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The Messianic Figure in Film: Christology Beyond the Biblical Epic

Abstract
With the decline and fall of the religious epic, christology (the study of the person of Christ) in film has moved into genres outside of the biblical spectacular. Deliberate attempts to harmonize the Gospels and offer a literal rendition of the life of Jesus have proven mediocre to some and offensive to others. What has proven more successful is the Messianic Figure: a formula in which the central character is a non-conformist or unlikely redeemer who transforms lives and ultimately undergoes martyrdom. Four films offer the prototype of such a character: *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and most recently *Sling Blade* (1997).

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As a general rule, motion pictures which attempt to offer a literal rendition of the life of Jesus typically fall short of cinematic excellence. At one time, the Christ of the silver screen was a red-haired, sunburned, blue-eyed "Jewish Palestinian" standing on the banks of the Colorado against the backdrop of religious calendar art. The four Gospels were harmonized, one discourse, parable or mighty work was depicted at the expense of another, and Jesus sounded like Hamlet.

The evolution of Jesus films is rooted in the religious or biblical "epic;" a popular genre in the 1950's usually accompanied by towering budgets and names such as Charlton Heston, Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr, or Yul Brynner. Melodramatic dialogue aside, religious epics of the 1950's were actually good. *Quo Vadis* (1951) had fine location shooting and an acceptable musical score. The parting of the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) was decent considering that computer graphics were non existent at the time. The chariot race in *Ben-Hur* (1959) speaks for itself.

The ensuing decade brought the first attempt by a major studio to produce a religious epic in which the Christ Event was its singular focus. MGM released *King of Kings* in 1961, inspired by a Cecil B. DeMille film of the same title from 1927. Critics suggested the film should have been titled I Was a Teenage Jesus. Jeffrey Hunter, a "pin up boy" in the title role, was upstaged by a more interesting Barabbas. The screenplay seemed less concerned with Jesus as Messiah than with

rendering him as a non-violent revolutionary or Peace Corps volunteer. Four years later, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, directed by George Stevens, was completed for $25 million. The film's true claim to notoriety is its monotonous cameo appearances: John Wayne as a Roman soldier, Sidney Poitier as Simon of Cyrene, and Charlton Heston as the Baptizer to name a few. Swedish actor Max Von Sydow's portrayal of Christ was lambasted for being emotionally removed and humorless. The same could be said for *Jesus of Nazareth*, a 1977 made-for-television mini-series scripted by the same writer who penned *A Clockwork Orange*. The film received mostly favorable reviews on the part of the evangelical community but it was profoundly overemotional. Robert Powell's paint by numbers Jesus rises to speak his lines as if he has a secret ambition to join the cast of *Days of Our Lives*.

It wasn't until 1989 that another major studio took a gamble on a movie involving the life of Jesus, but this one involved a new wrinkle. Universal released *The Last Temptation of Christ* amidst what was probably the most inflamed protest against a film in history. The pre-release publicity centered around demonstrations taking place outside of Universal after celebrated figures in the evangelical media began speaking about heretical content in the film. Theater managers across the country were terrified to screen the movie and no major video chain would carry it.

Screenwriter Paul Schrader, an admitted Calvinist, adapted *The Last Temptation* from the Nikos Kazantzakis novel which engages in a fictional exploration between the two natures of Christ - divine and human. The film was not intended to be a Gospel portrait. The fictional aspect, which apparently provoked opponents of its release, centered around a vision presented by the devil to the Jesus of the film while on the cross. In this vision, Jesus is shown what it would have been like to marry, have a family, live until an old age, and die a natural death. The struggle for the Jesus of the film is the torment between his human wishes for a normal Jewish life and his longing to accomplish the divine mission set before him. The aesthetic value of the film is that Jesus conquers these temptations and carries out his sacrificial death by crucifixion.

