



JESUS IN FILM AND THE APPEAL OF PURITY

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Abstract

The history of Jesus as he appears in film has been white-washed for a century. Certainly white-supremacist attitudes in the motion picture industry are an explanation for this injustice; however, one explanation that has not been fully explored is the reality that whites have always felt a sense of purity concerning their racial self-view. This paper explores that possibility with the help of important thinkers who have discussed the notion of purity. Offering an answer for what motivated directors throughout the course of cinematic history to exclude actors of color from playing the historical Jesus, the research methodology herein includes the following: the incorporation of film theory; close examination and analyses of historical and rhetorical texts; one-on-one interviews; and, an inclusion of media sources to contextualize the central issue of the dangers of racial purity. Unfortunately, this appeal of purity continues presently, and must be exposed any time it is attempted, because of its rhetorical danger.

Keywords

Jesus In Film, Whiteness Studies, Purity, Film Studies

Introduction:

When Ridley Scott's production company helped create the 2015 made-for-TV movie *Killing Jesus*, he felt pressure to cast the role of Jesus ethnically and racially accurate. Coming off the film *Exodus*; in which, major roles were given to white actors to play Egyptians, Scott decided to cast Haaz Sleiman as Jesus in *Killing Jesus*. Sleiman was born in the United Arab Emirates, raised in Lebanon, moved to the United States at age 21, and came out as gay in 2017. This was one of the first times in entertainment and film history that an actor, who was cast as Jesus, was born and raised in the same part of the world as the historical Jesus. Previously the role of Jesus was exclusively given to white actors. Sleiman's humility and gratitude seems clear, when describing his approach to portraying the religious figure: "I only thought about one thing, which is to be as honest as possible. But what makes this easier is that how could you not fall in love with Jesus and what He stood for? It's that simple for me. It's like one of the most beautiful things that you can apply to your life. And I'm still trying to, cause it's not easy. 'Love your enemy. Judge not so that you not be judged. Forgive them, so that you be forgiven....' If you do that, it's freedom and it's the truth. For me, it is at least" (Goodwyn). Sleiman's feelings on Jesus certainly align with the Jesus of the New Testament; additionally, the time for a person of color to play Jesus—another person of color—was way overdue; especially, in the role of a religious and historical figure as significant as Jesus. What took so long for this to happen? Why was the role of Jesus the exclusive territory of white actors? Certainly quite a few answers to those questions exist; however, one explanation that needs to be considered for why actors of color were excluded from portraying a person of color, and why white actors were chosen instead is the notion of *white purity*—this dangerous appeal needs to be examined and explored as a reason for the cinematic white-washing of Jesus and the appeal also deserves scrutiny when made in public dis-course. The argument for the consideration of this appeal as an answer to the question of why actors of color were historically excluded from the role of Jesus in cinema includes the follow-ing: the incorporation of film theory; close examination and analyses of historical and rhetorical texts, one-on-one interviews; and, an inclusion of media sources to contextualize the central issue of the dangers of racial purity.

Jesus in Film: theoretical considerations and a brief historical overview

Contemplating our relationship with movies in *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* Richard Rushton formulates the notion of ‘filmic reality’ by asking several questions which inform his theoretical inquiries concerning cinema including “What do films do?...In what ways might films influence the ways we think about the world?... In what ways do films contribute to our understanding of reality?” Continuing, he encourages his reader to consider “What do films allow us to realize?” Quoting the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who summed up the power of film by claiming “Cinema Produces Reality,” Rushton’s book length argument is similar and can be synthesized by the statement “...films are what they produce” (Rushton). Films are a very powerful art form which have the ability to reveal how we see ourselves in relation to the world. If the films themselves can help us understand ourselves, and what makes us human—ideas, emotions, spirituality, our place in the world, etc.—then the history of film certainly has the power to reveal realities over time. In other words, certain cinematic histories can reveal realities, as well as the particular films themselves.

