

Christ-figures, Religious Imagery, and the Critique of  
Religious Institutions in Film

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## Introduction

Religious themes, figures, and institutions have become commonplace in film ever since the medium's inception. But films not expressly concerned with religion, in both their content and scholarly interpretations, often produce the most thoughtful ruminations on religion's merits and faults. These outwardly non-religious films may include a Christ-figure, recreations of famous religious artwork, and religious themes, such as faith or redemption. Although these devices insert non-religious films into religious discourse, a film's religious imagery does not guarantee an affirming message that upholds religious principles. On the contrary, these subversive films apply religious imagery specifically to criticize aspects of religion and its institutionalization.

Of the numerous films that would satisfy this definition, I have selected two pairings of films to examine through this lens: Stuart Rosenberg's *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) alongside Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), and Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979) alongside Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). These films share a central focus on a Christ-figure who, adored by his peers, experiences tension with his reality or imprisoned circumstances. Each of these films targets the institution or society that responds to and molds these Christ-figures, highlighting repressive institutional regimes or society's deluded mindset. I have divided these four films into pairs because of the considerable parallels between the films within each pairing. *Cool Hand Luke* and *Shawshank* both belong to the prison-escape genre, following a beloved protagonist serving an unjust prison sentence and his attempts to escape. *Being There* and *The Truman Show* focus on the stardom of an unknowing individual, while satirically criticizing society's television obsession. I will elucidate these commonalities later in this essay.

Previous scholarly work on religious imagery and Christ-figures in film ranges from general methodologies of religious interpretation in film, as can be found in M.J. Wright's *Religion and Film: An Introduction* and in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Oswald's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, to specific studies on religious depictions in the films that this essay concerns. While Mark Kermode's BFI installment of *The Shawshank Redemption* tackles some of the film's religious symbolism, Christopher Deacy's essay on "Redemption" in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* contains analyses of *Shawshank's* themes of redemption and the afterlife. Adele Reinhartz dedicates individual chapters of her book, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, to *Shawshank* and *The Truman Show*, focusing on biblical narratives and metaphors present in each of these films. Studies specific to *Cool Hand Luke* and *Being There* do not currently exist, but Reinhartz's 2016 article, "Scripture on the Silver Screen," her chapter in *The Routledge Companion* on "Jesus and Christ-Figures," as well as Anton Karl Kozlovic's essay, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," each refer to the manifestations of Christ in all four of the films in question. Peter Malone's *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, meanwhile, serves as an exemplary outline for the various types of Christ-figures that appear throughout film history until the book's publication.

Although this thesis adopts and enhances some interpretations of these scholarly works, it will move beyond the mere observation of religious imagery and symbolism in the selected films. This thesis differs from earlier studies in its portrayal of religious allegory and Christ-figures as designed to critique religious institutions. This study will also expand the conversation into critiques of society's need for and response to religious figures and institutions by examining how the films comment on ideology and social constructs. As opposed to previous research, this essay will not only address films that have thus far received little to no specific

attention within this topic, but will also place these four films into dialogue with each other for the first time.

This thesis incorporates a multi-faceted approach to film interpretation, combining close readings of scenes and shots with thematic and allegorical readings of narratives and characters. In addition to expounding each film's religious subtext, I will engage in philosophical, ideological, and sociological readings of each film, underscoring the role of society and the masses in empowering religious figures and institutions. While this approach will mostly entail original work, I will consult artwork, published film scholars and major 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. The essay consists of two main sections: Part One will focus on the first pairing – *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Shawshank Redemption*; Part Two will transition to the second pairing – *Being There* and *The Truman Show*. Parts One and Two will first examine the Christ-figures at the heart of each film, comparing and contrasting their visual and thematic representations as tools of the film's religious criticism. Both sections will then discuss how each film critiques religion through its setting's society, culture, and institutions.

## Part One

### **Introduction**

The prison-escape drama lends itself to religious and ideological interpretation because of its setting and themes. Prisoners remain locked in the confines of a complex cut off from the rest of the world while hoping for or even attempting to gain their freedom. These themes of confinement and loneliness, escapism and freedom, hope and redemption, certainly evoke religious sentiment. Stuart Rosenberg's *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) not only serve as prime examples of religious representation but parallel each other significantly, magnifying the other's religious and ideological subtext.

Numerous elements beyond the prison setting justify this pairing. Most prominently, both films follow the exploits of Christ-like protagonists. *Cool Hand Luke*'s Luke Jackson (Paul Newman) and *The Shawshank Redemption*'s Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) each exert considerable influence on their environments as they plot their escapes in similar yet distinct fashions. They are both unjustly imprisoned, Luke for a petty crime and Andy for one he did not commit. They both confide in a right-hand man and attract several friends and followers who treat them as heroes. They both share complicated relationships with their prison guards which flit between mutually beneficial and torturous. They both crack mentally after stretches in solitary confinement. And crucially, they both escape. Other key characters contribute to this model, too, including sadistic wardens and devoted right-hand men, Luke's Dragline (George Kennedy) and Andy's Red (Morgan Freeman). Similar shots and scenes mirror each other throughout the films: the road-tarring sequence in *Cool Hand Luke* and its roof-tarring counterpart in *Shawshank*, Luke receiving a beating from Dragline and Andy from the Sisters, or Luke and Andy each standing in the rain with outstretched arms. The parallels range from

broader themes, such as the soothing powers of music and the escape of sexual fantasy, to minute details, such as Luke's inmate number, 37, appearing in Andy's – 37927.

Despite such strong ties between the two films, their tones differ substantially: *Cool Hand Luke* contains ambiguous, nihilistic undertones, whereas *Shawshank's* hopeful ambience possesses more uplifting qualities. This disparity, though, produces a complex and intriguing dialogue between two films revolving around Christ-figures and teeming with religious allegory. Through religious imagery, these films explore the ambiguity of human motivation and purpose, while investigating ideological confines and institutional dogma.

### **Christ-figures**

A miraculous individual sent to save humanity from its sins. An innocent soul who sacrifices himself for the betterment of the world. Glorious and grim, Luke and Andy fulfill both these definitions of a Christ-figure. They each receive harsh punishments out of proportion with their crimes, or lack thereof. Their positive influence uplifts their fellow prisoners as they challenge the status quo while enduring the iron-fisted retribution of the exasperated wardens. In the terms of Peter Malone, an Australian theologian and film scholar, Luke and Andy embody the “redeemer-figure” of Christ, who “may be redeemed by his or her own suffering [and is] able to be the means of redemption for others.” The prison locale befits this manifestation of Christ “caught up in the world of evil, of human sinfulness” (Malone 41). Engulfed in a community of criminals, Luke and Andy each find their own redemption and redeem others.

Both films support these definitions of Christ-figures with their visual composition and mise-en-scène. At the conclusion of the infamous egg-eating scene, Luke lies motionless on a table in a crucifix position. The film's final shot superimposes a photograph of Luke torn in the

shape of a cross over an aerial shot of a crossroad. In *Shawshank*, Andy stands in the rain in the cross pose upon his successful escape. To pass the time in prison, and as a cover up for his escape, Andy carves stones into figurines, adopting the trope of Jesus working as a carpenter. Such themes and imagery elaborately portray the pair as Christ-figures, but their varying responses to their circumstances distinguish them from the standard Christ-figure, shaping the religious outlook of their respective films.

i. *Cool Hand Luke*

Luke Jackson is no ordinary Christ-figure. Rather than starting with an establishing shot, *Cool Hand Luke* begins with a closeup of a parking meter bearing the word VIOLATION on a red backdrop, foreshadowing the film's subversion and highlighting the idea of rules. This shot appears three times in quick succession, forming a trinity, before the parking meter head falls from its pole. The camera tilts up to the perpetrator: Luke. The police apprehend him shortly afterwards, prompting Luke to laugh. Thus, the film introduces its Christ-figure as an anarchist, a person amused by law and order, an individual who beheads the Holy Trinity and the rules for which it stands.

Luke's arrival at the jail complex develops this notion of a renegade Christ-figure. A recurring symbol throughout the film, luminous light bulbs in the barracks hang over Luke like halos. Yet the film complicates this imagery by keeping Luke beside the lights, rather than directly beneath them. The film similarly elevates Luke to hero status as an American flag waves aloft behind him while the Captain (Strother Martin) reads aloud records of Luke's war heroics. But when the Captain points out that Luke left the army with the same rank with which he entered, Luke simply says: "I was just passing time." The film subtly detracts from any

distinction bestowed upon Luke, thereby questioning the adulation of this rebellious Christ-figure.

The film compounds this dilemma at every opportunity. After a punishing fistfight with Dragline, a “resurrected” Luke somehow pulls himself off the ground, gradually earning the respect of his fellow inmates. Shortly afterwards, he bluffs his way to victory in a game of poker, winning with “nothing.” Luke casually remarks that “sometimes nothing can be a pretty cool hand,” which prompts Dragline to dub him “Cool Hand Luke.” Luke’s name references the Evangelist and namesake of the Gospel, simultaneously attaining religious significance and departing from the persona of Christ. But Luke’s newfound nickname stems from his empty victory; his name therefore alludes partly to religious importance and partly to meaningless accomplishment.

After Luke accrues a positive reputation among the inmates and finds a companion in Dragline, he is propelled to full cult-hero/Christ-figure status in the road-tarring sequence. Tasked with tarring a lengthy piece of road, Luke rallies the troops, inspiring his peers to speedily complete the job at hand. The inmates follow Luke’s enthusiastic example as they run, shout, and shovel their way to the end of the road. With two hours remaining in the day, Dragline asks what they should do next, to which Luke replies with a grin: “Nothing.” Luke’s heroics have granted him and his followers a chance to appreciate doing nothing, freeing them from responsibility and their taskmasters for a brief moment. On the other hand, this episode ultimately achieves nothing for the group. Luke’s victory and wry response carry a Schopenhauerian twist, pointing out the emptiness felt upon reaching a milestone. In this vein, the road signifies the eternal cycle of suffering and boredom; it is a road leading nowhere. The scene exhibits this tension by dissolving from smiles and cheers to the next shot before we can



see the inmates enjoying their well-earned time off. After this pivotal scene, Dragline invents exaggerated feats, or miracles, he has witnessed Luke perform, underscoring the ambiguous outcome of the previous scene by fictionalizing Luke's exploits.

Luke's recent glory culminates in the egg-eating sequence, in which, for the first time, the film explicitly presents him as a Christ-figure. Prompted by Dragline's incessant promotion of his abilities, Luke agrees to eat an extortionate number of eggs, but sums up his next mission apathetically: "It'll give me something to do." This extraordinary act means little to Luke, who arbitrarily suggests the number fifty because "it seemed a nice, round number." Hence, in a torturous yet comedic scene, Luke gorges himself for the amusement of those watching. He has no stake in the matter as he makes a Christ-like sacrifice for the benefit of those around him. Luke eats all fifty eggs, much to the delight of those who bet on him. But the inmates abandon him as soon as the entertainment ends. Alone, Luke lies in the crucifix position, bare-chested with white underwear. The high-angle shot implies that the omniscient camera, or God, is gazing down upon Its son.<sup>1</sup> In his moment of "everlasting glory," as Dragline calls it, this Christ-figure boasts no followers. They express no interest in Christ himself, only in his miracle and the money it may have earned some of them. Thus, while using distinctly Christ-like imagery and themes, the film subverts the traditional notion of Christ the Redeemer. He has mesmerized his followers, giving them something to enjoy while languishing in a prison camp, but has done so through a random, absurd deed of minimal impact.

