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The Son of Man Film as a Cry for Justice: A Cross-Cultural Convergence of Film and the African Theological Struggle for Liberation

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THE *SON OF MAN* FILM AS A CRY FOR JUSTICE: A CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERGENCE OF FILM AND THE AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the 2006 South African film *Son of Man* as a cry for justice in the African context. Existing at the confluence of art, film, and theological reflection, this thesis develops new insights into concrete problems which Africans face like anthropological poverty. My central argument is that the film *Son of Man* is a cry for justice in a context of gross corruption, indiscriminate apportionment of resources, and a failure to address the real plight of the poor people living in slum areas.

Following the art and theology of Engelbert Mveng, I open the Christological discussion with the idea that Jesus in the film, has an African face. Grounded in Mveng's artistic language and the inculturation of African masks, this thesis unmasks anthropological poverty. It proposes that a Christology grounded in the image of Jesus as liberator best suits the African context. This discussion culminates in the role of Mary in the film and how her story inspires the fight for justice and liberation. From a Marian Art perspective, it looks at how Mary's portrayal in the movie gives a voice to the African experience, where mothers of faith help communities transform through protest. Using a dialogical approach between Mary in the film and paintings by social justice activists, the thesis shows how women's work can have transformative and life-changing impacts on communities.

In this thesis, I use A. E. Orobator's Generative Contextualized method to discuss the problem of injustice and poverty in slum areas in the light of *Son of Man.* Under the moment of encounter, I discuss the film, the Director, and the fictional context of the film. I also argue that this film is part of Third Cinema. Under the interpretive moment, I use Mveng's *Hekima Christus* as a lens through which to discuss the life and death

struggle of poverty. Under the synthesizing moment, I bring in the implications of this film for theology. Under the generative moment, I look at how films can offer viewers and theologians inspiration to build on their faith, beliefs, and actions in the face of the reality of oppression, injustices, and poverty.

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Anh Q. Tran, S.J., Ph.D., Director Date

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For my late parents

Rodwell and Alfredah Ngwenya

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

When I was young, I remember watching movies on video cassette players and in makeshift movie theaters, engaged in the experience. As I sat in the cinema hall, the light projected on the silver screen became, for me, a metaphor for hope. The film viewing experience provided me with, literally, a light at the end of the tunnel. Watching films showed me different ways to be human amid a life of contradiction and many challenges in the world. Though I consumed a lot of films, I gravitated towards those in which the hero's journey was about light shining through the cracks of life and presenting hope to a hopeless world.

When most Catholic theologians discuss inculturation in Africa, they rarely bring up cinema. Cinema is viewed casually as an entertainment medium lacking depth and effort in the theologian's toolbox. While a theology of inculturation finds a lot of reflection and development in speech, dance, dress, song, proverbs, and Bible translations, there is still much work to be done in the intersection between cinema studies and theology. For many ordinary Christians, films impact their lives and address issues they face. Since films are audio-visual materials, they have the potential to raise questions that may resonate with people in a difficult situation.

Films can focus on the human story, and the many challenges human beings go through. As audio-visual parables, films offer entertainment, but as art, they help us reflect on our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with God. Rather than just viewing an opaque surface that is being hit by light from a projection, we see a portal open virtually. We are taken to another world and another dimension. Films offer a promise and a possibility for transformation, change, and hope. In our twenty-first-

century context, film is the new stained-glass window because it works both with light and shadow, showing its effect when there is light. Like a painting in light, and through this new form of a stained-glass window, we are given a glimpse of how there is a beautiful narrative underneath a narrative of challenge and ugliness.

When I studied theology at Hekima College in Nairobi, I struggled to find a course on African theology of art.[1] Was this because of the lack of African Christian art? No. I think it was due to the fact that the primary goal was the priestly formation of the scholastics and seminarians; there was less emphasis laid on training theologians to appreciate visual theology in the African context. The experience drew me to engage critically with Mark Dornford-May's 2006 movie, *Son of Man*.[2] This film helped me reflect on the meaning of being a human amidst the world's contradictions, poverty, injustice, and human evil. The film presents a prophetic liberating Jesus, who becomes a mouthpiece for the poor and marginalized through his message, lifestyle, and actions. The film also depicts his mother, Mary as an agent of change who mobilizes people in protest and helps transform the community by unmasking the evils of the regime. Through such a presentation, the film presents the keen viewer with many theological and artistic questions about what would happen if Jesus was born, raised, and died in a slum.

[1] I became more interested in this topic during my undergraduate studies in theology. I was and still am an avid consumer of films and so I always wished to find a correlation between theology and film criticism. And so when an elective called "Hope and Solidarity in Global Cinema" was offered by Br. Antonio D. Sisson, I signed up and enjoyed the course. The short course kindled my theological imaginations to be able to see the dialogue between systematic theology and cinema studies. Consequently, I became interested in studying the person of Jesus (Christology). After my ordination, I was invited to give a few courses to the novices of the Zambia-Malawi province in cinema and Christology. I showed the movie Son of Man and discovered how it had great symbolism for students who come from about eight countries of Eastern and southern Africa. This showed me that the topic in question was relevant to the African worldview where third cinema is produced but not well distributed for a wider viewership.

[2] Mark Dornford-May dir., *Son of Man* (Lorber Films, 2006).

Every time I watch the film, I experience another way to understand the predicament of the African people and how Jesus is present in that reality.

Nature and Scope of the Study

Having said this, I will address two problems in my thesis: the salient and continuing problem of injustice and the pain of poverty in slum areas of South Africa during the apartheid period. To do this, I will argue that the film *Son of Man* is a cry for justice in a context of gross corruption, indiscriminate apportionment of resources, and a failure to address the real plight of the poor people living in slum areas. Through Dornford-May's presentation of the person of Jesus, I believe that there is a cinematic-analogical parallel to visual artworks and theologies of Engelbert Mveng and other theologians. Mveng provides a theological foundation for the Christ image of a liberator interested in the workings of the African people in their struggle to use art as a force for interrupting the operations of unnecessary repression of capitalism and neo-colonialism. In addition, Dornford-May presents a Marian image of agency, fragility, and hospitality for contemporary communities.

Consequently, this study is situated within three intersecting conversations. First, I focus on the film *Son of Man* as it relates to the African context with its issues of poverty and injustice. Following the film's social analysis, I argue that this film is part of the genre known as Third Cinema. Secondly, this thesis intends to set in dialogue the artwork of Engelbert Mveng, the *Hekima Christus,* and the film *Son of Man.* I show that Mveng, through his artwork, unmasks poverty, a public secret that is hidden only from those who choose to ignore it. I will then delve into Mveng's idea of anthropological

poverty[3] and injustice in political structures. Using Mveng's perspective, I will further explore the interplay of Mveng's Christology of Jesus as Liberator and the portrayal of Jesus in *Son of Man.*

Thirdly, I will focus on the African theological struggle for liberation using some poignant scenes in *Son of Man* in which the depiction of Mary borrows from the history of iconography in Marian art. A few contemporary paintings will be brought it for comparison and to shed new light on the use of these images in the film.[4] This thesis is a confluence of film, art, and theological reflection. It discusses a lower Christology, which focuses on the humanity of Jesus, that can open to issues that affect the African continent, such as anthropological poverty and injustice in political structures. From a Marian Art perspective, it takes a closer look at how Mary's portrayal in the movie gives a voice to the African experience, where mothers of faith help communities transform through protest.

Methodology

This research uses the "generative contextualized" method developed by Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator to reflect on film, art, and theology.[5] This method is

[3] Mveng defines anthropological poverty as: "When persons are deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, spiritual, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world and the specificity of their "*ipseity*" as individuals, society, and history when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith universe, and their basic creativity, deprived of all their rights, their hopes, their ambitions (that is, when they are robbed of their own ways of living and existing)-they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person. It is this poverty that we call anthropological poverty." See Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 155-159.

[4] Dornford-May, *Son of Man*.

[5] In the Generative Contextualized method, we deviate from pure abstract thinking by appealing to four moments: the moment of encounter; the interpretive moment; the synthesizing moment; and the generative moment. Firstly, in the moment of encounter, the context provides material for theological

contextualized because though theology is a rational activity, it is not above the human predicament.[6] It is *generative* because a reflection upon the arts is "neither predetermined nor amenable to dogmatic or doctrinal manipulation."[7] This methodology asks salient questions which guide the discussion: What is going on here? What are the different ways of understanding this reality? How do we image and re-imagine theology in the face of the complex reality? What practical models of faith, belief, and action suggest themselves in this present context?[8]

I use Third Cinema critical theory[9] as a hermeneutical key that unlocks the layers of meaning hidden in the film using stylistic devices such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, camera angling, editing, sound, and the director's intention.[10] I propose

reflection – the problem. (The question here is: What is going on here? It corresponds well with seeing, in the See, Judge, Act methodology) Secondly, in the interpretative moment, a variety of sources and resources are consulted to analyze what is going on. (The question here is: What are the different ways of understanding this present reality? This is the literature review.) Thirdly, the synthesizing moment investigates how we can image or re-imagine theology in the face of the complex reality. Finally, the generative moment looks at practical models of faith, beliefs and actions/solutions that can be presented in the face of the reality. See Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "Method and Context: How and Where Theology Works in Africa," in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 124.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Third cinema is a creative movement which began in 1960s Latin America with film makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. They used cinema, as a gun, to produce *La Hora de los Hornos* (1968) which critiqued the working class and shifted the focus to the audience – it engraved its ideas on the spectator's mind. This cinema also advocated the production of films that represent the third world's struggle for liberation. Consequently, the term third cinema is rooted in the notion of the third world who are at the lowest rung of the three worlds of the global pyramid. The under-developed countries are at the base of the pyramid in this global socio-economic race. Since the third world is still dealing with post-colonial issues such as impoverishment, the cinema that is meant for their emancipation is not the one that they consume. And so this third cinema as a concept is apt for their view of Jesus as he is presented in the film *Son of Man*. Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 12–13.

[10] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*. 3.

that using a comparative dialogical style that connects with other media will reveal the objective of the aesthetics of liberation[11] present in this film. This approach is, in other words, a social-historical analysis of the filmic space in search of an authentic Christian praxis which helps me link the film *Son of Man* to iconography[12] and a theology of liberation.[13] It is a dialogue between film/visual art and theology that takes us from the story and theological debates suggested by the movie director and into people's social experiences as they aspire for liberation.

Overview of Chapters

This study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduces the film *Son of Man* as a dialogical counterpart to theology and and other plastic arts. I then discuss the director's intention to make the movie. I further look at how the director shapes the discussion of Christology from the Global South perspective. I make the case that this film belongs to the Third Cinema movement, a film theory that did not emerge from a Euro-American context.[14] I also discuss the Christology of Dornford-May and the fictional context behind the production of *Son of Man*.

[11] The aesthetics of liberation use art as a primary force in interrupting the operation of capitalism, of colonialism and of oppression. Many artists do their best work when they are an opposing force to an oppressive system.

[12] Iconography, meaning icon painting, or the field of study relating to the interpretation of signs and symbols in a work of art.

[13] The method championed by Teshom Gabriel called aesthetics of liberation is based on the stylistic strategies of third world cinema, the only critical method of film that does not emanate from a Euro-American scholarly context. The theological principle I will use is contextual theologies, liberation theology and theological anthropology of understanding the Christ figure. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 18.

[14] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*.

In the second chapter, I focus on Christian African Art from Englebert Mveng's point of view as an African historian, theologian, and artist. I briefly relate how one of his paintings, the *Hekima Christus,* unmasks poverty. I also address Mveng's idea of inculturation of African masks and how that relates to the image of Jesus as Liberator as also portrayed in the film.[15] I also discuss how Mveng's idea of anthropological poverty acts as a prism through which the film *Son of Man* can be viewed. [16]

The third chapter discusses the role of women in the struggle for liberation. Here I raise questions about how Mother Mary is presented as an agent of change in the film. This chapter connects the film to contemporary artworks, such as Mark Doox's *Our lady of Ferguson,* and Tylon Sawyer's the *Pietà*. In this chapter, I ask how contemporary Christian art paintings can offer insight into women's roles in the struggle for liberation as mothers. Can motherhood affect how people see the world through cinema or audio-visual art forms? Can such images show hope or critique structures of oppression?

Significance

This thesis adds a voice to the works of Richard Walsh, Adele Reinhartz, and Antonio Sison, among many others.[17] It seeks to describe and disclose the many cultural and religious forces which make *Son of Man* meaningful for African theology. Since its release fifteen years ago, this movie has been a masterpiece in film and religion. Yet, it

[15] Antonio D. Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021). 21.

[16] Ibid. 60. 1.

[17] Jeffrey Lloyd Staley and Richard G. Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*.

has suffered poor distribution and recognition by most people. It begs greater attention for its continued saliency, its ability to act as a catalyst for shaping theological reflection, and (as I argue) for its potential to bring about meaningful change as we labor toward a more just and peaceful world.[18] In this work, I offer a unique voice that views film and visual art as tools that transform society through their message and performance.

[18] Considering that Christian artists live in a historical context surrounded by different social problems, their art gives me an ingredient to use in shaping my theological reflection and come up with insights that encourage conversation and conversion for me and the community.

CHAPTER 1

FILM AND ART AS THEOLOGY

Introduction

When one watches global news about Africa, one sees a continent with many problems: poverty, wars, injustice, disease, corruption, etc. Given all these problems, British-born South African director Mark Dornford-May responded by giving Africa a revolutionary Christ figure who fights oppression in contemporary Africa in his film *Son of Man*. This chapter introduces the film *Son of Man* as a dialogical counterpart to theology and other plastic arts. To do so, I use the generative contextualized method of Agbonkhiameghe E. Orobator, which uses four moments to analyze a work of art/film: the moment of encounter, the interpretive moment, the synthesizing moment, and the generative moment.[19] In the moment of encounter, I situate *Son of Man* in the Third Cinema paradigm, a film theory that did not emerge from a Euro-American context. Then I give a detailed synopsis of the movie and its impact on the context in which it was produced. In the interpretative moment, I briefly narrate the life of the director Mark Dornford May and give his background and influences. Finally, in the generative moment, I discuss the fictional context of the film and how that impacts the relevance of the film to African viewers. I also look at models of faith or solutions to some of the film's questions to address these questions: Where do we go from here? What are the implications of this discussion for the people of Africa?

[19] Orobator, "Method and Context: How and Where Theology Works in Africa," 124.

Locating *Son of Man* in Third Cinema

In this section, I begin by discussing what Third Cinema is and then offer a brief explanation of how *Son of Man* fits into its framework. My choice of Third Cinema as a dialogue partner for theology is driven by strategic and personal reasons as follows. Strategically, I think that Third Cinema provides enough ideological insights to help me reflect on the problems of injustice, poverty, and slum life in Africa. Personally, as an African, I am a Zambian/African child of the Global South in search of a story that will help liberate the people to whom I minister. And so, *Son of Man's* message has the most personal resonance and provides me with material to reflect on the world I live in.

The History of Third Cinema

Third Cinema theory was born in the 1960s as a radical, politically driven artistic movement articulated by filmmakers Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino.[20] For Solanas and Getino, Third Cinema was distinct from other forms of cinema using the following classification: First Cinema was commercialized and epitomized in Hollywood; Second Cinema was mainly from Europe and included art cinema, American independent cinema, and new wave cinemas; Third Cinema was a radical alternative to these two and understood itself as guerilla[21] filmmaking.[22]

[20] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 11.

[21] In filmmaking, low-budget films which do not meet the standards set by big production studios are called guerilla films. Though low budget is a huge characteristic, having smaller crews and less equipment gives artists a sense of hardship which gives the end product something to share. The fact that the filmmakers will not bow down to big entities like Hollywood means they can do what they want even though they will have less distribution and recognition.

[22] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 14.

When asked about his cinematic roots, Fernando Solanas narrates the difficulties of making a film within the traditional structures of the 1960s Argentinian context. [23] Being new and inexperienced meant they could not obtain official support and financial means. Then there was the problem of freedom of expression. Since the theme of power in a mass movement was key to their project, they could not be granted an official commission that could approve the financing. And so, they ended up choosing a documentary style of filmmaking where they were their own producers. Instead of having a huge crew, as seen in Hollywood end credits, they had a smaller team of fewer than twenty people.

Solanas and Getino broke with the foreign models of great cinema tied to Euro-American cinema adaptations that proceed from novel to story and movie theatre.[24] Cinema became a tool of expression and communication of knowledge – mostly ideological-political film.[25] They were influenced by Frantz Fanon, who opposed colonization by coming up with a "political discourse in which the film depended on the expressive possibility of intellectually underdeveloped levels. It was a cinema of shit in ultimate terms."[26]

[23] Fernando Solanas et al., "Cinema as a Gun an Interview With Fernando Solanas," *Cinéaste* 3, no. 2 (1969): 19.

[24] Ibid., 20.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

In 1968, they produced a documentary film *La Hora de los Hornos*[27] (The Hour of the Furnaces), a film to provoke a penetration of the themes concerned.[28] This film aimed at being an example of realizing decolonization – a film of disruption compared to the traditional values of Euro-American cinema (for example, Hollywood).[29] They knew that having a cinematic language was crucial for helping people come out of oppression and colonization. As Solanas states, "it would not have been a decolonized film if it didn't decolonize its language."[30] This revolutionary cinema became an intense instrument of battle and concrete struggle – "cinema like a gun[31], a guerrilla film, a film of and for the masses."[32]

For Teshome H. Gabriel, instead of designating Third Cinema as a weapon opposed to the dominant forces of Hollywood and Western culture, he proposes a critical theory of Third Cinema.[33] This critical theory is built on Frantz Fanon's three phases of decolonization, which are: assimilation, remembrance, and revolution (combative).[34]

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[27] *The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968 shifts the onus to the viewer who is asked to do something about what they have seen and apply that to their real lived situation. It ends with a mandate – "Now it's up to you to draw conclusions, to continue the film. You have the floor." Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994). 262.

[28] Solanas et al., "Cinema as a Gun an Interview With Fernando Solanas," 20.

[29] Ibid., 21.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam believe that *The Hour of the Furnace* is such a crucial moment in the development of Third Cinema. As they state, "The film resuscitates the venerable analogy of camera and gun, charging it with a precise revolutionary signification. (Art becomes, as Walter Benjamin said of the Dadaists, "an instrument of Ballistics.") Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 260.

[32] Solanas et al., "Cinema as a Gun an Interview With Fernando Solanas," 21.

[33] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 18.

[34] Teshome H. Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films," *Black camera: the newsletter of the Black Film Center/Archives* 12, no. 2 (2021): 318.

Gabriel maps assimilation with Hollywood, remembrance with early government-sponsored film productions, and the combative with films that show the struggles of Third World peoples.[35]

As Sison observes, "Gabriel reappropriates Fanon's genealogy to interpret the development of Third World films."[36] However, these classifications of first, second, and third cinema do not correspond to the hypothesis of the first, second, and third worlds in geopolitics (of the Cold War era); they are proposed by Solanas and Getino to be virtual geography with overlapping boundaries.[37] So, Third Cinema is not locked to the theory of three worlds but stands only as analogous to the Third World conception of economic reality. Gabriel notes that there exists a generalization about the so-called "third worlds"[38] as places rooted in human fear.[39] He speaks about spiritual and traditional practices that still hold on the people in the rural populations manifested in the knowledge obtained from spirits, magic, masquerades, and rituals.[40] Instead of sticking to this fear, *Son of Man* goes beyond it by embracing the best of both worlds.

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[35] Ibid., 318–320.

[36] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 18.

[37] Ibid., 14.

[38] Mike Wayne expounds on this idea: "Third Cinema is not to be restricted to the so-called Third World. First, Second and Third Cinemas do not designate geographical areas, but institutional structures/working practices, associated aesthetic strategies and their attendant cultural politics. Thus, if we understand First and Second Cinema in more complexity, we will be more ready to understand that we can have First and Second Cinema in the Third World and Third Cinema in the First World." Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 6.

[39] Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films," 327.

[40] Ibid.

Son of Man in Third Cinema

Son of Man can be situated somewhere between the remembrance and combative phases within Third Cinema critical theory. The film includes elements of the remembrance phase, such as indigenization and control of production. It is the brainchild of a theater company formed in the wake of African appreciation of Traditional values in the film.[41] It also embraces elements of the combative phase, such as mass participation with members of communities speaking indigenous languages, and does not seek technical and artistic perfection in the film's production.[42]

"All films are political, but films are not all political in the same way."[43] This assertion by Sison touches on the sociopolitical aspect of Third Cinema. Many films offer social analysis and political critique without necessarily being Third Cinema. Third Cinema is grounded in its use of hermeneutic tools that call for change in society and liberation for the people. When we view Third cinema in the light of biblical stories, such as the Jesus story, we can use hermeneutics of suspicion and liberation. Hermeneutics of suspicion argues that rulers may use the Bible in self-serving ways that perpetuate their rule. For Third Cinema, the Bible is held in a dialectical tension where it is also a subject of critique and interrogation. Hermeneutics of liberation uses the Bible to construct a future that promotes human flourishing, especially among the oppressed and marginalized. Third Cinema uses the power of the Bible as a subversive and

[41] Ibid., 318–319.

[42] Ibid., 320.

[43] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 11.

emancipative religious text.[44] *Son of Man* and *Guadalupe* (dir. Santiago Parra, 2006) are used as examples of the hermeneutics of liberation[45] in Sison's discussion, and this is an apt application.[46]

In addition, films in the combative phase signal the maturity of the filmmaker who now adopts ideological aims in filmmaking.[47] Gabriel further notes that the combative phase shows a framework of an agreement between the public and the filmmaker. Filmmakers in this phase are perceptive and knowledgeable of the life of the masses in the Global South.[48] In *Son of Man*, we can see how the narrative includes a commentary on the: unrest, refugee crises, disappearing acts, murder of innocent children, and oppressive regimes. This depiction of present-day occurrences in Africa symbolizes the film's intention to replace the old oppressive structures of apartheid with the message of liberation which Christ brings to the people.

Contrary to this position, Peter Gilmour argues that *Son of Man* reflects *Neo-Hoodoo* art, "which privileges the local, the spontaneous and the democratic over the

[44] Antonio D. Sison, "Liberative Visions: Biblical Reception in Third Cinema," in *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 740.

