

# Cosmic Christologies

## Christ Figures in Science Fiction Films

By

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### Proposal Introduction/Summary

Movies both reflect and affect our culture's collective values, dreams, and fears. Since the classic 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Christ figures have appeared in over 100 sci-fi films, becoming a phenomenon noticed by many. From the essential formulation in 1951, Christ figures have transformed through the last five decades, showing radically different faces. Their multifaceted portrayals include, among many others, the failed protagonist of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the sweet nostalgic figures in *E.T.* and *Superman*, the silly and parodic characters of *Groundhog Day* and *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, and the dark apocalyptic figures in the *Terminator* and *Matrix* series. We even came full circle recently, back to the original, with the Christ figure openly acknowledged and given a unique twist by the director of the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. My book *Cosmic Christologies: Christ Figures in Science Fiction Films* analyzes how the Christ figures function mythically inside each film, how they relate to each other, how they transform through the years, how cultural factors may contribute to this evolution, and what this phenomenon may mean to us.

Reflecting cultural shifts and creative drives, movie genre conventions have evolved over the decades, and Christ figures have evolved as well. After the initial formulation of unambiguously good, pure, and noble Christ figures of the 1950s and 1960s, a "demythologized" phase (with

ineffectual, ambiguous, dark, and even evil Christ figures) occurred in the early 1970s that reflected that era's societal upheaval. The late 1970s began an explosion of nostalgic films, with a return of the feel-good and pure Christ figures. Not sustaining a continuous trend, but popping up sporadically like court jesters, were comic, "burlesque," unlikely, and very human Christ figures. The 1980s began the final transformative stage of "remythologized," complex, ironic, more "realistic" Christ figures who were mostly good and could still save the world. Since then, these transformative stages have been revisited and mixed together in various ways.

Today, after more than half a century, Christ figures are very much alive and well in movies. Indeed, the profusion of them seemingly indicates that, as we face economic, ecological, political, and international crises, our society *needs* Christ figures because they perform, on a psychological and spiritual level, a subtle work of salvation.

I created the core structure of this book for a Master's thesis 17 years ago, but as a life-long fan of sci-fi films, this book's roots go way back to the sci-fi movies and books that I loved as a kid. Those strange and wondrous stories about other worlds, other times, and other dimensions sparked my first encounters with transcendence. Those initial transcendent feelings came before I had any real, internalized Christian faith. Sci-fi, in a way, gave me my first "religious experience." For me, science fiction led to spirituality. Today, I see sci-fi Christ figures as a type of *preparatio evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel) for the movie audiences of today's world.

### **About the Author**

Regarding the writer's adage of "write what you know," I have been a life-long fan of sci-fi films, and I have viewed almost every major film produced during the last fifty years as well as many of the low-budget ones. My published articles exploring aspects of film and religion have appeared in *The Journal of Religion and Film*, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, *Integra*, *The Mennonite*, and *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. My previous book was *The Gospel in Greasepaint* (Piccadilly Books). I served as a pastor in several churches and as a staff member with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. However, I later became more interested in communications and less interested in traditional pastoral ministry. For nearly 15 years, I've been a full-time, professional corporate/technical writer, and my freelance writing experience goes back over 25 years (with over 100 published articles). From preaching as a pastor to technical writing, I have excelled at taking complex and/or abstract concepts and making them understandable and relevant to an audience. This is confirmed by my having won over two dozen awards for communication excellence. I have a B.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Kansas, an M.Div. in Pastoral Ministry from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and an M.A. in Communication Arts from the University of Notre Dame. I also have done postgraduate work in film studies at the University of Dayton, among many other educational experiences.

### **Intended Audience**

I believe my book would appeal to people who like science fiction and/or movies, as well as people who are looking for spiritual connections in cultural experiences. The primary audience of this book would include college-educated people interested in film, religion, and/or cultural studies as well as science fiction fans. (Science fiction movies have gone mainstream, however,

since half of the top-ten highest grossing films in the United States have been sci-fi.) Moreover, since seminary and university classes about religion and media have grown increasingly popular, I see this book as potentially making a valuable contribution as a text in such a class. To make the book accessible to any interested reader, however, I minimized jargon and provided a glossary of terms near the end.