People missed what was really bad about the film. The casting was dreadful. Willem Dafoe, who portrayed Jesus, still evoked memories of all of those times he has played a terrorist or Vietnam veteran. Harvel Keitel's Judas sounded like a gangster and appeared as if he had dyed his hair orange. Evangelicals were offended by the notion that Jesus had a libido, but they never objected to a scene in which he pulls his heart from his chest nor to the suggestion that Christ was a pantheist, as rendered in the Gethsemane sequence. Either way, the damage had been done.

Film makers have characteristically fallen into the pit of localization. The present the Christ-event with the assumption that the Gospel stories were written

exclusively for today, as opposed to exploring what the writers sought to convey to their first century audiences. *King of Kings*, for instance, was filmed against the backdrop of Kennedy's new America. The Barabbas of the film symbolized the violent side of social change while Jesus personified the alternative. Another problem is that virtually all screenplays dealing with the Christ-event have attempted to harmonize the Gospels. Each Gospel offers a unique portrait of Jesus from the perspective of that particular writer as he addresses his community and its questions. To mix all four perspectives simply does not work. Choosing to do the life of Christ according to Mark or Luke would offer a more coherent script. Nevertheless, we are unlikely to see another attempt at such an effort for quite some time. To produce these films authentically is expensive, they are impossible to cast, and producers run too great a risk of offending too many people.

The failure of the Jesus epic has produced an alternative manifestation: the Messianic figure in film. Christology has managed to move into genres outside of the biblical spectacular, both intentionally and unintentionally. Paul Newman's character in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) has long stood as the archetypal Messianic figure in religion and film studies. In the story, Lukas Jackson is arrested for destroying parking meters while intoxicated, but his true crime is non-conformity. Sentenced to two years in a hard labor prison, Luke introduces a new way of existence to his disciples by injecting amusement into the mundane obligations of

incarceration. Conflict with the prison establishment is inevitable and the last straw comes when Luke encourages his fellow inmates to complete, with enthusiasm, the arduous task of repaving a highway well before five o'clock. The road paving episode is the equivalent of Jesus cursing the Jerusalem Temple. Luke is seen as a dissident and the ruling authorities plot to humiliate him.

The story concludes when, in the midst of a third escape attempt, Luke stands in an abandoned chapel engaged in an intimate and informal conversation with "the Old Man" and reaches the conclusion that his martyrdom is inevitable. Luke is gunned down by the spiritually blind "man with no eyes," a guard who wears reflective sunglasses throughout the film. "Dragline" (George Kennedy), Luke's companion, attacks the guard and his trademark glasses are crushed, suggesting that Luke's death has liberated the inmates once and for all. In the final scene, Luke is regenerated as "Dragline" retells the incident and the disciples remember him.

The formula repeats itself in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) when Randall McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) is sent from the state penitentiary to a mental hospital in order to be evaluated. The institution hinges on routine and proper procedure while its patients, most of whom are voluntary, and who accept their reduction to an inanimate existence. McMurphy is promptly situated as the deviant who will challenge the establishment, embodied principally by the villainous Nurse

Ratched (Louise Fletcher). Randall demands to know what medication is being administered to him, attempts to teach fellow patients basketball and black jack, and instigates a futile campaign to have the schedule altered so that everyone may watch the World Series. His threat to the stability of the institution is finally acknowledged by the Board after he commandeers the hospital bus in order to take his disciples on a fishing expedition. The ruling establishment convenes and determines that McMurphy is indeed "dangerous," pondering "what will we do with him?" As High Priestess, Nurse Ratched asserts that it would be abdicating responsibility to simply "pass him on to someone else," insisting the institution can reform him.

