



10-1-2007

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David B. Howell
Ferrum College, dhowell@ferrum.edu

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Recommended Citation

Howell, David B. (2007) "Screening the Temptation: Interpretation and Indeterminacy in Cinematic Transformations of a Gospel Story," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.11.02.03>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss2/3>

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Screening the Temptation: Interpretation and Indeterminacy in Cinematic Transformations of a Gospel Story

Abstract

Stories contain gaps that that readers and listeners must fill in with their imagination. Film by its very nature fills in some of the gaps in narrative as it presents a visual and aural experience for its viewers. In doing so, however, film can also impose particular interpretations of a biblical story even while creating an appearance of verisimilitude. In this essay, different understandings of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness are explored through some cinematic portrayals of this biblical narrative.

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Gaps and Indeterminacies

Some New Testament scholars have argued that the movement from an oral to a written gospel represents a movement from flexibility and fluidity to firmness and fixedness. Order is imposed on the oral traditions of Jesus as stories are connected and hierarchically arranged. Writing creates a sense of closure and completeness absent in the context-bound performance of orality.¹ Even within the order fixed by textuality, however, narratives still contain gaps or indeterminacies. Readers fill those gaps by supplying information in the reading process. What happens to these gaps, however, when the text is transformed to visual image in a moving picture? Does film fill in some of these gaps and thus impose particular interpretations of a biblical story even while appearing to portray "what happened" in space and time?

Phenomenologist Roman Ingarden and reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser are most responsible for developing ideas about the function of gaps in the reading process. Ingarden argues that every narrative text has "spots of indeterminacy" within them because they are incapable of reproducing real objects. Real objects in space and time are always "universally, quite unequivocally, determined."² Objects portrayed in fiction, no matter how minutely described, on the other hand will always have a finite rather than an infinite number of

determinations. The resulting gaps or "spots of indeterminacy" are what are filled by readers in the reading process as they make characters and stories concrete.

Iser has argued that these gaps stimulate the imagination of readers. They are the "switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text."³ Narrative prose must provide the right mix of referential statements to guide readers in their projections, but not so many as to bog the readers down in boring prose. Iser argues that the images made concrete in the reading process are different from objects in photographs or film. In film these objects are "optical" rather than imagined and thus more determined. This determination is one of the reasons he believes that viewing a filmed version of a novel is rarely as satisfying as the experience of reading it.⁴ No matter how "faithful" a director is to a written text when adapting it to film, the story is altered or "mutated" as it moves from one medium to the other. Different film versions of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness can be examined to illustrate this phenomenon.

Screening the Temptation

In the move from oral to written gospel, those who hear or read the biblical stories must still engage their imaginations to make characters and events in some sense "concrete." In adapting biblical stories from text into film, however, movies will fill in some of Ingarden's "spots of indeterminacy" or Iser's "blanks" through

their visual representations. Settings are given form and characters shape as moving pictures provide viewers with sufficient "determinations" to create the illusion that they are watching real people in time and place.⁵ Iser has criticized the way Ingarden conceived of the filling in of "spots of indeterminacy" as "banal" and "mechanistic." According to Iser, Ingarden's readers simply seem to create and complete a mental image (e.g., an old man is given "gray hair" by readers as they read a story).⁶ And yet, this process is exactly what happens in movies as the director "fills in" the indeterminacies of the story with an image. Iser's alternative is to think that "blanks" in the determinacy of text demand a "need for combination" rather than simply a "need for completion." In other words, readers make connections between facts or situations in the story and thus fill in blanks to the extent that they serve some function in the story.⁷ The movement from indeterminacy to determinacy that films partially provide simply by the medium used, however, likewise means that connections and combinations, to some extent at least, are also already made for viewers. Camera angles, lighting, and sound to mention just a few dimensions of film provide viewers with determinations missing from a text that is read. Additionally, the connections made with the music and interpretive commentary that sometimes accompany the visual images in filmed versions of biblical stories can provide particular theological interpretations of the biblical text.

