**LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING**

Peter Jackson (d) Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson (w) NZ, 192 Minutes. **CAST INCLUDES:** Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Ian McKellen, Viggo Mortensen, John Rhys-Davies, John Noble, Miranda Otto, Orlando Bloom. **DVD FEATURES INCLUDE:** *A Director’s Vision* and ‘Filmmaker’s Journey’ Featurettes.

The eye of Sauron returns—and we’re not just referring to the rimmed fire that seeks to engulf Middle Earth. Tolkien’s big ‘window into nothing’ has unfortunately come to embody Jackson’s own mind’s eye. Tolkien warned that ‘the canons of narrative art in any medium cannot be wholly different; and the failure of poor films is often precisely in exaggeration, and in the intrusion of unwarranted matter owing to not perceiving where the core of the original lies’. Given the excesses of Two Towers, there was a concern whether Frodo was going to keep the Ring or whether Aragon would toss it in a dwarf to retrieve it. **Return of the King** completes the corruption of the narrative’s guiding theme of the renunciation of power. Jackson, of course, suffuses Tolkien’s books with an entirely different aesthetic sensibility—he transcribes a peculiarly literary experience into a visually spectacular encounter. Jackson thereby failed to perceive the Christian core of Tolkien’s allegory, and such a failing may itself be attributed to what scripture calls the **lust of the eye**. By placing the moral burden upon spectacle, the films appeal to our sense of seeing and inflame human desire through sight. Tolkien’s moral vision is willfully obscured by the focus upon procession and pageantry and corresponding will to power. Particularly unfortunate is that Jackson gave every indication of heeding Tolkien’s warning from the outset. Not unlike Frodo, the brilliant writer/director could not resist the urge to give into the corrupting influence that the **Lord of the Rings** itself fights against. Specifically, Jackson promised ‘at the beginning of the process that we weren’t going to put any of our own politics, our own messages or our own themes into these movies. What we were trying to do was to analyze what was important to Tolkien and to try to honor that. In a way, we were trying to make these films for him, not for ourselves’. The objection to the latter two films is the way Jackson breaks this promise to Tolkien—the medium of film invariably becomes the overriding message, and effectively removes the original text’s soul. Not even Tolkien could foresee, however, the contemporary objection to Jackson’s triumph of cinematic will. **Return of the King** is a terribly bad film precisely because it is such a great movie. Jackson has such command over his chosen medium that audiences cannot help but find themselves bound to its way of seeing.

Witness the way Jackson transversers the Shelob episode from Two Towers in order to build momentum and heighten tension in **Return of the Ring**. The long trek up the mountain is given short shrift, and the complex dynamic between Frodo, Sam and Gollum is psychologically altered to falsifying dramatic effect. Given that the trek is intended as a preparatory for the inevitable Fall, the audience is equally unprepared for the moment of truth. Jackson’s realignment of Tolkien’s landscape extends, of course, to how the conflict between good and evil ‘triumphanty’ ends—his abandonment of the morally duplicitous ‘scouring of the shire’ conceals Tolkien’s view of history as a ‘long defeat’. More troubling is the way Christian virtues like mercy and forgiveness are allowed to fall by the wayside in favor of action and adventure. The view of the grief-stricken Denethor (Noble) is particularly merciless, and lays bare the film’s questionable intent. Instead of being allowed to see that it is Denethor’s knowledge of war that drives him out of his mind, he is presented as a coward that merits a beating with a staff and a kick in the head by a horse. The ‘coward’s’ tragic suicide suddenly becomes a narratively merited death for him, not for ourselves’. The objection to the latter two films is the way Jackson breaks this promise to Tolkien—the medium of film invariably becomes the overriding message, and effectively removes the original text’s soul. Not even Tolkien could foresee, however, the contemporary objection to Jackson’s triumph of cinematic will. **Return of the King** is a terribly bad film precisely because it is such a great movie. Jackson has such command over his chosen medium that audiences cannot help but find themselves bound to its way of seeing.

Nonetheless, we should give credit where it is due and try to forgive the film’s trespass against the text. Against all odds and expectations, Jackson has managed to forge an artifact to rule over them all. One eye opening sequence encapsulates the director’s commanding movement—mountain peaks being lit as the camera moves from peak to peak simultaneously signals **Return of the King**’s crowning achievements.