These thematic and visual devices intensify thereafter, conveying the tragic consequences of Luke's Christ identity. After his mother's death, the Captain sends Luke to "the box" as a

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<sup>1</sup> I will be referring to 'God' as 'It' in this essay unless a film's depiction of God necessitates a male pronoun.

preventative measure in case he were to develop any thoughts of escape. Thus, he receives inordinate punishment despite his complete innocence. Luke dons a white garment and stands with his arms against the walls of the box, forming a crucifix pose once again. Over his shoulder, a prison guard expresses his regret at having to lock him up, stating that he is “just doing [his] job.” The guard represents Pontius Pilate, the reluctant executioner of Christ. Luke, however, responds gravely: “Calling it your job don’t make it right, Boss.” This short exchange raises questions about duty and the fairness of suffering. Why should Luke suffer for the sins of his predecessors, who tried to run after a relative’s death? With whom should the allegiances of the guards lie; Luke, their savior, or the Captain, their institutional leader? A low-angle shot of a dejected Luke standing in the box, still in the cross position with a light hanging over him, dissolves into a shot of his fellow inmates hacking at weeds (1:12:01-7). The shot angle makes Luke, dressed and positioned as Christ, appear imposing. Yet for a brief second, the dissolve constructs an image of his followers beating him. He not only suffers for them, here, but because of them.

Luke emerges from the box two weeks later. He steps out wearing his white robe, walking beneath another luminous bulb. This angelic picture reimagines the resurrection of Jesus, who arose from his tomb and presented himself before his disciples. The newly resurrected Luke now plots his escape. His second unsuccessful attempt proffers further depictions of Christ. Back in the barracks, the camera cuts between slightly high-angle closeups of Luke, bleeding and disoriented on a table, and full shots of his followers congregated around him. The shots evoke two famous paintings of Jesus: Mantegna’s *Lamentation of the Dead Christ* and Giotto’s *Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ)*.<sup>2</sup> But Luke quickly rejects the mantle

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A

now placed upon him. His followers display a picture he sent them of himself with two women, which Luke reveals to be “a phony.” The inmates refuse to believe him; the picture symbolized Luke’s triumph and, therefore, their own glimmer of freedom. They cannot live with the reality of their desired truth being a falsehood as Luke shouts in anguish: “Get out there yourself. Stop feeding off me!” Luke resents his Christ-like reputation and the blind idealism gathering around him. Rather than willfully accepting his role as the sacrificial lamb of God, he dismantles the construct of his Christhood.

Due to his insurgence, the prison guards inflict cruel physical and psychological punishment on Luke, gnawing away at his charisma. They force him to dig, fill, and re-dig a ditch, in which he lies out of exhaustion and despair. His followers look on hopefully in the background, singing a song entitled “Ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.” Reminiscent of Jesus carrying the cross, Luke effectively digs his own grave, out of which he soon rises: a second Resurrection. In fact, the Captain, playing the role of God, refers to Luke as “son.” On this occasion, though, Luke’s followers, having given up hope after witnessing his breakdown in front of the Captain, tear up the picture he sent them. The film thereby portrays Luke as Christ while concurrently destroying his heroic status and the spirit of his audience.

This hurdle does not deter Luke; in similar fashion to his earlier resurrection, he stages his final escape soon afterwards while on a road dotted with electricity pylons that resemble crucifixes. Unfortunately, Luke only gets as far as a church before his capture. His closest associate, Dragline, plays the role of Judas by naively coaxing Luke out of the church. Luke stands beside a blank window with stained-glass décor above the clear frame, almost waiting for a painting of Jesus to enter it. Luke obliges, facing his tormentors who shoot him through the window. Although not shown outright, the film implies that Luke dies that night as his car drives

beneath a traffic light changing from green to red. Back at the prison camp, Dragline exalts Luke to the inmates, glorifying his death by gleefully recounting how Luke smiled in death as he always did while alive. The film ends on this optimistic note with the notorious shot of the crossroad and the torn picture pieced back together in the shape of the Cross. Thus, Luke's followers sanctify him after his death, elevating him to the status of Christ despite Luke's misgivings. His sacred position stems only from the designs of those around him, who ignore his protests and apathy towards his lofty appointment. *Cool Hand Luke's* religious imagery consequently generates an alternative version of the Christ-figure and a fresh look at the institution for which it stands.

ii. *The Shawshank Redemption*

In many respects, and in contrast to Luke, *The Shawshank Redemption's* Andy Dufresne functions as a paradigmatic Christ or Redeemer-figure. Despite claiming his innocence in the murder of his wife and her lover, he receives two life-sentences, thus suffering for the sins of another. Paralleling the Christ-like aura of Luke, Andy's presence raises the spirits of his peers who reminisce about him with fondness. To the inmates, Andy serves as a beacon of hope, a role model able to fulfill what they can only dream of – escape, redemption. Not long after Andy's arrival at Shawshank, the film begins to portray his Christ-like features. After meeting the Warden (Bob Gunton) in a lineup matching Luke's, Andy stands naked in a cross pose as the guards hose him down. This baptism signifies Andy's rebirth; descending into the sinful, treacherous halls of the prison, his path as Christ begins.

This same imagery returns when Andy escapes Shawshank. Standing in the rain in a crucifix-like pose with outstretched arms, he is once again reborn. He tumbles literally and figuratively out of the prison's sewage to find himself free and resurrected. Yet this scene harks

back to one from *Cool Hand Luke* in which Luke stands in a similar pose in the rain, sarcastically confronting God. The latter scene will be discussed in greater detail, but for now it suffices to say that considerable parallels exist between these two Christ-figures, regardless of their visibly disparate representations. *Shawshank* frequently places Andy in the same settings, circumstances, and visual compositions as his counterpart, Luke, demanding that Andy's Christ-figure be examined in light of Luke's.

Following Luke's example of drawing encouragement from music when his mother dies, Andy gets himself into trouble by playing Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" over the prison loudspeaker. Listening to the opera, Red declares that "every last man at Shawshank felt free." Andy, as their Redeemer, gives the prisoners a taste of freedom through an act of insurrection. This transcending power of music mirrors the relief it provides for Luke. Hence, just as Andy earns himself two weeks in "the hole," Luke receives the same punishment to prevent any such sense of freedom from entering his mind. Andy thereby embodies the spirit of Luke in the flourishing of his Christhood.

Although Andy's polished, agreeable demeanor distinguishes him from Luke's rebellious behavior, they each begin their respective films in similar fashion. Andy sits in his car at the scene of the crime, drunk and mentally unstable, just as the police discover Luke with the decapitated parking meters. The film intersperses these shots with Andy's trial, linking his Christ-like innocence and punishment to his alternate, decadent self. Renowned British film critic, Mark Kermode, further complicates Andy's role by pointing out that first-time viewers ought to see Andy as guilty at this stage of the film. He comments that Andy warrants our sympathy but is still guilty, "a good man tainted with the stench of death who has yet to achieve redemption" (16).

The film subverts Andy's Christ imagery further when he meets Red, the inmate who will become his mentor and closest friend. Andy requests that Red smuggle a small rock hammer into the prison for him, implying that he is a craftsman as Jesus is thought to have been. But as they part ways, Red notes that Andy had "a walk and a talk that just wasn't normal around here. He strolled like a man in the park without a care or a worry in the world." At once, Red underlines Andy's uniqueness while also implicitly suggesting a comparison with Luke; the film depicts Andy as Christ with a hint of Luke's indifferent nature.

Andy accordingly repeats Luke's heroics in a roof-tarring sequence analogous to *Cool Hand Luke's* road-tarring scene. In return for offering his help in saving Captain Hadley (Clancy Brown) money from his brother's will, Andy secures a beer-break for the group, who now revere him for his miraculous bravery and providence. While his friends enjoy drinking in the sun, Andy sits alone, smiling and declining a drink of his own because he "gave up drinking," which Kermode relates to Jesus providing but not partaking in the wine of the first communion (32). The film encourages the viewer to look upon Andy as noble; the satisfying score soars as Andy's selflessness is revealed. But Red surmises Andy's motives, as discussed later in this essay, conveying the hidden ambiguity of this sequence. Aloof yet content, Andy replicates Luke's rejoicing in the opportunity to do "nothing" since he finds simple pleasure in the absence of work. Thus, in Luke-like fashion, Andy both affirms and casts doubt over his Christ-figure status.

Andy's Christ-like parallels to Luke continue in his suffering and escape. Upon hearing that his protégé, Tommy (Gil Bellows), knows a witness to prove Andy's innocence, Andy senses a glimpse of freedom. Warden Norton reacts by putting Andy in the hole for two months, echoing the Captain's decision to place Luke in the box after his mother's death. Thus, both

Christ-figures endure undeserving retribution in response to a growing sense of freedom. Andy returns from solitary confinement a broken man, just as Luke succumbs to the Captain's torment in his grave-digging scene. The film similarly hints at Andy dying by picturing him with a rope the night of his escape, suggesting he will hang himself, just as Luke dug his own grave. But, like Luke, Andy uses this experience as a springboard for his escape, resurrecting himself on his way to freedom.

The major difference here, however, is that Andy escapes successfully, whereas Luke is tracked down. The plots and tones diverge at this junction as Andy, and eventually Red, reach their 'happily-ever-after' in Zihuatanejo, a destination that many posit symbolizes paradise or the afterlife. The scene on the beach, where Andy scrubs his boat and awaits Red's arrival, conjures visions of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, preaching to his disciples from a boat (Reinhartz 2016, 16). Red reinforces this theory as Andy's most faithful disciple, gaining courage from Andy despite his absence before following in his footsteps, much like Jesus' apostles after his crucifixion. As the aerial shot of Andy with outstretched arms, cleansed of filth in the rain and standing before a heavenly thunderstorm confirms, Andy's Christ-figure has redeemed both himself, his best friend, and his fellow inmates, who now trade stories about him as Luke's did. Andy enacts the film's title, embodying the Redeemer-figure of Christ.

But Luke's failed escape and resulting death, while opposing Andy's destiny on the surface, elicit a comparably positive tone. *Cool Hand Luke* does not end with Luke's death but, rather, with his resurrection through Dragline's storytelling and the image of the Cross as the film's cheerful score plays in the background. When Luke is carted off, dying from his wounds, a wry smile spreads across his face, indicating that he has finally found peace; his death serves as his escape. Andy and Luke therefore share satisfactory endings of their own making. This

nuanced approach to Luke's demise lends itself to a deeper discussion of the complex motives of these two characters and the implications thereof for their respective Christ-figures and films.

### iii. Character and Motive

While Luke and Andy present themselves as Christ-figures with redemptive qualities, both films question their intentions and psyches, which often contradict the divinely inspired effects of their actions. Luke, a rousing maverick, appeals to his peers but bares his resentment for the limelight and his blissful ambivalence to the viewer. Andy, an uplifting savior, falls prey to self-doubt, institutional torment, and conflicting personas.

