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From Holy Aliens to Cyborg Saviours: Biblical Subtexts in Four Science Fiction Films

Abstract

Science Fiction (SF) films have frequently been the vehicles for hidden biblical characters, particularly Christ-figures. These subtexts can make the difference between an ordinary film and an exceptional one. The critical literature was reviewed and four popular films were selected to illustrate their religious dimensions, namely: (a) *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), (b) *Blade Runner* (1982), (c) *The Terminator* (1984), and (d) *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). It was concluded that the SF cinema is a rich source of contemporary religiosity that can be pedagogically employed in the Religious Education (RE) classroom.

Introduction

The Science Fiction (SF) genre is replete with hi-tech gadgetry, space ships, laser beams, angry androids, crafty computers, rogue robots and alien beings of every conceivable description. Less well known is its capacity to harbor religious figures. Particularly Christ-figures, that is, on-screen characters who in significant ways represent the life, actions or attitudes of Jesus Christ according to the Gospels. These religious subtexts are frequently missed by the public, especially those who consider 'science' and 'religion' to be mutually exclusive categories. Yet, it is these powerful religious resonances that can turn an ordinary film into an exceptional one. The following four SF films were selected because of their neo-classical status and inherent religious properties.

The Holy Alien:

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951, dir. Robert Wise)

Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) was an alien emissary from an advanced intergalactic federation who landed his flying saucer in America at a critical moment in world affairs. Humankind was on the brink of interplanetary travel and spreading its violence throughout the universe, which required cosmic intervention. Critics quickly saw him as a "highly evolved powerful messiah figure who comes to Earth...with a force that cannot be denied."¹ "Klaatu has an unmistakable touch of divinity about him."² "He represents transcendent power and

has come to offer mankind salvation from holocaust,"³ via encouraged discipline from above, coupled with "the overt Christian philosophy of this so-called federation of advanced beings."⁴

The film was a cautionary tale about human aggression and a "modern retelling of the Christ story."⁵ Klaatu-as-alien-saviour came from the starry heavens bearing wondrous gifts and an opportunity for galactic redemption saying: "We have come to visit you in peace and with good will." Despite his human appearance and peaceful intensions, he was feared, abused, incarcerated, forced to flee military and political stupidity, and subsequently wandered incognito amongst the people. As the disguised Mr. Carpenter, just as Jesus was a carpenter, Klaatu became distraught at the inhumanity of man to man, and man to alien where bigotry "against aliens by extension becomes the heathen denial of Christ."⁶

He was also testily impatient with humankind's petty political squabbles, of which he would have no part. Regrettably:

... Klaatu's messianic mission is opposed by stereotypical representations of a war-mongering military, xenophobic citizens (represented by the inhabitants of the boarding house), and an amoralistic publicity seeker (Tom Stevens [Hugh Marlowe]). Heroic Americans (Helen Benson [Patricia Neal], Bobby Benson [Billy Gray], and Dr. Barnhardt [Sam Jaffe]) who defy prejudice and recognize a messiah when they see one aid Klaatu.⁷

Despite his Earthly disciples and his (literal) universal message of peace, he was again denied, rejected, pursued, cornered and then killed by human intolerance. His

Jesus status being visually confirmed after being shot by the military and he falls onto the ground in a cruciform pose (with appropriately bent knee), the Christic identifier. This makes "it easy to construe Klaatu as a Christ figure who sacrifices his life in order to preserve civilization."⁸ Later, his Establishment-pierced body is retrieved by Gort (Lock Martin), an imposing "god-like robot,"⁹ and taken Pieta-like to his spaceship to be miraculously resurrected in "a science fiction version of the Ascension."¹⁰

Before returning home to his starry abode as the risen Klaatu, he "emerges from his ship like Christ from the tomb and delivers a sermon to the assembled scientists."¹¹ This sermon turned into a terrifying ultimatum. Humanity is to live in peace or else the Earth will face apocalyptic obliteration on Judgment Day when it will be turned into a burned-out cinder, Armageddon-style. Klaatu then entered his flying saucer and ascended skywards, homeward bound.

In the meantime, the "god-like forces he represents will be watching the people of Earth to see that they uphold his teachings of peace and disarmament. Like Jesus at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew [28:20 KJV], Klaatu is with us "always, even unto the end of the world".¹² Even his eventual "departure by spacecraft...has a New Testament Ascension feel about it,"¹³ while the phenomenal powers he demonstrated "become powers to be worshipped and adored"¹⁴ as a form of deified science.

