MOMENTS OF DOUBT AND PAIN: THE SYMBOL OF JESUS CHRIST IN *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* AND *APOCALYPSE NOW*

by

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(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the intersection of the fields of film studies and religion. That intersection, after being studied through several works on the topic, is further explored through the films *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Apocalypse Now*. Each of these films is analyzed for their religious aspects, more specifically through their depictions of a Christ figure.

INDEX WORDS: Film Studies, Film Theory, The Last Temptation of Christ, Apocalypse Now, Jesus Christ, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola

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DEDICATION

To W.W.

My star, my perfect silence

Psalm 16:6

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a medium centered around the moving image, film has a unique ability to show its viewers aspects of the human experience. This project seeks to define how the religious experience is shown through this medium as an intersection of the fields of film studies and religion. The first chapter will detail some of the present scholarship that analyzes film in a religious context, taking into account that different types of films must be analyzed in different ways. While it may be the case that many genres of film can be analyzed religiously, especially with the methods outlined in this chapter, it is hardly effective to offer superficial analyses of many films. Therefore, I have chosen two films that are thematically and compositionally rich, with many elements to be analyzed. Chapters two and three will present an in-depth look at Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, respectively. By presenting an in-depth exploration of two films through both a filmic lens and a religious lens, I will show that they can each function as religious films, although in different ways.

While there are many films that I could have chosen for this project, I ultimately settled on these two because they share the defining characteristic of presenting a

Christ figure, even though they do so in different ways. In the case of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the figure of Christ is physically present throughout the film. By analyzing it from both a religious and cinematic perspective, I will show that the cinematic techniques used in the film effectively bolster the film's effort to show the human and divine sides of Jesus Christ. Throughout the film, the struggle between these two sides results in the development of Jesus as an interesting lead character, but also conveys the universal theme of the internal struggle between good and evil, "…derived from the inherent dual tension shared by all humanity: it is the 'lower temptation of the flesh—sexual, passion, violence, sedition, intoxication, greed, marriage—at war with the 'higher' trials of the spirit—sacrifice, martyrdom, divine vocation."[1] In *Apocalypse Now*, humanity and divinity are divided and are represented in the two main characters of the film. This does not diminish the ability of the film to convey its message, rather it merely presents that message in a different way, allowing each side of the Christ figure to develop at its own rate and then come together at the end of the film. The Christ figure in film is important to study because of its significant impact on Christianity as a religion and because of the effect that Christianity has on American culture.

While this thesis does not specifically focus on the histories of the respective directors, it is prudent to mention their directorial and personal histories as a way to

[1] Simon D. Podmore, "Crucified by God: Kazantzakis and the Last *Anfechtung* of Christ," *Literature & Theology*, Volume 22 No. 4 (2008), 422.

frame their involvement with each of these projects. Each filmmaker has a Catholic background, which would naturally affect them even if they do not consciously identify with it. In an article describing the connections that Catholics have to the creative aspect of cinema, Richard A. Blake, SJ notes that, "In a Catholic Church, the senses reign, or at least they are encouraged rather than suppressed."[2] Therefore, a director with a Catholic background is more likely to present a human Jesus rather than merely a doctrinal figure.

As for Martin Scorsese, his involvement with *The Last Temptation of Christ* began in 1977 when he purchased the rights to Nikos Kazantzakis' novel by the same name. It was adapted by screenwriter Paul Schrader and immediately upon being leaked to the public was under great scrutiny by religious organizations concerned with its supposed blasphemy. After Paramount cancelled funding for the film, it was financed by Universal and shot in two months on a greatly decreased budget.[3] Scorsese's intent was never to produce a piece of blasphemy, but to remain true to Kazantzakis' mission of presenting a human struggle through a divine character. Kazantzakis' background should also be mentioned, as his Greek

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[2] Richard A. Blake, SJ, "Finding God at the Movies... and why Catholic Churches Produce Catholic Filmmakers," Published March 6, 2009. http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/resources/articles/Finding%20God%20at%20the%20Movies.html

[3] Brian J. Snee, "The Spirit and the Flesh: The Rhetorical Nature of *The Last Temptation of Christ*," *Journal of Media and Religion*, volume 4, issue 1 (2005) 50-51.

Orthodox upbringing would inspire "… empathy with the Greek Orthodox tradition of theosis, or divinization. Through this process of deification the struggling believer strives towards participation in God via personal participation in the suffering of Christ."[4] *The Last Temptation of Christ* is successful in this, creating empathy with Christ by his strikingly human portrayal.

Francis Ford Coppola's role as director in *Apocalypse Now* came out of his desire to make a grand war movie, which later formed into a "surreal, drug-induced sensibility."[5] The film was initially condemned as disastrous, but it was still fascinating enough to draw viewers and earn an Academy Award nomination. As an even greater testament to its popularity, Coppola released *Apocalypse Now: Redux*, which contains an additional 45 minutes of footage that makes the film an even denser product for character development and analysis. Similar to *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the film does not enjoy the status of a movie that one is likely to watch for leisure, but rather a dark and twisted narrative that forces a viewer to consider the themes that are depicted by the film rather than just the basic plot of it.

Ultimately, there is similarity to be found between the two films and their directors, even though their differences are quite obvious. Each film presents a hero who is facing a great test with dire consequences that affect not only himself, but nearly all of humanity. While it is unlikely that a viewer would be in this exact

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[4] Podmore, "Crucified by God: Kazantzakis and the Last *Anfechtung* of Christ," 420.
[5] Francis Ford Coppola, interviewed by Devin Gordon. GQ, October 19, 2010.

position, he or she can at least find kinship with the heroes they are shown. Blake writes, "Coppola and Scorsese have their heroes wrestle with the conflict between tribal loyalties to the family or the mob and their own personal integrity, but they too find redemption."[6] In the actions and sensibilities of these characters, a viewer can take an introspective journey that leads him or her to a greater awareness, both of his or her personal struggles and of the struggles he or she may face externally.

[6] Richard A. Blake, SJ, "Finding God at the Movies… and why Catholic Churches Produce Catholic Filmmakers"

CHAPTER 2

THE INTERSECTING FIELDS OF FILM STUDIES AND RELIGION

As the goal of this thesis is to show that religion can be studied through film, leading to a greater understanding of how society perceives religious stories and themes, it will investigate how film is currently viewed from the perspective of the field of religion. By first analyzing pre-existing literature on both topics, I will show what the intersection of these fields is and consider how more effective analysis of film and religion can be accomplished. I will next apply these findings to two films: *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Apocalypse Now*. I have chosen these two films because they share a thematic element in their use of a martyr (or potential martyr) as a main character. Therefore, they may be compared to the story and journey of Christ, albeit through different dimensions. These differences are important to explore through similar lenses because they will show that films that have similar religious aspects and messages can present them in different forms and through different means. This strengthens the concept that film may be analyzed through several, equally effective religious angles, and that these analyses can be further supported when put in dialogue with theoretical concepts from film.

This study is located between the fields of religious studies and film studies. To situate my work, I surveyed several collections of essays and literature on religion and film to get an idea of the nature of pre-existing scholarship in the intersection of these two fields. These collections are from varying perspectives, some from an academic standpoint and others from a devotional standpoint. Other notable differences include their intended audience, their perspective on religion, and their attention to technical detail. These differences will be addressed as they occur in each volume. What I have chosen to do is to look at and consider each book and to point out its strengths and weaknesses as part of the canon of combined studies of film and religion. In doing this, I will determine what approaches seem to be most useful to the films of which I wish to make a more in-depth study. These approaches include those that are more theoretical in nature. While specific analysis of films is useful for giving concrete examples, I have found that without a theoretical basis in both film studies and religious studies, these analyses seem to be less grounded. By weaving in theory from both fields, an author lays a better foundation for his or her analysis.

I have chosen to summarize, analyze, and make a critique of these books in order of their publication dates as a way to track the development of the intersection of the fields and, potentially, to be able to consider where the study of religion and film will go in the future. The works I read are: Thomas M. Martin's *Images and the Imageless*, Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt's *Screening the Sacred*, Clive Marsh and

Gaye Ortiz's *Explorations of Theology and Film*, Bryan P. Stone's *Faith and Film*, and Catherine Barsotti and Robert Johnston's *Finding God in the Movies*. Thomas Martin takes a theoretical approach to both fields and effectively ties them together. Martin and Ostwalt seem to have the strongest collection, using methodology of both film studies and religious studies to carve out an academic space for their intersection. The final three, but especially Stone's, tend to take a specifically Christian perspective and lean toward theological readings of film. As a result, it is not necessarily fruitful to use each of these in the films analyzed in this thesis, but they should be mentioned as part of the broad picture of the study of film and religion together.

Images and the Imageless

Thomas M. Martin's *Images and the Imageless* accepts film as a representation of cultural identity, while also recognizing that it can be a method by which that identity is altered, or even changed radically. Because of the bond developed with characters and actions onscreen, Martin argues that "… the persistent experience of electronically transmitted stories has a profound impact on the basic notion of oneself as it relates to one's religious sense of reality."[7] By functioning as modern day mythology, film as a medium has the capability to influence society in terms of morality. Martin is careful to link religious consciousness to the imagination, which, to

[7] Thomas M. Martin, *Images and the Imageless* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 3.

him, is "… the backdrop of human consciousness."[8] As we see, he defines imagination reverently, not as though it is childish or useless. Faith is defined in similar terms; for Martin, it is a way that an individual chooses to see the world despite evidence that one may be wrong. Martin asserts that heroes (such as those of film) are from this mold: they are characters who stand up against the odds in the face of adversity.