The plot against McMurphy is intensified following another group session characterized by a newfound defiance and assertiveness in which the patients begin to question hospital procedures. A violent uproar ensues, causing Randall's beloved disciple "Chief" (Will Samson) to physically assault a ward who attempts to subdue McMurphy. After the administration of corrective shock treatment to the dissenters, McMurphy begins to persuade the others to leave the institution, a premise they resist due to a lack of faith in their own capabilities to function on the outside. Randall contrives a way to escape on Christmas Eve by inviting two female friends to visit the hospital and coaxing the night attendant into allowing a party. Before he leaves, McMurphy insists that Billy (Brad Dourif) spend the evening with one of

the women. Unexpectedly, everyone falls asleep and Nurse Ratched returns with the wards the following morning, quickly deducing what has taken place. For a moment, a poised Billy appears to have been liberated from his self-hatred as he confronts Nurse Ratched. Billy's stutter as well as his self-hatred returns as soon as she begins to suggest, with shades of Freud, that his indecent act will devastate his mother. Billy's regression is his first betrayal. His second is blaming McMurphy for his fall from grace. Immediately, Billy leaves the room and commits suicide. Randall is this time taken for a frontal lobotomy and it is fatal for all practical purposes.

In the concluding sequence, it is obvious that McMurphy has empowered at least one of his disciples to do what was once unthinkable. "Chief" hurls a limestone bathroom fixture through the window and escapes the hospital, personifying a resurrection similar to that of the closing scene in *Cool Hand Luke*.

The same effect was achieved by Robin Williams as Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society* (1989). The alumnus of an elite New England prep school, Keating returns to his alma matter as an instructor of English and he employs unconventional teaching methods amidst an environment of uniformity, drill, and rote memorization. Keating advocates that students should "seize the day" and think for themselves, best illustrated by his insistence that every student in his class should rip pages from the course textbook which prescribe a lifeless methodology

for interpreting poetry. As was the case with the central characters in *Cool Hand Luke* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Keating's non-conformity results in an inevitable conflict with the ruling authorities.

The disciples' application of his teachings is most visibly enacted by Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard), a young man being manipulated and overpowered by his father's obsession that his son go to medical school. Neil's true passion is not medicine, but the theater. When he auditions for *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*, he is awarded the main part but must keep his involvement in the play from his father, who forbids him to participate in the production. After the play, Neil's father makes a surprise appearance, abruptly takes his son home, and declares "you will go to medical school and you will be a doctor." Neil Perry commits suicide that evening and the institution decides that the way to avoid a tarnished image is to make Keating the sacrificial lamb. Keating's disciples are questioned and pressured into signing a confession, all set into motion by a betraying Judas who tells the other students "save yourselves." Keating's regeneration comes in the final scene, when the disciples engage in a demonstration which affirms his impact on their lives.

A new paradigm for the Messianic Figure can be found in a more recent incarnation. *Sling Blade* (1997) presents a Messianic figure who is a far more unlikely and scandalous redeemer than Lukas Jackson, Randall McMurphy, or John Keating. Billy Bob Thornton, tabbed as the hillbilly Orson Wells after his

screenplay and performance were nominated for Oscars in 1997, penned the script in the fall of 1994 based on a character monologue presented regularly in his theatrical one man show. For Thornton's purposes, the religious content of *Sling Blade* was intentional. "I wanted to show that religion is not a bad thing," he explains. "The foundation of all religions is good: treat your fellow man all right and don't steal his ox and have a little faith."[1] The characters in *Sling Blade* illustrate the coexistence of two kinds of religion, two very different notions of morality.

Karl Childress (played by Thornton) is a mentally handicapped patient about to be released after twenty-five years of institutionalization in an Arkansas state mental hospital. In an incredible monologue, Karl tells the story of how his parents confined their child to a shed with a dirt floor, making sporadic appearances to feed him or give him his "Bible lessons." One evening, the twelve year old Karl left his shed, entered his parents' living room, and discovered a teenager named Jessie Dixon "having his way with" Mrs. Childress. Karl murders Dixon with a gardening tool and, upon discovering that she was not a victim but a willing participant, also murders his mother.