Sequence after sequence we’re beaten into thankfulness submission and willing servitude, culminating in the rush to (and thrill of) the battlefield. And therein lies the film’s most spectacular failure—its sanctification of war. It casts such a covetous eye on the power and glory of war that Jackson has essentially provided a morally vacuous and politically opportunistic counter to Tolkien’s concerns. Indeed, Jackson has provided the world with what director Samuel Fuller would disparagingly call the ultimate ‘war recruitment film’, and given a ringing endorsement to Mussolini’s outlook on the circle of life. Specifically, where ‘fascism, now and always, believes in holiness and in heroism [since] war alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the people who have courage to meet it’. Following Tolkien’s lead, the DVD release therefore presents viewers with two choices.

**★ ‘Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused.’**

**++++++ ‘Yes, yes ... my precious. We want it, we needs it. Must have the precious.’**

**THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST**

Mel Gibson (d) Mel Gibson and Benedict Fitzgerald (w) US/IT, 2004, 120 Minutes. **CAST INCLUDES:** James Caviezel, Maia Morgenstern, Monica Bellucci, Hristo Jivkov, Hristo Shopov, Rosalinda Celentano, Francesco Capras, Claudia Gerini. **DVD FEATURES INCLUDE:** Bupkis.

Suddenly Mel Gibson’s passion for the Three Stooges...
makes sense. All that eye gouging and gnashing of teeth helped to put him on the road to Damascus. Perhaps what made him see the light was the sight of Jews beating on each other. The broad strokes clearly paved the way for a more general and devout approbation. Passion of the Christ offers a sadomasochistic ritual worthy of any three stooges short—except its emotional and physical violence goes on for over two hours in the name of the most holiest of trinities. The film’s anti-Semitism has the purity of a catechism, giving rise to a misanthropy that applies to every other lowlife within the vicinity (excepting the Roman high command, which has already begun its ascent to heaven). The film’s dubiousness is to be found in the way the script seeks to authenticate its singular view of the four gospels. Texts with distinct emphases and concerns are arranged to speak in the one and same voice—mostly involving Jews yelling in unison or on top of each other. Textual inconsistencies are brought into tonal harmony by way of supplementary material given a halo through sanctified languages. Consequently, the gospels’ primary spokespersons aren’t the communities of interpretation in which they arose or (ideally) continue to function—rather, they’re filtered through the sensibility of one person in particular: nineteenth century ‘mystic’ Anne Catherine Emmerich. This German nun assures us that ‘it was true that Jews strangled Christian children, and used their blood for all sorts of superstitious and diabolical purposes’ which extend far back into the time of Jesus, where ‘every countenance looked diabolical and enraged’.

Passion of the Christ begins by citing the controversial Isaiah 53 prophesy concerning the suffering servant within history. This Old Testament passage concerns the promise of healing through suffering and atonement, and occurs within a text that also predicts exile and calamity for the Jewish people. The passage is controversial because there remains a question whether the ‘consolation’ it promises refers to the coming of Jesus or the state of Israel. It clearly doesn’t occur to Gibson that the Christian interpretation of this text might actually be the source of Jewish calamity, where the charge of deicide invariably leads to genocide. According to the film, it is simply Jesus who embodies the state of suffering. Specifically, ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed’. Unfortunately, this brief citation is the only context we’re given for the life and death of Jesus (Caviezel). Unlike the opening passages of the New Testament, for example, there is no attempt to locate Jesus within the context of Judaism, and his message appears to have been posthumously delivered to more righteous gentiles on foreign soil. So if you’re looking for the historical Jesus or the kerygmatic Christ, you’ve wandered into a desert. The film’s primary kerygma (message) is that humankind’s ‘salvation’ is to be located within his physical ‘suffering’. Eschewing the principle ‘less is more’, the relentless beating is offered as a palliative to whatever ails you.

