

# CHRIST-FIGURES IN CINEMA, IN RELIGION, IN THEOLOGY

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FILM AS A *locus theologicus*, moral and pastoral if not always systematic? Theology needs to acknowledge films as analogies for theological understanding—sometimes it raises its eyebrows exponentially the more the public asserts its enjoyment and contradicts highbrow critical pronouncements. Could it be that there are lowbrow—down-to-earth, ordinary—*loci theologici*?

Jesus preached, taught and performed prophetic symbolic actions. He was a story teller, giving leads for his disciples to work on systematic, moral and pastoral formulations: mustard seeds, leaven, pearls (moving up market for his images). ‘The kingdom of heaven is like...’ and Jesus’ mundane analogies and classic ecclesiastical texts.

Jesus also appealed to the ‘multiplex crowd’ of his day who queued up eagerly to get the front stalls. He told of a mugging on the Jericho road, of a wastrel whose escapades offended the official religious sensibility (he, hungry, wanted to eat pigs’ slop) and added a pre-Freud touch with the older brother’s envy of his sibling’s lewd activities, of lazy bridesmaids, of vigilante vineyard owners, of a capricious king who could execute reluctant wedding invitees. And, for his commonplace stories of lost sheep and its domestic counterpart in lost money as well as his masterpiece about the two lost sons, he had an eager audience of apostles, financial crooks and sex-workers.

Jesus knew that stories made for interesting, provocative and challenging theological reflection on God’s covenant of justice, fidelity and loving-kindness. In playing to the gallery (and to the stalls, so to speak), Jesus was using a method we might call ‘Lights... Camera... Faith’.

## *The Question*

It is not the usual question: can cinema be a ‘*locus theologicus*’? And, could an exploration of the answer, ‘yes’, provide some insight into how religious issues, religious sensibilities, whether they be in connection with, or affiliation to, organised faiths or the looser religious experience called ‘spirituality’ (or both), contribute to Australian society and culture and could continue to do so in the aftermath of the western secularisation of Judaeo-Christianity and the wider diffusion of the tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam?

I would like to enter into an answer via the Christ-figure and, eventually, some Christ-figures in Australian films. Christ-figures in general and, in our case, in cinema, have a more than respectable lineage. Jesus himself was interpreted in his person and in his mission by the Gospel writers, by St Paul and in the first letter of Peter, as the fulfilment of the servant-figure in the book of Isaiah. Then Stephen, in the Acts of the Apostles, was presented as following the pattern of Jesus in his death and the forgiveness of his killers. He was presented as a Christ-figure. So were the martyrs of the early Christian centuries... and right throughout the history of the Church, those who resembled Jesus in their lives, their love and their heroism were seen as Christ-figures.

The term Christ-figure is used advisedly, following a terminology suggested by Malachi Martin (1): any representation of Jesus is a Jesus-figure; any representation of someone who resembles Jesus, significantly and substantially, can be called a Christ-figure, from his title rather than his personal name. They do not have to be Christian persons nor be in-

terpreted by a Christian artist. The Gospel stories and metaphors have become classics in world culture and can be drawn on, and have been drawn on, by a range of writers, artists and film-makers, believers and non-believers. I would suggest looking at the use of the cross and the crucifix in Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) as well as his *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and the explicit use of this iconography by an American Jewish director.

David Tracey, some decades ago, reminded us of the value of the 'Analogical Imagination' (2), that it is one of humanity's greatest assets. He wrote of classics which have inspired in their times and have been awarded pride of place in worldwide culture. While some thought that this sounded somewhat highfalutin', Tracey alerted his readers to the different ways in which classics communicated by noting the different 'publics' that classics can address. This means that we acknowledge the profound classics but we do not neglect the general public, what we might call the Multiplex, DVD-BlueRay, YouTube public and the classics of popular culture. Of course, there are cinema classics from directors like Bergman, Kurosawa, Tarkovsky. But Shakespeare wrote classics for the pit as well as his timeless tragedies and histories. Cinema, at all levels, can provide classics – and does. As Michael Paul Gallagher noted, doing theology without this reference to the public and cinema is like doing theology in a bell jar (3)

. Since practice should reflect preaching, it is important to look at some movie examples.

One of the earliest examples for me in writing on movie Christ-figures was the work of Clint Eastwood in *High Plains Drifter* (1972) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). Archbishop Frank Little of Melbourne was wont to ask whether Clint Eastwood had directed another 'soteriological western'. He did not live to see Clint Eastwood's apotheosis as a sacrificial victim in *Gran Torino* (2008), perhaps atoning for his violent years as Detective Dirty Harry Callahan.