In *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* W. Barnes Tatum discusses the cinematic history of Jesus, arguing for both the filmmaker and the viewer “...the problem of the cinematic Jesus encompasses at least four dimensions: the *artistic*, the *literary*, the *historical*, and the *theological*” (Tatum). Under the *artistic* category Tatum briefly discusses the issue of the appearance of Jesus, and what he looked like on screen, while never following up on this important aspect of Jesus in film. In a rather astonishing passage, Tatum—a biblical scholar—relegates the responsibility of conceiving the appearance of Jesus to society, instead of the church by suggesting “Preconceptions about Jesus’ visual appearance need not be derived from church attendance or membership” (Tatum). An entire religion—Christianity—is largely based on the existence of one figure: Jesus. The Church insists that this spiritual figure lived and breathed at one time. If the Church cannot substantiate, or at least discuss, Jesus’ race, ethnicity, language, gender, and other identifying characteristics, then Jesus is relegated to the status of myth. In other words, the actual person may not have even existed—just listen to the message, and forget about the messenger. That may be OK for believers, but for objective non-believers, skepticism about the central figure of a major religion, and the religion itself, will continue unless this important piece of Christianity is properly confronted and discussed. In fact, Tatum seems to think the historical, and cultural accuracy of portraying Jesus in film as attempted by directors and producers is a “...mundane issue...,” although, he claims that in fact this is something that moviemakers have attempted throughout the years. If he is correct, then directors and producers have done a dreadful job addressing the ethnic and racial verisimilitude of Jesus on screen. That portrayal began with the film *From the Manger to the Cross*—a silent-era film, which debuted on 14 October 1912 in New York at the Wanamaker Auditorium (Tatum).

The list of films; in which, Jesus was a central figure begins with this motion picture. The role of Jesus in *From the Manger to the Cross* was played by a white English actor named Robert Henderson Bland. Four years later, D.W. Griffith directed *Intolerance*; a year after *Birth of a Nation*; in which, Griffith portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as heroic figures to the delight of then President Woodrow Wilson. In fact, at that film’s conclusion, straight-haired pale Jesus seems to bless the United States, after the Klan saves white women from white actors in blackface marauding and raping white women. Jesus was played in *Intolerance* by another white English actor named Howard Gaye; in which, Jesus who taught compassion and tolerance, was crucified by the Jews. So Griffith managed to attach white Jesus to both anti-semitism and white supremacy with these two films. In 1927 Cecil B. DeMille directed *The King of Kings*, which Tatum claims “...became the most widely viewed Jesus film in the world over the next half century” (Tatum). In this film, Jesus was played by the white English actor H.B. Warner, who was born in London. DeMille’s films have been widely panned over the years for their lack of historical accuracy, notable by Pauline Kael, who claimed DeMille “...falsified history more than anyone else” (Kozlovic). So it comes as no surprise that DeMille’s Jesus was played by a white actor. These three films all produced in the silent era cast white English actors in the role of Jesus. That trend would continue well beyond the silent era, beginning with several films released in the 1950’s and 1960’s (IMDB), (Blum).

Ben-Hur (1959) was produced for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer by Sam Zimbalist and ran four hours. The epic cast Claude Heater as Jesus—a white actor from Oakland, California. In 1961 *King of Kings* was released and produced by Samuel Bronston Productions. In this film a long-straight haired, fair skinned Jeffrey Hunter from New Orleans, Louisiana played Jesus. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) directed by George Stevens and produced by George Stevens Productions cast the white Swedish actor Max Von Sydow as Jesus. The trend of casting whites as Jesus would continue into the 1970’s and 1980’s (IMDB).

John Krish and Peter Sykes directed *Jesus* (1979), which starred the English born actor Brian Deacon in the role of Jesus. Again, his appearance in the film is consistent with the way; in which, Jesus had been portrayed since the silent era: fair skinned and straight haired. In 1988 Martin Scorsese directed *The Last Temptation of Christ* based on the Nikos Kazantzakis novel of the same name. The film inspired boycotts and some controversy for the way; in which, Jesus was portrayed. Produced by Universal Pictures, the blonde haired white Wisconsinite Willem DeFoe was cast in the lead—interior monologue brings the viewer into the thoughts of the character, as he is seen as a somewhat reluctant messiah. The last film of note takes the casting of white Jesus to a much more

disturbing level, evoking the blackface of the minstrel show, and the yellow-face of Hollywood, seen in characters such as Mr. Yunioshi played by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).