What the film lacks in social context and spiritual delineation it makes up for in historical revision. Jesus—and his followers—are invariably Roman Catholics, and his relationship to Israel is betrayed by Judas when giving the kiss of death by referring to him as ‘rabbi’. The resulting arrangement between the Jewish council and Roman governor (Shopov) is ‘revealed’ as the first Jewish conspiracy, one where the occupying power is somehow completely subordinate to the people being occupied. What Passion of the Christ does, then, is religiously serve a ritual outlined in Leviticus 16–17—the practice of scapegoating via the psychology of transferring a community’s sins onto separate scapegoats similarly marked for death. Within the context of passion narratives, of course, Jesus willingly delivers himself up as a scapegoat by which humankind’s sins may be transferred and removed. The rest of Judaism, however, unwillingly becomes the site for Rome’s role in Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, and are ordained to carry the burden of their exile into calamity. Indeed, the historically merciless governor is risibly presented as another suffering servant, and the film bends over backwards trying to wash its hands clean of the blood also to be found on Pilate’s hands. Irrespective of historical accuracy or accountability, Gibson’s script doesn’t even try to get its own theology right. If Jesus was presented as God’s sacrifice, how is it that the Jews have the ‘greater sin’ for sacrificing him? Given the film’s own logic, Pilate’s attempt to spare Jesus his ‘fate’ puts the Roman emissary in league with the devil (Celentano). Nor does the film bother to observe one of the few Christian precepts cited. If to love your enemy is better than loving your neighbour, Mel is continually betrayed by his own proximity to Christianity—his own Faith mandates a more sympathetic and faithful view of the very people who proclaimed Jesus the messiah in the first place. Whilst it’s true that the film does not translate the still spoken blood libel—‘His blood be on us and on our children!’—it’s a moot point: its translation of scripture is the blood libel. We therefore leave the final word to good Samaritan and Stooge look-alike Adolf Hitler, who reminds us of the importance of Passion Plays. One ‘of our most important tasks will be to save future generations from a similar political fate and to maintain forever watchful in them a knowledge of the menace of Jewry. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued … for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There, one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewy.’

That’s funny—he doesn’t look Jewish.

SCHINDLER’S LIST

Steven Spielberg (d) Steven Zaillian (w) Thomas Keneally (novel) US, 1993, 197 Minutes, B&W (with some colour).

CAST INCLUDES: Liam Neeson, Ben Kingsley, Ralph Fiennes, Caroline Goodall, Jonathan Sagall, Malgoscha Gebel.

DVD FEATURES INCLUDE: ‘Voices from the List’ and ‘Shoah Foundation Story’ Docs.
Thomas Keneally recently observed in After Schindler that ‘if one looked at the Holocaust using Schindler as the lens, one got an idea of the whole machinery at work on an intimate level’. We may begin to ‘see that Schindler and his Jews reduced the Holocaust to an understandable, almost human scale’ since he had been there … for every stage of the process’. The problem with Keneally’s way of seeing is that it attempts to locate an event beyond the conceivable. One extraordinary person’s experience becomes the Holocaust’s focal point and guiding principle, reducing millions of ‘ordinary’ humans to the margins of their own calamity. Indeed, if one chooses to look at the Holocaust through the broader prism of humanity, we find ourselves presented with something that remains inconceivable. The difficulty in understanding the Holocaust isn’t too difficult to see—it was somehow conceived by human beings not unlike ourselves, who understood themselves to be victims and heroes in a narrative requiring its own ‘solution’. Keneally is, of course, the Australian author of Schindler’s Ark, the ‘factual’ that provides the basis for Spielberg’s subsequent ‘historical document’. Spielberg saw through Keneally’s eyes the possibility of presenting the Holocaust through his own lens—a camera assimilated into the framework and mechanics of Hollywood storytelling. It is important to stress that Keneally and Spielberg originally came from different perspectives. Keneally’s ‘reduction’ was intended as a supplement to the standard big picture, and the author couldn’t help but see Schindler through the lens of his own Christianity. According to Schindler’s Ark, the passion of Christ provides a moral framework for understanding the Holocaust. Specifically, Schindler desired to alleviate Jews’ suffering ‘with some of the absolute passion that characterized the exposed and flaring heart of the Jesus’ on a picture. Spielberg, however, wanted to acknowledge his own cultural lineage by picturing the defining event of contemporary Jewish identity. It is for this reason that he understandably changed Keneally’s original title, since the idea of an Ark implied that the Holocaust was a Christian God’s wrath upon Jews. Spielberg’s Jewishness didn’t prevent him from seeing the story’s moral arc via a human savior and salvation—hence the broad appeal. Nonetheless, when the world’s most popular storyteller adopted Keneally’s vision, he provided his own refracted image. A supplementary account was instantly transformed into the primary vehicle in which to transport and understand an inconceivable event. We are thereby made to see a contradiction in terms as if it were the exception that proves the (moral) rule. If we really want to try to understand the Holocaust, however, we have to ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to cast it in terms of a salvation narrative—especially once those salvaged from the wreck of history emerged with their own guilt. From the point of view of cultural representation, Schindler’s List locates the Final Solution in a parallel universe that we shall call the ‘bizarre world’ Holocaust. In this universe, we encounter a backward looking event populated by imperfect duplicates of familiar characters and situations. The world’s greatest hero is merely a chalk faced Nietzschean Superman and his villainous counterpart a recognizable psychopath. And not unlike Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, it is where the suffering of Jews becomes an occasion for Christian redemption.