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The opening of *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is quite significant but, surprisingly, many audiences in the mid-1970s did not register the clues, especially the words from the book of Job, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the Lord he gives, the Lord he takes away' and the stick cross falling on Josey Wales' shoulders at the grave of his wife and son.

It needs to be noted, especially for those brought up in a word and print culture, that the indications for cinema Christ-figures are more frequently to be seen rather than heard or read. We can be very literate but often we are not, to coin a word, 'visuate', able to see and appreciate the meaning of the visuals. We need to be aware not only of the text of a film but also of what we might call the 'texture' of the film: images, moving images, sound effects, music... (4).

### *Australian Cinema Heritage*

One of the great resources available to us for reflection on the future of religion in Australia is the cinema heritage. Australia began its film career, so to speak, with the blend of the secular and the religious. Pathe Brothers company filmed the Melbourne Cup of 1896 within a year of the first public exhibition of films by the Lumiere Brothers in Paris on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1895. That is symbolic of the Australian spirit. One hopes that the next example of film-making, a combination of lecture, slides and film clips in the Melbourne Town Hall in 1899 is also symbolic. It was a program called *Soldiers of the Cross* and was produced by the

Salvation Army which sponsored a film company for the following ten years (5).

During the ensuing decades, Australia was quite prolific in its making of feature films as well as providing documentary material but suffered the inroads from vast American production and publicity know-how between the wars. Ken G. Hall, who was to go on to establish Cinesound News (remembered and celebrated in the 1978 *Newsfront*) was the key film-maker in the 1930s. His perspective was national/commercial rather than particularly religious but his heritage is available. There was spasmodic production during and after World War II. It was only with government, both federal and state, support for the so-called renaissance in Australian cinema that began in 1972, that the cinema resource came into its own (and made an impact on world screens). This has continued to the present with 2009 being a particularly strong year for films of quality and films which explored values.

And there is the connection between cinema and religion: the dramatising of values. This is broadly religious, values being presented rather than religion of church practice. It means that religion is to be found in our film heritage implicitly rather than explicitly, although Australian cinema has a record of quite a number of explicit presentations of religion and church, *The Devil's Playground* (1976), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), *Evil Angels* (1988), as well as some fine television drama like *Brides of Christ* (1991) (6). And one of the ways of making the connection and moving the dialogue into more explicitly religious language is the use of the Christ-figure.

### ***Theology, Stories and Metaphors***

It is not fanciful to link films, even commercial Hollywood movies, to Christology or to be using them as a source for theological understanding. A short statement made by the bishops present at the First Vatican Council, 1869-70, highlights this (though a more modern translation is desirable): 'Reason, indeed, enlightened by faith, when it seeks earnestly,

piously, and calmly, attains by a gift from God some understanding, and that very fruitful of mysteries; partly from the analogy of those things which it naturally knows...' (7). The other ways for fruitful insight are from the relations the mysteries of faith bear to one another and to our final destiny. Our stories relate and dramatise 'analogies' (metaphors, images, symbols) of those things which reason naturally knows.

This means that we are in the realm of story and the importance of story for theological reflection. Since the Jesus of the Gospels is a storyteller *par excellence*, we are to be listeners to and watchers of stories. Jesus had the advantage of being able to offer us challenging 'answer-parables' while the film-makers, no matter what their ambitions, offer us 'question-parables'. Jesus himself is, of course, a story. Many decades ago Tony Kelly reflected on this reality (in the inevitably exclusive usages of the time):

As expressed in his human existence, the Word has a history. Jesus is born, lives, suffers, dies, rises. As he enters into the heart and mind of man, the Word becomes a story. As projected into the history of all men, in all times, in all cultures, the Word becomes a story told and retold. The occasions for such retellings are as frequent as the number of the life-stories of men and women who hope that their story is a good story. The Word becomes the way of telling our story, the way of accounting for how we belong together, from the beginning unto the end

The Word becomes the story, the Gospel. He does not become first of all doctrine or dogma or theology. Each of these is only part of his story. And so, it is essential to note the narrative of how the Word lives amongst us and invites us to listen (8).

Because the cinema stories are in moving images, this may lead to difficulties for those who are accustomed to or prefer sources for theological reflection in words with their clarity and definitions. Suggestions for a method for theology that appeals in this regard is that of Monica Hellwig in her booklet, *Theology as a Fine Art* (9).

She states that theology, say Christology, can begin with contemplation. By this, she means that, for instance in a group, each member offers something that is important to them, to their experience of Jesus. It could be a Gospel text, a classical painting or statue of Jesus, a hymn, or a film like Zefferelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* or Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a particular scene like Jesus' encounter with the woman of the city (from Luke 7:35-50) as well as a credal statement of a text from the magisterium. Anything is valid at this stage, theology beginning from experience.

