

The “Deep Focus Construction” of Selected Characters within Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1923 & 1956) and Elsewhere

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Abstract. Legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille was a progenitor of Paramount Pictures, a seminal cofounder of Hollywood, and the master of the American biblical epic; but whose pioneering achievements and filmic practices still remain grossly unappreciated today. One of his aesthetic trade secrets was the “deep focus construction” of his on-screen characters, that is, the engineering of pertinent correspondences between his characterizations and the actors’ idiosyncratic traits and/or previous roles to deepen the naturalistic resonance of authenticity. A brief review of the critical literature and an examination of selected DeMille films, particularly *The Ten Commandments* (1923 & 1956), was performed to illustrate this casting principle; utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens. It was concluded that DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than hitherto appreciated. Further research into DeMille Studies is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

Keywords: Cecil B. DeMille, casting principle in film, the Golden Age of Hollywood, “deep focus construction” of characters.

Introduction: Casting, DeMille and the Golden Age of Hollywood

The Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) was admired by film critic Susan Macdonald (1969, 24) because he “chose his characters by the ‘rule of analogy,’ his peasants are genuine peasants, his sub-proletarian characters come from the sub-proletarian world, his bourgeois characters are bourgeois in real life, and so on.” It was an intuitive and perfectly legitimate casting principle, but it was not unprecedented in film history. Constructing similar actor–character correspondences was a significant filmmaking feature of

legendary American producer-director¹ Cecil B. DeMille² (1881–1959), affectionately known as “CB” (Birchard 2004; Cherchi Usai and Codelli 1991; DeMille and Hayne 1960; Edwards 1988; Essoe and Lee 1970; Eyman 2010; Higashi 1985, 1994; Higham 1973; Koury 1959; Louvish 2008; Noerdlinger 1956; Orrison 1999; Ringgold and Bodeen 1969). DeMille [Fig. 1.] became an international moviemaking icon who earned fame and fortune as the “arch apostle of spectacle” (Clapham 1974, 21), the “high priest of the religious genre” (Holloway 1977, 26), and especially as the “King of the epic Biblical spectacular” (Finler 1985, 32) with his indelible epics: *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956), plus numerous personal hosannas and industry accolades (see Essoe and Lee 1970, 245–247).

In addition to being “virtually the Sunday school teacher for the nation” (Beck 2005, 27), DeMille was a co-progenitor and chief creative force behind America’s oldest existing film studio, Paramount Pictures. Therein he had “introduced a number of innovations that later became standard in films: the listing of actors’ names in on-screen credits, the use of proper sets rather than painted scenery for indoor scenes, and the use of extra lighting apart from the sun to emphasize certain aspects of the screen image (he called this ‘Rembrandt’ lighting). He would also go on to invent the boom mike” (Donnelley 2010, 355) and “helped fashion the fundamental rules for the Classical Hollywood Narrative Style” (Gomery and Pafort-Overduin 2011, 71) in betwixt becoming one of *the* seminal cofounders of *the* centre for commercial moviemaking – Hollywood – whose very name became the moniker for an entire industry and an international synonym for success. In short, “DeMille was Hollywood” (Freer 2009, 11) and so it was not surprising that he was tagged “The Father of Hollywood” (Kroon 2010, 337) and it was argued that whenever “speaking of Hollywood as either the physical or spiritual center of worldwide moviemaking, one should never forget DeMille’s role in its development” (Siegel and Siegel 2004, 117).

Despite his pioneering efforts and immense filmic achievements during the genesis of that billion dollar industry, including surviving the arrival of sound, colour film, wide screens, changing public tastes, shifting demographics, two

1 There is not one DeMille but many DeMille personas that did numerous jobs and played multiple roles. His career was so long, complex and multi-faceted that to describe, let alone justify each aspect would be prohibitive. Therefore, concise hyphenated compound terms will be used herein to help disentangle his various roles and avoid needless explanation, repetition or reader boredom.

2 Many scholars have spelled Cecil’s surname as “De Mille” or “de Mille” or “deMille” however, the correct professional spelling is “DeMille” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 6), which will be employed herein along with “Cecil” and “CB” as appropriate.

World Wars, the Wall Street crash, Communist hysteria, the threat of TV etc., his career as the “Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man” (Mitchell 1993, 17) is still grossly under-appreciated today. Even more worrying, the artistic skills and thematic preoccupations that he deftly engineered within his cinema were frequently ignored, belittled or dismissed during his lifetime and decades after his death. Furthermore, as Eric Smoodin (2000, 251) argued: “De Mille rarely receives the serious academic recognition and study that he deserves.” This lamentable situation is in need of re-examination, rectification and renewal. Not only is the true breadth and depth of Hollywood’s best-known unknown immense, complex and relatively unappreciated, but as Laurence Kardish (1972, 133) warned: “It is impossible to describe the career of Cecil B. DeMille in a few words. A whole book is needed.”

