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CINEMATOGRAPHIC CHRIST FIGURES

1. Definition of movie Christ-figures

In the history of Christianity, Jesus has been iconographically represented in different forms and styles. The same happens with his representation in films, where the figure of Jesus has been present since the beginning of the cinema, offering a modern interpretation of the meaning and value of the figure of Jesus Christ for people nowadays.

Besides the performances of 'Jesus of the Gospels', which until now has been filmed in more than a hundred and fifteen films, less or more successfully (films like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* by George Stevens, or *Jesus of Nazareth* by Franco Zeffirelli, or *The Passion of Christ* by Mel Gibson), there are also films that use a different approach to retell the event 'Jesus Christ', the more metaphorical one: the so-called *Christ figures films*. The figures of the saviors, redeemers, liberators and martyrs who transform the lives of people around them, are present in the movies, but more and more 'disguised' in these secular protagonists, distant, at first glance, from the specifically religious context. Many scholars have identified Christ figures in the films of various genres from westerns and dramas to science fiction and action movies.

In short, what is a Christ-figure in the film? This is the central figure of a story that reproduces the dynamics of the history and mission of Jesus Christ. The plot of these films is parallel to the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, where the characters experience what Christ experienced in his life, living the story of justice, love, freedom and sacrifice for others. It is about the protagonists that at first sight are ordinary people, they do not bring the personal name of Jesus, but with a careful analysis we can identify many parallels with the life story of Jesus Christ as depicted in the New Testament. Christ figure films are those works in which:

> "the Christ-event, or some of its elements, is drawn over or behind the events narrated in the story. The narrative of the film has its own meaning, which increases in moral and spiritual strength at the moment that we recognize and appreciate the Christ event that it reflects. In a sense, the film develops on two parallel levels: the literal and the metaphorical one, and the deeper

meaning of the film recognizes the dynamic interplay between these two levels, between two narratives."[1]

Actually, the text and the subtext of a story are not two separate entities, but rather seems like two concentric circles.[2] It is the subtext that is sacred and could hide an "anonymous religiosity".[3] Thus, Ronald Holloway will claim that a Christ figure "in allegory follows the main thread of the Christ story, while disguising it through a surface narrative and relying on the viewer to provide the necessary continuity. The figure is strong enough to exist by itself, but points to a meaning far beyond this existence for its ultimate truth."[4]

The Christ-figure is neither Jesus nor Christ, but rather a shadow, his mere reflection. As being fully human, Christ figure is subject to limits of any human being, it may be weak and uncertain, and a sinner as well.[5] With this type of film characters, cinematographic art confirms "continuing ability of the biblical texts to do a 'great code' of our culture, despite the – probably increasing – difficulty for audience to immediately activate richness of references to the Gospel."[6] Christ and the Christ-figure shed light on each other; there is a reciprocal relationship between two of them because "on the one hand, the reference to Christ shines upon the situation of the Christ figure and gives depth to the meaning of his actions, and on the other, the person and the situation of the Christ figure may lead to a new interpretation or a different understanding of identity or the nature of Christ."[7]

The American scholar Robert Detweiler indicates four different levels, or four different ways, of Jesus Christ's representation in the cinema.[8] On the first level, Jesus, as a central figure of a story, functions as a mere sign, present in simple movies of Christian catechesis or Christian propaganda (e.g., *Nazarin*, 1958, dir. Luis Buñuel). At the second level, the Christ figure would be represented rather as a myth, a cultural significance, without including elements of faith or historical

[1] L. BAUGH, "L'invenzione filmica di Gesù: tra i Vangeli canonici, gli apocrifi ed altre fonti" in G. ANGELINI, L. BAUGH (eds), *Fede, ragione, narrazione. La figura di Gesù e la forma del racconto*, Milano 2006, pp. 112–113.

[2] Cf. B. DICK, *Anatomy of Film*, New York 1998, p. 129.

[3] M.P. GALLAGHER, "Theology, discernment and cinema" in: J.R. MAY (ed.), *New image of religious film*, Wisconsin 1997, p. 151.

[4] R. HOLLOWAY, *Beyond the image. Approaches to the religious dimension in the cinema*, Geneva 1977, p. 187.