The idea of the image is also important to Martin, since film is a medium comprised of the presentation of images. Martin asserts that created images are, essentially, a dialogue between perception and thought. He writes,

> But images themselves are not formed in a vacuum. They fully participate in the dialogue that characterizes human consciousness…The claim that this section makes is that film as a visual medium occupies such a large portion of the average person's day, it must have a tremendous impact on the images that govern a people's flow of awareness and therefore have a profound influence on the religious awareness of that people.[9]

Martin makes a valid point in writing that the visual representations created by a culture can be an effective gauge of the culture itself, but his analysis overreaches in that it is an oversimplification of film's place in society. Additionally, he misses the commercial elements involved in filmmaking and sale. Because commercial films are made with the intent of reaching a wide audience as a means of being financially successful, it is safe to say that any of the people in charge of creating a film would

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[8] Ibid., 30.
[9] Ibid., 41.

want it to be sellable to the majority of the target market. However, I would caution against what seems to be a vast generalization about film. First of all, not all of culture reveres film as an art form – some people do (and always will) only perceive film as a method of entertainment. Secondly, film is not always accessible to everyone. Finally, not all people will find themselves able to relate to the images that they are shown, even if the film's theme seems to be universal. One must acknowledge that there is a level of economic privilege that is required to purchase a ticket at a theatre, rent or buy a film, or even take the time to watch it. Again, this is not to invalidate Martin's point – the film industry is obviously successful – but it is meant to show that there are issues that we must consider when describing a medium that must be deliberately and voluntarily accessed and consumed as a proper gauge of all human consciousness.

Martin reminds us that the creation of film is also to be considered, as any medium that can be controlled, as subject to the bias of its creator: "… the film process can take elements of life and present them in a dramatized and therefore more completed, uninterrupted manner… Is not such a claim echoed in the idea of mimesis, which… insists that drama can complete and fulfill that which is found only imperfectly in nature?"[10] He recognizes that both storytelling and the way that the technical aspects of film can make a viewer focus on certain aspects of the story

[10] Ibid., 53.

create a whole. For example, a shot can be framed and blocked in such a way that it creates dominance for one character over another without explicitly saying as part of the narrative, "Character X is more powerful than Character Y." In this way, the cinematic style leads the audience to notice and read these visual cues, with varying levels of awareness regarding their presence.

To clarify: elements of film are codified to represent certain things. Some audience members may notice and read these elements, while others may experience an emotional response to them. The visual representation, either in this explicit manner or with symbolism, differentiates film from other art forms such as literature. While the devices and substance are the same, their presentation is different. Because film has little choice but to show an image – as an evolved form of photography, it is after all, "the furthermost evolution to date of plastic realism,"[11] it shows the audience a reflection (or potentially a refraction) of its own experience.

Martin addresses the importance of religious reflection as the site at which religious studies and film studies intersect. Reflection is a way to orient oneself in a religious context. If a person does not engage in the practice of reflection, one "can easily be overwhelmed when the routine or rhythm of a setting is upset... [and one] is very susceptible to experiencing a basic disorientation as to the sense or purpose of

[11] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 160.

human existence."[12] Reflection, for Martin, takes on many forms, including the simple act of private remembering, but can also be far more complex when taken into the public sphere. The connection between film studies and religious studies is that both involve narratives that are part of the common, public human experience. Both fields rely heavily on stories to present themselves to the public, and "… because humans do embody their encounters with the greater whole in stories, they serve as the basis for the rhythms of life."[13] Therefore, stories and culture enjoy a symbiotic relationship, with each feeding the other as a way to build the stories that create and reflect the human experience.

Taking special care to explore theory, Martin offers very little in-depth analysis of any specific films. This makes sense because, at the time this work was published (1981), film studies was still a relatively new academic field, so Martin faced the underlying issue of establishing credibility, along with the challenges of connecting film studies to the field of religious studies. Although the book feels dated, it would be immensely helpful to anyone who is well read in both fields, but wants to combine this knowledge in a deeper way. Martin makes reference to many scholars from both fields, and although he gives adequate accounts of their philosophies in this context, it would be greatly helpful to the potentially critical scholar to know more background about each of them than is provided in this book. This lack of background certainly is

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[12] Martin, *Images and the Imageless*, 113.
[13] Ibid., 127.

not a weakness; rather, I present it as a caveat. It would be ridiculous for Martin to attempt to adequately summarize all of the opinions he is conflating in this volume. I will, however, note what I believe to be a significant (even if it is unintentional) oversight in the lack of mention of Walter Benjamin, especially when Martin covers the opinions of early media theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. The quality of the work does not suffer because of this, but would indeed be enriched by considering Benjamin's concept of art having an aura, a "unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which this work has been subject."[14] Doing this would further serve to make Martin's point that art is reflective of the society that produces it.

As an update to Martin's work, I would put his discussion of images in dialogue with Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, which was written the year after *Images and the Imageless*. By including a psychoanalytic element of film analysis wherein the film's viewer sees him or herself, one could better understand what it is that images mean and how they represent "the imaginary that constitutes

[14] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducability" in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, Howard Eiland, et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2008), 21.

[cinema] as a signifier."[15] Also missing from Martin's analysis is the commercial element of filmmaking. As stated earlier, there are consumers who only view film as a method by which they can be entertained. Because commercial films are made with the intent of being financially successful, they may engage with the issues of a culture, but many such films are unlikely to be much more than superficial reflections that do not break the barrier into the deep social critique that Martin seems to credit film as being.

There are few superfluous elements of Martin's book, however the inclusion of an appendix about television seems too much like an afterthought, and it opens the door to analysis of other media as well. Although film and television are extremely similar media, it seems that choosing to introduce television is not necessary. First of all, the way that consumers view television is drastically different from the way that they view film. Television is usually viewed incrementally, one episode at a time, while films are viewed in one sitting. Secondly, there are other narrative-based performing arts, such as theatre, that are similar enough to film that they might better be included in a discussion about similar methods of storytelling. If television were integrated throughout the book or if it had been left out entirely, the volume would be stronger than it currently is.

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[15] Christian Metz, "Identification, Mirror" from *The Imaginary Signifier* in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 695

Screening the Sacred

While Martin's book finds its strength in its utilization of theory, Conrad Ostwalt and Joel Martin's compilation of essays is a strong complement because many of its essays analyze specific films. Even though each film is analyzed through a religious lens, Martin and Ostwalt are open in their acknowledgement that there is not one singular interpretive framework into which all religious films fit. As such, they divide these methods of criticism into three permeable categories based on the way that the contributing authors use the term "religion" in their writings. The first category, theological criticism, describes authors who treat films as allegories to specific myths of religion or theological concepts. Next is mythological criticism, which considers the secular nature of society and accepts the idea that cultural institutions may be better able to convey the mythology surrounding religion than are religious institutions. Third are the ideological critics, who tend to consider religion through a political lens. Finding relations to three different methods of studying religion, Martin cites William Paden's identification of the three ways that world religions are studied: Christian comparativism, universalism, and rationalism. By using these imprecise parallels, the point emerges that, "these similarities across the subfields of religious studies convince [them] that [their] classification system is not arbitrary or artificial."[16] In the acknowledgement that there is not one existing system by which film as a whole

[16]Joel W. Martin, "Seeing the Sacred on the Screen," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 8.

is adequately or comprehensively analyzed through a religious lens, Martin and Ostwalt open the door for a potential new way of critiquing film that is capable of addressing the concerns and weaknesses in each of the current methods that they have chosen to define in this book. Each method that they define has a different purpose and is applicable to different types of films.

The first, theological criticism, locates religious traditions in their symbols and stories. Simply retelling the stories, however, "would merely locate religion elsewhere, outside the film; it might imply that the religious meaning of the film is available only to those who know the religious texts and traditions."[17] To prevent this, the texts engage with the stories to make them applicable to the situation that the film is depicting. The viewer, therefore, is able to use familiar ideas from religion such as martyrdom or the battle between good and evil as a way to begin personal philosophical exploration. Among the films referenced in the section is Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), whose clear Christian themes include parallels to biblical figures and direct references to scripture. This film, while it could stand up to either other form of criticism detailed in the book, lends itself to theological criticism because of the fact that Oliver Stone himself has actively acknowledged that it is a text that is both religiously inspired and meant to inspire religious thought. In placing this film, among

[17] Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Theological Criticism," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 15.

others, in the specific religious context that drives the elements of their respective plot, the viewer is able to interpolate additional meaning into what they see onscreen.

Next, mythological criticism treats film as though it is the way that stories are told in the modern day, where the theatre is "… our collective dream space, the place where we moderns encounter images and narratives of… the full range of possible human destinies."[18] Film provides a space for a culture's imagination to flourish, and with the rise of secularity in the modern era, religious institutions are declining in their influence with a turn toward emphasis on individual experience. Myth has therefore moved into the medium of film, which "… carr[ies] with [it] the values, beliefs, dreams, desires, longings, and the needs of a society, and, thus, can function mythologically."[19] Martin and Ostwalt also note that the rise of film accompanies the decline of the power of religious institutions in an age of increasing secularity. These are loaded terms, but modernity is focused far more on the experience of the individual and has arguably altered the way in which people perceive the way that a religious community can affect them. These films may often be ripe for allegorical devices, but it is important to remember that direct allegory is not necessary for a film to function in a mythological way. In fact, straight allegory could be detrimental to the intention of the film, causing the reader to "… start chasing exact parallels… and

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[18] Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Mythological Criticism," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 65.
[19] Ibid., 68.

proceed as if the story can be reduced to mathematical equations rather than appreciating what is actually there."[20] So while allegory can and should provide an outline of science fiction films which seem to contribute most to the mythological canon, their familiar stories being updated to what is popular in their own time allows room for altering the story's pre-existing structure. Andrew Gordon writes about *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) as though it is a "monomyth [divided] into three stages—departure, initiation, and return—each of which consists of various steps... to see how closely it corresponds to this traditional pattern of mythic adventure."[21] This is the case with other mythological films, which create heroes for a modern time and inspire belief in a force larger than that which can be seen. Generally, a form of mythological criticism is used to analyze works of science fiction containing religious tropes, but it is certainly not limited to one genre.

