

Brent Yergensen

## **The Devil as Doppelgänger: Instinctual Faith and the Exhausted Rant of Evil in LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (US 2015)**

2023

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19645>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Yergensen, Brent: The Devil as Doppelgänger: Instinctual Faith and the Exhausted Rant of Evil in LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (US 2015). In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Paradise Lost: Presentation of Nostalgic Longing in Digital Games, Jg. 9 (2023), Nr. 1, S. 157–171. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19645>.

### **Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:**

[https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs\\_jrfm/article/view/334](https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/334)

### **Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

### **Terms of use:**

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - Share Alike 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

# The Devil as Doppelganger

## Instinctual Faith and the Exhausted Rant of Evil in LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (US 2015)

### Abstract

LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (Rodrigo García, US 2015) portrays the devil as Jesus's doppelganger, demonstrating the rivalry between good and evil as the two compete over the efficacy of Jesus's faith. With Jesus assessing himself as he responds to the devil, the film offers a self-reflexive evaluation of faith as it is challenged by skepticism. By analyzing the film using the idea of an evolutionary faith instinct, the article presents Jesus's trust in God as empowerment that allows him to endure elements of nature and find signs of divinity. The devil's eventual exhausted impatience and his loss of his wager with Jesus bolster the applicability of a faith instinct. Ultimately, the film is an opportunity for this rendition of Jesus to be articulated in terms of evolutionary discourse.

### Keywords

LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT, Devil, Jesus, Skepticism, Instinctual Faith, Doppelganger

### Biography

Brent Yergensen, who received his doctorate from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is Department Chair and Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Texas at Tyler. His research focuses primarily on the rhetoric of film and popular culture and has been published in the *Journal of Visual Political Communication*, *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, *Studies in Popular Culture*, *Explorations in Media Ecology*, *Journal of Religion & Society*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and other scholarly journals and book anthologies.

## Introduction

Interpreting Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, scholar Leon C. Meggison<sup>1</sup> describes evolution as the survival not necessarily of the strongest but of "the one most responsive to change", with "change" understood as endur-

1 Meggison 1963, 4.

ance through the physical environment. Today, change in the physical environment can be observed in light of rapid revolutions in both technology and belief systems,<sup>2</sup> which run in parallel with the pitting of religion and evolutionary theory against each other.<sup>3</sup> Yet, religious belief systems do adjust to time and social needs, because, writes Andrea Fiala, “religion is an adaptable social phenomenon”, and its “evolution will continue”.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural notions of change are illustrated in a religious cinema depiction in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* (Rodrigo García, US 2015), in which Jesus outlasts the devil, both in terms of weathering the discomfort of nature’s elements and in winning their wager. The story focuses on a display of selfless service by Jesus while the devil, as his doppelganger, stalks, challenges, and discourages him. A parallel is evident between Jesus’s initially uncertain relationship with God, on one hand, and the relational dynamics of the family he helps, on the other, both relationships that “change”<sup>5</sup> for the better due to Jesus’s faith. The film is a timely expression of the combative relationship between faith and scientific reason. Jesus’s faith and diligence demonstrate religious piety, while the devil’s questioning and boredom with Jesus’s laborious worship demonstrate skepticism about religious belief, in line with contemporary atheist rhetoric<sup>6</sup> amid a shrinking religious population.<sup>7</sup>

## Faith Instinct as Public Issue and Cinematic Display

In the years preceding the release of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, the idea of a *Faith Instinct*,<sup>8</sup> also described as a *Belief Instinct*,<sup>9</sup> entered into public debate on evolutionary theory. In seeking to illustrate the role of belief in divinity as part of the evolutionary process, the concept proposes that committed faith in God is tied to a survival instinct, evinced through “moral rules”<sup>10</sup>

2 Danaher/Saetra 2022.

3 Ruse 2016.

4 Fiala 2022, paragraph 1.

5 Meggison 1963.

6 Hitchens 2019; Harris 2004.

7 Pew Research Center, 2015.

8 Wade 2009.

9 Bering 2011.

10 Bering 2011.

that implant unyielding religious devotion in the individual.<sup>11</sup> Human life in the natural world generates pain, but “our minds gravitate toward God in the wake of misfortune”,<sup>12</sup> so at a time of increased belief that purpose and action are driven by greater forces, such as a deity.

