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Jesus Christ, Superstar? Why the Gospels Don't Make Good Movies

Abstract

Though movies based on the Gospels might be entertaining and even deeply affective as movies, the medium of film must alter the form and function of the Gospels so much that they disappear into the film. The rhetoric and style of the Gospels do not translate into film, in contrast to other literary forms. Two films appearing within several years of each other—*The Gospel of John* and *The Passion of the Christ*—show how nearly impossible it is for Gospel narratives to be filmed. It would seem that only when the character of Jesus is portrayed in an iconic form within brief scenes do the Gospels make credible film material. Three movies helpfully show how this works: *Andrei Rublev*, *Barabbas*, and *Bad Lieutenant*.

In 1927 Cecil B. DeMille brought out *King of Kings* to massive success. But to make the story of Jesus fit the demands of film, DeMille did two things; he conflated elements taken from the four Gospels and he added material missing in the Gospels. DeMille carried out this radical revision for at least two compelling reasons: to make money and to make the narrative about Jesus work on the screen. In doing so, DeMille made Jesus interesting and thereby distorted the original Gospel narratives, voiding the rhetorical and theological purposes of the gospel accounts of Jesus. “Interesting” here means interesting in primarily an aesthetic sense; the narrative is restructured from the biblical one of testimony to a more fictionalized one in which Jesus becomes the protagonist of a plot rather than a sage or a savior who requires a response either for or against him.¹ What happens to Jesus creates interest as a character whose plot resolution becomes the purpose of the story. Thus, DeMille’s revisions point to a central problem in every filmic treatment of any or all of the Gospels, a problem hinted at by the British poet W. H. Auden in his essay “Postscript: Christianity and Art.” In this essay, Auden asserts that it “is impossible to represent Christ on the stage. If he is made dramatically interesting, he ceases to be Christ and turns into a Hercules or a Svengali. Nor is it really possible to represent him in the visual arts for, if he were visually recognizable, he would be a god of the pagan kind.”² The most an artist can do, according to Auden, is present Jesus either as a baby or as a corpse because one cannot portray pure holiness in dramatic form.

If Auden's point is applied to film, then the Gospels will always remain unfilmable in the sense that film can never duplicate the effect or purpose of the Gospels, unlike filmed adaptations of plays, novels, short stories, or even biographies. This paper will examine some of the problems associated with the transformation of the Gospels into film, but since so many excellent studies examining "Jesus films" are available, this study will fall into three parts of limited analysis of select films. Part I will quickly outline some key rhetorical dynamics of the Gospels and how those purposes seem nearly impossible to recreate in the medium of film. Part II will compare *The Gospel of John* with *The Passion of the Christ*. Both films came out at roughly the same time, and their extreme differences connect in the way they both fail in re-presenting Jesus. Part III will suggest how three films that briefly and only partially show Jesus might be the only way film can capture the spirit of the Gospels without making Jesus into a star. These films are Andrei Rublev, Barabbas, and Bad Lieutenant.

Part I

A central problem in transferring the Gospel narrative to film is the conflict between the rhetorical constraints of the Gospels and the narrative demand of film, at least of film that is directed toward a mass audience. Novels, short stories, plays, and biography might carry over into film (though in obvious cases this might not be a good idea—such as an experimental play or a novel of a thousand pages). Since

each of the four canonical Gospels is so short and relatively simple compared to the psychological complexities of even a good short story, it would appear obvious that any of the four, or a conflation of them into one continuous story, could make a decent film. But the Gospels do not work like usual narrative fiction or narrative non-fiction in spite of the superficial resemblance between Gospel and biography.

The ubiquitous leather-bound, double-columned, cross-referenced, chapter-and-verses Bibles most people are familiar with have little to do with the look and use of the Bible for more than a thousand years. Our modern perception of what the Bible is and, consequently, what the Gospels are, form a set of expectations of how we read the Gospels, but these expectations are modern and have little to do with the original design and use of the Gospels.