[5] Cf. L. BAUGH, "La rappresentazione metaforica di Gesù nel cinema: la figura cristica" in: *Gregorianum* 82(2001)4, p. 721.

[6] A. BOURLOT, "Il cinema cristologico" in: D.E. VIGANÒ (ed.), *Dizionario della comunicazione*, Roma 2009, p. 923.

[7] L. BAUGH, *La rappresentazione metaforica di Gesù*, p. 721.

[8] R. DETWEILER, "Christ and the Christ figure in American fiction" in: *The Christian Scholar* 47 (1964) 2, pp. 113–119.

truths related to Jesus Christ. The examples *par excellence* would be the *Superman* movies, or some movies that have some visual metaphors and allusions to Christ. At the third level, a Christ figure becomes a symbol, which focuses on the primary meaning that Christ has for the Christian faith; the protagonist is a redeemer and/or the savior of a modern community (*The Winter Lights*, 1963, dir. Ingmar Bergman or *Shane*, 1953, dir. George Stevens). On the fourth level, the Christ figure is the central figure of a story that in all its parts reflects the story of Jesus Christ, becoming a metaphor or extended allegory (e.g., *Au hasard, Balthazar* [1966] Bresson, *Babette's Feast* [1987] by Gabriel Axel, *Bagdad Café* [*Out of Rosenheim*, 1987] by Percy Adlon, *Jesus of Montreal* [1989] by Denys Arcand, etc.). We could speak about an authentic Christ figure when the protagonist of a film functions on this fourth level where "the significant, substantial resemblance to Jesus is essential,"[9] in terms both of the character, or the dynamics of his history.

Theologian Adele Reinhartz argues that Christ figures can be identified through some particular actions of the protagonist that bind him to Jesus, such as a symbolic crucifixion (e.g., *Pleasantville* [1998] by Gary Ross), walking on water (*The Truman Show* [1998] by Peter Weir), or the necklace with a cross (*Nell* [1994] by Michael Apted). Also, any film which would have the redemption as its main theme, would somehow have a Christological meaning.[10] The arising question is whether every movie with a hero who redeems and sets free, or which incorporates in its story some Christian symbolism (which actually includes many, if not all of recent Hollywood movies!), can be defined as a Christ figure film? According to Peter Malone's statement about Christ figures, namely, that it is any fictional character that, symbolically and allegorically, resembles Jesus Christ in a significant and substantial way,[11] the assertions of Reinhartz seem rather trivial.

The metaphorical representation of Jesus Christ passes through over a century old history of the cinema and can be found in all movie genres. Christ figures may be embodied in different characters within a movie: man, woman, children, saints, martyrs, nuns or priests. Christ figure may also occur in the guise of a criminal, an alcoholic, an outlawed,[12] a clown, or even a donkey (as it happens in *Au hasard, Balthazar* in which "the submission of the innocent dumb to the most atrocious

[9] P. MALONE, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, New York 1990, p. 158.

[10] Cf. A. REINHARTZ, "Jesus on the silver screen" in: N.N. PEREZ (ed.), *Revelation. Representations of Christ in photography*, London–Jerusalem 2003, p. 189.

[11] Cf. P. MALONE, "Jesus on our screens" in: J.R. MAY (ed.), *New image of religious film*, Wisconsin, 1997, p. 70.

[12] Some examples of prisoner Christ figures: Karl Childers in *Sling Blade*, John Coffey in *The Green Mile*, Luke in *Cool Hand Luke* etc.

cruelty recalls the suffering servant of Isaiah"[13]). Often film critics of this subgenre mention *Intolerance*, directed by David W. Griffith in 1916, as the first example of a Christ figure film in cinematography. In "modern episode" the film narrates of a terrible act of injustice against an innocent man, The Boy, in parallel editing with the incident of intolerance that Jesus was suffering in His Passion. Among other Christ figure films that are most often mentioned in the literature of the subject, we can find, for example, the science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) directed by Robert Wise, the western *Shane* (1953) by George Stevens, the Robert Bresson's art film by *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966), the prison film *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) by Stuart Rosenberg, the Oliver Stone's war movie *Platoon* (1986), or a recent SF film *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005) by Andrew Adamson. Oftentimes, the protagonists of action and science fiction movies - like *Superman* (1978) directed by Richard Donner, *Pale Rider* (1985) by Clint Eastwood, *Rambo* (1985) by George Cosmatos, *Terminator* 1/2 (1984/1991) by James Cameron, *Twelve Monkeys* (1996) by Terry Gilliam, *The Matrix* (1999) by Andy and Larry Wachowski – are selected as some typical Christ figures,[14] but whose authenticity is put in question due to their massive use of violence.