Differences in the way that movies have handled Jesus' temptation in the wilderness illustrate some of the possibilities and problems of film adaptations and interpretations of biblical texts. Given the episodic nature of the gospel stories, will movies provide intrusive commentary by a narrator alongside the temptations to provide connections between events in Jesus' life and interpret the significance of what happens? How will movies "picture" the tempter? While the gospel stories do not provide a verbal description of the tempter, a rich tradition developed which portrayed the devil in a variety of forms – snake, dragon, bat, man, or some combination of human and animal features to name just a few.⁸ Moreover, in the interest of making a story more dramatic or interesting, does the film stick to the biblical text or add dialogue? And finally, do the particular decisions that films make on some of these issues foreground one interpretation of Jesus' temptations above others?⁹ To mention two possible interpretations frequently found in commentaries, does a film portray Jesus in the wilderness temptation as the Second Adam who triumphs where the first Adam failed? Or is Jesus seen in the temptations as God's Son who proves himself fully obedient to God in ways that Israel fell short in its wilderness wanderings?

With regards to the question of how to depict the devil in film, director Nicholas Ray chose not to objectify the tempter in his 1961 film *King of Kings*. As Jesus walks into the wilderness after his baptism, voice-over commentary is used

not only to summarize but also dramatize the ordeal Jesus faced during his forty days in the wilderness. Bright lighting creates a sense of heat and hardship. This narrator's voice functions in this scene in a manner similar to the sort of omniscient third person commentary provided in the gospels. It interprets for viewer the purpose of the temptations and underscores for the viewers the experience of being outside looking in at a picture with some privileged perspectives. The viewer's privileged perspective of omniscience is further underscored by the camera angle used in the filming as we watch Jesus experience temptations as an outside observer. As the temptation begins, Jesus is a small figure in a vast, barren wilderness. For much of the temptation story, the camera is placed above Jesus and viewers look down on him

When the temptations finally come, Jesus hears a disembodied voice coming from the clouds. When we hear, with Jesus, the disembodied voice of the tempter the question arises where it comes from. Is this more privileged information for the viewers as we eavesdrop on an internal struggle of Jesus, or are we observing a force that comes to him from the outside? Jesus' tempter is never named in the dialogue between the two, but Jesus' challenge to him at the end of the final temptation, "Come if you will, for I shall not call upon the Lord my God to stop you." You shall not force me to put the Lord my God to the proof," suggests that temptation comes from outside of Jesus. The narrator resumes his voice-over

commentary at the end of the temptations and confirms such an interpretation by referring to the devil departing away from Jesus. By using a disembodied voice to depict the temptation, however, Ray offers viewers what can be seen as a "demythologized" understanding of the devil and temptation. Although many contemporary Christians still think of the devil in a variety of personified ways, Ray's demythologized "reading" of the biblical story is congenial to others who may experience temptation in ways similar to Jesus rather than coming from the caricature of a man with a pointed tail, horns, and pitch fork. Moreover, in the final scene of temptation, the camera is no longer placed above Jesus but more or less at eye-level. In triumphing over these temptations, Jesus can no longer be perceived in the weak position that high angle shots convey. Rather, Jesus' perspective and experience of temptation is at a level that many viewers may share.

Other film versions of Jesus' life portray the tempter in human form. Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), unlike many other films of Jesus that approached Jesus' life with a harmonizing method, was based solely on one gospel. Instead of using an omniscient narrator to make the connections between events in Jesus' life, Pasolini moves directly from baptism to wilderness temptation. The lack of transition seems jarring to the reader, but in some ways recreates the episodic nature of the gospel stories.

The pace of the temptation scene is slow. The lack of movement by Jesus as he kneels in prayer not only helps convey the sense that he has been in the wilderness meditating for some time, it also presents an almost iconic figure. Pasolini's juxtaposition of distant views with extreme close-ups also creates interesting perspectives for the viewer. The wide-angle view of Jesus kneeling in prayer in the middle of an immense desert creates an impression of the isolation of Jesus when off in the distance we see a solitary figure striding across the barren landscape. A cloud of dust, or is it smoke, is kicked up by the edges of his cloak dragging the ground. By having his tempter dressed in a long cloak Pasolini seems to be appropriating some of the conventions that developed in painting where the devil comes to be cloaked in a monk's garb in medieval art. When we see his face, however, he is an ordinary man. The dialogue between Jesus and the devil comes straight from Matthew so that the whole scene has a terseness missing from other films that create dialogue between the two. The distant point of view as the temptation scene began, however, is now replaced by a subjective point of view. By cutting back and forth between Jesus' face and the devil's face, the viewer is placed in the midst of the action. The use of black and white film and the brevity of interchange make the temptation more forbidding perhaps than in other films. In the third temptation when the devil offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Jesus' homage, Pasolini has interestingly included the ruins of a castle in the background as the devil speaks. Unlike other films that frame the temptation

against the background of splendor and riches, Pasolini's depiction suggests that the devil can either not deliver the goods he offers to Jesus or that the treasures of this world are fleeting and will not last.