Leland Ryken, who has written about the Bible as Literature for several decades, points to the literary idiosyncracies of the Gospels, allowing readers to see why attempts to transfer them into film leads to the kind of re-writing that Auden claims will transform Jesus too much. Ryken states that, above all, the Gospels are “episodic”; unlike narratives that achieve their unity through progressive action of a protagonist, one event leading to the next sequentially, the Gospels use apparent randomness to make their statements about Jesus.³ Unity instead depends primarily on “dialogue and encounter,” so that individual and often non-contiguous episodes “lay out the action into separate dramatic scenes, as though it were a play, focusing

on each segment and also noting the sequence or positioning of scenes as we move through the episodes.”⁴ Summarizing his description of how the Gospels work, Ryken claims that the Gospels rely on characteristics that just do not make for compelling film: “a preference for the brief unit, a relatively self-contained quality to the individual episodes, a prevailing realism, and a simple, unembellished style.”⁵ This style is paratactic, which consists of short clauses strung together with conjunctions. Nearly every modern translation of the Gospels break up their paratactic style in an attempt to make the Gospels more palatable for modern readers. Whereas the repetitive syntax of Mark, for instance, lends itself to short, self-contained segments such as the assigned readings of the lectionary, it works not at all as an unchanged script for a film.

Indeed, throughout most of church history, among Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and some Methodists and Presbyterians, scripture was recited or even chanted during the liturgy. Lections for set times of daily prayer and for Sunday readings gave the vast majority of Christians through the ages their exposure to Scripture, especially before the invention of printing made Bibles cheap enough for ordinary churchgoers to possess one. The chapter divisions found in the Gospels did not appear for nearly a thousand years, but the chapters follow more or less the natural pauses in the episodic narrative units, which are called pericopes. These pericopes formed the basis of lectionary readings, so

through the first fifteen hundred years of church history, Christians have heard the Gospels read in short, relatively independent units, and it is possible that the Gospels were composed with the idea that the texts would be used some way in regular liturgical worship. These pericopes tend to work against reading the Gospels as a narrative that moves fluidly from beginning to end.

The Gospels were crafted with a purpose other than straightforward biography. The episodic and disjunctive nature of the various teaching and healing scenes served primarily to assist catechesis and liturgy. Oscar Cullman, one of the major New Testament scholars of the Twentieth Century, put it this way: “we must note that the needs of preaching, teaching, and worship rather than biographical interest guided the early community in fixing this tradition of the life of Jesus.”⁶ Some scholars would go so far as to argue that Mark’s Gospel, usually reckoned as the earliest one composed, took its shape for Sunday by Sunday reading, being patterned as lections in imitation of Jewish antecedents.⁷ The Gospels, being intended for auditory and communal use, functioned within liturgical settings of prayer and Eucharist. In contrast, as Lloyd Baugh points out, “The nature of the genre cinema is that of the audio-visual ‘word,’ mediated by an ever more complex technology and ever more powerful economic structures, and experienced largely in settings that are social-cultural and entertainment.”⁸ The gap between the two genres would seem so great as to undercut any possible filming, especially

regarding such transcendent scenes as the Transfiguration or the Ascension, according to Baugh.

Further, our current perception of the Bible is as a single text with multiple narratives clustered together in rough chronological or generic order (e.g., historical books, Wisdom books, Paul's epistles, etc.). Modern readers have been trained to read the Bible as a fairly coherent whole, a text helpfully sectioned up into chapters and verses, all cross-referenced and indexed. However, for the first Christians living in the Roman Empire, the "Bible" was a collection of individual scrolls, each containing only one or at most several discrete texts. A single church in the First Century might own some scrolls of the Old Testament (especially the Psalms) and some scrolls containing New Testament material as these developed and circulated among the small urban churches. Though the canon of the biblical text formed rapidly, the slow production of texts by hand and their initial appearance in scroll form reinforced the rhetorical demands of the Gospels as liturgical and educational documents. The Gospels, then, aim at the auditory, especially in the context of a communal reading. Reshaping one or all of the Gospels into film requires such a massive transformation that the resulting product could be entertaining and emotionally affective, but by becoming entertainment, such a film—even if being a good film—effectively undermines the kerygmatic quality of Gospel literature.

