

TRDL6021 JESUS THROUGH FAITH AND CULTURE

Christology of Film

The Christ-figure has become a virtually ubiquitous presence within discussions of theology and film. Indeed, it is now possible to claim that virtually every main character in a film is to some degree a Christ-figure in as much as he or she (and occasionally it) demonstrates suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom or redemption.

In Christ-figure films, the character or the narrative must have characteristics which resonate with the biblical story such as mysterious origins in reflection of the Virgin Birth; attracts a group of followers in reflection of the disciples; commitment to justice or other aspects of Christ's teaching; miracles as signs of the coming utopia; conflict with authority mirroring conflict with the Jewish authorities; sacrificial victim redeeming or saving humankind; a close or mystical union with God; outcast, despised, rejected; resurrection of some kind.

For some, the Christ-figure emerged in the cinema as a result of the failure of the biblical epic, in the 1960s, to make effective and meaningful contact with audiences. The biblical epic, they claim, requires that audiences have some background knowledge of the scriptures and the theological tradition. Without these, the Jesus films convey very little that is meaningful. On the other hand, films which concentrate on relationships, love, self-sacrifice and themes such as redemptive action are able to strike a chord even when the narrative presents morally dubious characterization and plot (Wall, 1970: 51-2; Wall, 1971: 25).

Some qualification needs to be made here. Earlier films, such as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), can be claimed to demonstrate a Christ-figure, while questions ought to be raised about the meaning of such a category in the case of *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and more so, perhaps, in the case of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

The problem is one of definition. To have any real theological significance, the Christ-figure must in some way shed light on the person of Christ himself. Indeed, most commentators who use the category would claim this to be the case. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of many of the characters thus identified means that little light is really shed on the person and work of Christ.

If this is the case, any link with Jesus is one that does not arise naturally from the characterization and narrative itself but is in fact imposed on the film by those with a prior knowledge of the Jesus story. When it works well, the Christ-figure does not reveal something new of Christ but instead shows something about what it means to follow him. As such the Christ-figure reveals something of the embodiment, in faltering, failing and even sinful lives, of what it means to take up one's cross (Mth. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23). When it does not work so well it merely becomes a technical category within theology and film which is ultimately divorced from its roots in Jesus of Nazareth and is thus devoid of meaning except as a useful means of categorization and identification.

The Christ-figure

There are countless films that fall into the category of the 'Christ-figure'. Indeed it seems at times that it is possible to interpret any film in Christological terms. What is true is that such films can be interpreted on two levels:

1. Direct or literal level: this is where the character of Jesus is specifically recalled in the narrative and direct parallels are made between Jesus and the character in the film. Barnes Tatum (1997) calls this the 'explicit' Christ-figure.
2. Analogical or figurative level: this is where the imagery, the plot line, the narrative of the film follow a similar line to the story of Jesus. The parallels might not be obvious and while there are clues in the film itself, the cinema audience (or perhaps a commentator) have to identify such a Christ-figure. Barnes Tatum (1997) calls this the 'implicit' Christ-figure.

Lloyd Baugh justifies this analogical or figurative interpretation of film by claiming that Christian faith finds meaning in images and the imagery of film can add to this process of making 'meaning'. Furthermore, Christianity is *incarnational*, which means that the divine has chosen to be made known in and through the creation, fundamentally in the 'word made flesh', the incarnate one, Jesus Christ. At its widest, 'incarnation' can be extended to all *enfleshed* beings which is why human beings (in real life as well as in film) can display Christ's characteristics. Alongside this, Christianity is made known through story-telling, which is the cinema's primary function, while Jesus is known in two ways: (1) as 'Lord' to people of faith, and (2) as a cultural and secular icon to non-believers. Baugh goes on to issue a timely warning:

The Christ-figure is neither Jesus nor the Christ, but rather a shadow, a faint glimmer or reflection of him. As a fully human being, the Christ-figure may be weak, uncertain, even a sinner, that is may have all the limits of any human being in the situation at hand. The Christ-figure is a foil to Jesus Christ, and between the two figures there is a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance of his actions; on the other hand, the person and situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is (Baugh, 1997: 112).

Ronald Holloway groups Christ-figure films into three categories:

1. Sign: 'The Christ-figure is not a figure at all, but a mold (sic) to fit the Christ of tradition in simplified terms'.
2. Myth: 'Christ-figure as myth leans on the cultural significance of Christ without turning to the questions of belief or historical truth'. Superman, e.g., or occasional or even simple visual metaphors of Christ.
3. Symbol: 'The Christ-figure as symbol concentrates on the primary significance of Christ for the Christian faith, his role as redeemer, adapted to the problems of this world.'