Peter Malone, for example, points out that Christ figure in a film may take the form of a redeemer or a savior,[15] while Christopher Deacy observes that Christ figure is "the agent of redemption".[16] The Old Testament underwent a series of redemptive figures, who suffer and die giving their lives for others. One of the brightest examples is the 'Song of the Suffering Servant' of prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 53:5). The Passion of the Christ, as described in the Gospels, was very similar to the song of the suffering servant. However, this does not mean that every character who suffers or dies is consequently a redemptive Christ figure. The similarity must be significant and essential. The redemptive figure is a victim of sin and its consequences; he or she is "an innocent victim for whose suffering we are responsible and through whose suffering we are redeemed."[17] The Christ figure, through the suffering, condemns evil and sin and reconciles people; it becomes the means of redemption for others. Innocent suffering is one of the most obvious features of the

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[13] L. BAUGH, *L'invenzione filmica di Gesù: tra i Vangeli canonici, gli apocrifi ed altre fonti*, p. 113.

[14] Cf. P.O. BRUNSTAD, "Jesus in Hollywood - The cinematic Jesus in a Christological and contemporary perspective" in: *Studia Theologica* 55 (2001), p. 148.

[15] Cf. P. MALONE, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, pp. 37–65.

[16] C. DEACY, *Screen Christologies*, Cardiff 2001, p. 69.

[17] C. BURNS, "Mystic River: a parable of Christianity's dark side" in: *Journal of Religion and Film* 8 (2004) 1, p. 3.

'redeemer' figures. His beliefs come into collision with the law of this world and his suffering partly must be voluntary, otherwise it could seem pathetic.[18]

The cinematographic 'saviors' would be those characters who significantly resemble Jesus dead and risen again. They transform lives of others and guide them towards a new life. The savior figures extend from the patriarch Abraham who migrated with his people, Moses who led the people from slavery to freedom, and find fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the 'perfect Savior'. The savior Christ figure can suffer and suffers, but the significance of the figure is mainly in its leadership, and in bringing people into heaven. This figure brings freedom, joy, fulfillment, peace and rest. A Christ-figure is a figure of salvation, a prototype of a free man, the savior for a new era.[19]

2. Typology of cinematographic Christ figures

Christ figures can be classified into several categories according to the form and the genre that they assume. Anton Kozlovic has spoken of five categories of Christ figures in film: 1) normal Christ figures, 2) extraterrestrial Christ figures, 3) female Christ figures, 4) animal Christ figures; 5) inanimate Christ figures.[20] What we can immediately notice is the fact that his ranking puts the female Christ figures in a special category, distinct from the "regular" Christ figures. A year after, Kozlovic decides to rank them differently: male, female and alien Christ figures. We will follow this pattern in the following paragraphs, where the main characteristics and feature films related to each category of Christ figures will be discussed in brief.

2.1. Male Christ figures

Christ figures are predominantly of male gender, regardless of race, ethnicity or skin color, as we were able to see in the examples cited above. These are characters who, at first glance, might seem ordinary people, but within the film, they prove to be something more, often extraordinary leaders who bring redemption and salvation. Kozlovic cites several examples of films with male Christ figure. For example, in the film *Destination Unknown* (1933) by Tay Garnett, a stranger appears on a ship in the Pacific Ocean, bringing peace to all passengers. When the ship is destroyed, the stranger saves the crew and the passengers, and then he

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[18] W. H. AUDEN, *The enchafed flood, or the romantic iconography of the sea*, New York 1967, pp. 141–142.

[19] Cf. W. TELFORD, "Jesus Christ movie star: the depiction of Jesus in cinema" in: C. MARSH, G. ORTIZ (eds), *Exploration in theology and film*, Oxford 1997, p. 137.