Her second step is one of sharing but in the sense of explaining and clarifying the point of contemplation. It is a means of bridging between the members of the group, that they appreciate the different ways in which the reflection has begun, some empathy within the group. It is not a discussion, but a deepening of the contemplation. It is in the third step that the co-ordinator of the group, of the class, the teacher or the tutor, offers a background from the theological tradition that enables the group to articulate their experience of Jesus in relation to the tradition and to dialogue with that so that fresh and/or deeper understanding is reached.

This can be used for reflection on Christ-figures.

To move to a specifically Australian film to indicate how this might be done, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), directed by Peter Weir. The Christ-figure is quite explicit in Christopher Koch's novel and in the screenplay by David Williamson.

The film focuses on Indonesia in 1965, president Soekarno's year of living dangerously. It is in the genre of the reporter who goes into an unknown situation, observes it and is changed. The film creates the atmosphere of Jakarta most effectively. The film also uses the Wayang, the Indonesian shadow-play with puppets indicating the balance between Right and Left—forever in motion. But a chief focus is on Linda Hunt as Billy Kwan—a Chi-

nese-Australian dwarf who plays God in a good sense, who understands people's lives, is full of ideals, becomes disillusioned and is finally a Christ figure—a symbolic gesture in death for the people of Indonesia? Billy Kwan quotes the Gospel of Luke 3:10, 'what then must we do?', the words of John the Baptist to the crowds who asked him what they must do to repent. Billy Kwan serves as the eyes of the journalist played by Mel Gibson, enabling him to see the poverty of Asia, confronting him about his response. He is mocked by other journalists with reference to the crucifixion and eventually dies, something of a martyr, to bring the plight of the people to the attention of the president.

In contemplating Billy Kwan, we are drawn to the parallels between Billy and Jesus in terms of concern for the poor and his inviting others to react to this vast poverty of Asia. Even the non-religious journalists in Jakarta recognise these parallels, their mockery of his zeal and dedication foreshadowing his death, his disappointment in Guy's seeming betrayal and the failure of Soekarno to respond to the people's needs. The character of Billy Kwan can be further explored so that the cinema experience (as of the novel for those who have read it) can be shared.

With some Gospel references already in place, the next step of articulating theological perceptions can take place.

### ***Jesus, Redeemer, Saviour and Liberator***

A helpful insight for understanding Christ-figures comes from Frederick Dillistone (9). He studies the person of Jesus as Redeemer and Saviour. These are categories for Christ-figures. Later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicated that, perhaps a combination of redeemer and saviour, Jesus could be seen as a Liberator.

There is a long tradition in the Jewish scriptures of redeemers, those who suffer and die on behalf of others. The most impressive and profound example of this tradition is the pro-

phetic servant of the Second Isaiah,

...he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins.

On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed. (53:5)

The Gospel passion narratives rely on familiarity with the servant songs of Second Isaiah, often using detail from the songs as 'short-hand' for describing Jesus' suffering. In Isaiah 50:6, the servant is struck on the face, spat on, his beard pulled and his back beaten. In this same way, Jesus' torture is described in the Gospels (Mark 15: 16-20). The First Letter of Peter, 2:21-4, quotes Isaiah 53 explicitly. In fact, the author uses the language of Christ-figure to exhort readers to be Christ-figures themselves: after speaking of suffering (in a passage about slaves being punished justly and unjustly), he states that 'Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow the way he took' (v.21).

The other tradition from the Jewish scriptures is that of saviours, those who transform others' lives or lead them into a new life. They range from Abraham, the patriarch migrating with his clan, to Moses leading the descendants of Abraham into the promised land. The climax is the vision in Daniel 7, where the Son of Man, representing the faithful people of Israel, comes on the clouds of heaven to receive the reward for those who had remained faithful to God's promises to Abraham, those who were faithful to the covenant between God and his people. This, of course, is Jesus' reference to Caiphas when Caiphas asks Jesus who he really is (Mt. 26:63-6). Jesus is the Son of Man who, after suffering like the servant, will be glorified by God and lead his faithful into the new, heavenly, risen life. Saviours empower others to a rising to new life.

Jesus is also presented as King, Priest and Prophet. He can be described as a 'Holy Fool', remembering Paul's comments in I Corinthians. Billy Kwan can be seen as a redeemer Christ-figure as well as a holy fool.

Some more examples from the Australian cinema heritage can be considered, Christ-fig-

ures who are not presented so explicitly as such but whose Christ-figure characteristics are more implicit.

