Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies

Jeffrey H. Mahan
Iliff School of Theology, jmahan@iliff.edu

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Abstract
Films about Jesus attempt to interpret the gospel in light of both cultural issues and the concerns of individual filmmakers. Yet both 1) dominant assumptions about how to interpret Jesus and 2) the difficulty of presenting the narrative structures and worldview inherent in ancient texts within the forms of modern narrative cinema make this a difficult task. This article explores how this has been done, giving particular attention to how presentation of Jesus' divine and human natures are balanced in presenting the arrest, death and resurrection, in four well-known Jesus films available on video.

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Evangelicals, Orthodox and conservative Roman Catholic Christians picketed the theater in Chicago where I saw *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988. Standing in the cold they pronounced the Martin Scorsese film, and the Kazantzakis' novel on which it was based, blasphemy and told those of us waiting for tickets that attending might imperil our souls. It is tempting to think that the controversies generated by this film were unique. In fact however, filming the life of Jesus has always been a problematic enterprise and has always met mixed reactions.

Films about Jesus face the same aesthetic and commercial challenges as any other movie. A significant subject doesn't always produce a compelling film. The story must be engaging; the performances and production must be aesthetically satisfying. In addition, the attempt to portray on film the central narrative of religious communities has always been met with suspicion by believers and non-believers alike. In the case of a Jesus movie, the entire experience must work for viewers who have no personal investment in the subject and for those who see reflected or distorted in the film the central figure of their own religious lives.

The commandment against graven images has been one source of anxiety about the visual portraits of Christ. Protestants in particular have historically been concerned about the appropriateness of portraying Jesus. Suspicion of filmmakers in general and of their intentions in filming the life of Jesus added to that
concern. Churches that taught that Christians should not attend the movies were at best ambivalent about whether sacred subjects sanctified the medium. However there is no copyright on the gospel accounts. The story and images of Jesus have been translated into every art form. The church has never been able to entirely control that process. And many Christians of a particular generation report that Bible movies were the first, and for many years the only, films they saw.

Religious critics and audiences struggle with two problems when Jesus is presented on celluloid. First is the question of whether any visual presentation of divinity is acceptable. Secondly, even when the idea that Jesus can be a character in a movie is accepted, critics and audiences struggled with particular presentations of Jesus. How do we picture Jesus? Is he "gentle, meek and mild" or a "manly" figure confronting his antagonists? What elements of the gospel accounts will be included, or excluded, from a particular presentation? Is the emphasis on his teaching, on healing, on conflict with the Roman or Jewish authorities? The challenges of translation, transliteration and interpretation present themselves when anyone works creatively with the biblical text. They are perhaps particularly evident in attempts to present the story of Jesus on film.

For all the challenges filmmakers face, from the beginning of the history of the cinema Jesus has been a compelling subject that has drawn the interest of both believers and skeptics. The first commercial screenings happened in France in
1895, and Edison presented his first public screenings in 1896. Though we no longer have copies of them, in the next two years silent filmed versions of passion plays were showing in both countries. The American film purported to be filmed scenes from the famed Passion Play at Oberammergau, however some reports suggest that it was actually filmed on a rooftop in New York City. By 1912 an American cast and crew traveled to Palestine and Egypt to film From the Manger to the Cross. Critics report that these and other early films tended to be solemn, stoic and lifelessly reverential. They focus on Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity. Later films like The Gospel According to Saint Matthew (1964) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) would be more naturalistic and introspective. They attempted to reveal Jesus' humanness and suffering and attempted to explore his motivations.²

Concern about the appropriateness of presenting Jesus, and the effort to avoid offending any potential viewer is evident in the "sword and sandal" dramas of the 1950s. In films like Quo Vadis (1951), The Robe (1953) and Ben Hur (1959), Jesus is mentioned or appears, but little emerges about his character or mission. We see him at a distance, or his hand or feet fill the screen. We may overhear his words briefly or hear others discuss him. But there is too little distinct presence to define or offend.
It is not only attitudes about Jesus but about the Bible itself which shape these films and the critical response to them. Assumptions about how the Bible is to be read, about the relationship between the four gospels and about biblical criticism all shape the response to these films.