### **Comparison to Other Books**

No other book competes directly with mine. Of the books that would probably be the closest equivalents, Peter Malone's *Movie Christs and Antichrists* (Crossroads, 1990) covered all movie genres and was much more superficial in examining them. The other is Gabriel McKee's *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), which was also much more general in terms of media and religious themes it covered. These are great books, and they supplement and complement (rather than compete with) the approach in my book.

While other books have looked at Christ figures in various film genres, my book is unique in several ways:

- Most such books look at films in isolation and merely point out the Christ figures. I examine how they have changed historically through more than half a century, what might be the causes of the transformation, and what it all may mean to us today.
- Instead of just a few samples of movies with Christ figures, I comprehensively examine an entire genre, analyzing over 100 films (with greater depth given to the more significant films).
- I also thoroughly examine what constitutes “sound” characteristics of a Christ figure that are rooted in biblical tradition and not mere Hollywood conventions. An important related issue is how to evaluate the characteristics. Some people are oblivious to the symbolism, while others seemingly see a Christ figure under every bush. When is an accumulation of such characteristics “enough” for the protagonist to be considered an authentic Christ figure? Many authors seemingly take a “we’ll know it when we see it” approach. Although there have been vague pronouncements that the parallels must be “significant” and not trivial, no one (to my knowledge) has given clear, objective guidelines to establish what exactly constitutes “significant.” (This issue also goes beyond sci-fi movies into other movie and media genres.)
- I also address why science fiction contains more Christ figures than any other film genre. This statistic may seem surprising since sci-fi (as part of its DNA) contains references to “science.” How could sci-fi contain a surplus of Christ figures when logical, rational, empirical science is supposedly an implacable enemy of intuitive, emotional, subjective religion in the minds of many? If that perception is true, science fiction should then be the movie genre containing the fewest Christ figures, not the most. What is it about science fiction films that caused this paradoxical abundance? To explain this paradox, therefore, my book also explores the relationship of science, science fiction, myth, religion, and Christ figures.

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## **Manuscript Length and Projected Completion Date**

About 135,000 words or 785 double-spaced pages (including footnotes, bibliography, and appendixes) to be completed in Fall 2009.

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## **Chapter 1: What Is this Subject and its Significance?**

“For as long as we humans have existed . . . there have been mythic storytellers. These are men and women who have taken the best knowledge of their time and place and combined it with a sense of the incompleteness of mankind and the fundamental mystery of existence, and then told stories of higher unknown possibility: Stories of fear and wonder. Stories of quest into unknown lands and return with magical gifts which transform the world. Stories of the beginning and the end of all things.

The myths that we learn as we are growing up provide us with guidance in life. . . . Myths alert us to the limitations of how we presently live and who we take ourselves to be, and lead us on toward what we are not yet.

The myth of the modern Western world has been science fiction.”<sup>1</sup>

—Alexei and Cory Panshin

“Christianity is, at core, not an abstract philosophy, but a story; not pure factual reportage, but a recounting of one life in order that other lives might be transformed. . . .

If the church has forgotten that the heart of its theology is story (God’s story which begins in Genesis, ‘Once upon a time,’ and ends in Revelation, ‘They live happily ever after’), if the church has concentrated too often on structure and ethics and dogma, then God’s story will be heard in other venues, such as the movie theater.”<sup>2</sup>

—Robert K. Johnston

“Movies are the icons and the stained glass windows of post-modern America.”<sup>3</sup>

—Charles Henderson

“Look at a movie, really look, and you will see the face of God.”<sup>4</sup>

—Richard Blake

### **Cinema, Spirituality, and Science Fiction**

Looking for evidence of myth and spiritual imagery in science fiction films may seem odd to many. As popularly conceived, science (the common denominator within science fiction) opposes religion, and science fiction contains only gee-whiz gadgets and bug-eyed aliens. So what can ray guns, rockets, and robots possibly have to do with religion?

Quite a lot it seems. Although many people may not notice them, science fiction films, when examined closely, contain a remarkable number of Christ figures. Occurrences in over a hundred films spanning over half a century are detailed in this book. With all these instances, science fiction seems to contain more Christ figures than any other film genre. What is it about science fiction films that caused them to produce this surprising abundance? What is it about the genre of science fiction that sets it apart from other genres?

