful planets, or face potential annihilation. The choice was theirs. Similarly, the struck-down Jedi knight, Ben "Obi-Wan" Kenobi (Alec Guiness) in *Star Wars* was far more

powerful in his ethereal form than when physically alive. In the *Return of the Jedi*, an ethereal Ben stood alongside the ethereal forms of Jedi master, Yoda (Frank Oz) and the now redeemed but formerly evil Jedi knight, Darth Vader (David Prowse; voice of James Earl Jones), to form their own holy trinity. Such a perceived loss is usually considered one-off, extraordinary and purposeful, just like Jesus' own death, resurrection and ascension.

#14. The sacrifices made by Christ-figures specifically benefit others and are based upon higher principles, although these others are usually of "lesser" worthiness, talent or power, comparatively speaking. For example, in *The Green Mile*, John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) elected to die in the electric chair despite having miraculous healing powers of priceless benefit to humanity (aka Jesus—Acts 10:38). Furthermore, many people ungraciously turn against Christ-figures, as happened to Jesus in the Barabbas incident (Matt. 27:1-26). For example, Superman flew away from the unholy Kryptonian triumvirate in *Superman II* and the public quickly became angry and claimed that he had "chickened out" (actually, a stratagem to lure the evil trio to the Fortress of Solitude to be neutralised by Kryptonian technology).

#15. Christ-figures frequently choose sacrifice out of their newfound knowledge, status, position or cosmic mission requirements. Just like Jesus who knew that he was sent to Earth by his heavenly father as a ransom sacrifice for the sins of humanity (Matt. 1:21; Rev. 1:5), and so he instructed Judas to betray him quickly (John 13:27) to fulfill his divine destiny. Dying is really what they *want* to do, and frequently it is the *best* thing they can do, even if loving others protest vigorously about it. For example, the "good," Christ-like T-800 Terminator android (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* voluntarily stepped into the fiery furnace to be melted down to destroy the advanced computer chip inside of himself. Thereby, protecting the future of humanity from supercomputer domination-cum-extinction previously initiated by the rogue Cyberdine computer coupled to Skynet, which was built upon this future technology. His heroic act of self-sacrifice occurred despite the heart-felt protests of Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and John Connor (Edward Furlong), his surrogate human family, former enemies, and Earth's future leaders against cybernetic tyranny.

#16. Christ-figures are frequently accused of crimes although totally innocent, just like Jesus of whom Pontius Pilate said: "I find no case against him" (John 18:38), yet Jesus was condemned to death anyway. For example, the christic John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile* did not murder the violated children, he was totally innocent, but he went to his painful death willingly taking this vital knowledge of his innocence with him. Nor did he protest his innocence, just like Jesus who did not protest his innocence whilst a religious prisoner, rather, he calmly accepted his deathly fate (John 19:9-11). Death being his *raison d'etre* for living.

#17. The iconic Christian symbol of Jesus Christ is the cruciform posture, which is worn around the necks of millions of Catholics and hangs on many a Church wall. As such, Christ-figures are frequently displayed in a similar cruciform posture to tag their subtextual Christian divinity. For example, when Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) is machine-gunned to death in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, he quickly falls to the ground, but not in a crumpled heap as you would imagine, but rather, in a cruciform posture, complete with splayed arms and bent knee!

#18. In addition to cruciform postures, Christ-figures are frequently accompanied by cross imagery, the signature sign of Christianity based upon the Roman instrument of execution used to kill Jesus (John 19:19). Such cross imagery occurred in the classic western, *Shane*, starring Alan Ladd as Shane, the former gunfighter-turned-pacifist and the film's subtextual Christ-figure. During his ride into town to confront the hired gunfighter, he passed through the cemetery with the scene deliberately cut to make it look like a graveyard cross purposely following him, thus visually tagging his divinity in this subtle filmic fashion. In the prison film, *Cool Hand Luke*, starring Paul Newman as Luke-the-incarcerated-Christ-figure, it ends with him dying and a helicopter flying over a crossroad. Visually speaking, this was a cross image from God's point of view, which also symbolically indicated a place where the paths of the living and the dead crossed, thus adding multiple layers of religious meaning to the scene, character and movie.

