

Christian Communication in the Popular Cinema: Cross Imagery, Cruciform Poses and Pieta Stances.

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Abstract

Numerous Christian references exist within the popular cinema, but they are frequently ignored, dismissed or under-utilised by educational and ecclesiastical institutions, despite feature films being the *lingua franca* of contemporary Western society and the most persuasive of modern art forms. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the professions in this post-Millennial period to raise the public's consciousness and treat them, and the art of video exegesis, as legitimate extra-ecclesiastical tools for religious education, communication research and cultural studies. Using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens, the critical film and religion literature was reviewed and the popular Hollywood cinema scanned to explicate the following three Christian focuses, namely: (a) cross imagery, (b) cruciform poses and (c) Pieta stances. It was concluded that these three taxonomic categories are legitimate and entertaining pop culture phenomena whose pedagogic utility looks promising for the classroom, home and pulpit. Further research into the emerging and exciting interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film was recommended.

Keywords: Religion-and-Film, Popular Film, Popular Culture, Popular Communication, Christian Cinema, Applied Cinema

Introduction

The popular cinema¹ is the technological heir of the industrial revolution and a prime aesthetic bearer of 21st century Western civilisation. As a pervasive, potent and entrenched form of popular communication, it has become one of the most entertaining mass means of transmitting religious stories today. Thus, truly making this the “Age of Hollywood” (Paglia, 1994, 12) and the reign of moving image culture that has helped foster the current ascendancy of religion-and-film (aka sacred cinema, spiritual cinema, holy film, cinematic theology, cinematheology, theo-film, celluloid religion, film-and-faith, film-faith dialogue).

Given these techno-social facts and the pervasiveness of Christianity worldwide, it is not too surprising to find that the popular Hollywood cinema² is full of sacred stories and holy subtexts. These are themselves replete with religious iconography, symbolism, allusions, analogues,

metaphors, artefacts, behaviours etc., but which may not always be appreciated by audiences at first glance. For example, Diane M. Borden (1993) provided insightful examples of Christian iconography within two ostensibly non-religious films, Alan Parker's *Birdy* and Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo*. The former film alluded to the Holy Spirit, used bird's-eye/God's-eye points of view, and explored sexuality as a means of spiritual transcendence via its mental patient protagonist, Birdy (Matthew Modine). The latter film explored the link between the holy and the erotic, the rites of sacred prostitution, and the eventual redemption of its Beverly Hills gigolo, Julian (Richard Gere). These sorts of Christian references are easy to detect by those who have eyes to see, ears to hear (Ezek. 44:5)³ and are willing to seek them out. Indeed, enough hidden Christian references have been detected within the field to date to foster a small cottage industry in its own right (e.g., Baugh, 1997; Kreitzer, 1993, 2002; Reinhartz, 1999).

Their existence (whether overtly or covertly embedded) is due to at least three basic facts. Firstly, the religion-film interrelationship is relatively long, complex and honourable, if not always well-known, understood or appreciated by scholars, the laity or the public (see Lindvall, 2001). Secondly, popular films were a dominant communications medium of the 20th (and now 21st) century, and thus intrinsically worthy of scholarly investigation because of their aesthetic and cultural contributions to society, art and world civilisation. Indeed, "more than just media inundation, we have come to live in a *media-mediated* culture, where our understanding of life, reality and our own experience is filtered through video frames" (Mercadante, 2001, 3). Thirdly, popular films have become the *lingua franca* of contemporary society, the "Tenth Muse...[that] has driven the other nine right off Olympus - or off the peak, anyway" (Vidal, 1993, 2-3). This fact alone warrants serious professional recognition, let alone the pedagogic application of commercial feature films as a legitimate, extra-ecclesiastical form of Christian communication, that is, movies as the stained glass windows of contemporary electronic culture.

Popular Film as Religious Pedagogy: The Hollywood Hermeneutic

Commercial feature films and the attendant art of video exegesis (i.e., religious exegesis, Hollywood style) can be a very innovative form of education about the Bible and religion, in addition to its contributions to film studies, communication research and cultural analysis. Why even bother with celluloid religion when biblical exegesis, history and archaeology have sufficed in the past? Because this Hollywood hermeneutic is a viable research tool that can add layers of meaning, knowledge and insight into traditional religious puzzles. It achieves this result during the very process of filmmaking when directors have to make *explicit* what may

only be *implicit* within the Holy Scriptures. Herein lays an exciting world of factual diversity, selective interpretation, and interpolative probabilities whose “forced” consideration by filmmakers can be a proverbial breath of fresh air in a research field bogged down by traditional, but well-worn methodologies.