Immediately after attaining Christ-like status in the egg-eating episode, Luke deconstructs his religious symbolism by questioning the existence of God and demonstrating his indifference towards life. As Dragline cautions him against messing with "The Man with No Eyes" (Morgan Woodward), a ruthless, bespectacled guard, a thunderstorm halts their work on the road. All the inmates scramble back to their van except for Luke, who stands in the rain with outstretched arms. An aerial shot, the predecessor to Andy's, depicts Luke jocularly shouting to God, demanding that It show Itself, even by killing him. Luke, standing in a cross pose in a scene juxtaposed to his crucifixion after his egg-eating escapade, undermines his Christhood with these atheist and suicidal remarks. This spiritual dilemma reappears near the film's conclusion. Sitting in a church, facing certain capture and execution, Luke begs God for a miracle. Yet he does so with an element of cynicism, asking the empty room: "Hey old man, you home tonight?" Luke finishes his brief prayer, deciding that God either does not exist or will not listen to him. When Dragline enters, Luke throws his head back and jests: "That's your answer, old man?" Luke's Christ-figure seems to laugh at his circumstances, opposing the faith in God or some higher force and purpose expected from a religious icon.



The film toys with Luke's ambivalent agenda, or lack thereof, by juxtaposing the rain scene to his learning of his mother's death. Luke trudges to his bed, where he sits alone, tearfully playing a song on the banjo named "Plastic Jesus." The lyrics, which reference the rain of the previous scene, proffer the soothing capacity of religion: "cos I got the Virgin Mary / assuring me that I won't go to Hell." Luke displays contrasting views on death, switching from his 'come-and-get-me' attitude to despondence once death touches a loved one. He similarly flits between mocking religious faith and appropriating its doctrines and terminology to comfort himself. Did Luke tempt fate in the earlier scene? Does this moment reflect a change in his character? Or are we watching two sides of the same coin?

The film does not answer these questions with any clarity, as Luke's first attempt to escape exemplifies. His mother's death earns him a lengthy spell in the box until the eve of the Fourth of July. Amidst the Independence Day celebrations, Luke finds his way out of the camp using the noise and excitement as cover. This prompts the viewer to query what motivated Luke to escape: his mother's death or his distaste for the oppressive system containing him? The scene's proximity to his mother's death would suggest the former, whereas the reference to July 4<sup>th</sup> perhaps signifies the latter. This penetrating question pervades the film as Luke escapes for the final time soon after his mental breakdown before the Captain. Dragline praises Luke for his acting skills, implying that his surrender was part of the plot. But Luke quickly refutes this notion, admitting that the bosses broke him. Nonetheless, Luke certainly uses his new obedient disposition to his advantage. Perhaps, like many of his decisions, Luke escapes on the spur of the moment, with no evident intent or plan. This distinct lack of motive in tandem with his abstruse personality contradicts and interrogates the stereotypical model of Christ. The film immerses this

Christ-figure in uncertainty, never quite prioritizing one interpretation of Luke's character over the other.

Andy, despite exhibiting a clearer character arc and fulfilling his hopes, mirrors much of Luke's ambiguity. After all, his seemingly innocent desire to use a small rock hammer for carving rocks evolves into using the hammer to dig his way out of Shawshank. In the roof-tarring sequence, Andy reveals that he does not drink, causing Red to wonder why he endangered himself: "you could argue he'd done it to curry favor with the guards, or maybe make a few friends among us cons. Me, I think he did it just to feel normal again." Red even notes that Andy had a "strange little smile on his face," just as Dragline remembers how Luke would bizarrely smile at everything. Andy may often wear his heart on his sleeve, but he certainly keeps his cards close to his chest, too. He confides in Red but still forces him to guess his motives.

Andy's invented identity, Randall Stevens, problematizes any one-dimensional perception of his character. To cover up the illegal financial dealings of the Warden, Andy creates a fictional personality, complete with a birth certificate and social security number, to prevent the authorities from tracing any misdeeds to the Warden. Andy, recognizing his role in these operations, quips to Red: "On the outside I was an honest man, straight as an arrow. I had to come to prison to be a crook." Jokes aside, Andy is commenting on the subversion of his character relative to his environment. His Christhood is predicated on his imprisonment in Shawshank, the very place where he has willingly committed a crime. The invention of Stevens serves a second purpose, though, when Andy escapes; he assumes the identity of Stevens, withdrawing all the Warden's money secured under his name. By transforming himself into Stevens, Andy not only aids the erasure of his past but also obtains a dual identity composed of

his free, innocent self and his fictitious, criminal alter-ego. He now physically manifests the internal conflict of his character.

When Andy finally reveals his insecurities to Red after spending two months in the hole, his intentions remain unclear. Broken by psychological torment, Andy conveys his regret and disillusionment to his confidant. The scene opens with a full shot (1:40:40-48) of Andy, sitting up against a wall some distance from the camera. A pipe runs along the wall, stretching over his head, while the building's imposing shadow shrouds Andy in darkness, signifying his imprisoned and dejected state. But the shadow splits the scene's lighting with a striking, diagonal line drawn down the face of the opposite building towards screen-center. This lighting embodies Andy's ambiguous tendencies, which he immediately elaborates upon to Red: "My wife used to say I'm a hard man to know, like a closed book." His opaque persona clouds any perceptions of him, which the lighting suggests in a twofold manner. Andy sits in the shadows, blocking off a clear view of himself, yet this reluctance to open up creates an ambiguous truth rather than concealing it altogether. It is in the darkness that Andy exposes his inner self. Moreover, Andy and Red end the scene in the same full shot but standing in opposite positions, Red now alone in the dark and Andy crossing into the light (1:45:57-46:10). This imagery expertly depicts the underlying enigma of Andy's character.

The discussion in this scene digs deeper into, and further mystifies, Andy's intentions. Andy regrets his failure to express his thoughts and emotions to his wife, claiming that while he may not have pulled the trigger, he killed her by pushing her away. He thereby implicates himself in her death, a confession that recalls Kermode's comments on the initial guilty verdict of the opening sequence. Perhaps he deserved his punishment, then, or needed time in prison to realize his mistakes? Andy, however, puts it down to "bad luck" that he ended up suffering for

someone else's crime, immediately destabilizing the previous question by removing any roots of divine intervention, criminal justice, or philosophical validation. He then tells Red of his dream destination on the Pacific Ocean, a place with "no memory," returning to the motif of water as purification in a distinctly un-Christ-like scene. Andy longs to escape because he seeks a clean slate, "a profoundly Nietzschean state of guiltlessness...a typically a-Christian virtue" (Kermode 68). Ultimately, he as an individual neither absolves himself nor his friends. He is acknowledging his failings as a Christ-figure due to his reliance on external forces that contradict the film's mantra: "Salvation lies within." Andy's salvation lies within his individuality and resilience rather than in any sacred, Christ-like spirit.

### **Religious Institutions and Ideology**

The "Salvation lies within" motto originally belongs to Warden Norton, who superficially refers to finding solace and redemption in the Bible. His statement condemns the men of Shawshank to physical and mental imprisonment. They should harbor no hopes of escaping because salvation lies within the physical walls of the prison; in other words, they should look no further than inside the ideological walls of the Bible and the prison to discover it. The prison in both films epitomizes the strictures of religious institutions governed by confining ideologies. The inmates fall prey to this harmful doctrine, functioning as followers in this allegory. These followers absorb and regurgitate the dogma of the institution, thereby producing a self-perpetuating system which depends upon the continued obedience of the followers or inmates. By depicting this religious framework as a prison, these films cast a critical shadow on religious institutions and the absolutist truths of their ideologies.

The hegemony of the institution and its followers extends to the development of Christ-figures, who must confront this ruthless adversary and redeem their fellow inmates from

institutionalization. These inspired redeemers arrive in the prison free from ideological indoctrination, although they inevitably experience their own pitfalls in this regard. In this reading, the institution and the Christ-figure adopt a codependency. The Christ-figure's presence transforms the prison into a corresponding religious setting, while the religious institution's bleak and prohibitive nature promotes the savior to the status of Christ. To an extent, therefore, the Christ-figure exists only in response to the institution. The inmates or followers lie at the epicenter of this relationship. They yearn for a savior or Messiah to rescue them from oblivion. In these films, the inmates latch onto Luke and Andy, projecting their desires onto them. The followers, then, prove instrumental in creating the Christ-figure, who becomes a mere byproduct of this triangular interaction. By identifying Christ-figures as such, these films draw attention *to* their Christ-figures so as to draw attention *away* from them, instead scrutinizing the institutions and followers at each film's core. Hence, our Christ-figure discussion triggers the critique of religious institutions embedded in *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

i. *Cool Hand Luke*

After Luke's arrest, the viewer catches an early glimpse into life at the prison camp. The inmates toil away on the roadside, sweltering under the sun and the watchful eyes of their guards. The camera illustrates the workers' unending plight with a long shot that captures the line of workers alongside an eternal stretch of road rolling into the distant hills (2:39-49). But this shot portrays the unrest of incarceration simmering beneath the surface. The camera shoots from behind a half-open gate, leaving the screen divided down its center between clear space and the other door of the fenced gate. Prisoners stand on either side of the split, thus some appear free while the gate cages the others. An opened padlock hangs from the fence, magnifying the strange state of the workers; they are at once free and imprisoned. Prisoner-guard etiquette highlights

this inconsistency. Dragline, setting the example for similar exchanges throughout the film, yells before removing his shirt: “Taking it off, boss.” Dragline is asking permission from his guards but states his inquiry rather than asking, practically willing the guards into acquiescence.

The question of freedom, its definition, nature, and accessibility, permeates this prison-drama. Through Luke’s individuality, the film lauds freedom from institutional ties, yet through Luke’s nihilistic attitude, the film probes whether any true freedom or individuality can be attained. By depicting guards watching the prisoners, the camera’s authority over both parties wrests the power and freedom of the guards from their hands. Even when the prisoners act freely, the camera reminds the viewer of their captivity. Sitting in a van on their way to work, the inmates joke together and talk about jobs and money – the conversation of freemen. But the camera cuts to full shots of the prisoners lined up on the walls of the van with the caged backdoor at screen-center. The camera refutes their illusions of freedom.

Luke’s intrusion forces the inmates to confront this harsh reality. Working on the roadside one day, the group notices an attractive woman washing her car. Dragline nicknames her “Lucille” (Joy Harmon) as the men watch in exasperation. Lucille, Luke perceives, “knows exactly what she is doing, driving us crazy and loving every minute of it.” He sees straight through the sexual fantasy she poses, a skepticism he voices to Dragline that night. “Stop beating it into the ground,” he tells Dragline, who is still fantasizing about her, “it ain’t doing nobody no good.” Luke’s condemnation of conjuring up false hope and satisfaction angers Dragline, who challenges him to a fight. But Luke has also exposed Dragline’s weakness – his dependence on fantasy replacing difficult truths.

Luke spars with Dragline in the prison courtyard, much to the delight and entertainment of the surrounding inmates and guards. This fight embodies the struggle between ideology and

objective reality. Dragline, who eventually dedicates himself to Luke and preserving his memory, represents ideology, to which he has and will remain a prisoner. Luke, on the other hand, a pragmatic, free-thinking individual, symbolizes realism – the truth of a world without ideological meaning. Jarringly, the character most wrapped up in religious symbolism opposes ideology.

