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Systematic reflections upon the Christ images in some modern Western films

ABSTRACT

All of the images applied to Jesus in the New Testament have as their context the religious world of that time. So, there was a vivid interaction between gospel and culture. Especially in Western culture, however, that seems not anymore the case. This lack of interaction might be one of the main crises of Western theology. Could modern Jesus films fill in this gap and offer new, useful images? Partly, they do indeed. Referring to films like *Babette's Feast*, *A Short Film About Love* and *Breaking the Waves* is shown that filmmakers often have more tools at their disposal to express the meaning of Jesus Christ in Western culture than theologians have.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s a large number of exciting, exegetical studies were published on Jesus images in the New Testament. All of these have Western, academic theology as background. British New Testament scholar James Dunn is about to publish the third volume of state of the art results in this field in his series *Christianity in the Making*. The first two volumes appeared in 2003 and 2009. These momentous works clearly show the interaction between the Mediterranean religious world and the Jesus imagination of New Testament authors. All of the images applied to Jesus have as their context the religious, or what we call pagan, world of that time (Ohlig 1986:554-661). Nowadays one can observe exactly the same happening in the non-Western world. Contextual religious concepts are applied to Jesus.

In this application process one can often trace a two-sided transformation. At the moment contextual concepts are applied to Jesus, they are transformed by Jesus. The power of the "remembered Jesus" (Dunn) is often so strong that our concepts clearly only partly and insufficiently cover his impact. Therefore, New Testament concepts like lord, king, priest, prophet, healer, rabbi, et cetera can only be applied to Jesus by analogy – that means according to a classic definition of analogy, namely on the basis of a similarity in the midst of a still greater dissimilarity. That is, however, only the one side of the coin. The flip side is that these concepts leave their traces upon Jesus as well as they, in turn, colour the remembrance of Jesus. They add something new to him. In a certain sense they "transform" him. In this way it is a two-sided process. Elsewhere I called this two-sided process a process of "double transformation" (Brinkman 2009:17-23).

Remarkably, however, this historical process in New Testament times and the current process in the non-Western world do not match similar current developments in the Western world. When I ask my students to name some potential new Jesus images they often do not respond.

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When I, then, slightly challengingly refer to images like ombudsman, lawyer or help desk officer, they smile shyly and feel uneasy about being forced into such an unfamiliar name-giving process.

What could be the cause of this reluctance? Some would say that it is because the name-giving process had been accomplished, if not already in the New Testament, then definitely in the history of the church. Others might add that the names given in early Christianity remain satisfactory. Names such as advocate, mediator, substitute, saviour, judge, exorcist, et cetera, incorporate real meanings and some words, such as healer, prophet and exorcist, are even spectacularly revitalized, especially in Pentecostal circles. So, do we really need new names? The main thesis of this contribution is that we do. Of course, old names such as advocate, mediator, substitute and saviour are not depleted of meaning in contemporary Western culture. However, their original meaning is often so far removed from daily use that they at least need a continuous and thorough reinterpretation. Could the pious invention of new names offer an alternative?

In my opinion this question touches on one of the main and most serious crises in Western theology, namely its lack of vivid and spontaneous contact with contemporary Western culture. Western Christologies are not used to account for their interaction with Western culture. Of course, idealism, romanticism and existentialism left their traces, but these are barely explicit (Schwarz 2005). And, the closer we come to our own time, the more explicit dealings with the philosophical and cultural context are lacking. Would that have something to do with the still existing, implicit, universal pretensions of Western theology?

If one is allowed to consider artistic expressions as relatively faithful antennas of what is happening in a specific culture, one can award them the same pride of place as philosophy had in the time of the church fathers. I am fully aware of the complexity of this relation because one of the most prominent characteristics of contemporary Western culture is that there are not only no dominant philosophies, but also no dominant artistic expressions anymore. As for the recent past, however, one may say that, in the second part of the twentieth century, films constituted the most culturally influential artistic expressions. Its “lan-guage” became the lingua franca of that part of the century. Among them Jesus films enjoyed enormous popularity: *Ben Hur* (1959), *King of Kings* (1961), *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (1964), *The Greatest Story ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). All of these attracted audiences numbering several millions.

As to the quest for new images, however, the harvest of these films is relatively poor. They often do not deliver an original contribution to the process of giving meaning. Therefore, I am inclined to look in another direction, namely to that of the so-called hidden Christ images in modern Western films. In this contribution I shall briefly refer to four of them: Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987), Kieslowski's *A Short Film about Love* (1988) and *Decalogue Six* (1988-1989), and Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996).