To see old problems with new eyes is the unique gift that the popular cinema can provide today’s religious scholars, as admirably demonstrated by Mark Goodacre’s (2000) solving of the synoptic problem through contemporary Jesus films. As Les Casson (2002, 12) pointed out: “Film both reflects and shapes our world; it is the currency by which meanings, values and mythologies are traded. If we are to live and speak meaningfully in these times, then we had best learn the language.” One can only agree with him wholeheartedly, and urge the utilisation of popular film within the classroom, home and pulpit as soon as practicable. Indeed, precisely because of films’ worldwide popularity, cultural pervasiveness and profound influence upon the mass mind, it would be short-sighted and extremely churlish of the Church to deny the cinema its proper place under the sun. Besides, for “many people today, especially the young, popular culture *is* culture, and theology, to remain true to its calling, must take such cultural expressions seriously” (Simmons, 2003, 254).

It is also prudent for the profession to explore, analyse, and deploy video frames as a deliberate act of applied cinema; and not dismissively relegate them to the realms of diversionary entertainment, visual aide or student pacification purposes. That is, to employ commercial feature films as a legitimate tool for religious education simply because it fits closely the current needs of our postmodern, post-print and increasingly post-Christian society. This suggestion may cause anxiety, jealousy or disdain amongst those who have not developed complementary audiovisual skills to supplement their book skills. This is regrettable, but nevertheless in need of urgent change for as Brian Douglas (2003) counselled, there are sound religious reasons for upgrading the religion professions’ academic skill base:

“Oh yes”, I hear you saying, “just put on another video and fill up the religious education time slot in the timetable. It keeps the kids happy and it makes it very easy for the teacher”. True I suppose, it does fill up the space but if this is all we do then we are failing to meet the spiritual need and we are failing in our duty as teachers and spiritual guides (3).

Moreover, who would want to be guilty of these two basic failings? Unfortunately, generations of bias against film culture, let alone its religious application, is common amongst the churches and other ecclesiastical communities. As *Commonweal* movie critic Richard Alleva (1999) lamented:

All my life I had been told by teachers that reading was greater than movie-going because you had to work at reading, had to decipher the words, turn them into images in your mind, had to work at understanding what the author had to say, and it was the work of reading that consecrated that activity and made literature a greater form than film, which was scarcely art at all, since movies just flowed in front of your eyes and did all your imagining for you. [Not so!]...To truly watch a movie was to read it, i.e. to see all that was put before you and to question yourself about what was shown (468).

This makes movie-watching just as consecrated an activity as book-reading, if not more so given its triple data stream (i.e., textual, audio, visual) and their complex interrelationships. Of course, there is more to appreciating popular communication, film studies and the emerging discipline of religion-and-film than just looking passively at flickering screens, as the detractors of cinema would contend.

Popular Film and Consciousness Raising

A necessary first step upon the suggested pedagogic path is to raise the public's consciousness by pointing out the numerous Christian references embedded within the popular cinema. This act of identification-cum-revelation can provide layers of insight into films hitherto unappreciated, and it may even radically change the entire meaning of a film from that traditionally perceived. A good example of this transformative possibility is the 1951 science fiction (SF) classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Many interpreted this film as a UFO/alien/invasion film (Donkin and Fisher-Johnson, 1999), or a robot film (Telotte, 1995), or a monster film (Stacy and Syversten, 1983), while the more astute viewers saw it as an American political allegory about nuclear politics and associated anxieties during the dawning of the atomic age (Hendershot, 1999).

True and valid as these interpretations are, few viewers realised that the film is *fundamentally* a religious film, specifically, a Christ-cycle film, that is, an SF retelling of Jesus Christ's adult life with the spaceman Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) deliberately constructed as an alien

Messiah (Etherden, 2005; Kozlovic, 2001). This Messianic interpretation is *not* the wishful thinking of a culturally besieged Christianity desperate to see faith anywhere and everywhere, but rather, it was the *deliberate* narrative engineering of yesteryear's faith-filled filmmakers. The screenwriter of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*:

...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 (von Gunden and Stock, 1982, 44).

Moreover, as North 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" (Warren and Thomas, 1982, 26). One contends that this Christic subtext is the prime reason for its powerful emotive effect and its enduring reputation as an SF classic thereafter.

On the other hand, unlike sacred subtexts and their sometimes-obtuse Christic patternings, holy artefacts (aka religious artefacts; sacred artefacts) are overt manifestations of religiosity, whether subtly, artfully or boldly done. Very few people misunderstand their religious nature, utilisation, or referential status. One merely searches the popular cinema in archaeological fashion for religious artefacts, sacred accoutrements or holy paraphernalia for subsequent identification, categorisation and analysis. For example, this research method can consist of seeking on-screen churches, sacred spaces, divine raiments, votive candles, saint statues, holy water etc. (e.g., Beavis, 2003; Kreitzer, 1997; Lindvall, 1993). Included in this material listing that has already been show-cased within the Hollywood cinema is the Ark of the Covenant (*The Librarian: Quest for the Spear*; *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; *The Ten Commandments*), the Holy Grail (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*; *The Silver Chalice*), the robe of Jesus (*Demetrius and the Gladiators*; *The Robe*), and the Spear of Destiny (aka the Spear of Longinus) that was used to pierce the crucified Christ in the side to accelerate his death (*Constantine*; *Future Hunters*; *Hellboy*; *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear*).