Faith instinct theory comes from observing that people naturally fight for their own explanation of life’s origins and purposes, and in doing so they find a reason to fight and endure difficulty for purposes that, to them, are transcendent truths, such as theological beliefs. The outcome is manifest in an internal resolve that is an evolved and “patently organic... function of the brain.”<sup>13</sup> An example is Charles Peirce’s “humble argument” that “one’s instinctive faith in God” allows one to withstand arguments that God does not exist.<sup>14</sup> Borrowing from Thomas Aquinas’s ideas on “externalism”,<sup>15</sup> Gregory Stacey describes this utilitarian power of faith as a tool for navigating the natural world. In this study, I explore the faith instinct displayed in García’s film, which depicts Jesus in a mundane setting where he battles nature’s harsh elements. The film celebrates faith as overcoming both the natural elements and the devil’s ploys, proposing a manifestation of religious faith for an increasingly science-based public context.<sup>16</sup> The plot demonstrates Jesus as superior to his adversary because of the interlinking of his faith with the elements that he battles, which brings him victory.

In the film the natural world is the setting for Jesus’s growth. First, it threatens him, but then he receives God’s messages through it, and his faith instinct enables him to utilize the physical world to overcome its threat. In this study, I argue that the devil’s concession speech to Jesus illustrates the faith instinct outlasting doubt, with religious faith celebrated for its capacity to control elements of nature. I explore this idea through the dialogue between Jesus and the devil, with specific attention to the devil’s words to Jesus, illustrating how the two characters, as look-a-likes, portray the endurance of Jesus’s faith and the lazy, impatient, self-satisfying nature of the devil. Paralleling contemporary debates between faith and reason, symbolically the film shows Jesus at the service of a struggling family.

11 Wade 2009, 1.

12 Bering 2011, 6.

13 Bering 2011, 8.

14 Trammel 1972, 19.

15 Stacey 2021, 205.

16 Funk/Tyson/Kennedy/Johnson 2020.

Despite the film's sparse demonstration of Jesus as divine, his faith is evident in his emotional and physical endurance against exigencies that the devil exploits to implant doubt into his mind. Jesus's success comes at the cost of early confusion and tragedy, as his faith instinct is tested by the cruelty of the natural world, which is exacerbated by the devil's taunts and temptations as Jesus endures the bodily discomfort of fasting. During the climax, when the devil realizes that he has lost the contest, his angry expressions are juxtaposed with the composure of Jesus. Although the devil delivers two speeches about qualities that he declares he possesses, he is later shown to lack these qualities, creating a marked comparison with Jesus's patient waiting for signs of divinity. These two oration scenes are a pivot and climax respectively for the duality of the twin characters, and they lead to Jesus's ultimate victory.

## The Doppelganger as Cinematic Motif

The doppelganger is found as a theme from ancient Egypt to the Victorian era and has been given new prominence in recent years, especially as a cinematic motif.<sup>17</sup> Present in the work of psychiatrist Otto Rank,<sup>18</sup> the doppelganger was also taken up as a psychological theme by Sigmund Freud.<sup>19</sup> Jordan Peele's celebrated *Us* (<sup>US 2019</sup>) contains the contemporary doppelganger mythos, with the evil version of a self capturing "the specter of a human being",<sup>20</sup> suggesting the suppressed evil potential of the person whom the doppelganger mirrors.