Karl is discharged from the "nervous hospital" and returns to his hometown, unequipped to deal with everyday tasks such as placing an order in a restaurant. The Superintendent of the hospital, recognizing the injustice of Karl's plight, takes compassion on him and arranges for Karl to work for a man named Bill Cox (Rick

Dial), who operates a small engine repair shop. Despite Karl's past, Bill Cox makes deliberate attempts to acclimate Karl to the world and instill a healthy self-respect in him by repeatedly bragging on his ability to repair small engines.

One afternoon, Karl meets a young boy at the coin laundry named Frank (Lucas Black), who lost his father to suicide and lives with his mother, Linda (Natalie Canerday), who works at the "dollar store." Frank is drawn to Karl and the two become best friends. In turn, Linda consents to allowing Karl to move into her garage, perhaps recognizing that this mentally handicapped man with a past not completely revealed to her is the most viable father figure for her son.

The father figure issue is central to the plot. Three men are candidates to fulfill this role for the boy, the most influential being Karl. Vaughan Cunningham (John Ritter) is Linda's supervisor and clearly is one of the most humane and charitable characters in the story. Vaughan has even been tabbed by one reviewer as the "sinful woman" of the film.[2] Despite the fact that he is a homosexual male who faces intense persecution in a small, southern town on a daily basis, Vaughan exhibits compassion and patience for others, especially where Frank and Linda's livelihood is concerned. The greatest irony of *Sling Blade* is the depiction of who might be able best to fill the role of father-figure for the boy. It might be the formerly institutionalized, mentally challenged man with an institutionalized past.

Or it might be the persecuted, homosexual male with little future. Both would be better than Doyle Hargraves (Dwight Yoakum).

Hargraves owns his own construction company, yet the positive features end there. Doyle is Linda's boyfriend and as his character develops, we begin to see that he is beyond being merely a "red neck" or "white trash." Doyle, in Vaughan's assessment, "is a monster." He is verbally abusive toward Frank and his mother, making abundant use of the most objectionable vulgarities in Frank's presence. Doyle's first words to Karl are "What sort of retard are you?" He is prone to fits of rage and in one scene tells his friends to "get the f*ck out of my house," proceeding to violently propel a disabled man in a wheelchair into the corner of the living room. To Linda, he vows to kill her if she ever leaves him.

Doyle's displays of abuse and ignorance are alternated with episodes of Frank and Karl. It is clear that Frank's well-being becomes Karl's principal concern. Frank understandably wrestles with an intense hate for Doyle, not only resulting from his own abuse but his mother's as well. Karl repeatedly tells Frank that "little boys should think good thoughts" and "nothing bad ought to happen to children." Meanwhile, Doyle returns to Linda, sober and vowing to be a new man who will be spending more time around the house.

Though many viewers may determine otherwise, Thornton did not intend for his script to be a general indictment on religion. "People throughout history have taken the Bible and whatever the book of choice is," he explains, "and when it gets into certain hands, it's used to serve their own purposes."[3] Karl's parents clearly subscribed to such a notion. They confined their son to a shed but made certain he was given a daily Bible lesson. Karl later admits to Frank that his father, on one occasion, gave him a towel with a fetus wrapped inside and told him to bury it in the back yard. When Karl finally confronts his elderly father (a brief appearance by Robert Duvall, Thornton's mentor), he asserts that while in the nervous hospital "I read the Bible ... and those stories you and Momma told me weren't in there." One can only imagine what sort of warped, barbaric theology was instilled in the head of Karl the child. These manifestations of religion turned to evil are balanced out by people such as Bill Cox and the Superintendent of the state hospital. Karl, therefore, personifies the struggle to find the right kind of religion and to reconcile vengeful depictions of God with portrayals of Christ as the hero of a loving and liberating ministry of God's love.

Doyle Hargraves clearly embodies the patriarchal and hierarchial images of God and male derived from a non-critical reading of Scripture. Whenever Frank questions him, Doyle silences the boy by telling him "the adults are talking," "speak only when spoken to," and "I'm not your daddy; you just act like I am." The

implication is that Karl relives his own childhood through what is happening to Frank. Eager to prevent history from repeating itself, Karl becomes the Messianic figure.