The Gospels formed within these cultural, theological, and technological constraints, and the modern desire to turn gospels into dramatically interesting narratives that work like biographies or short stories always interrupts the design of the Gospels. A modern movie of Jesus might work as a movie, but the irony is that for it to work as a movie it must refashion the original text so much that, as Auden notes, the aesthetic supercedes the devotional, the theological, and the spiritual purposes of the Gospels. Jesus must become interesting, a dramatic figure probably with a recognizable face, hair, gestures, and accent, depending on the actor chosen.

Part II

Filming the Gospels demands several primary decisions, all of which alter the original design of those texts. One can film the Gospels straight; that is, the film can aim at word-for-word, scene-by-scene reenactment (e.g., Saville's *The Gospel of John* or Passolini's *The Gospel of Matthew*) or at synthesizing the various texts into one new narrative (e.g. *The King of Kings*, or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*). Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is somewhat unique in that it takes a discrete section of the various Gospels and conflates them along with material from outside the Gospels. But this contrast between individual Gospels as film and syntheses of the Gospels into one film is only apparent. In the first case, the Gospel-as-is, every attempt at replicating the text for viewing must make such substantial changes that the success or the failure of the film depends on features extrinsic to the Gospel

itself—background music, mise-en-scene, the actor chosen to play Jesus, the “realism” of the setting, the use of close ups or distance shots, the accents of the actors, and so on. All these and other elements of film mean that entertainment value of the film outweighs any theological or pietistic residue that might make it into the film.

The recent *Gospel of John* (2003) aptly demonstrates Auden’s claim that “staging” the Gospels detracts from the intentions of the gospel genre. Watching this purportedly literal visual equivalent of the fourth Gospel, the viewer is confronted with a number of visual and aural signals that distance the kerygmatic nature of the Gospel text. Christopher Plummer narrates, and once one is alerted to this fact it becomes impossible to avoid connecting his voiceover with his previous work. One thinks of “The Captain,” for instance, from *The Sound of Music*, and this leads to further associations such as considering other “famous” voices that might have narrated the material (would an upper class British voice have been better?). Similarly, with the relatively bloodless crucifixion scene, it is now impossible to view it or any other cinematic portrayal of Jesus’ cross without an immediate comparison to Gibson’s rendition.

As another example of how this process of association might work, adjusting the movie even more in the direction of mere entertainment, is the actor who plays Jesus, Henry Ian Cusick. Relatively unknown at the time, his visibility

in popular culture has increased with his role on the popular television series *Lost*. Viewing *The Gospel of John* now entails the same problems as viewing *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (Jesus went on to become Emperor Ming) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Jesus went on to become Spiderman's enemy, The Green Goblin).⁹

The relative lack of success enjoyed by *The Gospel of John* demonstrates the pitfalls of translating the Gospels into film. A word for word retelling of the fourth Gospel, this movie stands in bland contrast to everything that made viewers of *The Passion of the Christ* either love or loathe Gibson's film. The irony here points to the issue: a film that strives at faithfulness to a Gospel account turns into boring entertainment while also lacking the simple religious power one can encounter in the text itself. Admittedly, *The Gospel of John* is a low budget production, and the movie feels as if it were meant for a church library or for use in Sunday school. It is difficult to imagine even the most devout Christian watching the full three hour version in a theater without squirming impatiently at some point. The mediocre acting of nearly everyone other than Jesus leads them to more or less stand in the background staring at Jesus while he delivers his various discourses. Jesus' mother, for instance, displays a limited range of talent as an actress, and her tears at the crucifixion come off as forced. The entire performance—again, Jesus excepted—is only slightly above a well-rehearsed church play.

But bad acting and limited set designs alone cannot explain the plodding nature of this movie, perhaps the most boring of all the Jesus films. The deeper problem lies with the nature of the John's Gospel itself. The fourth Gospel is the most overtly theological of the four Gospels: the prologue with its declaration of Jesus' identity as the eternal logos, the limiting of miracles to a few specific "signs," the absence of the Last Supper with the foot washing episode substituted in its place—these and other facets of the Gospel do not lend themselves to dramatic portrayal. The most difficult problem for film treatment, though, is the discursive nature of John's Gospel. Jesus speaks a lot, and his rhetoric differs from the other Gospels, producing the effect of a wisdom teacher reciting with absolute assurance knowledge about things beyond mortal ken. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus speaks in parables or delivers apocalyptic addresses about judgment. In John's Gospel, parabolic discourse almost disappears. For example, chapters 14-17 consist of Jesus speaking to his disciples on topics related to his crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit. This material produces its own interest within the text, but translating every word of these chapters into film is beyond the power of even a great director.