#19. Jesus exhibited incredible behaviour whilst on Earth. For example, miraculous healings (John 5:5-9), turning water into wine (John 4:46), exorcising demons (Luke 8:2), raising the dead (John 12:1), as well as exercising mastery over physical nature, such as the calming of wild winds (Matt. 8:26, 14:31-32), the quelling of sea tempests (Matt. 8:23-27), and especially walking on water (Matt. 14:25, 28-31). Christ-figures are easily identified by such iconic Jesus behaviours. For example, in *Being There*, Chance (Peter Sellers), the Christ-figure gardener walked on the surface of the lake at film's end to signal his christic nature. Similarly, Truman (Jim Carey) walked on water when he stepped out of his boat into the ocean near the end of *The Truman Show* before returning to his real home via a secret heavenly door.

#20. Christ-figures frequently appear as bumbling simpletons, klutzs, nerds, mentally unbalanced, or fools in the tradition of 1 Corinthians 3:18: "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise." On other occasions, they display cognitive simplicity, emotional innocence or child-like trust in the tradition of Matthew 18:3: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." For example, the Christ-figure Francesco, later Brother Francis-cum-Saint Francis (Graham Faulkner) in *Brother Sun Sister Moon* was variously tagged throughout as "mad," "berserk," a "simpleton," an "idiot boy," a "cringing idiot," a "lunatic" and "a raving bloody lunatic." Chance (Peter Sellers) in *Being There* is actually mentally retarded but profoundly good nonetheless, whilst the Christ-figure-murder, Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton) in *Sling Blade* was called a "retard" because he was intellectually and socially challenged. He had been cruelly brought up and then lived in a mental institution for years. The essential simplicity of the Christ-figure is frequently misread as stupidity, their tolerance and compassion mistaken for weakness, and their saintliness confused with simplemindedness, much to their detractors' eventual shock, amazement or detriment.

#21. Frequently associated with the simplicity of the Christ-figure is their pronounced poverty, or alternatively, the troubling question of what to do with money if available. Jesus was poor (socially, politically, economically), powerless (administratively, legally, bureaucratically) and had claimed: "it is

easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24; see also Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). Some Christ-figures take this message to heart, especially Brother Francis (Graham Faulkner) in *Brother Sun Sister Moon*. He deliberately chose poverty by giving away his (and some of his father's) personal wealth, social privileges and fancy clothes (to the point of public nudity) to become a humble monk dedicated to God and the poor. This act alone caused his family, town and peers to think him mad, until they became followers of this saint-in-the-making! Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* had no hesitation in giving young Bobby (Billy Gray) two perfect diamonds of inestimable value in exchange for $2.00 of local American currency; despite Bobby's initial reluctance about cheating him. The earthly obsession with wealth and possessions did not warp this alien's capacity for kindness, goodness or the need to make a profit.

#22. Sometimes, Hollywood Christ-figures are physically clothed to look like modern-day representations of Jesus in his iconic white toga. For example, the alien E.T. (voice of Pat Welsh) in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* was placed inside a bike basket and covered with a cloth to hide him from prying eyes, but this head covering made him look like Jesus with a shroud, thus subtextually enhancing his holy resonance. In a more realistic vein, in *Jesus of Montreal*, Daniel Coulombe-as-Christ-figure (Lothaire Bluteau) had portrayed the crucified Jesus on the cross whilst naked and covered with pronounced scourging marks; just as the real Jesus must have appeared at his own flogging (Matt. 27:26), albeit, probably not as blood-drenched as Jim Caviezel's Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*.

#23. There is no biblical record of the colour of Jesus' eyes (or *any* physical description of Jesus other than the Prophet Isaiah's reference to "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"—Isaiah 53:2). One would expect Semitic brown eyes for Jesus the ethnic Jew born of a Jewish mother living in the rustic, desert environments of Israel. However, a common Hollywood convention is to have blue eyes for their Jesus-figures (i.e., supposedly historically accurate representations of Jesus), as evidenced by Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings* and Robert Powell in *Jesus of*

Nazareth. Hollywood Christ-figures are also frequently depicted with blue eyes, as evidenced by Superman (Christopher Reeve) in *Superman: The Movie*, the mysterious boarder (Jurgen Prochnow) in *The Seventh Sign* and the new Superman (Brandon Routh) in *Superman Returns*. Indeed, Routh wore blue contact lens to cover his naturally brown eyes to continue this cinematic convention!