[45] Antonio Sison classifies *The Last Supper* (dir. Tomas Gutierrez Alea, 1976) under hermeneutics of suspicion because it is a film that tries to use the biblical theme of the Last supper in order to critique the powers that want to perpetuate the status quo, namely slavery. Even the Biblical theme of the last supper is not exempted from critique. Under hermeneutics of liberation, the focus is on a prophetic-liberating message that seeks greater human flourishing for those oppressed and marginalized. Using the bible as a subversive and emancipative text is the main goal here. Consequently, when *Son of Man* is listed under hermeneutics of liberation, Sison argues that the film is a translation by dynamic equivalence and not by literal translation, meaning that it has been inculturated and made relevant in its message to the sensibilities of the people of Africa. Ibid., 739–747.

[46] Ibid., 744–745.

[47] Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films," 320.

[48] Ibid., 321.

universal, the classical and the official."[49] Using the *Neo-Hoodoo*[50] perspective to view *Son of Man* is very innovative. Because Neo-Hoodoo is inventive and improvises in its art forms, it draws upon itself a striking comparison to what is going on in the film. In my view, *Neo-Hoodoo* vernacular traditions differ considerably from what is being portrayed in the film. Because *Son of Man* is set in an African context, its focus is not to amalgamate different traditions as Voodoo does. It picks out the Xhosa culture and dwells on it. What Dornford-May is doing is syncretic; it does not venture into the *Neo-hoodoo* ethos or voodoo spirituality.

The three ideas of film, theology, and visual art meet in this single retelling of the story of Jesus on screen. *Son of Man* provides the filmmaker, the theologian, and the visual artist an opportunity to have a conversation surrounding the social issues of their concrete situation or context. For Jane S. Webster:

> *Son of Man* is also an excellent example of another film genre known as 'Third Cinema' […] these films are often created in response to consumerist Hollywood entertainment or European art films and take a 'different approach to filmmaking, by subverting cinematic codes, embracing revolutionary ideals, and combating the passive film-watching experience of commercial cinema […] *Son of Man* reveals the lived (that is not romanticized) experience of poverty and subjugation, exposing the 'hidden' struggle of minorities, impoverished, indigenous groups (Xhosa) and women living in a new South Africa.[51]

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[49] Peter Gilmour, "The Film Son of Man: An Artistic Revelation of Jesus the Christ," *Journal of adult theological education* 6, no. 2 (2010): 153.

[50] Neohoodoo hypothesis was expounded by Ishmael Reed in 1970 in *Mumbo Jumbo*. He started researching into vodoun and hoodoo materials in 1967 and that led to his thesis on Neohoodism. Neohoodoo originates from Voodoo. "Voodoo is Hoodooism or an American variation of the African vodoun. But I refer to it as the same form practiced by many non-Western cultures also, such as the Native Americans and the Cantonese" Joseph Henry, "A MELUS Interview: Ishmael Reed," *Melus* 11, no. 1 (1984): 84. In another interview he says, "going and reconstructing a past which I call Neo-Hoodoo in my work. I call it Neo-Hoodoo because you can have your own psychology rather than someone else's. In other words, they are trying to make us Europeans in this country, and we don't think that way. We are different; people are different." Peter Nazareth, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *The Iowa review* 13, no. 2 (1982): 122.

[51] Jane S. Webster, "Teaching Son of Man: A Dialogue with Biblical, Global, Film and Theological Studies," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 158.

As Webster has pointed out, *Son of Man* opposes the Hollywood intention to entertain by producing commercially successful films which promote passive film-watching. With *Son of Man*, one feels part of the group because it exposes the evils of society through film, art, and theology. [52] One leaves the cinema feeling the lived experience of poverty and oppression and a challenge to want a better society. Consequently, filmmaking has become the new way of painting in motion. The film acts as a bridge between the classical tradition and the modern African experience of the Gospel under the backdrop of artistic expressiveness.[53]

As I said earlier, my choice of Third Cinema as a dialogue partner for theology is driven by strategic and personal reasons. As an African theology student and a child of the Global South, I personally feel invited to engage in this dialogue between theology and film. As an African, I am an involved participant in the postcolonial exorcism that the Christ and Marian figure are performing in this film upon a culture that is influenced by powerful forces of the dominant culture of the 'First World'. The strategic aspect of my choosing a film situated in Third Cinema is the ideological aspect and the dialogue it calls upon me, the viewer, to engage in. Since the key point of Third Cinema is its "lucid

[52] Filmmaking has become the new way of painting in motion. Films acts as a bridge between the classical tradition and the modern African experience of the Gospel under the backdrop of artistic expressiveness. In Son of Man, we do not see a departure from the filmmakers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who used the art of the period known as the Italian Renaissance – paintings by the great masters of European art - to come up with visual representations of Christ in the motion picture. Cinema can be seen as a continuation of the practice of painting monumental narratives, as in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.

[53] In Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel according to Matthew, 1964), there is an explicit quote from the Christian art tradition where Mary is depicted as the actual mother of Pasolini. Pasolini presents Piero della Francescas's famous painting *Madonna del Parto* in the opening sequence. The fresco (c. 1460) is available at the *web gallery of art 2012*. Similarly, Dornford-May recalls Michelangelo's *Pieta*, a famous sculpture house at the Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican. Reinhold Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in Son of Man by Mark Dornford-May," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film* (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 115–116.

sociopolitical critique and liberative current, situated within the general rubric of post-colonial struggle," it offers me great flexibility to dialogue with the film's elements such as cinematic grammar, a collaboration of the divine and the human agency and the possibility of emancipative praxis looming on the horizon.[54] As an engaged member of the audience, I believe Third Cinema offers me and others who see this film an opportunity to actively interrogate the deep message of the film instead of passively consuming the film as entertainment.[55] Having discussed the place of *Son of Man* in Third cinema, I will now discuss the background and synopsis of the film. I think the film addresses many issues that slum dwellers face every day, and it preaches a message of hope to people living a poor quality of life.

Background and Synopsis

Mark Dornford-May's 2005 film *Son of Man* premiered at the Sundance Film festival in February 2006 (Fig. 1). It was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize in the "World Cinema-Dramatic" category.[56] It won "Best Picture" at the L.A. Pan African film festival in the same year.[57] However, because the producers failed to obtain a wider distribution until 2010 when the DVD was released, most viewers did not see or hear about it.[58] In the same year (2010), the film was presented to scholars at an international

[54] Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*, 2.

[55] Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films," 322.

[56] Richard Walsh, Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, and Adele Reinhartz, eds., *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013). xiii.

[57] Hugh S. Pyper, "Son of Man: A Case Study in Translation, Postcolonialism, and Biblical Film," in *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, ed. Richard Walsh (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2018), 210.

[58] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*.

symposium devoted to biblical films and violence held in Munster, Germany, and at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting held in Atlanta, Georgia.[59] When the film was viewed at the Cannes film festival, unsurprisingly, it attracted scholarly essays, which eventually culminated in the publication of the book *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film* (2013).

Son of Man is a retelling of the life and ministry of Jesus, which draws upon all the four gospels as well as the Chester Mystery Plays[60] and African Traditional Religion.[61] *Son of Man* provides a cross-cultural interpretation of the Jesus story in its use of Xhosa language, which constitutes ninety percent of the dialogues in the film. The other portions of the film's dialogue are restricted to the government officials and news media in English. [62] The film script mingles the words of Jesus with the popular words of Steve Bantu Biko[63], one of the founders of the Black consciousness movement.[64] Though

[59] Ibid.

[60] These public plays would dramatize biblical stories while at the same time show "the cosmic and earthly struggles between good and evil, with God Almighty, being the ultimate Victor – the Alpha and Omega (Rev 22:13)". Their production originated in thirteenth-century Europe and 1422 was the year in which the Mystery cycles reached Chester and received their name – Chester Mystery Plays. Samuel D. Giere, "Mark Dornford-May: Transposing the Classic," in *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016). Hugh S. Pyper adds that these plays were written and produced by the various guilds of workers in the city and that Dornford-May was cast in these plays himself as a child. Because they were performed by ordinary working people, this tended to bring hostility with the authorities. Pyper, "Son of Man: A Case Study in Translation, Postcolonialism, and Biblical Film."

[61] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*.

[62] Samuel D. Giere, "'This Is My World'! Son of Man (Jezile) and Cross-Cultural Convergence of Bible and World," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 23.

[63] There is, therefore, in *Son of Man* a fusion of traits of Steve Biko (1964-1977) and Jesus Christ. "Jesus sometimes almost speaks Biko's words and some viewers without a deeper knowledge of Biko might often wonder where the Gospel stops and Biko starts." Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in Son of Man by Mark Dornford-May," 114.

[64] Gerald O. West, "The Son of Man in South Africa?," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 17.

I would not go so far as stating that Jesus is the embodiment of the life of Biko or that Biko is a Christ figure (because of his non-violence, ideology and disappearance, and death), this film includes all those aspects.[65] The creativity of the film shines in its use of present-day newsreel feed of a looming crisis taking place in the shantytown of Khayelitsha near Cape Town.[66] The film's cinematographic realism[67] incorporates child angels, miracles, and female disciples in what is surprisingly an all-black cast of actors who speak Xhosa and English.

Even though *Son of Man* did not win the award in the world cinema category, it left a very positive impression on the viewers for being simple enough to be enjoyed by the masses and complex enough to be appreciated by academics.[68] For instance, Neil Bastian said, "In these CG-saturated times, the film's simple theatrical effects will prove refreshing to some but crude and unsophisticated to others."[69] Another critic, Martin Hoyle, said, "'*Son of Man* updates the story of Jesus to modern South Africa, recalling the same opera company's *Xhosa* language version of Bizet's 'Carmen'…Hypnotic

[65] Katleho K. Mokoena, "Steve Biko Christ-Figure : A Black Theological Christology in the Son of Man Film," *Hervormde teologiese studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 1.

[66] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*. xiii.

[67] Dornford-May makes use of cinematic realism in his use of real locations such as Khayelitsha and real residents such as slum dwellers to be a part of the shooting process. He also uses editing strategies notably deep-focus cinematography and long shots instead of using montage editing techniques which are heavy on the Director's genius in editing and not in letting the film tell its own story. André Bazin as "the pre-eminent "realist" of film theory, opposed a previous generation of "formalist" film theorists (the Soviet director Eisenstein most notably), who saw filmmaking as the interpretation and reconstitution of reality through formal cinematic means, notably montage."Elijah Siegler, "Bazin, André (1918–1958)," ed. Eric Michael Mazur, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, LLC, n.d.), 49.

[68] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*.

[69] Neil Bastian, "BBC - Movies - Review - Son of Man," last modified February 27, 2008, accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2008/03/03/son_of_man_2008_review.shtml.

visuals, eloquent – but never over-used – music and gritty performances make this a riveting, moving experience."[70]

In its ninety-one minutes, the film covers the complete life of Jesus, beginning with the Annunciation and ending with the Ascension. The film begins with a close-up shot of a locust zoomed into focus. We immediately transition to another close-up shot of Jesus, whose face is painted white, as if he is wearing a mask. Satan tempts Jesus by offering him stones to turn into bread, by asking him to throw himself over a cliff and by asking Jesus to worship him. In the first and second temptation, Jesus walks away from Satan. But in the last temptation, Jesus pushes Satan over into the sand, declaring, "Get behind me Satan. This is my world!" (0:02.20). A scene of fire burning follows with Satan's voiceover saying, "No, this is my world!"[71]

Then a TV News report from Channel 7 follows (the voiceover is in English) (0:02.39). It reports that forces of the Democratic coalition invaded settlements that are in Herod's territory and (ironically) that the coalition aims to bring peace to the region through violence. Gunshots are heard; people are scattered in all directions; injured bodies are carried, and fire burns in the slum. Members of the coalition (in yellow shirts) sing a freedom song. Next, we see Mary, caught up in the crossfire between Herode's government and the Democratic coalition, running frantically, searching for a place to hide (0:05.11). Finally, she finds an open classroom, hiding in the corner of that room. The camera then shifts from Mary to show a pile of dead children across the room. Mary

[70] Martin Hoyle, "Son of Man," *Time Out Worldwide*, last modified March 3, 2008, accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.timeout.com/movies/son-of-man.

[71] See, Mt. 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-23 for the temptation of Jesus and Mt. 16:23 and Mk 8:33 for get behind me Satan reference.

reacts in shock. Upon hearing some voices and footsteps, she plays dead by lying down next to the corpses on the floor. An unknown child frantically enters the classroom and takes off. Then Satan enters the room and also leaves.

When it quiets down, Mary wakes up and heads towards the door. Suddenly, she hears and sees archangel Gabriel sitting on a desk. The angel, who takes the form of a child, then speaks to Mary in the words of the Annunciation according to Luke, "hark thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee. Fear not thou hast found favor with God." (0:05.11).[72] A very close-up shot of Mary's face reveals her emotional transition from fear to surprise and rejoicing. All this happens against the backdrop of an impending war. Mary then sings the Magnificat in an operatic voice, starting low and raising her voice progressively (0:05.57). Gunshots can be heard in the background as Mary sings the song.

The scene changes to Mary and Joseph's sojourn to Bethlehem to register for the census. Using wide-angle shots, the Director shifts between different landscapes to show Mary and Joseph moving beside the sea, on grassy plains, on dry plains, and finally on a donkey carriage approaching Bethlehem (0:08.21). In Bethlehem, the streets are busy with activity, children are playing, and women are selling their goods. We also see members of the Herod's coalition announcing that all should register. As a long line of people is waiting to enter a government office, one man is dragged out of the office by a soldier, and a woman follows after them, screaming. After registering, Mary, now heavily pregnant, walks to the innkeeper, who leads them to a stable for accommodation

[72] See Lk 1:28, 30-31, 35.

(0:09.37).[73] The goat herders are tending their flock when they are visited by hosts of child angels led by Gabriel. Gabriel announces the birth of Jesus after having raised his hands to grab their attention. Then the angels sing, "The Sun will rise in Spring over the mountain. Today we are united, we are one people" (0:11.05).[74]

Jesus is born in a stable, and his parents place him in a grass-filled manger. The camera shifts from the baby Jesus to Mary, looking at Jesus from above (0:12.26). The camera zooms in to reveal a clever superimposition of artistic creativity and religious symbolism surrounding the image of Mary. Mary's head is circumscribed by what appears to be a fan behind her. The round object, which acts as a halo, has a small light above it. On closer inspection, the object behind Mary's head looks like an African palm bowl basket. We then see Mary, two elderly midwives, and Joseph smiling around the child Jesus as the acapella music plays. The camera moves outside the stable and upwards to show child angels on the roof. It looks like a Christmas card with shining stars behind the dark sky in the background. In the morning, the goat herders present a kid (young goat) to Mary as they recite the words of the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (0:13:52).

The long and arduous journey of the Magi is interspaced with various shots showing the progressive growth of Jesus.[75] As the wise men ride on horseback through different types of terrain, acapella music plays, and we see wide-angle shots that reveal the beauty of the South African countryside. The film shows Mary and Jesus in their home as she engages in daily activity. She cares for Jesus on her lap as chickens play.

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[73] See Lk 2:6-20.

[74] This song gives hope to the dire situation that has characterized the film so far. It promises that though they can be in a dark winter, spring will come and the sun will rise. Unity is another theme that is prefigured here. A slogan that even Jesus will use later in his speeches.

[75] See Mt. 2:1-12 for the account of the Magi.

She takes Jesus with her as she tills the ground, and she looks on from behind as Jesus wears a paper crown.

Meanwhile, as Jesus plays with Gabriel, Jesus foretells the coming of the Magi to Mary. The three wise men meet coalition members who have barricaded the road, but they pass through the checkpoints without incidents because the angels are there. Upon reaching Jesus, being bathed outside by his mother in a bathtub, the wise men worship and praise Jesus as people look on. Jesus, in response, tells them to be quiet (0:17.03).

Herod's men announce that all infant males must be registered with the authorities. As the holy family sleep, Satan and Gabriel face each other outside the house. In a dream, Joseph gets a warning from an angel to flee the massacre. They run like refugees walking away from their homes with very few belongings (0:17.40).[76] Suddenly, Herode's men capture some children from the group of refugees and separate them from their parents. They pummel them to death.[77] After this, Mary moves from hiding and cries to Gabriel in protest, "to children! Why?" At that moment, Gabriel offers Jesus a chance to join him, but Jesus declines it by stating, "this is my world" (0:21.54).

The baptism scene opens with a close-up shot of the grown-up Jesus, who is now washing his face. We then transition to a wide-angle shot where four men in white are undergoing the *ulwaluko*, the Xhosa male coming of age ritual. As the four *abakwetha* (initiates) wash in the ocean, a close-up shot of Jesus washing his face fades in and out of the frame. Then the four men apply white river clay to cover their faces, arms, and legs.[78]

[76] See Mt. 2:13.

[77] See Mt. 2:16.

[78] Smearing clay is supposed to keep them warm and protect their skin from the scorching heat of the sun.

As they chatter among themselves, one of them says, "You said you wanted to be a man" (0:23.02). Then a shot of Jesus with Satan fades into the frame as it depicts the temptation scene where Jesus pushed Satan rolling over the sand. We then transition to the women preparing a feast to strengthen the initiates for the trials to come. The *abakwetha* return to the village covered up in special blankets. Mary and the women receive them with great rejoicing, ululation, and dancing. An older man invites them to the table to eat together because they are now men. We then shift to the scene where the men sing hymns in a hut. Interestingly, the *abakwetha* now have ochre clay applied to their faces (0:24.22).[79] Jesus then completes washing off the clay from his face, and as he wipes the water off, an imprint bearing his likeness remains on the cloth (0:24.34).[80]

Jesus' ministry begins with the call of the disciples, some of whom are women.[81] As Jesus leaves his mother to start his ministry in the city, he meets up with Peter, James, and John, who were his fellow *abakwetha*. They visit a coal processing plant where Jesus calls Thomas and Bartholomew to join him. We then see two masked rioters in the township running from the police, and one of them is identified as James the younger (0:26.23). Matthew comes into the frame holding a handgun he shoots while hiding behind a truck (0:26.30). We get introduced to the women disciples, Simone and Philippa, throwing stones as the other people run (0:26.37). Thaddea and Andie (also women) listen to Jesus peacefully in a cattle grazing plain. Finally, Judas loads a coal train as he looks out for a potential client for his gun supply business. Caiaphas and

[79] The ochre face painting forms a face mask that calls to mind the Africa masks which I will discuss in chapter two.

[80] The imprint brings to mind the legend of St. Veronica who after wiping the sweat and blood from Jesus's face, Christ's image was left emblazoned on the cloth.

[81] See Mt. 10:1-4; Mk 3:13-19 and Lk 5:13-16.

Annas, the elders, have come to Judas to buy firearms (0:27.07). Jesus and his disciples then travel a long distance to get to the city. They use a train and a bakkie (pickup truck) to get there. A TV News 2 report announces Herod's death. Then the governor speaks (in English) about a democratic coalition between him and the elders. He promises peace and stability and establishes an interim government before by-elections are held to replace Herod.

Jesus delivers his first sermon on nonviolent change in a shack, stating that their movement will not stand on the sidelines. He talks about the futility of negotiating with organizations based on bigotry and hatred. He preaches that commitment must govern all action. He gives a brief social analysis of the political players by suggesting that both the occupiers and the elders blame the people for robbery, unrest, and killings (0:29.29). Jesus unmasks the root causes of the problems as poverty, overcrowding, and lack of education. He reiterates his commitment to nonviolent change. [82] He argues that when negotiations begin, they should avoid corruption, but instead, they should fight poverty, epidemics, and thuggery (0:29.49). He says that every human life is valuable and that they have to protect their beliefs without taking a life.

After a curfew is announced, it gets dark, and Jesus advises his disciples that there is no need to use weapons to win this battle. He presents them with a bag in which all of them have to give up their weapons. When Judas stands to hand in his gun, he flashes back to his childhood trauma where Satan forced him to execute some hooded people (heads covered in a bag) tied to a pole (0:31.39).

[82] See Mt. 5:38-40 and Lk 6:29-30 for non-violent change.

A sharp transition to a scene follows where a crowd of people is pursuing a woman caught in adultery (0:32.16).[83] A man pours gasoline on her, and before lighting her up, he asks Jesus whether he approves of setting her on fire (also known as necklacing[84]). Jesus opposes this action, standing for nonviolent change.[85] The soldier of the coalition appears, and people start leaving. The woman thanks Jesus for saving her from the mob, and Peter returns her jewelry. Caiaphas, Annas, and the instigator of the necklacing remain speechless. The woman sells her jewelry and goes to buy perfume with the money.

Then, Jesus and his disciples attend a wedding where they praise God, sing joyful hymns, and dance. Suddenly, the woman caught in adultery storms in, anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair.[86] Judas complains about how the woman is wasting the perfume when the money could be used to help the comrades.[87] Jesus rebukes him and tells the hosts who did not wash his feet that this woman has done so with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Jesus then forgives the woman of her sins, and Mary (Lazarus' sister) comes to her to comfort her. Mary and the other women sing a comforting song that uplifts the woman caught in adultery. That night, Judas leaves the comrades sleeping,

[83] See Jn. 7:53–8:11.

[84] In South Africa, the term necklacing was used to describe the punishment that was given to those who collaborated with the Apartheid government as police informants. The victims were burnt alive as a brutal public execution. This practice was gross mob injustice that was committed in the name of the uprising. Jesus in this film condemns the practice. He takes a minority position in liberation movements by choosing nonviolence because other movements had military wings and promoted necklacing to punish traitors.

[85] Here the director reminds us of a similar action of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu who once prevented a woman from being necklaced. West, "The Son of Man in South Africa?," 11.

[86] In this scene, the director weaves several biblical stories together. See Lk 7:36-50; Jn 12:1-8 (anointing of Jesus' feet) and Jn 2:1-10 (wedding at Cana).

[87] See Jn 12:8 and Mk. 14:4.

but Jesus sees him leave. He goes to present his camcorder to Annas and Caiaphas (0:26.54).