Doppelgangers in film and literature challenge the protagonists, for example in works by Plautus and Shakespeare.<sup>21</sup> The idea of good and evil dualities is captured in popular culture narratives such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*<sup>22</sup> and *The Incredible Hulk*,<sup>23</sup> both of which portray dual personalities expressed in a singular body. Hypothesizing the enactment of the evil version, cinema has doppelgangers seeking to replace or influence

17 Little 2017.

18 Rank 2014.

19 Freud 1919.

20 Little 2017.

21 Bannon 1985.

22 Stevenson 1886.

23 Lee/Kirby 1962.

their more benevolent twins. Contemporary depictions pick up on a cinematic change over time, as doubles moved from being combined parts of a singular person, to become split and dueling embodiments.<sup>24</sup>

In his review of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, William Blizek describes the evil versions of ourselves as being “not something outside of ourselves, but rather a part of ourselves that we must overcome”.<sup>25</sup> A more recent cinematic depiction of dueling oneself is found in *THE PRESTIGE* (Christopher Nolan, US 2006), which combines the doppelganger theme with mad science. Similar stories of evil versions of selves include *THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS* (Peter Jackson, US 2002), *BLACK SWAN* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2010), *OCULUS* (Michael Flanagan, US 2013), and *THE UNBORN* (David S. Goyer, US 2009), and personalities in conflict are found in *FIGHT CLUB* (David Fincher, US 1999) and *SPLIT* (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2016). Such dueling characters allow for polarized depictions of belief systems, with the “cinematic doppelganger”<sup>26</sup> a setting for competing values and beliefs.

The lead actor in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, Ewan McGregor, has played doppelganger-like characters on multiple occasions, for example in *THE ISLAND* (Michael Bay, US 2007), in which he plays both a human and a clone, and as twin brothers with opposite personalities in *FARGO* (US 2017). McGregor’s performance as *STAR WARS* (George Lucas, US 2002) character Obi Wan Kenobi was playfully interpreted as an artistic depiction of Jesus, with memes and fan art on T-shirts, prayer candles, and paintings humorously depicting McGregor being worshipped as Jesus.<sup>27</sup> By 2015, the year in which *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* was released, McGregor had already played a role in which he was seen, humorously, as the face of Jesus and had also appeared as dual-faced doppelgangers. McGregor’s performance history draws attention to the cinematic use of the doppelganger theme, which here is used in telling the story of the biblical confrontation between Jesus and the devil during his fast in the desert. This study considers how the film explores this “good and evil coexisting in the individual”<sup>28</sup> and how the faith instinct jettisons evil.

24 Mayer 2021; Chung 2015; Cameron 2016.

25 Blizek 2015, 2.

26 Eason 2019.

27 Jesus Obi Wan 2022.

28 Lawton 1981, 121.

## Rhetorical Interlude and Rhetorical Culmination as a Cinematic Structure

The study of interludes in cinema can capture rhetorical moments within the structure of a film's themes, character arcs, and historical and cultural contexts.<sup>29</sup> In these pivotal moments, characters hear and are influenced by addresses that then drive the final scenes.<sup>30</sup> Rhetorical moments in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* capture the duel between faith and doubt that is associated here with an evolutionary process of navigating through the elements. They also revisit, in a rhetorical culmination, the wager that has been placed, with the faith instinct victorious over any appeal to doubt. Both orations are given by the devil and are addressed to Jesus, but the cumulative effect of the devil's presence in the film is to expose how the faith instinct enables the discomforts of nature to be endured.

### A Struggling Jesus

The film begins with a focus on Jesus's body as it is subject to discomforts created by nature, illustrated as he grunts from the soreness of sleeping on the hard ground and rocks back and forth in the cold wind as he prays. His early scenes of loneliness set the stage for his battles and struggles with the devil, as he asks God for strength during his isolated fast. That need is echoed by his subsequent initial inability to resolve the problems faced by the family he spends most of the film attempting to help. A key demonstration of Jesus's endurance is provided by his resilience in maintaining his faith despite his unanswered prayers, which in turn empower the devil early on to challenge and taunt Jesus. Within the first few minutes of the film, Jesus prays out loud twice, pleading with God to speak to him: "Father, speak to me", and "Where are you?" (00:05:32–00:05:37), demonstrating his initial confusion but also his hope that his prayers will be answered. The very lack of dialogue early in the film and also Jesus's repeated running away from the devil set up the value of dialogue for the film once Jesus begins conversing with and battling the devil.