Diane Sawyer interviewed Mel Gibson in 2004 for ABCNEWS Primetime; in which, the actor/director confessed the bottoms he experienced from a drug and alcohol problem ten years prior. Gibson turned to Christianity, which helped him overcome his problems, and inspired him to direct *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Gibson told Sawyer his goal with the film was to interpret the Gospels as best as he could. The film was immensely successful grossing over \$600 Million worldwide. The actor that Gibson chose to help him in this project was the blue-eyed caucasian actor Jim Caviezel born in Mount Vernon, Washington. For Caviezel the project was grueling, as he experienced numerous health problems from the filming. So the physical torture that Caviezel endured during filming at least somewhat approached the pain that the Jesus experienced, as he was led to the cross over 2,000 years ago. The on-screen violence is jarring to the point that a contemporary review in *Deseret News* describes a scene which "...includes the graphic depiction of flesh being ripped from a human body. It's portrayed so vividly, so realistically, that you may not get the sight or sound of it out of your mind for days" (Film Review). The question emerges: if Gibson wanted to portray the violence inflicted upon Jesus accurately and realistically, then why did he portray the race and ethnicity of Jesus so inaccurately? Gibson went to extreme lengths to capture the violence, and he also made sure to keep the dialogue in the film as historically accurate as possible by scripting the characters to speak Aramaic, and Hebrew—two languages Jesus would have probably spoken. So Gibson committed to making the film as realistically as possible, except for the casting of the most important character in the film, who was played a white American. Gibson seemed to add insult to injury by not only casting Caviezel in the lead, but as the *Deseret News* also noted in the review, Gibson and his team made sure Caviezel wore "...brown-colored contact lenses to disguise his blue eyes" (Film Review). This is almost literally black-facing, relegating the role of Jesus to that of the racist comedy and degradation associated with minstrelsy. Jesus as a minstrel figure? Why did that not spark significant outrage publicly? That is the danger of not considering race and ethnicity when portraying historical figures on screen. This white-washing of Jesus on screen demonstrated by the aforementioned films in the twentieth century was merely an extension of how the image of Jesus was portrayed in culture writ large during that same time.

White Jesus: a brief history

In order to connect the white-washing of Jesus on screen with the appeal of purity a historical perspective of the white iconographic Jesus seems necessary. Why was Jesus presented in film, painting, and culture as white, when he was not white? Tracing this question back 500 years, Edward Blum and Paul Harvey in *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* claim the figure of Jesus in the United States "...rose to become a conflicted icon of white supremacy..." (Blum). The origins of this white iconography in the United States began in Europe, and can be seen in the fine arts during the High Renaissance, as DaVinci placed Jesus at the center of the table pale-skinned and fair-haired. Also during that time, in *Salvator Mundi* Jesus is pale and fair haired. Into the Baroque period Jesus is pictured as pale-skinned, and even Rembrandt's *Head of Christ* without grand imagery, lighting and capturing Jesus as almost working-class looking still has Jesus as rather pale skinned and even blue eyed (15 Famous and Influential Paintings of Jesus).

Once white Jesus made it onto the shores of America though, the connection between whiteness and Jesus developed into a much darker, sinister saga. Blum and Harvey attach spiritual supremacy to this whitening of Jesus in America: "By wrapping itself with the alleged form of Jesus, whiteness gave itself a holy face...but also helped create the perception that whiteness was sacred and everlasting" (Blum). Dating back to the mid nineteenth century when the United States expanded and was torn apart by civil war, the appearance of Jesus began to take on importance. Mormons presented Jesus as white. This white Jesus was also adopted by the Ku Klux Klan post-reconstruction as a figure who was crucified by larger political forces in his day, as Southern white supremacists felt they were by the North. Whites in general adopted the Nordic Jesus later in the 1920's, as non-white immigrants began to settle in the United States. According to Blum and Harvey, the merging of white Jesus with this anti-immigration ideology explained why whites "...presented their racial ideology as sacred..." (Blum). So whites adopted this racial self-view as sacred with white Jesus as a symbol of this racial holiness. The danger here is that whites look at themselves as belonging to a group, and position themselves publicly, as sacred, and holy—by extension the group positions itself as pure. People are not sacred, neither are the groups; to which, they belong. Every human who ever lived made, and continues to make mistakes. We tell lies, we judge others, we get jealous, envious, we are fearful, distrustful—we are imperfect beings. The risk for any person, or group, who claims to be pure is that when the rubber meets the road, and when humans are forced to genuinely confront themselves, we know we are not perfect; despite, the public persona we may present. Purity as an appeal relating to superiority creates inner conflict for individuals and groups that manifests itself in horrific and sociopathic ways, especially when the outer "purity," and inner humanity collide. This appeal received attention from two major twentieth-century thinkers—Kenneth Burke and James Baldwin. The discussion and interpretation of the appeal of purity through these two intellectuals can help understand what may have been the motive for the white-washing of Jesus; furthermore, the theoretical discussion of this appeal will prove beneficial as the appeal plays out in the public square.