Modern biblical criticism helps us to see what is distinctive about each of the gospel accounts. But, with the notable exception of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1966), the Jesus films create a narrative by drawing on multiple gospel sources.\(^3\) This harmonization approach assumes the unity of the biblical texts. In doing so, the filmmaker imposes a dominant interpretation that masks the distinctive perspectives of the gospel writers. In an extreme example of this tendency C. B. DeMille actually imports New Testament texts to the story of the exodus and puts the "Magnificat" in the mouth of Moses' mother in *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Such liberty works with a popular audience that is vaguely familiar with the material but is frustrating for those aware of the critical issues of biblical authorship.

A further problem is the difference between the narrative form used in the genres of the biblical text and the form of popular contemporary genres. Modern audiences look for introspection and explanations of motivation that held little interest for the biblical writers. The gospel writers give us pictures of what Jesus did and said, and of the actions and responses of others but they are not interested
in the questions of why these characters acted as they did. One example of this can be found in the accounts of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Modern readers want to know why he led the authorities to Gethsemane but the Bible is silent about this. Did he do it for the money? Was Judas, as some later scholars have suggested, a zealot disappointed that Jesus had not launched a revolt against the Romans? We struggle with this same problem in reading the more problematic sayings of Jesus. What was he thinking when he cursed and withered a fig tree that didn't bear out-of-season fruit? If filmmakers are to do more than provide visual back drops for the gospel texts they will have to struggle with these or similar questions and offer audiences some answers.

Modernity's scientific worldview and the viewer's awareness of the film industry's ability to create special effects present another problem. Audiences will suspend their disbelief to enter into a fictional world in which the fantastic can happen. But the successful Jesus movie cannot present ancient Palestine as though it were Oz. Can the filmmaker present healings, walking on the water, multiplying loaves and fishes, or the raising of Lazarus without making Jesus seem merely a cinematic trickster? Can resurrection be suggested in a post enlightenment world? Film's realistic presentation makes difficult any of the theological nuances of what resurrection might mean.
One resolution of this problem is to abandon naturalistic presentation and historical continuity as was attempted in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, or *Godspell* (both 1973). Another is to displace the story as was done in *Hail, Mary* (1985) and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). In all of the Jesus films, selections are being made about what gospel material to include. Limiting the presence of the supernatural and focusing on Jesus as one who teaches, blesses and forgives reduces this problem for modern audiences. For instance, the 1927 version of *King of Kings* shows Jesus healing a blind girl and raising of Lazarus from the dead. But when the film is remade in 1961 these elements are eliminated. The only miracle involves a blind man healed when Jesus shadow falls upon him.

Biblical scholars explore how the original gospel writers shaped their narratives to respond to the needs of particular communities and historians examine how later tellers project their own issues of faith onto Jesus. One commentator argues that the responses of church and religious critics tended to reflect theological assumptions and social concerns of the critic's religious community. After reviewing the responses of the church press to the release of the various Jesus films, W. Barnes Tatum⁵ suggests:

- Mainline Protestant responses tended to evaluate on the basis of social relevance and the portrayal of Jesus' humanness.
- Evangelical Protestants tended to focus on faithfulness to the biblical text and to the portrayal of Jesus divinity.
Catholic publications seemed more open to the portrayal of Jesus, perhaps reflecting greater comfort with religious images.\(^6\)

Jewish response largely focused on concern about anti-Semitism, acknowledgement of the Jewish setting of the tale and the question of responsibility for Jesus' death.

The religious critic's assumptions and faith concerns shape his or her responses to the Jesus films. The same thing can be said of every creative engagement with the gospels. Each telling of the Jesus story projects the teller's own issues of faith onto Jesus. Thus, in making *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Marxist Pier Paolo Pasolini finds in the gospel a highly human Jesus who sides with the poor and is contrasted to a corrupt empire. The impact of the artist's own questions of faith on the portrait of Jesus is perhaps nowhere as evident as it is in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. For filmmaker Martin Scorsese, as for novelist Nikos Kazantzakis before him, the great mystery is how one comes to faith. They give us a Jesus who struggles throughout his life and ministry with God's call. Only on the cross does Jesus finally come to peace with his vocation in a way that allows him to give himself over to his calling.