The inmates, refusing to come to terms with reality, overwhelmingly support Dragline, exuberantly pressuring him to “kill” Luke while encouraging the latter to “stay down.” Their cheers and laughter verge on cultish ecstasy, hinting at the risks of brainwashing when subscribing to an ideology. Dragline, the heavy favorite, slugs away at Luke, just as harmful ideologies eliminate realistic cynicism. As the fight progresses, Dragline gradually wears Luke down, blow after blow, flooring him. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Luke on the ground, taken from in between the legs of a prisoner. These legs stretch vertically across the screen beside Dragline, who stands in the background, minimizing him relative to the chains and legs in the foreground. Despite his imposing stance, Dragline cannot overcome the shackles of imprisonment. Luke, though, gazes through the chains at the camera; he recognizes the shackles of his fellow inmates and the task that the camera has assigned to him. Luke rises to accept Dragline’s barrage while the prisoners nervously taunt Luke out of fear of him defeating their ideological reality. As disturbed inmates depart the scene, one bystander comments that “somebody ought to stop this thing” before walking away. They sense that Luke’s bloodied and bruised realism will rear its ugly head, thus they decline responsibility and condemn him to further abuse. Satisfied with his work, Dragline leaves a barely-conscious Luke to amble in the courtyard as the last man standing. Reality triumphs, albeit in chaotic and debilitating fashion.

The prison's tight grip on its prisoners attempts to institutionalize them so as to avoid the epiphanies emanating from Luke's character. Whether through long stints in the box, the drudgery of manual labor, or physical restraints, the Captain goes to extreme measures to clamp down on any thoughts of freedom. Luke, however, provides an unprecedented challenge for the Captain, prompting him to utter the infamous line: "What we've got here is a failure to communicate. Some men you just can't reach." Referring to Luke's anarchist streak, the Captain laments Luke's imperviousness to his "communication," or, indoctrination. But the "failure" here stems from the Captain and his prison – the institution, rather than from Luke – the individual. The Captain's unhinged reaction to Luke's sarcasm exposes this fragility as he realizes that he must deal with Luke more harshly to suppress his heresy.

Such mistreatment villainizes the Captain and his guards, known as "bosses," whose obstinance reflects that of coercive religious institutions. As mentioned in the previous section, their physical and psychological torture of Luke infuses their cruelty with religious allegory. Luke resembles Jesus in the digging of his own grave, his resurrection from that grave, and his deference to the Captain, who occupies the position of God. The Captain stands over Luke in an imposing low-angle shot, with backlighting making only his head visible as he stands on the other side of the fence, akin to God floating in another world. Luke now begs for his life, exclaiming "Oh God, Oh God, I pray to God you don't hit me anymore...I can't take anymore." He is appealing to the Captain here, pleading with God to end the abuse.

Luke's fractious relationship with God interrogates the film's religious fabric. As discussed earlier, the film juxtaposes Luke's conflicting attitudes on God and religion, transitioning from his impudent confrontation with God in the rain to Luke consoling himself with religious lyrics after his mother's death. His last stand at the church denotes a belief in God



when he has nowhere else to turn, yet his casual demeanor and informal prayer connote his insincerity. This scene conjoins Luke's audience with God to his resistance against authoritative systems. A low-angle shot captures Luke from behind, looking up at the blank ceiling rafters, with his prison number, 37, in the center of the screen. This number references a verse from the Gospel: "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Luke exploits this principle by humbly requesting intervention, yet he quickly assumes that no such help will arrive. He alarmingly describes himself as "a pretty evil fella" who "killed people in the war" and "chewed up municipal property." Luke equates these vastly disproportionate 'sins,' dismissing these violations as products of "rules and regulations and bosses." Luke is venting his frustration with the system to God, whom he pegs as yet another "hard case" who has "things fixed so [he] can't never win out." God, morality, rules, bosses – to Luke, these all amount to constraining figures of authority and systems of false hope, more obstacles for him to laugh at and shrug off.

Luke's Christhood makes his critique and that of the film all the more poignant. His lofty position, rather than illuminating religious worship, unravels some unnerving truths about religious institutions and the inner workings of their ideologies. Combined with the oppressive nature of the prison camp, Luke illustrates and defies the suffocating standards that religious and ideological systems can impose. His Christhood, then, rests in his attempts to evade and surpass the physical and metaphorical barriers of the prison's religiously tinged ideology.

ii. *The Shawshank Redemption*

After Andy's court proceeding, a door opens into a room of five men seated at a table. In walks Red, innocently awaiting permission to sit before subserviently answering the parole officers that he "can honestly say I'm a changed man." His parole rejected, Red exits and dons his cap, knowingly looking up at the tall jail towers. Kermode notes that his demeanor changes

from naïve to “world-weary con, simply going through the ‘same old shit, different day’” (18). This is a man of experience, “an institutional man,” as he will later dub himself. He is not hopeful, nor is he acting; he accepts that there is no escaping Shawshank. As an inmate jokes to Red: “I’m up for rejection next week.” Shortly afterwards, the camera arches over the prison complex, displaying an aerial shot of the Shawshank behemoth. This daunting institution retains its prisoners by making them fully aware of their eternal incarceration through psychologically damaging avenues. They face a Day of Reckoning, a final judgement before God after one’s death, to determine whether they can exit Shawshank and move on to the afterlife – their freedom. But this decision lies in the hands of corrupt prison officials who care not for rehabilitation and freedom. They punish the inmates by keeping them in this loop of judgement, a mechanism of religious derivation through which the prison preserves its damning institutional authority.

Institutionalization serves as a crucial thematic device in this film. By detaining its prisoners for long enough, Shawshank becomes a person’s only reality. Reflecting on Brooks’ (James Whitmore) violent reaction to his release, Red describes the walls of Shawshank as “funny...you get so you depend on ‘em,” before concluding that “they send you here for life, that’s exactly what they take.” For Brooks, this death sentence comes to fruition when he opts to hang himself to escape his frightful new world of freedom. Just before his suicide, the camera pictures him smiling in a close-up behind a wooden ceiling adornment, which looks like the bars of a jail cell (1:04:43-51). Brooks longs for the security of imprisonment at Shawshank. Thus, life at Shawshank, or lack thereof, infects one’s life out of Shawshank, hindering a person’s appreciation of his freedom. The prison and its everlasting influence symbolize the detrimental

effects of ideological confinement; the institution restricts its inhabitants to such an extreme that its ideology becomes their only conceivable way of life.

Brooks' death exemplifies a universal trend among the prisoners at Shawshank, who experience a subconscious internalization of their oppression through the film's cinematic elements. The end of the roof-tarring sequence accomplishes this by constructing a false sense of freedom for the inmates while simultaneously revealing their unfortunate reality. The camera circles around Red triumphantly drinking his beer, before settling on a closeup of him as he remarks in a voice-over that the men felt like "the lords of all creation" in that blissful moment. Hence, the camera movement mimics the world which now revolves around him. But as Red utters this phrase, his guards stand over his shoulder in the background, reminding the viewer that Red remains a prisoner; his experience of freedom is fleeting and fantastical, a fact unknown to him since he faces away from his watchful superiors. For Red, "salvation lies within" in a sinister sense: it exists only in his mind. Recycling the imagery of the inmates in *Cool Hand Luke* as free yet trapped, Darabont fictionalizes Red's freedom and curtails his ability to think freely by painting him as a product of his establishment.

The institutionalization process is epitomized through Andy's monotonous routine and his brutal encounters with the Sisters. Red explains that "prison life consists of routine, and then more routine," which deprives the inmates of inspiration and numbs them into willful obedience. Andy's routine, Red continues, entails fighting off or receiving beatings from the Sisters, a group of vicious men seeking violent sexual gratification. As the Sisters bludgeon Andy relentlessly, Red comments that although he wishes he could say that Andy "put up a good fight...prison is no fairytale world." This statement, while elucidating the brutality of prison life, removes the

“fairytale” narrative from the institutional reality. Shawshank has convinced its prisoners not only of its truth, but of the impossibility of transcending that truth through creative means.

Darabont contrasts the aggressive sexuality of the Sisters with the sexual fascination of the other convicts when Andy leaves a room of inmates swooning over Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* directly to his final assault at the hands of the Sisters. Whereas the Sisters resort to cruel satisfaction of their lust, the other convicts settle for sex in the form of cinema, replicating the use of Lucille as a form of escape for the inmates in *Cool Hand Luke*. Like Luke, Andy bursts the bubble of this fantasy by putting a pin-up of Hayworth on his wall to mask his escape hole. Thus, the prisoners’ sexual fantasy becomes a literal and symbolic cover up. The poster, emblematic of the films the prisoners watch, labels the prisoners’ dreams of escape as pure imagination. They see their sexual fantasy on the screen from the safe distance of their seats, an activity whereby Shawshank can keep them far away from any realistic sense of freedom. The poster, by disguising and blocking an escape tunnel, therefore plays a vital institutional role as the physical manifestation of Shawshank’s ideological impediments to its detainees. Andy, on the other hand, transcends the boundary of the screen, or the poster on his wall, to crawl to freedom. He uncovers the institution’s fictitious, totalizing blanket, literally poking a hole in the structure of its ideological framework.

The Warden’s fanatic use of the Bible as a source for discipline and salvation at Shawshank sews a religious thread into this crooked, dehumanizing institution. In contrast to *Cool Hand Luke*’s Captain functioning as a metaphor for God, Darabont portrays Warden Norton as a religious man steeped in earthly vices. Well-versed in the Bible, Norton launders money, accepts bribes, and commits murder to ensure the truth about Andy’s innocence remains a secret.

Norton and his Bible stand at the center of this depraved religious body, personifying the hypocrisy that underlies this church/prison.

The Warden's inspection of Andy's cell demonizes the Warden and his prison while foreshadowing his demise and the limitations of his religious ideology. Seeing that Andy has been reading the Bible given to him upon his internment, the Warden quotes a verse from John: "I am the light of the world, he that follow me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (8:12). Through these words, spoken by Jesus, the Warden arrogantly displaces Andy by appointing himself as Shawshank's Christ-figure. But, as Kermode highlights, the Warden misjudges both Andy and the reach of his religious institution; he ignores the word 'MOTHER' etched into the wall above Rita Hayworth's picture, dismissing Andy's Virgin Mary and route to redemption as sexual in purpose, and keeps Andy's Bible closed, keeping the hollowed-out pages for the rock-hammer concealed while showing that Christianity "is ironically a closed book" (Kermode 49-50). The scene ends with the Warden leaving the cell and shutting the gate, after which he returns Andy's Bible. The Warden, now pictured behind bars (51:02-09), looks like a prisoner. Since the Warden is still holding the Bible in this shot, Darabont associates this religious authoritative text with captivity. Not only does the Warden use religious authority to imprison his subjects, but he, too, is confined by his religious ideology.

Shawshank prison itself assumes religious significance through its likeness to purgatory, a locale in Catholic doctrine where sinners expiate their sins before going to heaven. But Shawshank's vision of purgatory never ends. In a prison where every man is innocent and the phrase "up for parole" is synonymous with "up for rejection," Shawshank leaves little room for atonement and redemption. Red summarizes this flawed system in his final hearing in front of a new set of parole officers: "Rehabilitated? It's just a bullshit word." A much-changed man since

his earlier sessions, Red overtly downplays the virtue of rehabilitation and contemplates how he must live with his crimes, rather than erase them. Ironically, the parole board grants Red his freedom, confirming that he speaks a truth about the previous tyrannical regime.

