Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 27
Issue 2 *October 2023*

Article 7

October 2023

The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film

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Abstract

This is a book review of Richard Walsh, ed. *The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

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Walsh, Richard, ed. *T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film* (London: T&T Clark, 2021)

The T&T Clark Handbook of Jesus and Film reads like a sequel to Richard Walsh's previous edited collection, the *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film* (2018). Where that earlier anthology addressed the broader subject of the dynamic ongoing relationship between the Bible and the cinematic medium, this second book narrows the focus to what Walsh describes as the "Jesus film tradition" in his introduction. Even as the thematic red thread woven throughout the handbook is the cinematic depiction of or allusion to Jesus Christ, the diversity of films and theoretical approaches explored by its over two dozen authors speaks to the expansive reach this particular subfield of biblical film criticism generates. Many of the authors are well-known and oft-cited senior scholars in the Jesus-and-film academic conversation, though there are fresh perspectives included as well.

The volume has a general two-part structure based on the familiar distinction between "Jesus films" and "Christ-figure films." Where the former are films explicitly *about* Jesus—prominent examples include DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Scorsese's The *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)—the latter are films which are loosely linked by the "Christ figure" trope and its debatable characteristics, ranging from Superman (*Superman*) to Neo (*The Matrix*) to (apparently) an inflatable sex doll named Bianca (*Lars and the Real Girl*). As Walsh makes clear in his introduction, such distinctions and descriptions generate further questions and quandaries: who or what type of "Jesus" is on display in any given film? What formal and theological criteria should support Christ-figure readings? How and why do certain film genres depict Jesus or messianic figures? What counts as a true "Jesus film"?

In the first chapter of Part One, film critic Peter Chattaway provides a meticulous survey of the "obscure" elements included within Jesus films, i.e., those scenes and characters from the gospel texts which are generally omitted from most cinematic depictions of the gospels (e.g., the siblings of Jesus, the female patrons and disciples of Jesus, the healing of the ten lepers). The next two chapters from Peter Malone and Jeffrey Staley provide similar surveys, but are centered around key Johannine scenes which frequently appear in Jesus films: the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–46), respectively. The subsequent two chapters each focus on a significant gospel character's portrayal in film. Michelle Fletcher offers an excellent feminist analysis of *Mary Magdalene* (2018) and its fresh vision of its unjustly maligned titular character, while Reinhold Zwick provides an overview of *Histoire de Judas* (*Story of Judas*, 2015), a French-Algerian film which aims to "rehabilitate" the character of Judas in the public's cultural imagination. Chapter 6 returns to a broader overview of Jesus films as critic Steven D. Greydanus considers the significance of "point of view" in the formal structure of Jesus films and how the use of perspective can defamiliarize an overly-familiar story; Greydanus's thoughtful analysis and appreciation of *The Miracle Maker* (2000) and *Last Days in the Desert* (2016) particularly stand out here.

The subsequent three chapters also take broad sweeping approaches, but from the perspective of biblical scholarship. Jeffrey Staley's second chapter in the volume traces seventy years of Jesus films and their parallels to the gospel texts' historical developments, while Richard Walsh describes what he calls "the gospel effect" in translating the story of Jesus from text to film, where "Jesus films present themselves as the gospel by adhering closely to the popular memory about Jesus and through creating the illusion of historical realism" (7). Kevin McGeough's chapter similarly addresses such illusions, claiming that audiences expect a certain "historical" or

"archeological" realism from Jesus films which often does not actually adhere to historical accuracy or archeological evidence: an irony here is McGeough's generalizing claims about audience's expectations and understanding without providing actual cited evidence of audience's experiences. Turning from biblical scholarship to cultural production and reception, the next three chapters provide overviews of Cinecittà Jesus films (Bible films expert Matt Page), "revolutionary" Jesus films (Lloyd Baugh), and modern-setting Jesus films (Freek L. Bakker). The final two chapters provide close readings of unique and subversive Jesus films relocated into contemporary European contexts: Anne Moore's analysis of *Je vous salue, Marie* (*Hail Mary*, 1985) and Caroline Vander Stichele's reading of *Le tout nouveau testament* (*The Brand New Testament*, 2015).