To be science fiction and not some utterly other genre, the science fiction film formula must contain an ingredient of “science” in some (possibly remote and flawed) form.<sup>5</sup> Science fiction and science certainly do not have identical assumptions, ideology, goals, rules, and methods, but fiction without at least some DNA of science is . . . fantasy, horror, or some other genre. Yet, science—that crucial, distinctive, and essential seed of sci-fi—has been widely perceived (by liberal secularists as well as conservative believers)<sup>6</sup> as an ideological competitor that is hostile and destructive to religious beliefs. Some suppose that one may believe in religion *or* science, but not both. If such a win-lose, either-or relationship really exists between implacable enemies, would not spiritual symbolism in sci-fi films cease? Would not technology intertwined with theological implications be taboo? Would not science fiction be the film genre with the *fewest* Christ figures?

This, however, is most certainly not the case. If science requires logic and spirituality requires intuition, then the paradoxical plethora of sci-fi Christ figures apparently defies both. This seemingly illogical and counter-intuitive development indicates something in popular perceptions, conceptions, and/or assumptions is wrong. How then did logical, rational, secular roots seemingly sprout so much spiritual symbolism? Is there a strange and surprising synergy within science, science fiction, and spirituality?

Science is not as *incompatible* with religion as many believe (as Chapter 3 will discuss more deeply). The relationship between the two has undeniably been conflicted and ambivalent at times, but on the other hand, the bond between the two is surprisingly strong. Professor of Physics and Astronomy Chet Raymo quoted the

physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne by writing that there is a “God-shaped hole in many people’s lives.”<sup>7</sup> Raymo went on to write:

[M]any educated people in the Western world long wistfully for something akin to traditional religious faith, but they know there can be no turning back to a world of divine fiats and penny miracles. As Polkinghorne says, they can neither accept the idea of God nor quite leave it alone.

I am one of those people, trained in science, who cannot quite accept the idea of God nor quite leave it alone. I am less pessimistic than most, however, that science and religion must remain in conflict. It seems to me that science is part of the traditional religious quest for the God of creation.<sup>8</sup>

Quests are well known in science fiction. To travel on a story’s quest, science fiction may owe plot devices to scientific theories and conjectures, but it does not necessarily follow the rigorous rules, rational logic, skeptical philosophy, and academic worldview of the secular scientific disciplines.

Some authors have even argued that science fiction is an inherently spiritual, transcendent genre. Science fiction writer Bruce Sterling declared, “Science fiction dotes on the sublime, which ruptures the everyday and lifts the human spirit to the plateaus of high imagination.”<sup>9</sup> Although it was not meant in a religious way, professor and science fiction writer James E. Gunn’s motto of “save the world through science fiction”<sup>10</sup> certainly has a goal in common with many forms of

spirituality. Although there is rarely explicit religion per se in science fiction overall, David Hartwell wrote that there is:

a tradition of wonder and transcendence. . . . A sense of wonder, awe at the vastness of space and time, is at the root of the excitement of science fiction. . . . To say that science fiction is in essence a religious literature is an overstatement, but one that contains truth. SF is a uniquely modern incarnation of an ancient tradition: the tale of wonder. Tales of miracles, tales of great powers and consequences beyond the experience of people in your neighborhood, tales of the gods who inhabit other worlds and sometimes descend to visit ours, tales of humans traveling to the abode of the gods, tales of the uncanny: all exist now as science fiction.

Science fiction's appeal lies in its combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous.<sup>11</sup>

Not only does general spirituality appear in science fiction films, of course, but symbolic representations of Christ also appear. Anton Karl Kozlovic noted:

The Science Fiction (SF) genre is replete with hi-tech gadgetry, space ships, laser beams, angry androids, crafty computers, rogue robots and alien beings of every conceivable description. Less well [known] is its capacity to harbour religious figures. Particularly Christ-figures, that is, on-screen characters who in significant ways represent the life, actions or attitudes of Jesus Christ

according to the Gospels. These religious subtexts are frequently missed by the public, especially those who consider 'science' and 'religion' to be mutually exclusive categories. Yet, it is these powerful religious resonances that can turn an ordinary film into an exceptional one.<sup>12</sup>

Christ figures appear as mythic figures in such films. Many people may think that myths in western civilization died long ago along with beliefs in the Greek gods, but that is a narrow—and mistaken—view of myth. I want to rescue myth from the common perception of myth being antiquated and irrelevant to our society.