Finally, Martin and Ostwalt address films that transcend explicitly religious themes and take into account that there are other cultural aspects than religion that may affect film . By opening film to a broader range of analysis, more disciplines – sociology, political science, and economics, to name a few – are able to contribute to defining what is meant by culture and the way that it shapes people's individual

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[20] Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara, *From Homer to Harry Potter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 58.
[21] Andrew Gordon, "*Star Wars*: A Myth for Our Time," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 78.

ideology. Films can therefore be used as a meter for the ideologies of culture without assigning specific religious meaning to them. While this may seem unimportant to connecting religion and film, Martin and Ostwalt correctly contend that "[b]y studying the interaction of religion and ideology in film, we can understand more fully how movies move audiences so deeply by 'screening the sacred."[22] Ideology, therefore, bridges the gap between film and religion and can create a dialogue between the two. Although one could argue that it is too far reaching to call this a form of religious criticism, it is the case that religious elements are often used to project a secular message.

One example of a film using religious elements to project a secular message, as given in the text, is *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976). With its use of Rocky as a docetic Christ figure, the film leads the viewers "to understand that a fullness of saved power is always already there, lurking beneath the surface. It is secular, however, because sacred power is no longer tied to a spiritual realm but is incarnated in the body."[23] While this is not exactly the Docetism of Christianity, it is a reimagined form of it with a clear connection to the original. Ideological criticism, therefore, involves a synthesis of religion with other fields as a way to interpret film.

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[22] Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr, "Ideological Criticism," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 123.

[23] Joel W. Martin, "*Rocky* as Ritual Racial Drama," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 131.

Overall, each of these criticisms has its own purpose, and they potentially can be combined as needed to produce an effective method by which a film can be analyzed. This does not mean that one is more valuable or complete than another, but that there are such different methods indicates that there is value to analyzing films in a religious light. Ostwalt states that studying the conjunction of film and religion "recognize[s] the presence of religion in our contemporary culture and demonstrate[s] that the investment of religious longings, values, and engagement in the public sphere is alive and well."[24] Martin and Ostwalt conclude that, despite increasing secularity in the world, religious imagination is still a force that is alive and well in the minds of both creators and consumers of film.

A great strength of this compilation is that each type of criticism is given equal treatment, so the merits of one type are not valued over the elements of the others. This creates the sense that a truly complete religious analysis of a film would perhaps combine elements of each method. To justify the use of three different systems, Martin notes that there are different ways that religions themselves are studied, and he writes that "although [they] employ our tripartite system only to explore the relation of religion and film, it could be useful in the broader study of religion and culture… It may provide a useful means of interpreting out culture's running dialogue with

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[24] Elizabeth McLemore, "From Revelation to Dream," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 137.

religious values, themes, archetypes, and narratives."[25] Martin is asserting that, because this method is usable for the analysis of film, it also may have value in the process of analyzing culture as a whole. As film and culture seem to be conflated here, Martin's thesis can be tied back into Thomas Martin's perception of film as an indicator of a culture's religious identity.

Although this compilation finds its strength in the variety of methods it justifies for religious criticism of film, I believe that it would be further strengthened by introducing a method of criticism that looks solely at religious symbols being used in film as a way of indicating a theme. For example, images of crosses may be used to indicate martyrdom, even if this theme is only a secondary element of a narrative. Symbolic criticism, therefore, would analyze film by looking at the way that the symbols within it can give hints to the underlying theme of the film. In these cases, there is religious influence, but it is far more subtle than the overt use of a religious theme or the simple retelling of a religious story. Both volumes would also benefit from greater engagement with film theory and using it to understand film, as a whole, and individual films. Another weakness that the theorists share is that technical issues such as editing or cinematography are barely addressed at all. While both volumes are effective as they are, better engagement with film theory and with technical aspects of filmmaking would strengthen them further.

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[25] Martin and Ostwalt, "Seeing the Sacred on Screen," 8.

Explorations of Theology and Film

Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz cover the broadest range of scholarship of the works I have read for this study. Although their book focuses on films with Christian themes, it covers too broad of a spectrum to be considered strictly a work of Christian theology. In the first section, the authors present essays that serve as an introduction to the areas of film studies and religious studies. The first of these essays lays some theoretical groundwork for the area of film studies. This would be helpful to a person who is not familiar with treating film from a critical perspective. Combined with an introduction to Christian theology as it is to be understood in the context of cultural studies, and more specifically the study of film, any reader from either (or neither) field would be able to effectively use this book. There is also a justification for linking the two fields, which seems also to indicate that the authors find it important to address both audiences of readers. The link of theology to film is justified by addressing the concern that film (as a new medium) will challenge perceptions of theology because "… unless theology can say things in new ways [such as through a new medium], it will cease to be interesting, and – perhaps worst of all – cease to be relevant."[26] This is useful, because it acknowledges that the fields are able to nurture

[26]David John Graham, "The Uses of Film in Theology," in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 42.

each other without necessarily competing. Also, the reader is able to contextualize the essays that follow as a body of work that is meant to build up both fields.

The next section of the book takes specific films as examples and uses them to link theology and film. While many of the elements related to the religious experience are explored, such as salvation, redemptive violence, and moral ambiguity, they tend to be viewed from a Christian perspective. This is not a weakness, as Marsh and Ortiz never make any claims that their study is exhaustive in any sense, but it would be irresponsible of a reader to believe that this is the only lens through which any of these topics or the films addressed with them can be viewed.

The concept of violence, studied by David John Graham in the context of the films of Martin Scorsese, presents the world as a violent place using biblical stories and ideas. Redeeming violence is framed in terms of atonement through violence, so that (potentially undue) suffering has a positive result "offer[ing] a scenario with hope, and not just despair."[27] Framing this in terms of vengeance and justice, Graham notes that rarely are these issues black and white, even regarding Jesus' suffering on the cross, both in Christianity and in its retelling in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Scorsese, 1988). These stories are not always told in an allegorical way, however. William R. Telford's chapter addresses films that are either direct retellings of or that

[27] David John Graham, "Redeeming Violence in the Films of Martin Scorsese," in *Explorations in Theology and Film* eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 91.

share similar narrative characteristics with bible stories. This chapter focuses primarily on the Christ film, which can take the form of a "biopic" of the man of Jesus Christ or present a character that behaves as a martyr. There are some problems with making this type of film, which is the way that society perceives religion and religious figures enters the discussion. Jesus is not an easily cast character, as "there has always been a tendency for the public to be sensitive to that overlap between the actor's professional and private life."[28] The actor playing Jesus can hardly be someone that an audience would associate with the world of vice so present in Hollywood culture. Related to this is the character of Jesus himself (I'm referring to the character though – not the man of Jesus). Not only is it necessary to "sell" an actor as Jesus, but it is necessary to sell Jesus as a leading character, despite the fact that pacifists generally are not interesting enough for an audience to attach itself to. Along with this concern is that Jesus is an inherently complex role, being both human and divine. This negotiation must be effectively done, lest the fourth problem Telford mentions arise. This is the problem of the controversy surrounding the portrayal of Jesus. It is often the case that filmic depictions of Christ are heavily scrutinized simply because of his importance to Christianity. This controversy perhaps best seen in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which presents Jesus considering succumbing to his own human desires by

[28] William R. Telford, "Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema," in *Explorations in Theology and Film* eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 128.

removing himself from the cross in his hours of suffering. Most films do not raise this issue; rather, they adhere to the gospels as they are in the Bible. Whether strictly canonical or inventive – or perhaps a combination of the two–depictions of Jesus are not easily constructed. In these instances, as with others covered in this section, theology plays a major role in the construction of an accurate religious narrative.

The concluding chapters of the book take the opportunity to look critically at the way that theology and film are linked. Because theology has different relationships with culture, Marsh and Ortiz point out three different constructions of this relation, but also acknowledge that placing theology against culture, immersed in culture, or in dialogue with culture creates problems of its own.[29] Looking to the future of the exploration of the fields, Marsh and Ortiz warn against too much systemization of the theology of film, as "film simply will not deliver a systematic theology."[30] While there may be an order to the analysis of film, an attempt finally to sort and classify it could feasibly diminish all that the film may have to say. With the acknowledgement that theology as it is generally defined may not offer a comprehensive body of knowledge with which to analyze a film, they state their desire to have "stimulated readers to be critical, but also to have ventured their own theologically creative

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[29] Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, "Theology Beyond the Modern and Postmodern: A Future Agenda for Theology and Film," in *Explorations in Theology and Film* eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 247. This idea was also presented in chapter 2, but defined more explicitly here.
[30] Ibid., 248.

endeavors in dialogue with film."[31] As it does not seem to want to limit the reader to its two specifically addressed fields, this collection functions as an excellent starting point for someone from any perspective, not just those of film studies or religion.

Faith and Film

Continuing the trend of Christian based theology in film, Bryan Stone's book *Faith and Film* uses the Apostle's Creed as an outline for the films and topics addressed in each chapter. In doing this, Stone has somewhat married himself to films that fit into the teachings of Christianity. If we were to use Martin and Ostwalt's system of categorization, Stone's is clearly in the paradigm of theological criticism. While taking one approach may raise concerns, the book is still useful to someone seeking to study film in the specific context of Christian belief. There is little discussion of film theory (or religious theory for that matter), but Stone is far more concerned with connecting film to religion on a thematic level, not a theoretical one. In doing this, the book has a much wider appeal than would one that seeks to focus deeply on theological or filmic issues. Stone views the study of film in conjunction with religion as a natural progression, as art has always been used to express the message of religion. In the abstract sense, "... few, if any of our most fundamental Christian convictions can be reduced to words on a printed page... Film offers us a creative language—an imaginative language of movement and sound—that can... throw open

[31] Ibid., 255.

fresh new windows on a very old gospel."[32] Put in this perspective, film is cast as a lens that serves to show the world, but Stone cautions that it may also a medium that can dictate what is seen. Similarly, one should note that the Apostle's Creed is a sort of lens through which one can perceive the doctrines of Christianity. It is not canonical scripture, but serves as an important part of many churches' worship and message. With each of these – film and the Creed – functioning as lenses through which Christianity can be viewed, Stone goes on to analyze each of the films he selected, providing discussion questions and related films for each one at the end of each chapter.