The Gospel of John attempts to transform these chapters of speech into a visual medium in two ways: first, we see Jesus and his disciples walk to various locations or even walk around within one location while Jesus speaks, the cuts between the scenes producing the effect of momentum as Jesus moves towards his

crucifixion in Jerusalem; second, while we listen to Jesus we sometimes see a few flashbacks, presented in black and white, of previous scenes such as when Jesus summoned his disciples. It is a valiant attempt at avoiding a straightforward filming of Jesus speaking for fifteen minutes, but this, again, signals the problem of filming the Gospels. Aurally, John's Gospel possesses a simple rhetorical energy. But the continuous recitation of the texts by an actor walking around cannot replicate the winsome simplicity of John's prose.

Similarly, all the Gospels rely on the standard minimalism of Biblical narration. As Eric Auerbach pointed out in *Mimesis*, biblical narrative supplies no details beyond the dramatic nature of dialogue. No biblical character in the Old or the New Testament is ever described or placed in a detailed setting. The briefest of details, such as David's "ruddiness" or Goliath's size, is the closest biblical narrative ever comes to supplying supporting visual information. Nothing of Jesus is known. Height, hair length, eye color, barefooted or sandaled, Galilean accent, and so forth—all detail has disappeared into the pure presentation of his actions and his teaching. Any filmmaker must make choices that undermine the function of the Gospels, and even as apparently straightforward version as Saville's entails the visual staging of Jesus within specific scenery. Cusick's English accent and unique features immediately mark him as a Jesus, one to be placed next to all the other Jesuses of film.

One scene in particular pulls together the problems with this film: in the temple-cleansing scene, Cusick/ Jesus swings around over his head a whip of cords, but the rather inept handling of the scene makes it embarrassing more than anything else. Jesus never makes contact with anyone, so he unconvincingly scatters merchants while tossing around a few small tables and releasing a few animals. The obviously low budgeted action takes place with Christopher Plummer's voice telling us what takes place as we see it anyway. This duplication of action and narration demonstrates the dilemma involved in filming the Gospel. The decision to recite the text in its entirety leads to some rather bizarre scenes along with the temple cleansing. In the first chapter of John, as Jesus establishes his mission in contrast to John the Baptist's mission, some disciples of John decide to follow Jesus. In John 1.38, the text simply states, "Jesus turned and saw them following him." The film both shows Jesus turning to see the two men, but the voiceover also tells the viewer that Jesus turns and looks. Voiceovers can be problematic in film, but the redundancy here is so palpable that it distracts from the visual element that is film's primary power. *The Gospel of John* is full of scenes like this, creating nothing but tedium. Just listening to the film without any video pinpoints the problem. The soundtrack by itself works, like a kind of Bible-on-tape. This shows that the Gospel in its original form is auditory in its intent. Visualizing the Gospel of John, even if had been undertaken by a master director with an unlimited budget, would still turn the powerful text into mere spectacle. As John O. Thompson writes,

“A photographic narrative medium . . . must fill in the details of ‘how Jesus looks’ in a way that a staged reading of the Gospel narrative does not need to.”¹⁰

Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to Matthew* changes and deletes scenes more than Seville’s film of John’s Gospel, making *The Gospel of John* the only film that strives for complete transferal of text into film (with the exception of the film’s lesser known predecessor, *The Gospel of Matthew*, which is part of the Visible Bible project, an attempt to film each of the Gospels with complete recitation of the biblical texts). All other Jesus movies in varying degrees conflate, elide, insert, or rewrite—sometimes radically—the original texts, and Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* does this to an extraordinary degree. Though this film has elicited the harshest of condemnations and the most ecstatic of defenses, the purpose of discussion here is narrow and it will avoid engaging the controversies that have flared up. Instead, the focus now remains on how Gibson’s spectacularly successful film about the last few hours of Jesus’ life relies entirely on the elements of film, those artistic qualities that give film its unique power over against other forms of art. The very success of *The Passion of the Christ* in terms of film results from its having abandoned the biblical text.