Not surprisingly, the popular cinema is full of religious artefacts, and thus equally worthy of investigation and explication because of it. In fact, religious artefacts and sacred subtexts are so common today that they are frequently taken for granted (i.e., "invisible"), and thus

automatically dismissed in many a viewer's mind because of their ubiquitousness. However, the time is now ripe to make the invisible, visible, and elevate its reputation beyond its current screen-fill status by exploring, identifying and documenting the depth, range and diversity of this valid pop culture phenomenon.

For the purposes of this work, the critical film and religion literature was reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour). Using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens (i.e., examining the textual world *inside* the frame, but not the world *outside* the frame—Bywater and Sobchack, 1989; Telotte, 2001), a preliminary scan of the popular cinema reveal three iconic areas of Christian focus, namely: (a) cross imagery, (b) cruciform poses and (c) Pieta stances. The following is an introductory explication of these taxonomic categories utilising copious inter-genre film exemplars to demonstrate its diversity and richness.

A. Cross Imagery: The Sign of the Boss

A particular Hollywood favourite is the Christian cross, that undeniable calling card of that heavenly boss, Jesus Christ. Christian symbol hunters actively seek out these religious images, artefacts and associated paraphernalia for consideration because it is the iconic signature sign of the Divine, even if only tangentially related to the storyline of the film. For example, Neil Hurley (1993) noted the subtle deployment of crosses in many Alfred Hitchcock films. For example:

Take *Notorious* (1946). We meet a U.S. secret agent Cary Grant at a Miami party with a dissolute Ingrid Bergman acting as the hostess in a teasing striped blouse. Behind him is a lighting fixture clearly giving the impression of a cross...As another instance of surprising cross allusion, take *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1940), a frothy screwball-type romantic comedy with Carole Lombard and Robert Montgomery. Reviewing the film some fifty-two years after my first viewing upon its release, I was astonished to spot a crucifix on a dresser in the bedroom where Lombard sleeps...In *Torn Curtain* [1966], Hitch uses the Red Cross symbol as a hidden sacred, uniting red for Communism with Christianity, an ironic visual (138-139).

Regarding the historical film *The Mission*, Peter Fraser (1998) noted that:

The cross recurs significantly in more than contextual sequences. The narrative... begins with the images of the first missionary priest tied to a wooden cross... The dropping of the priest and cross into the river suggests both self-sacrifice and baptism, especially in the spectacular image of the cross dropping upside down through the spray of the falls. When Father Gabriel [Jeremy Irons] reaches the top of the falls in his first journey up, he consciously makes the sign of the cross... [and] it is a cross which Gabriel gives to Mendoza [Robert De Niro] when he asks for a blessing on the mission's defenders, and the cross he gives him is that worn by the martyred priest... (83-84).

This repeated infusion of crosses is of course understandable given that *The Mission* is ostensibly a priest movie about Jesuits doing missionary work in South America, and where crosses are literally the tools of their trade. Not only did the upside down cross in the opening scene signify Jesus Christ, but it also alluded to Jesus' faithful disciple, the Apostle Peter. He is traditionally associated with dying upon an upside down cross, appropriately named, St. Peter's cross (Matthews, 1990, 50).

Crosses can also occur in different forms in more mundane settings and under less expected circumstances. For example, Geoffrey Hill (1992) saw significant crosses and its imagery in *The Graduate* starring Benjamin "Ben" Braddock (Dustin Hoffman). As he explained regarding the scene where Elaine (Katharine Ross) is giving her wedding vows in the church, and Ben is locked outside desperately trying to stop the ceremony and reunite with his true love:

From the nave below, Ben's image outside the glass upstairs presents him as an icon of the crucified Christ, with outstretched arms, as if he were a stained glass figure of the gospel passion. At both sides of this dying savior we see the shape of crosses made by the support bars of the windows, as if to represent the two criminals who died on each side of Jesus [aka Luke 23:32-33, 39-43] (209).

There is also the more obvious physical cross used to bar the church door during Ben and Elaine's frantic escape near films end. Ironically, this desperate act implied that the cross of Jesus was holding back the older generation by trapping them within the confines of the church (literally and symbolically). Yet, at the same time, it allowed freedom for the newer generation if only they could step outside its boundaries and harness his sacred power more appropriately, if unconventionally, and not let the older generation overwhelm them in the process!

In the World War 1 drama *A Farewell to Arms*: “A bandaged soldier stands in a slanted doorway, behind which is a large Red Cross symbol, and stretches his arms out to appear as Christ. A graveyard of hundreds of crosses lingers on the screen. Telephone and electrical poles cast a shadowed ‘T’ over a wartorn landscape” (Fraser, 1998, 93). The “T” image being another variant of the Christian cross known as a “Tau (also called the Egyptian cross, or the cross of St. Anthony)” (Matthews, 1990, 50). At films end in the prison film *Cool Hand Luke*, “the camera withdraws from the place where Luke’s disciples are working, providing a helicopter view of a crossroad’s inverted cross” (May, 1991, 90), thereby, tagging the heroic Luke (Paul Newman) as the film’s Christ-figure via an innovative use of this sacred sign. The screen image was particularly apt because the “cross can also be understood as a sign for the crossroads, as the place where the paths of the living and the dead cross” (Matthews, 1990, 50). The filmmakers had artistically fused an actual crossroad with a cross image as seen from a heavenly, God-like point of view and linked it with Luke, the Christ-figure, at the very time of his unjust death. Filmmakers can be very canny and innovative in the deployment of Christian imagery when they want to be.