Jesus delivers his second sermon in a small shack surrounded by people while others listen from outside. The theme of his message is finding peace (0:39.45). He urges his listeners to stop focusing on moral trivialities but on the struggle against real sin.[88] He assures them that not all authority is divinely instituted but that if they follow him, they will have peace. As Jesus is speaking, women carry a paralyzed child on a wheelbarrow in search of access to Jesus.[89] Jesus continues his sermon by telling the people that he has not come to destroy their beliefs or traditions but create them anew (0:40.32).[90] He then preaches forgiveness to those who have trampled their comrades. He argues that forgiveness will eliminate hatred of the enemy, which destroys any future of their movement. As Jesus preaches, the women are passing the paralyzed child to each other on the shack's roof. Jesus continues talking, exposing the lies of the media.[91] After this sermon, the women open the shack's roof and hand over the paralyzed child to Jesus, who heals her (0:42.12).

Jesus and his disciples travel in a bakkie on a busy road where the police have stopped a Mercedes Benz. Jesus begins his third sermon by urging his disciples that they

[88] Interestingly, this is the only mention of Sin in the film.

[89] See Mk. 2:2-11; Lk. 5:17-39 and Mt. 9:1-8.

[90] See Mt. 5:17.

[91] In the film, Jesus was discussing the contemporary political situation. He says the colonizers pretend to forget the imperial histories and blame Africa's problems on tribalism and corruption. He states that such countries say these things while building new economic empires, which is all a lie. Jesus then reminds the people that evil did not fall. He argues that when people are tortured and beaten in the Middle East, that is all a lie and evil did not fall. He adds that the same can be said of Asia where child labor is said to be legislated for, it is all a lie. In fact, he continues, when politicians in Europe and America defend trade subsidies and restrict the use of medicines through commercial patents, it is all a life and evil did not fall. Consequently, he says, when we hear about people just disappearing, it is all a lie and evil will fall.

must not be a suspicious group but believe in the inherent goodness of humanity (0:42.24). He encourages them to trust their collective leadership, be it to glory or destruction (0:43.33).

Jesus and his disciples rush to attend the funeral of Lazarus in Mary and Martha's home (0:43.38).[92] The sadness is overpowering. Viewing it on the camcorder footage, Jesus prays over the coffin and instructs the men to open it. Mary protests, but Jesus insists that the coffin must be opened. Peter opens the coffin, and Jesus touches the face of Lazarus. We do not see Lazarus rise from the dead, but Jesus falls as he loses some power. A wide-angle shot of the slum showing a rainbow follows. Then Peter paints the first mural (0:45.43).

The next miracle of Jesus is shown through videotaping. In a dark, eerie room, disciples stand by themselves as cries from a demon-possessed girl are heard. Jesus calms her down by laying his hands on her chest.[93] We quickly shift to the room where Judas shows this video to Caiaphas and Annas, but they protest that this exorcism is not evidence but mumbo jumbo for children. It is not enough to prove his political ambitions. We then see the second mural of Jesus exorcising the girl (0:47.29).

Jesus's fourth sermon is delivered publicly when he stands on a platform and calls for solidarity and unity. He states that his group has deliberately operated openly. He then calls on everyone to work together because through collective dialogue, and they can penetrate the deafest of ears. He encourages them, saying that it feels like they are defeated. However, they need to act as a movement to ensure that everyone is treated

[92] See Jn. 11:1–44

[93] See Mk. 9:14-29 and Lk. 9:37-48.

with dignity. Then he chants, "*imbumba! Yamanyama!*" meaning, "Solidarity! Unity!" As Jesus sings celebration songs, the soldiers command the crowd to disperse in a minute. They call their gathering illegal. Peter picks a rock as the other people leave the scene, but Jesus tells him to put the stone down (0:49.27). Judas records the whole sermon and runs to Annas and Caiaphas, stating, "I got him."(0:50.30).

A riot breaks out in the township,[94] and the soldiers fight the rioters who throw stones at them. The soldiers use sjamboks to whip the protestors. Herod declares martial law and states that he will use whatever means possible to protect his troops (0:50.54). He speaks about restoring order using force. This force turns out to be fatal as dead bodies of young people lie on the ground like a warzone. These massacres upset the women who protest this violence by placing their children at the main entrance to Herode's palace (0:51.52). The women cry out repeatedly, "stop killing our children!" Jesus and his disciples are walking that way. They join the protest by holding a baby each and sitting on the road in solidarity with the women.[95]

Jesus' disciples carry Jesus on a cart as they march into the township singing. Crowds of people welcome Jesus with loud shouts of acclamation (0:53.38).[96] Annas and Caiaphas have a conversation with Jesus where they warn Jesus not to destabilize the peace initiatives that are being worked out between them and Governor Pilate. Caiaphas emphasizes that their power-sharing with Pilate has come at a price. Jesus rebuts him by pointing out that power-sharing only creates a false sense of hope to make people think

[94] In South Africa under apartheid, township refers to a residential development that confined non-whites living near or working in white-only communities.

[95] See Mt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10;13-18 and Lk. 18:15-17.

[96] See Mt. 21:1-9; Mk. 11:1-10, Lk. 19:28-38 and Jn. 12:12-19.

something is being done. Caiaphas argues that Jesus and his movement are a small minority who should take the offer. But Jesus refuses to give in to their demands stating that they all have a voice. Caiaphas then warns Jesus that their efforts will not be frustrated by his group. Jesus argues that no group possesses a monopoly on the truth and intelligence. Jesus unmasks their plan by telling them that their compliance with the occupiers only serves to ease the governor's conscience.[97]

In the meantime, Mary packs her suitcase and leaves home for the city. She carries with her a portrait of Jesus (0:52.12). Later, Mary arrives at the train station, and as she meets Mary Magdalene, the billboard sign behind her reads, "The first. The original." (0:55.29).

At Pilate's palace, Judas shows the recordings of Jesus' speech on the outpost. Pilate asks Judas to leave and then confronts Annas and Caiaphas. He tells them that the video is not evidence but tales for children. Caiaphas implores Pilate to allow them to get rid of Jesus themselves. As Pilate pours himself a cup of water, he suggests that he would not be held accountable if Jesus disappeared. At that, the cup overflows, and he wipes it with a paper towel (0:56.13).[98]

Jesus meets Mary in the kitchen, where she is washing dishes (0:57.19). Immediately, Jesus has a flashforward to his body hanging on a cross. For the last supper, Jesus and his disciples share a meal.[99] Jesus then takes a drink from a big aluminum cup and passes it around to his disciples, who drink from the same cup. As they drink from

[97] See Jn. 11:45-53 for a parallel reading.

[98] See Mt. 27:24 for Pilate washing his hands off Jesus' case.

[99] See Mt. 26:20-29; Mk. 14:17-24; Lk. 22:14-38 and Jn. 13:1-30.

the cup, we flashback to the slaughter of the innocents. When Jesus gets back the cup, he again flashes forward to the cross. Jesus then tells his disciples that one of them will betray him. Everyone starts talking about it among themselves. Judas then rapidly collects the dishes as the others debate who it could be. Then Jesus tells Judas to do whatever he plans quickly. Judas drops all the plates and leaves the room. Peter is upset with Judas' action and stands to go after him, but Jesus stops him and tells him, "sit down. Very soon, you too will betray me" (1:00.00).

Jesus and his disciples go out to pray (1:00.13).[100] Jesus tells his disciples to stop and wait on him as he goes over to a quiet place to pray. Peter asks Jesus what is troubling him. But he tells Peter to wait for him. Satan watches at a distance as Jesus prays. Jesus sees Gabriel. He prays, saying, "what is about to happen, if possible, let it pass." Jesus rebukes his disciples for sleeping and begs them to stay awake with him. Suddenly a group led by Judas comes with torches to arrest Jesus (1:02.13).[101] When the crowd approaches, Jesus asks them whom they want, and they all shout, "Jesus!" Jesus states that he is the one.[102] While carrying a camcorder, Judas kisses him in betrayal (on camera).

Jesus is arrested and taken to Caiaphas and Annas' quarters.[103] They torture Jesus and punch him. Judas throws up after seeing Jesus' beating (1:04.07). Caiaphas wipes his hands and tells Jesus to join them because it is still possible for them to share power.

[100] See Mt. 26.36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:40-46 and Jn. 18;1-42 for a comparison to the prayer and the arrest in the garden.

[101] See Mt. 26:49 and Mk. 14:45.

[102] See Jn. 18:1-12.

[103] See Jn. 18: 19-23.

Jesus responds to him by saying that it is better to dialogue than beat him into an agreement if they wish to cooperate with him. Caiaphas assures Jesus that he will kill him. Jesus asks him, "how long will it take you?" Jesus stands by himself, crossing his arms like the *ecce homo* painting (1:04.54). A group of Caiaphas' men takes the body of Jesus into a small utility van. Satan smiles as he looks at the body of Jesus at the back of the van.

After thunderstorms and lightning, the soldiers find Peter hiding under a large water drain pipe. They ask whether he is the man on their list of the followers of Jesus. Peter denies it. They ask him to remove his hat and ask him again. Peter again denies it, saying people look alike. The soldiers hear a message on their radio summoning them, and they leave in a hurry. Peter remorsefully remembers what Jesus said and the cock crows.[104]

Satan walks through a vineyard as the van drives to dispose of Jesus. They find two other men waiting at the deserted place as they get to the site. The four men carry the body of Jesus to a shallow grave. Meanwhile, we transition to Caiaphas and Annas, holding an interview with a TV reporter (1:07.25). Caiaphas eloquently states that as leaders of the interim government, it is their responsibility to work closely with the coalition forces to establish a road to democracy. He warns any opposing parties that they will be excluded if they refuse to work with them.

Back to the burial scene, Jesus is thrown into the grave. One of the men grabs Jesus' shoes. The other one shoots Jesus five times to ensure that he is dead. One of the four men, Hundred, ponders the evil of their actions before getting into the bakkie.

[104] See Mt. 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72 and Lk 22:54-62.

Mary learns of Jesus' abduction from his disciples, and she gets a portrait of Jesus in readiness for protest (1:09.17). A journalist asks Pilate a question on the validity of the occupation in the name of democracy. Before he can answer, the women interrupt the press conference when they start banging on windows while holding the picture of Jesus (1:09.20). The protest goes on outside, where protestors burn Pilate's effigies. The crowd of protesters sings, "they rule by guns!" A close-up shot of the portrait of Jesus reveals a smile on his face. Mary, in protest, exclaims, "They are killing our youth!" Hundred then comes to Mary and whispers to her that Jesus is, in fact, dead, and he knows where they buried him. Mary's countenance changes from the animated *Toyi-Toyi* jumping to wailing (1:11.08).

At the grave, Mary sits quietly while three other women watch her mourn. Hundred is also there. When the time comes to go back to the bakkie, Mary starts digging up the grave with her bare hands as the three women look on.[105] In a motion capture transition, Mary holds the body of Jesus on her lap as they ride the bakkie in silence. As the bakkie passes the overpasses, light flickers on Mary and Jesus. The angels stand at the gravesite (1:12.42). That night, Mary and the women tie the body of Jesus with red ribbons to a wooden cross and put it on a high platform (1:12.45). It is now daybreak, and Jesus' body hangs on a cross overseeing the township (1:13.26).[106]

Township dwellers immediately see Jesus hanging on the cross. They come in droves to the hill of Calvary, where Mary stands above them all. But they are separated from each other by barbed wire. Mary starts to sing, and all the women join in, then the

[105] See Mt. 28:1-11; Mk. 16:1-8 and Lk. 24:1-12.

[106] See Jn. 12:32.

men. The song is about a land covered in darkness. A man removes the barbed wire to allow the people to join Mary on the platform. They then start performing the *Toyi-Toyi* while shouting, "comrades unite!"

Meanwhile, a helicopter hovers above. Riot police are deployed to go to the hill. The *Toyi-Toyi* chant continues. This time they shout, "unite, freedom fighters! Strength comrades!" The soldiers climb the platform as many people run to nearby bushes. On a megaphone, the soldier announces that the people only have five minutes to disperse. But the core group keeps chanting. Gunshots are fired, and everyone goes to the ground.

Mary stands up, looks at the soldiers, and looks at Jesus. She then faces them with other women behind her. She restarts the song about the land covered in darkness. Everyone is animated once more -- no more gunshots. We see a graffiti cross (1:19.50). Then a shadow of Jesus looking at his grave. Other shadows of angels come around Jesus. Then angels follow Jesus to the hill for the ascension scene. Jesus ascends the hill accompanied by the angels to an empty cross. The film ends with Jesus raising his fist. Before the end credits, we read a caption from Genesis 1:26: "let us make man in our image after our likeness" (1:22.00). End credits roll showing documentary footage of actual people from Khayelitsha happy with their daily tasks.

The Director – Mark Dornford-May

His Background and Influences

According to Samuel D. Giere, *Son of Man's* director, Mark Dornford-May (Fig. 2) was born in 1955 near the village of Eastoft in York, England.[107] As a young man, he

[107] Giere, "Mark Dornford-May: Transposing the Classic," 722. This biographical information is presented in Giere and Hugh S. Pyper with some minor differences.

was fascinated by the Chester Mystery plays that were performed in the town of Chester, near the border of England and Wales. When Dornford-May was learning his acting as a boy, he played in various roles: as an angel, as Lucifer, and as Jesus. These plays had a significant influence on his later work on stage and in film. He went on to direct a stage production called *Mysteries-Yiminmangaliso,* a version of the passion play from Chester but transposed to a South African context.

Dornford-May studied theater at the University of Bristol and later directed theater productions with the Royal Shakespeare Company. When he moved to the Broomhill Opera Company in London, his collaborative work with Charles Hazelwood prompted him to broaden the appeal of theater beyond the wealthy and educated middle class. He changed admission to the Broomhill productions by asking theatergoers to pay whatever they could afford. This resulted in an increase in audience numbers from different economic classes. Such social and communal consciousness is attributed to his upbringing since his parents were passionate about using drama as a way of helping people work together socially.

Former South African ambassador to the United Kingdom, Dick Enthoven, visited Broomhill productions and was impressed by Dornford-May's social experiment. Enthoven is a South African billionaire and prominent businessman who owns major insurance companies, hotel chains, and Nando's restaurant chain.[108] Enthoven had served in the South African parliament in the 1970s but was opposed to apartheid policies on economic and ethical grounds. Once he had built his business empire, Enthoven became a major sponsor for South African artists and set up Spier films, the production company

[108] Nando's is one of the big sponsors of the film.

which would help fund local projects such as *Son of Man*. It was at Enthoven's invitation that Dornford-May and Charles Hazelwood first came to South Africa.

Enthoven was interested in bringing this concept to South Africa to help deconstruct Apartheid-Era policies which limited the place of black South Africans in theater productions.[109] The challenge Enthoven gave Dornford-May and Hazelwood was to recontextualize the western classics in order to engage the contemporary issues in South Africa.[110] In 2000, when they arrived in South Africa, the duo recruited thirty-five local actors, actresses, singers, and musicians from across the nation altogether. With these performers, they formed a theater company *Dimpho di Kopane* (meaning combined talents in *Sesotho*) which produced *The Mysteries – Yimimangaliso*.[111] The production brought together good singing, dancing, poetry, and a message of hope to Africans who could now be seen performing on stage.

Theater Company

In an interview with Carla Nauss, Dornford-May recounts some experiences that *Dimpho di Kopane* went through. [112] He shares that at one showing of *The Mysteries – Yimimangaliso*, which cast a black actor, Vumile Nomanyama, as God, many white people walked out when the character shouted, "I am God." There was jealousy from some white actors who felt that they lost acting roles to black South Africans despite

[109] Giere, "Mark Dornford-May: Transposing the Classic," 722.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Carla Neuss, "South Africa and the Future of Post-Apartheid Theatre: An Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Artistic Director of Isango Ensemble," *Theatre journal (Washington, D.C.)* 72, no. 4 (2020). E-12.

being trained in the arts at university. The so-called experienced actors felt that their positions were being given to "kids of the townships" and could not be taken seriously – an assumption that Dornford-May debunks with his body of work. The jealousy also extended to Dornford-May, who was considered an outsider brought to South Africa to run the festival rather than a South African director.[113] Consequently, transposing classical theatrical performances into film was the next challenge for Dornford-May after the success of the *Mysteries-Yiminmangaliso*.[114]

As a visionary director, Dornford-May, though born British, identifies himself as a South African.[115] *Son of Man* features the same cast of the theatrical productions, all Africans, with Mary, played by Dornford-May's wife Pauline Malefane, taking the lead while Andile Kosi had the role of Jesus.[116] Through Dornford-May's involvement with the Xhosa culture and the theatre group he co-founded, he tackles the community aspect of Third Cinema in an African context. For *Sarafina!,* a musical film, the magic lies in the local actors who perform as though they were on stage. This magic is what provides a striking resemblance to *Son of Man*. Moreover, the African communitarian feel is ever-present in those scenes that involve many actors singing together songs of freedom. While most of the actors in *Son of Man* were not yet acclaimed before their theater performances, they were schooled in African culture and traditions.

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Giere, "Mark Dornford-May: Transposing the Classic," 723.

[115] Neuss, "South Africa and the Future of Post-Apartheid Theatre: An Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Artistic Director of Isango Ensemble." E-18.

[116] Malefane plays the Virgin Mary. She has starred in all Dornford-May's films which include: U-Carmen -Khayelitsha (2005), Son of Man (2006) and Breathe Umphefumlo (2015) and Noye's Fludde – Unogumbe (2013).

Dornford-May criticizes the South African film productions for focusing on white liberal guilt rather than anything else.[117] Instead, he proposes using films like *Sarafina*! or *U-Carmen - Khayelitsha* as exemplars to spark an industry such as Bollywood musical films (characterized by melodramatic stories, Hindi songs, and are popular in India) in a South African context.[118] He believes that politicians (for example, African National Congress) have not appreciated the role of the arts in nation-building.[119] He acknowledges some challenges the theatre group has grappled with, such as, not raising many questions about political issues in the ANC-led country and not developing new playwrights who can give the performers enough material to enact.[120] It is one thing to adapt Shakespeare in a *Sotho* language but another to create a new drama that addresses the issues troubling South Africans. Some concerns overshadow his optimism, but he is still quite hopeful. The shadow is that most South Africans do not see the performing arts as their own.[121] Dornford-May's theater productions have been characterized by "their unique syncretic approach[122] to combining Western canon and South African

[117] Neuss, "South Africa and the Future of Post-Apartheid Theatre: An Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Artistic Director of Isango Ensemble." E-16.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid. E-15.

[121] Ibid. E-16.

[122] This approach is not unique to Dornford-May., Fr. Kevin Carroll also carried out experimental work at the Oye-Ekiti location where he worked with local artists such as carvers to produce unique artworks with a Christian theme. See, Nicholas J. Bridger, *Africanizing Christian Art: Kevin Carroll and Yoruba Christian Art in Nigeria* (Cork, Ireland: Society of African Missions, 2012).

aesthetics."[123] Dornford-May endeavored to work with the local cultures and to help the poor gain full humanity through the arts.

Christology of Dornford May

From a theological perspective, I situate Dornford-May's approach to the Jesus film in a Christology *from below* because he begins with the story of Jesus as a poor, marginalized, and downtrodden resident of Judea. Dornford-May challenges the stereotypical images of Jesus as white, middle-class, and Western that missionaries embedded in the African consciousness.[124] The portrayal of Jesus in the film reimages the Renaissance oil paintings and murals by presenting him as a Black, poor, and underclass member of society.[125] The contemporary and revolutionary imaging of Jesus in the film poses a challenge to the audience as Dornford at time deviate from the sequence of Gospel narratives.

Jesus in *Son of Man* is but one signifier of the sacred among many others. It is interesting to note that the film chooses to focus on particular aspects of Jesus' life, leaving out many passages from the gospel account. The film harmoniously combines many African liberation ideas with the Gospel account of Jesus and offers an interpretation of the Jesus story which challenges the present situation. But this choice raises questions. Is Jesus the main signifier of the sacred in this film? Do other stories or issues the film addresses, reduce his role to a superficial window dressing that is

[123] Neuss, "South Africa and the Future of Post-Apartheid Theatre: An Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Artistic Director of Isango Ensemble." E-11.

[124] Gilmour, "The Film Son of Man: An Artistic Revelation of Jesus the Christ," 157.

[125] Ibid.

spectacular but not deep? [126] The clear ideological framework behind the film suggests that Jesus is promoting an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial form of governance and the passive consumption of entertainment. The film raises the question of whether or not Jesus' stance is one among many other voices or whether he is the main signifier, the truth bringer to an African context steeped in problems of poverty, injustice, corruption, and violence in slum areas. As the film's focus is on the Son of Man, it should be largely faithful to its source material which is the Bible. However, given the freedom Dornford-May has with his productions, the film appears to be more interested in a symbolic appropriation of the Jesus image than a faithful portrayal of the accounts as is found in the evangelists. One could argue that the historical Jesus is replaced by a shadow, a man steeped in social justice awareness, and not the kingdom of heaven of the synoptic gospels. However, I think Jesus in *Son of Man* is not a shadow but an inculturated version of the same historical Jesus mixed in with the Chester mystery plays and Xhosa culture.

In addition, the film uses the disciples of Jesus as a key to showing solidarity with the liberation struggles suffered during apartheid and colonial periods in other parts of Africa. The word 'comrades' appears many times in the film and replaces disciples or followers to show that Jesus leads as a member of a collective and not as a dictator. There is therefore no master-disciple relationship but Jesus is a community person. Jesus is in solidarity with others because he empowers members of society who feel like they do not yet belong to Herode's regime and worse, Pilate's corrupt heavy-handed approach. In the

[126] For Richard Walsh, There is always a danger when movie directors use symbolic replacements of Jesus in their harmonious accounts. He argues that we are then left with a shadow of Jesus rather than Jesus himself. By switching from Jesus to other characters, the result is that Jesus tends to get lost. This danger is averted here because the focus is entirely on Jesus as is the title of *Son of Man.* It has a solid Christological interpretation of who Jesus would be if he walked the face of the earth in the twenty-first century. Richard G. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2003), 187–188.

call of his comrades, Jesus invites Peter, James, and John to join him on a quest to change the world. He offers this invitation to equals, fellow *abakwetha* whom he later calls comrades and not servants.[127]

Creative changes to the narrative make the presentation of Jesus to be grounded in the here and now. Jesus traverses the line between life and death, good and evil, and sacred and profane. His death by five gunshots deviates from the narrative because he is killed before he can be hung on the cross. The cross now means something different from what it has signified in history.[128] The ensemble style Dornford-May uses fits well into the "Anthropological Model'[129] of Stephen B. Bevans' contextual theology.[130] Given that he starts with the human experience of the present (where people are, with people's real questions and interests rather than imposing questions asked out of other contexts) and focuses on human culture, Dornford-May engages the local cultures in a respectful and dignified way.

