

**THE WORD MADE CINEMATIC:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF JESUS IN CINEMA**

by

**Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen**

B.A. Film Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1997

M.A. English Literature, University of Pittsburgh, 2002

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2008

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen

It was defended on

April 24, 2008

and approved by

Adam Lowenstein, Associate Professor, Department of English

Troy Boone, Associate Professor, Department of English

Vernell A. Lillie, Professor Emeritus, Department of Africana Studies

Dissertation Chair/Advisor: Marcia Landy, Distinguished Service Professor,

Department of English

Copyright © by Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen

2008

# The Word Made Cinematic: The Representation of Jesus in Cinema

Gregory Kahlil Kareem Allen, Ph.D.

University of Pittsburgh, 2008

Marking the invention of cinema as a point of entry and consequent filmic narratives about Jesus as aesthetic documents, this study will demonstrate how movie-going, due to its similarity to the devotional exercise of “worship” and the motion picture’s continual co-option for perceived religious purposes as readily indicated by the recent reception of The Passion of the Christ, complicates what otherwise might be the obvious distinction between the sacred and the profane. Examining the way in which the spectator is prompted by certain traditions of cinematic language and interpretation, this dissertation demonstrates how the representation of the Jesus in cinema must by definition always insinuate the sacrosanct, even if the symbol or image is presented in a context perceived to be secular. In this way, the Jesus film works as a hybrid text that through its study makes possible new ways of understanding both space and power. As a medium commonly engaged in public, cinema that represents Jesus is difficult to distinguish as exclusively sacred or profane, as these texts inevitably borrow from the tradition of both spaces. This study also investigates how the claims of directors of Jesus films inform the perceptions of both audiences and critics, and how the use of certain key terms situate a language of exchange between artist-

commodity and consumer that only suggests more thoroughly what Bazin described as the inescapable historical combination of circumstances that institutionally and ideologically frame the auteur. Through careful film analysis, this study argues that throughout the twentieth-century the cinematic choices that filmmakers have made seem to be limited not by artistic sensibilities, but by the politics of the image itself, especially in terms of casting. Spanning from Sidney Olcott's From the Manger to the Cross (1912) to more recent works like The Passion of the Christ (2004), this study challenges certain so-called auteur filmmakers like Martin Scorsese's own claims regarding the difference of The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) from other films about Jesus, while carefully examining many other films in an attempt to determine how democratically Jesus can be represented in mainstream cinema.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE ICON AND THE SPACE BETWEEN THE GAZE.....	1
II.	CH. 1: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MINISTRY – THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE GRAVEN IMAGE.....	25
III.	CH. 2: PRIEST OF CINEMA, OR POET OF GORE? - SCORSESE’S <u>THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST</u> .....	90
IV.	CH. 3: WHAT’S LEFT GIVEN THE “RIGHT” REPRESENTATION OF JESUS? – THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGE AND <u>THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST</u> .....	161
V.	CONCLUSION: CINEMATIC PARAOUSIA - THE NEGRO AS TIME TRAVELLER AND THE FEAR OF A BLACK SOVEREIGN.....	235
VI.	WORKS CITED.....	302
VII.	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	309
VIII.	ONLINE SOURCES.....	315
IX.	FILMOGRAPHY.....	316

INTRODUCTION:  
THE POWER OF THE ICON  
AND THE SPACE BETWEEN THE GAZE

This study examines the similarities between both the priest and the filmmaker as institutionally situated agents whose agencies both are determined and dependent on a group of listener's willingness to either believe or suspend disbelief regarding not only the object of representation, but also the agent's ability and authority to make claims about the object in the first place. In the case of Jesus and the cinema, the object happens to be an image, or more specifically, the proclaimed reality, or *re*-presentation of the Word in the flesh, as suggested by the image. In this dissertation, a further parallel is drawn between the devotional exercise of "worship" itself and the movie-going experience; and, while this relationship is not necessarily a new film studies argument, the sudden surge in publications about Jesus and the movies, which stem mostly from both the popularity and controversy surrounding The Passion of the Christ (2004), has only demonstrated more fully how authorship and a sense of blame for narrative-based material by critics even when the filmmaker is not the so-called "author" has worked to obscure a more careful discussion. When these

obscurities are complicated by the apparent devotional and sublime nature of the film-going experience as perceived by some, the filmmaker can come to be regarded as a sort of mystical figure with unique representational abilities. But I attest that there still remains a certain economic component that cannot be ignored in this process. The manner in which the concerns of the marketplace dictate not only how Jesus narratives are constructed, but also how the manner in which production companies and filmmakers themselves have marketed the director as producers of these works in the first place is a vital component to consider in terms of the representation of Jesus in cinema.

Perhaps no cultural phenomenon surrounding a Jesus film demonstrates the pitfall of the perceived auteur more readily than that pertaining to The Last Temptation of Christ. As a result, I will argue how when it comes to interpreting Martin Scorsese's 1988 film, scholars have one of two choices: one, either to get honest and concede that somewhere along the line filmmakers either gave up their artistic freedoms regarding the representation of Jesus, or they never had these freedoms in the first place; or two, filmmakers, for some undetermined reason, have conspired to participate in a cooperative project that spans throughout history not only to politically stabilize Jesus's image in historical inaccuracy and dislocation – but likewise have they schemed to challenge how we *talk* about Jesus through cinema, without actually challenging how we *see* him. Either option warns of a prospect that threatens to undermine not only the hermeneutical possibilities of the image as stabilized within the



space between the gaze, but the cinema itself in terms of how it can be accessed, and in turn, discussed publicly.