By taking the Apostle's Creed article by article and giving a film to go with each one, Stone has creatively divided the book into sections that give each tenet of Christian belief a film to be analyzed in conjunction with it. His chapter on the Holy Spirit, for example contains analysis of the film *Star Wars*, with the use of The Force in comparison to the Holy Spirit. They are "cosmic and intimate, universal and local. In contrast to the Holy Spirit, however, the Force of *Star Wars* is impersonal and in no way is meant to serve as shorthand for the activity or presence of a supreme being or deity."[33] By showing his awareness that the film is not an exact parallel, Stone gives the reader/viewer a chance to interpret what the Force is and what the Holy Spirit is.

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[32] Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 5.
[33] Ibid., 135.

While they are vastly different, each plays a similar role in its own context. The Force, for example, also adopts some of its elements from Zen philosophy. Unlike the Holy Spirit, the Force is made up of both a good side and a bad side, therefore making its place in the *Star Wars* franchise similar enough to the Holy Spirit to draw the comparison, while still different enough to spark fruitful discussion. This model – where the religious theme in the film may deviate slightly from its place in Christianity seems to be useful for Stone's goal of creating a guide for discussion of film in a religious context.

Finding God in the Movies

Similar to the books in the previous three sections, *Finding God in the Movies* is divided into sections that address different parts of the religious experience. Barsotti and Johnson clearly state that they aim "to assist Christians in bringing their faith and life together, to ling their experience of a story on the screen with their experience of Christ in their churches."[34] Therefore, one must keep in mind that this book has an inherent bias toward films with Christian themes. Meant to be a guide for group study of film and religion, the book facilitates discussion by providing synopses of films, biblical references, and potential discussion questions. Each film's narrative serves to teach a lesson similar to one taught in Christianity. As Jesus used stories that "triggered the reason, imagination, and emotion of his listeners as they were invited

[34] Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston, *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 31.

to deepen their faith and understanding,"[35] film acts as a modern-day parable to teach truth with the use of metaphorical fiction. In this way, the methodology used to select films seems to be one that takes the intended messages of these films and applies it to a Christian context using the film's take on theology, which therefore creates a corresponding ideology.

The authors use between two and four films to analyze each ideological topic, such as forgiveness or faith and doubt. If one were interested in a topical analysis, this method would be useful, but if one wanted an in-depth analysis of an individual film, the necessary information may be difficult to extract. For example, the section on faith and doubt weaves together the films *Signs* (Shyamalan, 2002) and *K-Pax* (Softley, 2001) in such a way that it would help someone studying them together, but would possibly confuse someone only studying one of them. Despite its practical use for its intended purpose, this book may not be as useful for someone interested in a theoretical or academic approach. There is little, if any, deep reference to methods of film criticism or religious theory. By offering a broad perspective rather than a deep one, the authors address different films from a wide array of genres, thus making it more likely that anyone who picks up this book would find something interesting or useful in it. Because the scholarship and methodology behind this text for its intended purpose as a discussion guide is sound, it still would be functional as enjoyable

[35] Ibid., 16.

reading for someone not necessarily interested in film or religion. Similar to Marsh and Ortiz's book, this book is highly accessible to people of different fields and could be effectively used as an introduction to either or both of the fields of film studies and religious studies.

Conclusion

While it is true that there is no singular way to analyze and interpret religious films, the key component of any analysis is to consider the message of the film as a whole and the way that this film uses imagery to convey its message. This element is present in each of the volumes, where authors see religious themes in the films they choose to analyze, and then support this analysis with thematic and occasionally technical elements of these films. Although technical knowledge is not needed to look at the images on the screen, the details of their physical and thematic placement in the film is paramount when considering the importance that they may have to the plot and theme of the film in question. By combining different aspects of each volume, one can gain a fuller picture of where the fields intersect. Therefore, I find my own scholarship to be something of a mixture of that presented by Thomas M. Martin and that presented by Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt, combining film theory with acknowledgement of religious themes. In doing this, a film can be analyzed both as a

religious event, while also maintaining elements of formal and cultural film analysis.[36] Combining pre-existing methods of analysis and adding additional theoretical concepts of film and technical knowledge leads us to a stronger interdisciplinary bond between film studies and religion. While each method used by the authors discussed in this section is not effective for analysis of each film, I have selected techniques that are effective and have used them in conjunction with pre-existing theoretical structures in film theory.

This will be the primary framework with which I will analyze Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) in the following chapters. I suggest that both of these films, despite their vast differences, share a thematic commonality in their presentation of a Christ figure with clearly separated divine and human natures. As I will show, the films can be analyzed similarly, albeit not with the exact same method. This reinforces the need for intentionally incomplete methods of analysis, which are perpetually open to reinterpretation and reform. My exploration indulges two differing ideas about the nature of Christ regarding his divinity and humanity as shown through these two films. I make neither claim that this study is comprehensive nor do I claim it is necessarily a representation of religious film as a whole. It is merely a specific and theoretical study

[36] For further discussion of this concept in terms of teaching religion and film together, see M. Gail Hamner, "Religion and Film: A Pedogogical Rubric," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (December 2013), 1139-1150.

of each film from a perspective that combines the fields of religious studies and film studies, weaving together theory from each.

CHAPTER 3

A SELFISH, UNFAITHFUL SON: *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST*

In the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Martin Scorsese presents an interpretation of the figure of Jesus Christ (Willem Dafoe) based on Jesus' exploration and indulgence of his own humanity. Based on Nikos Kazantzakis' book by the same title, this exploration is executed through a series of Jesus' interactions throughout his life with the human world, while still remaining in touch with the divinity that is forced upon him. Scorsese shows the audience an image of Christ's struggle between humanity and divinity as a means of symbolizing the internal struggle between good and evil. I will analyze and interpret the film by discerning its intended message, then considering its usage of the moving image to convey that message. As film is an inherently image-based medium, judging the efficacy of its visual argument can be equated with judging the film itself.

This presentation of Christ's story was not without controversy. After Scorsese purchased the rights to Kazantzakis' book in 1977, it took nearly a decade for a studio to commit to its production and release. Even after this, theatres were picketed

and protests were held in an effort to prevent the film from reaching the public.[37] The film assumes that its audience has some awareness of Jesus' story; however, biblical literacy is not required for one to understand the narrative. Christ and his story are merely the medium through which the aforementioned exploration is conducted. Because the story itself is updated, so is the medium through which it is presented.

The film acts as a vehicle for one to identify with the figure of Christ, who is shown as a man constantly struggling between his divine call in life and his human desires. And, it utilizes a modern medium: film. Instead of reading words on a page, the consumers see images on a screen and therefore are given a more concrete reflection of the struggle than they would have if they were simply reading a story in a book. By updating the figure of Christ to give him overwhelmingly human traits, Scorsese makes the story more relevant to the culture that is consuming it. Therefore, the audience's enhanced capability to relate to Christ's struggles allows them to see their own reflection in the story. While reading the story may be effective, Scorsese's presentation of Christ magnifies the empathy that an audience member may feel. First of all, Jesus and his flaws are readily shown to the audience. From the beginning of the film, his weaknesses help define him rather than his divinity. Additionally, the use of an image helps manipulate the viewer into seeing the Christ that Kazantzakis and

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[37] Brian J. Snee, "The Spirit and the Flesh: The Rhetorical Nature of *The Last Temptation of Christ*," 50-51.

Scorsese desire to present – a human who struggles through his life rather than a god who reigns over all.

The Last Temptation of Christ has obvious religious meaning, and as an updated telling of the life of Jesus it serves to show that modern religion may not necessarily want to rely on the stories that are canonical, in the Bible, but rather may seek to present a spirituality based on a practical mythology and modern needs. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to use each of the methods outlined by Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt in their compilation, *Screening the Sacred* as a guideline. Their first category, theological criticism, describes authors who treat films as allegories to specific myths of religion or theological concepts. In mythological criticism, their second category, the analyst considers the secular nature of society and accepts the idea that cultural institutions may be able to convey the mythology surrounding religion than religious institutions are. Third are the ideological critics, who tend to consider religion through a political lens. Each of these categories is permeable, and therefore does not restrict an analyst to a singular perspective, but it is useful to consider a film from each angle, then to synthesize the observations from each perspective, thus allowing room for additional film theory to support these analyses. While, therefore, I adhere to the order in which the methods are presented in Ostwalt and Martin's book, it is merely a practical matter and neither an assertion of validity of one method over another nor an assertion that this is necessarily the best

way to analyze any given film. *The Last Temptation of Christ* benefits from each of these interpretive frameworks, as it can be analyzed from each of them in order to gain a fuller, more complete picture of the film's message.

The Devil's Trying To Break Me Down

First to be considered is theological criticism, which deals with the allegorical structure of the religious story that is being depicted. Theological criticism locates religious traditions in terms of their symbols and stories. The story of Christ's life is not merely retold; rather, the film engages with this story to make it relevant to a modern audience. This film depicts the familiar theme of the internal personal battle of good and evil, and they are depicted through the use of a sometimes-heavily altered biblical narrative. Jesus is not the gentle and loving person that one would read about in the Bible, rather "his having been chosen by God is a source of endless pain, like claws digging beneath his skin… [He is] an emotional wreck who is engaged in one long identity crisis after another."[38] The conspicuously religious nature of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is not what makes it open to theological criticism; rather, it is because it "can be best understood, as an elaboration on or the questioning of a particular religious tradition, text, or theme."[39] Even without much religious background, the film is understandable to its viewer. Although familiarity with the Gospels—especially with regard to the names and characteristics of Jesus'

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[38] Stone, *Faith and Film*, 75.
[39] Martin and Ostwalt, "Theological Criticism," 13-14.

apostles—would be helpful for the viewer, it certainly is not necessary for enjoyment or understanding of the film.

Symbols are present in a more concrete way in the film as well. After being baptized by John the Baptist (Andre Gregory), Jesus must go to the desert to speak to God, but as John the Baptist cautions him, "God isn't alone out there."[40] Jesus asks God to speak to him, stating that he will stay in the circle he makes for himself until he receives a clear message from God about what to do. Following this, he has three visions. The temptations that Jesus faces while meditating in the desert where he goes to pray after his baptism are represented by specific biblical references. The symbols that he sees "… do not enter the film in a virgin state; they carry with them, before even cinematographic language can intervene, a great deal more than their simple literal identity."[41] Although Jesus sees what the viewer sees, each object in each vision is only allowed to be outside of the circle.