In his lifetime Jesus is a bringer of life to the community. As a healer, he restores what is lacking in the slums of Khayelitsha and Kibera, good health. Through the three miracles, we can appreciate the evils that Jesus is targeting. He targets the evil of

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[127] See Jn 15:15.

[128] The symbolism of the cross as a redemptive sign is highlighted by Jn 3:14-15 where the evangelist gives the analogy of the serpent that was lifted up in the wilderness and compares that to the Son of Man being lifted up to give eternal life to those who believe in him. So when Jesus is lifted up by his mother Mary, the cross becomes a moment that brings courage to the people and awareness of the evils the regime has been doing especially in the disappearing acts.

[129] For Bevans, the anthropological model focuses on the value and goodness of the human person (*Anthropos*) and so will start by studying the language of the people. Those operating in this model are at home with inter-religious dialogue because they believe God is in every religion. Consequently, this model promotes inculturation, indigenization and contextualization of the Bible in all cultures.Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev. and expand. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 55.

[130] Ibid., 60.

sickness, the evil of death and the evil of spirit possession. He comes not only as a healer but as a liberator. A man among his people but capable of confronting evils in society and in the spiritual world.

Behind the Fictional Context of *Son of Man*

Where do we go from here? What are the implications of this discussion for the people of Africa? Dornford-May builds a fictional world in *Son of Man*, reflecting many issues that the African continent suffers from without being specific to one country alone.[131] He places *Son of Man* in a post-colonial/post-apartheid conflict-laden context and then includes references to 'Judea, Afrika'.[132] This recontextualization of the Jesus story raises many questions. Dornford-May is interested in offering his viewers a socio-political or socio-economic context that leads to the problems Africans face, hence the expansion beyond South Africa alone for the film's primary setting.

In an interview with the Victoria and Albert Museum, Dornford-May comments on the influences and inspirations that made him decide to set his production in South Africa. His answer demonstrates his willingness to be rooted in the South African context:

> I first went to South Africa eight years ago to do a theatre production and I fell in love with the country. And it seemed to me that the difference in wealth in South Africa was similar to the difference in wealth that existed in nineteenth-century London when Dickens was writing. You have a huge disparity from people who are terribly rich to

[131] Lloyd Baugh asserts that the main problems that the film depicts are social turmoil, violence, will to power and corruption. Lloyd Baugh, "The African Face of Jesus in Film: Two Texts, a New Tradition," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffery L. Statley, and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 131.

[132] The word 'Afrika' is prevalent in strong Africanist connotations among South African writers and activists. So when Dornford-May uses it, it may be suggestive of the critique of the kind of South Africa that has been built post-apartheid. The film acts as a mirror to show the audience that it is as important for the viewer to watch out for the context as it is to observe the characters on the screen. West, "The Son of Man in South Africa?," 2.

> people who are very poor. And so that helped us get into the story quite easily. Also that he wrote the story after he'd been down a mine and seen children working and the mines South Africa are still way behind the rest of the world in terms of health and safety issues and there are a lot of similarities.[133]

Although South Africa was the original setting, Donford-May wants to address the common problems that have continued to plague African countries even after gaining independence from the colonial masters, for example of injustice, poverty, and corruption. I believe that *Son of Man* offers the viewer an excellent fictional space to judge whatever African context they find themselves in. It provides a contemporary adaptation of problems people face while telling the story of Jesus (a man thrown into a context of scarcity and carnage) in an indigenized context.

The Xhosa traditional context builds another layer of meaning to this discussion. West notes that the film's beginning shows Jesus as a young *amaXhosa* man in the final stages of the rite of initiation from boyhood to manhood.[134] Jesus has to leave with other young initiates (*abakhwetha*) to go through the ritual of circumcision. During the final stages of this period of initiation, Satan tempts him. Jesus faces off against Satan, a formidable foe who will reappear during key moments of evil in the film. Jesus is wearing white clay paint (*ifutha*) on his face, which is meant to hide and protect the young initiates from the gaze of women and evil spirits.[135]

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[133] Victoria and Albert Museum, "Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Director of A Christmas Carol," May 16, 2011, accessed February 14, 2022, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/i/video-interview-with-mark-dornford-may,-director-of-a-christmas-carol/.

[134] West, "The Son of Man in South Africa?," 3.

[135] Ibid. The clay on the face also acts as a mask they wear during the process and will wash off when the initiation ends.

Gerald O. West's analysis represents those elements in the film dedicated to inculturating the Gospel while being relevant to a broader audience. This effort is praiseworthy but faces some criticism. For instance, when Jesus goes by himself to be tempted by Satan, he goes as an individual. If this temptation occurred during the initiation period, there is a disconnect with Xhosa culture. According to Xhosa culture, the initiation into adulthood is a communal rite. It can only take place with other agemates (*abakhwetha*) who form a cohort so that they can face the pain of the ritual and the temptations together. As West notes, "the film followed the biblical, particularly the Markan emphasis on the individual."[136] West's observation raises the question: which is more important, an individual's religiosity or community politics? Is Jesus' kingdom really of this current world or not (Jn 18:36)? Richard Walsh et al. argue that "*Son of Man* highlights the tendency in the Jesus tradition to restrict Jesus to matters of religion, modernly understood and constructed, and /or the tradition's tendency to find security in some (neo-platonic or fantastic) otherworld."[137] Does *Son of Man* avoid this neo-platonic otherworld altogether, or is the charge that the everyday Khayelitsha life shown during the end credits another version of this romantic fantasy? For Lloyd Baugh, when the closing credits roll, a clip of women, men, and children of the townships is shown living in harmony, community, and peace.[138] Because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have happened, the world that Jesus leaves behind should consist of non-violent

[136] Ibid., 4.

[137] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*. xxiii.

[138] Baugh, "The African Face of Jesus in Film: Two Texts, a New Tradition," 131.

resistance and harmony in the new world. Can this new world lead to anything other than more martyrdom and the continuation of oppressive economic structures?

Where does true redemption lie? Is it on the cross where our sins were nailed? As Walsh et al. argue, "In a gesture rare, if not unique, among Jesus films, salvation does not come in Jesus' death on the cross."[139] *Son of Man* does not clarify whether salvation lies with the death of Jesus or Mary's protest afterward. These questions are raised here because the film chooses to place Jesus and Africa in a dramatic tension against the problems/institutions that many Africans face presently. The fact that this film has a fictitious element by giving the viewer response nothing but appreciation because it has an interpretative status open to standard traditional biblical account on which it is partially based. "Surely, no one can mistake it for the Gospel."[140]

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the background and synopsis of the film *Son of Man* and the story of Dornford-May's journey into film. More importantly, locating *Son of Man* as part of Third Cinema has helped me weave into the ideas of Solanas and Getino, Teshome H. Gabriel, and Antonio Sison to establish the Director's choice of a film style that is useful for liberative purposes. The chapter has also dealt with the fictional context behind the production of *Son of Man,* arguing that this context provides the viewer an opportunity to interpret the film more aptly even in an everchanging context. All in all, I hope this discussion will help me explore (in the next chapter) how Engelbert Mveng, as a missionary, engages with this film which was produced decades after his assassination.

[139] Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*.

[140] Ibid. xxiv.

CHAPTER 2

JESUS WITH AN AFRICAN FACE

During my theology studies at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2015, I was captivated by the remarkably decorated space of worship, evoking visceral emotions as it drew my attention to the center of the chapel. [141] Decorative wavy patterns punctuate the outer side of the ceiling of the chapel, forming a border that directs one's attention to the center of the room (like a spear). And at the end of the chapel is a mural called "Hekima Christus" right behind the altar (Fig. 7). I was fascinated with this fresco because of how unfamiliar it looked compared to the traditional Catholic portraits of Christ I was used to up to this point. Here was a painting with many layers of meaning begging to be interpreted by the viewer. I kept asking myself new questions every time I was in the chapel. Why was Jesus floating above the expanse of the city? What did the colors mean? What did the image mean for the people of Kenya and other students studying at Hekima?

This experience connects me to the film the *Son of Man*. The film raises many questions about human suffering and where is God when we are suffering? I would

[141] Stepping into the College chapel is entering into a place of worship that also invites one to engage in theological reflection. Worship and theological engagement meet when students gather for liturgies there as the two aspects play a unifying role for the whole community there. The chapel is located in the middle of the college campus and marks the interface between academic affairs in the college side and community in the hostels where the students live. Indeed, being a part of worship at the chapel provided moments of great consolation, learning and growth for both students and staff members. It helps instill in the students training to be pastoral workers a sense of mission and provides impetus for work in interreligious and ecumenical dialogue as the mission statement states "Hekima College is an institution that blends integral human formation with higher learning to prepare men and women for the challenges of a 'faith that does justice'." "Vision and Mission," n.d., accessed March 28, 2022, https://www.hekima.ac.ke/?page_id=487.

imagine Engelbert Mveng would ask a similar question, where is the God of the Western Christians when Africans are suffering?

In the second half of the film, Jesus becomes more active in public events and the struggle against the repressive regime. He is driven by a fundamental conviction inspired by the Gospel message to promote justice and human dignity. In the film, graffiti and street art reappear in shots of colorful mural paintings that preserve the critical moments of the life of Jesus.[142] Peter paints the street art in the naïve style[143] of the poor oppressed people depicting events already represented in the film: the raising of the dead man (0:45.43) (Fig. 3), the exorcism of the girl (0:47.29) (Fig. 4), the sermon on the outpost (0:50.39) (Fig. 5), and the crucifixion (Graffiti cross) (1:19.50) (Fig. 6). The murals present Jesus' miracles, teaching, and cross, revealing the film's ideological perspective more honestly. Just as graffiti comes from the people, the film gives the people a lot of power.[144]

The mural scenes of *Son of Man* offer a motif of the African genius in expressing itself through paintings. The difference here, though, is that they do not adopt any of the

[142] In churches, murals stimulate the imagination, act as an ex-voto for thanksgiving, could be evangelical in terms of spreading the message of the gospels, etc.

[143] Naïve style of art was once considered the art of untrained artists because it was characterized by simplicity and directness. As a movement, it can no longer be dismissed as lacking any creativity or depth because trained artists use it for its ease of communication with the public. Before the 20th century, in its most basic sense, naïve art was any form of visual art created by a person who lacked the formal education and training a professional artist undergoes. Examples of naïve art include "The Hungry Lion Attacking An Antelope" by Henri Rousseau (From the collection of Fondation Beyeler) and Michael Soi who rose to prominence in 2015 for his series "Shame in Venice." "What Is Naive Art?," *Google Arts & Culture*, accessed May 24, 2022, https://artsandculture.google.com/story/what-is-naive-art/HAXB8yxnsRUtJA.

[144] Graffiti and street art were used in the anti-apartheid movement to solidify events, structures and slogans into a striking public image cemented in the liberation movement. Like the art of first and second-century Christianity, these murals represent an evolving tradition and preaching which will outlast the death of Jesus. Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in Son of Man by Mark Dornford-May," 113.

stylistically African patterns that characterize them as either Xhosa or Zulu. They are like promotional posters bearing a simple message – Christ is the Liberator, and it matters. In the span of a Jesus film, a sophisticated work of art would be too much for the eyes to appreciate. Simplicity wins over layers of meanings. And yet, for a Jesus film, this use of art is sophisticated because the artwork calls for further interpretation.

Examining the film through Mveng's lens of inquiry offers an appreciation of its mélange of artistic creativity. This is expressed through the directing and acting, the use of material culture of religion (specifically, the inculturation of African masks), and by highlighting social injustices, specifically, human poverty and suffering. In the discussion below, I use the ideas of Engelbert Mveng to dialogue with *Son of Man*, which incorporates art into the narrative and filmic space, both in its reference to Christian iconography as well as the inclusion of street art and other objects.

In this chapter, I draw upon the life, theology, and artworks of Engelbert Mveng to construct the argument that *Son of Man* is a cry for justice and a cross-cultural convergence of film and the African struggle for liberation. First, I will offer a brief account of Mveng's life and then describe one of his most famous artworks – *The Hekima Christus* – as an entry point to his theology of liberation. I will then delve into the concept of inculturation of African masks and suggest that *Hekima Christus* unmasks poverty. Second, I will deal with the problem of anthropological poverty and connect it to Mveng's Christology as a way to interpret the film. Third, I will discuss the title of "Jesus as Liberator" and argue that Mveng's idea resonates with Black theology's quest for a Christology of Liberation.

Engelbert Mveng - Biographical Outline

Mveng was born on May 9, 1930, in Cameroon.[145] Despite hailing from a Presbyterian family, Mveng was baptized as a Catholic in 1935. He studied at different Catholic schools in Cameroon, beginning at Minlaba, then at Efok, and eventually at the minor seminary at Akono. At an early age, Mveng displayed artistic talent.[146] From 1951 to 1963, he joined the Jesuits and underwent priestly formation beginning with the Novitiate in Congo-Kinshasa and ending with Theology at Lyon-Fourvière.[147] In 1963, he came to Louvain for advanced studies, and between 1965 and 1970, he pursued a Doctorate in History at the University of Paris. After graduation, he taught History at the University of Yaoundé and published *History of Cameroon*, which the French academy recognized. He was assassinated in his residence at Nkol Afeme, Yaounde, on the night of April 22, 1995. To this date, the motive of his assassination remains a mystery. He is remembered as a writer, historian, theologian, teacher, lecturer, poet, and artist.

[145] Jean de la Théotokos Ilboudo, *Via Crucis Africae. Chemin de Croix, Chemin de Résurrection* (Nairobi: JESAM, 2006). Meinrad P. Herba, "Engelbert Mveng: A Pioneer of African Theology," in *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, ed. Benezet Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya, vol. 1 (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003). These two sources provide me with his posthumous biographical data.

[146] Art came naturally to Mveng; as early as the fifth grade, he would draw pictures that impressed his teachers, but contrary to this claim, Meinrad P. Herba suggests that Mveng was born into a family of artists. See Herba, "Engelbert Mveng: A Pioneer of African Theology," 39.

[147] Following his philosophy studies, he was sent as an intern at Libermann College (1958-1960) in Douala (Cameroon). This stay in his native country helped him discover the art and history of his country. He went to Bamileke and Bamun countries to discover the art of these regions. At the end of this internship, E. Mveng returned to France for his studies in theology at Lyon-Fourvière at the end of which he was ordained priest on September 7, 1963. In 1964, he became the first Cameroonian Jesuit to defend a Doctoral thesis in history entitled "Paganisme Face Au Christianisme Dans La Correspondance De Saint Augustin" (Paganism in the face of Christianity in the correspondence of Saint Augustine.) François-Xavier Akono, *Explorer La Théologie d'Engelbert Mveng* (Saint-Denis: Edilivre Éditions Aparis, n.d.), 9.

Mveng left a considerable legacy in the arts. Though he was a trained historian and theologian, he also produced and wrote about art throughout his career.[148] He would decorate chapels and churches with African sacred images and wrote articles about African art (*l'Art Negre*). He found himself standing at the confluence of European missionary Christianity and African Traditional Religion in the arts. He understood art from both the colonial masters and his African artisan associates. Consequently, in search of an insider's perspective, he was initiated by Bamileke and Bamum artisans, and this helped him gain great insights into African traditional art.[149]

One of his original insights included his belief that it was possible to discover universal laws of African aesthetics. Mveng believed that Black art is a language of signs and symbols that conveys some message of life or death to human beings. Mveng believed the colors[150] were connected to life (red), night and trial moments (black), and death and ghosts (white).[151] Two minor colors used in African art were ochre yellow and green. Ochre yellow signifies earth or neutrality and covers the background, dry leaves,

[148] Annette Schemmel, *Visual Arts in Cameroon: A Genealogy of Non-Formal Training, 1976-2014* (Oxford, England;Mankon, Cameroon; Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2015), 60.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Schemmel argues that he analyzed three dominant African colors and expressed their symbolism as: red for life; white for death; and black for night, suffering, and testing. The minor difference here is on black.

[151] Engelbert Mveng, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the Peoples of Black Africa," in *Colloquium: First World Festival of Negro Arts* (Dakar: Society of African Culture, 1966), 20.

and the ground. Green represents the leaves of trees and is used to cover the initiated[152] ones as a sign of victory.[153]

Traditional African artists generally translate an object into a line, then a motif, before integrating it into a larger composition.[154] Mveng dealt with African artists who worked with sacred imagery of traditional African belief systems to translate these aesthetics into Christian decorations. In his artworks, Mveng combined techniques, motifs, colors, and materials he identified as indigenous with ideas, motifs, and techniques from Christian iconographies. In his paintings,[155] he endeavored to weed out what has often been perceived as the fetishist, magical aspects of African art to show that art was a manifestation of "life's victory over death."[156]

He avoided focusing on the ideas behind art (aesthetics) but rather on the practical and technical aspects of working with crafts such as sculptures and basket making.[157] He

[152] Since Mveng considered Christ as the master of initiation, green was a special color used for victory of those to be initiated into the Christian life.

[153] Okê Marien Robert Gbèdolo, "Depicting the Incarnation: Theodore the Studite and Engelbert Mveng on the Particularity and Universality of Christ" (STL thesis, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, 2019), 95.

[154] Schemmel, *Visual Arts in Cameroon: A Genealogy of Non-Formal Training, 1976-2014*, 70.

[155] Western Christian Tradition has a love/hate relationship with icons and has experienced several iconoclastic controversies through the centuries. With the coming of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Church saw the iconoclastic period with John of Damascus defending the icons and arguing that the incarnation of Jesus changed everything. Later, Pope John Paul II reiterated the words of St. John of Damascus, asserting that, because of the Incarnation and Jesus becoming flesh, that "matter matters." Certain protestant groups, Jews and Muslims are opposed to using icons as an adjunct to prayer because of the idea of idolatry spelled out in the second commandment. Africans have a liturgical understanding of art that embraces the rituals with meaning in the worship.

[156] Schemmel, *Visual Arts in Cameroon: A Genealogy of Non-Formal Training, 1976-2014*, 61.

[157] Ibid., 64.

also empowered the craftspeople and visual artists with enough engineering knowledge[158] of pre-colonial times, with which he sought to replace the foreign ideas taught in the mission schools.[159] He founded the *Atelier de l'Art Negre* workshop from the mid-1960s to the 1970s, where he invited craftspeople and their apprentices to provide a platform for networking and learning from each other's specializations. He aimed at inculturating Christian architecture and Church furniture so that they would have an aesthetic that was noticeably African. His work is a testament that his ideas were not only Cameroonian but also African.[160]

Mveng was not afraid to experiment with new ideas in his creative process. He did not hesitate to combine techniques, motifs, colors, and materials he identified as indigenous with distinctly modern artworks, such as Christian iconographies or reliefs from wood or concrete.[161] Being an artist and a priest helped him explain the theology behind the iconography and articulate the traditional local symbols in the final product to those uninitiated. His creative independence used a hybrid approach even though his ideas seemed to have been generalizing about Africa as if Africa were something homogenous and, therefore, one reality.[162]

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[158] Mveng encouraged craftspeople and artists to draw on the engineering knowledge of pre-colonial crafts rather than on imported concepts of art, because Mveng deemed the "foreign academism" the weakness of Africa's formal art schools. Ibid.

[159] Ibid.

[160] His workshops bore fruit and produced works such as the *Hekima Christus* of Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya. He also did a mural at the Holy Angels Church in Chicago.

[161] Schemmel, *Visual Arts in Cameroon: A Genealogy of Non-Formal Training, 1976-2014*, 70.

[162] Ibid.

Interpretations of *Hekima Christus*

Hekima Christus was conceptualized by Engelbert Mveng and painted by South Sudanese artist Stephen Lobalu. Lobalu started painting the mural on January 8, 1988, and after a month of following faithfully the draft version that Mveng had prepared, he completed the work to Mveng's liking. Mveng oversaw its realization with personal presence. Sison comments, "Mveng was physically present for the execution of the work. It would be unlike the master guiding the hand of the student, but taking full attribution for the work."[163]

The artwork is a triptych mural that puts together three scenes from the life of Jesus.[164] The central panel depicts an elevated Christ, enveloped in lustrous bright yellow, an image simultaneously evoking Christ's crucifixion and glorification. Jesus looks like a worm of the earth: naked, poor, and simple.[165] Jesus here is reduced to a state of radical poverty and is indeed bruised for our iniquities. The immensity of light that surrounds the image of Jesus draws the viewer to the center of the action – Jesus glorified in his crucifixion.[166] The central panel is sometimes called "Crucified and Risen," a

[163] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 27.

[164] While Sison classifies Hekima Christus as a pentaptych, Mveng himself states that it is a triptych. Mendouga and Gbedolo also divide Hekima Christus into five parts, including the three main images and the border art as part of the same image.

[165] Engelbert Mveng, "Interview Du Pere Engelbert Mveng SJ," *Hekima Review: Journal of Hekima College* 1 (April 1988): 62.

[166] St. Columba Church in Oakland has a sculpture of a crucified Christ floating in an open space. I see a striking resemblance between this sculpture and *Hekima Christus* save for the cross that hangs in the background. The sculpture can only be seen fitting perfectly in the confines of the cross pattern at a particular angle as one enters the front door.

metaphor for Christ who is poor and yet comes to liberate the needy, the hungry, the exploited, the homeless, and all other poor and marginalized people of Africa.[167]

Mveng intended *Hekima Christus* to remind the viewer of the eucharist and redemption in an African context.[168] On the right of the central panel is a scene depicting the miracle of the multiplication of loaves, a miracle recounted in all the Synoptic Gospels and John's gospel (Jn 6:1-15). Mveng presents the miracle of the loaves because it recalls the Psalmist's vision for the poor: "The poor will eat and be satisfied" (Ps 22:26).

On the left of the central panel is depicted the miracle of Cana (John 2:1-12), where Jesus turned water into wine. Mveng chose this because it was Jesus' gesture to help a friend that led to the miracle.[169] In a context of near embarrassment and utter poverty of the wedding party, Jesus performed the miracle of turning water to wine at Cana. Likewise, he multiplied the bread to feed the crowds. That Jesus did something for the poor is significant because he became the Suffering Servant proclaimed by Isaiah 53.[170] Taken together, by their focus on bread and wine, they make a meaningful identification of this artwork as a Eucharistic fresco.

