

“Fear Not”: ‘Our Man’ Robert Redford in J. C. Chandor’s “All Is Lost”

THE ART OF FILM is inherently interdisciplinary. Film draws upon every artistic discipline—literature for its narrative and characterization, theatre for its acting, painting for its cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, and music for its score. To write about film and to truly appreciate film, one must have a basic familiarity with all of the artistic disciplines. Similarly, I have found that a religious sensibility and a basic understanding of theology are also necessary in writing about and appreciating film, for film consistently uses theological motifs—sometimes overtly, and sometimes in veiled forms—and often utilizes religious themes in its storytelling.

And just as Jewish Studies is an inherently interdisciplinary field—it utilizes methodologies from all of the humanities disciplines, in addition to an array of disciplines from other fields—a proper understanding of and appreciation for the arts is highly beneficial in the attempt to fully understand Judaism.

In the spirit of this interdisciplinary dialogue between Judaism and the arts, I present the following essay on J. C. Chandor’s *All Is Lost* (2013) as a brief demonstration of the ways in which Judaism can engage with film, and as a simple illustration of the ways in which Jewish themes can adumbrate a film’s underlying motifs.

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All Is Lost (2013)

“Fear not:” considering that this imperative is repeated an astounding seventy-five times in the Hebrew Bible, it is arguably the most significant biblical message.¹ The Hasidic sage Rabbi Nahman of Breslov famously explicated this biblical principle with his adage “the entire world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid at all.” Our Man, the unnamed character played by Robert Redford in J. C. Chandor’s remarkable, virtually wordless *All Is Lost*, is a filmic epitome of this maxim. “Our Man”—a name evocative of the primordial biblical “Adam” (lit., “Man,” in Hebrew) of the Bible²—is on a small sailboat, dozing in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, when a stray cargo container of sneakers collides with his boat. Quickly realizing that the container has punctured his sailboat, Our Man devises a makeshift sealant for the hole. All alone on a wrecked sailboat in the middle of the Indian Ocean, Our Man improvises a host of other ersatz solutions and utilizes every ounce of his resourcefulness in his ensuing struggle to survive.

The qualities that are uncanny about Our Man are many, but perhaps the uncanniest quality of them all is his utter lack of fear. He is at times agitated, perturbed, and occasionally extremely frustrated—witness the one-word imprecation he utters during one crucial scene—but he remarkably evinces no fear whatsoever. And neither does he express any degree of self-pity.

In a 2013 film season in which the predominant theme has been survival—*Gravity*, *Captain Phillips*, and *All Is Lost* have all revolved around characters who are compelled to use every ounce of energy in order to survive in extreme circumstances—Redford’s Our Man is the character tasked with perhaps the most extreme survival trial of them all. Unlike Tom Hanks in *Captain Phillips* and Sandra Bullock in *Gravity*, Redford is truly all alone: he did not embark upon his mission with other crew members, and never establishes genuine radio contact with another soul once disaster strikes his vessel.

In some respects, *All Is Lost* is in dialogue with *Gravity*—it is, intentionally or not, a companion film to *Gravity*, and these films almost beg to be viewed in tandem. The preferable order would be to view *All Is Lost* subsequent to *Gravity*. *Gravity*’s posture toward silences verges on the hypocritical: Bullock preaches a love of silence, but along with her co-star, George Clooney, she engages in a near-incessant stream of dialogue.

All Is Lost’s genuine silence is a subtle rebuke to *Gravity*’s loquacity. And Redford’s Our Man is a character with no known backstory, with no words, and most significantly, with no discernible fear—a stark contrast to Bullock’s

fearful Ryan Stone in *Gravity*. While neither character should be harshly condemned for their particular reactions to the extreme circumstances that befall them—after all, one should not judge another person “until you have stood in his place” (Mishnah, *Avot* 2:5)—Redford’s taciturn *Our Man* is a welcome contrast to Bullock’s melodramatic Ryan Stone.

Redford’s performance itself is uncanny. Redford is the entire film—it is literally a cast of one. And even though he does not speak but a few words during the film, his performance is anything but one-key: it is modulated and nuanced. Each movement has a purpose, each gesture an aim, and his eyes speak much more profoundly than his mouth ever could; indeed, if one carefully watches Redford’s eyes, one will notice a discernable progression in *Our Man* over the course of the film. That Redford can communicate veritable character development with his eyes alone speaks wonders as to the type of performance he delivers.