The first of these visions is of a snake that calls itself Jesus' spirit and tells Jesus that he wants a family and that he cannot save a world that does not want to or have to be saved. This snake, with a female voice, says that Jesus called it, just as Adam did because he was lonely. Because of the role of the serpent in Christianity's

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[40] *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Netflix. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 1988.
[41] Christian Metz, "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film" in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75.

creation story, one can conclude that the snake is attempting to pose as God. The snake offers Jesus the opportunity to escape his torment, but Jesus refuses.

Ten days later, a lion appears, congratulating Jesus for resisting the small temptation of a woman and a family and calling itself Jesus' heart, which wants power. The lion is a symbol of the Israelite tribe of Judah, from which Jesus is a descendant. Jesus resists this temptation, threatening to pull the lion's tongue out. The lion disappears as it encroaches on Jesus' circle, showing first that it cannot exist inside the circle that Jesus has reserved for himself and God (so it is neither Jesus nor God), and that he has faced and resisted this temptation.

A fire then appears to Jesus and reminds Jesus that he asked to be made God when he was a child. The fire says that it and Jesus are to rule the living and the dead. The fire immediately disappears when Jesus addresses it as Satan, and the camera cuts to a reaction shot of Jesus, who then looks up to see an apple tree (another reference to the creation story) outside of his circle. Jesus takes an apple from the tree and eats it, as it gushes with blood.

By reaching outside of the circle that he created, Jesus breaks into the world of temptation. Because the apple tree is not an object that has tempted him directly, it shows that one may lapse into sin without being conscious of it. The fire reappears and says that it (Satan) and Jesus will see each other again. The only temptations to which Jesus did not fall victim are the ones that actively tried to lure him in. The apple

tree never spoke to him; he reached out to it and accepted its temptation on his own accord. This fits in with the theme of the film that good and evil are already present within each of us, and that we ourselves choose which to indulge. While Jesus is supposed to be the eraser of sin, he himself has reaffirmed the original sin of disobeying God and falling into Satan's trickery. This sets him up to reencounter an innocent-seeming form of Satan at a later time, during his crucifixion.[42]

There is one major concern with a theological criticism that is presented by the film itself: it specifically claims not to be based on the Gospels, but rather on Nikos Kazantzakis' personal exploration of an internal conflict which "ha[d] been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh and [his] soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met."[43] This disclaimer, an abridged version of Kazantzakis' book's prologue, placed at the beginning of the film succeeds in "… prepar[ing] the viewer for a Jesus who, in his transparent weaknesses and torment, differs fundamentally… from the Jesus of the Gospels."[44] However, by addressing this concern, it almost ironically reaffirms that there is perhaps some grounding in one's judgment of the film as an adaptation of the Gospels. It must be considered, however, that "[e]very representational film *adapts* a prior

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[42] This final temptation is best addressed in terms of ideological criticism, and analysis of it will be in that section.
[43] Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.
[44] Adele Reinhartz, "History and Pseudo-History in the Jesus Film Genre," *Biblical Interpretation* 14, no. ½ (February 2006): 4.

conception."[45] So in one sense, it is correct to bear in mind that the film is not a adaptation under the most strict denotation of the word, but that it does in some manner find its grounding in the story of Jesus Christ, which is told in the Gospels. The disclaimer, in detaching the film from the Gospels, asserts that the film's message is strong enough to stand alone from a viewer's familiarity with the already-established characters in the narrative. Whether or not the creators of the film would find a full theological criticism (in the sense that Martin and Ostwalt define it) to be appropriate for the film, its theme and use of allegory certainly leave it open to this method.

We Want To See Thee More Clearly

Mythological criticism treats film as though it is the medium through which our society tells its stories. Film provides a medium through which a culture's imagination can be exposed, and with the rise of secularity in the modern era, religious institutions are declining in their influence with a turn toward emphasis on individual experience. Myth's function in the modern world can be said to supplement theology because "[u]nlike theology, which supports a particularistic truth and tends to focus on the activities and purposes of the God of Judaism and Christianity, myth communicates universal truth."[46] Even though there are theological themes to the film, the imagination of the creators is seen in the alteration of the story, better to convey its

[45] Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation" in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 373.
[46] Martin and Ostwalt, "Mythological Criticism," 66.

meaning. Their personal imagination reflects a religious experience, through which film meets a larger audience and "… can assimilate both the individual's initial experience and the basic form of reflection as well as work from the integrating stories that serve the fiber of society."[47] One aspect of Dafoe's depiction of Jesus that exemplifies this is the alteration of the words that Jesus speaks. Instead of speaking formally he "… thinks on his feet and uses language spontaneously in the cut and thrust of debate… the audience is hence offered his words at a refreshing remove from the process which later crystallized [his] teaching into holy writ."[48] Even though a personal experience of the raw story may be present, however, the retelling of it in a new way can broaden the viewer's conception of that experience and further attach it to society.

Mythological criticism is applicable to *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as the alteration of Jesus' story can be evidence of the modern human being's imagination becoming less reverent of established religious narratives. Whereas the narrative of the life of Christ may have served once as a religious institution itself, increased secularization can realign the institution's place in society. Because of the influence of the modern era, "we can expect that the deities of a hybrid secular, religious imagination will not be encountered first and foremost in traditional sacred institutions such as the church and synagogue but they will manifest themselves most fully in

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[47] Martin, *Images and the Imageless*, 121.
[48] Telford, "The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema," 133.

modern, secular cultural formations."[49] The change in transmission of the message allows religious consciousness simultaneously to develop and to be developed as a part of the imagination, which Martin considers highly valuable to the human experience as "… not only are humans continually imaging events and encounters in an attempt to digest them, but that they extend this spatial orientation to life as a whole."[50] Imagination plays a huge role in the film because it is the key to adapting the characters and their stories into the narrative that Scorsese desires.

A major example of this is the character of Judas (Harvey Keitel) who is portrayed as Jesus' most loyal companion and faithful follower. Judas is a particularly intriguing figure for Scorsese to use as a foil to Jesus because of his reputation as a traitor. In the opening scene of the film, the viewer meets Judas and Jesus simultaneously. They speak colloquially as friends, which establishes them as equals rather than in any kind of master and servant relationship. If anything, Jesus seems to admire Judas while thinking of himself as a coward. Throughout the film, Judas acts as a sounding board for Jesus' discussions about his identity and ministry. Judas is the first person that Jesus tells that he (Jesus) must die, saying, "Last night, Isaiah came to me. He had a prophecy, I saw it written. It said, '… Despised and rejected by all, he went forward without resisting, like a lamb led to slaughter'… I am the lamb. I'm the

[49] Martin and Ostwalt, "Mythological Criticism," 68.
[50] Martin, *Images and the Imageless*, 17.

one who's going to die."[51] As a confidant, Judas also plays a crucial role in getting Jesus to his crucifixion, but the film sets this action up as though Judas' betrayal was planned and demanded by Jesus himself. The film suggests that, as Judas was forced into the role of the traitor, so does Christianity force its followers into sin. Human beings are, by nature, imperfect and sinful, hence the need for Jesus to atone for their sins. Judas is placed in a similar position because Jesus must be betrayed so that he can be crucified and the prophecy can be fulfilled. Judas, therefore, can be read as a signifier of humanity as a whole, while his betrayal signifies humanity's sinful nature.

Righting His Wrongs

Finally, Martin and Ostwalt address films that transcend explicitly religious themes and take into account that there are more cultural aspects that may affect film than just religion. By opening film to a broader range of analysis, more disciplines are able to contribute to defining what is meant by culture and the way that it shapes people's individual ideology. Films, therefore, can be used as a meter for the ideologies of culture without assigning specific religious meaning to them. While this may seem unimportant to connecting religion and film, Martin and Ostwalt correctly contend that "[b]y studying the interaction of religion and ideology in film, we can understand more fully how movies move audiences so deeply by 'screening the

[51] *The Last Temptation of Christ*

sacred.'"[52] Although one could argue that imagination is required to call this a form of religious criticism, it is the case that religious elements can be used to project a non-religious message.

Operating under the assumption that Kazantzakis' claim that the film is not a retelling of the Gospel, as well as under the belief that the film can be understood, even by those who have never read its words, the theme of the struggle between good and evil is present in human life no matter what one's religion is. It is in the temptations that Jesus faces throughout the film that the secular viewer finds interest. The weaknesses that define his humanity are where human viewers are able to see themselves rather than in the divinity with which Jesus struggles throughout the film. These struggles culminate in his "last temptation," to leave the cross and live a normal life complete with a wife and a family. This scene is unique to *The Last Temptation of Christ* in the genre of Jesus films, as the camera placement puts the viewer in Jesus' own position, rather than that of a mourner. Snee details this, writing, "Actual first-person point-of-view shots... are provided when the camera swings from side to side as Jesus looks at the two men being crucified with him and at the crowd that has gathered to witness the executions."[53] Although the viewer is most likely unable to

[52] Ibid., 123.
[53] Snee, "The Spirit and the Flesh: The Rhetorical Nature of *The Last Temptation of Christ*," 59.

relate to this mental and physical anguish, Scorsese forces him or her into Jesus' position as a way to facilitate empathy.