Because *The Passion of the Christ* was so provocative, it immediately generated articles and even books. To stake out limited territory for discussion in this article, one particular feature of the film will be examined here: Gibson’s use

of slow motion. Slow motion is an artistic element unique to film and can be used to stimulate a variety of responses. Gibson uses slow motion scenes abundantly in this film, reinforcing the heightened emotional response sustained throughout *The Passion of the Christ*, but departing from the bare style and the episodic plotting of the Gospels.

The Passion of the Christ is visually gorgeous. The opening shot of the moon hanging in the bluish night sky, the forward tracking shot that leads the viewer through the fog-shrouded garden up to the back of Jesus, the foreign language and faux exotic music—these and other elements combine to make the movie a genuinely filmic experience, and in spite of the later scenes that critics complain about, Gibson expertly employed standard Hollywood techniques to produce a visually powerful movie. During the opening sequence, for instance, Peter looks up at the full moon, the scene cuts to the high priest looking up at the same moon, and he turns to look at Judas. This movement leads to the first slow motion sequence, when the bag of money is tossed to Judas, upon whom the bag strikes open, scattering the coins. The film then cuts back to Jesus in the garden. When the soldiers show up to arrest Jesus, the entire scene of his capture cycles between real time and slowed time—interestingly, the sequence begins with Judas attempting to run away in slow motion after he shows the guards who Jesus is. The guards thrust him back toward Jesus, he kisses Jesus, and the guards position

themselves for the capture, all of this taking place in slow motion. These movements are interspersed between ordinary time movements and dialogue so that the entire scene flickers back and forth in speed until the general mayhem begins—Peter cuts off the ear of Malchus, the disciples scatter, the guards take Jesus. Again, most of this action takes place in slow motion.

Another scene consisting of generous portions of slow motion activity is the “via dolorosa” sequence. After the flagellation of Jesus (during which Satan moves among the crowd in slow motion), Jesus carries his cross and carries out the various actions associated with the traditional devotion of the Stations of the Cross. Especially when Jesus falls down, Gibson has structured the action to slow down, apparently in an attempt to give dramatic enactment to several of the fourteen Stations. However, the bloody spectacle of the unbelievably lacerated Jesus overwhelms any possible devotional use of these scenes. The standard Stations of the Cross involve pausing and meditating on a static image or a statue while various prayers and devotions are recited, usually in a communal context. Turning the Stations into slow motion horror might excite a powerful emotional response, but it cannot duplicate the intentional, steady slowness of prayer and meditation. Gibson not only departs from the biblical text, but he departs from the original purpose of the Stations. But this is not necessarily Gibson’s fault; any film maker, to make a good movie, must use techniques proper to the aims of the medium to

beguile audience interest, and the medium of film does not suit static, reflective pauses or assist one's prayers. During the Stations sequence, Satan and Mary opposite one another on either side of the crowd pace along with Jesus in slow motion. Given Gibson's Catholic commitments, he valorizes Mary by allowing her alone of all the people to recognize Satan, and thus both Mary and Satan watch Jesus, and they turn and watch one another, in slow motion. There is no basis for this scene in any biblical text or in devotional literature, but the scene, supported by the right kind of music, works powerfully in the visual realm, though in order to do so it must forsake the simple, muted presentation of Jesus in the Gospels with their paucity of details.

Other instances of slow motion appear: in one flashback, Jesus falls as a little boy while Mary runs to him; the soldier drives the spike through Jesus' hand; the rain drop, seen at first from a God's eye view, falls to the ground. By using such striking visual material, Gibson captured a large audience. Easily the most polished and exciting of the Jesus films, the very success of *The Passion of the Christ* severs it from the Gospels.