In *Jesus of Montreal*, both the on-screen and off-screen audiences leisurely watched the dramatic re-enactment of Jesus’/Daniel Colombe’s (Lothaire Bluteau’s) crucifixion upon an aesthetically pleasing cross, which the camera lovingly lingered upon. Later, the physical cross supporting Daniel toppled over with disastrous medical consequences for himself, thus demonstrating its intrinsic death-dealing function once again, but this time in vivid postmodern terms. In the West German road movie *Kings of the Road*, “the hope for redemption is reflected in an object found along the road: a crucifix with a Jesus figure that seems to be flying upward. When one of the protagonists raises his arms in imitation of the gesture of the Jesus figure, he implicitly relates to the religious context” (Hasenberg, 1997, 55), as would the bulk of the Christians in the audience.

The cross is of course a necessary religious accoutrement in all sacred servant movies dealing with Christian priests, nuns, saints etc. (Kozlovic, 2002, 2004). Who could forget the elderly and embittered Father Ellerton (James Ellis) who used a huge crucifix as a battering ram against the Bishop’s leaded parlour window in *Priest?* Alternatively, the medieval Dominican monks carrying their crucified Christ through the streets followed by praying penitents and ecstatic flagellants in *The Seventh Seal* or the wailing Jesus on the cross (Paul Hipp) during the brutal rape on the church altar of the exasperatingly forgiving nun (Frankie Thorn) in *Bad Lieutenant?*

Then of course there is Christ at the Golgotha execution site in the numerous Jesus films ranging from DeMille's *The King of Kings* to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

The cross is also a crucial plot point and holy prop within numerous vampire films, particularly the cross-happy *Captain Kronos*, *Vampire Hunter* and its famous iconic forebear *Dracula* (Kreitzer, 1997; O'Donnell, 2000). On a comical note, the relationship between crosses and vampires was delightfully done *in absentia* within *Dance of the Vampires* (aka *The Fearless Vampire Killers*). A Jewish vampire is faced with a crucifix-waving peasant girl and wittily replied to her: "Oy yoy...have you got the wrong vampire!" (Gaiman and Newman, 1985, 231). Conversely, in *Love at First Bite*, Count Vladimir Dracula (George Hamilton) was forced to leave Transylvania and live in New York City. During a classic good-versus-evil confrontation, Dr. Jeffery Rosenberg (Richard Benjamin), a biological descendent of the famous vampire hunting van Helsing, dramatically pulled out what he thinks is a Christian cross with which to repel the evil one. Dracula is initially terrified at this impending possibility. However, when Rosenberg pounced, his Christian cross mistakenly turned out to be a Jewish Star of David, and so not fearing it, Dracula gave a cocky retort instead and lived to bite another day! Apparently, the expulsive power of Jewish religious symbols is not as powerful as those of Christianity.

Indeed, the entire vampire genre can be seen as a *de facto* recruitment agency for Christianity because the cross can defeat serious evil when all else fails, including resorts to the scientific, the rational and mundane violence. The potency of the cross (and by default Christianity) is especially strong considering that:

...vampirism remains the most physical, the least spiritual of all supernatural manifestations. It records the triumph of sex over death, of flesh over spirit, of the corporeal over the invisible. It denies almost everything other than the gratification of the senses by physical means. It is the most materialistic of all possible cosmologies (Pirie, 1984, 6).

On the other hand, it is particularly disturbing to see Christian crosses associated with mentally unstable or undesirable persons throughout the Hollywood cinema. For example, the sadistic, leg-breaking nurse Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates) wore one in *Misery*, just like the rapist Robert Dood (Kiefer Sutherland) in *Eye for an Eye*. The psychotic killer Max Cady (Robert De Niro) in the remake of *Cape Fear* had a cross tattooed on his back, and he frequently quoted the Bible in between his criminal acts. The sociopath serial killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Se7en* had a

neon cross above his bed, in addition to a room filled with religious paraphernalia, such as Bibles and empty holy water containers. This murderer killed so as to sermonize in blood each of the seven deadly sins, which he claimed the world had forgotten about, thus prompting his murderous spree.

Interestingly, John Doe's room is similar to the house of the psychotic Margaret (Piper Laurie) in *Carrie*, which is also filled with crosses and other religious paraphernalia to the point of unhealthy obsession. Here the semiotic association between crosses, Christianity and mental illness is very stark and another indirect form of character assassination of the faith and the faithful. The image of the cross was also:

...used for torture, as in the St. Andrew's Cross of the 1923 version of the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Sometimes it was used for religious and sexual symbolism (as well as bondage) by American producers of the scale of [Cecil B.] de Mille, while [Sergei] Eisenstein used it for anti-religious propaganda in the cause of Bolshevism (Philips, 1975, 88).