Not only have mythic Christ figures appeared in numerous science fiction films viewed in our society, but their complex characterizations evolved through the decades. From the essential formulation in 1951 with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Christ figures revealed radically different faces as they transformed through a half century. Tracking the wild divergences reveals a thickening of the plot. Characters sweep the spectrums from good to evil, from humorous to tragic, from bumbling to superheroes, and from humans to aliens to machines. Their multifaceted portrayals include, among many others, the failed protagonist of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the sweet nostalgic figures in *E.T.* and *Superman*, the silly and parodic characters of *Groundhog Day* and *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, and the dark apocalyptic figures in the *Terminator* and *Matrix* trilogies. What are the possible causes for these changes in Christ figures? Possible answers to that question can be found by examining the cultural contexts of these films.

Finally, taking all the questions so far together, we must consider the implications. What does it all mean? What does it all signify to our society, to our world, and to each and every one of us? How do *reel* world Christ figures affect the *real* world?

This book, then, explores some profound questions. The following chapters examine the various elements that form science fiction films, the relationship of science (fiction) and religion, and the various elements that comprise Christ figures. This book analyzes how the Christ figures function mythically inside each film, how they relate to each other, how they transform through the years, how cultural factors may contribute to this evolution, and what this phenomenon may mean to us.<sup>13</sup>

Besides discussing general principles, this book analyzes individual movies and discusses their contexts and implications. The more culturally significant and important films<sup>14</sup> (at least for the purpose here) will receive extensive analyses. Others will receive briefer synopses.

Various approaches to analyzing movies exist. In *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. described three such approaches. *Theological* criticism studies “the ways in which films express classic religious concerns, sensibilities, and themes. . . . The basic assumption behind theological criticism is that certain films can be properly understood, or can be best understood, as an elaboration on or the questioning of a particular religious tradition, text, or theme.”<sup>15</sup> A film critic using *mythological* criticism “operates on the assumption that myth is a predominant component of any particular film [and] wishes to illuminate those characteristics or elements of the film

that tap into universal human feelings and reactions.”<sup>16</sup> *Ideological* criticism examines the “system of representations, perceptions, and images that [encourage] men and women to ‘see’ their specific place in a historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, and necessary.”<sup>17</sup>

These three approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To analyze Christ figures and their significance, the approach in this book is primarily theological. However, how these films function mythologically is also very important.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the ideological background (cultural and historical context) is also considered along the way.

This book notes the historical and societal context of science fiction films that were produced (usually) and viewed in the United States as well as the influence the films had on American culture.<sup>19</sup> Although most American video stores have a foreign film section, foreign language films have appeared relatively rarely in American theaters and have made little direct impact on American culture as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Although quality films have been made in other countries and languages, English-language films (made in North America, Britain, and Australia) have led world cinema’s sci-fi sphere, and “American concerns and aesthetics have been dominant in the genre.”<sup>21</sup> (Some may find this situation insulting or unfortunate, but it is the reality we have.)

## **Significance**

I have listed the various questions addressed in this book, but perhaps some will still wonder: “Why care about what sci-fi flicks say about spirituality? Why look

at imaginative reinterpretations of old religious themes? Why view a multitude of movie messiahs that appeared in the last half century? Why bother with all this work? What can all this possibly matter?"

Concerning movies in general, the editors of *Metaphilm* wrote that if "more people go to movies than read books, than vote, than go to church, than do anything else of cultural, political, and metaphysical significance, then we think it's time movies were given the serious . . . attention that they deserve."<sup>22</sup> Anton Karl Kozlovic wrote that "commercial feature films were the most persuasive art form of the 20th century, and they will continue to be so well into the 21st century."<sup>23</sup> The persuasiveness of movies stems from imaginative, multi-sensory storytelling. Storytelling and science might seem to have little in common, yet Albert Einstein, although he is iconically identified with intelligence and knowledge, said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."<sup>24</sup>

Imagination can be found in developing a new theory of physics or telling a new story. In their introduction to a collection of stories from around the world, Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield wrote:

The priceless gift of any story lies in its power to spark a fire in our imagination. A great story has the capacity to transcend the boundaries of our personal worlds, with their sorrows and joys, and introduce the universality of human experience. . . .