On both the left and right sides of the mural, we have some border artwork representing two sides of the same reality. The border artwork constitutes four wavy solid

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[167] Mveng, "Interview Du Pere Engelbert Mveng SJ," 61.

[168] Ibid., 62.

[169] Ibid., 63.

[170] Isaiah 53:4-5:"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." RSV.

lines flowing downwards in a 'v' shape, forming what appears to be four repeating colors (yellow, two shades of orange, and red). Mendouga calls these decorative color patterns "Spears or palm tree branches"[171] Note that Mveng's own village was called *Ngoulemakon*, meaning by the power of spears.[172] The significance of this object of war, the spear, lies in its origin from the blacksmith who patiently, meditatively, and expertly forms this instrument into something beautiful yet deadly. Though a mere tool, the spear gives confidence and propels a community onto the path of peace.[173] The palm symbolism suggests peace as the psalmists say, "The Just shall flourish like the palm tree, shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon." (Ps 92:13).

I have always pondered what Mveng intended to portray in 1988 and whether we, the future generations, are free to interpret the mural differently than he might have originally intended. The idea of openness to new interpretations speaks to the nature of symbols and how the original intention of the symbol can be superseded by new interpretations as people and cultures develop. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, as individuals, we tend to have subjective reflections on works of art that make the reflection itself abstract and so objectify the art. Instead, he proposes that we understand the work of art as an object with an ontological value. Gadamer states:

> [T]he work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the

[171] Julien Ndongo Mendouga, "Engelbert Mveng's Visual Theology: Art and Inculturation toward a More Thorough Evangelization in Africa" (STL thesis, Jesuit School of Theology, 2014), 28.

[172] Gbèdolo, "Depicting the Incarnation: Theodore the Studite and Engelbert Mveng on the Particularity and Universality of Christ," 105.

[173] Ibid.

> person who experiences it. The "subject" of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself.[174]

Mveng engages in image-making that changes something about the external aspects of the physical images of Jesus to coincide with the African community's understanding without changing the concept of God that the two intersecting communities hold dear.[175] As Susan Sontag makes abundantly clear, images are often used as aids to understanding. However, images do not explain; they acknowledge. [176] Kathleen Martin concurs, "images and meanings are understood momentarily with some of the meaning unnoticed, implicit, or embedded in the image."[177] How easily can viewers differentiate the experience from acknowledgment? Can viewers affirm and reaffirm a connection between "ideas and relations from personal experiences as opposed to simply viewing images and recognizing depictions?"[178] Since images and symbols are abstractions not tied to specific places, they can be reinterpreted to suit the time, place, or situation in which they are adapted.[179]

Dornford-May and Mveng share the idea that Black art expresses the nature of human beings and the world insofar as that world is closely associated with human

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[174] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, rev. ed. (London;New York; Continuum, 2006), 103.

[175] As an African missionary, Mveng stood at the confluence of Christianity and African Traditional Religion. And yet he held dear the message of the Gospels and endeavored to create religious art that would reflect the life of the African Christian communities.

[176] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), 111.

[177] Kathleen J. Martin, *Indigenous Symbols and Practices in the Catholic Church: Visual Culture, Missionization, and Appropriation* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT; Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 140.

[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

destiny.[180] He believes that human beings conceive the world in their image, and they use the language of art to express what the world means to them. Art reflects the struggle between life and death, and this struggle is not restricted to humanity alone but extends to the whole cosmos – everything that exists is involved in this struggle.[181] Therefore, the theme of "life and death" entails unmasking what life and death are. Mveng would probably agree that art is the supreme mode of expression for Africans, and so to unmask what life is, is to see the vibrant chant of its victory over death. Death takes the form of racial hatred and bigotry[182], neocolonialism, economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and the spiritual suffocation of disembodied religions.[183]

Consequently, it is crucial to embrace the symbolism of Black art because it enables us to "look at the book of the world and find out the names of those allied to the two camps," that is, either on the side of life or on the side of death.[184] So the artist is not a passive agent in this struggle of life and death. The artist takes a stance to create art that humanizes nature. For Mveng, Black African artists take "the cosmic battlefield where life and death confront each other and transform them into the Elysian Fields where life

[180] Mveng, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the Peoples of Black Africa," 140.

[181] Engelbert Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," in *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (New York: Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 140.

[182] Mveng considers "racial hatred and bigotry" a South African problem in 1977 during the Pan African Conference of Third world theologians. What strikes me here is how the apartheid regime put a huge stamp on the African consciousness even for theologians like Mveng who wrote from a totally different context of Cameroon. His comment here on death is crucial because this list of what represents death is still relevant for present African contexts.

[183] Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," 141.

[184] Ibid., 140.

chants its victory over death."[185] Mveng also believes that the language of art is eminently religious and not theological. African art celebrates God's creation without judging, describing, or even unveiling God.[186] As a celebration of life's victory over death, every rite, dance, piece of music, or work of plastic art is a cosmic liturgy.[187]

Of all Mveng's artworks, *Hekima Christus* intrigues me the most because it presents an African Christ who seems familiar to me and yet, is not easy to understand immediately. The central panel has a numinous allure that transcends my everyday experience of art. The mural gives the viewer a transcendental cosmic feeling when worshiping in the chapel.

Unlike Raymond Moloney and Antonio Sison, who admit that they are foreigners in the presence of this African artwork, I feel a special connection to it. As an African I am confronted with what this artwork could mean for me and others living in the African context.[188] I think *Hekima Christus* has the potential to open up more insights into our lived experience in Africa.

Mveng and Inculturation of Face Masks

A closer inspection of the central panel of *Hekima Christus* shows that Jesus is wearing a mask (Fig. 8). Mendouga suggests that the oval shape of Jesus' head resembles the face masks from the Dan people of the Ivory Coast, which show a face demarcated by

[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid., 141.

[187] Ibid., 140.

[188] Raymond Moloney, "The Hekima Christus," *Hekima Review: Journal of Hekima College* 1 (April 1988): 71.

lights and shadows and are circumscribed by consistent decorative border art patterns.[189] Mveng consciously covered Jesus' masks with symbolic colors, which boosted his artworks and communicated humanity's cosmic destiny.[190] The mural beams with color, and that is deliberate. Ultimately, *Hekima Christus* is a kaleidoscope through which one perceives colors of concrete *humanum*.[191]

In the mural, only Jesus' eyes are open. The rest of the people's gazes are downcast. What is paradoxical about this detail is that "The majority of African mask faces have closed eyes – closed to this world, but open inwardly, to another."[192] And yet, for Mveng, Jesus' eyes are open. Could this suggest that Jesus is the master of initiation, the master of life and that the rest have to show him respect by lowering their eyes to him?[193]

Masks are used in African ceremonies. According to Sison, making masks was a profoundly spiritual affair beginning with the ascetic life of the carvers, who abstained from sex and contact with dead bodies.[194] These masks are seldom associated with living

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[189] Mendouga, "Engelbert Mveng's Visual Theology: Art and Inculturation toward a More Thorough Evangelization in Africa," 30.

[190] Mveng, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the Peoples of Black Africa," 20.

[191] A kaleidoscope is both an instrument that reflects colors to produce a symmetrical pattern and a lens through which one perceives the true beauty of light. From its etymology, the Greek word *kalos* and *eidos* mean 'beautiful' and 'what is seen', respectively. *Skopeo* means seeing. Therefore, a kaleidoscope is literally an "observer of beautiful forms" coined by inventor David Brewster (1781-1869). (https://www.etymonline.com/word/kaleidoscope#etymonline_v_1769)

[192] Peter Stepan, *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2005), 20.

[193] Mendouga, "Engelbert Mveng's Visual Theology: Art and Inculturation toward a More Thorough Evangelization in Africa," 29.

[194] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 46.

persons but are directly or indirectly connected to supernatural beings or spirits.[195] Most Africans believe that the "heavens are populated by innumerable spirits and beings." Yet, Christian missionaries and Muslim marabouts misunderstood this idea and labeled it as animism when it was "rich in transcendental forms of existence that populate the continuum between this life and the life beyond."[196] As Sison states, "beyond cultural bricolage, a dynamic internal dialogue exists in the creative tension between the basic Christological narrative and the African cultural narrative symbolized in the mask."[197] So when Mveng uses the African mask as a stylistic device to present the faces of Jesus in *Hekima Christus*, he is trying to break the cultural barricade that considers the masks animistic and put it in opposition to the Christological narrative of the early missionaries.

Importance of Initiation

According to Mveng, wearing masks is crucial in the initiation process. Masks invoke spirits of ancestors and appear in the context of the ceremonies, such as during the initiation itself.[198] As pointed out earlier in the section on the life story of Mveng, he was initiated into the Bamileke worldview before he could be taught about their art. Looking at Mveng's artworks requires an initiated mindset to appreciate some of the underlying

[195] Stepan, *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks*, 24.

[196] Ibid., 23.

[197] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 49.

[198] A few years ago, in 2019, I remember working in Malawi doing vocation promotion for the Society of Jesus. On one drive through Dedza, a Malawian town, I saw masked men dancing on the road. I immediately knew that these were *Nyau* or *Gule Wamkulu* initiates attending a ceremony of the Cewa people. I stopped and gave them some tips/offertory to honor the spirits of the land and to have a safe passage. One thing clear in my mind was I had stumbled on the rare occasion. How could I stumble upon these spirits and live? Growing up in Zambia, I was told to fear these spirits as they were powerful entities of the religious world. In Zambia the *Nyau* are believed to be a cult or secret society of initiated men who put on a show when the traditional ceremonies are performed.

meanings behind how he paints his pictures. Initiation is crucial because it involves a transition period in which people encounter the new culture or their own culture with fresh eyes.[199]

What is Mveng's response to masks? For Mveng, the mask acts as a liturgical vestment.[200] Because masks are used in traditional African rituals, Christians view them as something alien or foreign to their way of life.[201] For Mveng, the mask has to be Christianized for true inculturation to be accomplished since it will give us access to African Christian language and symbolism.[202] For Victor and Edith Turner, the contrast between pilgrims putting on Christ Jesus as a paradigmatic mask (or persona) and tribal initiation, where individuals don ceremonial masks, is that for the Christian, he or she

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[199] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, illustrates this mystery:

> "How do they do that, Papa-Nnukwu?
> How do people get inside that one?" Jaja asked.
> "Shh! These are mmuo, spirits! Don't speak like a woman!"
> Papa-Nnukwu snapped, turning to glare at Jaja.
> Aunty Ifeoma laughed and spoke in English. "Jaja, you're not supposed to say there are people in there. Didn't you know that?"
> "No," Jaja said.
> She was watching Jaja. "You didn't do the ima mmuo, did you? Obiora did it two years ago in his father's hometown."
> "No, I didn't," Jaja mumbled.
> I looked at Jaja and wondered if the dimness in his eyes was shame. I suddenly wished, for him, that he had done the ima mmuo, the initiation into the spirit world.[199]

In the account above, the grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu refuses to acknowledge to his grandson Jaja, that people get inside the costume masks. Had Jaja done the initiation called the *ima mmuo*, he would have learned about the spiritual world and appreciated the masks. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 87.

[200] Mveng, "Interview Du Pere Engelbert Mveng SJ," 68.

[201] As stated above, this attitude was attributed to missionaries who condemned the masks as pagan symbols with no meaning for Christians. Because masks were identified with fetishes and witchcraft, they lost their liturgical function in the African Christian worldview.

[202] Mveng, "Interview Du Pere Engelbert Mveng SJ," 68.

becomes the redemptive tradition. In contrast, for the traditional masquerade, they become for a while the god or power signified by the mask.[203]

Sison agrees that the conventional sense of a mask is understood as a false face meant to hide one's true identity or character.[204] For African masks, this notion is contradicted because they go beyond the merely decorative function but have a sacred function to play.. Stepan explains, "the dancing of masks is surrounded by an entire liturgy, designed to encourage the entry of the supernatural into the mundane world."[205] The dancer is not just playing a role but performing a liturgy; he continues, "in the old masquerade traditions, the urgency of each dancer's performance derived from the conviction, 'I am not myself.' It was not he who danced: he was danced."[206]

Hekima Christus Unmasks Poverty

Whenever masks are used in the film, they usually hide the true identity of a character. The director uses an editing strategy to build tension in the story so that the unmasking becomes the climax. The unmasking serves as a literary device that acts as an unveiling of the truth or a payoff to the tension built by not knowing who it was all along behind the mask.

Sison posits that Mveng unmasks human poverty for what it truly is in the impoverishment they suffer in their very being and personhood.[207] To unmask poverty

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[203] Victor Turner and Edith L.B. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 11.

[204] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 49.

[205] Stepan, *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks*, 22.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 60.

would be to show its true identity and kill it. Poverty is an evil found in all societies. Yet there is a kind of poverty that is more drastic.[208] Mveng argues that when persons are deprived of their basic needs, spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs, and everything that makes up the foundation of being-in-the-world[209], they sink into poverty that exterior goods cannot satisfy but strike at their very being as persons.[210] This kind of deprivation of their very being-in-the-world is an affront to the *imago Dei*. Mveng disagrees with the definition of poverty as is understood in the political sphere, where it is regarded as a deprivation of essential goods necessary for human flourishing in a given society.[211] He questions why the lack in question is restricted to material goods alone when humans have an insufficient supply of spiritual, moral, sociological, and cultural goods.

The Life and Death Struggle of Poverty

For Mveng, black art expresses human beings insofar as they are beings with a destiny.[212] Ideally, the fate of human beings resides in life, flaunting its reason for being

[208] As Katie Smith argues, "There's a big difference between being "broke" and being "poor". Poverty is the daily agony of not having enough money for groceries or having to decide between buying food for your children and paying the rent. Real poverty is isolating. It's living in fear of who will find out and how you will be judged." Katie Smith, "You're Not Poor. You're Broke," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2019, sec. Life and style, accessed March 30, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/12/poor-broke-difference-poverty-inequality-society.

[209] Though Mveng does not mention it, he is influenced by Martin Heidegger's philosophy which uses the phrase being-in-the-world from the philosophy of being.

[210] Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 156.

[211] Poverty is a public secret hidden only from those who choose to ignore it. Jesus does not ignore poverty in *Son of Man*, he is born poor and dies a poor man in the eyes of the rich and powerful.

[212] Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," 138.

in the face of death.[213] In my view, Mveng is arguing that art best expresses what human beings aspire to be (possibility) and their ultimate destiny when faced with their death.

For Mveng, human beings are in an ongoing struggle between life and death. From the outset, those to be initiated are steeped in the battleground between life and death, where the victory of life over death is experienced.[214] The vocation of these initiates is to ensure the triumph of life over death. Consequently, in his anthropology, Mveng believes that human beings ought to "bear within themselves all the elements involved in the struggle for life and its victory and serve as a network of vital relationships that give concrete, historical reality to them as persons."[215] Underneath African life is a daily struggle for existence, and sometimes, life presents a struggle against death. Even though death is the ultimate end, poverty and injustice lead to an existence that needs a positive way of seeing the world. I agree with Mveng's analysis that we need to focus on the destiny of human persons as persons struggling against death.

In *Hekima Christus*, Mveng uses the medium of art to communicate the underlying context of most African peoples of his time. The context that confronts

[213] This idea is similar to what Martin Heidegger calls being-towards-death. For Heidegger, being is equal to time. And since time comes to an end at death, it follows that to be, one must consider one's death. Heidegger pronounces that "In being-towards-death, Da-sein is related to itself as an eminent potentiality-of-being." What this means is that as human beings we are always "ahead of ourselves": - we understand our present activities as bringing about some possible way for us to be in the future. In general terms, we come to know ourselves by exercising our abilities or our "possibilities-of-Being." Heidegger also states that "higher than actuality stands possibility." As human beings, we take a stance toward our mortality, which consists of our understanding that death is "approaching" – both possible and inevitable – at each moment of our existence. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaug (New York: State of University of New York Press, 1996), 234.

[214] Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," 138.

[215] Ibid.

Hekima Christus is the demarcation between the rich and the poor in the world.[216] As Mendouga notes, Mveng's artwork is enveloped by the life and death struggle of poverty.[217]

At the bottom of the central panel, right between the feet of John and Mary, one observes the city of Nairobi with its unmistakable iconic buildings[218] and a slum on the edge of the right side. Why does Mveng include such contrasting images? One possibility is that he sandwiches the city skyline and the slum between the miracles to point to the Eucharistic miracle Jesus performed for his people. *Hekima Christus* offers the city of Nairobi hopes as members of the body of Christ – rich or poor. The symbol of the Eucharist for the urban dwellers and the slum dwellers can neither be ignored nor treated lightly in this mural.

Reviewing what Mendouga and Sison say about the Kibera neighborhood is quite insightful.[219] Mendouga was struck by how small the township appears in the mural compared to the cityscape in the background. Is Mveng intentionally diverting the viewer's attention away from Kibera and onto Nairobi's glory because of the squalor of Kibera? On the contrary, Kibera is presented as small because it was small in 1988, and

[216] Sison adds more insight in this description, "Juxtaposing the image of the city's modern downtown skyline with the slums of Kibera neighborhood, Mveng draws attention to the pervasive structural disparities in Kenya and in much of Africa, realities that echo the liberationist social analysis apparent in his written theology. Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 36.

[217] Mendouga, "Engelbert Mveng's Visual Theology: Art and Inculturation toward a More Thorough Evangelization in Africa," 39.

[218] In 1988, the The Kenyatta International Conference center stands tall above all the rest and is the pride of the Nairobi city scape.

[219] Mendouga, like myself, studied at Hekima College for our theological studies while Sison in 2017 was a visiting lecturer who was appreciative of the artwork and intrigued by Kibera township.

yet presently, it has grown into a size one cannot ignore.[220] Despite the extreme conditions within which Kibera dwellers live, the slum hums and throbs with life. Children do everyday activities such as sports, selling meals, and watching pirated Hollywood films in makeshift theatres. Sison sees in the human faces of Kibera people forced into survival mode without proper sanitation but instead using the infamous 'flying toilets.'[221] None of these accounts are far from the truth about the reality of many great cities in Africa – the slums beam with an abundance of life, but they are also plagued by poverty which the wealthy feel ashamed to acknowledge or see.

Like Kibera, Khayelitsha is a slum of Cape Town where the film *Son of Man* was filmed.[222] Dornford-May and Mveng both endeavor to artistically depict Jesus in current

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[220] Sison recounts his visit to Kibera to a parish outreach and children's ministry done by the Guadalupe Fathers. He narrates how though it was not his first time in a slum, Kibera's sheer scale and density blew his mind.

[221] A flying toilet is a word used for describing plastic bags uses as a simple collection device for human fecal matter in places where there is a lack of toilets. These toilets are said to be disposed of on the roadside but are sometimes hurled across houses in a comedic flying motion comparable to missiles of attack. Common stories suggest that some rowdy youths threaten to smear a newcomer with the contents of the flying toilets if he or she refuses to tip them.

[222] Son of Man was filmed in Khayelitsha slum in 2005. According to the 2011 census, the slum has a ninety-nine percent Black population. Most slum dwellers are either unemployed or work menial jobs such as domestic or local industry jobs. The disparity between the beauty of Cape Town downtown and Khayelitsha is one of the clearest you can ever see in the world. When I visited Cape Town in 2013, I saw a cityscape decorated with beautiful architecture of glass towers and was well paved with beautiful roads of European standards. When I drove by the nearby suburbs, I saw good housing with expensive cars parked on the side of the road. And yet adjacent to these suburbs was Khayelitsha, a slum that politicians have yet to eradicate. The city officials have struggled to provide housing and sanitation for a growing young population.

In spite of the efforts the government makes to provide new affordable housing to the slum residents, the slum continues to grow every year. New problems in the country and neighboring countries make any new housing initiatives impossible to solve. Even when the city has provided new housing, it has done so far from the city, forcing workers to either stay in Khayelitsha or start taking long commutes. At the heart of this situation is the fact that residents are struggling and losing their lives because they lack basic necessities like clean water and toilets. Many women and children have lost their lives trying to access a public toilet in the slum at night. According to a 2012 Commission of Inquiry into Policing in the Slum, about twelve thousand households had no access to toilets, and researchers and activists highlighted the link between violence and the need to walk long distances at night.

Even though there are over two hundred thousand slums on earth, ranging from a few hundred to more than a million people, most slums arise when shanty towns and squatter communities merge into continuous belts of informal housing, usually on the edge of major cities. The people live in self-built

contexts rather than taking him back to Palestine. The Jesus of Mveng and Dornford-May is a prophet-liberator of poor people. He uses Truth to challenge human living conditions while also offering ultimate hope and freedom from society's ills. The casting of a resident of Khayelitsha subverts the normative tradition of having white European actors playing Jesus in an African context.[223] Dornford-May had inculturated the image of Jesus like many African artists before him who painted Jesus as a Black man.

The mural scenes in *Son of Man* can also be seen as a parallel between the visual art of Mveng and Dornford-May. After a miracle is performed, an unidentified artist (Simon Peter) paints the event on street walls to show everyone what God is doing in the people's lives.[224] These murals contain enough detail and primary colors to identify what

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substandard housing. Though squatters possess land without title, they are often coerced to pay bribes to politicians, gangsters, or police to have access to these sites. Most scholarly literature focuses on squatters while ignoring renters. Landlords are at the center of the social reality going on in slums throughout the world. The film depicts this band of people in the elders Caiaphas and Annas.

The short history of slums in former British colonies in Africa like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Zambia is that the colonial administration denied native populations the right to urban ownership of land and permanent residence. They used a divide and rule strategy to prevent Africans from forming anti-colonial communities. Africans in these areas had to provide evidence for being in cities in the form of passes. In 1960s Apartheid South Africa, the system was heightened by colonial racism, which criminalized urban migration and brutally uprooted many Blacks from cities. However, with the coming of the late 1980s, South African rulers grappled with shantytown uprisings that forced them to dismantle the totalitarian controls that restricted Black migration and settlement. In Cape Town, between 1982 and 1992, the population tripled around, with families building shacks with their bare hands using whatever materials they could find. This population growth resulted in an influx of bootleggers, gangsters, prophets, Rastafarians, gun dealers, and recently foreigners from neighboring countries.