In the cyber film *Johnny Mnemonic*, the Jesus look-alike assassin called Street Preacher (Dolph Lundgren) is an evangelical extremist who killed his victims, crucifixion-style using a huge crucifix that is actually a concealed dagger. It was a deadly object similar to Don Jaime's (Fernando Rey's) small, jewel-encrusted crucifix in *Viridiana*, which turned out to be the handle of a concealed dagger. The next step in this cross-as-weapon theme was taken in the supernatural thriller *Constantine*. Its demon-fighting anti-hero John Constantine (Keanu Reeves) fought the denizens of Hell using a holy shotgun with a large cross as its barrel, a cross-shaped gun site and other holy relics as anti-evil attachments. Thus, providing further semiotic messages about physical death hidden within the symbol for eternal life, which itself was bought and paid for by the gruesome death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. However, all these deadly film examples are more illustrative of the manipulation of Christianity's symbols and holy status rather than the inherent corrupting power of Christianity itself, especially Luis Bunuel's screen war against Roman Catholicism.

One of the strangest Christian crosses was the Y-shaped table of the Last Supper in the historical Jesus film *King of Kings*. As director Nicholas Ray reported: "I took a cross and broke it in such a way that the horizontal arm did not meet. Then I placed Jesus at the head of the cross" (Baugh, 1997, 244). It was done this way to imitate the counterculture peace symbol, thus, further

reinforcing the construction of Ray's Jesus as a counterculture hippie, or as this feature film was cheekily called in the industry: "I Was a Teenage Jesus" (Fraser, 1998, 166). However, one wonders if Ray was aware that this "Y" cross is also known as the thief's cross (Matthews, 1990, 50), and thus indicative of a deeper unspoken message that Ray may have been making to his audiences.

B. Cruciform Poses: Re-Enacting the Crucifixion

Other film commentators and Christian symbol hunters were more interested in finding cruciform poses (aka the "pectoral pose") rather than crucifixes, crosses or cross imagery *per se*. This focus is concerned more with the suffering personage of Jesus Christ than the Roman instrument of his torture and death, and so not surprisingly, the popular Hollywood cinema is filled with many poignant scenes of this ilk. As Adele Reinhartz (1999) reported:

The classic example is *Cool Hand Luke* upon whom the camera lingers as he [Luke (Paul Newman)] lies in cruciform position in a semi-comatose state after ingesting fifty eggs in the space of an hour. Another example is Matthew Poncelet [Sean Penn] in *Dead Man Walking*, who is strapped onto the execution table with arms outreached, and then tipped upright and flanked by two officers [visually representing the Roman soldiers – John 19:23, or even the good and bad thief – Luke 23:32-33, 39-43] as he says his final words to the parents of his victims (8).

Another, if unexpected cruciform scene is the street execution of Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. When this friendly and noble alien is machine-gunned to death by a panicking military, he falls to the ground. However, he does not land in a dishevelled heap, as you would expect, rather, he falls on his back and strikes a classic cruciform pose, complete with appropriately bent knee! Similarly, Jett Rink (James Dean) in the Americana film *Giant* is:

...a victim, though anything but sympathetic, [who] rests his arms on a rifle slung over his shoulders and bows his head, in a precise visual reference to Christ crucified. A young Elizabeth Taylor [playing Leslie Benedict] kneeling at his feet and looking up at him [Mary Magdalene-like] completes this peculiar Calvary-image (Baugh, 1997, 221).

The defeated Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro) in *Raging Bull* strikes a cruciform pose on the boxing ring ropes in the film's "exploration of an extreme form of Catholic sado-masochism" (Elley, 1994, 736). The formerly Ramboesque Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Aliens*³ engineered her postmodern *auto-da-fe* by outstretching her arms and diving backwards into the iron foundry's bubbling cauldron of hot metal. She had calmly sacrificed herself, Christ-like, for the good of the prison community and the future of the human species. This scene was visually reminiscent of the doomed priest on the wooden cross going upside down over the waterfall in *The Mission*. Thematically speaking, Ripley's death resonated intertextually with the fiery self-sacrifice of the "good" T-800 Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. This cyborg Messiah from the future was deliberately lowered into a boiling foundry furnace to destroy the advanced computer chip built inside of him, thus protecting humanity from the future extermination programme initiated by the rogue Cyberdine computer coupled to Skynet (Kozlovic, 2001). Then there is Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) near the end of *The Truman Show* who was "lying spreadeagled on the boat, as if *crucified*, looking for all the world as if he is dead" (Baker, 2002, 105). Only to rise again, walk on water and then discover a whole new world of freedom as he literally stepped into the heavenly void-cum-exit door of the giant TV studio.