Nevertheless, to get an introductory taste of Cecil’s craft canniness, it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to focus upon just one aspect of his moviemaking praxis, namely, his casting habit of choosing professional actors whose idiosyncratic private traits and/or previous acting roles fundamentally embodied the naturalistic essence of their DeMille-designed characterizations. As Richard M. Barsam and Dave Monahan (2010, 298) described it: “Screen acting appears naturalistic when actors re-create recognizable or plausible human behavior for the camera. The actors not only look like the characters should (in their costume, makeup, and hairstyle) but also think, speak, and move the way people would offscreen” (see also Baron and Carnicke, 2008). However, DeMille took this principle one step beyond their constructed appearance and professional acting skills to also include features of their actual idiosyncratic life stories to underpin their performances. This DeMillean “rule of analogy” is better described as “deep focus construction” as it provided several levels of dramatic information simultaneously, and which became one of his major casting strategies-cum-auteur signature signs, and thus intrinsically worthy of academic investigation because of it.

Consequently, the critical DeMille, biographical and related film literature was selectively reviewed and integrated into this text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour). This investigative effort was followed by a selective examination of Cecil’s silent and sound films to identify this DeMillean rule of analogy/deep focus casting principle, followed by a more extensive explication of the phenomenon within his 1923 and 1956 versions of *The Ten Commandments*. Although a theoretical framework embedded within Star Studies, Screen Performance Studies, Intertextuality etc. could have been gainfully employed, textually based humanist film criticism was chosen as the

guiding analytical lens herein (see Bywater and Sobchack 1989, chpt. 2).³ This grossly under-utilized film analysis technique is applicable to all genres ranging from science fiction (Telotte 2001, chapter 2) to literary autobiography (Johnson 2007) and it assumes that audiences are cultured, accept the cinema as fine art, and have seen the movies under discussion. Its main pedagogic function is to identify noteworthy incidents and foster critical commentary rooted in both primary and secondary sources (e.g. memoirs, autobiographies, film journals); and especially the tracking and interpretation of motifs, symbols, themes and other construction secrets, tropes and topoi. This analytical focus is tailor-made for the chosen inter- and intra-filmic research task.

DeMille's "Deep Focus Construction" within His Silent Cinema

In his review of the silent castaway drama, *Male and Female* (DeMille, 1919) Ronald Bowers reported that: "the post-World War I year of 1919 saw the release of two motion pictures which heralded a new hard-edged materialism and which 'openly acknowledged sex.' The two films were *The Miracle Man* [1919], a Paramount production directed by George Loane Tucker, and *Male and Female*, the Cecil B. De Mille/Paramount production of Sir James M. Barrie's successful play, *The Admirable Crichton*. Quite by accident both films starred Thomas Meighan" (1982, 689).

However, this so-called "accident" was no accident because Ronald Bowers (1982, 691) later reported that DeMille was so "impressed with Meighan's work in *The Miracle Man*" that he hired him for *Male and Female* when Elliot Dexter (a DeMille stock player) became ill. DeMille-the-canny-businessman-director had quickly capitalized upon shifting social circumstances and the "sexy" reputation of *The Miracle Man* using a success-by-appropriation tactic. Furthermore, CB had Thomas Meighan play Crichton the butler, a servant who exhibited a profound behavioural change under shifting social circumstances when he became the natural leader of a coterie of rich castaways, which itself

3 Bywater and Sobchack's 1989 textbook on film criticism classified the major critical approaches to narrative film according to the following schema: (a) textual (journalistic and humanist approaches): this focuses primarily upon the cinematic text and our responses to them regarding plot, characters, themes, reactions etc., (b) textual/contextual (auteur and genre approaches): this focuses primarily upon comparing the nominated films with older and other films for similar recurring patterns, and (c) contextual (social science, historical and ideological approaches): this focuses primarily upon examining the relationship of films to the sociocultural contexts outside the frame.

had thematically mirrored Meighan's previous Tucker-directed role as Tom Burke, a con man who exhibited a profound behavioural change under shifting social circumstances when he and his gang of social outcasts were miraculously healed. Audience members who had seen Tom in *The Miracle Man* could easily transfer their admiration for him to Crichton in *Male and Female* that ultimately benefitted DeMille's film and Paramount's purse.

DeMille's "deep focus construction" strategy also applied to other attributes of his on-screen characters. For example, he hired Fanny Ward to play the defrauding wife in his classic silent film, *The Cheat* (DeMille, 1915), despite the fact that she was inexperienced and had anxiously complained: "But Mr. DeMille, I am a comedienne. I have never played emotional roles." He told her: "Which is exactly the reason I want you to play in *The Cheat*." As he had planned, that put her on her mettle, and she accepted; what she had not realized, of course, was that another reason he had cast her as *The Cheat* was because he was convinced after seeing her at parties and on screen that she was very deceitful (Higham 1973, 44). Whether Ward's cheating ways was factually true or not, DeMille believed it and acted accordingly. Therefore, given his devotion to his deep focus/rule of analogy casting, it was not too surprising to find that DeMille had cast a perceived real world cheat, who could convincingly display deceptiveness on-screen, as the central cheat-protagonist in his movie eponymously titled *The Cheat*.