[20] Cf. A.K. KOZLOVIC, "The hidden Jesus within popular films: Christ-figures as sacred subtexts" in: *Scriptura* 85 (2004), p. 100.

disappears. In *Black Jesus* (1968) by Valerio Zurlini, Christ is hidden within an African leader of the resistance movement, who eventually is killed, manifesting some explicit references to the Passion of Christ. Because of their great dramaturgical flexibility, the Christ figures may appear in less conceived places, as for example in the body of the nineteen-year-old postman Tomek in *Short film about love* (1988) by Krzysztof Kieślowski.

We can include many heroes of action movies in this first category of Christ figures. As proof of this statement Kozlovic cites the Christological imagery present in an apocalyptic movie *Cyborg* (1989) by Albert Pyun, where Gibson Rickenbacker would represent the Christ-figure. The actor Jean-Claude Van Damme describes his character in the following way: "I play the messenger of the future, almost God-like, and I'm here to help cure a plague on Earth... Rickenbacker's not really a superhero, he's just a person like you or I. But halfway through the story, the guy's almost physically dead, and when he comes back to save the world, he realizes he's the 'chosen one'."[21] Kozlovic also pointed out allusions to the crucifixion of this "muscular Christ", stating that "the poses of the crucifixion are the signature of the divine and are also really loved by Hollywood screenwriters."[22] Many protagonists of action movies today are identified as Christ figures to the point that it may seem that Arnold Schwarzenegger, Keanu Reeves, Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stalone, have become the new 'macho' messiah who saves the world only because of their strength and muscles.

According to Humphries-Brooks, the male Christ figures in Westerns, like *Shane* or *Pale Rider*, would represent the embodiment of heroic America, which plays the role of both Messiah who brings peace, and the messianic role of an executioner. In *Shane*, for example, the Christ of America carries the weapons, and that is how the true figure of Christ is replaced by a hero with a gun, becoming such a new equivalent of Christ executioner.[23]

But there are also some more realistic and significant male Christ figures that have marked this film subgenre like Daniel Coulombe in Denys Arcand's film *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), John Coffey in Frank Darabont's *The Green Mile* (1999), Il Professore in Ermanno Olmi's *Centochiodi* (2007), father Michael Logan in Alfred Hitchcock's *I confess* (1953), etc.

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[21] K. GILPIN, "Cyborg Saviour" in: *Starlog* 138 (1989) 57, p. 54.

[22] A.K. KOZLOVIC, op. cit., p. 100.

[23] Cf. S. HUMPHRIES-BROOKS, *Cinematic Savior. Hollywood's making of American Christ*, Westport 2006, p. 109.

2.2. Extraterrestrial Christ figures

The science fiction genre is often a fertile ground for religious narrative. This is especially true since the decline of the great biblical epics, to the point that Hugh Ruppersburg at the end of the 1980s, states that science fiction films of the 1970s and the 1980s perform the same function of the biblical epic in the 1950s and the 1960s.[24] The parallels between Jesus Christ and a leading science fiction character for Kozlovic is obvious: "the scriptural Jesus Christ can be seen as a human-looking alien who came to this planet from off-world (heaven) to fulfill his divine mission (death via selfless sacrifice). He then returned (ascension) to his home (heaven) after the successful completion of his earthly mission (crucifixion) that reaped humanity an inestimable boon (the redemption of all humanity)."[25]

Extraterrestrial Christ figures, which are quite often cited in the literature of this genre, are usually referred to the protagonists of the following films: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *E.T.*, *K-Pax*, *Superman*, *Spiderman*, *Starman*. Their protagonists are "transcendental" beings who bring people wisdom and knowledge, thereby establishing harmony in the sociopolitical system.[26] The director of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Edmund North, has clearly stated that the parallels between the story of Christ and the film was intentional: "It was my private little joke."[27] The director of *Superman* did confess a deliberate allusion to Jesus Christ that he used in the film. He reported: "I had life threats, because people accused me of approaching Brando as God and his son was Jesus... we had Scotland Yard, the FBI, and the LAPD looking in to them. I literally had people saying that my blood would run in the streets for doing that."[28] It seems that the transcendental nature of the cinematic SF heroes are not a random Hollywood creation, but are deliberately designed as a cinematic transfiguration of Jesus Christ. Another bright example of extraterrestrial Christ figure is E.T. from the homonymous film directed by Steven Spielberg in 1982. Its Screenwriter Melissa Mathison has confirmed the parallelism between the character of E.T. and Jesus Christ. It consists in the fact that E.T. was also a pre-existing entity, his childhood is unknown, he came to children, suffered