One of the most gruesome cruciform poses occurred in the visceral cop thriller *Resurrection*. The psychotic serial killer and religious fanatic called the Numbers Killer/Demus (Robert Joy) is a zealous murderer who steals parts of his victim's bodies to physically reconstruct the crucified body of Christ in time for Easter. In addition to the bloody cruciform pose, each victim was found on a Friday, was a male, thirty-three years old, had the name of an Apostle, and did a job that was derivative of what their namesake did 2000 years ago. They all bleed to death when their limbs were removed for the bizarre Jesus reconstruction-cum-hoped for resurrection that only a psychotic mind could conceive.

Cruciform poses and bleeding bodies was also central to the French cop film *The Crimson Rivers*. The story was about a serial killer, and a psychotic twin sister, Judith Herault (Nadia Fares) who took painful revenge upon three perpetrators of an illegal Nazi eugenics experiment by removing their eyes and hands before killing them. Her third grisly victim, Dr. Bernard Cherneze (Jean-Pierre Cassel) was painfully mutilated and left hanging in a cruciform pose with blood slowly running from his mutilated eye sockets. The cryptic inscription written in blood above his head read: "I will track the source of the crimson rivers" [subtitle translation].

Its sequel, *Crimson Rivers: Angels of the Apocalypse* was also a religious thriller replete with crucifixes and cruciform poses. For example, a full-sized sculpture of the crucified Jesus was located in the garden of the Abbaye de Labaudieu (Lorraine), while smaller devotional versions were placed on tables and nailed to cloister walls throughout the film. An evil monk also adopted the cruciform pose prior to diving backwards from a high building to escape a pursuing police officer. Furthermore, gruesome dead bodies were laid to rest in cruciform poses behind a bricked-up monastery wall, behind sealed doors in an underground tunnel, laid out on a table for display, as if just removed from the cross, and set on fire and burnt on an X-shaped cross in front of a police station. Bodies were also nailed-gunned to an office wall, artfully positioned on the bloody floor of a supermarket aisle, and dramatically pinned to an altar by several death-dealing arrows all fired simultaneously.

As in *Resurrection*, these ritual murder victims had names like the twelve Apostles (e.g., Philippe, Barthelemy, Andrew, Thomas, Judas, Simon) and did similar jobs to their biblical correlates (e.g., Thomas was a mason; Matthew was a customers officer; Bartholomew was an administrator; others were fishermen). Some of them had the historical cross symbols of their corresponding Apostles located near their final resting places (e.g., the cross and two loaves for Philippe; the square and lance for Thomas; two daggers for Bartholomew). To uprate their religious quotient even further, the evil, German Montanist monks lead by Heinrich von Garten (Christopher Lee), the Minister of Culture and Cultural Affairs (Berlin), were hunting for Lothaire II's Vatican treasure, which contained the secret Gospel written by Jesus himself. This great sacred book was missing for centuries but was about to be revealed on the exact day of the apocalypse, as calculated by a phantasmagorical translation of the Montanist's three-letter seal, namely, "J" plus a backwards "E" (actually the number "3") and "O" meaning 730, thus 73,730 days from Jesus' crucifixion on the 7th April, 30 AD. This computation resulted in the date 27th of November; the very day and year that it was deciphered by the police and dramatically acted upon!

Furthermore, a photograph of the recreation of the Last Supper made by the victims prior to their deaths was taken, as in *Viridiana*, and the Jesus-looking character was positioned in the traditional Jesus spot and called, very appropriately, "Jesus" (Augustin Legrand). (Sometimes filmmakers are not so canny or innovative in their Christic constructions). Not only did this on-screen Jesus cry out "Father" for help, but he rambled on about biblical topics such as the four horsemen, the angels of the apocalypse, the breaking of the 5th seal, the Last Judgement, and the Sermon on the Mount. To further cement the Christ association, this Jesus survived his deadly

ordeal to live another day while wearing a clean, white gown (the symbol of holiness), and bathed in a bright white light (a metaphor for the Divine) whilst inside a hospital ward (metaphorically, Jesus' tomb). He was also in the physical company of the religiously trained, cross-wearing police officer Marie (Camille Natta) and her two professional associates who were also visiting Jesus (Augustin Legrand) in his cave-like hospital room (metaphorically, Mary Magdalene and Apostles visiting Christ's tomb).

In the religious horror film *The Unholy*, Father Michael (Ben Cross) was charged by Archbishop Mosely (Hal Holbrook) with the task of casting out a powerful demon known as Daesidarius, or The Unholy, from a New Orleans church. This demon was responsible for the horrific death of numerous Catholic priests, especially when disguised as a sexy, semi-nude female (Nicole Fortier). She confronted, seduced and then murdered the priests in the act of sinning (e.g., kissing) and then quickly sent their souls to Hell. In due course, Father Michael encountered a bloody body hanging upside down in a cruciform pose inside the church, and in another scene, an upside down crucified skeleton was depicted. During his inevitable fight with the demon and her two small helpers, Father Michael is physically crucified himself. The two demons grab and position him before the altar then bang nails through the palms of his hands pinning him to a wooden beam, Jesus-like. He eventually freed himself and defeated these forces of evil by evoking the power of Jesus and literally rising through the air to challenge them before casting the dog-like demon into the fiery pit of Hell.