29 Yergensen 2007.

30 Yergensen/Church 2022.

Jesus's confidence in his mission grows as the film progresses through his fasting and increasing recognition of God's responsiveness. Up until his dream where he sees himself hovering above a cliff, Jesus struggles with and is at the will of the elements, culminating in his inability to stop the family's father from falling off a cliff. He prays, "Am I expected to just walk away? As if I'd never met these people? As if they meant nothing to me?" (01:19:17–01:19:25). Jesus's early uncertainty and his passivity at the end of the film illustrate his growing methodical faith instinct, an evolutionary advantage over his doppelganger.

## The Devil as a Worthy Opponent

While manifesting himself as the face of Jesus throughout most of the film, the devil also taunts, tempts, and discourages Jesus with trickery, discouraging words, sexual temptations, and nightmares, as well as appearing to have a hideous tail – common in depictions of the devil<sup>31</sup> – which frightens Jesus. The devil chooses to present himself as the mirror of Jesus. The two can be distinguished only by the comparison between Jesus's humility and kindness and the devil's bravado. The devil takes on Jesus's face and the two characters share the same bodily form, one of them representing a faith instinct while the other exhibits assertive doubt. A battle for the survival of the fittest is launched, amid Jesus's preparatory fasting before his entrance into Jerusalem.

The devil mocks and taunts Jesus's efforts. Predicting that Jesus will fail to help the family, the devil utilizes different voices and physical manifestations to confuse and frustrate him. In a drawn-out scene of temptation immediately following Jesus's dream of being chased by wolves, the devil appears to him as the family's mother, in a near naked display of sexual temptation. Although Jesus resists the devil's ploy to bring him to sin, the weight of sexual temptation leaves him troubled by the range of options from which the devil can draw in his efforts to thwart Jesus's resolve and faith. The devil's commitment to doubt is juxtaposed with Jesus's efforts to endure, adding weight to Jesus's burden.

31 Howell 2007.

## The Rhetorical Interlude

After the devil has been disappointed by seeing a comet shoot across the sky, the first sign of God communicating with Jesus, Jesus confronts the devil, at night and as they sit across from each other with a fire blazing between them. The twins stare at each other as the devil recites his history with and hate for God. He uses his knowledge of God against Jesus and suggests that Jesus will be unable to save humanity. The devil's monologue illustrates his impatience with God's arduous efforts to help humanity: "The mundaneness of your father's plan is bewildering to me. The same lives lived over and over and over again. Is there a plan?" (00:44:50–00:45:02). The devil's expression of doubt turns into an insistence on quick comfort: "It all has to turn into something ... And what? That is my weakness. Curiosity" (00:45:04–00:45:13).

While attempting to illustrate the qualities of Jesus's stubborn but immovable faith as he waits for God's signs, the devil pronounces his own resolve: "I'll stay as long as it takes, forever, to witness the end", a daring declaration that suggests readiness for a fight with Jesus to the end (00:44:17–00:44:21). The devil asks, "These things he expects of you, do you think anyone will care? Men of a thousand years from now?", foreshadowing a twist at the end of the film related to contemporary sentiments toward religious faith (00:45:59–00:46:07).

To install doubt in Jesus, the devil must undo the faith instinct embedded in Jesus's fasting and searching for signs. In the opening scenes, as he battles the brutality of the elements, Jesus feels worthless and fearful. The devil seeks to define God as being without signs and miracles, and therefore as no more promising than the brutal world that Jesus has been battling. With this speech detailing his perception of God, the devil prepares Jesus for his ultimate lie: that he will be there for Jesus in the end.

As the devil outlines the tragic story of the family that Jesus is helping, the climax of the interlude is the devil's declaration that Jesus is the intervener in tragedy, or the person who can "take a hand" (00:49:18–00:49:19), redirecting trajectories in God's plan, which will fail without him. The devil is an inquisitor who seeks to challenge and resist, but ultimately succumbs to, the authority of Jesus's faith, an instinct amid the pain of mortality and its difficult physical conditions. Jesus asks about the conditions for victory over his twin, agreeing to battle the devil.