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[24] Cf. H. RUPPERSBURG, "The alien Messiah in recent science fiction films" in: *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 14 (1987) 4, p. 165.

[25] A.K. KOZLOVIC, "Jesus covered in a secular wrapper: the Christ-figure in popular films" in: *Kinema. A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* 24 (2005) 6.

[26] Cf. B. MCMILLAN, "24 frames... – Film notes" in: *The Furrow. A Journal for the Contemporary Church* 53 (2002) 6, p. 360.

[27] A.K. KOZLOVIC, "The structural characteristic of the cinematic Christ figure" in: *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (2004), p. 7.

[28] Ibid.

death, has risen and ascended to 'heaven'. He brings the message of unconditional love, which was also proclaimed by Christ crucified.[29] The ontological difference between E.T. and Christ is that Christ became fully one of us, a fully human being, while E.T. remains an extraterrestrial figure.[30]

A science fiction film, defined as an allegory for the world's redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, "so chock full of obvious Christian symbolism you could choke on it,"[31] is considered the Matrix trilogy.[32] But Baugh will underline that "young Catholics and even students of theology, argued that these three films [...] depict with clarity, consistency, updated and dramatic style, and entirely convincing effect, both the essential structure of the Christian story of salvation that many precise details of this story."[33] The Christological references are not superficial elements in the trilogy, constituting the fundamental issue of the film narrative. The protagonist Neo, aka Thomas Anderson, is often defined as a typical Christ figure: he is 'the chosen one', 'the anointed one', 'The One'.[34] Like Jesus, Neo is the Messiah, who ultimately is killed and then resurrected as a 'divine' creature. He is actually 'raised' by the Trinity, which is a metaphor of God, but in the female form. The Matrix trilogy is also full of Buddhist and Gnostics symbols, and that is why Baugh concludes that Neo is actually "a Gnostic Christ".[35] What contradicts the Buddhist, Christian or Gnostic doctrine,[36] is the use of violence in the name of salvation of the nation. The 'American Christ' in *Matrix* induces sadism and never ends with the cycle of violence,[37] which is why it is hard to accept the film as an allegory of the Christ.

On the other hand, some scholars state that *Spiderman* (2002) by Sam Raimi is "the most Spiritual of all super heroes and this movie adaptation helps prove it,

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[29] Cf. G. ORTIZ, "Jesus at the movies. Cinematic representation of the Christ-figure" in: *The Month* 12 (1994), p. 494.

[30] Cf. P. MALONE, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, p. 59.

[31] A.K. KOZLOVIC, "The structural characteristic...", p. 7.

[32] *Matrix* (1999), *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *Matrix Revolutions* (2003), dir. Larry and Andy Wachowski.

[33] L. BAUGH, *L'invenzione filmica di Gesù: tra i vangeli canonici, gli apocrifi ed altre fonti*, p. 117.

[34] Cf. A.K. KOZLOVIC, "Sacred subtext and popular film: a brief survey of four categories of hidden religious figurations" in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18 (2003) 3, p. 318.

[35] L. BAUGH, *L'invenzione filmica di Gesù: tra i vangeli canonici, gli apocrifi ed altre fonti*, p. 119.

[36] Cf. J. FORD, "Buddhism, Christianity, and the Matrix. The dialectic of myth-making in contemporary cinema" in *The Journal of Religion and Film* 4 (2000) 2, p. 3.