Interestingly, Bruce Marchiano played Christ in the historical Jesus film *Matthew* and he went through the obligatory crucifixion scene, which he found physically taxing. However, it also gave him a profound spiritual insight. As he recalled: "I can't describe the panic that goes through a man's heart when you see a nail fixed on your hand...I believe every Christian should hang on a cross for at least 30 seconds. Their lives will never be the same" (Guell, 1995, 6).

C. Pieta Stances: Aesthetic and Emotive Effects

Pieta stances and associated imagery is another Christian favourite within the popular Hollywood cinema, and despite Joseph Marty's (1997, 140) concern that: "a mother who holds the body of her son is not inevitably a Pieta...Discernment is necessary in order not to "baptize" hurriedly every allusion or every symbol, all the more so because it is today that they flourish, and publicity makes reference to them for purposes other than evangelizing!" Marty was absolutely right. Many popular films have been baptised in this way by filmmakers and critics

for commercial, scholarly and religious advocacy reasons. For example, Charles B. Ketcham (1992) saw a fleeting Pieta in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* concerning the prisoner-cum-mental asylum patient-cum-Christ-figure, Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson). As he argued:

“Crucified” by lobotomy...[and] returned to the ward amidst rumors that he had escaped and other reports that he was “upstairs, meek as a lamb” [aka Jesus, the “Lamb of God” – John 1:29]. Chief Bromden [Will Sampson], seeing the stigmata, holds McMurphy in a position reminiscent of the Pieta. Saying, “You’re coming with me,”... (152).

In *Jesus of Montreal*, after leaving the hospital without being medically attended, the cross-injured Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), along with Mireille (Catherine Wilkening) and Constance (Johanne-Marie Tremblay) wandered the streets at night before descended into a subway where Daniel eventually dies of his physical wounds. For Bart Testa (1995, 108), this deathly sojourn was interpreted as “an inversion of the *via dolorosa* up to Calvary.” Before Daniel died, he gave a delirious pseudo-apocalyptic discourse (aka Mark 13) with “Mireille cradling his head in her lap, forming the unequivocal visual analogue of a ‘Pieta’” (Baugh, 1997, 277).

Donna Bowman (2001) considered the Brazilian film *Central Station* to be a compelling religious allegory of the Christian mythos that contained a distinctive Pieta scene. She considered Dora (Fernando Montenegro) to be analogous to the Virgin Mary and the young Josue (Vinicius de Oliveira) to be analogous to the child Jesus, therefore, when “Dora [is] sleeping on a sidewalk with her head in Josue’s lap, a gender-inverted *Pieta*” (ibid, 4) had occurred.

Peter Malone (1988, 79) considered that Agnes (Harriet Anderson) in *Cries and Whispers* was a female Christ-figure who also re-enacted this holy bonding scene. Her harrowing “death affects her proud and selfish sisters and her maid who, like an earth mother, cradles her corpse as a dead Christ in Pieta-fashion.” Another variation of the Pieta occurred in *On the Waterfront* where “crucifixion and resurrection are spelled out in the brutal terms of New Jersey waterfront” (Ketcham, 1968, 363) in this decidedly “twentieth-century passion play” (Malone and Pacatte, 2003, 68). As Neil Hurley (1992) put it:

After a battle royal with the dock boss Johnny Friendly [Lee J. Cobb], Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) lies beaten to a pulp, but in no way defeated. Supported by Father Barry

(Karl Malden) and his girlfriend Edie (Eva Marie Saint)—a variation on the *Pieta*—he will rise from his muted crucifixion and lead the intimidated dockworkers onto the pier in revolt against the “pistol local” (102).

Similarly, Diane M. Borden (1993) saw a profound *Pieta* in the Vietnam War trauma film *Birdy*. As she claimed:

An extraordinary *pieta* is imaged when Al [Columbato (Nicolas Cage)], seated on the floor in an upright position in the hospital cell, holds the head of the “dying” Birdy [Matthew Modine]. Bars and cruciform lines, along with diagonal lighting, enhance the conflicted tenderness and tragedy of the fraternal bond. [Alan] Parker’s configuration of devotional love at the point of death and consummation stands behind such other great cinematic *pietas* as those of Terry Malloy and his girlfriend in Elisa Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* and of the maid and Esther in Ingmar Berman’s *Cries and Whispers* (446).

If one wanted to look even harder, *Pietas* can be found in even stranger places. For example, in the SF classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, its alien Messiah, Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter is killed by a panicked military and his body is temporarily stored in a local prison. Later, his bullet-pierced body is retrieved from the cave-like cell by his mechanical companion Gort (Lock Martin). This imposing eight foot robot carried Klaatu’s dead body, *Pieta*-like, back to their spaceship where he is miraculously resurrected in “a science fiction version of the Ascension” (Saleh, 1979, 41). However, Gort is not meant to be a cinematic analogue of the Virgin Mary, rather, he was used that way to underscore the Christic nature of Klaatu; the visitor who came from the stars and was rejected, pursued, killed, resurrected and then returned home into the heavens once his earthly mission was complete (i.e., the Christ cycle).