This interlude sets the stage for the rest of the film – Jesus battles his doppelganger over the fate of the family just as he also battles the natural world’s bodily pain and temptations while fasting. His resilience and faith instinct enable him to emerge from both struggles, and satisfied in his union with God, he decides to leave the desert and begin his ministry in Jerusalem.

## Material Evidence of Pleading Answered

As the film focuses on the brutality of the natural world, Jesus labors daily to build a house for the family. The natural world, immediately established in the film as the setting for his challenges, begins to present itself to Jesus in manifestations of his union with God, which causes the devil to squirm and adopt the fetal position. The devil’s dissatisfaction becomes Jesus’s transcendence. The devil’s losses are evidence of God’s presence, which bolsters Jesus’s faith and illustrates, in Darwinian terms, the probability of survival through a faith instinct.

In his final battle with the elements, specifically with gravity, Jesus finds his faith strengthened by the father’s abrupt worship of him after the father’s deadly fall. The dying father’s countenance is enraptured as he recognizes Jesus’s divinity, his adoration of Jesus evident in his tearful eyes and his mouth open in awe. He touches Jesus’s face while staring into his eyes. After looking up to the sky in wonderment, as if spoken to from heaven, the father looks directly at Jesus through tears as he dies – Jesus has become the magnetizing hero figure of the biblical account. The father had not previously known who Jesus was and had referred to him with the generic term of “holy man” (00:15:07–00:15:08), but now his responses solidify Jesus’s growing awareness of his own divinity.

Stunned by the father’s dying adoration, Jesus finds his dreams supporting his faith. Where earlier he had dreamt of drowning and being chased by wolves, accompanied by scenes of the devil’s attempts to confuse and tempt him, a dream in which he hovers above the ground on the cliff ledge puts Jesus into a contemplative mindset when he awakens. At the beginning of the film he had rocked painfully, but now he sits calmly, comforted by signs of his power over the elements against which he has been struggling. The shift in his dreams shows a harmony with the elements and serves as a beginning of his victory over and command of the devil; he is now ready to

face the daunting task of entering a “dirty and corrupt” city that will crucify him (00:13:35–00:13:36).

With Jesus’s confidence strengthened by further faith-confirming signs, in the final moments of his suffering on the cross a hummingbird approaches Jesus and hovers within inches of his face, joyously fluttering up and down and bringing a tear-filled stare from Jesus. This sign comforts Jesus, who intentionally drops his head and dies – God has been manifest again through the natural world and Jesus is allowed to die in peace. The scenes that bring confidence to Jesus involve signs from God, specifically the dying father’s changed behavior and adoration, the comet, his dream of having transcended the elements, and a comforting hummingbird in his final moments. The evolutionary battle that sets faith instinct against the lack thereof plays out among the elements of the natural world – the setting in which Darwin described the evolutionary process transpiring. The survival of the fittest has come to be, as Jesus’s newfound authority over the natural world has upheld his faith, bringing him success over his enemy.

## An Evolving Jesus

God’s responses to Jesus emerge over time through signs, and so too does Jesus’s confidence in his ability to minister in Jerusalem emerge over time. As observable signs from God increase, Jesus’s approach to the family changes, as does also his approach to handling the devil. Where initially he had been intimidated and shocked by the devil, which had caused him to flee from or ignore his doppelganger, at the end of the story Jesus commands the devil. Where the devil was initially confident and without worry, he becomes weakened, exhausted, and uncertain. The devil’s failures are the opposite of the faith instinct and give Jesus leverage against his evil doppelganger, with the wager of the interlude proving to support Jesus’s belief about God and the devil’s final speech conceding the devil has been outdone by Jesus.