Purgatory, an in-between state of being, functions as a liminal space in relation to the afterlife. Several scholars theorize that freedom after Shawshank represents the afterlife, thus travelling to and from the outside world becomes a literal and figurative liminal space. Afraid of what the future holds, Andy, Brooks, and Red quiver in their bus seats as they experience the uncertainty of travel, the state of being neither here nor there. Before Brooks dies, we see him packing a suitcase as if he anticipates travelling to the next world.

The film's last eschatological vision of Andy and Red's reunion in Zihuatanejo investigates liminality within the allegorical afterlife itself. Andy and Red embrace in a distant long shot that captures the scenery of their newfound paradise. Sky, sea, and land seamlessly blend into each other on this deserted beach, creating multiple liminal lines. The coastal setting compounds this liminality with its edge-of-the-world nature. Andy's beached boat, meanwhile, simultaneously connotes settlement and an unfinished work. This vision of the afterlife as natural yet supernatural, all-encompassing yet fragmented, and complete yet incomplete, imbues the film's religious ideology with Andy's complex sensibility at the expense of the dogmatic approach of the Warden's institution. The camera position, though, diminishes Andy and Red into miniscule figures overshadowed by the larger forces of nature engulfing them. The film thereby reminds the viewer of the individual's subjection to these larger forces, which in this case coalesce to form the religious notion of an afterlife.

The blurred lines of a liminal paradise open avenues for different versions of the afterlife. The institution's basic understanding of the afterlife, the one to which the viewer is provoked to

subscribe, manifests as the world outside of prison. But this conception of the afterlife fails to live up to idealistic expectations, as Brooks' suicide and Red's fear upon release suggest. Andy, however, proposes an alternate variety of the afterlife in his reassuring message to Red, claiming that "hope is a good thing...and no good thing ever dies." Shawshank cannot determine the afterlife for an individual, rather, the individual must shape his or her own afterlife through unassailable hope. But Andy's comment speaks of hope as an eternal product of the individual, as opposed to a route to the afterlife which would require death and passing on to another world. Hence, as Adele Reinhartz points out, Andy and Red's paradise exists in this world, on a beach displaying components of nature (Reinhartz 2003, 138).<sup>3</sup> *Shawshank's* critique of religious institutions, therefore, ends on a more optimistic note than does that of *Cool Hand Luke* by redefining the bounds of religious ideology in Andy's terms.

### iii. Followers and Faith

Both films cement the authority of their institutions and the sanctity of their Christ-figures by means of the supporting cast. Without followers, the institution cannot subsist and the Christ-figure loses its audience. By identifying the prisoners as key players in this regard, each film sharpens its assessment of religious ideologies that claim legitimacy from objective or metaphysical sources. These films hypothesize that the autocracy of ideology, whether achieved through an oppressive institution or the inception of a Christ-figure, stems from the complicit crowd's subjective experience.

The cult that develops around Luke adheres to this model. Much to Luke's chagrin, his fellow prisoners verge on worshipping him as they live their dreams of freedom vicariously

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<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Deacy's chapter, "Redemption," page 359, in *The Routledge Companion* for further discussion.

through him. Much of this fervor revolves around the photograph of Luke flanked by women that he sends to the prisoners during his second escape. Upon his disheartening return to the camp, the inmates gather around him, rejoicing over the insurmountable heights of freedom Luke achieved in their stead. Despite Luke's protestations against his stardom and his revelation that he faked the photograph, the inmates reassure themselves of Luke's valor by dismissing his reactions as the result of his harrowing capture.<sup>4</sup> Luke, now retreating into himself as he absorbs the torment of the bosses, still inspires camaraderie as the inmates help him finish an enormous portion of food. Luke's continued veneration, therefore, originates with his peers rather than from any doing of his own. They support him unwaveringly, preserving his Christhood, because they are afraid of confronting the truth of their empty reality and, most importantly, Luke's vacuous heroism.

The photograph remains at the forefront when the bosses derail Luke's hero-status in front of the prisoners and when Dragline resuscitates Luke's Christhood in his stories. After Luke tearfully begs the Captain and the bosses for mercy, the onlooking inmates give up hope in their savior, which Koko (Lou Antonio) enacts by ripping up the photograph. Luke trudges back to the barracks before falling to the floor in exhaustion. He raises an arm as if to receive the help of a friend, but nobody comes to his aid. He shrieks, "where are ya' now?" In his moment of desolation, his followers have abandoned him, leaving him helpless on the ground. Luke's call could also translate as a call to God, reinforcing his skepticism towards his institution's supreme ruler. But after Luke's final capture and probable death, Dragline regales the inmates with stories of Luke's optimistic individualism, after which the film's closing shot superimposes the torn photograph over a crossroad. The photograph, shaped like a cross, reappears in this

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<sup>4</sup> See above, page 6, for specific discussion of this scene.



immortalization of Luke's character. Thus, Luke's rise, fall, and resurrection rest in the hands of his followers and their fictional image of him.

Dragline persists as the instigator and receptor of this dynamic. He promotes Luke's imaginary feats, defends Luke against his doubters, and ultimately follows Luke in his final escape. Dragline then babbles about his plans for himself, Koko, and Luke following their escape, but Luke elects to move on alone, rejecting his position in this trio and, in turn, swiping at his place in the Holy Trinity. Despairing at the thought of losing his leader, Dragline exposes his mental fragility as he responds, "what am I gon' do all by myself?" He explains that had he stayed put for a couple of years, he would have been released, but he could not help himself when he saw Luke driving away. Thus, Dragline's fanatical devotion to Luke damns him to longer imprisonment upon his capture. He cannot bear the thought of a life without his Christ-figure, a fatal dependency that culminates in his further institutional confinement.

Kneeling in the background, Dragline convinces himself of Luke's plan to split up, while the camera displays Luke's legs in the foreground, leaving the shot as he walks off (1:54:05-16). As if praying to this larger-than-life, godly image of Luke, Dragline sees his idol abandon him but continues his worship nonetheless. This naiveté results in Luke's discovery when, having been tricked into thinking that his friend would be spared, Dragline sells Luke out to the Captain. Dragline, then, becomes a Judas-figure. Accordingly, this disciple preaches about Luke at the film's conclusion. Dragline's ignorance, therefore, molds him into a vessel for ideological forces, yet it also establishes him as the source of Luke's everlasting influence.

In *Shawshank*, Red parallels Dragline as Andy's main confidant, but does so with the film's endorsement, as opposed to *Cool Hand Luke*'s derisive approach. While Dragline's character plays a supporting role to Luke, Red arguably dominates *Shawshank* because he

narrates the film. Andy retains the centrality of Luke, but we learn his story from Red's perspective, rather than from his own or the objectivity of the camera; Darabont thereby penetrates Red's complex individuality. In what becomes his farewell scene with Andy, Darabont distinguishes between Red and Dragline in circumstances redolent of Luke and Dragline's parting ways. Although Red categorizes himself as "an institutional man," matching Dragline, the scene's final imagery indicates a fluidity in Red's character. In the same full shot as shown earlier in the scene, Andy leaves Red standing in screen-center where a diagonal line of shade strikes through him, his head and shoulders above the line in the sunlight, his torso beneath the line in the shadows (1:47:19-24). This mixture of lighting sheds light on the opposing forces at work on Red: those of the institution, those of Andy, and those of his own making.

Red gives a mouthpiece to such external influences before using his narration as a platform for his own voice. At first, Red appears as the voice of reason, warning that "hope is a dangerous thing" in response to Andy's meditation on music as an intangible source of individuality and beauty, "something they can't touch, it's yours." But Red's condescending caution disguises the underlying puppetry of Shawshank; he is preaching the narrative of the repressive institution to which he belongs. Andy, however, challenges Red's staunchness, retorting that Brooks died as a victim of this ideology.

Andy's impact reverberates through Shawshank after his escape as his friends reminisce about his escapades, just as Dragline and the inmates do at the end of *Cool Hand Luke*. Red, though, longs for Andy's presence, exhibiting the human need for God, a savior, or some form of ideology to fill the void. Cleaning up a graveyard, Red reflects that "some birds aren't meant to be caged; their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away the part of you that knows that it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice, but still the place that you live in is that more drab

and empty that they are gone.” While Red now appreciates Andy’s hope and success, he feels unfulfilled. He does not, however, fall into the trap of worshipping Andy as a replacement for the institution’s ideology. As he expresses in the subsequent parole scene, he rejects the notion of rehabilitation and of Andy’s desire to erase the past, opting instead to bear the burden of his past mistakes. Red, perhaps unwittingly, finds himself in this scene; hence, he is released. He replicates the journey of Brooks, living in the same halfway house and working the same job, before following Andy to the oak tree and the beach of Zihuatanejo. Yet, as he manifests by carving his name into the same ceiling beam as Brooks once did, Red stamps his own mark on his redemption. Despite this stark contrast to Dragline’s fate, Red’s accomplishment achieves a comparable evaluation of the religious institution and ideologies obstructing his self-discovery. *Shawshank’s* tonal differences to *Cool Hand Luke* certainly do not discourage a critical view of the prison’s totalitarianism and of Andy’s Christhood.

## Part Two

### **Introduction**

The social commentary and satire genre defamiliarizes norms to highlight society's vices and the ominous consequences of progress. Considering the historic interaction between society, culture, and religion, satirical films have become an appropriate site for challenging religious institutions and standards. Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979) and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) each accomplish this through the use of biblical allegory and Christ-like protagonists. A combination of parallel thematic and cinematic elements motivates this critical pairing of films. Both films follow a religious framework involving God-like characters and their relationships with parallel Christ/Adam-figures, while also investigating the motifs of television and audience obsession and themes concerning reality and perception.

These unconventional Christ or Adam-figures, in that they each subversively represent not only Jesus but also Adam, have a mantle thrust upon them, much like Luke Jackson and Andy Dufresne do in *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Shawshank Redemption* respectively. The followers of these individuals attach importance to their idols through projection, rather than through ascertaining the substance lying behind those personalities. But as a simpleton of unknown origins and as a television icon living a fictional life, Chance (Peter Sellers) and Truman (Jim Carrey) lack the conscious individualism of Luke and Andy. In identifying these characters as redemptive icons, these films critically evaluate the blindness of society to reality and the ways in which social structures and ideologies manipulate audiences within the films as representatives of our society.

## Christ/Adam-Figures

Each film features a God-like figure, “the Old Man” followed by Ben Rand (Melvyn Douglas) in *Being There* and Christof (Ed Harris) in *The Truman Show*, and each depicts its protagonists, Chance and Truman, as their sons. The lovable features and the uplifting spell these sons of God cast on their peers confirms this Christ-figure status, as does evocative imagery, like shots of Chance walking on water and of Truman standing in a cross-pose while stopping cars in the road. But the concern of their God-like father-figures establishes Chance and Truman as Adam-figures, too. Chance, a gardener who attracts the love of Eve (Shirley MacLaine), and Truman, a man living at the center of a paradise made for him before his departure upon discerning the nature of his life, both embody distinctly Adam-like traits in Edenic settings. Despite Chance and Truman’s unique circumstances and traits, these matching portrayals imbue both films with religious undertones that illuminate societal flaws.