As the film progresses, Jesus succumbs (either physically or only mentally – the film leaves room for interpretation) to the final temptation, descending from the cross, led by a young girl who claims to be his guardian angel. In the course of this exploration, Jesus encounters Paul (Harry Dean Stanton) who is preaching about the story of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection. This part of the film shows the effects of Jesus' alleged death and resurrection on the society in which they would have taken place. Jesus asks Paul if he ever saw the Jesus of whom he speaks. Jesus calls Paul a liar and says that he (Jesus) is, "a man, just like everyone else." Because the resurrected Jesus is the symbol of Christianity, it does not matter that the resurrected Jesus, in this exploration, is not real. Paul tells Jesus, "I created the truth. I made it out of longing and faith. I don't struggle to find truth. I build it. If it's necessary to crucify you to save the world, then I'll crucify you. And I'll resurrect you too, whether you like it or not."[54]

Paul uses peoples' willingness to believe in whatever gives them hope. The story of Christ's resurrection does that, whereas the story of Christ leaving the cross does not. Similarly, Scorsese and Kazantzakis can be said to have used a story of Christ's overwhelming humanity as something to give them hope that, even the most

[54] *The Last Temptation of Christ*

perfect man (in Christian mythology) suffered the same adversity as every other person. In this way, the Pauline narrative within the film is representative of the film itself – a method by which an author creates a story to explore and satisfy the needs of humanity. Without the symbol of the resurrected Jesus, there is nothing in which the early Christians may place their hope. If it were the case that Jesus removed himself from the cross, there would be no body for God to resurrect, therefore nullifying the miraculous part of the Easter story: everyone dies, but not everyone comes back later.

These scenes in particular lend themselves to religious reflection as Thomas Martin defines it. This abstract reflection–in which one must adapt his or her perception of his or her self into the form that is shown onscreen–is beneficial because "… the more abstract the form of reflection the more one is dealing with the general themes and its, therefore, trying to discern larger movements in life rather than absorb a particular expression."[55] While the characters of the film are concrete in their presentation, they exist as an abstraction of human character, thus engaging the viewer in an exploration of his or her self to discern his or her place in the narrative. This exploration occurs in such a way that engages with elements of the viewer's life, elements that one may not consider part of his or her religious identity.

[55] Martin, *Images and the Imageless*, 116.

Jesus Walks With Us

In these final scenes of the film, each method of criticism benefits from being put into dialogue with another. Mythologically, the character of Jesus is built when Jesus experiences old age, and, nearing death, speaks with his remaining apostles. Judas, again, plays a unique role that would not have fit the biblical context. Judas calls Jesus a coward for not performing God's will and a traitor for making him Judas betray him, if he was not going to go through with the crucifixion. As Judas speaks, Jesus experiences a form of stigmata, wherein he literally has blood on his hands, signifying his own guilt for allowing his final temptation to consume him.

Judas reveals that the guardian angel is actually Satan and that Jesus has fallen to the temptation to save himself from being sacrificed to save mankind. The film jump cuts to the fire from the desert, which says, "I told you we'd meet again." Jesus crawls from his bed to see Jerusalem burning, and he pleads to God, admitting his human weakness saying, "Will you listen to a selfish and unfaithful son? Will you forgive me? I did not fight hard enough… I want to be the Messiah!"[56] The desperate Jesus calling to his Father in Heaven is the culmination of his own struggle with his identity. Although Jesus is theologically considered to be God in human form, this scene depicts the human part of Jesus reaching out to divinity and realizing that he needs the strength of God in order to complete his life's work.

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[56] Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

With these final words, the film rapidly cuts back to Jesus on the cross, where he says his final words, "It is accomplished, it is accomplished," with a sense of victory and relief. A slight departure from the Biblical "It is finished," the line signifies the vast effort that Jesus put forth to endure, not only the physical pain, but also the psychological torture that he felt, whether the preceding events were actual occurrences within the film or were simply a manifestation of Jesus considering the outcome of following the angel at the foot of the cross.

It Is Accomplished

While it is true that fruitful analysis can come from each of Ostwalt and Martin's methods, one can see that combining them and taking elements of each leads to a stronger overall analysis. There are several ways that *The Last Temptation of Christ* fits into the model by which I choose to analyze and interpret religious films, which is to discern what message the film is trying to convey, then to consider the way it uses its images to convey that message. Film is a medium that cannot exist without the image, so by judging the ability of the image to make the film's argument, one can judge the efficacy of the film itself. Ostwalt and Martin's outline of three types of criticism is useful in that, used together, they do not diminish or oversimplify the film's importance and complexity. Adding Thomas Martin's theory, I consider the religious consciousness of the film itself and the presentation of images as a response to this consciousness. In this presentation of images as a unified plot, there exists a reflection

of the culture that helped produce it. Also to be considered is the evolution of the story along with the evolution of the way it is presented. By weaving together all of these elements of the film that are under consideration, the character of Christ emerges as a reflector of the human struggle between good and evil and as a man struggling to accept and claim his identity.

CHAPTER 4

ONE THAT KILLS AND ONE THAT LOVES: *APOCALYPSE NOW*

In contrast to the explicit religious themes of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Apocalypse Now* requires a more nuanced analysis. While the figure of Christ is present by name in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Apocalypse Now*, based on Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, has themes related to the story of Christ present in its narrative. It is not the case that there is a necessary parallel between the life and mission of Christ and the life of any specific character or of the plot with the Biblical narrative, but there are similarities within the thematic elements of the film.

There are several religious elements in *Apocalypse Now*, only one of which is its use of both Colonel Walter Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a rogue officer who has deified himself to a tribe in Cambodia, and Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen), a tired and troubled soldier incapable of returning to ordinary civilian life, as equal yet opposite characters whose fates seem to be inextricably connected. A useful way to access the religious themes in this film is to view Kurtz, a mysterious entity known primarily by his artifacts (writings, recording, rumors), as a representation of the divine aspect of the Christ figure. Conversely, one may view Willard as the seemingly more accessible side of Christ, his physical human presence. By separating the Christ

figure into two pieces, each side may be explored as it develops at its own rate and in its own direction in the film. Ultimately, when Willard and Kurtz meet, there is palpable tension but with an underlying, silent respect between them as though they have known each other as adversaries for some time. By using a more abstract depiction of Christ, *Apocalypse Now* avoids the necessity of making its characters' journeys follow any specific Christ narrative. The viewer can watch the film and see these intersections when they occur, deriving meaning from them as they see fit. Alternatively, if he or she does not observe them, he or she can find religious meaning in its other elements that lay the groundwork for the Christ figures to emerge.

The first issue with *Apocalypse Now* is locating the Christ figure within the dense narrative that is rife with other themes and symbols. Admittedly, there is no character whose story matches that of Jesus, but that does not mean that elements of the film do not lend themselves to Christological analysis. *Because Apocalypse Now*'s Christology is less explicit than that of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it is more fruitful to divide its analysis by event rather than by method of analysis. That is to say, instead of considering it from three different extra-filmic perspectives, greater attention should be paid, first, to the structure of the film, then to the functions of the characters within the film and their overall meeting. In accordance with this

methodology, each section will be separated by events within the film, leading into analysis.

I Want To Talk To God

First, we will consider why *Apocalypse Now* should even be considered a religious film. Most of the scholarship on the film seems to be from a non-religious perspective, with great emphasis on both its quality as a film and its political implications. While there are many ways to connect it to religious scholarship, the staging of both Willard and Kurtz as objects for sacrifice seems to be the most common way to frame the religious angle of discussion. In a broader sense, the film evidences an "imagination [that] is religious because it continues to present human beings in relation to awesome, nonhuman powers of creation and destruction and continues to grapple with classic religious questions."[57] With these observations of sacrificial staging of the main characters and the struggle between human and nonhuman powers, certain themes can be discussed in terms of their correspondence to Martin and Ostwalt's three methods of analysis for religious films. The first is Joseph Campbell's monomyth, approached through the lens of mythological criticism. The second theme is an ideological criticism, which highlights the way that morality interacts with Willard's loyalty to his assignment. Finally, these two will coalesce to

[57] Martin and Ostwalt, "Mythological Criticism," 67.

demonstrate that the two men, Willard and Kurtz, exhibit traits that connect their story to that of Jesus Christ via theological criticism.

Show Me The Way

From the beginning of the film, Willard's experience seems to coincide with the aspects of the monomyth as developed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The groundwork for everything in the film begins with Willard's call to adventure, the moment when "[a] blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood."[58] Willard's superiors call him to travel to Kurtz, and then kill him – a mission so highly classified that it is said not to even exist. An atypical assignment, in all senses of the word, this "journey up the river, which makes little sense in terms of modern strategic warfare, is a mythic journey to the deepest realm of the self, to the ultimate horror."[59] The physical trip itself is not the point of the mission; rather, it is intended to guide the audience on a journey into the dark recesses of warfare.

Of course, Willard's assignment is not actually given by mere chance, nor are any such journeys: Willard "wanted a mission, and for [his] sins, they gave [him]

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[58] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 46.
[59] Naomi Green, "Coppola, Cimino: The Operatics of History," *Film Quarterly* 38.2 (1984), 31.

one."[60] Because of his prior experience in Vietnam, an aspect of his life that is intentionally left undefined by the film, Willard is a man who seems to be seeking atonement. Although hardly the neophyte as described by Victor Turner, Willard is still in a position wherein he must submit to the will of a community, reflecting "the whole gamut of the culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments and relationships."[61] The culture, in this case, is American military culture, and the values supported are its maintenance. Having nothing left to lose, he is the perfect candidate for a potential suicide mission.

The film introduces him through his image, which is intercut with explosions and fire in the jungles of Southeast Asia as "The End" by The Doors plays. The sound in this scene is key, as it also contains a noise that sounds enough like helicopter blades that the audience can believe that Willard is either experiencing a flashback to his time in the jungle or that his role as a soldier has become more of a vocation than a mere job. Walter Murch, the editor of the film acknowledges that "… [t]he greatest thing that sound can contribute to a film is metaphoric tension between the sound and the image. If you produce a sound that has no creative tension… it doesn't add very

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[60] *Apocalypse Now*. Netflix. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola.
[61] Victor Turner, "From *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*," in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion*, ed. Carl Olson, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003), 271.

much because you are not soliciting the imagination of the viewer."[62] This partially-diegetic sound increases the depth of the scene, indicating at the outset of the film that this is a man who is entombed in destruction and presumably marked for death.