In a more humorous vein, whilst filming his reverential Jesus film, *The King of Kings*, DeMille once again proved that he liked his actors to be typecast in real-life as well as on-screen. During the arduous shoot, his Christ (H. B. Warner) [Fig. 2.] had started an intimate relationship with actress Sally Rand, later to become notoriously famous as an erotic fan dancer (Knox 1988), but back then just a film extra playing a slave girl belonging to Mary Magdalene (Jacqueline Logan) in her house of ill repute. One day, the two real-world lovers arrived late on the set, which greatly angered the punctilious DeMille, and so he thundered from on high: "Miss Rand, leave my Jesus Christ alone! If you must screw someone, screw Pontius Pilate [Victor Varconi]!" (Hay 1990, 53).

At least DeMille's commercial heart was in the right place because a sexually disgraced Jesus would have spelt financial disaster for the film and his fledgling new studio, Cecil B. DeMille Pictures; which it nearly did "when the actor playing Christ, H. B. Warner, was found *in flagrante delicto* with a young lady whose object was blackmail" (Shipman 1982, 181). DeMille dealt decisively with this delicate issue and kept Warner working because as Gary A. Smith (1991, 129) put it: "H. B. Warner is everything DeMille had hoped his cinematic Christ would be, compassionate and tender but also exuding a powerful feeling of strength and wisdom;" and thus in accordance with CB's deep focus casting

principles (minus the blatant infidelities but itself suggestive of the many extra-canonical stories of Mary Magdalene as the secret lover of Jesus – Bellevie 2005).

Nevertheless, as a result of this blackmail scare, DeMille-the-pragmatist placed his principle star under *de facto* house arrest: “No one but the director spoke to H. B. Warner when he was in costume, unless it was absolutely necessary. He was veiled or transported in a closed car when he went between the set and his dressing-room or when we were on location, his tent, where he took his meals alone” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 256); along with a pious PR cover story that suggested it was all done to “maintain the spirit of reverence” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 256). DeMille briefly mentioned this problem in his autobiography but vaguely attributed it to “the purposes of some gutter journalism or blackmail” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 257). Furthermore, Warner also needed to be watched closely because “the problems of playing the [Jesus Christ] role sparked off an old drinking problem, kept secret by DeMille’s and the publicist Barrett Kiesling’s most resolute efforts” (Higham 1973, 167), thus protecting their film investment-cum-future success.

DeMille’s “Deep Focus Construction” within His Sound Cinema

At times, DeMille capitalized upon actor-character correspondences that had newsworthiness and other PR publicity value, for example, Jean Arthur (born Gladys Georgianna Greene) played Calamity Jane [Fig. 3.] in DeMille’s Americana film *The Plainsman* (1937). As her biographer John Oller speculated: “Another reason Arthur may have fancied the role of Calamity Jane was the connection between the famous plainswoman and Arthur’s own relatives. Growing up in Deadwood, Hannah Greene would have known Calamity by sight, and her family likely had some contact with the itinerant legend in South Dakota or in Billings, a town frequented by Calamity [...] This connection was not enough, however, to draw favorable local review for *The Plainsman* when it reached Montana in the summer of 1937” (1997, 95).

This newsworthy historical connection possibly influenced DeMille-the-PR-man to choose the glamorous Jean Arthur to play the lead role; however, DeMille erred somewhat because he overlooked another more significant historical fact. Namely, that the “real Calamity Jane [born Martha Jane Cannary] was a vulgar, tobacco-chewing, raw-boned kid who resembled nothing more alluring than an oversized Huckleberry Finn, minus the charm of innocence” (Cody and Perry 1982, 198) and whom Wayne Michael Sarf (1983, 38) described as “a female only in the narrowest technical sense.”

In which case, DeMille's passion for "deep focus construction" and the Hollywood need for beautiful stars to sell pictures severely tripped him up historically speaking; albeit, he admitted to the error as follows: "I confess to taking some liberties with authenticity in that casting: pictures I have seen of the real Calamity Jane were far removed indeed from the piquant loveliness of Jean Arthur" (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 320). DeMille's deep focus habit was quickly evidenced again in his historical railway film, *Union Pacific* (1939), when the character of Andrew Jackson was played by actor Hugh Sothorn, a real-life "descendent of one of Jackson's uncles" (Rivers 1996, 113).

DeMille had also attempted a casting appropriation strategy in his swash-buckling sea adventure *Reap the Wild Wind* (1942) by approaching the famous black actress Hattie McDaniel, the Negro house servant Mammy from *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) to play the part of his Negro house servant, Maum Maria. However, business commitments prevented McDaniel from accepting DeMille's offer, and so her look-alike, Louise Beavers got the role instead (Jackson 1990, 76). DeMille's habit of engineering actor-character correspondences appeared again in his pre-Revolutionary Americana film *Unconquered* (1947). He had cast Boris Karloff as the Indian villain Gyuasuta, chief of the Senecas, who was portrayed as a ruthless bloodthirsty beast and a menace to white maidenhood. Professionally speaking, Karloff was considered the reigning "King of the Monsters" and the "Titan of Terror" (Bona 1996, 55) following his archetypal performance as the monster in *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), and so DeMille used Karloff's filmic reputation as the iconic monster to strongly shade his evil Indian characterization beyond the traditional red man versus white man racial stereotype prevalent in his day. As Damien Bona (1996, 55) noted regarding DeMille's deep focus/rule of analogy casting practise: "Here's how Cecil B. DeMille's thinking went: Boris Karloff plays villains. Gyuasuta, chief of the Senecas, is a villain. Ergo, Boris Karloff would be ideal as Guyasuta, chief of the Senecas." In effect, DeMille had engineered a multi-level layering of evilness (and other associations) to get his horrific emotional point across to the paying public.