### i. *Being There*

*Being There* opens with a sequence of Chance’s daily routine, which consists of tending to the plants in his garden and watching television. Chance, depicted as Adam in the Garden, knows no other life and understands none of the world’s complexities outside of his two hobbies. When his household’s maid, Louise (Ruth Attaway), informs him that their homeowner has died, Chance fails to react. Like Adam before his expulsion from Eden, he cannot comprehend mortality. But this biblical parallel does not compliment Chance, since the film instantly exposes his childlike naiveté. His innocence, not unlike that of Christ, may carry religious connotations but does not amount to anything more than his vacuous persona. Louise’s comment that “the Old Man’s dead” highlights this subversion of religious allegory by echoing Friedrich Nietzsche’s sentiment that ‘God is dead.’ Nietzsche proposed that society murdered God, sending people’s

sense of moral obligation into the abyss. For his followers, Chance becomes their “one and only chance” of filling this vacuum. This framework serves as the basis for the film’s irony, which places the mantle of Christ on Chance, a beloved simpleton who means no more than he says.

Thomas (David Clennon) and Sally (Fran Brill), the attorneys sent to handle the Old Man’s estate, are perplexed upon discovering Chance in the house. He possesses no record of his residence there and says he has no doctor or dentist who could provide a medical history. Chance, at least according to rudimentary forms of identification, does not exist. As his name indicates, and as his path to fame will reify, his identity depends on luck, coincidence, and unwitting opportunism. Chance loses this name when, introducing himself to Eve as “Chance the Gardener,” she mistakes his name for “Chauncey Gardener.” This misinterpretation functions as a microcosm for Chance’s fabricated persona.

To the naked eye, Chance appears as a political upstart, a man of humble origins suddenly entering the fray. Cutting from a medium shot of the Benito Juarez Statue in Washington D.C. to a forlorn Chance, the film draws a parallel between the pair in that this former Mexican President arose to his position from an underprivileged background. The statue not only points Chance in the direction of the capital’s heart, but points to Chance himself, the subject of the subsequent shot. Throughout this sequence of Chance leaving home for the next frontier, music plays from a remix of Richard Strauss’ “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” as popularized in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This overture sparks Chance’s astronomical rise while characterizing him as Zarathustra, the infamous prophet of Nietzsche’s work. Such avenues of promotion anoint Chance as the next great leader of the people, yet the viewer knows him as a grown man showing his bedroom to Thomas and Sally with the demeanor of a proud child. As film scholar Karl Anton Kozlovic points out, Christ-figures frequently appear in film as

“bumbling simpletons, mentally unbalanced, or fools” (Paragraph 20.0). Chance therefore inhabits the simplicity and chosen-ness of Christ as a simplistic soul elevated to the status of messiah. Chance’s innocence, however, cuts a humorously unconventional Christ-figure by symbolizing purity of childish inexperience rather than cleansing from sin.

Chance’s burgeoning fame develops from this absurd notion of him as prophet. Speaking to the President (Jack Warden) about gardening, Ben and the President interpret his words as a metaphor about salvaging the economy: “there will be growth in the spring.” His flowery prophecy echoes those of the biblical prophets and Gospels, begging for interpretation. Yet the audience knows that Chance is literally talking about gardening; Ben and the President are projecting their own interpretations onto this individual whom they perceive to be a prophet. The film cloaks Chance in the mirage of a Christ-figure or prophet to underline the misguided trend in religious worship of groping for an absent savior.

Ashby enhances Chance’s stature through religious allegory, a product of his interactions with Ben and Eve Rand. Ben, replacing “the Old Man” of Chance’s past home, occupies the role of God. Describing his idea for a new financial assistance fund, Ben suggests that Chance “work on the idea, water it, fertilize it...I’m sure you’ll sprout some thoughts in a few days.” Aside from the comical aspects of this line, which capitalize on Chance comprehending complicated business matters only as gardening terms, this advice symbolizes God’s command to Adam to dwell in the Garden of Eden and the later sentencing of Man to work the fields. In a later scene, Ben requests that Chance escort his wife, Eve, to an ambassador’s reception. A full shot (1:21:31-22:05) of Ben talking to the pair opens with Doctor Robert Allenby (Richard Dysart) administering a vaccine to Ben’s backside, evoking images of God showing His back to Moses in the book of Exodus. Chance and Eve sit next to each other on an examination table in the

manner of children awaiting a parent's words. By asking that Chance accompany Eve to the party, Ben emulates God giving Eve to Adam as a partner. Eve, having fallen in love with Chance, attempts to seduce him the next morning. She therefore fulfills the trope of Woman as temptress, however she is unable to bring Chance to sin because he does not understand her gestures.

Chance's relationship with Ben flits between Adam and Christ allegories. Both Eve and Ben comment on how Chance's presence has soothed Ben in his sickness, hinting to the healing powers of Jesus. Ben treats and effectively adopts Chance as a son, making him the Son of God in this metaphor. On Ben's deathbed, the film returns to the God-Adam relationship but opposes the biblical story arc. Instructing Chance to take care of Eve after his death, Ben asks that Chance stay in his house, rather than exiling him as God did to Adam. In flipping the narrative around, Ashby appropriately dismantles the film's metaphor at this stage as Robert confirms with Chance that he is merely a gardener. By swaying between these two religious figures, the film espouses a dichotomous view of Chance: at times he is the redemptive, guiltless Christ-figure, while at others he is the newborn, innocent Adam prior to eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

The film's final sequence, at Ben's funeral, emphasizes Chance's ironic Christhood in the context of the film's contemplation of reality. Carrying Ben's coffin, his associates discuss who should pick up the mantle to spearhead their political enterprise; they settle on Chauncey as their "one and only *chance*." Cut to Chance, dawdling in the woods away from the funeral service. The forest setting mirrors that of Gethsemane, the garden where Jesus is said to have prayed and been arrested the night prior to his crucifixion. Mantegna and Correggio, medieval Italian painters, each depict this episode from the Gospels in scenes known as *The Agony in the Garden*, artwork that Ashby draws from in a full shot of Chance among the trees with the Rand mansion



on a hill in the background (2:00:07-25).<sup>5</sup> Chance's isolated presence, meanwhile, reflects that of Adam, alone with nature as the sole, natural human being in existence.

Chance tends to a wilting plant, resurrecting it, before stepping onto a pond. Walking on the water, he immerses his umbrella to prove he is not walking on a platform, but truly walking on water and consequently achieving Christ-figure status. The film anticipates the viewer's skepticism here, toying with our instinctive rationalization. Is he really walking on water? Should this scene be taken as purely allegorical or stitched into the film-world's reality? These questions lend themselves to the larger issue of Chance's heroism. Can he be considered a Christ or Redeemer-figure when he lacks intention and wit? Or is his simplicity a virtue that justifies his position? The response, or lingering point of inquiry, correlates with Ben's quote read aloud in the background by the President: "Life is a state of mind." The truth resides in an individual's choice of what to think and accept. This questioning of reality and of Chance's sanctified representation notably occurs when the film embraces Chance's Christhood. Such subversion and uncertainty exemplify the film's wariness of latching onto Christ-like heroes.

ii. *The Truman Show*

Like Chance, Truman's identity crisis lies in his name – is he a True-Man? Living in a fictional town named Seahaven as part of a television show in which he unknowingly stars, Truman's existence seems to contradict his name. Yet in many ways, Truman leads a more realistic life than anyone else in the film. He lives life with sincerity, while his costars are acting and his audience are never seen doing anything other than watching television. This dilemma simmers underneath Truman's parallels to Adam and Jesus as Peter Weir adapts the Eden and

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B

Christ narratives to his protagonist's peculiar circumstances. His Christhood conveys the redemption he inspires in his audience, while his Adam-like innocence reminds the viewer of his questionable grasp of reality. Thus, *The Truman Show*'s religious allegory sharpens Truman's complicated heroism and resistance to his oppressors.

The details of Truman's background and the age at which we meet him allude to his Christ/Adam-figure status. The film begins on day 10,909 of the show, which would make Truman close to thirty years old, the age of Christ according to the Gospels. The product of an unwanted pregnancy, Truman essentially lacks legitimate parents, as tradition dictates that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth to the Virgin Mary. Christof, the Creator of "The Truman Show," figuratively adopts Truman, establishing a God-Son bond. Truman's relationship to Christof as the subject of this God-figure's creation simultaneously places him in the boots of Adam. He lives in a paradise with no knowledge of existence outside of Seahaven, until encountering a female love-interest who attempts to reveal the truth to him. Sylvia (Natascha McElhone) functions as Eve, tempting Truman to gain knowledge and thereby disobey Christof, or God.

Christof's resemblance to God substantiates these allegories while facilitating the subversion of Truman's Christ and Adam portrayals. Like the biblical depiction of God, Christof dubs himself the Creator of the show, residing in the sky and conducting Seahaven's daily functions from above. He controls the weather, imitating God's words of "Let there be light" as he instructs his workers "Cue the sun," before sending a rainstorm of biblical proportions, mimicking the flood God sends to destroy Noah's generation (Reinhartz 2003, 10-11). In contrast to Ben Rand's God-figure, then, Christof embodies the manipulative, deterministic elements of the biblical God. Reinhartz attributes the film's transformation of the Eden narrative

to this vision of God's darker side, contending that "whereas God deplores and punishes humankind's disobedience but does not step in to prevent it, Christof determines every detail of Truman's life" (2003, 11). In this vein, she asserts that *The Truman Show* flips the perspective of the Eden narrative, since "Truman, far from being expelled from paradise, can hardly wait to leave it" (2003, 20). Weir, therefore, crafts the biblical narrative in a way that affirms Truman as an Adam-figure while reversing the story's message from God's condemnation of humanity to a True-Man's triumph over his Creator.

Truman's Christhood as it relates to Christof exhibits a more fraught model than the film's take on the Eden narrative. Despite their respective roles, Christof's name derives from Christ and Truman's from True-Man; the God-figure attains the façade of Christ while the Christ-figure is rooted in humanity, pointing to the promotion of Christ as a god in opposition to Christ as a man. Weir molds Truman's Christhood into a markedly human accomplishment rather than an exemplar of Christ's religious sanctity. Twisting the traditional Christ-figure, a very human Truman defeats the godly Christ of religious authority.

Appropriately, then, the film's imagery associates Truman's Christhood with him transcending his fictional life. Standing in the middle of the road, he raises his arms at his sides as if to stop the incoming traffic. An aerial shot captures Truman in center-screen, standing in the cross-pose as his shadow forms the same shape (31:04-10). This shot follows a radio malfunction that transmits Truman's whereabouts to his car and precedes a scene of Truman discovering the show's set behind an elevator door. Placed in this context, Truman's Christhood links to his recognition of his fabricated reality and thus coincides with his journey to become a True-Man.