As his journey wears on, Willard learns more about Kurtz from the dossier given to him by his officers. The journey itself, complete with helpers present in the other soldiers on the boat, sets Willard up for his encounter with Kurtz, which "… introduce[s] Willard to settings that become more and more bizarre as he nears Kurtz, which tends to magnify the insanity of Kurtz, the desperation of Willard and his crew, and the horror of unrestricted ego, war, and evil."[63] As Willard reaches Cambodia, where Kurtz is, he slowly crosses the threshold into Kurtz's world, and "instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and [appears] to have died."[64] At this point, Kurtz and Willard have a strange relationship, wherein Willard feels as though Kurtz is nearly omniscient. He says of Kurtz, "He knew more about what I was going to do than I did."[65] The audience is left to wonder, however, if this is truly the case, or if the mythos that has surrounded Kurtz since his introduction through his artifacts is manipulating Willard's

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[62] Gustavo Costantini, "Walter Murch interviewed by Gustavo Costantini," *Soundtrack* 3, no. 1 (March 2010), 35.
[63] Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Hollywood and Armageddon," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 58.
[64] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 83.
[65] Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*.

perception of him. Willard's final victory – if it can be called a victory at all – comes with his slaughter of Kurtz, but then the question arises about what Willard should do next. In this moment, Willard is faced with the choice of taking up Kurtz's mantel or leaving. This choice, as it is based in Willard's continuously developing ideology regarding the actions of war, will be addressed under the umbrella of ideological criticism in the next section.

Mythologically, this moment represents Campbell's conception of the return, although the film's overall ambiguity creates the sense that, despite the accomplishment of Willard's mission, his journey may not actually be complete. When the film ends, Willard may have departed from Kurtz's camp, but he is still in the heterotopia of the jungle, a "privileged or sacred or forbidden place, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis."[66] While Campbell's delineation includes seventeen steps of the hero's journey, neither Willard nor Kurtz experiences each step, nor does their journey finish as neatly as the monomyth typically would. This is perfectly acceptable because, as has been shown, a character need not fit perfectly into a model created in order to have meaning, and despite the differences, the similarities help illuminate the inner working and intentions of the film.

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[66] Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 no. 1 (Spring 1986), 24.

We're At War With Ourselves

It is at this point that one must ask what exactly Willard has been accomplished in killing Kurtz. Yes, his mission as it was assigned has been completed, but what does this mean? Although this is the natural end to the orders that Willard is given, there is an element of responsibility incumbent upon him, as he is the person who carried out these orders. Although individual ideology may be a negative in such a power structure, it can hardly be avoided, as it "is a necessary part of the process through which human beings come to know their social worlds."[67] Throughout his journey, Willard's individual ideology develops through his relationship with Kurtz's artifacts, and now Willard must make a choice regarding the continuation of Kurtz's reign. Kurtz's position as a leader is ultimately left vacant as "[i]nstead… of becoming Kurtz's successor… Willard simply turns tail and goes home; reassuring himself that by doing so, he has, like a good soldier, both fulfilled his assignment and disassociated himself from the evil military bureaucracy which made it."[68]

After meeting Kurtz, Willard is forced to recognize that there is validity in Kurtz's philosophy. After all, Kurtz was not having his people attack American troops; rather, he was successfully running guerilla missions against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. Practically speaking, there is little reason that Kurtz should be

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[67] Martin and Ostwalt, "Ideological Criticism," 120.
[68] Leslie A. Fielder, "Mythicizing the Unspeakable," *American Folklore Society* 103.410 (1990), 397.

stopped: his mission is shared with that of the United States Army. Because it exists outside of the strict chain of command, however, it is not officially sanctioned and therefore poses a threat to the power structure that formerly kept him in line. This is where *Apocalypse Now* experiences a sharp departure from the hard-boiled detective formula, which it shares with its source material. In reference to *Heart of Darkness*, Hellmann writes,

> The one crucial distinction… lies in the relation of the protagonist to the criminal. The detective, despite his similarity to the underworld in speech and appearance, remains sharply distinct from the murderer, for in not only exposing but also judging the murderer he embodies the moral order of the ideals of his society not found in its reality; [Willard], in contrast, comes to identify with Kurtz, finally admiring him as much as he is repelled by him.[69]

Even prior to meeting Kurtz, Willard is disillusioned and lost in terms of his military experience. As the film progresses, this disillusionment grows, becoming deeply evident in the scene in which Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) occupies and destroys a village simply for an opportunity to surf. Willard is both stunned and disgusted, saying, "If that's how Kilgore fought the war, I began to wonder what they really had against Kurtz. It wasn't just insanity and murder. There was enough of that to go around for everyone."[70] Again, the problem with Kurtz was never *what* he was doing; rather, it was that he was doing it without authorization and outside of the

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[69] John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film," *American Quarterly*, 34 no. 4 (Autumn 1982), 431.
[70] Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*.

structure of the military. Willard is perceptive enough to catch on to this, and it affects him emotionally throughout the film.

The slow degradation of the already-weakened Willard occurs throughout the film and is symbolized in several ways. After the boat leaves Saigon, American flag flying above it, Willard's overall mood shifts further into darkness and disillusionment. Additionally, his relationship with the other people on the boat that is carrying him shifts as well. Chief Phillips (Albert Hall) and Willard are engaged in a power struggle from the beginning, which becomes hostile with the killing of Mr. Clean (Laurence Fishburne), a young soldier who is like a son to Chief. Mr. Clean's death, caused by random gunfire while he is listening to a tape from his mother, is an especially senseless death that delivers a *coup de grace* to any enthusiasm that the remaining crew members may have for their mission. This is symbolized by the folding of the boat's American flag, now tattered nearly beyond recognition, and its burial with Mr. Clean.

The other two crew members experience a shift in personality too. Formerly upbeat. Lance (Sam Bottoms) and Chef (Frederic Forrest) both use drugs to calm themselves amid the stressful environment, and by the end of the film, they both become much more withdrawn and tense than at their introduction. Willard is not especially friendly with any of them to begin with, for they are merely his shepherds to his location, but any sense of camaraderie very nearly disintegrates throughout the

film, only changing when they face Kurtz. Typically, sharing a mission of this type would build relationships, not diminish them, but Willard's mission quite explicitly is *not* shared with the other men. Willard is not even allowed to confirm to Chief (Albert Hall), the captain of the boat, that the mission will take them into Cambodia. Willard eventually shares the assignment with Lance and Chef, including them in it to help insure that Kurtz will be killed successfully. Upon their arrival at Kurtz's camp, a photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) greets them, praising Kurtz and preaching his gospel.

After Kurtz's people take Willard, Kurtz reads him an article from a 1967 issue of *Time* magazine that contains an overly optimistic assessment of the situation in Vietnam. At this point, the children of Kurtz's people flock to him. Kurtz welcomes them, as though they wish to learn as well.[71] Kurtz allows them to sit with him and uses this opportunity to ask Willard if the magazine's assessment is true, making the point that the institution that sent Willard to kill him is merely a façade, and now "Willard's discovery of the moral chaos that has resulted from Kurtz's pursuit of a moral ideal has led him to see the darkness that pervades not only the hypocrisy of the army, but also the darkness at the heart of his own pursuit of an honest war."[72]

This scene is unique because not only is Willard heavily obscured in darkness, but Kurtz's face and body are both perfectly visible in the light of day, showing that

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[71] Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:13-16

[72] John Hellman, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film," 436-7.

he is not only correct, but also that he has nothing to hide, providing a strong contrast with the film's typical lighting scheme. The lighting that selectively exposes Kurtz during his presence in the film is natural light, from elements such as the sun or fire, whereas Willard's face is obscured primarily by intentional means such as the painting of his face. This lighting also suggests that they are not always to be recognized by their image, but only by their actions. For Willard, this is a stark contrast from the beginning of the film, where the audience knows fairly little about him. For Kurtz, who is only known by his actions for nearly the entire film, this is typical. Masking allows them each to perform their respective tasks without judgment, as their identity is obscured. This would be favorable to Kurtz, as he expresses the desire to preserve the truth about the reasoning behind his actions, concealing the horror of the actions themselves.

We're Living In Hell Here

This leads into an analysis of each individual character and his efficacy as a Christ figure, with Willard representing the physical, human Christ and Kurtz representing the spiritual, divine element of Christ. This Nestorian perspective is slightly different than the previously described Dyophysitic perspective in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as Christ is present not only in two natures, but in two persons as well. While the film is not specifically theological in its intent, one can still see how it addresses theological concepts that are "the window to understanding the film's

intent, even if it means discounting other dimensions of the film."[73] This does not mean that one can pick through the film and only consider the parts applicable to his or her argument, but it does mean that it is possible for a theological theme not to present itself in an obvious way. This is the case with *Apocalypse Now*, in which one may see either Willard or Kurtz as a Christ figure based on his or her own experience of the film.

In order thoroughly to understand the roles of each of the characters as a Christ figure, one must first understand how the film introduces and develops them. From the very beginning of the film, the viewer is aware that there is violence and destruction surrounding Willard. He is entrenched in it enough that it has become all that he knows, thus trapping him. Because he is bound to duty, he accepts his assigned mission, albeit with some hesitation. Acknowledging that his and Kurtz's fates are intertwined, he states that there is no way to tell Kurtz's story without telling his own, again indicating their interconnectedness. This sets up the rest of the film wherein the viewer learns about Kurtz as Willard does – progressively, and only through sources outside of Kurtz himself – through recordings, papers, and other official documents, all of which are evidence of Kurtz's actions rather than firsthand experience. Willard keeps this knowledge to himself, as the mission is entirely classified, even from the men accompanying him.

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[73] Martin and Ostwalt, "Theological Criticism," 14.

These crewmen serve two potential roles. First of all, they may be seen as shepherds of Willard to his destiny. Second, and more accurately, they are analogous to Jesus' apostles. They follow him and begin to listen to his orders, even though he occasionally clashes with Chief (until his death). Even though Willard is visible throughout the film, he is the character about whom we know the least. All of the crewmen share information from their past or they receive correspondence from their families. Chef, for example, talks about his upbringing to be a saucier. Even Kurtz, the enigma of the film, has parts of his past shared through Willard to the audience. This again points to their interconnectedness. Most of what the audience knows about Kurtz comes through official documents, read by Willard, expressing the notion that Kurtz's aura infuses the entire film. He is revealed slowly until finally he and Willard eventually come face to face.