George Stevens' film *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) also portrays the tempter in human form, but the film differs greatly from others we have considered. Although this film does not have as much voice-over commentary as say *King of Kings*, the commentary is theological and does not just serve to make transitions between events in Jesus' life. For example, as John goes into the wilderness after his baptism to be tempted, we hear the voice-over speech of John the Baptist quoting Ps. 24 and references in the psalm to God, "the King of Glory" are by implication predicated to Jesus.¹⁰ It is the narrator's voice at the completion of Jesus' triumphant exchange with the devil that paraphrases Daniel 7:13-14 about the Son of Man coming in great power and glory as the viewers see Jesus atop a cliff in the wilderness at daybreak with glorious music cascading down from heaven. Moreover, the devil has a much greater role in this film than in others. The dialogue between the devil and Jesus is greatly expanded in the wilderness temptation and he also appears in five other scenes in the film.¹¹

Jesus first confronts his tempter after a long hard climb up from being baptized by John. The severity and hardship of the wilderness experience seems to be indicated by the strenuousness of the exercise rather than its length. What Jesus

finds at the top is not a forbidding creature, but a congenial, balding, middle-aged man who offers him hospitality and tempts him with the comforts of creaturely existence. Stevens' use of lighting and camera angle in the initial encounter is noteworthy. Unlike the bright lighting of *King of Kings*, Jesus' encounter with the devil takes place at night. The viewer joins Jesus in looking into the dark and shadowing mouth of a cave to see his tempter. Does the lack of direct lightening say something about the evil designs of the tempter, especially if we note the contrast to Jesus who is backlit by a gigantic moon that functions almost as a halo behind his head? In the expanded dialogue that follows, the devil makes the temptations of food, power and glory in this world, and protection from God sound so reasonable. By having the temptations couched in the appeals of creaturely comforts, Jesus faces the type of temptations viewers may face. With such a portrayal, many have seen Stevens offering a critique of the materialism and consumerism of America in the mid-1960's.¹²

If he was connecting Jesus' temptations with those experienced by his viewers, Stevens was following an ancient tradition that connected Jesus' temptations with those faced by Adam and Eve in the Garden. Peter Lombard is representative of the lines of medieval exegesis when he argues in his *Sententiae* (2.21.5) that "The Ancient Enemy raised himself in three temptations, against our first parents, for then he tempted them with gluttony, vainglory, and avarice...But

in the same way that he [Satan] overcame the first man, he lay subdued before the Second. He tempted him with gluttony when he said "Command that these stones be made bread. He tempted him with vainglory when he said, "If thou be the Son of God cast thyself down." And with avarice for loftiness and power, he tempted him when he showed him all the world, saying "All these things will I give thee if falling down thou wilt adore me."¹³

More explicit connections between Jesus' temptations in the wilderness and the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden are found in other films that elect to depict the tempter not in human form but in the form of a serpent. Although the Genesis account does not identify the serpent who tempted Eve with Satan, this identification was made in later Jewish and Christian writings. John Heyman follows this convention in his 1979 film "*Jesus*" by depicting Jesus tempted by a snake while in the wilderness. Like Pasolini, Heyman eschews the harmonizing methods of many films of Jesus and bases his movie on one gospel - the gospel of Luke – but unlike Pasolini he makes heavy use of a narrator throughout the film. Although we do not see the serpent speak to Jesus in the film, a snake slithers by just as Jesus hears a voice and the narrator identifies the temptation as coming from the devil. Here is a "spot of indeterminacy" in the film that Heyman expects viewers to fill who know the connection between the serpent and Satan in the biblical tradition.

One final film to consider briefly that uses the identification between the tempter and a serpent is Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). This film is not based directly on the gospels themselves, but is an adaptation of a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis that struggles with the question of the relationship between the dualities of flesh and spirit. And yet it includes within a highly imaginative framework many stories taken from the gospels. In the movie (and the novel), Jesus' temptations in the wilderness are displaced, occurring much later in Jesus' ministry than they do in the gospels. The tempter comes to Jesus three times, but in a different form each time; first as a serpent, then a lion, and finally as a flaming torch. Throughout the movie Scorsese portrays Jesus subjectively so that viewers experience what Jesus is thinking and experiencing. Voice-over techniques are used in the film not to provide narrative commentary, but to give the viewers access to Jesus' inner life. With the temptations, this subjective viewpoint results in a tempter that appears both external to Jesus, but also represents his inner thoughts. The voices who speak are the voices of friends, Mary Magdalene and Judas, but they are identified as Jesus' spirit and heart. With a woman's voice, the serpent describes her temptation of Adam and invites Jesus to "find love," seek a similar experience of companionship, and share her bed. Whether the temptation is primarily one of domesticity or sexual in nature (and critics generally think that the issue is one of domesticity in the novel which Scorsese develops in a more sexual way), one is struck by a portrayal in the twentieth century that connects the devil