The reappearance of explicit Christ and religious imagery accordingly returns when Truman escapes the set. Having conquered his fear of water, Truman sails to freedom. Mirroring

Jesus's trials and crucifixion, Christof pushes Truman within an inch of his life as he attempts to drown him in an artificial storm. Truman defies the audience's belief that he has died, rising out of his baptismal soaking like the resurrected Christ. Reborn, Truman finally confirms his suspicions of his world's falsehood when his boat hits the set's wall. On the verge of leaving paradise, Reinhartz likens Truman to Adam once again as a close-up of his hand reaching out to touch the wall shows his fingers meeting those of his shadow, reimagining Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1:29:52-30:00; Reinhartz 2003, 11).<sup>6</sup> Exiting the boat, Truman walks along the painted skyline on water, invoking Chance's manifestation of Christ. The sky implies that Truman has reached heaven, which a stairway to the stage door reinforces as a reference to the Led Zeppelin song, "Stairway to Heaven." Christof finally speaks to Truman, who sees only a voice coming from the sky, like that of God. Despite Christof's affectionate pleas for Truman to stay, our hero disappears into the dark doorway, presumably to leave the set, although we do not see him again.

Truman's Christ-like resurrection and ascension to heaven functions as a rebellion against God and the confines of Seahaven; he chooses the 'real,' outside world over the fantasy of paradise. Moreover, in completing the Christ narrative by leaving the set, thereby redeeming himself and the rejoicing audience, he simultaneously relinquishes his Christ/Adam-figure status by stepping out of paradise and out of the limelight. Weir authors a fascinating paradox, here, as the question concerning Truman's manhood lingers: Is he a True-Man? Is he a True Christ?

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix C

## iii. Watching and Looked-at-ness

The crucial disparity between these two Christ/Adam-figures stems from their relationships to the television and audience motif that runs through both films. Chance obsessively watches television, whereas Truman is obsessively watched on television by others. This dynamic clouds the Christhood of each of these characters as Chance personifies the numbness of the television binge-watchers in *The Truman Show*, while Truman's individuality is assaulted by the voyeuristic and constraining elements of starring in a television show.

One of the many comedic devices in *Being There*, the film's hero, our illustrious Christ-figure, longs for nothing more than to watch television. His followers believe him to possess superior intelligence and a profound understanding of the world, yet in truth he spends his time watching *Sesame Street*, an educational program for children, and learns social cues by imitating people shaking hands on a newscast. Having at first not reciprocated Eve's flirting while he watches television in bed, which Eve mistakes for him respecting her, Chance copies a couple kissing on television, twirling Eve around just as the camera circles the couple on the screen. Chance simply tells Eve that he "likes to watch," referring to the television, but Eve misinterprets this to mean that he would like to watch her masturbate. Declining the authority of the male gaze, Chance continues to watch television while Eve pleasures herself. Chance's viewership forges and warps his character, educating him on real-life matters while also distracting him from real-life relationships. The television's influence, therefore, exerts control over Chance much like his influence casts a spell over those who meet him. Thus, our Christ-figure not only fuels, but participates in the unconscious ensnaring of larger forces.

These two models overlap when Chance sees himself on a television screen outside of a shop window, resembling a child encountering his or her reflection in a mirror for the first time.

Chance plays out what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan termed the “mirror-stage,” a vital phase of psychological development during which a child sees a complete image of him or herself with which they identify. However, this mirror-image is merely a fictitious and idealistic version of what the self looks like, generating an unrealistic expectation for their self-identification.

Chance, observing himself on the screen, falls prey to the same falsehood as his followers, viewing himself in the idealistic shimmer of the television screen. The camera displays Chance on the television, rather than in the flesh, compounding the fabrication of his character by initiating a chain from the film’s camera, which watches the television, which receives footage from the visible camera, which watches Chance (25:48-26:00). The viewer therefore replaces Chance by witnessing events on television, several steps removed from reality. As Chance steps off the curb, a car reverses into him; the driver’s failure to notice Chance reflects his imaginary persona and mirrors the viewer’s inability to see the real Chance. This scene’s reflexivity and its culminating altercation symbolize the collision of reality and fantasy as it connects to Chance and his screen habit.

Truman, as opposed to *watching* television all day, is *watched on* television all day by others, albeit unbeknownst to him. Cameras hidden around Seahaven follow him everywhere he goes, supplying footage that often fills our own screens; the viewer participates in the same stalking as the onscreen audience. The distinction between the film and television camera becomes clearer when the film camera adopts the frame of the surveillance cameras, frequently in the shape of an iris, as if spying on Truman from afar. Even as he nears popping the balloon of his existence when he follows his wife, Meryl (Laura Linney), to her job at the hospital, the iris shot reminds us that he cannot escape our sight.

The camera's voyeurism similarly spoils Truman's Christ/Adam-esque innocence. On a couple of occasions, the camera gazes at Truman through a hidden camera in his mirror. Evoking Chance's mirror-stage scene, Truman plays make-believe in the mirror as a child would, imagining he is a mountain climber or an astronaut. Ordering his fellow climber, "Eat me," Truman associates himself with the consumption of Christ through the communion bread. He unknowingly stares down the barrel of the camera as the viewer intrudes on his childhood games, secretly corrupting his Christ-like purity and genuine wonder for the sake of entertainment. In the first of these scenes, the camera displays Truman through a close-up of a television screen (00:47-55), before switching to the television camera's point of view, in the mirror itself, in the room with Truman (2:15-42). The viewer gradually invades further into Truman's privacy, gaining the authority of the television audience and then of the camera. These shots are interspersed with interviews with "The Truman Show" cast, including Truman's friend, Marlon (Noah Emmerich), who explains that "nothing here is fake...it's merely controlled." Hence, the camera enables the viewer to partake in the show's control of the innocent Truman.

The camera-subject power structure demotes Truman, making him inferior to the camera and the viewer. His Christ-figure status is compromised as a result, which the scenes juxtaposed to him standing in the street in a cross-pose imply. His car radio reveals that he is constantly being watched before staff throw him out of a building as he exposes the set behind an elevator. When Truman verges on an epiphany of his reality, his looked-at-ness obstructs him. Even when he exits the set, fulfilling his own Christ-like redemption, the film cuts to the celebrating television audience rather than to Truman in the outside world. His success as Christ therefore hinges on viewer satisfaction rather than on his individual effort and reward.

## Religious Institutions and Society

The television motif in these films moves beyond our Christ/Adam-figures to a critique of society and mass culture. On the surface, this social criticism attacks the effects of mass media on audiences, but when accounting for the religious allegory at the heart of each film, a deeper critique of society's interaction with religious institutions and ideological forces emerges. Much of this assessment originates with society's incessant need for a hero, or Christ-figure. As Luke and Andy's characters established, Chance and Truman's Christhood derives from their lofty status among their audiences. The representation of these audiences and their varying responses to Chance and Truman cement these films as commentaries on society and its religious affiliations.

### *i. Being There*

Chance's solitude combined with his socially constructed identity embody the film's title as a derivative of Heidegger's concept of '*dasein*,' which translates as 'being there.' This principle defines the peculiarity of human existence as a constant dilemma between isolation of the self and the necessity of interacting with others in a community. Chance's television watching functions as a solitary activity; he ignores Eve's seduction, choosing to be alone with the television over companionship. Yet Chance must interact with Eve and others to build and preserve his renown. He accepts the identity that society bestows upon him, fulfilling French philosopher Louis Althusser's definition of interpellation:

ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it... 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the



hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him (Althusser 118).

By answering to “Chauncey Gardener,” the name that Eve mistakenly gives him, Chance identifies with this invented character, thereby transforming him into an interpellated subject. The film’s Christ-figure, therefore, is purely a product of society and ideology.

Chance’s appearance on “The Gary Burns Show” epitomizes this foundation for his character. After the President quotes Chance in a televised speech, the media begins promoting Chance while searching for nonexistent clues to his background. The clamor that the President unintentionally causes signifies the instantaneous influence of mass media. Chance interviews on a widely viewed talk show, discussing gardening tips that the audience assumes symbolize political opinions. The film equates the viewer with the television audience by displaying the interview on television screens, as opposed to the live recording; we step into Chance’s shoes, watching and learning from the television.

This sequence transports the viewer across the varying reactions of people watching at home, who each represent different social groups and agendas. “I think he’s brilliant,” remarks Johanna (Denise DuBarry). Johanna represents the masses; Chance stupefies this audience, who assume that his comments must come from a place of education, when really Chance genuinely speaks about gardening. Ben and Eve watch on while speaking of their fondness for Chance. As his close acquaintances, they attach love and meaning to Chance’s words and their relationship with him. Robert, Ben’s doctor, watches in bewilderment since he sees straight through Chance; he is the scientist, a representative of post-Watergate skepticism. Louise, Chance’s former maid, tells her friends that she raised Chance, claiming that his rise to fame proves that “all you gotta be is white in America, to get whatever you want.” Louise, a black woman, represents the

naysayers, the minority opinion that enviously challenges the majority's chosen narrative. Other groups that react to Chance include the press, who search for the truth behind Chance, or rather, drama to attract readers, and Ben's associates, who represent politicians in search of a leader. Each of these groups perceive Chance through their own lenses, adapting what he says to mean what they desire it to mean. In truth, however, they are misperceiving Chance's sincere simplicity. The audience, therefore, concocts its own Christ-figure, despite Louise's remark that Chance was "shortchanged by the Lord." Her use of religious terminology to describe Chance's intelligence draws attention to the ignorance of society in its pursuit of a religious icon.

Ashby highlights society's need for a Christ-figure or religious institution in an earlier shot that addresses Louise's concern with racism. In a long shot of Chance embarking on his journey to D.C. (20:53-21:09), graffiti on a wall behind him reads: "America ain't shit 'cause the white man's got a god complex." Like Louise, the author of this statement identifies American success with white privilege. But as Chance walks beside this message, Ashby implies that society's "god complex" is one of desperation, rather than arrogance. The film is underscoring society's search for a god and its reliance on divinely inspired saviors, which drive people to manufacture Christ-figures, such as Chance.

Gods and saviors manifest in various shapes and sizes to satisfy the ideological needs of society. At Ben's funeral, several of these social institutions die with him, leaving Chance to pick up the pieces. The scene follows Ben's associates escorting his coffin towards his final resting place: a pyramid engraved with the Eye of Providence. This Christian icon signifies the omniscient sight of God's judgement, a device of the Church's enforcement, while also obtaining cultural significance as the image depicted on the US one-dollar bill. Thus, Ben's death, or God's death in this metaphor, is equated with the termination of institutional religion and capitalist

consumerism. In their time of need, Ben's associates turn to Chance as they seek to retain political dominance. Thus, dependence upon a false savior has spread to the arena of political tactics. By portraying the downfall of religious, economic, and political institutions, the scene undermines society's building blocks. But as the President reminds the viewer of life's fragility as a "state of mind," society cannot bear to lose the order of an institutional lifestyle; they merely replace the old institutions with their infatuation with a Christ-figure – Chance. Ironically, though, society figuratively abandons order by leaving its fate up to 'chance.' A Christ-figure, whose fictional state in this case offers little alternative to socially constructed institutions, will not resolve society's "god complex," but rather, will continue to feed it.

ii. *The Truman Show*

"Love him, Protect him," declares the slogan of "The Truman Show." This statement equates loving Truman with protecting him, specifically from the harm of the outside world and the truth of his existence. The mantra drives the constraining world in which Truman resides, diminishing his autonomy. The film's Christ-figure, like Luke and Andy, finds himself at odds with an oppressive regime. Christof, as Creator, has manipulated Truman's biographical narrative, Seahaven's culture, and the script to thwart Truman's attempts to leave Seahaven. He kills off Truman's father at sea, instilling Truman's fear of travelling over water. He surrounds Truman with reminders of the perfect life he leads in Seahaven as well as the perils of leaving. Newspapers declare Seahaven "the best place on earth," travel agents display posters of planes being struck by lightning, and the radio covers up the falling of a studio light by claiming that it fell from a plane shedding parts. The latter excuse also exemplifies how Christof and his crew inhibit Truman's ability to think outside of the confines of his reality. Meryl's explanation of the elevator incident as a cable snapping exhibits shades of a religious institution's efforts to bat

away inconsistencies and stave off heresy. As head of this church, Christof fears the prospect of Truman thinking freely, which would in turn destroy everything he has created.