Our imagination is touched by the stories of fairy tales and mythology and of great people who have changed the world around them through the power of their own wisdom and love. . . .

A priceless message of such timeless stories lies in their capacity to move us to look anew at our own lives and our own stories. Great stories teach us not to despair, not to be swamped by sorrow or hopelessness; they remind us in clear and inspiring ways of our own possibilities and potential. The stories of others serve as examples and guides for us, teaching us that the possibility of great courage, love, and compassion can be part of our own story.<sup>25</sup>

This book describes many great stories (and some not-so-great stories) contained in over a hundred<sup>26</sup> films. The stories in all these films exhibit varying levels of a mythic resonance because they all contain links to that which Christians believe to be the “greatest story ever told.”

Merely pointing out random Christ figures in cinematic stories could potentially be an exercise analogous to target-shooting metal ducks at a carnival arcade, but dinging ducks has little value. To uncover the true significance, we must also examine what such a phenomena means in and to our culture. Perhaps we can find out if it is true, as Frank McConnell wrote, that stories “matter and matter deeply, because they are the best way to save our lives.”<sup>27</sup>

What this study will mean to any particular reader will depend on what presuppositions, openness of mind, and faith (or lack of faith) the reader brings to this

text as well as to the text of the films. At minimum, even if the reader has no religious faith, recognizing the disguised spiritual symbolism on the screen adds new levels of meaning to these movies.<sup>28</sup> It is also instructive to see how savior symbolism has subtly permeated the collective unconsciousness of a seemingly secular culture.

At the other extreme, a reader who professes Christian belief may find that the variety of cosmic Christologies enhances one's understanding of Jesus. Concerning this possibility, Steve Lansingh wrote:

The incarnation of Christ is a mystery we rarely allow ourselves to fathom. The idea that a person can be both fully human and fully God is impossible for our mortal minds to comprehend. . . . Christ figures in literature and film help us explore the humanity of a person whose life mirrors Christ's in some way—revealing the thoughts and emotions that Jesus himself might have experienced. These Christ figures reveal only a single dimension of who Jesus is, but combining these slivers of truth, we can begin to see reality peek through.<sup>29</sup>

One issue needs to be addressed, however, before beginning the film journey. One might wonder whether we can truly find the “meaning” in a movie without knowing the intent of the director. Although some directors and screenwriters have revealed the Christ imagery they had in mind,<sup>30</sup> the meaning one finds in these movies may be more complex and go far beyond the conscious or even unconscious intent of the filmmakers. Although directors are most often identified as “authors” of

a movie, as will be seen in the stories behind several of the films in this book, screenwriters and producers and others can also play crucial roles in “authorship.”

In practical terms, even if we assume the director is the primary “author” of a particular film, how much can we really know about the director’s intentions on any topic related to his or her film? When we watch a movie, we don’t have the director sitting in the theater seat beside us. We can’t ask him what he intended. We can’t ask her what the movie is supposed to mean. In deciding what a movie means, a director’s intentions are not irrelevant, but they are usually not available.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, even if we would know the director’s intentions, intentions do not equate with results. Intentions often meet with unexpected obstacles and lead to unintended consequences. Hence, a director’s intentions are not as important as the results.

In *Film and Religion: An Introduction*, Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Torry commented about their approach to this issue:

We are interested in interpreting the film itself, not the details of how it was created. In other words, meaning resides in the text . . . for the simple reason that the text is what we have. We have neither an author to interrogate nor a compelling reason to believe that an author’s statements about the text would be any more authoritative than the text itself.<sup>32</sup>

More on this topic will be discussed in the concluding chapter, but we ultimately have to decide for ourselves what the film may have meant to the director, and even more importantly, what the movie means to us.

What are the meanings of the films in this book? To discover their significance, we must question the obvious, uncover the hidden subtexts, make conscious what is unconscious, and make visible what is invisible to the eye. “The real voyage of discovery,” said novelist and art critic Marcel Proust, “consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”<sup>33</sup>

Most who pick up this book will not read it cover to cover—although I highly recommend sequentially reading the first four complete chapters (the “theory”) and then at least the introductions of Chapters 5 through 10 and then all of Chapter 11 (the “practice”) before skipping around the movie sections as if they were independent encyclopedia articles. Most will probably read the sections describing their favorite movies first, then go back and read some of the explanatory sections in a nonsequential, somewhat haphazard way. For that eventuality, the various sections have some redundancy of material to reach those surfing by.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, since this book is meant to be accessible to a wide range of readers and not just ivory tower types, the jargon used in the fields of theology, science fiction, and film studies has been minimized. For definitions of jargon that remains, see *High Definitions: Glossary of Significant Terms*.