I intend to look for the above-mentioned phenomenon of “double transformation” in these films. In what sense do these movies influence (transform) our images of Jesus? Do they introduce new images? That will be my first question. It concerns the fact that the medium colours the message. However, the message colours the medium as well. That will be my second point and it concerns the other element of two-sided transformation. Translated into

the language of the film, one may then ask in what sense the filmmaker introduces a “foreign”, transcendental element by which his Christ figure changes (transforms) that which one would expect. I am indeed inclined to presume that there is a compelling mysterious force within the creative human imagination that shapes fictional characters and dramatic plots in the image and likeness of the central personage and central events in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Apparently there is a transformative power in the Christ figure engineering subtextual (see below) Christian construction (Kozlovic 2004:nos. 6-7). This implies that rather than unilaterally using the New Testament story to interpret cinematic Christ figures, the stories in these films can also be employed to interpret the New Testament Jesus. That would indeed be the “reverse of the hermeneutical flow” (Kreitzer 1993).

JESUS AND CHRIST FIGURES

It is common among film critics to distinguish between Jesus and Christ images (Reinhartz 2009:420-439). For most of us the term “Jesus movies” calls to mind biblical epics that lavishly depict Jesus’ life from birth to death (for example, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*) or dramatise a particular period of his life (for example, *The Passion of the Christ*). Like other biographical films (so-called biopics), they make explicit use of primary sources (the Gospels). In claiming fidelity to Scripture, most Jesus movies also claim to be true to the historical events of Jesus’ life. In spite of this pretension, most of these films, however, move far beyond the constraints of history in the strict sense. They include scenes, dialogues, characters and subplots that have no foundation in the canonical Gospels. Thus, these Jesus movies always express a paradox: they claim to be authentic, scriptural and historical, but undermine this claim by their own creativity (Reinhartz 2007:252-255).

From a narrative point of view, Jesus movies face two almost insurmountable difficulties: a key person whose divine character is extremely difficult to convey and a plot that is actually already known to all viewers before they have seen the film. However, for audiences without any detailed foreknowledge and without a prior faith commitment to a specific Christology, the ability of a film to engender a powerful spiritual response may well be in an inverse relationship to its fidelity to Scripture and tradition. It certainly is the films that strayed the furthest from a literal depiction of the Gospels (for example, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ*) that have resulted in the most powerful public reaction (Reinhartz 2009:429).

Even more numerous than the Jesus movies are the so-called Christ figure films. Whereas Jesus figures are representations of Jesus himself, Christ figures are fictional characters that resemble Jesus in some significant way. Among critics the personal name of Jesus is often used just for the Jesus figure. The title “Christ” is used for those who are seen to reflect his mission (Malone 1997:59-60). By their very nature, Jesus figures are easier to detect. Christ figures are built into a different kind of film, are frequently ignored by critics and are often left unappreciated by film fans. Conversely, believers sometimes want to see Christ figures where none credibly exist. They are often inclined to “baptise” films (Kozlovic 2004:nos. 1-16). In this way the Christ figure is often a contested figure, because he (or she) is not portrayed directly but represented symbolically or at times allegorically. This kind of film is used to deal with religious themes in a “secular wrapper” (Ellis 2003:304).

This secular wrapper is sometimes called the “subtext”. A filmic narrative often has a dual nature: an overt plot as well as a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to

the metaphorical or symbolic within literature. The narrative and the infra-narrative (the text and the subtext) are not two separate entities – there is after all only one film – but rather two concentric circles with the infra-narrative within the narrative. Through this narratological arrangement, secular films can engage in religious storytelling about biblical characters, ideas and themes without appearing religious. Therefore, the “Christic” resemblance needs not always be significant and substantial. It will sometimes be difficult to accurately distinguish between reading into the text what does not exist in it and the legitimate observer’s construct – similar to the legitimate reader’s construct as justified in so-called reader response theories. “Response” refers here to the creative and responsible reception by the competent reader who is able to read the “code” of the text in order to come to a certain “match” between what the author probably intends and what the reader understands (Thiselton 1992:495-503 and 515-523). So, the reference to reader response theories quite differs from a reference to mere subjectivism.