#24. Whether directly or indirectly, on-screen or off-screen, some characters literally say: "My God!" or "Jesus Christ!" or "Jesus!" or "Christ!" or "Gee!" to identify their Christ-figures. However, these verbal tags are usually said unknowingly about the divine identity of the character, and are often disguised as curses, astonishment or disgust, as depicted in *The Green Mile* for example. Nevertheless, once their deliberately engineered subtextual function is recognised, these words take on profound religious meaning beyond the putatively obvious, and thus another easily perceived give-away moment to point out the Christ-figure.

#25. The character names of the Christ-figures sometimes literally have the initials J. C. (aka **J**esus **C**hrist) to tag their divine nature. For example, **J**ericho **C**ane (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in *End of Days*, **J**ohn **C**offey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile*, **J**ohn **C**onnor (Edward Furlong) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and **J**ames **C**ole (Bruce Willis) in *Twelve Monkeys*. At other times, they are verbally called "Chris" or "Christopher" (i.e., Christ bearer) or have part of "Christopher" obscured only showing "Christ…" to tag their divinity, as occurred to James Cole in *Twelve Monkeys*. After all, this Christ had been sent from another world to try to save this world for the benefit of all humanity. Filmmakers can be very creative in this way.

Conclusion

Having been alerted to the existence, nature and numerous elements of Christ-figures, one may never be able to look at E.T., James Cole, John Coffey, John Connor, Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter, Neo, Prot, Superman and their christic peers in quite the same way ever again! And this is a good thing. Not only is it a legitimate pop culture phenomenon worthy of recognition and deployment within the classroom, home and pulpit, but its applied theological utilisation for further

sacred storytelling applications is even more indispensable. Therefore, its future utility for secular film studies, communication studies, cultural studies, scriptwriting, storytelling, theology and religious education looks assured. As an increasingly valuable extra-ecclesiastical tool within the theologian's toolbox, further research into Christ-figures and the religion-and-film field is definitely warranted, warmly recommended and is already long overdue.

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Filmography

Babette's Feast (1987, dir. Gabriel Axel)

Being There (1979, dir. Hal Ashby)
Brother Sun Sister Moon (1972, dir. Franco Zeffirelli)
Central Station (1998, dir. Walter Salles)
Cool Hand Luke (1967, dir. Stuart Rosenberg)
The Da Vinci Code (2006, dir. Ron Howard)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951, dir. Robert Wise)
Edge of the City (1957, dir. Martin Ritt)
End of Days (1999, dir. Peter Hyams)
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial (1982, dir. Steven Spielberg)
God Told Me To (aka *Demon*) (1977, dir. Larry Cohen)
The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964, dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini)
The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965, dir. George Stevens)
The Green Mile (1999, dir. Frank Darabont)
Jesus of Montreal (1989, dir. Denys Arcand)
Jesus of Nazareth (1977, dir. Franco Zeffirelli)
The King of Kings (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
King of Kings (1961, dir. Nicholas Ray)
K-Pax (2001, dir. Iain Softley)
The Matrix (1999, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski)
Nell (1994, dir. Michael Apted)
The Passion of the Christ (2004, dir. Mel Gibson)
Pleasantville (1998, dir. Gary Ross)
Return of the Jedi (aka *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi*) (1983, dir. Richard Marquand)
Samson and Delilah (1949, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
The Seventh Sign (1988, dir. Carl Schultz)
Shane (1953, dir. George Stevens)
Sling Blade (1996, dir. Billy Bob Thornton)
Starman (1984, dir. John Carpenter)
Star Wars (aka *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*) 1997, dir. George Lucas)
Superman Returns (2006, dir. Bryan Singer)
Superman: The Movie (1978, dir. Richard Donner)
Superman II (1981, dir. Richard Lester)
Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991, dir. James Cameron)
The Ten Commandments (1923, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
The Ten Commandments (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
The Truman Show (1998, dir. Peter Weir)
Twelve Monkeys (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam)

BIO: Anton Karl Kozlovic MEd, MEdStudies, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the School of Humanities, Flinders University (Adelaide, South Australia) researching biblical cinema. He is interested in Religion-and-Film, Interreligious Dialogue, DeMille Studies, Computer Films, Popular Culture, Applied Cinema, World Religions and the New Age. He has published over one hundred articles in more than forty different journals in over ten countries as well a being a book reviewer and anonymous peer reviewer on three academic journals.

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