[37] Cf. S. HUMPHRIES-BROOKS, *Cinematic Savior*, pp. 111–112.

what is even clearer is that his Spirituality is rooted in Christianity,"[38] while David Bruce writes that "Spiderman in many ways is a retelling of the story of Superman which is a telling of the life of Jesus Christ."[39] Kozlovic, even though has recognized some parallels between Spiderman and life of Jesus Christ, however, asserts that it is not "a legitimate Christ-figure".[40] While Spiderman needs an external cause to become a superhero, another 'Christ-figure' of pop culture, Superman, does not need it: he was born as a 'super' because he is not a human being.

Here arises a question and a theological reflection: When Jesus was born, he was "the Word became flesh," he had supernatural powers, he could control the forces of nature, was raising the dead, he drove out demons, turned water into wine. Can Jesus Christ be considered an alien dropped onto our planet, in the same way in which it is, for example, Superman, who "drops" to save, and then goes back?[41] Many analysts of pop culture due to these parallels have made the connection between Jesus and Superman, from *Godspell*, where Jesus wears a T-shirt with the S of Superman, to the Superman movie where Marlon Brando, Jor-El, the father of Kal-El, sent his only begotten son to save the earth: "Even though you've been raised as a human, you are not one of them. You have great powers, only some of which you have as yet discovered. Always hold in your heart the pride of your special heritage. They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son." The popular culture has transformed Superman into a Christ figure, into a messianic symbol, but is it a valid portrait?

Catholic theologian Susie Paulik Babka reflects on the notion of an alien savior, and in this regard stresses that if the Savior is an alien, then he does not bring human beings to the fullness of intimacy with God. An alien savior reinforces the human alienation from God, the same way as he makes God distant from human beings. If the humanity of Christ is fundamentally different from our humanity, if he can do things that no other human being is capable of doing (like healing or raising from death), then Christ is not fully human. If Jesus has a gift of healing because it is in the human nature to do healings, and if Jesus is sinless, it means that the ability not to sin lies in human nature. Christ's power to heal or to be sin-

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[38] M. FURCHES, *Spider-Man*, www.hollywoodjesus.com/spiderman_furches.htm, p. 1 [accessed 13.03.2009].

[39] D. BRUCE, *Spider-Man*, www.hollywoodjesus.com/spiderman.htm, p. 5 [accessed 13.03.2009].

[40] A.K. KOZLOVIC, *The hidden Jesus within popular films: Christ-figures as sacred subtexts*, p. 104.

[41] Cf. S. PAULIK BABKA, "Arius, Superman, and the *Tertium Quid*: when popular culture meets Christology" in: *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008), p. 114.

less, is part of his humanity related to God, and represents the potential present in all human beings:

> "Any Christology that cannot admit the unique fullness of divine being in Jesus, or any Christology that sees Jesus' humanity as substantially different from our own humanity (whether in ability, knowledge, freedom, or in degree of suffering), that views Jesus as without sexuality, or as manipulating the forces of nature, considers Jesus a "third thing." Christological affirmation of Jesus' super-human humanity make him an alien dropped into our environment for the purpose of intervening in the lives of a few to save them from evil. (…) The value of the Christian affirmation of the incarnation is precisely that God the Son becomes what is authentically human, not the appearance or veneer of humanity."[42]

This means that every time we construct a Christology of the 'tertium quid', we create a reality of mediation which intercedes for the salvation, it manifests even in angels and superheroes or 'super' saints, something that is based on spectacular and supernatural to convince us that God, who transcendences us, cares about us. This is the persistence to see Christ neither as fully divine nor as fully human. The value of the humanity of God, as well as its power, are thus underestimated. Superman, while focused on justice and human suffering, can act for the salvation of the world not as an outsider, but as one of the world. This limits the effectiveness of his ethics activity because his actions are impossible to imitate: the interpretations and implementations of justice cannot be done by any other than Superman himself.[43] For these reasons, David J. Graham argues that neither Superman nor E.T., just like many other fiction characters, are in any way 'Christlike', because they are not 'one of us', even if they show love, die and rise again.[44] Perhaps a better term to use for these supersaviors and superredeemers of the popular culture is that of 'messianic figure'.

Can superheroes and supersaviors of comics, science fiction movies, or television dramas, who save the world with physical force and use of violence, be appropriate and authentic Christ figures, as claimed by some scholars? Can we talk about abuse of the 'Christ figures' in the popular culture? Lloyd Baugh expresses great urgency to undertake a serious study of the movie superheroes, frequently described as

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[42] S. PAULIK BABKA, op. cit., p. 128. The concept of 'tertium quid' is referred to an image of Jesus who would be totally different both from human beings and from God.