Deliberate attempts are made to establish Karl as a Christ figure from the beginning. When Karl first leaves the state hospital, his possessions are a stack of books: the Bible, "a book on Christmas," and "a book about how to be a carpenter." An eating motif is also woven throughout the story. When we are initially introduced to Doyle, Linda has just explained that Karl will be moving into the garage. His first reaction is "I don't want him in the house while I'm eating." Thus, Doyle declines table fellowship with "that retard" and "that faggot." By contrast, Karl accepts an invitation to dine at the home of Vaughan, along with Vaughan's companion and a mentally handicapped woman from the dollar store. The parallels with the Lukan portrait of Jesus are obvious. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is always sitting down at a meal, going to, or coming from a meal. In first century Palestine, the Pharisees are often portrayed as declining to dine at the table with certain people, using this as the ultimate insult in their culture. Social and religious ostracism were part of the conventional wisdom of the day. By contrast, Karl, like Jesus, dines with people whom conventional religious wisdom would label "sinners."

Sling Blade eventually does what any good christological film will do by making its hero a martyr. To understand the depth of Karl's sacrifice for Frank, one must pay careful attention to a particular night-time conversation between the two, three-quarters of the way through the film. It is at this time that Karl first relates the details of being given his baby brother to bury in the backyard. Frank is appalled by the story and remarks that those who willingly commit murder "will go to hell." Karl agrees.

Karl later asks to be baptized and upon returning home from the ceremony, Doyle is waiting in the living room. Hargraves sends Linda out for fried chicken, a ruse to get her out of the house, and issues an ultimatum: Frank will be silent and submissive while Karl is to pack his belongings and move out immediately, which he does. In something of a farewell discourse, Karl asks Vaughan to take care of Linda and Frank and visits the boy for the final time, promising him "You will be happy." Karl returns to the shop, locates a lawn mower blade and sharpens it. Returning to the house where Doyle awaits, Karl inserts his own form of divine vengeance by murdering Hargraves. Causal observers may conclude that Karl brought the plan into effect because he was more comfortable living in the mental hospital and the murder did nothing more than facilitate his return. By viewing the film from a theological perspective, Karl's act of vengeance is also one of of atonement. He feels that those who commit murder will go to "Hades." Therefore,

Karl has done more than give his life for the happiness of a child; he has sacrificed his soul.

Summary

Universal's 1989 release of *The Last Temptation of Christ* was the possible death knell for depiction of the Christ Event in the biblical epic, a genre which enjoyed its golden moment in the 1950's. Film makers have learned that it is impossible to say everything about Christ in one screenplay: after all, there are four canonical Gospels. Films such as *King of Kings*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and *Jesus of Nazareth* demonstrate the complexities involved and serve as monuments to what the sacred writings lose in the process. *The Last Temptation* is an example of how the varying degrees of sensitivity and lack of consensus involved with the subject matter will result in chaos when explored.

As theology in film has moved to genres outside the biblical spectacular, so has christology. *Cool Hand Luke*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Dead Poets Society* suggested that humanity is indebted to those who dare to confront, challenge our thinking patterns, and willingly suffer for it. *Sling Blade* enlarges our understanding of suffering on behalf of another. Jesus still remains on the silver screen; not as a prophet and teacher from Nazareth, but rather as an unlikely

redeemer in a prison, a mental hospital, a class room, or inside the home of an abused child.

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[1] *The Mister Showbiz Interview: Billy Bob Thornton.* Internet WWW page, at URL: http://mrshowbiz.com/interviews/349 (version current at 03 March 1998).

[2] Wyatt, Jordan. *Sling Blade: A Review from Christian Spotlight on the Movies*. Internet World Wide Web page, at URL: http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/i-sling blade (version current at 28 October 1997).

[3] *The Mister Showbiz Interview*.