In a brief essay, there is not space to address all of the Jesus films, or in fact to examine even a few in full. What follows in closing is a brief look four quite different films, each relatively easy to find for video rental or purchase. Together they suggest something about the possibilities and problems inherent in the Jesus
movie. How they present the crucifixion and resurrection is particularly revealing of the challenges of making a film about Jesus for a modern audience.

In 1961 Hollywood Nicholas Ray directed the first of the modern sound era Jesus extravaganzas, *King of Kings.* Working in the Hollywood spectacular tradition Ray had a big budget and crafted a film in 70 mm with expansive visual vistas and a melodramatic narrative. Demonstrating the seriousness with which the audience should take the film it begins with an extended symphonic overture. Should the viewer miss this aural cue, a helpful subtitle reads "Overture."

The film follows earlier Jesus movies by harmonizing the gospels but adds extended non-biblical material. The film begins with the sacking of Jerusalem and the desecration of the temple. In keeping with the concerns of the era in which the film was produced its moral context emerges from the politics of social conflict and change. The story of Jesus is set against that of Barabbas who is presented as a zealot warring with the Romans. This contrast comes to a head when Jesus' entry into Jerusalem coincides with an insurrection in the city led by Barabbas.

Youthful blue-eyed Jeffrey Hunter plays Jesus. The preview promoting the film's theatrical release announced that he was selected after a lengthy search "for the humility and devotion which he brought to the role." Hunter's Jesus is a quite human teacher of religious wisdom. While a script that de-emphasized the
supernatural may have made the story more approachable to a contemporary audience, critics found teen heartthrob too ethereal and Hollywood dubbed the film "I Was a Teenage Jesus."

In moving toward the crucifixion the film answers the question of Judas' motivation by tying him to Barabbas. It is Barabbas' disappointment that Jesus' plan does not call for a more immediate reversal of political conditions that leads to the betrayal and death. In some of the earlier films, which emphasized Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity, Jesus hardly seems to suffer in his torment and crucifixion. One would expect that this Jesus would experience real human pain and torment on the cross. But the pious intention of the production pulls back from that implication of taking seriously Jesus' humanity. Beginning with the scenes in which Jesus carries the cross through the street the camera angles tend to be from above masking his face and emotions. When he is hoisted onto the cross he seems more sad and tired than pained. In this sequence the move to idealize and dehumanize Jesus is so strong that the hair has been removed from his body and, in adoring shots from below, we see Jeffrey Hunter's clean shaved armpits. In death the flesh looks instantly stiff and wooden, the fleshly Jesus is no longer a man, he has become a classic crucifix such as you might buy in any Roman Catholic religious bookstore.
The film struggles with how to compellingly suggest the idea of resurrection. Biblically the resurrection is a matter of mystery. The risen Christ is clearly different from the fleshly Jesus and even his followers must discern his identity. Ray attempts to suggest the resurrection through a series of brief images from different perspectives. A quite fleshly Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, then his much-amplified voice is heard, and finally a huge shadow of the resurrected Christ falls across the landscape forming a cross as it lies across a rolled fishing net. This resurrection presentation seems pious in intent but unconvincing. One review of the day suggests that resurrection is presented as though "it might have been an hallucination."

Ray's film is a judged a failure by both secular and religious critics. It remains interesting for the way it illustrates Hollywood's effort to fit the story of Jesus into the format of spectacular historical melodrama.

A quite different presentation of the story of Jesus is found in the Italian film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo, 1964).* Shot in a poor rural region of southern Italy in the style of the post-World War II (WW II) Italian neo-realisits, the film is in black and white, frequently uses a handheld camera and featured local people chosen for their look rather than professional actors. The result is a stark, documentary like presentation. The sound track is particularly rich, drawing on sacred music from Africa and the Americas, as well
as on classical European compositions to underscore and interpret the visual images.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, the filmmaker, did not claim to be a believer. In fact, he was a professed Marxist. This created some controversy at the film’s release. But critics and audiences generally agreed that his was a friendly, sincere and compelling interpretation of the material. Pasolini reported that, stuck in a hotel room for a day, he read Matthew's gospel in a single sitting and was deeply moved by the story.