[43] Cf. idem, pp. 130–131. See also R.M. ANKER, Catching light. Looking for Good in the movies, Grand Rapids 2005, pp. 244–269.

[44] Cf. D.J. GRAHAM, "Christ imagery in recent film: a saviour from celluloid?" in: S.E. PORTER, M.A. HAYES, D. TOMBS (eds), Images of Christ ancient and modern, Sheffield 1997, p. 312.

Christlike, which would underline limits and dangers that these pop Christ figures bring with themselves; and to argue about their inadequacy to represent Christ.[45]

2.3. Female Christ figures

Since the Christ figures should resemble and reflect the behavioral characteristics and the parallels to the life of historical Jesus Christ, the female protagonists, on a par with those of men, are able to be valid representatives and authentic representations of Christ figures in the cinema. Nevertheless, their presence in films is quite poor. For example, the online dictionary Wikipedia (although not considered the primary and reliable source), under the item 'Christ figures' cites only movies and novels with male protagonists.

Religion and film scholars most often mention a list of the following films as those that for protagonist have a female Christ figure: Helen Prejean in *Dead Man Walking* (1995) by Tim Robbins, Antonia in *Antonia's Line* (1995) by Marleen Gorris, Bess in *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) by Lars von Trier, Leeloo in *The Fifth Element* (1997) by Luc Besson, Ripley in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) by Joss Whedon, Gelsomina in *La strada* (1954) by Federico Fellini, Jasmin in *Bagdad Café* (1987) by Percy Adlon, Babette in *Babette's Feast* (1987) by Gabriel Axel, Vianne in *Chocolat* (2000) by Lasse Hallström, Joan of Arc in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) by Carl T. Dreyer, Agnes in *Cries and Whispers* (1972) by Ingmar Bergman, a nun in *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) by Abel Ferrara.[46] We can notice that female Christ figures mostly take parts of drama genre, with some exceptions of science fiction movies.

The author of this article considers that among listed female characters, the most authentic Christ figures are present in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Bagdad Café*, *Babette's Feast* and *Chocolat*. Amongst those figures, Joan of Arc is the only woman who gives her life as a strong Christological marker, to save others while remaining true to her values and the truth. She, thus, becomes a redeemer figure, a victim of sin and its consequences, and though we are responsible for her suffering, we are redeemed through her death. In suffering, she condemns evil and sin, becoming the means of redemption for others.

Jasmin and Vianne do not suffer a physical death. Rather, they are part of savior figures: those that transform the lives of others and guide them toward the hope of a new and better world. The two of them bring freedom, joy, fulfillment

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[45] Cf. L. BAUGH, *Imaging the divine*, p. 235. See also C. SCHWARTZ ELLIS, "With eyes uplifted: space aliens as shy gods" in: J.W. MARTIN, C.E. OSTWALT (eds), *Screening the Sacred: religion, myth and ideology in popular American film*, Boulder 1995, pp. 83–94.

[46] Cf. W. TELFORD, "Religion, the Bible and theology in recent films (1993–1999)" in: *Epworth Review* 4 (2000), p. 35. Cf. L. BAUGH, *Imaging the divine*, pp. 130–157.

and peace in their communities. They have arrived in the community in need of salvation, coming from far away and being in a certain way refugees from situations of extreme hardship.

It should be noted that some of the most famous female Christ figures – Joan, Vianne and even Bess - are placed in an explicitly religious context, both Catholic and Protestant, where the true Christian values have been forgotten, where you live a bigoted, superficial, formal religiousness with patriarchal tendencies, far from the concrete person and real love. The female Christ figures arrive in a community where values are upside down and with a general annoyance, to criticize and to redeem it and to indicate the right way to go to safety, although they are often perceived by other characters in the film as a stumbling stone because they are outside of the patriarchal system.