The Christ-figure is the central figure of a narrative, which in all its parts runs parallel to the Christ-story. For the Christ-figure to be authentic, 'the significant, substantial resemblance is essential' to the character in question, and in the central dynamic of the character's story.

The profile of the Christ-figure

The profile of the Christ-figure can be made up of a number of elements or dimensions which can all find fullness of meaning in Jesus the Christ but also receive meaning from the character in the film. But how is the Christ-figure to be identified? There are several forms often used in order to serve as an appropriate metaphor of the totality of the Christ-event.

- (a) Mysterious origins in reflection of the Virgin Birth / Word made flesh. Sometimes this is portrayed by the Christ-figure entering, unannounced from beyond the main stage of the story: he/she may come from abroad, from another town, from another planet - there could simply be uncertainty as to where he/she comes from.
- (b) Attracts a group of followers in reflection of the disciples. Often the group is taught by the Christ-figure and in some ways saved by him. The disciples carry on the Christ-figure's mission once he is gone, continue to speak of him and bless his memory. (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; *Cool Hand Luke*). This often interpreted as a resurrection.
- (c) Commitment to justice or other aspects of Christ's teaching. The Christ-figure may be the one who leads the people against some oppression or other. This is, e.g., particularly evident in Western films. Note the irony, however, of seeing Gandhi (for example) as a 'Christ-figure'!
- (d) Miracles as signs of the coming utopia - not a common characteristic.
- (e) Conflict with authority mirroring conflict with the Jewish authorities.
- (f) Sacrificial victim redeeming or saving humankind. This is seen in many disaster / apocalypse films. This is sometimes seen when a figure takes up the sins of the people and rides into the wilderness carrying those sins on his back like the biblical scapegoat (*Shane*).
- (g) Sometimes a close or mystical union with God. The use of prayer sometimes denotes this. This is subtle because the prayer is not always answered.
- (h) Outcast, despised, rejected.
- (i) Shedding of blood by hero.
- (j) Resurrection of some kind.

It is worth remembering that the Christ-figure can be embodied in a variety of guises or models, some traditional, some involving aspects of biblical theology and other less extensive and limited in scope. Sometimes the Christ-figure is a dominant presence with a major significance for the film; sometimes a secondary character or even a single image.

Models of Christ-figure

1. The saint. 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' says Paul (1 Cor. 11:1). The *imitatio Christi*. The martyr comes closest to this. There are films about recognised saints such as Jean of Arc or Francis of Assisi but it could just be ordinary people doing good.
2. The priest / minister. Beware of this for the priest or minister can often function as a caricature and even as an anti-Christ-figure. Must have the attributes already mentioned.
3. Women figures: most notably Susan Sarandon in *Dead Man Walking*.
4. Clown, Fool or Madman: Christ was ridiculed, foolishness to the Greeks. Often the clown or jester reveals the truth and is punished for so doing.
5. The outlaw. Difficulty in unrepentant villains. Usually such outlaws would also be seen as a victim too (*Cool Hand Luke*). Must remember that Jesus was crucified as a villain which according to Neil Hurley 'makes the persecution and death of certain rebels take on a mystical aura' (Baugh, p.241).
6. Children: the boy pursued by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 2: The Day of Judgement*, will lead human resistance movement in the future. His name is John Connors - J.C.!

Conclusions

1. More than anything we must remember that the Christ-figure is not Jesus. Even in those explicit or literal cases where the character *thinks* he or she is the returned Christ, in fact there is a falseness in this or at the very least a discontinuity between the filmic Christ-figure and Jesus.
2. To qualify as a Christ-figure there has to be something about the narrative of the film, the screenplay or the character him/herself which mirrors the story of Jesus. This can be the way a character saves others, performs miracles, collects disciples, is sacrificed; the use of Christian imagery particularly that of the cross; or a character who

- demonstrates the attributes that associated with Christ of meekness, humility, love etc.
3. The Christ-figure is valuable in a theological interpretation of film because it (1) has a straightforward resonance with theology and (2) may help us to understand the Christian story better. But beware lest you see Christ-figures everywhere! This is, perhaps, inevitable if the film's narrative follows the pattern of Beginning (stable equilibrium) – Middle (disruption) – End (restoration) as this can always be mapped on to the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption.

Bibliography:

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