With his confidence, resolution, and freedom from the devil serving as signs of his faith, Jesus mends the relationships within the family, telling the son that he is not selfish for wanting to leave the desert, and the boy laughs as he exclaims, “I’m not a bad son!” (00:36:30–00:36:31). Jesus comforts the family on multiple occasions by embracing and instructing them. He kisses them in a fatherly way, tenderly lays his hands on them in blessing, and abandons his previously timid persona as he holds the dying mother in an

extended scene, kissing her in a sign of compassion, as he had done previously in the father's final moments. In his new role as comforter, Jesus lifts the family's spirits, for he smiles at the son's riddles, engages in long conversations about life with the father, and laughs with the son during moments of levity. For this new Jesus, happiness has replaced fear.

In an illustration of the faith instinct, at no point in the film does Jesus hear God's voice or have a physical visit from God that gives him explicit direction or comfort, neither does he receive a heavenly vision. His confidence that he can master the elements and also his adversary is evident in symbolic moments: the comet in the sky, the evolution of his dreams from nightmares in which he was threatened by the elements to dreams in which he is empowered to use them, the dying father recognizing and worshipping Jesus, and the arrival of a closure-giving hummingbird while on the cross. Rather than finding explicit instructions, resolve, or answers in the desert, Jesus finds simply a desperate family. He progressively assists each of them, with the crowning moment his freeing the son from his parents' poverty in the barren desert after he has bestowed a blessing upon the boy. Jesus's own answers come from finding opportunities to minister and to use the natural elements to his own advantage, a survival-of-the-fittest instinct that empowers him to fix the family's troubles.

The film suggests that faith can withstand the badgering of skepticism if accompanied by patience, allowing skepticism to exhaust itself. Faith operates beyond reason. For Jesus, faith is measured in physical effect and demonstrated in signs. Jesus's finding his relationship with God aligns with the father's finding his relationship with his son, for as they learn to understand each other they move from testing each other to a devotion to each other. The resultant Jesus of *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* is assertive when facing evil. Both the rhetorical interlude and the rhetorical cumulation focus on endurance through the bodily experience of mortal appetites and fatigue. The explicit articulation of faith as illustrated by endurance suggests the value of religious faith as a drive to survive.

## The Rhetorical Culmination

At the end of the film, the devil's previously sly and smooth style of speaking is set aside as Jesus begins performing divine works, causing the devil to scream, "Who the hell do you think you are?" (01:27:52–01:27:54) The evil

doppelganger's true nature is capable of a more assertive and violent approach<sup>32</sup> that contradicts the devil's earlier calm and self-assured demeanor. The devil's desperation is fully on display when he begins arguing with Jesus about the fate of the mother, stating, "No! She's mine!" (01:26:30–01:26:31), thus insisting that Jesus not heal her from her painful sickness. Ignoring the devil, Jesus enters the tent of the mother and places his hands on her abdomen with the intention of healing her.

The devil attempts to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, but exhausted he tells Jesus he is unable to continue, putting an end to his attempt to place obstacles in Jesus's path. Victorious over his doppelganger, Jesus smiles on recognizing his enemy's limited staying power. In a final push for legitimacy, the devil aggressively offers Jesus one last empty promise, "I'll come to you in the end, and if you give me a sign. I'll let you down, and you can stay" (1:29:17–1:29:23), which proves in a subsequent scene to be a lie. The final look on the devil's face is one of uncertainty, while moments later, Jesus looks upon Jerusalem with determination. Empowered by his victory and proven faith, Jesus pushes forward, while the devil is shown in the end to be unsure whether to smile or frown, as his final uncomfortable chuckle and fallen face display his abandonment by Jesus. The survival of Jesus's trust in divinity captures the evolutionary potential of belief – he has looked for signs even as he has been prodded with skepticism; in a story that has played out in the natural world, faith has triumphed over disbelief, and signs have been sought and found despite that skeptical prodding.

Faith is shown to outlast skepticism. Contemporary skepticism does not have the endurance of faith's trust in what cannot be seen, as is ultimately demonstrated by the exhaustion of the weakened counterpart, who declares, "My feet hurt" (01:28:55–01:28:56). Jesus's journey to victory and readiness for ministry are displayed by his triumph over evil through greater patience and physical endurance. Following the interlude, as he sees signs of God accumulate, Jesus no longer fears or is confused by the devil, and he engages with his doppelganger at his own discretion. His transcendence over appetites, nature's pain, and the appeal to doubt in effect allow him to move beyond the representation of the evil doppelganger as an "extension"<sup>33</sup> of himself. Faith willingly leaves skepticism behind, driven by the assumption that signs will eventually emerge.