There is often no clear watershed between intended and not intended Christ figures. This lack of clarity not only has to do with the above-mentioned potential tension between the intention of the film maker and the interpretation of the audience, but also with the impossibility of delineating exactly in advance the basic structural characteristics of the cinematic Christ figure. Such a delineation would suggest that we already have a complete Christology in mind, while the purpose of many Christ films is precisely the opposite, namely to explore how the biblical Christ figure and the cinematic Christ figure shed light on each other. There is no such entity as an objective cinematic Christ figure (Deacy 2006:no. 10). Although some characteristics are indispensable in one’s own Christ image – for example, (a) his ethic attitude, (b) his willing and vicarious self-sacrifice, (c) his survival (resurrection) and (d) his dual human-divine (like us and yet not like us) character – not every good Christ film needs to include all of these (in the same way as not every good sermon needs to mention all these characteristics). A simple checklist, therefore, does not work. Being one-sided can in certain circumstances and at certain times be more revealing than being complete. Meanwhile, it remains an open question what dynamic takes place in the viewing audience as they experience the protagonists of these films and are invited to make their identifications and distinctions between the Christ figure and the transcendent reality it points to, the Christ (re)figured (Baugh 1997:235).

FOUR FILMS

Babette’s Feast is based on a story published in 1950 and written by the Danish author Karen Blixen (pseudonym Isak Dinesen), who was also the author of the novel *Out of Africa* (1937) that decades later became famous because of the film based on it (1985). The story tells of the mysterious conversion experience of members of a small Danish, Lutheran community occasioned by the activity of a French female refugee Babette, a victim of the tragic events of the Paris commune (1871). Babette becomes the cook in the house of the two daughters of the founder of the community, a Lutheran pastor. In Paris she used to be a famous, professional cook. After the death of the founder, the community fell into decay. Resentment, fear and guilt threaten to destroy it. On the occasion of the centenary of the birth of the founder Babette, who won a lottery in France, prepares a meal for the remaining ten members of the community and two guests, Mrs. Löwenhielm and her nephew, the general and former lover of Martina, one of the two daughters. Twelve persons in total enjoy the meal and two, the coachman and the kitchen boy, share the same meal in the kitchen. Babette, who herself is not sharing the meal, spent all her money on this feast. During the meal the members of the community, at first terrified of spiritual tragedy (foretold in Martina’s dream), are determined not to express

their appreciation, but then miraculously rediscover forgiveness, peace and hope. The speech by General Löwenhielm in particular, puts the meal in a religious context. Referring to the words of Psalm 85 (that love and faithfulness will meet together and righteousness and peace will kiss each other), he speaks of God's abundant grace in terminology that reminds of Kierkegaard's talk about fear and trembling. The food was the visible sign of the abundance that they had dared not believe in: How could God ever forgive their sins? (Schuler 1997:no. 5)

It is clear that the film has an explicit religious setting but without any explicit reference to Babette as a Christ figure. She looks like the "knight of faith" that Kierkegaard never met (Schuler 1997:no. 6) when, in *Fear and Trembling*, he deals with the problem of identifying a true person of faith, since the signs are hidden in the heart. Yet, the Christ references are uncontested among the critics. Babette's arrival as a refugee can be characterised as a Christological kenosis. She had lost everything – her husband, her son and all her possessions. Her hidden existence acquires aspects of a Christological incarnation (Baugh 1997:137-145). Her meal reminds of the Last Supper. It's a thanksgiving that evokes words of confession and even absolution from the guests. In the person of Babette and in the effect of her sacrifice, Christological and soteriological motifs are revealed. Her "death" is her arrival as a refugee in Denmark. Her "resurrection" is her meal (Chatelion Counet 2009:204-208).

A Short Film About Love and *Decalogue Six* are two versions of the same film – one for television (55 minutes) and one for cinema (90 minutes) – that form part of a greater project on the Ten Commandments. The main protagonists are middle- and upper-middle class men and women and their normal daily lives in which they work, love, die, forgive, deny or discover God, et cetera. *A Short Film about Love* is about the "impossible" love between a voyeuristic, sexually frustrated, young man and a promiscuous woman ten years older than him. Strictly interpreted as concerning the Sixth Commandment, it shows the hell on earth that people who violate this commandment create for themselves and for others. On this level the film is far from embodying anything close to a Christ figure. However, there is apparently also another level of interpretation.