As Truman's suspicions escalate, Christof deploys obstacles, such as fake forest fires and nuclear power plant accidents, to keep his precious star at bay. When Truman's questions erupt in a violent confrontation with Meryl, she and Christof paint this episode as a mental breakdown rather than a revelation of the truth; in Seahaven, original ideas are branded as madness or heresy. Marlon arrives to save the day, comforting Truman to shepherd him back into Christof's grip. The pair sit at a dock that overlooks a body of water, scenery that features throughout as the site of Truman's contemplations and epiphanies. Truman sits on the edge of the dock, his legs dangling below, as if on the edge of sanity or on the verge of discovery. Truman speaks of conspiracy, claiming that the world revolves around him and that everyone is in on it. He is starting to believe in a narrative as he searches for answers, but Marlon discourages this approach: "I know that feeling when it's like everything is slipping away and you don't wanna believe it so you look for answers somewhere else." Marlon is dismissing Truman's theories as facile attempts to reconcile contradictions and upsetting aspects of life. Yet as he utters this line, the camera cuts to Christof, who is feeding lines to Marlon. Not only is Truman correct about the grand narrative of his life, but he has exposed the harmful methodology of Christof's rule. Christof is condemning Truman's creative ideas about the nature of his existence, only to substitute them with his own version of Truman's narrative. Marlon reaffirms his friendship with Truman here, ironically stating that "the last thing I would ever do is lie to you." This is itself a lie, which points out the falsehood of everything he has said up to now and the lies of Christof's narrative. The scene attains religious significance as well, since Christof speaking through an agent to Truman is juxtaposed to Truman's reunion with his father, hence we metaphorically

witness God speaking to his son, Jesus. Placed in a religious framework, this scene portrays the sugarcoated tyranny and hypocrisy of which religious institutions and leaders are capable.

The film, however, detracts from Christof's divine perfection and the cohesion of institutional narratives by alluding to what Reinhartz terms the "constructedness of the world as we know it" (2003, 16). Reinhartz theorizes that every detail in *Seahaven* relates to film and television; the characters are named after famous actors, such as Meryl Streep and Marlon Brando, the street names are named after directors, such as DeMille Street, and Truman's last name, Burbank, derives from the city in California that houses several movie studios (Reinhartz 2003, 15-6). Since "The Truman Show" airs all day, the producers have built in advertisements throughout *Seahaven*, while characters advertise products in the style of 1950s television commercials, such as when Meryl offers Truman "Mococo drink." Not only do these factors emphasize the fictitious, constructed nature of Christof's paradise, but they elucidate the hypocrisy at its core. Christof labels the outside world "a sick place," mimicking religious institutions' condemnation of vice. Yet, Christof benefits from the outside world's consumerism and television obsession, phenomena blatantly visible in the building blocks of his world.

*Seahaven's* "constructedness" achieves religious significance when Truman and Marlon watch the sunset together. A stunning wide shot at the beach shows the moon in the sky and the sun setting, while clouds separate the two heavenly bodies; the shot mirrors the nature and liminality present in the closing shot of *The Shawshank Redemption*. As the film later reveals, Christof's observation deck sits in the moon, thus the moon here represents Christof and God. The sun, resting on the water, replaces Truman walking on water in the film's final scene, while the wordplay of 'sun' and 'son' confirms Truman's father-son bond with Christof. This scenery prompts Marlon's comment: "It's the big guy. Quite a paintbrush he's got." To Truman and the

casual listener, Marlon refers to God. In truth, however, he refers to the Creator of the set – the filmmaker, or in this case, Christof. Equating God and the filmmaker, this scene implies a skepticism towards the concept of God as a supernatural being, the origin of all creation. Just as Truman will ask himself whether some other force disguised as God hides behind the curtain of this breathtaking sky, the viewer must ask him or herself about the nature of our world's origins.

Christof's observations of reality demonstrate how Seahaven's constructedness reflects that of the world outside. Defending his exploitation of Truman, Christof explains in an interview that "we accept the reality of the world with which we're presented." Just as Truman accepts Seahaven as his reality despite its fictionality, people outside accept the so-called real world as true. In short, "Life is a state mind." Christof repeats this sentiment to Truman before he leaves the set, affectionately teaching him a lesson from father to son that "there's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you." Reinhartz negates this statement, claiming that Christof, "slow to admit defeat" should not be taken seriously, otherwise "there is no more truth in the real world than there is in the television world circumscribed by the small screen" (15). Frightening as that thought may be, Christof's argument should not be dismissed as a persuasive technique to keep Truman on set. Christof is making an astute observation about the 'real' world, albeit for his own sinister purposes. The social constructs of our world pose little difference to the constructedness of Seahaven, a notion on which Christof hopes to capitalize by displacing the institution of reality with that of his fantasy world.

The film's depiction of television audiences sharpens this critique of the 'real' world. Viewers around the world frequently appear watching the show, specifically at a bar and a parking garage office, or even from the comfort of their own living room and bathtub. These viewers never leave their spots or engage with the world outside; the viewer never sees the real

world outside of these viewing parties. In contrast to Truman, who exhibits adventurousness and experiences joy and sadness, his audience members prefer to sit in their own bathwater for days at a time watching him lead the life they should be living in the real world. Truman therefore proves more of a True-Man than anyone living in reality. Rather than copying Truman's outgoing personality, they fall victim to the sway of television and consumerism, posting Truman calendars on their walls and clutching pillows bearing Truman's face. This obsession assumes a religious fanaticism when Christof opts to cut the transmission after Truman vanishes. Exclamations of "Jesus" and "God in heaven" can be heard as the audience loses its reason to live; they cannot cope without the religious institution that is to them, television in the form of "The Truman Show."

The audience's dependence on Truman culminates in his eventual departure from Seahaven, which spurs jubilant cheers from the audience because his redemption functions as their own. The viewers want him to succeed, to find the truth, because only he can access the truth which they have failed to find in the real world. Truman thereby substantiates his claim as the only True-Man in the film. The film's final scene, however, illustrates how easily society will move on to the latest craze. The parking officers, seeing that Truman's narrative has terminated, search for the TV guide as they ask, "what else is on?" Audiences will simply continue to sit watching television in search of the next Christ-figure or inspiring antidote for their boredom. The underlying content of Christ-like heroes and attractive religious institutions matters not to society. They root for Truman's escape because it makes for good television, rather than because they recognize the cruelty of Christof's regime. Regardless, then, of an institution's exploitation of people and resources, society continues to support ventures, such as "The Truman Show," that

fulfill people's primal need for meaning and redemption from the comfort of their own couches or bathtubs.

## **Conclusion**

*The Truman Show's* ending produces an individual triumph for Truman alongside a derisive critique of society and its institutions. This conclusion matches those of *Being There*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*, tying these four films together. On their own and in tandem with one another, these works subvert the Christ-figures and religious imagery at their centers to support a criticism of religious institutions. This critique incorporates the numerous tools at an institution's disposal, such as harmful ideologies and ideological practices, with the role of society, which comprises society's exploitation at the hands of its institutions as well as its contribution to sustaining an institution or Christ-figure's power. This trend also appears in films outside of these pairings, notably in Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). Future research into this topic would benefit from considering these films, among others.



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Mantegna, Andrea. *Lamentation of Christ*. c. 1480, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

Michelangelo. *The Creation of Adam*. c. 1512, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

Appendix

**Appendix A**



Above left: Mantegna's *Lamentation of the Dead Christ*. Right: Giotto's *Lamentation* (Source: Wikimedia Commons).



Luke, an exhausted, resentful Christ-figure, lies before his followers (*Cool Hand Luke*, Rosenberg).

**Appendix B**



Above left: Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden*, 1458-60. Right: Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden*, 1457-9 (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

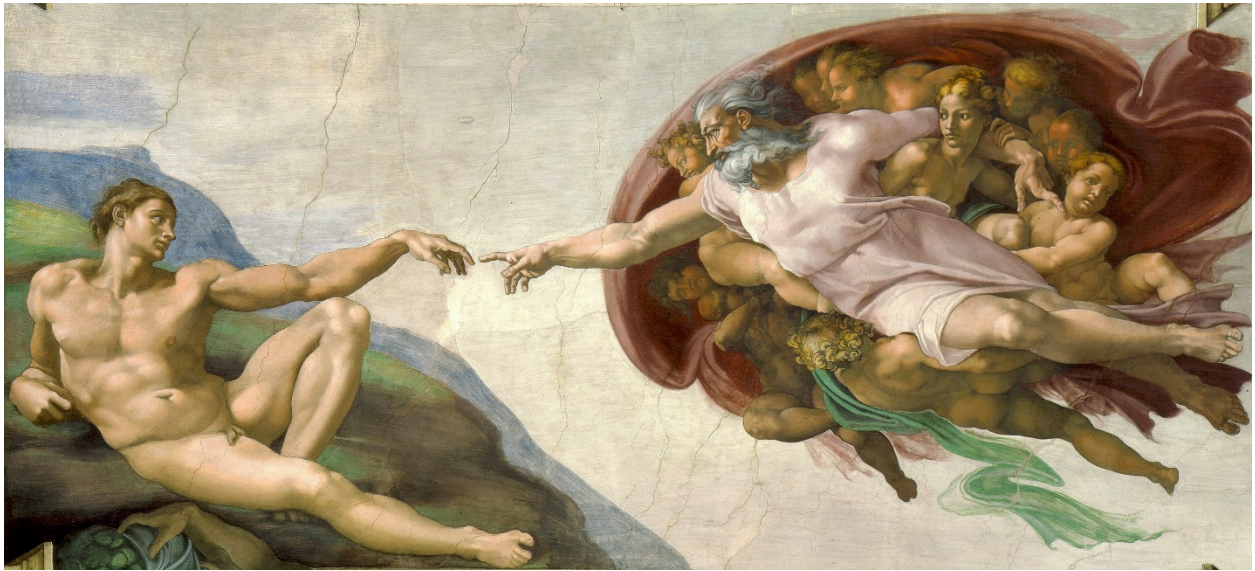


Correggio's *Agony in the Garden* (Source: Wikimedia Commons).



Chance as Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (*Being There*, Ashby).

Appendix C



Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (Source: Wikimedia Commons).



Truman discovers the boundary of paradise (*The Truman Show*, Weir).