In the recent past, South Africans have engaged in xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals who come from neighboring countries, especially Zimbabwe. Poor people from Zimbabwe flooded the poor areas of South Africa and created more informal settlements, which have been a seedbed of crime. Because of the crime, drugs, and the problems of the slums, South African young people are triggered to protest and riot. In fact, there is a minority anti-immigrant group called operation dudula, which organizes protests against undocumented foreigners. “Dudula” means forced out, and it creates fear in the over four million Black foreigners who came to look for greener pastures in South Africa.

See Paola Totaro, “Insight: Slumscapes - How the World’s Five Biggest Slums Are Shaping Their Futures,” *Reuters*, October 17, 2016, sec. Retail, accessed May 1, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slums-united-nations-world-idUSKBN12H1GC. and Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006), 26. 38, 51, 60-61.

[223] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 60.

[224] Street art provides the onlookers with a visual voyage to discover the beauty, mystery, tragedy, satire, pain, and more. It provides the onlookers with how the artists see the world by raising questions

has happened. There are close similarities between these murals and what Kenyan artist Michael Soi does in his paintings. His bold, colorful style is a satirical mirror of Kenya's society and politics.[225] He states, "What I try to do is make it as simple as possible to a point where if you stand there and don't get it, then there's something wrong with you."[226]

Mveng is committed to authentic dialogue that begins with an honest assessment of the evils done in the socio-political and economic spheres. He is not interested in going back to what Africa was before colonization or recapturing the lost history and identity of Africans but in developing dialogue in the existing cultures based on mutuality.[227] African art is a book that tells the true story of Africa's creative genius. Mveng explains, "everywhere you will find signs stamped with the genius of our people, the bearers of a single and identical message, written according to the laws which are common to the cultures of our country."[228] Indigenous art acts as a *locus theologicus* or wellspring of

about where they live or move to. While most artists are said to be a nuisance because of their graffiti and murals, some are celebrated for their creativity and given a platform to collaboratively work with comic book magazines and film productions. What I find particularly engaging with the street art movement is that it is still in its infancy and yet Dornford-May uses it to depict the miracles and life of Jesus. In Tristan Manco's book *Street Sketch Book: Journeys*, one graffiti artist recounts how he tackles social subjects and the harsh realities of life. He says that he depicts homeless people sleeping rough. The viewers tend to see the pictures from their personal level and according to their beliefs. Tristan Manco, *Street Sketchbook: Journeys*, 60th anniversary edition (San Francisco: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 39.

[225] In another interview, Soi discusses how he started with animal characters such as the pig and cat to symbolize gluttony and selfishness in Kenyan politics and society. He then transitioned to using human characters which helped him tackle social issues such as commercial sex work, intergenerational sex relationships, interracial relationships, the economics of love and China's involvement in Africa. (DW The 77 Percent, *Kenyan Painter Michael Soi Portrays Hard-Hitting Topics Such as China's Influence in Africa*, 2020, accessed March 11, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2ncojc9DRE.)

[226] TRACKS, *Kenya: The Tribal Traditions Live On | African Renaissance | TRACKS*, 2021, accessed March 12, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hNLHofysh0.

[227] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 57.

[228] Mveng, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the Peoples of Black Africa," 15.

theological insight that opens up new horizons of meaning for the everchanging African context.[229] Mveng's perspective is, therefore, relevant to what is going on in the film. *Son of Man* is a project engaged in audio-visual inculturation, but it is also concerned with addressing poverty and injustice. The film provides a solution in the image of Jesus, who comes to the African context as a poor man of the slums and yet is not hungry for political power.

Anthropological Poverty

Moreover, Mveng states that material poverty can lead to misery when people are deprived of everything and live in conditions inferior to those of animals.[230] These people are humanly poor, and Mveng calls this state "anthropological poverty," a situation where persons are deprived of everything that contributes to their well-being and have no identity, dignity, freedoms, and hope. "They are robbed of their own ways of living and existing."[231] Mveng is fully aware of the structures that perpetuate poverty and squalor in shantytowns and why politicians seem to find no permanent solution to the housing and sanitation crisis.

In Africa, poverty is anthropological and structural because it affects both individuals and social groups and can lead to despair or a condition he calls "anthropological impoverishment".[232] Impoverishment affects many city dwellers who

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[229] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 60.

[230] Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," 156.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Ibid., 157.

come from rural areas to look for a better life and end up in slums. The true face of impoverishment is seen in the political sphere, where it corrupts the interpersonal relations of people and creates a crisis that leads to a culture of more impoverishment.[233] Structures of sin support this kind of impoverishment through injustices, domination, and exploitation (together forming anthropological, political, and structural poverty).

Consequently, Mveng critiques the mechanisms that perpetuate the idea of African countries begging Western Countries for aid.[234] He believes that such assistance would never bring any underdeveloped country out of poverty but would lead to economic misery greater than in colonial times.[235] His analysis of the African situation points out the structural sin that persists there and how that affects the people at the grassroots level. As Julien Mendouga states, "anthropological poverty created conditions in which Africans would become permanent beggars. Therefore, no word could adequately describe the horror of this destruction of African cultures and the minds of her sons and daughters."[236]

This socio-political analysis of the implications of these spheres of dehumanization unmasks the real face of the culprit behind what perpetuates the state of affairs in Kibera and Khayelitsha.[237] However, Mveng's indictment of poverty shows that hope is on the horizon. Most news reports about Africa show a dire situation that Sison

[233] Ibid., 159.

[234] Ibid., 157.

[235] Ibid., 162.

[236] Mendouga, "Engelbert Mveng's Visual Theology: Art and Inculturation toward a More Thorough Evangelization in Africa," 46.

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calls “miserabilism” and “poverty porn” because they immobilize the viewer into doing nothing but seeing more suffering.[238] Does Mveng’s social-political analysis lead to a theological vision that helps Africans become more liberated amidst the colonial legacy they find themselves in? I think it does. Mveng presents us with ideas that he translates into a theology of praxis and liberation. Still, he also leaves us with visual theology, which dialogues with African culture to transform our current situations, whatever those may be. Consequently, while the people in Kibera and Khayelitsha are indeed materially poor, the presence of the Church and other Non-Governmental Organizations provides spiritual and cultural support that offers hope to them.

Evangelical Poverty

Evangelical poverty is one possible solution Mveng offers to this problem of anthropological poverty. Evangelical poverty is based on the imitation of Christ, who came to liberate us from sin and physical, moral, and spiritual miseries.[239] Evangelical poverty[240] aims to establish God’s reign on earth through the beatitudes. How can people in slums gain access to this evangelical poverty? Mveng’s answer to this question is that they must first be free. They must be liberated from structures of sin and the vicious cycle of impoverishment.[241] After bringing down these Jericho walls of structural sin, they need to establish counter structures whose role is to neutralize the effects of the structures of

[238] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 44.

[239] Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World,” 164.

[240]. Ibid.

[241] Ibid., 165.

sin. He asserts that we should "mobilize Christians of the Third World to follow Christ the liberator and themselves become liberators of their sisters and brothers."[242]

Evangelical poverty is based on the spirituality of the evangelical counsels (vows) of poverty, consecrated celibacy, and obedience as examples of poverty that can inspire good actions in society. Mveng believes that evangelical poverty does not belong to the structures of sin that dominate the world and produces misery, suffering, and despair. He believes that once we adopt the Reign of God, evangelical poverty will be the way to go. In his dualistic thinking, there is a Reign of heaven and the reign of this world (ruled by the devil). The dualism continues as he contrasts life and death, justice and injustice, and anthropological poverty and evangelical poverty.

Mveng's Christology as a Way to Interpret *Son of Man*

Jesus as Liberator provides an essential bridge between Mveng and *Son of Man*. The film does an excellent job of depicting Jesus teaching a revolutionary message of liberation. Jesus attacks the structures that perpetuate poverty, such as the destructive legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Jesus opposes the immediate cause of most of Africa's problems situated in domestic politics.[243] He does not ignore the social and political spheres of the people but addresses the oppressive structures that plague communities and individuals.[244] The film presents Jesus as *Liberator*, a Christ who overpowers evil spirits, anxiety, sickness, death, and poverty. [245] Throughout the running

[242] Ibid.

[243] Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 111.

[244] Ibid.

[245] Ibid., 112.

time of the film, Jesus overcomes Satan's temptations (0:00.56); he preaches his first sermon about non-violent change (0:29.12); he rescues a woman caught in adultery (0:32.12); he heals Lazarus (0:43.38); he preaches solidarity and unity atop a latrine (0:48.33); and he rejects a role in government from Annas and Caiaphas (0:54.21).

Mveng considers Christ to be the Liberator. Though his Christology is not very detailed, he states that Christology is "nothing else but an attempt to express the mystery of Christ in terms of anthropology that it is part of the theologian's own tradition[246] … African tradition prefers to talk about the mystery of the Son of God becoming the Son of Man. It is a mystery of 'humanization' or 'humanification.'"[247] Mveng's Christology uses art and anthropological-centered theology. His Christology dialogues with the concrete human situations of his own African tradition. In the process, the heavenly image of Christ comes down to earth in the image of the Son of Man. If Mveng saw the film *Son of Man*, I would imagine that he would use anthropological language to dialogue with the film from an African perspective. Mveng would review the title of the film *Son of Man* and suggest whether the humanization of Jesus into the African context was successful or not.

Consequently, while discussing what he calls "Third World Theologies," Mveng argues that liberation is a confusing notion because the poor and oppressed peoples have no right to speak out and tell us what liberation means for them.[248] There are as many

[246] Mveng's Christology is about inculturation. He believes that the Gospel has to take root in the local traditional way of life of the peoples of Africa.

[247] Mveng, "Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language," 140.

[248] Engelbert Mveng, "Third World Theology - What Theology? What Third World?: Evaluation by an African Delegate," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology : Papers from the Fifth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, August 17-29, 1981, New Delhi, India* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 219.

liberations as concrete situations of oppression, domination, and contempt. For instance, he points out that Black minorities of the United States and the Caribbean, Blacks of South Africa (indeed of all Africans), and exploited masses of Latin America and Asia suffer from institutionalized oppression.[249] Mveng's idea here suggests that we dialogue with the actual people who are affected by the said oppression if we are to talk about liberation.

By the same token, I think the title of "Jesus the Liberator" from Mveng's analysis resonates with Laurence Magesa's Christology. For Laurenti Magesa, African Theology should raise critical ethical and moral questions about excessive wealth amid poverty, questions of exploitation of the majority of African peoples by internal and external forces, questions about political domination by domestic and international power brokers, and questions of suffering and issues of lack of freedom in its various aspects.[250] Magesa points out two post-independence problem areas that have affected African countries: the unbalanced socio-economic and political relationship between the economic North and South; and the area of domestic politics.[251] He proposes continuing with the image of Jesus as Liberator – because this is "the only Jesus that can be comprehensible and credible among the African rural masses, the urban poor and idealistic youth."[252] Jesus the Liberator is in solidarity with us in the struggle to diminish

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[249] Ibid.

[250] Laurenti Magesa, "Christ the Liberator and Africa Today," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 154.

[251] Ibid., 156.

[252] Ibid., 157.

poverty among the masses and also prevent death by malnutrition, poor hygiene, and lack of medical care.

According to another African theologian, Jesse N. K. Mugambi, the idea of liberation is inherent in the concept of salvation:

> Liberation is the objective task of a contemporary African Christian theology. It is not just one of the issues, but rather, all issues are aimed at liberating the African from all forces that hinder him from living fully as a human being. In the African context, and in the Bible, salvation as theological concept cannot be complete without liberation as a social/political concept.[253]

Holistic liberation Christology addresses all areas of life, including the violent displacement of the people from their own land. In South Africa, the slums in Khayelitsha point to the injustice that many categorize as systematic racial oppression. "Black suffering has been systematic, braced by poor education, untreated disease and the exploitation of black labor."[254] Because of such problems, the suffering of Jesus becomes redemptive – he suffered to liberate people from oppression.[255] For those championing this cause, their attitude is to suffer redemptively for their brothers and sisters instead of a fatalistic resignation to oppressive social and political structures.[256]

Jesus the Liberator exists in the framework of a liberative utopia where people can begin receiving the fruits of liberation in the here and now. Rather than utopia being *ou-topos* (meaning "no place" or something unattainable, impractical, or ideal), utopia can stand for a dialectical tension between "what is" and "what ought to be."[257] Utopia

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[253] J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, "Liberation and Theology," *World Student Christian Federation Dossier*, no. 5 (June 1974): 41–42.

[254] Pope-Levison and Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts*, 115.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid.

[257] Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius*, 97.

can be praxis-oriented in its approach to building society while dreaming forward and not merely dreaming. "Liberative utopia has a theandric character; it urgently demands human praxis as participation in the in-breaking of the reign of God, but is cognizant of the proviso that definitive salvation-liberation will only be brought to fulfillment by the God of the reign."[258] In other words, it does not promise only the afterlife (pie in the sky) but addresses real human needs in its praxis-oriented approach.

The liberative utopia can be seen in the film, which does not shy away from portraying Jesus as a Healer and Liberator. When Jesus heals the paralytic (00:40.13), raises Lazarus (0:43.38), and exorcises a boy possessed by a spirit (0.45.58), he is doing so to bring liberation to the persons and to bring wholeness to the community. The word "healer" itself suggests a significant meaning in the African consciousness ranging from treating fertility issues to performing magical acts as a prophet or visionary.[259] As a healer, Jesus cures the sick body and absolves unhealthy guilt when he releases the women caught in adultery (0:32.13). He "reestablishes equilibrium to the community by returning those who are healed to normalcy."[260] This is a genuine work of liberative utopia.

Conclusion

The work of Engelbert Mveng shines a light on those who work at the confluence of art and theology. Though *Hekima Christus* can be appreciated as an act of preserving artistic motifs of a past era (1988), it sheds light on how Engelbert Mveng's vision can

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[258] Ibid., 100.

[259] Pope-Levison and Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts*, 108.

[260] Ibid., 109.

help us deal with many social problems of our times. Mveng's project is an excellent example of inculturation because it dialogues with local cultures to develop something new. Similarly, *Son of Man* is a project standing at the confluence of film and inculturation. The link between Mveng's ideas and *Son of Man* has been seen in their anthropological focus. *Hekima Christus* unmasks poverty by showing the reality of the poor people in Nairobi. *Son of Man* also presents Jesus coming from poverty but rising above all to overcome it as the liberator. I believe that the image of Jesus as Liberator can help Africans in the twenty-first century adopt a revolutionary message of Jesus which recognizes the root cause of problems and challenges the political players affecting the lives of many Africans. African Christians must rise to embrace Christ the Liberator, so that once liberated, they can become liberators themselves.

CHAPTER 3

MARY AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I drew upon the life, theology, and artworks of Engelbert Mveng to argue that *Son of Man* is a cry for justice and a cross-cultural convergence of film and the African struggle for liberation. This chapter examines the role of Mary in that struggle, as is depicted in the movie. It also raises questions about how the virgin mother could be an agent of change rather than the humble virgin of some traditional teachings.[261] To do this, I will discuss some poignant scenes in *Son of Man* in which the depiction of Mary dialogues with the iconography of some selected paintings.[262] The dialogical approach highlights similarities and differences between the artworks and the cinematic depictions without arguing for direct influence. To underline the liberation theme, I focus on two particular scenes of the movies: The Madonna and Child and The Pietà. After these discussions, I will move on to Mary's agency as a mother responsible for mobilizing her community. This chapter, therefore, asks how contemporary icons of

[261] Mary's humility developed from Christian writers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries -- Hugh of St. Victor (1141), Bernard of Claivaux (1153) and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1274) -- using vocabularies, such as meek, humble, lowly and modest, to describe her characteristics. Before this time, she was rarely associated with lowliness or humility, but obedience and divine motherhood. Her divine motherhood was emphasized because that was a primary model of fruitful virginity for the celibate life. Bernard believed virginity was not a prerequisite to enter heaven but rather humility as he stated in one of his sermons, "the virginity even of Mary would have no value in His eyes apart from her humility." For Bonaventure, who followed in the line of Augustine and Bernard, he equated humility to Christian perfection holding that Mary was likened to both heaven and earth because she was humble. Brian K. Reynolds, "The Patristic and Medieval Roots of Mary's Humility," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, First. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 332–337.

[262] This discussion makes use of popular artworks such as Our Lady of Ferguson, the Black Madonna of Detroit, "Mama" and Margo Humphrey's Black Madonna.

Christian art can offer motifs of "motherism"[263] or motherhood which may affect how people see the world through cinema/audio visual art forms. Can images or paintings show hope or critique structures of oppression? By the end of the chapter, I hope voices of liberation, action, and protest will be heard. I also hope to show that encounters with Mary can have a very transformative and life-changing impact on communities who suffer because of her ability to be a compassionate host to a suffering Jesus.

Madonna and Child

Dornford-May offers three meaningful portraits of Mary and the child Jesus in the film. One appears at 0:13.55 before the boy shepherds present Mary with a kid (young goat) and recite the Gloria (Fig. 10). Mary beams with a huge smile to reflect the moment's joy, and the boy shepherds join in the laughter when the kid cries. The second image comes at 0:14.15, when Mary plays with the baby Jesus on her lap (Fig. 11). What is rich about this shot is how the *mise-en-scène* brings out a typical setting of an African slum area. The poor shack in which they live is visible, and one can see through the open door a small kitchen. The scene is enriched further by the chickens feeding right in front of Mary. The third and final image of Mary and the child Jesus comes at 0:04.35 (Fig. 12). It presents Mary looking over the shoulders of the boy Jesus who is now about four

[263] The word "motherism" is used in two different senses in feminist discussions. In the first sense, it means mothering as an experience and not as a patriarchal institution (Getman). In the second sense, it denotes motherhood, nature and nurture (Catherine Obianuju Acholonu). I use motherism in the first sense to describe Mary's work in protest, transformation and change of the social conditions. The motherism of Mary in *Son of Man*, echoes the role women played in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. I believe Mary exhibits biological motherism for Jesus in the first instances of the film but then transitions into the social justice work and becomes the mother of all. Eliza Getman and Sarojini Nadar, "Natality and Motherism:," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 66. Catherine Obianuju Acholonu , Let's Help Humanitarian Project., Nigerian Institute of International Affairs., *Motherism : The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri, Nigeria: Afa Publications, 1995), 110. Sarojini Nadar, "Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo! - The Son of Woman in the Son of Man as an Embodiment of the Struggle for Justice," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 65.

years old. The colors here are eye-catching. Mary wears a blue headwrap embroidered with yellow flowers. The director avoids the usual depiction of having a veil around Mary's head long enough to go over the shoulders.[264] The young Jesus wears a yellow paper cutout crown that suggests a halo and signals his divinity. The simple materials show the theatrical aspect of this production.[265] The image of the child Jesus looking ahead while his mother stands behind him is reminiscent of the popular adage: "Behind every successful man, there is a strong woman." This moment prefigures the personal journey Mary is going to undertake once Jesus goes missing after his death.[266] These nativity scenes show Mary's motherism in a less developed sense of the word. She is acting as Jesus' mother only. She is less concerned with the world's troubles and is

[264] Muslims suggest that Mary wore a hijab.

[265] The simple materials used in the costume of Jesus show the theatrical aspect of this production. As stated in Chapter one, Dornford-May was a director for the Royal Shakespeare Company and Broomhill Opera in the United Kingdom. Erin Runions, "Son of Man and Resisitance to U.S. Imperialism," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Phoenix Press, 2013), 14.

[266] These three images offer a good comparison and contrast exercise to some of the Byzantine representations of Mary in the Church's tradition. As Ioli Kalavrezou observes, when we see Byzantine representations of the Virgin, the images that come to mind are those of the Virgin holding the baby Jesus in her arms. However, such images took centuries to develop. From the *Hagia Maria* to the *Theotokos* (which depicts her as enthroned while presenting her child to the world), Mary is the bearer of God (Theotokos means God-bearer). Mary will, after the iconoclastic period, gain a special place as the mother and *Hodegetria* of humankind. In this traditional sense, Mary became the mother of all because she was the abode, the *skemona* of Christ. In the tenth century, the image of a caring and affectionate mother begins to appear where Mary holds the child in her arms in a loving embrace. In the virgin of *Eleousa*, found in the New Church of Tokali, Mary presses the child Jesus against her cheek and looks out towards the viewer establishing eye contact. Images of this kind are a composition of the iconic type meaning that they are of private as well as communal prayer and devotion. The *Hodegetria* (e.g. from Kastoria) represents another achievement of Byzantine visual experience in that it transferred human expresssions of sentiment from narrative to iconic representation. The virgin with child now had elements from the scenes of the crucifixion, the deposition, and the lamentation. Mary's face displays anguish and worry. The joy of holding the child in her arms is all but gone. The love and pain of a mother is manifested in her face. It is like she knows of her son's death and that is clear from her facial expression. Ioli Kalavrezou, "The Maternal Side of the Virgin," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira Editore SPA, 2000), 41–43.

unencumbered by state politics as she immerses in the joy of having her son. A development in her character begins with the murder of the innocents.

Mark Doox's *Our Lady of Ferguson*

The third image of Mary and the child Jesus in *Son of Man* (Fig. 12) has many parallels with Mark Doox's[267] *Our Lady of Ferguson* (Fig. 13). Apart from both depictions being Black Madonnas, these images make a stark comment about the societies[268] in which they were produced. *Our Lady of Ferguson* presents a close similarity to the Mary shown in this film because Jesus is in danger of death at a young age. As a boy, Jesus's life was threatened as Michael Brown's life was lost in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. As an African, looking at *Our Lady of Ferguson* connects me to the sufferings of other Africans living in America. Doox's artwork adapts Byzantine symbolism in a postmodern context. The painting tells a story about the black man who is perceived as dangerous and to be feared. The Mary in this painting is a confident woman gazing straight at the onlooker. This mother is resolutely focused on the injustice, the harm, and the hurt of losing someone she loves, a contrast to the traditional meek and quiet woman of Bethlehem (as in the Latin hymn "Stabat Mater").[269]

[267] "Mark Doox is a multi-disciplined artist of paradox, insight, and profound depth. He is a Visual Artist and a Writer and Graphic Novelist. He is also a committed 'Iconographer'– (the moniker used by artists in the sacred genre-painting of traditional Byzantine iconography.) He now mostly works in his own style that he has developed called Byzantine Dada." Mark Doox, "About," *Mark Doox*, accessed April 20, 2022, https://www.markdoox.com/about.