## **Mapping the Journey**

This is a quest, a journey to find the personal and cultural significance of a phenomenon in films that has existed since the middle of the 20th century. On any journey, a map is a useful or even essential tool to have. Here is a textual map of the various roads that lead toward the goal.

- **Chapter 1: What Is this Subject and its Significance?** would get the introductory “You are Here” arrow if this were a graphic map.
- **Chapter 2: What Really Is a Science Fiction Film?** attempts to define the surprisingly slippery term, discusses how its components relate, the relationship with fantasy and horror genres, and how science fiction functions as mythology.
- **Chapter 3: What Is the Relationship of Science (Fiction) and Religion?** describes how science, science fiction, and spirituality interact in seemingly paradoxical ways.
- **Chapter 4: What Is an Authentic Christ Figure?** lists and discusses the nature, characteristics, and evaluation of a Christ figure in a film.
- **Chapter 5: What Is Genre Transformation?** Discusses how and why a movie genre changes over time.
- **Chapter 6: Formation—Making the Mold** is the first of the major sections of this book consisting of analyses of various science fiction films, according to their type of genre transformation, and what, in the final analysis, it all means. This first one shows how it all began. (Note that most of the analyses contain “spoilers,” and readers who want pristine movie viewings may want to view the videos before reading the respective sections.)

- **Chapter 7: Demythologization—Breaking the Mold** reveals the historical context of the crisis of the traditional Christ figure's fall from grace.
- **Chapter 8: Nostalgia—Remembering the Mold** shows the superhuman good and pure Christ figure rising again in the hearts of movie audiences.
- **Chapter 9: Burlesque—Mocking the Mold** shows an alternate, humorous Christ figure full of human foibles.
- **Chapter 10: Remythologization—Remixing the Mold** shows the final stage of transformation, a darker, more complex, but still mostly good Christ figure saving the world.
- **Chapter 11: Movie Messiahs and the Meaning of Life** ties the threads together and discusses “so what?” (although meaning is addressed throughout the various analyses). If the meaning of it all is not important, then this is, at best, an interesting but academic exercise or, at worst, a “Where’s Waldo”<sup>35</sup> or “Trivial Pursuit”<sup>36</sup> of Christian symbolism.
- **Appendix I: Film Chronology** is the first of various appendixes that contribute indirectly to this task. The chronology lists the films analyzed according to the year of their release. Elsewhere individual films from a series are grouped together under the same heading, and all the films are divided up among the five stages of transformation (which are generally but not completely linear).
- **Appendix II: The (Meta)Physics of Resurrection—The Converging of Religion, Science Fiction, and Science** looks at the religious background of resurrection (a key signifier of a Christ figure) as well as the hypothetical

secular scientific methods (the science behind the science fiction) that could imitate the phenomena on some level in the future (or already have in fiction).

- **Appendix III: The Hero's Mythic Journey in *Superman*** is a look at the first *Superman* film as a hero's journey according to the view of mythology found in the work of Joseph Campbell.
- **Appendix IV: Middle Earth's Messianic Mythology Remixed—Gandalf's Death and Resurrection in Novel and Film** shows that Christ figures are found in genres other than science fiction. This section also contains in more condensed form the characteristics of a Christ figure and the relationship with myth.
- **Appendix V: History Lessons—Time-Travel Films as Postmodern Parables** discusses postmodernism and some of the influence it has had on films.
- **Appendix VI: Cinema Divina Resources—Unmasking the Spirituality of *Spider-Man*** lists resources for contemplation and discussion of the spiritual themes in this film series.
- **Appendix VII: These Are my Bodies—Aliens, Humans, and Machines** lists the types of incarnation “bodies” the Christ figures in this book have and their (whether alien, human, or machine) surprising commonality.
- **Appendix VIII: Theologies of Violence—Servant Versus Warrior** lists how Christ figures engage in conflict, either sacrificially absorbing violence or fighting back.