Part III

Comparing *The Gospel of John* with *The Passion of the Christ*—one a literally faithful recitation and the other the most complete rewriting of the Gospels yet—

demonstrates that movies are not conducive to extended treatments of Jesus because Jesus is a religious figure who demands a decision of faith. One film bores and the other film entertains. Avoiding either extreme in representing the Jesus of the Gospels seems impossible. As Auden points out, a dramatic representation of Jesus transforms the religious aims of the Gospels to the point that entertainment overwhelms the theological and devotional concerns of the biblical texts. A further proof of this comes from examining a few instances of film in which Jesus only briefly appears rather than stars as the main attraction. In these instances, Jesus remains enigmatic, undetailed as a character, and virtually unseen either because of shadows or of his distance.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, while the Medieval icon artist Rublev speaks with an elderly monk about the miseries of the Russian peasants, the scene shifts from their conversation to a Russian peasant's version of the crucifixion. Rublev and Theophan argue about God's purposes in letting Russian rulers, invading Tartars, famine, and plague decimate the simple people of Rus and whether Christ's crucifixion makes any difference in such a world. When Jesus first appears, the viewer is caught off guard because Jesus appears as one of the Russian peasants, indistinguishable from those around him. Jesus' grimy clothes and thick-soled peasant boots match those around him as he trudges through the snow to Calvary. In stunning images that simultaneously defamiliarize the Gospel account

yet also replicate its narrative simplicity, Tarkovsky has Jesus awkwardly crawl up a hill slippery with snow while alongside of him the cross is dragged up with ropes. When Jesus lies down on the cross, his features and gestures display sadness and exhaustion. No sign of scourging appears; instead, Jesus is identified as one of the peasants around him who all look tired and cold. Mary Magdalene throws herself on the legs of Jesus while he awaits the nailing, and a soldier dressed in Medieval Russian clothing gently taps her on the shoulder to move away. The distance between Tarkovsky's version of the crucifixion and Gibson's is vast, and the deft handling of the scene with the slow tracking, the distance shots, the large empty black and white spaces of the countryside, and the voiceover of the two monks create a mood much closer to the unaffected, direct account of the crucifixion in the Bible. Ironically, the strangeness of Tarkovsky's version gets one closer to the Gospels than the lavishly realistic version that Gibson put so much effort into.

In *Barabbas*, Jesus appears relatively immobile, he nearly always remains in the distance, he is usually shrouded in darkness, and the viewer never sees his face. Because of these visual factors, Jesus functions in *Barabbas* more iconically than in just about any film in which the character of Jesus appears. Jesus nearly disappears in some scenes, placed in the background or to the side of the main action. In an opening shot of the film, Jesus is led up a flight of stairs by a soldier in the background at the left side of the frame while at the same time an officer

walks across the center of the frame to the dungeon door to let out Barabbas. In another scene, while Barabbas carouses with his friends in a tavern, Jesus carrying his cross is barely and briefly glimpsed through the window. At the crucifixion itself, Jesus is seen only in silhouette, and the darkened cross with its placard, outlined against the sky, reminds one of the traditional Greek or Russian Orthodox cross. Though the scenes of Jesus in *Barabbas* lack the dramatic flair of *The Passion of the Christ* or the constant movement of *The Gospel of John*, its static presentation gets one closer to the way the biblical text works. The problem for film, of course, is that it would be impossible to create an entire movie that depicts Jesus in this iconic manner.

Another iconic Jesus is the one who appears for only a few minutes in *Bad Lieutenant*, a movie about a corrupt cop whose addiction to drugs and gambling destroy him. Harvey Keitel plays an unnamed police lieutenant who attempts to make one act of restitution in his miserable life by offering to “fix” the two young thugs who have savagely raped a nun. He meets the nun in an empty traditional-looking church where she prays in front of the altar and makes his offer, pointing out bluntly that the justice system will fail to capture and incarcerate the rapists. The sister stuns the cop by telling him that she has already forgiven them, and he asks what gives her the right to let them go free, inevitably to hurt others. The nun

simply responds, “Talk to Jesus. . . .” She gives the cop her rosary and leaves him befuddled and indignant on the floor.