In fact, the film's screenwriter:

... Edmund H. North himself admitted that the parallels between the story of Christ and Day were intentional: from Klaatu's earthly name of Carpenter, to the betrayal by Tom Stevens, and finally to his resurrection and ascent into the heavens at Day's end. "It was my private little joke. I never discussed this angle with [producer Julian] Blaustein or [director Robert] Wise because I didn't want it expressed. I had originally hoped that the Christ comparison would be subliminal."¹⁵

As North also confessed elsewhere: "I didn't honestly expect audiences to pick up the allusion...I never wanted it to be a conscious thing, but I thought it had value being there."¹⁶

Not only was the heaven-roaming Klaatu a Christ-figure, but many of the surrounding characters complemented his Christic role. As Billy Gray (who played young Bobby Benson) reflected:

Just as Jesus Christ worked miracles yet allowed himself to be vulnerable, Klaatu's abilities do not prevent him from encountering the same dangers humans must face in a world of free will...You've got Christ, Mary Magdalene (Pat Neal), Judas (Hugh Marlowe), the death and resurrection. I guess I was one of the disciples, but I'm not sure I fit well into that scenario.¹⁷

One would argue that Bobby did not represent a Disciple. Rather, he was symbolic of all the children Jesus was so fond of (Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16 KJV), and whose innocence gave him access to the gifts of the Kingdom (Matt. 18:3, 19:4; Mark

10:14; Luke 18:16 KJV), in the form of privileged companionship, knowledge and diamonds.

Interestingly, there was also an Old Testament resonance in the film. Dennis Saleh¹⁸ argued that "Klaatu comes on a mission from the skies, in a great glowing wheel of a saucer." This description, plus the flying saucer's glowing, unearthly light fits the fiery, wheel within a wheel, whirlwind of Ezekiel 1:4, 19-21 (KJV). Conversely, this Scripture convinces many UFO buffs that the Prophet Ezekiel had a close encounter with an alien.¹⁹

The Diseased, Replicant and Cop Christs:

***Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott)**

One does not have to be an otherworldly alien to qualify as a Christ-figure. The noir cop thriller *Blade Runner* demonstrated that damaged, real and synthetic human beings could adequately fill the role. For example, the progeria suffering, Replicant designer J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) was seen as functioning:

... as a symbol of Christ in this film. First, he is a composite of man and Replicant, just as Christ is a composite of God and man. Second, just as Christ lived among men, J.F. lived among the Replicants. Third, Christ attempted to bring humanity to God, and was killed by the very people he attempted to help. J.F. Sebastian also

attempted to bring a man (Batty) to his maker (Tyrell) and was murdered for his trouble. It seems significant that Sebastian and Batty ascend (via elevator) to the presence of Tyrell.²⁰

Both the Replicant-hunting cop Deckard (Harrison Ford) and his quarry, the synthetic renegade Replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) were also viewed Christologically:

Batty ... drives a nail through his own hand in order to keep it functioning. Of course, Batty mimics Christ in this action as well as in his salvation to Deckard, accompanied symbolically by his release of a dove at his death. Deckard, too, parallels Christ, particularly in his words to Gaff after the confrontation with Batty is over, "Finished," echoing Jesus's last words on the cross and announcing his retirement as a blade runner. He follows up these actions by becoming a savior to Rachel, another replicant condemned to death.²¹

For Ryan and Kellner, "Roy suddenly carries a white dove that soon becomes a symbol of charity and forgiveness. He himself in fact becomes a figure of Christ as he lowers his head and dies."²² Peter Lev considered that Roy saved "Deckard's life in a Christ-like gesture of compassion,"²³ while Linda Badley argued that:

Baty saves Deckard's life. This act, together with the nail he forces through his hand, a dove that flies up to the heavens when his "life" ceases, and even the incessantly turning windmills (which echo James Whale's burning windmill/cross [in *Frankenstein* (1931)], makes Baty a type of Christ.²⁴

Indeed, numerous other biblical references were discovered therein. For example:

The light which, however briefly, shines down upon Roy Batty is a commonplace in tradition depictions of Pentecost--the time when the Apostles were given the gift of speaking in tongues--of communicating with people they had been unable to communicate with before. The dove, also, is a hoary Christian symbol, and when Roy Batty holds one it confers its mana upon him, and also (since he first holds it, then releases it into the rain) suggests the story of Noah, who sent out a dove to discover whether there was any dry ground on which the Ark could land. So continuous is the rain in *Blade Runner* that it suggests the Biblical deluge.²⁵