- **Appendix IX: Apocalypse, How?** discusses the nature of apocalypse and lists the various ways the films in this book show how the world as we know it ends . . . or almost ends.
- **High Definitions: Glossary of Significant Terms** explains important terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers (although jargon has been minimized throughout the book).
- **Works Cited** lists the many sources this book is based on if readers would desire further study of a topic.

Now, are you ready? Let the quest begin . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Alexei and Cory Panshin, *The World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989) ix.

<sup>2</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000) 78, 80.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Henderson, "Why Movies Matter," *GodWeb* 11 July 2005, 9 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.godweb.org/whymovies.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Blake, "From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 6.2 (October 2002), 9 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/peepshow.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup>Granted the "science" portrayed in science fiction films is all too often "bad" science or pseudoscience used merely as a flimsy excuse for the plot. Even in better

movies, basic laws of physics are routinely broken for the sake of drama, and plot developments are justified with pseudoscientific technobabble. Nevertheless, references to space exploration, time travel, genetic mutation, and other extraordinary things are extrapolated from real (or at least imagined) science and technology. See for example, Sidney Perkowitz, *Hollywood Science: Movies Science, and the End of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), Lawrence Krauss, *The Physics of Star Trek* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), Leroy Dubeck, et.al., *Fantastic Voyages: Learning Science through Science Fiction Films* (New York: AIP Press, 1995), and Tom Rogers, *Insultingly Stupid Movie Physics* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Hysteria, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>The often antagonistic relationship between religion and science is perhaps most famous in the battle between evolution and creationism. But these conflicts are not necessarily inherent in the nature of science and religion. The conflicts are among people with particular understandings of science and particular understandings of religion. People with atheistic understandings of science, such as Richard Dawkins, certainly have verbally attacked religion. Religious groups have also attacked what they perceive as increasing secularism. Religious zealotry has even literally attacked secular symbols, such as the World Trade Center.

<sup>7</sup>“There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus” is often (inaccurately) attributed to Blaise Pascal (although it does paraphrase his theology).

<sup>8</sup>Chet Raymo, *Skeptics and True Believers: The Exhilarating Connection Between Science and Religion* (New York: Walker and Company, 1998) 1-2. Much the same could also be said for, among others, filmmakers ranging from Ingmar Bergman to Paul Verhoeven.

<sup>9</sup>Bruce Sterling, "Science Fiction," *Encyclopaedia Britannica 2007 Ultimate Reference Suite* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Lesley L. Smith in "Interview with 2007 SFWA Grand Master James E. Gunn," *Electric Spec* 2.1 (31 Jan. 2007), 9 June 2007 <<http://www.electricspec.com/Smith2.html>>.

<sup>11</sup>David Hartwell, *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction* (New York: Walker and Co., 1984) 42. He talks here of literature rather than film, and although differences exist between film and literature in science fiction, the principles are similar. In fact, what he says here about literature may be even more true about film.

<sup>12</sup>Anton Karl Kozlovic, "From Holy Aliens to Cyborg Saviours: Biblical Subtexts in Four Science Fiction Films," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 5.2 (Oct. 2001), 5 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/cyborg.htm>>. An example of a Christ figure turning an ordinary film into an exceptional one can be seen in action by comparing the theatrical release of *The Abyss* and DVD version *The Abyss: Special Edition*. The Christ-figure-saving-the-world theme is obvious in the additions to the DVD, and the change in emotional impact is striking. The longer, back-to-the-

original-idea version is superior overall and also makes more logical sense than the theatrical version that was shortened (too much) for time considerations.

<sup>13</sup>And along the way, the “true” nature of science fiction films, the conflicted but close relation of science and religion, codes and subtext, “false” myths and “true” myths, and other related issues will be analyzed.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, the titles with asterisks in Appendix 1. Even among English-language films, which are the only ones I looked at (with the exception of the silent *Metropolis*), I will not exhaustively cover every possible film.

<sup>15</sup>Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) 13-14.

<sup>16</sup>Martin and Ostwalt 68.

<sup>17</sup>Martin and Ostwalt 119.

<sup>18</sup>Appendix III: “The Hero’s Mythic Journey in *Superman*” is written from a perspective of purely mythological criticism.

