The Christology of a Jesus-Film

Another useful and *very important* way to distinguish among the Jesus films is to determine whether they offer a higher or a lower Christology, that is, presentation of Jesus' person and work:

High Christology	Low Christology
Jesus is clearly depicted as the Christ, the Son of God	Jesus identity is not clearly portrayed
Jesus is generally portrayed as a strong person	Jesus is generally portrayed as a weak person
The death of Jesus is clearly associated with salvation	Jesus' death is not clearly associated with salvation
Jesus is clearly portrayed as risen from the dead	The resurrection is not portrayed or even denied

To these lists I would offer my own very Lutheran means of distinguishing the types of films as well: If Jesus role as Savior is overshadowed by His role as teacher, then I would argue that there is a lower Christology than if His role as Savior is predominant. And one other factor to be considered would be the director's own personal beliefs and agenda.

On the basis of this and the above, I make the following *three* distinctions among the Jesus films:

High Christology	Middle Christology	Low Christology
Ben Hur	King of Kings	Jesus Christ Superstar
Jesus of Nazareth	The Greatest Story Ever Told	Godspell
The Jesus Film Project	The Gospel of Matthew	The Last Temptation of Christ
The Passion of the Christ		Jesus of Montreal
The Gospel of John		

Christt-Figure Films: "Am I Watching a 'Christ-Figure Film'?"

A. Major Evidence/Themes:
1. At some time in the film the character appears in cruciform or cross imagery is used.
2. The character performs miracles which benefit others and/or demonstrate his/her function as "Christ-figure" in relationship to the other characters in the narrative.
3. The character undergoes what can be interpreted as a passion, death, and/or resurrection.
4. The character functions in some way that is redemptive/saving to other characters in the film.
5. Sacramental imagery may be employed which calls to mind baptism and/or the Lord's Supper.
6. There may be a direct or indirect reference to Jesus himself in regard to this character. (Someone might even utter "Jesus!" in this character's presence.)
7. Other characters in the film may resemble to varying degrees characters from the Gospel accounts—God the Father, Mary, disciples, authority figures, Satan, etc.
8. Certain scenes may recall events or themes from the Gospel accounts–the Christ figure tempted, the Christ figure rejected by his family, the Christ figure's disciples fulfilling his work, etc.
9. The character might have a mysterious origin or a father he never knew or who is now dead and so is who is no longer around, but whom others venerate as special in some way.

B. Other Evidence:
1. The character is often an outsider in relationship to the wider group and to society as a whole.
2. The character is thus often misunderstood, even initially by those with whom he/she will later befriend and "save."
3. At the same time, the character could be or become "the ultimate insider" within his/her own smaller group.
4. The character is often at odds with authority figures and this may often lead to conflict.
5. The character is often the victim of injustice and unfair treatment and is depicted as suffering as such.

C. Portrayals of the "Christ-figure" in "Christ-films" (not intended to be a complete list):
1. Christ as Rebel against the System—e.g., *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999).
2. Christ as Promised Deliverer—e.g., *The Terminator* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999), *Avatar* (2009).
3. Christ as the Savior of Mankind (or some other species)—*The Omega Man* (1971), *The Terminator* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Happy Feet* (2006), *Wall-E* (2008), *Avatar* (2009), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014).
4. Christ as Ideal Man or Model Hero (or even Model "All American Hero")—e.g., *The Cowboys* (1972), *The Matrix* (1999), *Spider-man 2* (2004).
5. Christ as One Who Identifies with Sinners/Criminals/Outcasts/the Marginalized—e.g., *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Gran Torino* (2008).
6. Christ as Father-figure, Teacher, or Mentor—e.g., *The Cowboys* (1972), *Gran Torino* (2008).
7. Christ as Agent of (Divine) Wrath—e.g., *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *Pale Rider* (1985), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Tombstone* (1993).
8. Christ as Righteous Sufferer—*Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *The Green Mile* (1999), Batman in *The Dark Knight* (2008).
9. Christ as Leader or Center of (His Own) Unique Community—*Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Bronco Billy* (1980), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *The Matrix* (1999).
10. Christ as Antichrist—Hannibal Lector in *Hannibal* (2001), the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008).