When Chef, Lance, and Willard arrive at Kurtz's compound, they see that it is heavily guarded by the natives who consider Kurtz to be a deity, or at the very least a sort of demigod. The natives allow the boat through, and they land successfully. At this point, they encounter a nameless photojournalist who serves as a gatekeeper to Kurtz's compound, espousing Kurtz's greatness and power. As Willard and Chef progress toward Kurtz, they notice the soldier who had been charged with killing Kurtz, but then joined him instead. Willard, now, is noticeably more aware of Kurtz's charisma, and Chef contends that Kurtz has gone crazy. After assessing the situation,

which seems to have invoked more questions than it answers, they return to the boat, and he orders Chef to wait, and then call in an airstrike with the code "almighty" at a specific time and if Willard and Lance do not return from investigating the compound.

During their investigation, Willard is taken to Kurtz and questioned. Kurtz tells Willard that he is neither an assassin nor a soldier, but "an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks to collect a bill."[74] Willard's subsequent discussion with the photojournalist places Willard in the role of clarifying Kurtz's actions and philosophy for posterity after Kurtz's death. Kurtz and his followers know that his death is imminent, but that his memory will need to be kept. Willard even acknowledges his role as the caretaker of Kurtz's memory at the beginning of the film, and now he must grapple with the idea that he should remain loyal to his mission, even as he begins to accept the validity of Kurtz's philosophy. Willard's role as a Christ figure is evident in his reluctance to carry out his mission, as Jesus is reluctant to accept his fate and die on the cross.[75] The fate that Willard accepts is not only his own (to kill Kurtz), but also Kurtz's (to be killed).

Throughout the film, it is clear that Willard feels as though Kurtz controls him, representing Jesus' destiny being guided by god. Control is a theme that continues even through Kurtz's own death, an action Willard carries out. Willard kills Kurtz in a very personal and brutal manner, with an axe rather than as a sniper or even with a

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[74] Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*.
[75] Matthew 26:39-45, Luke 22:42-44, Mark 14:34-36

bullet. Similarly, Jesus was crucified, a method of execution that savors death and pain. Kurtz's death is done in a hellish scene, creatively lit with fire, symbolizing the end of Kurtz's reign over the natives and implying a descent into hell. To reinforce that Kurtz's death is more than a mere murder, Coppola interweave Kurtz's death with the sacrifice of a water buffalo by the natives. While this meaning may not be apparent to the casual viewer, the editing is paramount to the understanding of the scene and the film as a whole. Kracauer writes,

> Of all the technical properties of film, the most general and indispensible is editing. It serves to establish a meaningful continuity of shots... The interest lies not with editing in itself, regardless of the purpose it serves, but with editing as a means of implementing—or defying, which amounts to the same—such potentialities of the medium as are in accordance with its substantive characteristics.[76]

Because of how the images are intercut, the resulting scene is not merely a sum of its parts, but rather a product: the message that Kurtz is a sacrifice for the preservation of order, just as Jesus' death is presumed to restore order due to his role as the Messiah. Murch writes, "The goal of narrative films is... complicated because of the fragmented time structure and the need to indicate internal states of being."[77] The editing in this scene cuts across space in time to provide the message that Willard uses

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[76] Siegfried Kracauer, "Basic Concepts" from *Theory of Film* in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.

[77] Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, (Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press,1995), 11.

Kurtz as a sacrifice in order to fulfill the mission that was given to him. Therefore, Willard is "… [acting] out the reassuring action of an agent of moral order, but in doing so realizes that he is judging himself, taking a moral stance towards his own unconscious self."[78] This is a problem because, as Kurtz taught him, to judge is to be defeated. Willard's mission is accomplished, but he is a changed man, and "at last sees… that the only possible response to the utter dissolution of his moral assumptions is to preserve innocence and the false ideal."[79] The true horror is that ignorance is valued more highly than knowledge, power more highly than conviction, and structure more highly than success. Kurtz works against these ideals, and therefore must be sacrificed to maintain them. Kurtz, therefore, is the sacrifice to maintain the image that the American people have of the reality of war. Kurtz's death means that he can no longer function to change society. Willard, continuing his role as the caretaker of Kurtz's memory must choose what to do with this memory: he can suppress it, letting it remain dead, or he can share it, thereby resurrecting it.

This Is The End

Although *Apocalypse Now* is not a film that is based on any specific religious story, it is a film that derives meaning from religious questions and themes. These themes are evident when a viewer uses the full spectrum of analysis outlined by Martin and Ostwalt in *Screening the Sacred*. Because of the subtle nature of the film,

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[78] John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film," 437.
[79] Ibid., 438.

it is necessary to use both mythological and ideological criticism as a way to uncover its theological themes. This method is not sufficient, however, as the film's religious elements are best uncovered when the film is watched with theory from film studies in mind. By studying the technical elements of the film, such as editing and lighting, one can read deeper meaning into the film, thus illuminating its religious elements.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As this thesis has shown, there is value in investigating the dialogue between the fields of religion and film studies because doing so can illuminate meanings in films that would be missed than if they were only investigated for their filmic or religious qualities. While there is great value in analyzing a film for its technical qualities, there is little point to this effort if there is no meaning derived from them. As a result, one studying film should seek to acknowledge how the technical qualities support and define the overall message of the film.

In order to do this, the effective scholar must first establish a framework within which the films can be explored. One must be careful not to establish so narrow a focus as to neglect some aspects of the film, but one should not analyze too broadly, lest the film's message become lost in its presentation. To establish a balance, it is favorable to find a balance that allows for close reading of a film from several perspectives. This is present in Martin and Ostwalt's method in *Screening the Sacred*, wherein not one but three methods of analysis are delineated. These methods are not meant to be either exclusive or essential to one genre of film, but rather the reader is charged with combining the methods to reach a fuller understanding of any film that

he or she chooses to analyze. The ultimate goal is for a student of film and religion to ask "how films and religious imagination [are] related, and how does this relationship help us to understand contemporary society, cultural values, and individual beliefs."[80] To do this, according to Ostwalt and Martin, one must use a broad spectrum of analysis, using a combination of theological, mythological, and ideological criticism. While this is a good start, I do not find this method sufficient for fully reading a film. To further analyze the films I have chosen, I have combined my own knowledge of film theory.

My method of analyzing film parallels that of analyzing religious phenomena, which requires an interdisciplinary approach. For example, either of the films I study could be viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, using Lacanian theory to describe the audience's capacity and tendency to identify with the image of Christ, but they also benefit from the application of other theories as well. Therefore, these two films have been analyzed for both their overall messages and their specific technical characteristics, using several different theories rather than only one.

There are many religious films that I could have chosen for this study, and there are even numerous films that address the theme of martyrdom through an adaptation of the story of Jesus Christ. By choosing these two films, I intentionally have elected to

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[80] Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Conclusion: Religion, Film, and Cultural Analysis," in *Screening the Sacred*, eds., Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 159.

consider complex presentations of Christ that signify the Gospels rather than those that are more simplistic in nature. This is not to say that there is not value in presenting Christ as a simple man charged with a divine task and led by his god to fulfill it, but it is to say that the "perfect" Christ, reified from the Gospel stories, serves his audience as an object rather than a subject, as an idol rather than a leader, and as an untouchable deity meant only for worship and not for a personal relationship. Although some Christians already find the figure of Christ accessible, these filmmakers take this accessibility a step further, portraying Jesus with overwhelmingly human qualities. The films I chose make us rethink that image and focus on the humanity of Jesus. In the case of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus is a broken man, constantly questioning his own faith even until the moment of his redemption in death. This lets us examine the human struggle with faith in an unseen god and our own constantly vacillating between spiritual and more basic human desires or overcoming them. While it seems obvious to analyze this film theologically, one should also consider the larger message of the film, which happens to be conveyed through the story of Jesus' life as a divine being with a human body.

The struggle is also present in *Apocalypse Now*, but the struggle occurs both within Willard as a man and between Willard and Kurtz when they finally meet. This is a conflict between good and evil, and, in the end, one man must be sacrificed to resolve the struggle. Willard overcomes the temptation to let what the film has defined

as evil prevail, killing Kurtz and maintaining the established order as he was charged to do. This result is found at the end of his undergoing of the monomyth, although the story of the monomyth is not completed by the theatrical version of the film. Because of its complexity, it would be impossible to analyze *Apocalypse Now* from only one standpoint. While Martin and Ostwalt's method of mythological criticism would serve it best, this leads a viewer to a conclusion that nearly eliminates the ideology that the film puts forth, as well as neglecting any theological issues that may be found. Again, there is the necessity for combining methods of analysis to achieve a stronger understanding of what these films mean in their contexts and how they convey their messages.

The novelty of selecting these films lies in the fact that they are not often acknowledged by sources as movies that accurately portray a Christ figure. For example, *Christianity Today*'s top ten Jesus movies list includes neither.[81] This is reasonable in the case of *Apocalypse Now*, as it is not a film that is specifically tied to the story of Jesus, but it is curious in the case of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Although the film itself is Sources that are specifically religious in nature seem to prefer adherence to the message and text of the Gospel narratives as opposed to those that complicate the figure of Jesus, using this center of Western culture to

[81] Peter T. Chattaway, "Top Ten Jesus Movies," from *Christianity Today*. Published April 11, 2006. http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/aprilweb-only/top10jesusmovies.html.

question its ethos. These films do not want Jesus Christ in his superstar persona, but rather as an everyman, facing his world as just another human rather than a divine emissary.

This is an important exploration because of its practicality in an increasingly secular world. While it may not be the case that religious institutions still hold the power that they once did, that does not mean that American society is necessarily less religious, but that they are religious in a different way. By acknowledging religious themes and motifs in film, one must challenge his or her previous way of thinking about both areas, as "… movies can no longer be viewed as simply secular entertainment, and religion can no longer be viewed as an antiquated or a peripheral institution in a dominantly secular society."[82] With religion as the message and film as its medium, a greater understanding of it as a driving force of society can be achieved

[82] Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Conclusion," 157.

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