<sup>19</sup>In the world of cinema, America has dominated the production of science fiction films. If this book were entitled *Christ Figures in American Science Fiction Films*, it would be largely, but not entirely descriptive.

<sup>20</sup>Perhaps the biggest exception to this, at least among American evangelical Christians, was *The Passion of the Christ*, but since the language was ancient Aramaic and Latin, it was a “foreign language” film to the people of every country.

Furthermore, Mel Gibson, the director and producer, was an Australian who has worked in Hollywood for many years.

<sup>21</sup>Phil Hardy, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction* (New York: Overlook Press, 1995) xii. American science fiction has also dominated the literary genre in the last half century in spite of early visionaries across the sea, such as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells.

<sup>22</sup>“Writing for Metaphilm,” *Metaphilm*, 9 Nov. 2008  
<<http://metaphilm.com/index.php/writers/>>.

<sup>23</sup>Anton Karl Kozlovic, “Jesus Covered In a Secular Wrapper: The Christ figure in Popular Films,” *Kinema* Fall 2005, 2 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/kozl052.htm>>.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in George Sylvester Viereck, “What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview by George Sylvester Viereck” *The Saturday Evening Post* 202 (26 Oct. 1929): 113.

<sup>25</sup>Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of the Spiritual Path from Around the World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 7.

<sup>26</sup>This number does not include movies that are mentioned only incidentally or that are discussed only in an appendix. The complete list of all film references, totaling about 150, can be found in the Primary Sources section of Works Cited.

<sup>27</sup>Frank McConnell, *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 3.

<sup>28</sup>Spiritual symbolism does not apply only to Christ figures of course.

Although it did not contain a Christ figure, 2009's *Knowing* (dir. Alex Proyas) packed an astonishingly large number of biblical references into its closing scenes. Prophecy, Ezekiel's vision, angels, apocalypse, Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, and a new heaven and earth all converged together (through a lens tinted by the "space gods" idea popularized by Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods*). All this symbolism was lost on baffled viewers who were without basic biblical literacy.

<sup>29</sup>Steve Lansingh, "Christ Figures are Found in the Strangest Places: A Study of James Cameron's Sci-Fi Movies," *The Film Forum* April 1999, 21 July 2003 <<http://www.thefilmforum.com/columns/990424.html>>.

<sup>30</sup>See the discussions on *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951 and 2008), *E. T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Superman: The Movie*, *Superman Returns*, and *RoboCop*.

<sup>31</sup>Perhaps they can be discerned indirectly. Perhaps we can glean hints from movie reviews, other information on the Internet, or a DVD commentary track. Some DVD commentaries are priceless in that regard, but others are basically filled with blather.

<sup>32</sup>Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Torry, *Film and Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007) 5. They also wrote (xi) that to find the broader religious meaning of a film we have to "go outside the film into the social and political culture within which and for which a film was created. That is, films frequently addressed cultural issues under debate in the larger society. Sometimes these issues were of broad national importance, while other times the questions

mattered only to a small subsection of society, perhaps as small as the director and his colleagues. Big issue or small, we realized that we needed to ask about each film's cultural context to interpret its use of religion."

<sup>33</sup>Marcel Proust quoted in Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentis Hall, 2005) ix.

<sup>34</sup>Redundancy of critical systems helps a spacecraft fulfill its mission and avoid catastrophic failure, and a measured redundancy of words can sometimes help attain a communications goal and avoid failure.

<sup>35</sup>Anton Karl Kozlovic wrote, "Hunting for Christ-figures in popular films is fast becoming the religious equivalent of a "Where's Waldo" adventure, particularly within the SF genre." "Save Us! Recognizing Christ-Figures in the Movies,"

*Metaphilm* 11 Aug. 2003, 9 Nov. 2008

<[http://metaphilm.com/index.php/detail/save\\_us/](http://metaphilm.com/index.php/detail/save_us/)>. "Where's Wally" ("Where's Waldo" in the United States and Canada) was a series of children's books first created by the British illustrator Martin Handford in 1987, which became a cultural phenomenon in the 1990s. The goal was to find the hidden title character in complex illustrations featuring many other people and items.

<sup>36</sup>"Trivial Pursuit" was a board game, first created in 1979, that reached bestselling status in the early 1980s. It was played by answering questions of general knowledge and popular culture trivia. The original game went through many different versions with different categories of questions.