Part Two turns from "Jesus films" to the nebulous realm of "Christ films," those cinematic works which somehow allude to messianic figures. The trouble of making such formal distinctions becomes immediately clear, as the first two chapters actually focus their attention on "Jesus films": James Cochran examines the Johnny Cash-narrated *The Gospel Road: A Story of Jesus* (1973), and Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch compares Martin Scorsese's Jesus film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, with his more recent religiously-laden work, *Silence* (2016). Adele Reinhartz's chapter examining three Quebec Jesus/Christ films—*Jésus of Montréal* (1989), *Léolo* (1992) and *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005)—is insightful and informative, but could have fit just as well in Part One. Indeed, a number of the chapters in Part Two directly address this difficulty in creating a clear taxonomy of traits for "Christ figures." Robert Johnston's essay provides a critique of previous attempts (most pointedly at Anton Kozlovic's unwieldly list of twenty-five structural characteristics of a "Christ-figure film") before offering three helpful criteria which "work in tandem": (1) formally, the film must parallel the Christ story in a significant and substantial way, (2) theologically, the film's story ought to

genuinely reflect the meaning of Christ's salvific mission, and (3) experientially, the audience ought to be emotionally and/or ethically moved by the film in a way which challenges them to respond to its Christological meaning (215). Johnston's excellent essay makes for an engaging contrast with the subsequent chapter from Anton Kozlovic, who offers an overview of the supporting characters in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and their biblical parallels.

The strongest chapters in this section are those which take innovative and eye-opening approaches in discerning Christological allusions within the darker genres of horror and fantasy. In his reading of Ofelia in Guillermo del Toro's dark fairytale *Pan's Labyrinth* (2007) as a subversive Christ figure, Matthew Rindge boldly claims that, in her disobedience and nonviolence, "Ofelia's death is less selfish, and more sacrificial than Jesus's (as it is depicted in John's gospel)" (244). Tina Pippin also raises provocative questions about Jesus in her reading of Jordan Peele's horror film *Us* (2019) in dialogue with the Christian creedal statement "He [Jesus] descended into hell." What was Jesus *doing* in hell? And might Jesus's life and death be considered "creepy" (265)? Richard Walsh provides textual evidence of "Jesus films" lurking within two grimly violent films—*The Last Temptation of Christ* within *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *The Passion of the Christ* within *The Wrestler* (2008)—while Brandon Grafius provocatively and effectively reimagines the meaning of "messianic figures" in his rich analysis of two truly disturbing horror films, *The Mist* (2007) and *Martyrs* (2008). Less compelling are Larry Kreitzer's roundup of apparently every reference to the Bible (though not necessarily to Jesus) spoken by a character in the Star Trek universe in 2000–2019, an exercise which may have fit better in a broader "Bible and film" collection rather than this book. A similar problem arises with Ward Blanton and James Crossley's summary of philosopher Robert Pippin's Hegelian reading of Western films: there are allusions to messianic figures and political theology in their survey of Sergio Leone films, but it remains

unclear as to how and why these Westerns ought to be considered distinctly "Christ films." Readers may find the anthology's final chapter to be the biggest stretch of "Christ figure" definitions, as George Aichele considers the "character" of a sex doll, Bianca, in *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) to be a messianic figure in the vein of the Gospel of Mark. As I am a fan of the film, I appreciated Aichele's fresh religious reading of Bianca's character, but I can see how other readers might roll their eyes at such a claim.

Even as this *Handbook of Jesus and Film* provides a solid diversity of perspectives and films, its strength is also its weakness: there are just so many "Christ films" that numerous cinematic engagements with Jesus are necessarily under-analyzed or overlooked. Perhaps the biggest lacuna from a recent "Jesus and film" anthology is analysis of the production and reception of *The Chosen* (2017–), the popular American streaming series focused on the life of Jesus which has also had theatrical releases in 2021 and 2023.[1] There are also not enough considerations of broader world cinema (i.e., beyond North America and Europe), and future anthologies could benefit from expertise beyond religious scholars—in my view, the perspectives of film critics like Chattaway, Greydanus, and Page is a unique strength to this handbook, and the inclusion of more film critics, film scholars, and filmmakers would be beneficial in the wider film-and-religion discourse. Still, scholars of film and religion interested in the person of Jesus will find plenty of insights in the individual chapters expertly collected and curated by Walsh, who summarizes what the book ultimately proposes: "Jesus is Jesuses. … 'Jesus' is an endlessly manipulable sign, taking its meaning, if it has any, from whatever ideology or mythology appropriates it" (12). If this is the case, then there will always be a need for "Jesus and film" essays and books—more "Jesus and film" sequels, as it were—as long as the cinematic medium continues to shape our cultural and religious imaginations.

[1] Peter Chattaway's chapter does briefly mention *The Chosen* as depicting backstories for Jesus's various disciples (see page 23).