Nor do the religious parallels stop there:

The nail through the palm is an obvious crucifixion symbol, the more so since Roy Batty has just killed his creator in a parody and inversion of the crucifixion story: the Son killing the Father instead of the Father killing the Son. When Batty saves Deckard he enacts another Biblical inversion: the creation saves the creator, not vice versa. And, at the apex of it, there they are, the dark man and the fair, the human and the alien (lo!) communicating. It's typical of *Blade Runner* that the "hero" - the character whose ego is the focus of our attention - is dark and that his antagonist is fair. Traditionally, it has been the other way around. But then *Blade Runner* is full of such inversions: the Son killing the Father, the creation saving the creator, the Enemy who redeems.²⁶

However, for Forest Pyle, Christologising the rogue Replicant leader was a mistake:

When the cyborg Roy Batty impales his hand with a nail near the end of the film, the shot establishes a visual symbolic association to Christ on the cross, an association bolstered by other visual metaphors, such as the dove released to a suddenly blue sky at Roy's death. But though such imagery draw on that symbolic repertoire, the association with the Christian narrative inevitably conjured by the shots is invalidated by the films' own narrative logic: Roy inserts the nail into his palm solely in order to prolong his life, to defer his 'time to die'. Roy is in this and every regard far from Christ-like: he has, of course, just murdered the 'father' (Tyrell) who played his god and maker. What the film leaves us with are allegorical shots severed from their mythological sources, empty allegories that cannot be redeemed by the Christian narrative.²⁷

It was a valid point, but *Blade Runner* suffers more from being a disjointed pastiche with an excess of religious infranarration (inverted or otherwise). Indeed, biblical figure-hunting does not necessarily have to limit itself to the biological (whether alien, human, or hybrid), as ably demonstrated in The Terminator series where even intelligent machines can have the capacity for divine acts.

The Cyborg Saviour and Other Religious Clusterings:

***The Terminator* (1984, dir. James Cameron) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, dir. James Cameron)**

The relentlessly efficient T-800 Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) was an 'evil' cyborg in *The Terminator* (hereafter *T1*). He then became a cyborg-Messiah protecting a human-Messiah, John Connor (Edward Furlong), another J. C., in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (hereafter *T2*). While Norman L. Friedman noted that *T1* was "a Christ and Mary story about the savior of the human race,"²⁸ Lance Good offered five similarities in *T2* between the T-800 cyborg and Jesus Christ, namely:

1. Both sacrificed their lives, though innocent, for the sake of humanity.
2. When the naked T-800 first enters the bar, he is stabbed in the chest. Look at any painting of Christ on the cross and compare it to the T-800 as he enters the kitchen of the bar. The wound Christ receives in John 19:34 looks remarkably similar, in any painting, to the T-880's wound. Note - the T-800's wound is in a different place than where he was stabbed, watch closely! It would seem the creators went out of their way for this symbol.
3. Thomas doubted that Christ had been resurrected. He put his finger in the nail holes in Christ's hands (John 20:24-27). Consider the scene after Sarah

[Linda Hamilton], John, and the T-800 flee the mental institute. John puts his finger in the bullet holes!

4. As Sarah watches the T-800 slap fives with John in the desert, she has a mental soliloquy about the faithfulness of the T-800. She notes that the T-800 is better than any earthly father. Now check out Hebrews 3:6 (there are many others).
5. A second coming is important for both.²⁹

For Roland Boer, another indicator of John Connor's Messiahhood was the conversion of the 'evil' Terminator in *T1* to the 'good' Terminator in *T2* which he considered was "the greatest of miracles."³⁰ Indeed, Mark Jancovich not only saw John Connor as Jesus Christ, but he elevated Sarah Connor to Godhood:

Sarah is constantly referred to as "the legend," and the film is full of biblical allusions: John Connor shares the same initials as Jesus Christ and his conception is an impossible, almost immaculate, one. Sarah is, in a sense, the myth which holds the resistance together and from which John partly derives his authority. Nonetheless, these mythic overtones do not include Sarah as a virgin mother. Given what we see of her social world, it seems highly unlikely that she is a virgin. Instead, it is [Sergeant] Kyle [Reese (Michael Biehn)], John's father, who is the virgin. This is made very clear when Sarah asks him whether he has ever had a girlfriend and he answers, "No. Never!" As a result, the gender relations of the Biblical immaculate conception are reversed so that Sarah is not the Virgin Mary but possibly God. This is probably stretching the limits of interpretation, and certainly, if Sarah is God, it is not because she as an individual becomes the source of all history and all creation, but because the "religious essence" has been identified as the "human essence"--not the property of a single individual but the necessity for human interaction itself.³¹