32 Burucúa/Kwiatkowski 2014.

33 Galeti 2011, 129.

## Implications

Halfway through the film the son gives Jesus a riddle, “How far can a man walk into the desert?” (00:56:40–00:56:43). Jesus finds comfort in the answer, knowing that his time in the desert is preparation for his future ministry in Jerusalem: “Only halfway. After that, he’s walking out” (00:56:46–00:56:48). “Halfway” through his painful tests in the desert, Jesus grows in strength after he meets, serves, ministers to, and provides closure for each member of the family.

Darwin describes the victorious species as rewarded with the opportunity to multiply, while losing means “not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but few or no offspring”.<sup>34</sup> In both the biblical story and his winning the hearts of the family in *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT*, Jesus outlasts the devil and finds followers both in the family he serves in the film and in his disciples, as told in the biblical account (Matthew 4:20, KJV).<sup>35</sup> Although two of the family members die, the commitment to and faith in Jesus of all three, demonstrated at the end of the film, encapsulate Jesus’s victory. In illustrating a faith instinct, *LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT* frames religious faith as the capacity for bodily endurance and patient commitment.

After leaving the desert, Jesus is shown suffering on the cross, with the scene then transitioning to shots of his pierced side and the nail hole in his right hand. These brief images are then replaced by images of the emotional response of grief, as Jesus’s disciples sit somberly outside his tomb at dusk, heads lowered. This scene of discouragement recaptures the first evening of the film, when Jesus also sat at dusk, desperately praying to God to speak to him. In an unexpected turn, the “unusual”<sup>36</sup> final shot of the film is of contemporary tourists taking pictures of themselves on a cliff that overlooks the desert where Jesus’s faith instinct was confirmed, for it is the site of the father’s fall and subsequent recognition of Jesus’s divinity and where Jesus saw his transcending the elements as a sign from God. Where today humanity turns to technological comforts, in the ancient story, as told in Rodrigo García’s film, Jesus fasted.

With their 21st century tools such as cameras, contemporary tourists might struggle to value the story of Jesus fighting against the desert’s el-

34 Darwin 1859, 44.

35 Matthew 4:20, *King James Bible Online*, <https://tinyurl.com/39m738yx> [accessed 28 October 2022].

36 Blizek 2015, 4.

ements, echoing the devil's question during the interlude, "Do you think anyone will care? Men of a thousand years from now?" (00:45:59–00:46:07). The film's abrupt display of contemporary technological comforts coincides with the contemporary lessening of religiosity, which aligns in turn with the doppelganger's impatient need for bodily comfort. As the film celebrates Jesus's outlasting the devil in the desert, in key scenes the rhetoric-based separation of the faith instinct from its criticism is noteworthy.