### ***Gallipoli (1981): Redeemer Figure***

Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* is a fine war movie, with a screenplay by David Williamson. While it shows the reality of battle, it also highlights the futility of war and the loss of lives. It is the story of the Australian landing on the Turkish Coast at Gallipoli and the troops digging. This event quickly became the national 'myth' of the heroes of the Dardanelles, the ANZACS (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps). It is a myth of self-sacrifice and defeat which became a defining moment in Australian and New Zealand history: glory and honour from self-sacrifice. Anzac Day is the Australian public holiday.

Weir was moved during a visit, in 1977, to the site of the landing where he found relics of the veterans still lying in the sand on the beach. He says he sensed the spirit of the men and their presence. His movie is a tribute, a recreation of war and a powerful and emotional criticism of the waging of war and errors of human judgment in strategy and tactics. The score combines the classic with the modern, Albinone and Jean-Michael Jarre. It adds to the urgency and the poignancy, especially of the freeze-frame of Archie's dying.

Archie (Mark Lee) is an earnest and naive young man who volunteers to go to World War I. At the end of the film, as the troops stand in readiness to go over the top, Archie's friend, Frank (Mel Gibson) rushes from the officers with a message to stay. In the meantime, the men have prepared (with the religious element introduced of their reciting the Lord's Prayer). But, Frank is too late and the sacrificial slaughter begins.

The analogy of the redeemer figure is in Jesus' sacrificing life and suffering for others.

### ***Tom White (2004): Saviour Figure***

Perhaps Alkinos Tsilimidos' *Tom White* was too sombre a film for many tastes. After all,

the story of a man in midlife crisis, finally standing at the crossroads of his future is not your cheery night out. Nevertheless, it was well worth seeing - not only for its portrait of this middle-aged man but for the symbolism of what he represented in Australian urban society. Tom White (played by Colin Friels) is a symbol of Australian business success, with all its prestige, conveniences and trappings, which is ultimately found wanting. Tom White's symbolic journey amongst the less successful people in Melbourne society, those who find themselves or choose to be at the margins, is a challenge to audiences to discover where their social and human values lie.

What Tom White does is walk away from his life. His marriage has become brittle. He has failed at work and is on the way out - and walks out. His poise and acumen are gone. After an alcoholic binge, he literally disappears from his taken-for-granted safe world. His accustomed world no longer matters to him.

Tom's journey through the underside of Melbourne is not quite a pilgrimage through an *Inferno*. Rather, it serves as a journey through a kind of *Purgatorio*. The people that he encounters represent the inhabitants of an urban purgatory which could eventually lead them to their hell. Tom moves in with a rent boy, has an affair with a drug addict and experiences the brutality of her supplier, stays with an old man who has not quite opted out of life but has bypassed it and observes it with a wry wisdom, but still finds a woman to relate to, and a boy who has run away from a middle-class home. What effect does this St Kilda experience have on Tom?

He moves out of an isolated introversion. He is not dependent on his now fragile inner world for support - which it was failing to supply. He goes out and discovers that he can relate to men and women that he previously would not have encountered or would have avoided. In fact, he discovers that he is 'energised' by his friendship and contact with them. He is saved. And, this motivates him in his attempts to save those troubled people he en-

counters.

*Tom White* is a portrait of contemporary life in the margins of an Australian city. It is a picture of people imprisoned by circumstances and choices. Some, like the old man, choose not to get out. The rent boy still has a choice. The addict is killed. The boy has his life before him and needs reconciliation with his family. This is what Tom discovers about people, about life and about himself. The open ending means that we continue to wonder how much he has absorbed and how much it will influence the next phase of his life.

### ***Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002): Liberator Figure***

Philip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* is based on a true story of the Stolen Generation. In 1930, three young girls (two of whom, by now in their 80s, appear at the end of the film to add some heart-rending detail of how their story happened all over again with the next generation) escaped from a settlement presided over by a government official who had 'protective' rights over all aborigines in Western Australia. They returned home in a months' long trek along the fence erected to keep out rabbits.

For the girls, the shock of their being abducted from their desert home, separated from their mothers and their families, highlights the cultural world in which they live. It is a world of love and relationships that can make no sense of their being taken to the custody of the institution, let alone the minutiae of the rubrics for orderly living there. Their language is referred to by the nurses as 'That Jabber'. The only reality for them is HOME. This is the reality expressed in the voiceover comments and in the statements by the two surviving sisters at the end of the film.