[268] Fully aware that *Son of Man* addresses the African context, comparing it to the American context provides an opportunity for dialogue.

[269] The *Stabat Mater* is a popular hymn dedicated to Mary and it talks about the sufferings of Mary as Jesus is being crucified. It was composed in the thirteenth century. The phrase "Stabat Mater Dolorosa", comes from the first stanza of the hymn which goes by, " The sorrowful mother was standing beside the Cross weeping, while the Son was hanging."

Our Lady of Ferguson resonates with Mary's story in *Son of Man* because her son is also a victim of gun violence. Even though the sons are in different political and social contexts, the mothers take a central role as we can see their intense activity at the time when their sons have been shot. Our Lady of Ferguson is in the style of an icon, but it incorporates aspects of the present situation in its depiction of Mary and Jesus. Mark Doox's creativity lies in his ability to combine many subjects into one collage.[270] He specializes in Byzantine iconography and loves Dadaism, which has led him to coin a niche in an area of art called Byzantine-Dada. Dadaism was a movement that emerged from the trenches and violence of WWI by artists who had a keen interest in societal issues.

Doox's painting strikes me as targeting a very busy audience who wishes to see something shocking. Like his other paintings, such as 'Cosmic Whiteousness', the shock factor is apparent from the outset. *Our Lady of Ferguson* begs many questions, such as, "why is the figure a dark silhouette and not just a clear figure of Christ?" The dark figure represents Christ. The human shooting target is a black figure on whom people practice shooting at firing ranges.[271] This black figure is anonymous. It could be anyone of any race and gender. But I think it puts Christ in this position, like the one dying an innocent death. The other shocking part of this target man is that he has his hands up. This could indicate his surrender and beg the question of why the shooter would shoot him. Do we not shoot at the shooting target man? What do we have to fear about this target man? The

[270] Mark Doox, *Son Of Man: After Magritte*, 2020, accessed April 22, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa5oA8fH4eM.

[271] Albert Honergan expresses this insight in his talks about Our Lady of Ferguson and I found him helpful to come up with my analysis.

figure of Jesus is to be seen in the many who have died in systemic violence and how bad that violence is when it is unprovoked and done by a holy innocent child.

As can be seen in similar icons, which have Mary in the *Orans* pose, this icon has a circular figure inscribed in a circle demarcated into four parts.[272] That the hands are raised conjures up many Biblical figures who raised hands before prayer or doing God's bidding. Here, both Mary and the Jesus figure have their hands up. Is this a prayer or a sign of resigning to the threat? I think raising hands in worship when invoking the coming of the Spirit gives this painting a humbling feeling in me that urges me to pray.

For Doox, the Dadas were willing to be provocative because they used a method of graphic shorthand that we now call collage. Collage became one of the twentieth century's greatest inventions. It could be marshaled to humorous ends and adopted what at first seemed like nonsense. So for Doox to apply Dadaism to Byzantine iconography, he does not leave out his own Black cultural expression. The icon serves as a combination of his religious beliefs and identity, and he addresses an issue plaguing the community. Likewise, Dornford-May uses different filmmaking elements to develop the creativity in *Son of Man*: it has African cultural symbolism, political commentary on issues of segregation, and theatrical performances that Dimpho di Kompani performs.

Margo Humphrey's "Fear Not"

In the same vein as Our Lady of Ferguson, another Madonna lithographic painting presents a challenging picture of the context of America that cries out for justice. It can be seen as parallel to Dornford-May's filmic portrayal of the South African context,

[272] These four parts have another circle within the larger circle with the center of both circles being at the point of intersection of the two circles.

which calls for liberation and equality. In the 2013 painting entitled *Fear Not: I Got You* (Fig. 14) Margo Humphrey[273] reflects on the 17-year-old Trayvon Martin of Florida, who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman (acquitted) in 2012.[274] She presents a loaded image imbued with Pathos and passion for justice.

A Black Mary is holding the boy Trayvon Martin, a brown boy whose eyes are closed. Mary is shedding tears inconsolably while holding on to her dead son. Even though the son is dead, his fist is raised in protest, which signifies resistance, fortitude, and resurrection. As the film later shows, Jesus's resurrection scene on the hill shows Jesus raising his fist of defiance (1:22.00).[275] In Humphrey's artwork, the boy is shown holding an empty packet of skittles in his other hand. This gesture refers to Trayvon Martin because he was killed while holding skittles and iced tea in his hands on the way home. What is also particularly striking in this painting is the use of dynamic colors that bring out the rainbow skittles in stark contrast to Mary's blue dress. What is particularly contextualized is the hooded sweatshirt that Mary wears in place of the veil. For the halo,

[273] Margo Humphrey is an Oakland American printmaker, illustrator and art teacher who studied printmaking at the California College of Arts and Crafts. She obtained an MFA in printmaking from Stanford University. She has huge international experience with visits to Europe, Brazil, the Caribbean, and Africa. She taught art in Benin, Nigeria, and Uganda. A knowledge of various cultures and an interest in storytelling enliven Humphrey's artwork. She currently teaches art at the University of Maryland. "Margo Humphrey," *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, accessed April 20, 2022, https://americanart.si.edu/artist/margo-humphrey-5840.

[274] Teresaj Parker, "Welcome to Margo's World: The Prints of Margo Humphrey," *That's Inked Up*, November 25, 2012, accessed December 14, 2021, http://thatsinkedup.blogspot.com/2012/11/welcome-to-margos-world-prints-of-margo.html.

[275] The raised fist has a long-protracted history in both African and American contexts. Historically in the America, the fist is usually associated with the black power movement of the 1960s, which advocated self-esteem, economic empowerment, and the creation of black political power. In most African countries, the clenched fist, "was an expression of determination to bring … Africa closer together, amalgamate their ideas and strengths and ensure integration for sustained socio-economic and political development; virtues that can also be found in the tenets of hunhu/ubuntu." Michelina Andreucci, "Raised Clenched Fist Symbol of Struggle | Celebrating Being Zimbabwean," April 6, 2017, accessed April 22, 2022, https://www.thepatriot.co.zw/old_posts/raised-clenched-fist-symbol-of-struggle/.

the red pattern around Mary and the son makes this painting fit into popular iconography. The final minor detail is the shape of a dove on Trayvon's shorts. This detail could be easily missed, but it is a detail that points to the spirit of protest that the death of this boy will give birth to in the BLM movement. One more parallel that this image has with the film is the women's protest at Pilate's gate. Because of the systematic violence and disappearance of the young people of South Africa during Apartheid times, women protesteted this injustice. A movement was born and the film is an example of this movement being reenacted once more on the silver screen.

Black Madonna (1960s)

Doox's and Humphrey's works are most likely inspired by the Black Madonna of the 1960s (Fig. 15). The 1960s provided fertile ground for the production of such artwork. Influenced by the theology of the Black nationalist minister Albert Cleage (1911-2000)[276], Glanton Dowdell and General Baker painted a Black Madonna and Child, which was hanging at the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit.[277] This striking image stands eighteen feet high by nine feet wide.[278] Here Mary is portrayed as a very

[276] The importance of this Black Madonna is how it relates to the work of Rev. Cleage in the liberation struggle and his influence on Malcom X and other liberation movements.[276] Cleage's message was to promote a Black church with a new theology of liberation focused on freeing Black People. Cleage was concerned about the paradox surrounding Black people who were worshipping a white Jesus while trying to fight white people for Black liberation. As he stated, "When I say Jesus was Black, […] I am not saying it would be nice if Jesus was Black? Or let's pretend that Jesus was Black […] I am saying that Jesus WAS black." Errol A. Henderson, "Malcolm X, Black Cultural Revolution, and the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit," in *Malcolm X's Michigan Worldview: An Exemplar for Contemporary Black Studies*, ed. Rita Kiki Edozie and Curtis Stokes (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 252.

[277] Errol A. Henderson, "Malcolm X, Black Cultural Revolution, and the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit," in *Malcolm X's Michigan Worldview: An Exemplar for Contemporary Black Studies*, ed. Rita Kiki Edozie and Curtis Stokes (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

[278] Ibid.

dark woman wearing a white veil and adorned in a white robe with blue shawl cradles.[279] She holds in her arms a dark infant who many suggest the artist Dowdell identified as.

As for the creator Dowdell, the portrait symbolized the connection between the Madonna and any negro mother.[280] As a former inmate sentenced to 30-40 years in prison (for murder), he used his artistic abilities to challenge the conditions in the world. Dowell was paroled in 1962, and when he came out, he worked on the Black Madonna with Baker. At the unveiling of the painting, Cleage prayed over Baker and Dowdell before they were sentenced to prison again on concealed weapons charges.[281] Cleage once encouraged his congregation to simply sit and admire the painting "marveling that we have come so far that we can conceive of the Son of God being born of a black woman."[282]

Because Black people in America experienced enslavement and segregation, depictions of Jesus in films by directors such as Dornford-May may elicit powerful emotions. Dornford-May invites the Black viewers to not see images such as the Black Madonna -- controversial and doubtful because the context of the 1960s -- is vastly different from the present context. Hence, I suggest that there is more than a literal representation of Christ in this painting; the artist is challenging us to go beyond the boundaries of thinking.

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[279] Ibid.

[280] Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). 288.

[281] Ibid.

[282] Ibid.

The Pietà

In this section, I discuss how the Pietà scene in the film relates to some contemporary Pietà images which have a social justice message to address. Drawing from the Byzantine traditional artwork and applying it to modern settings is something both the Dornford-May and the artists endeavor to do.

The Pietà is "pictorial or sculptural depiction of the Virgin Mary holding in her lap the dead body of Christ after it has been taken down from the cross."[283] It is not an invention of an individual theologian or artist but an artwork that developed over five centuries.[284] During the fourteenth century, when Europe suffered the ravages of the Black death, the Pietà gripped the popular imagination of the people. Though it is neither mentioned in the Bible nor appears in Byzantine art, it is quite widespread in Europe.[285]

The "Bakkie" Pietà

The movie director focuses on Mary's story arc in the last quarter of the movie. Mary packs a bag as if to go on a pilgrimage to visit her son in the city (0:53:37). When Jesus is captured and killed, he joins the many sons who have been lost in government actions that cause people to disappear. It is the moment when Mary's role as mother of the oppressed becomes significant. Once she learns that her son has disappeared, she rallies the other women to demand answers from Governor Pilate. She uses Jesus's photo

[283] William H. Forsyth, *The Pietà in French Late Gothic Sculpture: Regional Variations* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995). 17.

[284] Ibid.

[285] The only drawing that comes close is the Threnos which is the lamentation of the Virgin over the dead body of Christ in Byzantine traditional art. Throughout France and Europe, the Pietà has provided to people a form of comfort and a sign of divine love and mercy when they have gone through dissension, pestilence, and fear. Forsyth adds, "The virgin was intercessor and mother; Christ was the savior, a fellow sufferer and yet God." Ibid., 17.

to lead a crowd of protestors to the place where the Governor is having a press conference (at 1:09:25). Holding the picture of Jesus against the window, Mary and the women protestors interrupt the press conference with their bangs on the windows and crying for justice for Jesus. Like the American women who started the Black Lives Matter movement,[286] these women hold up the picture of the victim of the violence to show where the injustice lies.[287] For Sarojini Nadar, once Hundred[288] tells Mary that her son has been killed and buried in a secret grave, this begins a loud wailing scene reminiscent of Rizpah's wartime lament for her sons who had been impaled on a mountain (cf. 2 Sam. 21:1-14).[289]

Hundred accompanies Mary to the burial place. The last time Jesus saw his mother was when he said goodbye to her (0:24:45) with the phrase *ndiham' umama*, which means, "I am leaving, mother."[290] At the moment when she unearths his dead body with her bare hands, she is reunited with her son. The scene shows agency as Mary is involved in the unearthing of her son, whose body was meant to remain hidden in the ground. Like the scene in Henry King's 1943 film, *Song of Bernadette*, Bernadette digs out the soil to set herself on a path to liberation (Fig. 16). Bernadette digs the earth with

[286] The BLM movement began in 2012 when three women activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi stated the movement which tackled social injustice activism across the country.

[287] Nikita Carney, "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media," ed. Alfred W. DeFreece, *Humanity & society* 40, no. 2 (2016): 180–199. 181.

[288] A character in the film. He is the one who reveals to Mary the place where Jesus is buried.

[289] Nadar, "Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo! - The Son of Woman in the Son of Man as an Embodiment of the Struggle for Justice." 62.

[290] Jeremy Punt, "'Thula' ('Be Quiet'): Agency in Son of Man," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013). 56.

her bare hands at the Lady's command, but she is laughed at by the crowd of onlookers (Fig. 17). Yet this act bears fruit when the water later begins to flow from the ground where she dug. After the apparition, Bernadette eventually receives her liberation from abject poverty when Lourdes became a place of pilgrimage as the miracles of Our Lady brought a backwater town its prominence.

After the body is exhumed from the ground (1:12:07), we then transition to the Bakkie Pietà (Bakkie is a colloquial term used for a pickup truck in South Africa) (Fig. 18). The Bakkie Pietà is the alternative name given to this scene because Mary is in this small pickup truck used to ferry male laborers to work in South Africa.[291] No music plays, but silence as the pickup moves past the trees, under the overpass bridges, and as it is overtaken by another car. For a few seconds, the Pietà scene is laid bare. The silence lasts two and a half minutes, beginning with Mary at the gravesite and ending when she hangs the body on the cross.[292] With moments of silence, Dornford-May pays homage to paintings/sculptures which do not have any sound effects but communicate visual messages.

The Bakkie Pietà is also about Mary's pilgrimage. [293] Her pilgrimage is aided by modern transportation, but her destination is not a workplace but the hill of Calvary.

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[291] Nadar, "Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo! - The Son of Woman in the Son of Man as an Embodiment of the Struggle for Justice." 62.

[292] This scene reminds the viewer of the silence in Martin Scorsese's 2016 film entitled, *Silence.* Scorsese's use of silence offers the viewer time to digest the moment of art and experience the scene without any music other than the natural sounds of nature.

[293] Mary's pilgrimage in this film connects well to the short documentary film, *Phil's Camino*, where Phil after being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, decides to overcome the fact that he cannot go to Camino de Santiago by building his own Camino in his backyard. "Phil's journey is one of hope, acceptance, and freedom, and is sure to inspire anyone who has ever dreamed of doing something that sounded impossible." Phil finally accepts that the Camino is a way of getting in touch with his situation and that the more he walks, the more he will draw closer to the sacred. He also learns that as he strives to

Similarly, as Mary moves to the cross, she is not alone; she has a driver, the disciples, and the women rallying alongside her. She will only become reconciled with the bigger picture once she reaches the top of the hill, where she will achieve a sense of justice and peace upon the earth.

Having looked at the Bakkie Pietà, I think it is important to put it in dialogue with Pietàs of some other artists (Mveng and Sawyer). My reason is to demonstrate how this one image has been adapted in different contexts in response to various social issues. I think it enriches the viewing experience when you see *Son of Man's* Bakkie Pietà through an African and an American lens.

African Pietà: Engelbert Mveng

In the Hekima Chapel, the thirteenth station of the cross is a compelling Pietà painted by Engelbert Mveng (Fig. 19). It depicts Mary and Jesus in an African style of painting.[294] Looking at this pieta image, one can observe the sadness that overshadows the image of Christ. The faces of Mary and Jesus are almost identical because Mveng employs the idea of the mask. As I said in chapter two, Mveng considered masks the universal African art form that needed the Christianization process (inculturation). "One should know that the mask is a liturgical vestment. It is precisely because of its liturgical role that the mask has become so foreign to Christians. Because it is an expression of the African missionary identified with the fetish art, so for the average Christian, the mask is a symbol of paganism. However, it is through the Christianization of the mask that we

be on his trail, he is gaining healing and not just a cure. He reconciles with the bigger picture: with family, friends, and God. Annie O'Neil, *Phil's Camino*, Documentary, 2016, http://philscamino.com/. 46.

[294] For an interpretation of the significance of the symbolism of these Stations see. Ilboudo, *Via Crucis Africae. Chemin de Croix, Chemin de Résurrection*, 3–4.

see the inculturation that gives access to an African Christian language." [295] Mveng, as in the *Hekima Christus,* uses the oval mask motif to show the inculturation and propose the idea of the masks of initiation (i.e., that Jesus is the master of initiation and that all those who believe in him must undergo Christian initiation). Since the film *Son of Man* provides a Jesus who underwent an initiation process, this image fits the function that Mveng intended for it.

Furthermore, the Pietà image shows its depth not in the accuracy of the facial expression alone but in the hand gestures. Mary holds on firmly to Jesus, whose hands are spread out in surrender. When comparing the way the Bakkie Pietà presents this scene, there is a remarkable difference between the two works. Mveng goes back into traditional African beliefs to use a symbolic artform, whereas Dornford-May gives us a realistic artform like a photograph in motion. I believe Dornford-May's training in the United Kingdom affected how he presented this Pietà. Still, it also shows that Mveng was able to use another tradition to appropriate it to an African context. While the wavy lines bordering this painting may seem meaningless, they present a decorative function that distinguished artists coming from west Africa.

A Contemporary American Pietà – Sawyer's Works

A contemporary American Pietà by Tylonn J. Sawyer[296] can also be compared to the *Bakkie Pietà* scene in the film. Although there is a difference in media, like

[295] Mveng in *Hekima Review*, 68.

[296] Tylonn J. Sawyer is a Detroit native figurative artist who creates huge canvas images which depict humans struggles from a particular point of view. He is a trained artist and holds a masters from the New York Academy of Art Graduate School of Figurative Art. Jason A. Michael, "Artist, Teacher Makes Black Faces Valid in Art," *Between the Lines (Ann Arbor, Mich.)* (Livonia: Pride Source Media Group, 2017), 34.

Dornford-May, Sawyer depicts the human struggles and the fragility of human nature as coming from a distinct point of view.[297] There is also a relationship to the works of Mveng in Sawyer's use of masks. The pietà artwork exists in two versions. The first is a 72 by 48 inches oil on canvas painting of a black woman in white clothes holding a black hooded dead boy.[298] Sawyer's Pietà uses the American flag as its background, which situates this painting in its context (Fig. 20). This Mary appears in another painting called "American Woman" which shows a strong woman holding a baseball bat across her shoulders to indicate her strength to strike back. The second is a black and white charcoal and gold leaf Pietà called *Madonna Nera E Bambino (Pietà ' II)* (Fig. 21). Pietà II shows Mary's head tilting to the left side as if to suggest that she is no longer looking directly at the viewer. The gold in this Pietà is the halo around Mary and Jesus.

Concerning his style, he chooses to focus on the world from a Black perspective regardless of what subject matter he is addressing. During his Western Art education in Michigan, New York, and London, he was disappointed to find a lack of Black faces in the works that he was assigned to study. And this is what led him to use figurative art, which depicts Black history and Black issues. Without mentioning Englebert Mveng or any African thinker, Sawyer began using knowledge from African masks in his paintings. He had people hold masks in front of their faces to signal how in certain African cultures, masks evoked the spirits of the ancestors. For Sawyer, masks of past archetypes like Martin Luther King and James Baldwin would send a message to contemporary people to

[297] Michael, "Artist, Teacher Makes Black Faces Valid in Art." 32.

[298] Tylonn J. Sawyer, "American Gods: N/a" (2018)"," *American Gods: N/A*, 2018, http://www.tylonn-j-sawyer.com/american-gods/2018/12/17/americangodsna.

revisit what these icons stood for.[299] His use of Figurative art as something visceral is to achieve the effect of people asking themselves the question, why? As he states, "If the question is why are these people wearing masks, then that's a great start."[300]

Sawyer's commitment to representing Black figures in his paintings led him to understand that art could present the human struggles and fragility of human nature. In the film, Dornford-May shows the human struggles of a mother who has lost her son at the hands of power-hungry politicians. Similarly, Sawyer presents a strong image of Mary, a woman who is willing to make a statement about the social ills of the community. Sawyer's fascination with African masks ties in well with the idea that I argued in Chapter two about the masks of inculturation. Whereas Sawyer uses the masks of famous figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin to remind Black people of their ancestors, Mveng incorporates the mask imagery to Jesus himself. I believe this particular use of masks in Sawyer's paintings could point to a possible interpretation of the Jesus figure as Steve Biko, Patrice Lumumba, and many other freedom fighters who died in the struggle for independence in African countries.

Mary As an Agent of Change

Since Mary takes center stage in *Son of Man*, this section discusses her community involvement and struggle for justice and liberation. I argue that Mary's agency leads her to become a voice of liberation, action, and protest. As I said above, the motherhood of Mary in *Son of Man*, echoes the role women played in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Mary's final scenes include her tying up the body of Jesus to a

[299] Michael, "Artist, Teacher Makes Black Faces Valid in Art." 33.

[300] Ibid.

cross to expose the tyrant's crimes. After hanging Jesus' body by night on a platform above the town, Jesus is greeted by morning light softly touching his dead body on a cross. Mary has organized a public spectacle that aims at restoring the injustice of her disappeared son into full public view. Mary and the crowd stage a postmortem crucifixion and publicly reveal the authorities' violence.[301]

Mary's lament begins with her chanting the words, "The land is covered in darkness." (Fig. 23) (1:18.55). Then the crowd joins in protest to respond to her cry for justice. Mary's song moves the people to resistance, to protest the violence done to Jesus and other victims of violent repressive crimes by the authorities. Her individual lament soon becomes a communal lament when she stands singing in the foreground with the crowd and the dead body of Jesus hanging in the background. Mary's protest is animated by dancing and clapping, actions that characterize the *Toyi-Toyi* dance repertoire. The dancing and clapping prompt the soldiers to fire non-fatal shots in the air. Mary, at first, ducks down in response to the shooting. But then she turns and faces the armed soldiers. This stare brings to mind the stare she once gave Jesus at the slaughter of the children (0:19.57). Then Mary looks at Jesus for reassurance. She rises, and others follow her lead. She then goes near the soldiers and restarts the protest song in defiance. She is now aiming her frustrations directly at the troops in front of her. It is not long before the entire group starts joining in with her again. They stare down at their repressors, confident that they will

[301] P. Jennifer Roher-Walsh and Richard Walsh, "Mary and the Mothers," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield UK: Phoenix Press, 2013), 172.

not be shot at. They are motivated by the idea that a woman is *imbokodo* – a grinding stone.[302]

This final scene testifies that Mary has agency but also transfers that agency onto others. Using the icon of God, Jesus Christ, Mary rallies the crowds to protest and liberation of mind and heart.[303] Mary rhythmically stomps her feet, and the crowd follows her lead. She successfully stages a successful political standoff against the soldiers who represent the corrupt regime, and she does so without any weapons. She arrests the violence and unites her neighbors in one act of protest.