DeMille had also skilfully deployed his adopted daughter Katherine Lester DeMille in this deep focus casting way. [Fig. 4.] She appeared in Cecil's *Madam Satan* (1930), *The Crusades* (1935), *Unconquered* and other non-DeMille films "usually as a jilted, jealous, or just plain unhappy woman in second leads or supporting roles" (Katz, Klein and Nolen 2001, 354). Why such morbidity and subdued prominence given the potential for massive DeMille nepotism in nepotism-infected Hollywood? Temporarily overlooking the fact that DeMille had a strong anti-nepotism credo (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 275), Katherine had experienced real unhappiness in her private life and was haunted by many

private demons that made her “a hidden girl: frightened, insecure, timorous” (Quinn and Paisner 1995, 133). For example, she suffered from bad orphanage experiences, rejecting biological relatives, a troubled marriage to Anthony Quinn, the drowning death of her young son Christopher, and many other emotional insecurity issues that followed her throughout life and assisted her fanatical devotion to religion and the afterlife (Edwards 1988, 157).

Notwithstanding all this morbidity and potential for interpersonal conflict, DeMille successfully turned Katherine’s private insecurities into professional advantages by matching her dour disposition with screen roles that reflected the same traits she had privately experienced and exhibited in life, that is, deep focus casting as a form of personal mirroring-cum-professional application. However, DeMille’s deep focus casting habit was put to more excellent use within both versions of his *The Ten Commandments* via the interlocking application of retrospective romances, political affiliations and beyond.

***The Ten Commandments* (1923): Silent Sinfulness**

DeMille’s first rendition of this classic was a silent, black-and-white triptych that was officially divided into two parts, one ancient and one modern.⁴ Therein DeMille emphasized the film’s sexual, erotic and romantic dimensions to underscore his morality tale about the dramatic consequences of breaking God’s Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17)⁵ utilising three major actor-character correspondences, namely: Nita Naldi as Sally Lung, Agnes Ayers as The Outcast, and Rod La Rocque as Dan “Danny” McTavish.

4 The film is officially divided into two parts. Part I deals with ancient Egypt and Part II deals with modern America. However, near the end of the film, there is a small flashback scene showing Jesus with his back to the audience talking to a small group of worshippers. Therefore, the film had an ancient world scene (from the Old Testament), a modern world scene (highlighting contemporary 1920s America), and another ancient world scene (from the New Testament), thus making this film an uneven triptych.

5 The Authorised King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout, unless quoting other translations, because it was frequently employed by DeMille (Higashi 1994, 180), most of the biblical phrases that are embedded in Western culture are from it, and it is one of the most widely used English translations of Holy Writ today (Taylor 1992, ix, 71).

1. Nita Naldi as Sally Lung: The Sexual Subversive

DeMille hired outrageous vamp Nita Naldi to play the role of the sultry Sally Lung in the modern Part II portion of *The Ten Commandments*. [Fig. 5.] Sally was a scandalous sexual suspect, a modern-day Delilah who secretly was an infected escapee from the "Leper Island of Molakai." She quickly became the exotic Eurasian mistress of bad-boy Dan McTavish (Rod La Rocque) who contracted "leprosy" from her (traditionally a code word for venereal disease in 1920s Hollywood) and was subsequently murdered by Danny when her gold-digger callousness exceeded his own. Why was Nita Naldi selected for this salacious role? According to expatriate Australian journalist, Dorothy Gordon Jenner (professionally known as Andrea), Nita Naldi in real-life had a well-known reputation for scandalous sexual behaviour and was particularly famous for never wearing underwear (Jenner and Sheppard 1975, 81). This private personal behaviour certainly resonated with the role of a rich man's mistress and genitalia-related proclivities that would have titillated audiences and prompted patrons to pay to see a putative beard-and-bathrobe production during the Roaring Twenties, thus making both DeMille-the-cinematic-lay preacher and DeMille-the-businessman very happy. Given DeMille's thorough research habits, one strongly suspects that he was very aware of Naldi's private erotic reputation, especially as the self-proclaimed "female Valentino" (Negra 2002, 276), and so he hired her for that sexy role according to his deep focus casting proclivities.