(both in the Garden and in the wilderness) to gender.¹⁴ Although people have pointed out that in the film women characters assume prominent roles in relationship to Jesus and the disciples, Margaret Miles' assessment that in the end "all the female characters represent the flesh side of the struggle" with spirit seems accurate.¹⁵

Conclusion

We have limited our consideration to some recent films that could be considered as adaptations, to some extent at least, of the gospel stories. Numerous other films use the devil and the theme of temptation in some imaginative retellings. Some, like Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), have been considered quite faithful to the biblical narratives. He has his contemporary Satan figure played by a lawyer who shows Daniel the city beneath their feet from the windows of an office penthouse. Issues of power, money, and fame form the basis of this modern day temptation. This cursory overview of cinematic retellings of biblical stories suggests that textual stories are mutated by the change of medium. Film must fill in some of the indeterminacies of the textual narrative and in doing so offers interpretations of the text. In the film versions we have seen, the interpretations more often find some way to connect Jesus' temptations to the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden rather than to Israel's experience in the wilderness. If this characterization is accurate, the films' interpretive moves go against the stream of

most biblical scholarship that sees Jesus experience against the backdrop of Israel's experience.¹⁶ When viewed in conjunction with reading the biblical texts, however, the different cinematic transformations of a biblical text provide professors with a helpful way for students to consider the interrelationship between the gospels and their nature of as interpretive literature of faith.¹⁷

¹ See Werner Kelber's work *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1983) for the most complete statement of this argument. He bases his work primarily on theorists such as Walter J. Ong. See his book *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

² Ingarden, Roman, *The Literary Work of Art*, transl. George Grabowicz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 193), 1973.

³ Iser, Wolfgang, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response," in *Prospecting: From Reader-Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 28.

⁴ Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 137-38.

⁵ Pier Paolo Passolini, in fact describes his film as "simply the visualization of one particular Gospel, that of St. Matthew." Quoted by Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine. Jesus and Christ Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 95.

⁶ *Act of Reading*, 176-77.

⁷ *Ibid*, 177, 182-83.

⁸ See Gertrude Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols, transl. J. Seligman (Greenwich, CT: New Graphic Society, 1971) for the development of different images of the devil or Satan.

⁹ Paul Flesher and Robert Torey in their essay "Filming Jesus: Between Authority and Heresy" in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol 8, no. 1 (2004), 5-7 argue that Jesus films use a method analogous to targumic approach to Scripture to insert non-biblical material and offer theological interpretations into their films.

¹⁰ See W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1997), 93.

¹¹ W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 91 points out the devil gets mentioned in the credits as "the dark hermit." The other scenes in which he appears are the attempted stoning of Mary

Magdalene, outside Jesus' house in Nazareth, when Judas goes to the priests, as one of Peter's accusers when he denies Jesus, and in the crowd crying out for Jesus' crucifixion.

¹² Both W. Barnes Tatum (92-97) and Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 143-45 make this point. Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospel in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 154 argues that "Stevens mythologizes the Jesus story to render it meaningful to moderns."

¹³ Cited in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 753-54.

¹⁴ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 155, point out that John Milton in his *Paradise Regained* has two devils suggest that Christ could be tempted sexually, although Satan ends up dismissing this strategy. Nikos Kazantzakis and Martin Scorsese are thus not the first to raise the issue.

¹⁵ Miles, Margaret R. *Seeing and Believing. Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 36.

¹⁶ A classic interpretation reflecting this view is found in Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son*, transl. J. Toy (Lund: Gleerup, 1966). A more recent exposition of this view is found in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's article about Jesus' temptation in the August 1999 issue of *Bible Review*.

¹⁷ I have used clips of the temptation from Jesus films in a number of classes over the years. See the short entry by Marianne Meye Thompson in the recent volume *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, ed., Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 261-62 for a good, brief discussion of one strategy for using these stories in film.