Unexpectedly, the cop begins to moan with deep anguish as her challenge to faith mixes with the sordid mess of his own life (his addictions have wrecked his marriage and he is being hunted by gangsters for failing to pay a huge gambling debt). Keitel’s powerful performance creates a sense of total abandonment and self-loathing. As he cries out, the cop looks up to see Jesus standing in the center aisle, in silhouette, backlit by two windows high up on either side of him. This Jesus appears to be the crucified one, not a pre-crucified Jesus-as-rabbi or a post-resurrection glorified Christ. Wearing a loin cloth and the crown of thorns, Jesus stands silently while the cop spits out his anger and anguish in a stream of blasphemies (the word “fuck” appears almost monotonously, certainly making this the most provocative rendering of Jesus in film, far beyond what one finds in *The Last Temptation of Christ*). After exhausting himself with his tirade, the cop drops to his hands and knees, and after a moment’s hesitation begins to admit his own failures. From blasphemy to repentance, the cop begins to crawl toward Jesus, repeating “I’m sorry. . . . I’m so sorry. . . . Forgive me.” Throughout the scene, Jesus remains immobile, his face shrouded by the semi-darkness. He is a muscular, mysterious figure who summons either offense or love, and as the cop moves close to him Jesus slowly moves his right hand to touch the cop on the head. As with

Barabbas and *Andrei Rublev*, *Bad Lieutenant* renders Jesus as a human being who is simultaneously one of us and yet distanced. In this case, it matters not at all that the actor playing Jesus, Paul Hipp, has gone on to a fairly successful movie, stage, and television career. By remaining motionless and shadowed, and by receiving the shocking verbal abuse from the cop, this Jesus replicates the Jesus of the Gospels better in his brevity than either Henry Cusick or Jim Caviezel with all of their detailed, realistic portraiture.

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis wrote that he personally found Ignatian-style spiritual exercises impossible to perform. In one part of this devotional practice one attempts to imagine all of the details associated with a particular episode from the life of Christ, such as his birth, or the wedding at Cana, or the crucifixion. Lewis admitted that while the practice might work for some, especially with the right guidance by a spiritual director, for him, “the picture would go on elaborating itself indefinitely and becoming every moment of less spiritual relevance.”¹¹ Lewis points out that in some ways our growth in archeological and sociological knowledge of first century Palestine actually works against this traditional form of visualization since we get better and better in the way we can endlessly amplify each detail with realistic precision. Regarding such a finely elaborated vision of the crucifixion, Lewis wrote, “this is of less spiritual value than one might expect. Compunction,

compassion, gratitude—all the fruitful emotions—are strangled. Sheer physical horror leaves no room for them.” In the same way, full length films about Jesus seem to require a similar elaboration, driving the film away from the biblical text and toward those things that make film work. K. L. Billingsley argues that film has difficulty in dealing with such subjects as God, religious figures, and religious experiences.¹² Instead, film’s strengths are found in such things as conveying a sense of place, in dealing with light, trivial subjects, in depicting war, and in making evil characters interesting.

No doubt Jesus films will continue to be made and some of them might be quite good as movies. But whatever permutation of the Gospels or whichever individual Gospel such films make their subject matter, these films must gravitate toward the spectacular and the dramatic. The conclusion to *Savior on the Silver Screen* seems unassailable: “portraying the absolute or ‘gospel’ truth about Jesus by means of cinema is not possible.”¹³ —at least when Jesus is the main character in a full length movie.

¹ This is a problem that goes beyond turning the Gospels into film. The same aesthetic issues apply to Buddhist scriptures and the Koran.

² Auden, W. H., 1989, “Postscript: Christianity and Art.” *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays*. Selected by Edward Mendelson. New York: Vintage International, 457.

³ Ryken, L. 1992, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. 2 nd Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker, 375.

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⁵ ...377.

⁶ Cullman, O., 1968, *The New Testament: An Introduction for the General Reader*. Philadelphia: Westminster P, 28.

⁷ Cabannis, A., 1970, *Liturgy and Literature: Selected Essays*. University of Alabama Press, 15.

⁸ Baugh, L., 1997, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 4.

⁹ Jeffery H. Mahan in "Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies," and Gerald Forshey in "Jesus on Film" discuss this problem with representing Jesus by recognizable actors.

¹⁰ Thompson, J. O., 1997, "Jesus as Moving Image: The Question of Movement." *Images Of Christ: Ancient and Modern*. Eds. Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P., 295.

¹¹ Lewis, C. S., 1964, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 85.

¹² Billingsley, K. L., 1989, *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film*. Crossway Books, 55.

¹³ Stern, R. C., 1999, Jefford, C. N. and DeBona, G., OSB. *Savior on the Silver Screen*. New York: Paulist Press, 217.

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