2. Agnes Ayers as The Outcast: The Erotic Resonator, Redeemed

In a similar actor-character correspondence, DeMille hired the popular Agnes Ayres to play The Outcast, a leprous sinner who approached Jesus and was cured by his holy touch and divine command during the closing New Testament triptych of *The Ten Commandments*. [Fig. 6.] Previously, her most iconic role was the expatriate English heiress, Lady Diana Mayo, who was forcibly seduced by virile desert chieftain, Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan. As Roy Liebman (1996, 25) put it, she will: "Forever to be remembered as the object of Rudolph Valentino's fevered advances in *The Sheik*," a now classic 1921 movie directed by George Melford, which had made the women of its day scream, swoon and faint during screening. This occidental movie became an iconic symbol for erotic love with an ethnic other that propelled Valentino into cult status as the epitome of the Latin lover, with Ayers as his erotically tainted conquest. Released before *The Ten Commandments*, one strongly suspects that Agnes Ayres was Cecil's cost-conscious means of appropriating Valentino's

mystique alongside the ravaged and romantic resonances of *The Sheik* (reinforced by casting Nita Naldi – the female Valentino). Furthermore, The Outcast was cured of her leprosy by Jesus just as Mary Leigh (Leatrice Joy), Dan's leprosy wife and social outcast was cured of her intimacy-associated affliction by listening to that sacred story of forgiveness and redemption read aloud by the film's Christ-figure, John McTavish (Richard Dix). These interlocking casting choices and multiple correspondences were engineered for the thematic, subtextual and fiscal benefit of Cecil's production; however, the inter-filmic and intra-filmic linkages did not stop with Agnes Ayers.

3. Rod La Rocque as Dan McTavish: The Alternative Valentino

Rod La Rocque played the evil troubled brother Danny in the modern Part II portion of *The Ten Commandments*. According to George A. Katchmer (1991, 451), he had a "striking resemblance to Valentino" whilst his screen character "Dan McTavish makes poses and facial angles which give him a most remarkable resemblance to the dusky-haired, lean faced, romantic Rudie." This comment suggests that DeMille was physiognomically, aesthetically and directorially imitating the famous lover from *The Sheik* (just like he did with Louise Beavers in *Reap the Wild Wind* when he could not hire Hattie McDaniel of *Gone With the Wind* fame). Thematically speaking, Rod La Rocque was also the perfect deep focus casting choice for the bad-boy brother given that he exhibited similar negative characteristics from his previous film incarnations. According to George A. Katchmer: "A November 1919 article states that for two or three years Rod was so tough in a professional way that he committed more crimes than Theodore Roberts, Stuart Holmes, Robert McKim, and Jack Richardson combined. He cursed, swore, drank, chewed and smoked. He plotted murder and dragged sweet young blondes about by the hair. At 16 he was Trampas, and at 17 he was the villain in *Shoreacres* [sic] [...]. Being a villain at a tender age when most boys are just learning to swipe father's cigars, had left a subtle imprint on La Rocque's character" (1991, 449).

Apparently, Cecil was sensitive to this "subtle imprint" and prior casting history and so under his tutelage he had Rod La Rocque relive his on-screen youth with reprobate resonances by playing the dastardly defiant Danny. This bad boy subsequently drowned when his speed boat named "Defiance" dashed against deadly rocks during his doomed escape from both the law (the police) and the breaking of The Law (God's Ten Commandments).

***The Ten Commandments* (1956): Sound Manipulators**

DeMille's habit of extrapolating his actors' past roles and private characteristics into his on-screen roles was particularly pronounced at the other end of his directorial career during the making of his 1956 *magnum opus*, *The Ten Commandments*. This was not a remake of his silent film of the same name, but rather, a second attempt at an epic screen biography of the life of Moses, and *without* any recourse to a modern-day morality tale to extrapolate the ethical lessons embodied within to 1950s America. As the very last film DeMille personally directed, it benefitted from a life-time of Hollywood experience from a religious man and filmic craftsman at the creative peak of his sacred storytelling power, and “even where *The Ten Commandments* invents narrative, its style and language remain redolent of the biblical Moses story. In fact, even the most daring innovations ultimately function to assert the biblical account's primacy over subsequent re-presentations” (Wright 2003, 94). DeMille had deftly demonstrated his deep focus/rule of analogy actor-character correspondences within the following four major roles, namely: Anne Baxter as Nefretiri, Edward G. Robinson as Dathan, John Carradine as Aaron and Judith Anderson as Memnet.

4. Anne Baxter (the Manipulative) as Nefretiri (the Manipulative)

Anne Baxter played DeMille's seductive Egyptian princess, Nefretiri, a possessive, in-love “sexpot” (Sauter 1996, 73), a power hungry schemer and future Queen of Egypt. [Fig. 7.] At first, Nefretiri was personally happy as the manipulative woman-behind-the-throne of the Pharaonic heir-apparent, Moses (Charlton Heston), then a prince of Egypt, and for whom she would kill to protect the secret of his Hebrew heritage. However, her dream life with Moses was quickly shattered when he was publicly revealed by his nemesis, prince Rameses (Yul Brynner) to be an Egyptian murderer and a lowly Hebrew slave, who was subsequently outlawed and exiled into the Shur desert to die. Nefretiri-as-royal-chattel subsequently married and bore a son to the now Pharaoh Rameses, whom she had initially rejected as both lover and leader to quickly become a bitter manipulative woman behind his throne. Given DeMille's professional penchant for “deep focus construction” and inter-filmic continuity, it is not too surprising to discover that Anne Baxter's most famous previous role before *The Ten Commandments* was in the classic melodrama about manipulative self-advancement, *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950). Therein Baxter played the devious and ruthlessly ambitious *ingenue*, Eve

Harrington, a blonde bombshell who through cunning had risen to the very top of the New York theatrical world, but despite her immense worldly success, she ended up bitter, bettered, cynical and unloved, just like Queen Nefretiri.