Most Jesus films pieced together material from multiple gospel accounts and created surrounding story to meet the expectations of contemporary audiences. In contrast, in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, there are no lines not found in the Bible, and Matthew's account is not harmonized with other gospels - though Pasolini does add some prophecy from Isaiah. This is a picture of Jesus drawn entirely from Matthew. However it is not the whole of the gospel. Like all the makers of Bible films, Pasolini must selection what material he will present. As with other contemporary films the major miracles are deleted, as is the transfiguration.

In Matthew, Pasolini found a strong Jesus, angry about the conditions of the poor. Though capable of smiling and taking joy in life he is often solitary, a bit
remote or aloof. This is a harsher presentation than the soft portrayals of Jesus we are used to from other films, however it is not inappropriate to Matthew's account. Pasolini presents Jesus as driven, constantly on the move. His primary role is that of eschatological prophet who demands that people make choices. This Jesus can divide as well as unite people.

The film can be criticized for its portrayal of the Jews. Pasolini emphasizes the conflict with the temple authorities, downplaying the role of the Romans in deciding Jesus fate. Ironically, for a Marxist filmmaker, this serves to depoliticize the Crucifixion. This anti-Semitism is, to some measure, balanced by Pasolini’s use of a quotation from Isaiah at the death of Jesus, which suggests that we should understand a broader shared human responsibility for the death.

Rather than looking from afar as Jesus carries the cross Pasolini places a hand held camera in the midst of the surging crowd. The technique draws us into the midst of the experience. The horrible cries of the thieves as they are nailed to cross underscore the pain involved. And though we don't see him as it happened, the extended, heart-wrenching cry of Jesus as the first nail bites into his flesh confirms his humanity. Pasolini brings Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the foot of the cross and it is her anguished reactions, inter-cut with close-ups of the face of Jesus on the cross, which tell us of the tragic and painful human death of Jesus.
Resurrection is suggested as much by music and light as by action. The "Gloria" sounds as Jesus body taken down and laid in the tomb. When the stone rolls aside opening the empty tomb we hear the "Amen." Then, driven by the Congolese musical mass "Missa Luba," there is a long shot of the disciples and others running to greet the risen Christ on a hillside. The segment provides a sense of power and direction through the images, editing and music. Here the concept of resurrection is carried by response of the faithful.

In the late 1980s two filmmakers moved beyond the canonical gospels in shaping film presentations of Jesus. In 1988, to considerable protest and public debate, Martin Scorsese released *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a film based on the Nikos Kazantzakis novel of the same title. A year later, to considerably less fanfare, French Canadian filmmaker Denys Arcand's art house drama *Jesus of Montreal* explored the stories of Jesus against the backdrop of modern day Montreal.

No Jesus film elicited so sustained and broad a public protest as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). It is difficult to view the film apart from the controversy it engendered. The protests, even before the film's release, inevitably turn the discussion to questions of the filmmaker's intent as much as to his accomplishment. Many assumed that it was an attack on the divinity of Jesus and on Christian faith. Scorsese responded that he was, in fact, a Catholic believer.
with genuine theological interests. He insisted that both the film, and the Nikos Kazantzakis novel on which it was based, were explorations of the meaning of the incarnation, and of the issues of the Council of Chalcedon (451CE) in which it was asserted that Christ was fully human and fully divine.

Scorsese's religious education and his knowledge of film history are evident in the film. The film's visual composition draws on the history of religious painting and its narrative and form comment on the style and limits of the Jesus films that came before it. This creates a strange contrast in the film. Scorsese works to de-westernize the story in his casting of minor characters, in the costuming and use of North African tribal tattoos, and in his selection of the music for the sound track. At the same time he draws on the history of the presentations of Christ in western painting to shape many images, none more obviously than when, in an evocation of the tradition of the sacred heart Jesus pulls forth and displays his own beating heart.