Even Cecil B. DeMille evoked a Christological resonance in his Old Testament film *The Ten Commandments* by using a reversed variant of New Testament *Pieta* imagery. This occurred in the muddy brick pits scene when Moses-as-lowly-Hebrew-worker (Charlton Heston) comforted an old dying man, Simon (Francis J. McDonald) by holding him *Pieta*-like. The old man does not realise that his comforter is actually an incognito Prince Moses, the God-chosen Deliverer of his oppressed people who will eventually lead them to freedom as Moses-the-lawgiver, the proto-Christ-like deliver of his people. Indeed, the *Pieta* image has become a *de facto* icon for an entire profession—nursing. As Ludmilla Jordanova (1995) noted regarding the British film, *The White Angel*:

The 1936 bio-picture about [Florence] Nightingale developed sentimentalism into a high art, and includes scenes reminiscent of the Virgin Mary attending to the dying Christ. Nurses could identify with the image and feel themselves as the *mater dolorosa* [Sorrowing Mother]. Patients, by the same token could imagine themselves the recipients of such devoted tenderness [just like Jesus Christ who was also pained and sacrificed to make a better world] (216).

Not only was Florence Nightingale a much-loved icon for both the nursing profession and Hollywood filmmakers (Jones, 1988), but her heavenly, angelic qualities were encoded in the very title of the film itself, thus, further typecasting her “divine” image and legendary nursing reputation alongside that other archetypal helper of humankind—the Virgin Mary (i.e., sanctity by association).

At other times, the power of the Pieta as a Christian symbol can be so overpowering that it can dramatically affect actors playing biblical roles. For example, Italian director Franco Zeffirelli discovered this psycho-religious effect during the making of his historical Jesus mini-series-cum-movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. As he reported:

...when we filmed the Pieta, she [Virgin Mary (Olivia Hussey)] became so transported that without instruction or help she threw herself forward and lifted the recumbent body of Christ [Robert Powell], a seventy-kilo man!...Olivia was shaking and weeping, and after the filming we had to carry her away...When they called Olivia the tension was such that she fell to the ground and began screaming as if possessed...She was laughing hysterically, stumbling and shouting. Appalled, Ann Bancroft [playing Mary of Magdala] walked up and slapped her in order to end the hysteria...But really it was beyond the poor girl. She hadn't been acting, she had been living the part, and all we could do was to drape her over the dead Christ, to whom she clung as if drowning. Awesomely, when I saw the rushes, this image of the Mother of God clasping her dead Son to her was so moving I knew at once that it had to be in the film (Zeffirelli, 1986, 280-281).

Apparently, Olivia Hussey had experienced the same sort of emotional panic that Bruce Marchiano felt in *Matthew* when he played Jesus about to be nailed to the cross.

Conclusion

The range of Christian references within the popular cinema is breathtaking. It is also testimony to the power of popular communications to entertain, disturb and still speak meaningfully to contemporary audiences two thousand years after the biblical events it purports to represent. As such, it is a potent extra-ecclesiastical resource crying out to be utilised in the classroom, home and pulpit. These three Christian cinematic focuses are a valid pop culture phenomenon whose future looks promising as legitimate postmodern resources for religious education, communication research and cultural studies. It is argued that a closer, more sympathetic examination of the popular cinema using these taxonomic categories (and others) will yield many more insights and delights unappreciated to date. Further research into the emerging and exciting interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is warranted, recommended and certainly long overdue, whether as education, entertainment or spiritual edification.

Notes

1. Although there are real ontological differences between “cinema,” “film,” “movie,” “video,” “TV movie,” “CD,” “VCD,” “DVD,” “Mpeg-4,” “Internet movie” etc., they all deal with audiovisual images and will be treated herein as essentially interchangeable.
2. The term “Hollywood cinema” is used herein as a shorthand code for Western, primarily English-speaking cinema that conforms to the classical Hollywood narrative tradition, whether actually made in America or not (see Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, 76-78).
3. The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout, unless quoting other translations, because most of “the biblical phrases that are embedded in our culture are from the King James Version” (Taylor, 1992, ix) and it is “the most widely used English translation of the Bible” (Taylor, 1992, 71).

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- The King of Kings* (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)

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Love at First Bite (1979, dir. Stan Dragoti)
Matthew (1993, dir. Reghardt van den Bergh)
Misery (1990, dir. Rob Reiner)
The Mission (1986, dir. Roland Joffe)
Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975, dir. Terry Gilliam)
Mr. and Mrs. Smith (1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock)
Notorious (1946, dir. Alfred Hitchcock)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975, dir. Milos Forman)
On the Waterfront (1954, dir. Elia Kazan)
The Passion of the Christ (2004, dir. Mel Gibson)
Priest (1995, dir. Antonia Bird)
Raging Bull (1980, dir. Martin Scorsese)
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Resurrection (1999, dir. Russell Mulcahy)
The Robe (1953, dir. Henry Koster)
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