Other commentators have seen Sarah embodying a variety of less omnipotent biblical characters. For example, she was perceived as a modern version of the Old Testament (OT) Matriarch, Sarah, Abraham's wife. Just as the Hebraic future was embodied in Isaac, Sarah's only child, the world's future was embodied in John

Connor, Sarah Connor's only child. Just as the Matriarchs were responsible for the formation and safe-keeping of God's people, Sarah Connor-as-the-latest-post-NT-Matriarch was responsible for the future safe-keeping of all peoples.³² Alternatively, Sarah was viewed as "Virgin Mary-like"³³ whose one-night stand and subsequent pregnancy is the "archetypal evocation of the Holy Birth."³⁴ Thus, as "the mother of the future earth-saviour, John Connor, she was a Madonna figure (in the Biblical sense) to be protected at all costs."³⁵

Further variant biblical themes were also perceived in *T2*. For example:

Critic Richard Corliss has ... pointed out that the story parallels that of the New Testament, with a soldier from another world (the archangel Gabriel) visiting a woman (the Virgin Mary) to announce that she is to be mother to a messiah (John Connor has the same initials as Jesus Christ). She flees with him into the desert, where an angel of death becomes a protector/father. Here, this hypothetical allegory begins to take on strange permutations, as it is the Terminator who redeems humankind through its death after a resurrection.³⁶

Of course, not everyone readily agrees with such diverse interpretations. For example, David Jasper was reluctant to accept religious references to films just because of their tentative biblical parallels:

... I would hesitate a little before I give assent to the claim that the issues raised by the Terminator movies are the issues explored by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. From the writings of the Hebrew prophets arises an enduring tradition of theological reflection which is intrinsic to the texts themselves. These are books which burn with fire of religious passion and the issues explored in them cannot be disentangled from that passion. The same cannot be said of James Cameron's movies ...³⁷

Unless of course one meets a Cameron-inspired, religious SF fan!³⁸

Conclusion

Clearly, religion is alive, well and living in popular films. The critics' impulse to see biblical resonances in all manner of overtly secular films is very strong indeed, even if it sometimes strains the limits of (in)credulity. Because the cinema is such a rich source of contemporary religiosity and a natural text for our youth, it seems professionally prudent to harness these subtexts and put them to work in the RE classroom. Indeed, it could also be viewed as an important religious duty to "discern the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3 KJV) for the video generation.

¹ Hendershot, 1999, p. 30.

² Pettigrew, 1986, p. 71.

³ Saleh, 1979, p. 41.

⁴ Macek, 1981, p. 590.

⁵ von Gunden & Stock, 1982, p. 43.

⁶ Biskind, 1983, p. 152.

⁷ Hendershot, 1999, p. 28.

⁸ Macek, 1981, p. 590.

⁹ Gianos, 1999, pp. 137-138.

¹⁰ Saleh, 1979, p. 41.

¹¹ Gabbard, 1982, p. 152.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 152.

¹³ Pettigrew, 1986, p. 71.

¹⁴ Jancovich, 1996, p. 45.

¹⁵ von Gunden & Stock, 1982, p. 44.

¹⁶ Warren & Thomas, 1982, p. 26.

¹⁷ Long, 1990, p. 27.

¹⁸ Saleh, 1979, pp. 39-40.

¹⁹ Vallee, 1988, pp. 4, 6.

²⁰ Newland, 1991, p. 2.

²¹ Gravett, 1998, p. 40.

²² Ryan & Kellner, 1990, p. 64.

²³ Lev, 2000, p. 73.

²⁴ Badley, 1995, p. 88.

²⁵ Warner, 1991, p. 182.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁷ Pyle, 2000, p. 126.

²⁸ Friedman, 1994, pp. 77-78.

²⁹ Good, 1998, pp. 3-4.

³⁰ Boer, 1995, p. 176.

³¹ Jancovich, 1992, p. 12.

³² Ortiz & Roux, 1997, p. 146.

³³ Wright, 1994, p. 143.

³⁴ Goscilo, 1987-88, p. 48.

³⁵ Cranny-Francis, 1995, p. 108.

³⁶ Mancini, 1992, p. 397.

³⁷ Jasper, 1997, p. 238.

³⁸ Lansingh, 1999.

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