In *Last Temptation* Jesus first appears alone, almost naked, struggling in the desert with his demons. In his resistance to the divine nature and calling the carpenter has become a maker of crosses. Throughout the film the divine and human natures remain in tension within him. Jesus is resistive, uncertain, searching for the message he is to bring. This struggle continues to the cross itself.
Scorsese's Jesus faces the graphically human pain of his torment and crucifixion. He bleeds under the lash and feels the heat of the desert sun. We see him shudder as the nails are driven into his flesh. On the cross his internal dialogue is audible, but the noise of the crowd fades into the distance, as though he is delirious. There is no interaction with others, no Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross, no word for the thieves crucified with him. The result is human suffering and struggle, but without any sense of connection to other people. Beyond some theoretical atonement, it is unclear how this suffering is for others.

The most controversial material in Last Temptation comes in the last thirty minutes of the film. Jesus' delirium deepens and he enters into an extended fantasy in which he confronts the final temptation of the title. He imagines that a guardian angel comes to take him down from the cross and that he lives out an extended "normal" life, a human rather than a simultaneously human and divine life. At the same time he observes the founding of the church as his followers assert his death and resurrection. At the end of the fantasy-exploration, Jesus finds that he regrets the rejection of his divine nature and pleads to be allowed to be God's son, to take on his calling, to die and be resurrected. Only then does he emerge from his dream state. Jesus comes out of his delirium, accepts his mission, and in doing so finds peace in his dual nature. Smiling, looking to the heaven, he pronounces, "It is
accomplished," and dies. The film concludes with triumphant light and music that recall Pasolini’s efforts to express the concept of resurrection.

Theologically Last Temptation considers how the two natures relate to each other. There is no "serene self-understanding and integration"\textsuperscript{11} of the human and the divine. The Jesus in Last Temptation wrestles with doubt and temptation. Jesus questions and struggles with his calling, identity and mission. Thus the "last temptation" of the title is not simply to domesticity and sexuality but from the implications and obligations of divinity. Interpreters of Jesus tend to project onto him their own questions of faith. For Scorsese, the central question seems to be how one comes to faith in a way that provides a clear sense of purpose, mission and calling. The mission of Scorsese's Jesus, for all his humanity, has little to do with teaching or healing. Jesus' calling is to unite the human and divine, and in Last Temptation Scorsese suggests that it is only in his acceptance of death and resurrection that his calling is fulfilled. Thus his Jesus will struggle with these things all the way to the cross, Christ's victory is to be found in accepting his role, and the film has little to tell us about the implications of living out of faith and religious self-understanding over time.\textsuperscript{12}

A still different approach to presenting Jesus on film is found in Jesus of Montreal (1989). Like King of Kings the film integrates the gospel material with another story, but here in a quite different and allegorical fashion. The film tells the
story of Daniel, a young actor/director hired to revise the dated passion play performed on the grounds of a Catholic shrine in present day Montreal. He gathers actors and begins researching and writing an updated passion. Daniel's research leads him to read contemporary Jesus scholars and he incorporates their questions and speculations into his play. Thus the play draws on the canonical gospels, but also makes reference to gospels not included in the cannon of scripture and to reflections on virgin birth, miracles and wonders, and resurrection from contemporary sources. The film was nominated for the Academy Award for the best foreign film.

The play is a story within a story about the actors, the church and the theater. As Daniel increasingly identifies with his subject, incidents we identify from the gospels begin to play out in his life and the lives of those around him. Arcand's two stories interpret and inform each other. There are two related but distinct Jesuses here. The Jesus within the play is a somewhat enigmatic figure who proclaims the kingdom of God and criticizes organized religion. The Daniel/Jesus figure in the play models the gathering of an alternative community of faith and, with the multiple explorations of crucifixion and resurrection takes on an increasingly apocalyptic tone.

