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Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus

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Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus

Abstract

This is a review of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* (2003).

In her reflective compilation "Mystery and Manners," novelist Flannery O'Connor observes "that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted," meaning perhaps that one can never fully escape from the transcendent beauty, inconceivable grace and mercy, and socially unconventional love of the embodied Son of God. It follows, then, that O'Connor's stories evoke such a milieu. In *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*(2003), director/ cinematographer/ producer Andrew Douglas blends his photography background with his commercial direction experience, in creative partnership with friend and screenwriter Steve Haisman, to document a guided journey into the heart of this very same American South.

We are told in a textual prologue that Douglas received as a Christmas gift from Haisman the Jim White record "The Mysterious Tale of How I Shouted Wrong-Eyed Jesus." The record's impact led Douglas to question the origins of such music and catapulted him and Haisman into their attempt to find answers through creating the ensuing film. Additionally, their wry humor offers Jim White himself as guide on this journey through the American South, a landscape littered with and stained by the faces and stories of its inhabitants.

One such denizen, narrating some of the early images, thoughtfully asks - perhaps the filmmaker, perhaps the viewer - "Do you know what you're looking for? Will you know it when you see it?" These questions permeate the film and support the themes of story and of the heart that move in and out of the narrative.

Such questions also hold up the Christ-haunted mirror to the viewer, causing unanticipated introspection. To engage the film is to honestly engage such questions.

Beyond the questions, we hear early on that "stories was everything and everything was stories." Woven throughout this particular story is White's statement that to look directly at something renders it inapprehensible. Perhaps this is why we're merely passing through the American South. We're not necessarily looking directly at southern culture and the human landscape as much as we're observing it to gain some level of understanding. This is evident throughout the film, as we're both told and shown that each small town is similar to the next one dotting the southern expanse, down to the location of each bar, prison and church, and the lone traffic light keeping them connected. And, though we stop in a few such towns, most of the experience is one of driving both by and through, hoping the next place will further inform the questions whose answers we seek.

Such an assumption of these towns, however, discounts the uniqueness of those comprising the towns - the faces and stories mentioned earlier, those rich in experience and rich in meaning. Living fully typically includes the full spectrum of human existence, and in *Searching*, we see the struggles of those on one end of the continuum - those who don't seem to fit, such as the devoutly religious, the artist and the have-not. Douglas' use

of eccentric musicians singing densely ironic, oft-melancholy tunes in non-traditional venues supports the notion of folks finding means of self-expression, even if only, as we're told, through sinning out on the fringe of society. Indeed life - backwater, mountain and small-town southern life - seems to be as the stories and songs stealthily proclaim: one either chooses Jesus or chooses hell - there's not a whole lot in between.

At key points, our journey intersects the lives of women in a trailer park, religious Pentecostals, prison inmates and small-town bar patrons. Each person we meet is eager to share excerpts of their life story and there is no separating religion from any other part of their life. In conversation with such folks, many phrases our guide utters seem at first a bit over-scripted or heavy-handed; however, they work in this film precisely because of the journey we – as filmmaker and viewer – are on together, and they complement the people we've met and the places we've been on our journey, as each helps define the other.

This review began by mentioning the Christ-hauntedness of Flannery O'Connor's American South. O'Connor's fictional communities and the lives of their inhabitants haunt by evoking the Christ experienced in the Biblical Gospel narratives. Albeit in the most counter-cultural way (which I believe is most honoring to an honest understanding of the Biblical Jesus), the essence of Jesus abounds in O'Connor's South as well as the non-fictional South toured with Jim White. If this Christ-haunted nature of the American South runs in the blood of a

southerner, then perhaps the truth of this film – the origins of haunted, artistic, transcendent beauty – has been with us all along, in the form of a \$65, wrong-eyed Jesus statue with an ironic smile and fingers pointing, not-so-coincidentally, to the heart.

This independent film was made in 2003, had limited screenings in 2005-2006 and was released on DVD in the UK, Europe and North America in 2006. For more information, visit <http://searchingforthewrongeyedjesus.com/>.