Kenneth Burke, James Baldwin, and Purity

Kenneth Burke begins *A Grammar of Motives* with a statement on the purpose of writing his text, which is an attempt to answer the question: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (Burke). Burke desires to investigate the motives behind the ways; in which, people think and act in all situations whether they be “...metaphysical structures, in legal judgements, in poetry and fiction, in political and scientific works, in news, and in bits of gossip offered in random” (Burke). His methodology for getting to the crux of what motivates the thinking and actions of people in any of these situations—trivial or serious—includes five investigative tools: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. This *dramatistic pentad* helps in at least giving some kind of explanation for the motives behind a situation, even if disagreements occur. as to the circumstances surrounding each individual element in the pentad.

Burke’s text is divided up into three sections: Part 1 “Ways of Placement”; Part 2 “The Philosophic Schools”; and Part 3 “On Dialectic.” Part 1 discusses what Burke calls the “Scene-Act Ratio.” Burke establishes the relationship between the scene or setting of a drama, and the actions performed in that scene. In order to understand motives the intricacies involved with the relationship between the setting or scene of a drama and the actions performed in that setting need to be investigated. The relationship between scene and act can be understood in terms of dialectic and linguistics, as Burke continues Part 1 with a chapter titled “Antinomies of Definition.” In this section he argues that to define something or “To tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else” (Burke). Burke gives examples from philosophy to point out that often times we can define something by what it is not. This approach to understanding a concept or term is key to a discussion of what Burke understands the concept of purity to be.

In fact, Burke includes a section headed “The Paradox of Purity” in this chapter on definitions. His dialectic into purity involves an insistence on understanding the implications of what purity is, and what the opposite of purity would be. Burke’s discussion takes a turn for the spiritual, which fits nicely with the discussion of Jesus, who is the spiritual center of the Christian church and the focal point of the discussion here. Burke believes that when we insist a person is so spiritual that the person comes from God, then we are actually discussing what he calls a super-person, an absolute person or a pure person. Thus, if we are talking about a person coming from a non-person, in this case God, then we are talking about a non-person. According to Burke “...the impersonal would be synonymous with the negation of personality. Hence, Pure Personality would be the same as No Personality” (Burke). To argue that a person is pure, or free of any fault, or to insist that a person has never ever made a mistake is to argue that that person is not human. By extension that could certainly hold true for any group attempting to make the case that the group is pure. If a person, or a group pretends to be pure, then that person or group is living in an alternative fantasy world that does not exist. That is a dangerous world; in which, to live, because the rules and norms that the rest of us adhere to and follow are thrown out the window. This notion of existing under the false pretense of individual and group purity also received attention from the great public intellectual James Baldwin.

In Raoul Peck’s *I am Not Your Negro*, a film version of an unfinished manuscript by Baldwin titled *Remember this House*; in which, Baldwin recollects his relationships with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers, the subject of purity as it relates to whites receives attention. Baldwin’s analysis on white purity is interesting because it can help explain the the psychology and behavior of whites in general; therefore, that analysis can offer an unexplored, deeper explanation for why directors, and producers chose to portray Jesus as white, rather than a person of color. A telling passage from the film, also published in a booklet which accompanies the film, illustrates the destructive nature that clinging to this false notion of purity can have:

I have always been struck, in America,
by an emotional poverty so bottomless,
and a terror of human life, of human touch so deep,
that virtually no American appears able to
achieve any viable organic connection
between his public stance and his private life.
This failure of the private life
has always had the most devastating effect
on American public conduct,
and on black-white relations.
If Americans were not so terrified
of their private selves,
they would never have become so dependent
on what they call “the Negro Problem,
This problem, which they invented
in order to safeguard their purity,
has made of them criminals and monsters,
and it is destroying them.

The emotional poverty that Baldwin writes about needs to be understood in terms of whites believing that their race is not only superior to that of other races, but pure. The problem with positioning oneself as pure—or as Burke points out non-human—is that a group that believes in this superior purity has to maintain that purity both publicly and behind closed doors. Whites put on a public face of purity; yet, when that public stance collides with private reality whites fall apart.

When the day is done, and the pressures of the daily grind have concluded, whites have to go home to a wife, kids, a mortgage, bills and the same pressures and struggles that everyone else faces, no matter what racial category a person belongs to. The white male faces arguments and disagreements with his wife, his kids are failing algebra, the roof needs to be replaced, etc. These are not problems of the non-human realm. This is reality. Whites know that they are not superior; yet, they have to put on a public face of superiority. That is where purity becomes manifest.

As Baldwin suggests, that is the manufactured “negro problem.” Jim Crow, lynchings, separate but equal, voter suppression—these are all outward manifestations of an inward terror that results from a group, and individuals belonging to that group, living a lie. This appeal to purity has deep roots in American political and legal history; additionally, the appeal is continually made—albeit often subtle and implied—in the current public discourse.