## Bibliography

- Bannon, Barbara, 1985, Double, Double, Toil and Trouble, *Literature Film Quarterly* 13, 1, 56–66.
- Bering, Jesse, 2011, *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, New York: W. W. Norton.
- Blizek, William L., 2015, Last Days in the Desert, *Journal of Religion & Film* 19, 1, 1–4.
- Burucúa, Jose E. / Kwiatkowski, Nicolás, 2014, The Absent Double, *New Left Review* 87, 1, 97–113.
- Cameron, E. D., 2016, The Film Noir Doppelganger: Alienation, Separation, Anxiety, *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 33, 1, 33–47.
- Chung, Hye Jean, 2015, The Reanimation of the Digital (Un)dead, or How to Regenerate Bodies in Digital Cinema, *Visual Studies* 30, 1, 54–67.
- Danaher, John / Saetra, Henrik Skaug, 2022, Technology and Moral Change: The Transformation of Truth and Trust, *Ethics and Information Technology* 24, 35, <https://tinyurl.com/ye228ade> [accessed 28 October 2022].
- Darwin, Charles, 1859, *On the Origin of Species*, <https://tinyurl.com/yajnrw6d> [accessed 19 May 2022].
- Eason, Edward, 2019, "A Suspended State": The Body of an American as Cinematic Doppelganger, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 52, 1, 121–137.
- Fiala, Andrea, 2022, The Evolution of Religion and the Rise of the Nones, *Only Sky*, 23 September 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/ys97d7xd> [accessed 28 October 2022].
- Freud, Sigmund, 1919, *The Uncanny*, London: Hogarth Press.
- Funk, Cary / Tyson, Alec / Kennedy, Brian / Johnson, Courtney, 2020, Science and Scientists Held in High Esteem Across Global Publics, *Pew Research Center*, 29 September 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/mracd5k8> [accessed 27 October 2022].
- Galati, Gabriela, 2011, Presence, Telepresence, Images and the Self. *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 9, 2, 129–134.
- Harris, Sam, 2004, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, New York: W. W. Norton.
- Hitchens, Christopher, 2019, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation that Sparked the Atheist Movement*, New York: Random House.
- Howell, David B., 2007, Screening the Temptation: Interpretation and Indeterminacy in Cinematic Transformations of the Gospel Story, *Journal of Religion & Film* 11, 2, 1–14.
- Jesus Obi Wan, 2022, *Etsy*, <https://tinyurl.com/4d6kf7um> [accessed 22 April 2022].
- Lawton, Anna M., 1981, The Double... A Dostoevskian Theme in Polanski, *Literature Film Quarterly* 9, 2, 121–130.

- Lee, Stan / Kirby, Jack, 1962, *The Incredible Hulk*, Marvel Comics.
- Little, Tom, 2017, Tracing the Development of the Doppelganger, *Atlas Obscura*, 6 November 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/53rj6d4v> [accessed 16 November 2020].
- Mayer, Ruth, 2021, Unique Doubles: Ornamental Sisters and Dual Roles in the Transitional Era Cinema, *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, 5, 22–47.
- Meggison, Leon C., 1963, Lessons from Europe for American Business, *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 44, 3–13.
- Pew Research Center, 2015, U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious, 3 November 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/bdzh6sym> [accessed 22 April 2022].
- Rank, Otto, 1914, The Double, *Imago* 3, 2, 97–164.
- Ruse, Michael, 2016, *Evolution and Religion: A Dialogue*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stacey, Gregory R. P., 2021, Aquinas, Instinct and the “Internalist” Justification of Faith, *New Blackfriars* 102, 1098, 205–224.
- Stevenson, Robert L., 1886, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Trammel, Richard, 1972, Religion, Instinct, and Reason in the Thought of Charles S. Peirce, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 8, 1, 3–23.
- Wade, Nicholas, 2009, *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Matters*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Yergensen, Brent, 2007, The Rhetorical Interlude: Examining Key Film Speeches in Cultural/Historical Context, *Journal of the Communication, Speech & Theatre Association of North Dakota* 20, 1, 21–29.
- Yergensen, Brent / Church, Scott H., 2022, The Rhetorical Interlude as Foreshadow and Strategy: *The ‘Burbs* and Defeating Horror Villains at the End of the Cold War, *Popular Culture Studies Journal* 10, 1, 278–294.

## Filmography

- BLACK SWAN (Darren Aronofsky, US 2010).
- FARGO, Season 3 (Created by: Noah Hawley, FX, US 2017).
- FIGHT CLUB (David Fincher, US 1999).
- LAST DAYS IN THE DESERT (Rodrigo García, US 2015).
- OCULUS (Michael Flanagan, US 2013).
- SPLIT (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2016).
- STAR WARS (George Lucas, US 2002).
- THE ISLAND (Michael Bay, US 2005).
- THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS (Peter Jackson, US 2002).
- THE PRESTIGE (Christopher Nolan, US 2006).
- THE UNBORN (David S. Goyer, US 2009).
- Us (Jordan Peele, US 2019).