The two protagonists, Tomek and Magda, are not just a voyeur and a promiscuous woman respectively. Tomek reveals himself as a voyeur. He accepts responsibility for his actions. The film contains three shedding-of-blood actions involving Tomek. In all instances it has the character of a sacrificial gesture intended to change the tragic situation of his beloved who is incapable of loving and of being loved. Crucial is the telephone call in which she states: "You know more about love than I do. Love exists. You have shown me the way ... Do you hear me?" It sounds like a confession of sin. Tomek's suffering (sacrificial "death") brought about a radical change, a conversion, in Magda's life. Tomek's interventions can be interpreted as a metaphor of the mysterious invitation of divine grace to conversion, to the encounter with God in Christ. The important role of glass and lenses in this film mirrors the way we see God and God sees us. Against the backdrop of the meaning of milk in Eastern European iconography, Tomek's daily volunteer job of delivering milk to his neighbours can obtain a spiritual meaning. Milk is not just a symbol of physical nutrition but also of spiritual nutrition. At the end of the film Magda is prevented from touching the bandaged wrist of Tomek, who attempted suicide. Although Tomek comes closer and closer to her, she (Magda – Mary Magdalene) is not allowed to come too close to him.

In the shorter television version (*Dialogue Six*) Kieslowski omits Magda's effort to touch Tomek's wrist. He also omits one of three scenes where blood is shed. Everything becomes even more

implicit but the allusions and metaphors are the same. The meaning seems to remain that Tomek (Christ) calls Magda (Mary Magdalene) to another level of relationship.

Tomek is acting like the Christ of John 20, who tells Mary Magdalene not to hold onto him as she may have done before the Resurrection ... He is calling her to mature spirituality, to live fully the liberating love he is offering her (Baugh 1997:183-84).

Breaking the Waves is the story of Bess, a deeply religious young Scottish woman who falls in love with Jan, an outsider who works on an oil rig off the coast. After a short period of wedded and sexual bliss, Jan returns to life at sea. The forlorn Bess beseeches God to return her love. She believes in the power of prayer. Jan has a terrible accident and returns home paralysed and ill. Because of her prayers, Bess feels guilty and her community insists that it is her duty to care for Jan. Whether due to his love, his illness or drugs, he pleads with Bess to take other lovers and to tell him of her exploits in order to help him live and heal. It is obvious that Bess finds this repugnant. Nevertheless, she becomes convinced that this will keep him alive and so she submits to his request. As Bess spirals down this path, she is eventually killed by the increasing levels of sexual violence that comes with her prostitution. After her death Jan makes a miraculous recovery. He and his friends rob Bess's body from the church's clutches and bury her at sea. This act is signalled by the ringing of the church bells. It, therefore, seems as if Bess indeed "saved" Jan at the cost of her own life and that God has sanctified this act of sacrifice. Hence, in the epilogue, at the coroner's inquest Bess is called a "good" person by her doctor who earlier diagnosed her as "neurotic" and "psychotic". Bess' goodness can be considered the general message of the film. Von Trier declared in several interviews that it was his main intention to illustrate that "goodness exists" (Von Trier 1997:2).

Bess' self-sacrifice is a forced and only later an internalised self-sacrifice. Although this film is fiercely criticised by feminists (and not only by them!), some female critics emphasise that it affirms the dominant feminist theological vision of a this-worldly redemption, rather than an eschatological disembodied reunion with God in the realms of heaven (Solano 2004:no. 19). Remarkably, however, this earthly redemption concerns here only Jan and not Bess! Jan is the symbol of the resurrection and Bess the symbol of the crucifixion. With her self-sacrifice she deserves a place in heaven. In this film one also finds an implicit reference to Kierkegaard. Bess' faith resembles the way Kierkegaard interprets Abraham's faith in relation to his preparedness to offer his only son Isaac. Her sacrifice also defies our common understanding of good and evil (Bekkenkamp 1998:153).

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTIONS

Babette's Feast can be labelled an instructive example of Eucharistic Christology. In its connection of word and sacrament (by means of the table speech of General Löwenhielm) it gives meaning to daily life. It is a clear indication of the earthly character of Eucharistic salvation as an anticipation of the coming kingdom. Confession of guilt and absolution, and concern for the needy and poor are brought together around an abundant meal. It reminds of the eschatological meals and messianic banquets of the Old and New Testament (cf. Is. 25:6-8 and Mt. 22:1-14). It shows that creation and sacrament can be neither equated nor separated. They do not simply overlap. In the sacrament a new light falls on creation, namely the light of forgiveness and renewal (Brinkman 1999:66, 70). As an interpretation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper, *Babette's Feast* can be seen as one of the most impressive imaginings of the Last Supper in the history of art. It points to the soteriological, ethical and communal aspects of sound Christology (Marsh 1997:207-218 and Wright 1997:nos. 14-21).