Furthermore, in the Alfred Hitchcock priest-film, *I Confess* (1953), Anne Baxter played Madame Ruth Grandfort, the pre-war girlfriend-cum-fiancée of Canadian Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift). She was madly in love with him and expected to be his bride; just like Nefretiri was madly in love with Moses and expected to be his bride. Consequently, Ruth dreamed of romantic fantasies and actively engaged in minor lover's trysts with him (just like Nefretiri did with Moses) that bordered on "storybook romanticism" (Spoto 1976, 224). However, her dreams of intimacy were quickly shattered when Michael got religion, was ordained and became Father Michael Logan, priest at the Quebec church (the historic Chateau Frontenac). Michael had thus romantically rejected Ruth for the celibate priesthood and she was hurt and humiliated by his rejection-cum-renunciation of her; just like Nefretiri was hurt and humiliated when Moses romantically rejected her for his Hebrew people, and then for a second time in favour of fulfilling God's divine commission to free his subjugated people.

Although Ruth still loved Michael, she saw no practical future together and so this clerk-secretary subsequently married her lawyer boss, Pierre Grandfort (Roger Dann), her marital consolation prize, and subsequently became a power behind the scene of this relationship of convenience. Later, Ruth confessed that she never loved Pierre, thus sacrificing her own personal happiness in the process; just like Nefretiri never loved Pharaoh Rameses, but married him anyway out of duty in a royal relationship of convenience. *I Confess* was another painful tale of unrequited love that was reflected in Ruth's face, which had "taken on a common harshness" (Bazin 1982, 132) simply because the "curse upon Ruth is that she is unable to forget the Eden she experienced earlier with Michael, although it is now as remote as prelapsarian grace" (Yacowar 1972–3, 21). This is the same sort of curse suffered by Nefretiri concerning Moses during her own Egyptian paradisiacal days, and which was reflected upon her own harsh face full of pain and anger, particularly following the death of her only son in DeMille's ancient tale of unrequited love.

Cecil's creative character correspondences also creatively coalesced with another DeMille signature sign – love triangles. Consequently, the triadic relationship between Ruth (Anne Baxter), Michael (Montgomery Clift) and Pierre (Roger Dann) in *I Confess* was structurally reprised in the love triangle between Nefretiri (Anne Baxter), Moses (Charlton Heston) and Rameses (Yul Brynner) in *The Ten Commandments*. Like Ruth, Nefretiri loved Moses, which was unrequited despite some brief tender moments together. Moses, like

Michael renounced Nefretiri for his own personal mission and ended up an earthly emissary of God. Nefretiri, like Ruth saw her romantic dreams crushed when she lost her lover before her pent up passions and plans could be performed. Nefretiri, like Ruth married someone else whom she did not love, which made her an unhappy and bitter woman. Consequently, for those viewers appreciative of Anne Baxter’s roles in *I Confess* (and her manipulations in *All About Eve*), DeMille’s Nefretiri was just reliving another unsatisfying romantic nightmare engineered by a master filmmaker. Indeed, Foster Hirsch (1991, 50) argued that Anne Baxter as the conniving Nefretiri “is *echt*-DeMille” and according to John Seville (1993, 49) she “absolutely sizzles with sex. Baxter understands DeMille and her role perfectly.”

5. Edward G. Robinson (the Red) as Dathan (the Collaborator)

A similar actor-character correspondence occurred with DeMille’s selection of Edward G. Robinson to play the lecherous Hebrew overseer, Dathan, the unredeemed and irredeemable traitor. [Fig. 8.] Scripturally speaking, Dathan supported the Levite Korah in his rebellion against the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron, and so he eventually died when God caused the ground to swallow him up along with the other anti-Moses dissidents (Num. 16:1-35; 26:7-11; Deut. 11:6; Ps. 106:17), whilst “the Talmud asserted that Dathan was wicked ‘from beginning to end’ (*Sanhedrin* 109b). Midrashim claim that he was responsible for denouncing Moses and revealing his Hebrew origins to Pharaoh, following Moses’ killing of the Egyptian taskmaster (*Yd. Ex.* 167), and at the Red Sea incited the children of Israel to return to servitude (*Exodus Kabbah* 1.29)” (Wright 2003, 98). Correspondingly, DeMille’s Dathan is the designated ringleader of these doomed dissidents and an ardent Egyptian informer-cum-collaborator, a blackmailer and a very nasty man only too willing to sell out his people for personal gain. More than the oppressive Egyptians, Dathan was deliberately designed to be despised, especially when as the vile Governor of Goshen he sexually preyed upon the lovely Lilia (Debra Paget), a virginal innocent, and then successfully blackmailed her by sparing from certain death her true love, Joshua (John Derek), so as to get his wicked way.