We almost immediately enter a parallel universe via the film’s characterization of the Judenrat (Jewish Council appointed by the Nazis to help facilitate their own annihilation). Schindler’s List’s fetishization of the chosen people via a list of selected names—‘the list means life’ we are reassured—places us in a kinder, gentler Holocaust. Instead of acknowledging the role of the Judenrat in forming their own lists—where the list meant death—we are euphemistically told council members drew up ‘lists for work details, food and housing’. This elision prevents us from seeing a morally complex and duplicitous world, one that reduces the Final Solution to an inconceivable human scale. It is the larger than life Schindler (Neeson) who indicates the true measure of a person when finally seeing the light in order to conquer death. An amoral and opportunistic Schindler walks into the eye of a gathering storm, and invariably provides us with the Holocaust’s most salutary lesson: he who saves a life, saves the whole world. Which is, of course, Schindler’s List’s way of avoiding the Holocaust’s most unfathomable question: how many times is the world destroyed with six million deaths? This is not to suggest that Spielberg avoids all of the horror—merely that (as the cinematography suggests) he can only conceive it in black and white terms. The film’s central event—the liquidization of the Krakow ghetto—is genuinely harrowing, and persuasively places Schindler on the path to righteousness as a counter to a horrifying mirror image (Fiennes). With the help of a suffering servant (Kingsley), the ‘war profiteer of slave labor’ answers the higher calling of conscience by placing his own life and money at risk.

Schindler’s List bizarrely presents the Holocaust as a site for redemption and salvation, where savior and saved figure definitively. Despite the film’s length, it makes no attempt to explore the roots of anti-Semitism or the cultural significance of Nazism. The antithetical approach is reductive and overly-emphatic, rendering the film an instance of Holocaust denial. Indeed, there’s a fine line between Schindler’s List and Mel Gibson’s dad claiming that reports of Jewish extermination were greatly exaggerated. Spielberg’s film denies the Holocaust by emphasizing survival over death, and it reduces our understanding to the triumph of good over evil. The film’s denial exhibits itself in contradictory ways, turning the chosen representation on its own head. Schindler’s List urges a link between Holocaust survivors and the second coming of Israel, but it wants to deny the theological implications of its own eschatological event. The term Holocaust itself means ‘burnt offering’, and implies that the Shoah (calamity) was a sacrifice for the greater good—but who wants to admit that? We’re just supposed to thank God for Oskar Schindler, and our eternal gratitude discourages us from asking the most important questions raised by the calamity—where was God during the Holocaust, and should s/he be thought worthy of devotion in its aftermath? Supposing the Holocaust was the fulfillment of the Isaiah 53 prophecies: doesn’t that make Israel’s covenant with God illicit in genocide? Perhaps that’s why Spielberg prevents audiences from acknowledging the millions of dead by transferring our grief onto the death of one
person. Schindler is given our last respects in contemporary Israel—but not before Jews can take pity on the grief stricken Christian for failing to save a couple more Jews. The Holocaust denial is similarly apparent in the way the film personifies the face of evil. The script too conveniently displaces Nazism’s systematic excesses onto a capricious and arbitrary individual. Summary executions and casual inhumanity primarily characterize his reign of terror. The emphasis upon Goeth averts our gaze from the Holocaust as the monstrous face of our own practical reason (the general human capacity for resolving problems and determining norms of conduct). Schindler's mirror image is effectively rendered a scapegoat and made to carry the collective burden of human pathology into death. This distorted image suppresses the fact that human civilization was responsible for crimes against humanity, and removes the responsibility of having to look at more 'civilized' beings like ourselves. Consequently, Schindler's List refuses to face up to the problem it purports to address: the nature of good and evil. We only have to look at the Nazi appropriation of the swastika to represent the nature of the entanglement. Although this bent cross has come to symbolize evil and death, its rotation is an ancient symbol of life’s circular movement. Symbolically speaking, the swastika is the lord of the rings—it signifies the human attempt to square the circle of life into an ordered whole. Derived from the Sanskrit, swastika literally means 'good being', and is a sign that the source of evil remains our own concepts of 'good'.

★½ Moral arc as empty vessel.

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