Babette's Feast corrects an exclusively spiritual and individualistic approach to the Lord's Supper. The incentive to this correction is threefold: (1) The initiative comes from an outsider who appeared on a stormy night with flashes of lightning across the sky; (2) the extraordinary and abundant character of the food is compared with the infinite character of God's grace; and (3) the main motif of the cook is her desire to be a "heavenly" artist – she thus has a "high" vocation. The film links a Kierkegaardian idea of the infinite character of grace with an, in these Lutheran circles, underdeveloped idea of sanctification. The congregation is "lifted up" to a more "holistic" idea of salvation while any romanticism is excluded in an outspoken concern for the needy and poor and a clear awareness of the need of forgiveness. In *Babette* the classic Lutheran Christological idea of a *deus absconditus* obtains a new female personification.

Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Love* and *Decalogue Six* have a far more concealed religious setting than *Babette's Feast*. However, much more clearly than the latter, these films elaborate on the personal breakthrough experience evoked by the gospel. Love is still possible in the urban desert of Stowki, the part of Warsaw where Tomek and Magda live. There is still hope for the place where they live, the "Condominium Earth". The sudden, mysterious shattering of glass "from above" represents the unexpected change in Magda's attitude when confronted with the unavoidable presence of Tomek. The Christ of Kieslowski, however, is really a "hidden", untouchable, barely recognisable Christ. His gospel is concealed in the paradoxes and ambiguities of human existence. Their own free will is respected and their trivial decisions are not condemned but are confronted with other options.

In Kieslowski's films revelation is not set apart. It concerns just another lens. Therefore, all kinds of glass play a crucial role in his films. He confronts us with the space left to eye-opening experiences in the often depressive setting of an extended suburb. Here Christ truly is a hidden Christ. He has to be discovered, revealed. It belongs to Kieslowski's filmic strategy to reveal to us the presence of this Christ at the borders of our decisions. He repeatedly shows us that Tomek and Magda's decisions not to transgress certain borders change their lives and open them up to experiences thus far unknown to them. Although his films have an outspoken "earthly" character, it is obvious that the changes always occur at the moment Tomek and Magda are prepared to listen to something or someone from elsewhere.

The same openness is characteristic of *Breaking the Waves*. However, here it has a remarkably stronger transcendental character. In her prayers Bess is continuously in contact with God. Slowly but surely she becomes aware of her divine calling. According to our moral standards, it seems to be a calling beyond good and evil. The death of Bess, her self-sacrifice, is presented as the precondition for the recovery of Jan, for his resurrection, and gets a vicarious character. Does Bess, however, eventually survive her self-sacrifice? The final scenes in the film suggest her glorification. It is obvious that Von Trier puts Bess' choices in strong opposition to the choices of her congregation. It is the opposition between "love for the word and the law" and "love for another human being". In her choice for the latter, Bess shows her "goodness". But it is clear that it is a contested goodness, misunderstood by many. Her goodness can be interpreted as unconditional love. In this film love is associated simultaneously with sexual and spiritual experiences – not unlike that found in mystic circles in church history.

All four of these films stress the earthly character of salvation. It turns out that the medium (film) is inclined to emphasise the incarnational character of the message. But the message also colours the medium. The message opens up the merely immanent character of human existence. *Babette* comes from elsewhere and has a higher, heavenly calling; Tomek turns

out to be “untouchable” for Magda; and Bess’ earthly interpretation of her calling takes her to heaven. Therefore, the incarnational aspect is not opposed to the heavenly aspect; the latter presupposes the former. Without heaven no incarnation. Although these films do not produce spectacular new images, the option for a female Christ figure (Babette and Bess) and the emphasis upon self-sacrifice are remarkable. The choice for a female Christ figure is an indication of an earthly, bodily interpretation of salvation, which in neither films happens to the detriment of a clear awareness of sin and the need of self-sacrifice. In all these films, self-sacrifice is connected with a higher calling (Babette and Bess) or with an untouchable character (Tomek). It alludes, amidst all the ambiguities and trivialities of human life, to “another” destination. Therefore, I find it difficult to classify these films anywhere according to the classic scheme of an Alexandrian approach “from above” or an Antiochene approach “from below”. The adequacy of this scheme can be criticised, not only on historical grounds, but also on the basis of the content of films of this kind. Therefore, this scheme cannot that easily be applied to modern Christ films as some suggest (Deacy 1999:325-37 and 2001:78-89). Apparently the film maker often has more tools at his disposal to imagine convincingly the Chalcedonian paradox of the interconnectedness of the divine and the human than the writer and the narrator often have.

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KEY WORDS

Two-sided transformation

Hidden Christ

Jesus films

Western culture

Female Christ

TREFWOORDE

Tweekantige transformasie

Verborgte Christus

Jesus-films

Westerse kultuur

Vroulike Christus

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