P. Jennifer Roher-Walsh and Richard Walsh use Abraham Maslow's psychology to argue that Mary self-actualizes in the film. They state that Mary self-actualizes outside her traditional passive roles as an innocent, virginal mother; an intercessor to her son (wedding at Cana); and a sharer in Jesus' suffering and anguish (*Stabat Mater*).[304] Indeed, Mary in *Son of Man* is capable of self-reflection and self-acceptance. She resists forced and debilitating cultural assimilation and cultivates and cares for a group of people.[305] Mary

[302] "The noun 'imbokodo' is a Zulu word meaning 'grinding stone.' Geologically explained, the shape, form, and texture of *imbokodo* together give the stone a fine slippery surface that over a period of time renders it immune to further erosion and thus makes it a perfect tool for grinding. *Imbokodo* is a resistant and durable stone that is able to withstand the geological tides of time and a perfect tool of choice for grinding food into fi ne powder. It is skilfully operated and controlled by women in African households. *Imbokodo* symbolises unity, solidarity and strength. *Imbokodo* is dependable: no matter what the task, it remains intact and unscathed. It withstands whatever rigor of the friction it encounters while retaining its same form before and after usage." Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar, "Breaking the Covenant of Violence against Women," *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, no. 114 (2002): 223.

[303] Sarojini Nadar argues that because of Mary's actions of fighting injustice as she does in *Son of Man*, the film could perhaps be renamed as *Son of Woman.* This clever idea is struck my imagination and I almost titled this chapter as "Son of Woman an agent of change." However, the idea raises a pertinent question: how can Mary be a Son? Is not Mary a daughter of Woman? Mary as Mother of the Son sounds better so the title fails to work unfortunately. Nadar, "Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo! - The Son of Woman in the Son of Man as an Embodiment of the Struggle for Justice," 67.

[304] Roher-Walsh and Walsh, "Mary and the Mothers," 167.

[305] Ibid., 169.

exceptionally fulfills Abraham Maslow's criteria of self-actualization by resisting the traditional maternal role and the oppressor's violence. She potentially improves the lives of the people in the community and, in so doing, becomes what Maya Angelou calls a phenomenal woman.[306]

In my view, Mary can also be regarded as "self-transcending" because she goes beyond the earlier categorizations that Abraham Maslow made in his theory of the hierarchy of needs. Later, Maslow added transcendence as a step further and a higher need to which a growth-oriented, self-actualized person may proceed. Mary's self-transcending means that she forgets and transcends the ego by being unselfish, self-forgetting, and impersonal.[307] Transcendence, according to Maslow, is the "highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature and to cosmos."[308] In other words, the description of a person at the level of self-transcendence is one who seeks to further a cause beyond oneself (e.g. service to others or devotion to an ideal such as truth or art or a cause) and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries

[306] In the poem "Phenomenal Woman," Maya Angelou presents a woman who is not built as a supermodel size but is respected by men when she walks in a room of people. The recurring phrase of the poem is "I'm a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me." This phrase echoes the kind of respect independent women gain in the eyes of society when they choose to dedicate themselves to causes that are beyond themselves. The phenomenal woman attracts two responses from the men: they fall down on their knees, and they swarm around her like bees. Mary as the phenomenal woman is like that. She demands the respect of the soldiers as they are paralyzed by her courage for the cause of justice. Her fearless demeanor toward the Governor confirms her relentless efforts to face injustice and stand for the weak. Though she is a woman phenomenally, Mary is a phenomenal woman per excellence. [great]

[307] Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2d ed. (New York: Van Nostrand, 1968), 72.

[308] Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 269.

of the self through peak experience (e.g., this may involve a mystical experience in which the person participates a sense of identity that transcends the personal self).[309]

As the credits roll, we see a utopian community life in Khayelitsha. Women and their children are laughing, playing, plaiting their hair, and doing many peaceful everyday activities.[310] These images call to mind the liberative utopia I discussed in chapter two. The utopic vision culminates in a shot that focuses on the lower half of a woman's body, walking with a small child on the street. Then we see a rainbow over the urban area, symbolizing hope. Mary is no longer alone as the mother of God but has helped to usher in a new community through her self-transcending acts. She is one among many other activists who work for social change.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the Marian scenes in the film *Son of Man* in light of challenging artwork by selected contemporary artists with comparable iconographic themes. I believe that Mary is presented as a change agent, an activist, and a person who self-transcends her traditional role of a humble virgin. Consequently, both the film and the artworks I used exist in a perpetual dialogue, which aims at helping this world become a better place. I believe the artworks I referenced challenge us to be better human beings because of the questions they raise about human nature. Art should comment on social issues that ordinary people go through. It should challenge politicians, form pastors, and

[309] Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of general psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006): 303.

[310] Roher-Walsh and Walsh, "Mary and the Mothers," 175.

encourage artists and mothers to try to be more. I, therefore, subscribe to the notion that what Dornford-May has done in this film is crucial for a development of an African world that is redeemed by Christ who was cherished by a loving Mother – Mary.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The central point of my thesis was to argue that *Son of Man* is a cry for justice in places where corruption, poverty, and injustice proliferate, such as slum areas. To do this, I began by examining *Son of Man* as a part of Third Cinema and argued that this guerilla filmmaking strategy fits the context of Africa, which is in the Global South. When Dornford-May chose to adapt the well-known story of Jesus, he was influenced by a quest for a prophetic liberating character of the Bible that he encountered as a child during the Chester mystery plays. I also argued that Third Cinema provides a dialogue partner for theology and film. Through a creative retelling of the Jesus story, Dornford-May delivers a compelling message of hope to the African people, who are facing many problems of corruption, injustices, and violence. Though grounded in a South African Xhosa cultural context, the film addresses issues that affect the whole continent. I believe the fictional space that the film creates offers viewers and critics an opportunity to apply more critical skills to their passive watching habits. Through the message of its protagonists, Jesus and Mary, whose messages and actions work against the evils in society, the film manages to bring hope to a desperate world. The film throws Jesus into a poverty-stricken African context at the brink of chaos and war. The situation prompts a theological response from either an ethical discussion of the inequalities, injustices, and violence or from an inculturation point of view where the gospel message is brought to an audience embracing technology and is receptive to audiovisual messages.

Using the generative contextualized method, I discussed how the film could be encountered in the problems that it addresses. In the moment of encounter, I gave a synopsis of the film and its background and influences, which set up the context which

influenced Dornford-May to make this film. In the interpretative moment, I used the inspiration of Engelbert Mveng and other African Theologians to argue that *Son of Man* is an excellent example of a film with an anthropological focus. The art of Mveng unmasks poverty by showing a Jesus who comes from poverty and is the liberator. In the synthesizing moment, I dialogued with many scholars on some of the film's themes, such as poverty, injustice, and violence in slum areas. In the generative moment, I appreciated the many solutions to these problems, such as evangelical poverty, dialogue with the film, art, and theology, and empowerment of slum people.

This methodology helped me engage with one film to bring out a theological reading in areas of Christology, Mariology, and Art. I believe this method helps investigate other films in Third Cinema as well. The methodology is conscious that people from the Global South are living in desperate times, and film provides a source of hope that can help shape their holistic development as a people liberated by Christ.

In this study, I outlined the importance of a liberation Christology centered on changing social conditions in particular African countries. Jesus as liberator challenges the complacent attitudes toward social conditions and opposes pie-in-the-sky theology, which promises an afterlife of joy at the expense of the present life. The idea of a liberative utopia offers the African people real and actual empowerment. Its praxis-oriented approach offers a radical solution to problems like anthropological poverty and impoverishment rampant in the Global South. By providing poor people a community dimension, evangelical poverty shines as one possible way of building communities that care for others.

In my opinion, Film and Theology offer academics a platform to disseminate some of the most creative ideas discussed in the classroom and theological journals to the public. In Jesus films like *Son of Man,* an opportunity arise to bring the message of Jesus anew to audiences. The problem lies in the power struggles that make such productions sidelined. The fact that many people have never watched *Son of Man* is proof that it has never received the backing to be widely distributed. The limited viewing of the film is a wake-up call for us to bring such media to more awareness and raise questions about issues creatively.

Coupled with Jesus as the liberator, I have argued that Mary's role in *Son of Man* as an agent of change and an activist stems from her self-transcending the traditional role of a humble, innocent virgin. Mary's depiction in the film challenges the liberative role women play in our societies to drive change and ensure social justice prevails.

This study did not investigate the ethical framework that could best fit into the issues that *Son of Man* raises. Such an investigation would have required in-depth research into ubuntu ethics which is an ethic that is community-centered and suggests that a person is a person because of people (*umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu*). Further research on how films affect people's behavior and vice-versa could be carried out to show how filmmakers are affected by the context in which they live and how films affect the people, and so on.

Film is culturally central and existentially transformative. It helps viewers discern the work of the Spirit both in themselves and on the broader culture. Working on this thesis taught me many pastoral and academic lessons. Firstly, from a pastoral perspective, I learned that films could be helpful in ministry as a way to open conversations and

deepen the Church's teachings on many social subjects. I also learned to appreciate art's role in building the faith community. Secondly, on an academic level, I learned to open myself to engaging closely with a primary text which was the film. I came to appreciate the work of other scholars on this confluence of film, art, and theology, considering how challenging it is to do this work.

I believe that any form of art needs theologians' attention, especially if it comments on the socio-political spheres where people's livelihood is at stake. Theologians must recognize the danger artists go through to publish their works when they face dictators for telling the truth. As theologians, supporting the works of revolutionary artists with reflections is not enough. I think we need to bring a culture that appreciates artists in Africa beyond the existence of a department of the arts in universities. I believe good art engages in politics and social justice but so does good theology. In times of great crises, artists write, paint, sing, dance, and inspire us to be more. I think theologians are invited to the table to continue dialoguing with the many works that artists produce every year. Given the opportunities of social media and mass communications, I believe the world has become increasingly visual. So there is an opportunity to spread the gospel, challenge evils, and encourage those in places like slums that we are in solidarity with them.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Son of Man Film Poster[311]

[311] Son of Man 2006 Poster. Accessed December 19, 2021. https://www.movieposterdb.com/son-of-man-i492490/0b9cf414

Figure 2. Director Mark Dornford-May with the child angels during the shooting.

Figure 3. Mural Scene, Simon Peter paints the raising of Lazarus on a wall.

Figure 4. Mural Scene, Jesus cures a possessed girl.

Figure 5. Mural Scene, Jesus preaching the sermon on the Outpost.

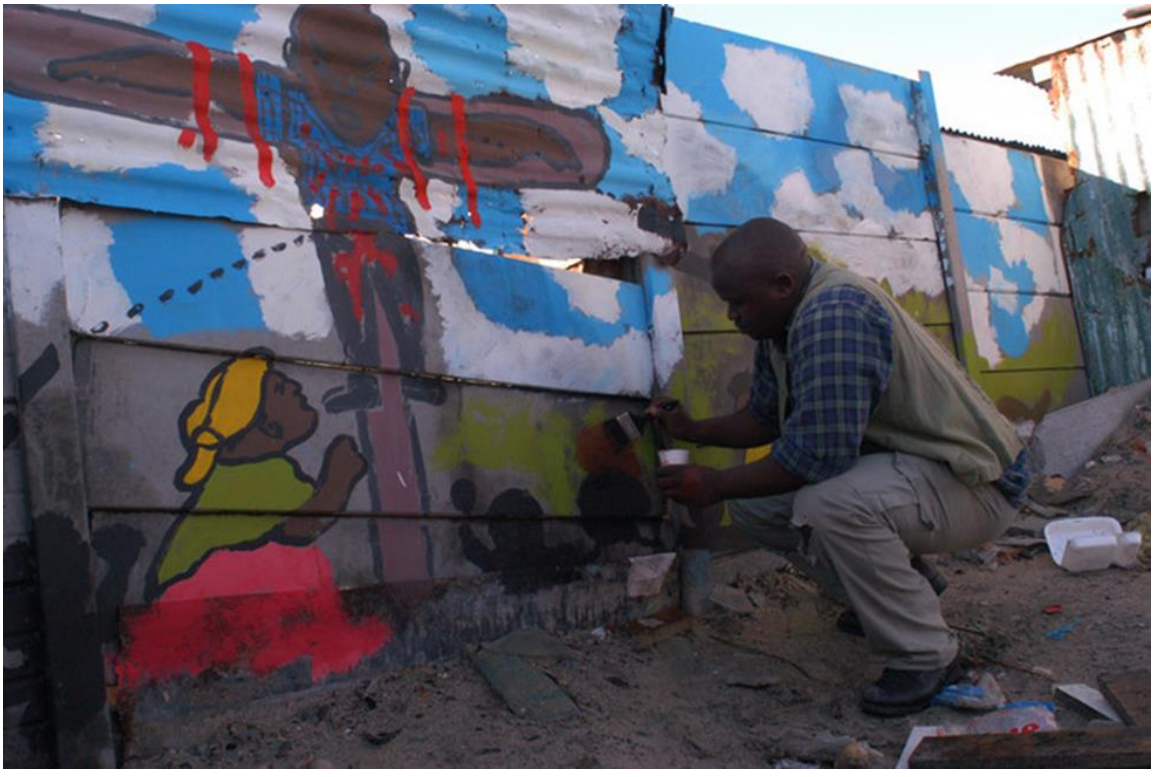

Figure 6. Mural Scene, Peter Paints the crucifixion scene or graffiti cross.

Figure 7 Engelbert Mveng, The Hekima Christus, 1988, Fresco, Hekima College Chapel, Nairobi.

Figure 8. Mveng used the motif of the masks in his artworks as can be seen here in his paintings. Mveng combined techniques, motifs, colors and materials he identified as indigenous and Christian iconographies

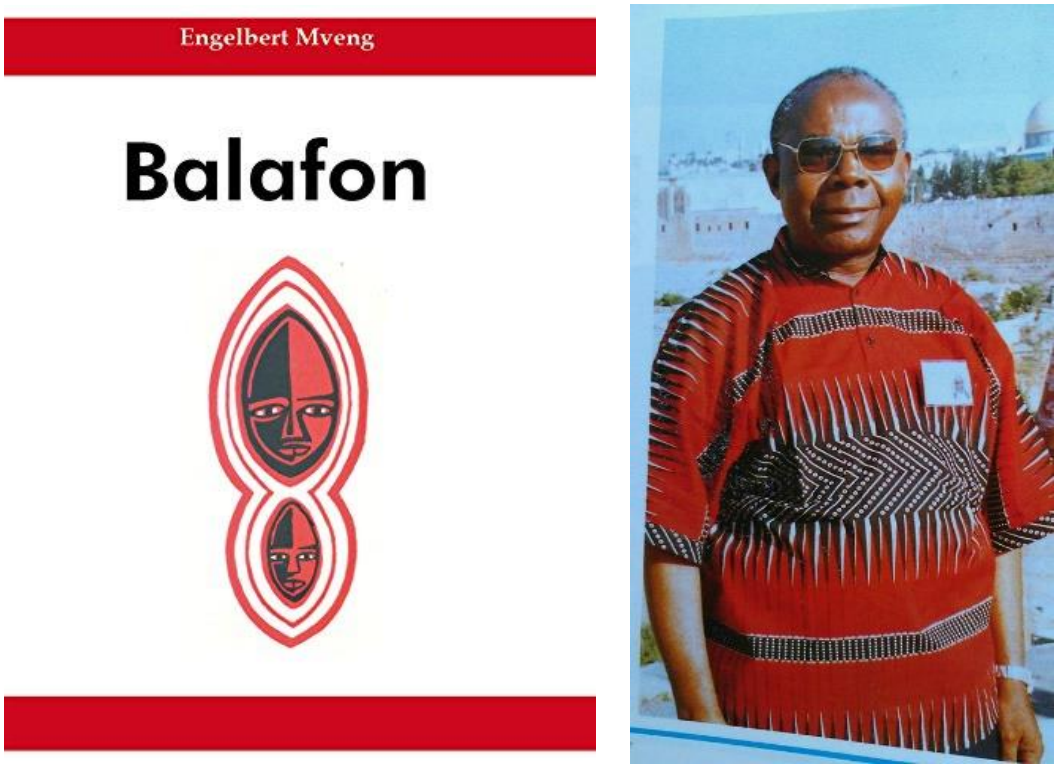

Figure 9. Fr. Engelbert Mveng, With His Traditional African Attire Inspired by The Balofon Design.

Figure 10 Mary with Shepherds

Figure 11 Mary at Slum house

Figure 12 Mary and King Jesus

Figure 13 Mark Doox's Our Lady of Ferguson[312]

[312] Mark Doox. *Our Lady of Ferguson.* Accessed on December 19, 2021. https://markdoox.com/work#/our-lady-of-ferguson-missouri-and-all-killed-by-gun-violence/

Figure 14 Margo Humphrey's Black Madonna[313]

[313] Black Madonna. Accessed on December 14, 2021. http://thatsinkedup.blogspot.com/2012/11/welcome-to-margos-world-prints-of-margo.html

Figure 15 Black Madonna[314]

[314] Glanton Dowdell, ""Black Madonna"," States of Incarceration: Michigan, accessed December 19, 2021, http://projects.leadr.msu.edu/statesofincarcerationmi/items/show/60.

Figure 16 Mary Digs

Figure 17 Bernadette digs near Lourdes. This image is a screenshot from Song of Berndatte (1943).

Figure 18 Bakkie Pieta

Figure 19 Englebert Mveng's Pieta Image

Figure 20 Tylonn Sawyer's Pieta[315]

[315] Pieta. Accessed on December 14, 2021. http://www.tylonn-j-sawyer.com/american-gods/luoxfpt0czc0llb12kigx4ukcnfgfv

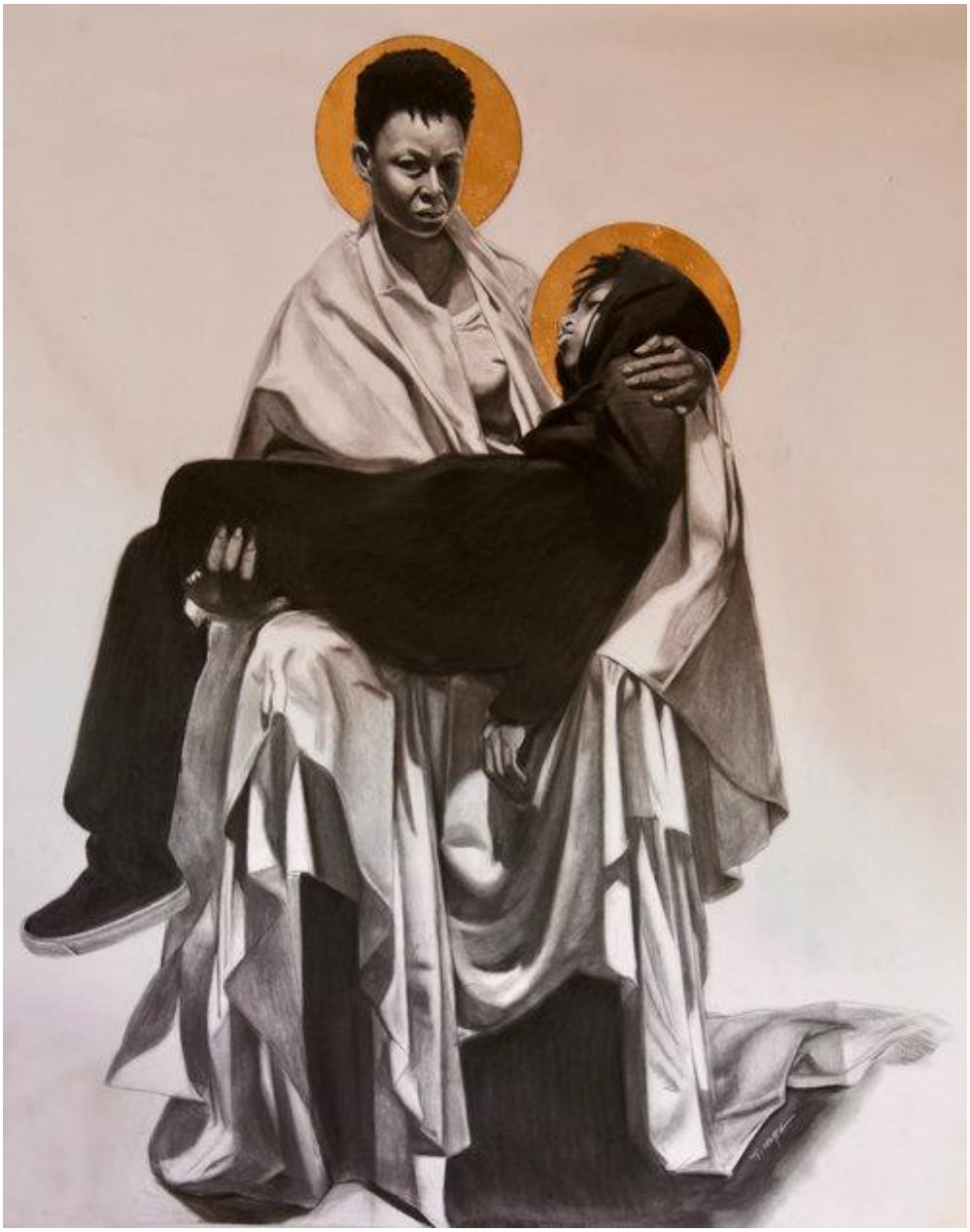

Figure 21 Tylonne Sawyer's Madonna Nera E Bambino (Pietà II)

Figure 22 Mary leads a group of protestors on a hill after the death of Jesus

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