Most viewers will come to *All Is Lost* with the knowledge that Redford’s character utters perhaps one word of dialogue over the course of the entire hour-and-forty minute film, but like most viewers, I was not truly ready to experience this dialogue-free performance until it was actually occurring in front of us on the screen. *All Is Lost* differs from any other film in recent memory in that it provides us with the visuals but no words, not even via subtitles or title-cards—and is thus even *more* silent than “silent films”—and, like a novel in which we are provided with the words but not the pictures and are invited to stage the visual of the story in our heads, *All Is Lost* compels us to sit back (or, more precisely, due to the story’s intensity, to lean forward) and silently script our own versions of Redford’s hidden inner monologue.

Redford’s *Our Man* also differs from Bullock’s Stone in that *Our Man*, unlike Stone, expresses no need or desire to pray. Perhaps *Our Man* prays in his head; perhaps, like Stone, he is frustrated that he does not know how to pray. But he never mentions the word “God,” even as an exclamation. *Our Man* is a hardy soul—after all, one must be supremely self-confident to venture out into the ocean all alone on a sailboat in an attempt to circumnavigate the globe—and one senses that this is not the type of man who would cry out to a higher power as do the sailors in *The Book of Jonah*. *Our Man* embodies the maxim of “the matter is dependent upon me alone.”³ He uses the raw materials God has provided him in an attempt to effectuate a miracle of his own making.

While *All Is Lost* is in dialogue with the survival films of this year like *Gravity* and *Captain Phillips*, the survival film it most closely resembles is Robert Bresson’s minimalist masterpiece *A Man Escaped* (1956). In Bresson’s

film, a French POW condemned to death by the Nazis meticulously plots an escape from a prison camp. *A Man Escaped*, like *All Is Lost*, is “unadorned”—there is no score, no subplot, and no hijinks. There is only a man, and all that matters is what he must do to survive. No segment in *A Man Escaped* is superfluous—“I can’t think of a single unnecessary shot in *A Man Escaped*,” Roger Ebert wrote—and neither is there an unnecessary shot in *All Is Lost*. Both *A Man Escaped* and *All Is Lost* are “lesson[s] in cinema.”⁴

If one changes “Bresson” to “Chandor,” Ebert’s description of *A Man Escaped* can easily be applied to *All Is Lost*:

Robert Bresson’s films are often about people confronting certain despair. His subject is how they try to prevail in the face of unbearable circumstances. His plots are not about whether they succeed, but how they endure. He tells these stories in an unadorned style, without movie stars, special effects, contrived thrills and elevated tension. His films, seemingly devoid of audience-pleasing elements, hold many people in a hypnotic grip. There are no “entertainment values” to distract us, only the actual events of the stories themselves. They demonstrate how many films contain only diversions for the eyes and mind, and use only the superficial qualities of their characters.⁵

At a surface level, Chandor’s talky *Margin Call*, one of the most underrated films of 2011, seems diametrically opposed to *All Is Lost*’s über-laconic atmosphere, but one should not conflate dialogue with excess. Every line of dialogue in *Margin Call* was delivered with a purpose, and its method of storytelling is just as spare and simple (but far from simplistic) as the method Chandor employs in *All Is Lost*.

Perceptive viewers will notice overt religious visual motifs at the end of *All Is Lost*. (Readers who have yet to see the film are advised to skip this paragraph.) The exact nature of these visuals is ambiguous and open to interpretation, but one possible interpretation is that Our Man is being ushered into an afterlife. Within this interpretation, the title “All Is Lost” may mean that all is in fact never lost—even at death—for those who believe in an afterlife.

With *All Is Lost*, Chandor has suddenly become one of the most interesting directors working today, and his career trajectory indicates that he could become a modern-day Bresson. In an era in which we are subject to an unremitting barrage of audio-sensory stimuli, Chandor’s entrance into the small, selective cadre of the directorial elite is a development that should be welcomed by any lover of quality filmmaking.

NOTES

1. Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically & Religiously* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 166.
2. Cf. the tannaitic “our rabbis,” a metonym for the rabbinic collective, and “Our Man,” a symbol for the human collective will to survive against all odds: “even when the sword is suspended upon your neck, do not despair from salvation,” urges the Talmud (*b. Berakhot* 10a), and Our Man never despairs.
3. *b. Avodah Zarah* 17a.
4. Roger Ebert, “A Man Escaped,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (Nov. 21, 2011), accessed Dec. 16, 2013. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-a-man-escaped-1956>
5. *Ibid.*