As Judy Scales-Trent points out “In the United States, federal law enacted in 1790 stated that only ‘white persons’ could become citizens.” (Scales-Trent). In an interesting side-by-side comparison between the racial purity laws in Nazi Germany and the racial purity laws in Virginia, Scales-Trent in the essay “Racial Purity Laws in the United States and Nazi Germany. The Targeting Process,” discusses descent as a way to establish if someone was Aryan or Jewish in Nazi Germany, or white or negro in Virginia. In both cases this was done “to create a target for bad treatment: once the statutory target existed, it was easy to draft legislation excluding that group from the normal rights of citizenship” (Scales-Trent). With Virginia and Nazi Germany it was up to the individual to prove that they were “white,” if the state determined the individual was not. Individuals would have to go back generations to prove they had enough “white” blood in them; thus, giving the person all the political, social, and economic benefits of that race. None of that really matters; however, because as Scales-Trent outlines using several examples, biology was a ruse that both Nazi Germany and Virginia used to oppress. Biological categories were re-ally socio-legal categories. That did not stop neither Nazi Germany nor Virginia though from passing laws they couldn’t really enforce, like anti-miscegenation laws that criminalized sexual intercourse between targeted groups—Jews in Nazi Germany and Blacks in Virginia—and oppressor groups, which were whites in both cases. Both Nazi Germany and Virginia outlawed intermarriages between whites and targeted groups. As recently as 1932, intermarriage in Virginia was a felony punishable by 1-5 years in prison. These examples are further evidence of the extent; to which, whites have gone to “safeguard their purity” as Baldwin noted. These historical examples, along with current public and political discourse reveal white attempts to appeal to purity in order to persuade and retain power.

Repeatedly during the 2024 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump has claimed that immigrants attempting to enter the United States are “poisoning the blood” of America. Keep in mind, this is the same Donald Trump who wondered to Anderson Cooper in a 2015 interview “Why do I have to repent or ask for forgiveness, if I am not making mistakes?” (Nothstine). In fact, making mistakes and admitting them is part of being human—not pure—and humbling one-self before the almighty. This is something that Donald Trump seems to be completely incapable of doing. I would challenge the reader to give an example—just one—of when Donald Trump publicly admitted he was wrong about anything.

The anti-immigration sentiment associated with the “poisoning the blood” remark runs contrary to the United States as being a country of immigrants, as white, settler colonists invaded the land in the Western Hemisphere famously beginning in 1492. Specifically with Trump, no one should be surprised at this attempt to appeal to whites through purity, as the former president has a long history of racist remarks and behavior, beginning with Trump and his father settling a lawsuit; in which, the Trumps were shown to have discriminated against Blacks attempting to rent apartments from them in the early 1970’s (AP Fact Check). His anti-immigrant and xenophobia continued as Trump, during a bipartisan 2018 meeting with Senators, described Black and Brown immigrants as coming from “shit-hole” countries, while wondering why the US does not receive more immigrants from predominantly white Norway? (Vitali). His xenophobic attempt to ban muslims from entering the US was struck down; however, this is further evidence of the white supremacism of Trump: both of these examples can also be understood in terms of appeal to purity. Clearly his “poisoning the blood” remark though is a direct appeal to purity. In Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, the sociopathic dictator claims that Germans in America will continue to remain masters of the continent, “...as long as he does not fall a victim to defilement of the blood” (Hitler). The white supremacist rhetoric of Trump is taken straight from the playbook of Hitler, as the Nazi leader felt people of color needed to be kept away from German whites in America. Arguably the most troubling part of this appeal is Trump knows there is a receptive audience for this vile racism.

Conclusion

One explanation that has not been offered for casting whites as Jesus in film is the notion that whites felt a sense of racial purity, and the appropriated figure of Jesus in America fit that narrative. By the time whites had

violently colonized first peoples in the western hemisphere, they had a firm belief in their own superiority; therefore, their hegemony on the North American continent can be understood as a wave of violent, white purity attempting to “civilize” first peoples in the name of Christianity. This consciousness needs to be understood as having been embedded by the time the early twentieth century rolled around, and the motion picture industry began its practice of mostly hiring whites to perform major roles.

Unfortunately, this self-view continues to this day in subtle, and not-so-subtle ways. When states attempt to ban Critical Race Theory, when politicians fuse fascism with racist rhetoric, when white supremacy rears its ugly head publicly—this needs to be fought against. Until the next generation is fully aware of the racist history of the United States, this fight cannot stop. It needs to continue until we can safely claim that this country is a country where all people are created equal.

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