This was naturally an unsympathetic biblical villain role in which Robinson played an “agnostic Israelite who becomes a slave overlord” (Gansberg 1985, 235) and Moses’s unscrupulous nemesis that easily earned him an honourable place in the history of film villainy (Stacy and Syvertsen 1984, 66–67), but why did DeMille choose Edward G. Robinson to play the despicable character of Dathan? For at least three deep focus reasons. Firstly, because Cecil hoped to capitalise upon the reprehensible resonances that Robinson’s most famous

screen character could bring to his biblical film, namely, rackets czar Cesare Enrico “Rico” Bandello (aka “Little Caesar” modelled upon Al Capone) and his empire-building aspirations from the classic crime film, *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931). This iconic film launched the career of Robinson and made him “one of Hollywood’s gangster prototypes” (Williams 1996, 259) and so film critics easily, if not always kindly, detected the Dathan-Rico parallel as follows: “the treacherous Dathan (played Little Caesar-style by Edward G. Robinson) (Sauter 1996, 76), or “Edward G. is here at his worst (sounding like Rico in *Little Caesar*)” (Stacy and Syvertsen 1984, 66), or “Edward G. Robinson as the evil Hebrew informer, Dathan, looks ludicrously like Little Caesar in a turban” (Druxman 1975, 209).

Secondly, physiognomically speaking, Robinson was the antithesis of the tall and regal Moses (Charlton Heston), the ruggedly handsome Joshua (John Derek), and the perpetually athletic Rameses (Yul Brynner), which itself conformed to another notable DeMille signature sign – binarism (i.e. contrasts within multiple production dimensions). Indeed, the “craggy frog-face, squat, stocky figure, and whine/growl of a voice made Edward G. Robinson the permanent property of generations of impressionists and caricaturists” (Thompson and McCarty 2000, 1052) including being the secular icon of evil itself; after all, gangsters defy the law and act selfishly, just like DeMille’s Dathan did. Furthermore, Robinson was born a Jew whose original name was “Emanuel Goldenberg” and whose full Hebrew name was “Menashe ben Yeshayahu Moshe” (Gansberg 1985, 13), which put him ethnically in the same broad ethnic camp as the Hebrew Dathan.

Thirdly, the evil betrayer theme also fitted perfectly with Robinson’s private life and personal troubles during the McCarthy era when he was suspected of being a despicable Red, “(he had met the exiled Trotsky)” (Wright 2003, 109) and was “persistently found in Communist fronts” (*Newsweek* quoted in Williams 1996, 259) and so people “railed against his alleged activities as a Soviet stooge” (Wright 2003, 109). “Although America’s favorite cinematic gangster eventually cleared his name, it came at the cost of a ruined career, over \$100,000 in legal expenses, and the need to humiliate himself by writing an article, ‘How the Reds Made a Sucker of Me,’ for *The American Legion Magazine* in 1952” (Ross 2011, 90).

Communism was the secular personification of evil according to the majority of 1950s right-wing Americans, and so Robinson’s unsavoury political associations contributed immensely to Dathan’s aura of collaborator-style vileness. DeMille was Hollywood’s most zealous Red-hater who had “remained a rabidly anti-union, anti-Communist Republican most of his life” (Ross 1998, 202), and yet he is credited with resurrecting Robinson’s career by professionally

OK-ing him and giving him the role of Dathan “only weeks before starting this film, [when he] had been released from the Hollywood blacklist of reputed communist sympathisers” (Forshey 1980, 491).

This was no insignificant casting decision as it proved to be a professional life saver because “Robinson hadn’t been asked to make a film in Hollywood since [Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s] *House of Strangers* in 1949” (Mitchell 1998, 148–149) and “the only offers he received were minor roles, at greatly reduced pay, in minor films” (Ross 2011, 123), therefore Robinson told his friends that: “Cecil B. DeMille restored my self-respect” (Gansberg 1985, 236). However, “DeMille may have revived the actor’s self-respect but not his former career. Given his tainted political past and the fact that HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] never officially cleared him, industry leaders still considered him a box-office risk” (Ross 2011, 123).

One strongly suspects that DeMille’s motivation in hiring Robinson was less altruistic than pragmatic, less political than artistic. DeMille-the-epic-filmmaker needed a good screen villain and Robinson fitted the bill admirably on multiple deep focus levels. After all, “his on-screen identification with Dathan, a figure who, as the American Communists were alleged to do, spied and informed on his own people” (Wright 2003, 109). Furthermore, where else was DeMille going to get a publicly perceived “traitor” who was a Jew and could faithfully act on-screen as a Hebrew traitor with gangster resonances to DeMille’s perfectionist standards at such short notice and without serious real-world political complications? In short, Edward G. Robinson was a casting God-send for DeMille, Hollywood’s Almighty, who had given Robinson his personal absolution by professionally hiring him for the Dathan-the-traitor role.