It is in the crucifixion that the two tales of Jesus intersect most clearly. Daniel is on the cross speaking the last words of Christ as disapproving Church officials
intervene to halt the play and have him arrested. In the melee that follows the cross is knocked over smashing Daniel to the ground. Dazed he is rushed to the hospital, seems to recover and wanders the subway station speaking a dark and apocalyptic message. Here the confusion of identity between Daniel and Jesus seems complete. He is again rushed to a hospital where he is pronounced dead.

Concepts of resurrection are also explored both in the play and the surrounding story. The performers act out the stories of believers who proclaim that they have experienced the risen Christ, and they also suggest that the idea of resurrection may have grown out of a community which found sustaining faith in Jesus even after his death. This scene happens in a catacomb below the shrine. In a particularly powerful moment the actors take their bows looking up at the light pouring in an open door through which they clearly expect Daniel to join them. In the surrounding story there are several distinct expressions of resurrection. First, it is suggested through organ donation. After his death Daniel lies in cruciform the hospital and his organs are harvested and sent forth giving new life to others. Secondly, it is suggested in the possibility that the acting company can continue in his name. And finally, it is suggested musically and visual behind the closing credits. The camera returns to the subway station where two minor characters from the film perform as street singers. As they sing a lovely, stately sacred dirge the camera begins a three-minute movement. First it tracks left through the station and then up, through the
earth, until it breaks forth on the hill side past the empty crosses of the play, and on up into the rainy but star light sky as a new day begins to dawn.

The effort to transform the written gospel accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus into a compelling film is full of challenges. The differences in the two media, changes in audience expectations of narrative form and style, and the diversity of understandings of Jesus make such a project difficult. Yet, bringing their own assumptions and questions of faith, filmmakers attempt the task. The Jesus films have each been interesting in their own way, but even the best of them offers partial interpretation. And that may be key to how we understand these films. If we think of them as translations of the gospel that could substitute for the original material we are particularly aware of their shortcomings. However, if we think of them as part of the ongoing human dialogue with the story of Jesus we can see each film as one attempt among many to respond to the gospel with the storytelling tools of the day. As such the films' limits seem less damning and their illuminating possibility more important.


Reader's interested in which portions of scripture are used and avoided by filmmakers will find helpful Stern, Jefford, and Deobona Savior on the Silver Screen (New York: Paulist Press, 1999. In an appendix the authors chart the bible verses drawn on in a number of the more popular films about Jesus.

My thinking on the challenges of this shift in worldview is much informed by conversation with my friend and colleague Gerald Forshey. He develops his understanding of the impact of the scientific worldview in American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars (Westport: Praeger, 1992).

Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years (Santa Rosa: Polbridge Press, 1997).

This openness to religious image and icon may be part of the reason why so many makers of Jesus films have been products of Catholic culture. Examples include Pier Paolo Pasolini (The Gospel According to St. Matthew), Franco Zeffirelli (Jesus of Nazareth, 1977), Martin Scorseses (Last Temptation of Christ), and Denys Arcand (Jesus of Montreal, 1990).

The Ray film should not to be confused with the 1927 silent, The King of Kings, by Cecil B. DeMille.

The novel The Last Temptation of Christ was published in 1955. The book was a serious literary work nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a controversial theological exploration, which lead the Greek Orthodox Church to excommunicate its author and the Roman Catholic Church to list the novel in its official list of banned books.

An extended discussion of Scorsese's religious background and interests, including his long time interest in making a film about Jesus, can be found in Lloyd Baugh's Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film.

Some argue that it is unclear that this sequence should be understood as a fantasy. But the film language strongly supports understanding the sequence in this way. Narratively Jesus has been descending further into delirium. The camera pulls back disconnecting from the immediate reality and the film becomes entirely quiet for an extended period. Only then does the fantasy begin. At the end of the sequence the camera finds Jesus once again on the cross. He lifts his head, looking out, smiling, reconnecting with what is happening and announces, "it is accomplished." Clearly the half-hour or so between these moments should be understood to take place in a different reality than the rest of the film.

Savior on the Silver Screen, Pg. 71.

This struggle with identity and mission can be found in much of Scorsese's work. That it has a sustained religious character can be seem most clearly by seeing how these themes are continued his 1999 film, Bringing Out the Dead.