Their journey, using the rabbit-proof fence as their guide, is one of liberation, a journey that did not lead to immediate liberation for aboriginal people but a story that played its part in the consciousness of the people—and

led to a film that jolted and reminded the wider Australian audience of oppression and the need for liberation. Exodus parallels in the desert come to mind. The girls' senses of seeing and hearing are acute. They are able to elude the aboriginal tracker pursuing them by moving into the water, by disguising their tracks. Their sense of traditional lore helps them to food, to follow the sun, to work out where the rabbit proof fence might be so that they can follow it home.

At the time of its release, *Rabbit Proof Fence* was seen by large audiences, even around the world, though it proved a sign of contradiction for some Australians and parliamentarians, something which liberators are prone to be.

### *Signals of Transcendence*

For dialogue between people of faith and people of doubt or no faith, the common denominator is the realm of values. That category is very broad but it takes in ethical philosophies and practice, moral perspectives and a basic sense of what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong. This language of values has been the standby for the Catholic Church's juries at film festivals around the world, including Cannes, Berlin and Venice (some of which are Ecumenical) as well as Tehran, Dakha and Brisbane (which are Interfaith, the former especially with Muslim jurors). This leads to creative conversations and insights through shared responses to stories and the particular value systems, faith tenets, searches that those involved in dialogue bring to the table. The sharing of values, whatever the perspective, is one way of keeping alive a broadly religious dimension in Australian society.

It can be noted that not all the characters in the movies are saints, stating the obvious. However, one of the facets of dialogue, especially with films that are tragic or grim, is the dimension named by Psalm 130, '*De Profundis*'. As Oscar Wilde found in prison when he penned his own *De Profundis*, human beings are often lost, stuck in dead ends, wandering byways but longing for something to save them. The *De Profundis* films (like those of Martin Scorsese, Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* or the Australian *Bad Boy Bubby* from Rolf de Heer) often probe the values and the search for values most fruitfully.

Sometimes the situations of the films are not so deep but there is still that sense of being lost, of the need for some salvation. They might be called 'Out of the Shallows' films, the kind of entertainment stories that go to the multiplexes or are TV movies. In recent years, there have been a number of quite nihilistic sensibility films. In 2009, Gaspar Noe made one of these films and named it, significantly, *Enter the Void*. His characters did not get out, perhaps as with Sartre's *No Exit*. It is one of the current challenges to people of faith and of values to dialogue with the out of the void films. (11)

I have always been impressed by the insight of Joseph Marechal SJ of Leuven that in each finite experience we can be aware of our capacity for 'more' (for the infinite where the sky is not the limit) and how this can be both of what is beyond us (transcendent) and what is the divine spark within us (immanent). Later, sociologist Peter Berger, reflecting on our finite experiences suggested that there were rumours of angels and signals of transcendence (12).

It can be both fascinating and fruitful to engage in cinema Christ-figure dialogue.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Yves Congar OP, *My Journal of the Council*, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2012. ISBN 978-192181744-1, \$60.00.**

Yves Congar OP was a theological expert (*peritus*) at the Second Vatican Council. Knowing that he was participating in an historic event, and knowing how important it would be for historians to have a detailed record of the events as they unfolded, he kept this diary in which he recorded his insightful, candid and sometimes emotional and acerbic comments on events and personalities. Indeed, his comments are often so candid that he embargoed publication until after the year 2000. The French edition (Editions du Cerf) appeared in 2002, and now we have an English translation published in 2012 by ATF Press. ATF Press have done us a great service – Congar's diary is an invaluable record of the most important events for the Church in the twentieth century.

Congar was a consultant to the Preparatory Theological Commission. In the course of the

Council he worked on the preparation of many council documents, especially on documents on the Mystery of the Church, on Revelation, on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), on Ecumenism, on relations with the Jews, on non-Christian religions, on the ministry of priests, on missionary activity, and on religious freedom.

The Council was an exciting time, especially for those of us who were fortunate enough to witness it close at hand (I was a student in Rome during the second third and fourth sessions) and Congar's Journal provides insights and captures the excitement and drama of the events.

Congar's own personal history was dramatic. He was earlier silenced because of his theological views, eventually reinstated, then called to participate in the Council, and made a Cardinal in 1994 by Pope John-Paul II.

This publication is a 'must-have' for every theological library.

—Barry Brundell MSC

*Fr Yves Congar was the most important and influential theologian at the Second Vatican Council. The journal that he wrote on the spot nearly every day provides entry not only to his ideas and feelings but to the dynamics at work as the Council accomplished a work of renewal and reform for which he had himself worked and suffered for decades before. This is indispensable reading for anyone who wishes to understand the texts, and the drama, of Vatican II.*

—Joseph A. Komonchak