Furthermore, the female Christ figures in the listed films are strong women, nonconformist, aware of themselves and their mission. They go against the main current, and although they serve others, they are not presented as 'slaves' of the needs and constraints of patriarchal culture, but of free choice. They demonstrate a high degree of autonomy, bring hope, salvation and redemption to the oppressed, especially to other women.

The authentic Christic figures in the three analyzed films use their own capabilities and means to bring out the best in people who are close to them, without destroying themselves. These are women who are able to set limits, to make choices based on freedom and love, unlike Bess that would distort the message of Christ on liberation and love: she symbolizes the stereotypical understanding of the woman, who finds the meaning of life in fulfillment of the desires of others despite the consequences.

The authentic Christ figures have the courage to oppose the patriarchal system peacefully, without resorting to violence, just as Christ was doing. The suffering, the *via crucis* for female Christ figures often derives from non obedience to patriarchal rules and loyalty to themselves. David Fillingim, in this regard, states that "Female Christ-figures who embody prophetic critique of and liberation from patriarchal structures of domination suggest that Christian history, with its tradition of male dominance and female submission, is radically discontinuous with the life and values of Christianity's alleged founder,"[47]

In some dimensions the female Christ figures follow the road into the dominant representation of women in film, while in other respects they exceed the mainstream of Hollywood. Joan of Arc, for example, is part of the classical category of 'holy

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[47] D. FILLINGIM, "When Jesus was a girl: polymythic female Christ figures in Whale Rider and Steel Magnolias" in: *Journal of Religion and Film* 14 (2010) 1, p. 9.

virgin', who because of her disobedience to the patriarchal system and for breaking of religious and social rules, is punished by losing her own life. She is a victim of the patriarchal system, the same one she surpasses; spiritually stronger, more divine, more perfect than the environment that surrounds her. Nevertheless, even in this film there is a tendency to exalt the femininity only if it is tied to virginity.

In Jasmin and Vianne, there is a slightly different trend. In general, these two characters do not enter into the classical dichotomy Mary/Eve, virgin/whore. They are women, whose characterization is not expressed primarily through motherhood or virginity. They are unmarried, have confidence in themselves, are independent, without fear of breaking religious and socio-cultural rules, they are carriers of redemption. Jasmin left the oppressive and violent husband, and finally decides to live an independent life in a remote place in the middle of nowhere, Vianne is a single mother who lives as an artist (a chocolate maker). All the analyzed characters find their fulfillment by serving others, their autonomy and self-determination are not only a function of themselves, something that highlights the religious and Christological dimension of these films. The role of leadership, usually permitted only to male leads, somehow is attributed to Vianne, she defies the laws and customary practices, ultimately leads to redemption, peace and reconciliation among the inhabitants of the city. The director in that film, even though a man, strongly criticizes the patriarchal and androcentric culture.

The authentic female Christ figures are a powerful image for women today because they can see a woman able to set limits, make choices and to cross the barriers of power in society based also on gender. The Christ figures in the movies we have mentioned embody the image of God who gave himself entirely to women, and that is why they are called to participate in the full humanity and to represent the One who has come to reveal the full, successful mankind as a Community of men and women as equal.[48]

Conclusion

Beside different representations of historical Jesus within films, there is another valid approach to the person of Jesus Christ in the Seventh Art, which scholars have named "Christ figure films". A Christ figure can be represented in many ways and in many forms; it is not necessary that a Christ figure should be incorporated in a thirty-year-old white male character to be Christologically significant. Thus, in this article we saw that a Christ figure can be hidden in a female, alien or even animal figure, though some representations do not satisfy the criteria for an authentic

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[48] A. GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, "Female Christ-figures in Films: a feminist critical analysis of Breaking the Waves and Dead Man Walking" in: *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002), p. 39.

Christ figure, like superheroes that use violence in their mission to liberate and redeem. The problem with this filmic subgenre is that there is still no agreement among all scholars to accept specific and unique criteria and definitions of what actually a Christ figure consists in, what his unique characteristics are, which would certainly help to better identify such figures within films. It is interesting to notice that some of the female Christ figures resemble the Gospel story of Jesus Christ more than male figures do (e.g., Babette in *Babette's Feast* or Jasmin in *Bagdad Café*). Further exploration of this argument is necessary and urgent because movie Christs are significant both for film and for studies in religion.