6. John Carradine (the Boulevard Bard) as Aaron (the Mouthpiece)

Just as interesting is the choice of John Carradine to play Aaron, Moses’ biological brother and co-ambassador of the Divine. [Fig. 9.] According to the Bible, Moses was “slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exod. 4:10), but as a practical compromise when Moses complained about it, God provided Aaron as his personal mouthpiece saying: “Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet” (Exod. 7:1). Scripturally speaking, Aaron was more eloquent in speech than his sluggish brother (Exod. 4:14–16) and chronologically speaking he was three years older than Moses (Exod. 2:1–4; 7:7).

Similarly, Carradine was older and more vocally experienced than Charlton Heston, having had a long career as a “B” movie star (with only a few meaty “A” roles), plus previous DeMille working experience. According to Robert A. Juran (1995, 53), “in several DeMille films his compelling voice was used off-

camera to lead mob cries and read oratorical statements or proclamations. (Film historians aren't completely sure in every case just which movies this occurred in)." He also had a profound personality-cum-professional quirk that proved providential for DeMille. According to Hollywood lore: "It is told that Carradine, a Shakespearean amok, now won notoriety on Hollywood Boulevard, marching up and down that 'Street of a Thousand Heartbreaks' in slouch hat and cape, day and night, roaring the Bard's great soliloquies." Carradine freely admits that during these days he did haunt Hollywood Bowl after midnight: "I used to go up there and shout Shakespeare at 20,000 empty seats. Night after night to develop my voice" (Mank 1989, 59).

DeMille heard, remembered and gave him the Aaron role because of his powerful and eloquent vocal skills, and presumably because his tall and authoritative physicality complemented Heston's tall and regal Moses; both being biological brothers on-screen. In short, Carradine-the-eloquent-speaker was cast in deep focus fashion as Aaron-the-eloquent-speaker, even if DeMille gave the more meaty dialogues, particularly the Divine demand: "Let my people go" (aka Exod. 8:1; 9:1, 13; 10:3) to Moses in his warrior-king mode, and in accordance with Holy Scripture that said: "And the Lord said unto him [Moses], Who hath made man's mouth? [...] have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" (Exod. 4:11-12). Filmmaking-wise, J. Stephen Lang (2007, 127) complemented DeMille because: "The events of Exodus 4, with Moses protesting that he is 'slow of speech,' are omitted, and rightly so, since Moses has proved to be quite eloquent" when it counted doing God's will.

7. Judith Anderson (the former Mrs. Danvers) as Memnet (the Usurper)

Baird Searles (1990, 20) noted that: "Judith Anderson does a pharaonic Mrs. Danvers as the nurse who knows the secret of Moses' birth." This is a plausible inter-filmic observation given that Anderson's role as the secret-holding servant, Mrs. Danvers, in *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) significantly predated her role as the secret-holding servant, Memnet, in *The Ten Commandments* [Fig. 10.], and which was such a noteworthy parallel performance to be remembered many decades later by Searles. Thematically speaking, the trusted Memnet got her deadly comeuppance when she rejected the much-loved Moses and tried to expose the secret of his lowly Hebrew heritage (and status as an ethnic foreigner) thus usurping his high position as the next dynastic Pharaoh of Egypt. Instead, she wanted to stay faithful to her previous Egyptian master, the loved and loathed Pharaoh Sethi (Sir Cedric

Hardwicke) and Prince Rameses (Yul Brynner), but she paid a terrible price for her loyalty – death.

This behaviour was similar to the trusted Mrs. Danvers’s who got her deadly comeuppance when she rejected the second Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine) and attempted to usurp her high position as the next mistress of Manderly, a large country estate in Cornwall. She considered this new bride of the aristocratic widower Maxim “Max” de Winter (Laurence Olivier) to be of a lower social status and thus unworthy of the honour, position and power of the prestigious household dynasty. Instead, she wanted to stay faithful to the memory of her first mistress, the loved and loathed Rebecca, but she paid a terrible price for her loyalty – death.

Conclusion

DeMille’s deep focus/rule of analogy casting principle was not always perfectly achieved on each occasion or on every level, but nevertheless, his attempts added incalculable resonances of authenticity, naturalness and emotional depth to his on-screen characterizations, even if at times it was technically unappreciated by the public and scholars alike. But this fact is not too surprising for as Simon Louvish (2008, xv) noted: “The curious, and somewhat stunning, fact of the life in art of Cecil B. DeMille is that most of his best, most intriguing, most masterfully crafted and indeed amazing movies remain invisible and unknown, even to film buffs who were brought up on the legendary sagas of this iconic movie-maker.” This aesthetic tactic made his filmic *oeuvre* unique and an integral part of his signature sign that was worthy of his tag: “master storyteller and craftsman” (Bernheimer 1998, 49), which along with many others helps explain DeMille’s phenomenal box-office success that propelled him far beyond his directorial peers into the realms of legendary greatness. As Roy Pickard (1978, 80) put it: “No-one before or after his death could quite capture that special DeMille touch [...] [he] took his special kind of talent with him to the grave.” Further research into DeMille Studies is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

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