Since the cinema is a medium chiefly invested in the image, the categorical failure of the motion picture to portray a more diverse, ethnic, or even historically accurate range in Jesus's depiction is both alarming and disappointing. Instead, Jesus's cinematic representation has indicated a *coalition* of sorts seemingly bent on determining precisely what Jesus can look like in cinema so that even a "controversial" film like Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ – while at first glance appearing unconcerned and not invested in a particular status quo in the name of art – still manages to expose the limited nature of cinematic thinking within a particular space.

The entire third chapter focuses on The Passion of the Christ: the flaw of the anti-Semitism argument, the inconsistency of the film's violence critique, and how this film in 2004 at the dawn of the Iraq War indicates a decisive interposing of secular and sacred space, that while first intimated by DeMille for the sake of commerce in the 20s with The King of Kings (1927), now becomes hijacked by the Fundamentalist Right for the sake of politics and situating how sovereignty can be discussed for an entire theologically-justified political lobby. Probing both the war-torn climate of the early twentieth century, and exploring

many of the United States conflicts of the past, I will argue as to the conspicuous absence of New Testament based films during times of war.<sup>1</sup>

But this interposing makes sense, since of all the problems one might imagine coinciding with the representation of Jesus in cinema, the most fundamental is the problem of space. I do not mean cinematic space. In that instance, then, I would be referring to the frame, the space between it, or some other very specific aspect of *mise en scène*. This too is a problem, and has been discussed *ad nauseam* by film scholars, but for me it is not the most fundamental. Instead, I am referring to the space between the gaze – that is, the space between what the characters in a given film see and are aware of and the space between what the audience sees. By this, some may think I am referring to the fourth wall, but I am not referring to the fourth wall, since in certain films like Austin Powers: Goldmember (2002) and Annie Hall (1977) it has been demonstrated that while untypical, fictional characters can be created to be made to appear both conscious and aware of the fourth wall. However, what I mean by the space between the gaze includes the fourth wall; it also includes that space whereby power is exchanged between speaker and listener as a result of a certain discourse about characters in a film or a film in its entirety without those characters even knowing it. Now at first this may seem to be a silly proposition as characters in films quite often are fictional and, by definition, are unaware of

---

<sup>1</sup> Even the recent success of the Passion, due to its emphasis on the crucifixion and not Jesus's actual pacifistic teachings, marks yet another example of the absence of New Testament-based films during wartime, only further suggesting the potentially subversive reading that one might apply to a mainstream, literal proliferation of such discourses as the Sermon on the Mount.

the world beyond their diegesis – true even of protagonists like Alvy Singer and Austin Powers who are written by Woody Allen and Mike Meyers, respectively – in order to appear aware of the audience, and thus the world beyond their diegesis; but, in actuality, any audience member knows this is but a farce, as these characters could not actually respond to a viewer who might take these fictional screen characters up on their supposed awareness during a screening. Yet, certain genres like the documentary quickly complicate this, where the characters, even if they are embellished to some degree, quite likely exist both in and outside of the cinematic world, and thus both in and out of the movie theater.

Yet, unlike most films, which historically have been screened in movie theaters, films about Jesus throughout the early part of the twentieth century, because of their subject matter, were often sold in print form to religious organizations. Since cinema then had been argued by some to be a sort of universal language, silent films about Jesus were often disseminated to foreign cultures under the auspices of being a means of breaking language barriers for those who had not yet heard the gospel. These prints were subsequently screened in a variety of locations with the express purpose of proselytizing non-believers – a considerable ambition that would crystallize most fully in 1927 with Cecil B. DeMille's The King of Kings decades before the introduction of home video would facilitate a similar sort of appetite for worldwide distribution. Yet, working under the guise of theology, what this method of international

distribution actually threatened by attaching itself to the Christian practice of evangelism was the viewer's implied relationship to what in theory had come to be understood as a both a public and secular space – that is, the movie theater. But now, under the aggressive tenets of what decades later would come to be regarded as evangelical Christianity in America, one begins to see the early stages of what would eventually emerge as a full-blown and very counter way of engaging the movie theater space. This counter way of reading in terms of the common hermeneutics related to this space would be successful to such a degree that what began *via* the nickelodeon as a profane pastime and intended only for the lower classes could eventually be imagined by 2004 with The Passion of the Christ as a sacred space that could be rented out by Protestant evangelicals for the purposes of *evangelizing* the world.

When the movie palace becomes a point of access for narratives about Jesus, for certain viewers it seems that these stories transcend that of other narratives disseminated through cinema – profane in places, sublime in others, and very often quite spectacular. For the viewer encouraged toward a sacred reading by the context of a film's narrative, the circumstances of its production, the distributor's marketing campaign, or some erratic hybrid of all three, the narrative becomes enabled through the space between the gaze as something more than just a story. For the viewer implicitly contextualized by a particular hermeneutic reading of this space, this sort of narrative can often come to be regarded as a sort of divine encounter – whether real or imagined – if there even

is a difference. But while certain apprehensions in regards to cinema have destabilized the possibilities of cinema's undisputed religious usage for most, some evangelicals, fundamentalists, and even scholars with similar dogmatic leanings, have remained unable to read cinematic texts as both reader<sup>2</sup> and viewer. Because of the necessary spaces where cinema is often discussed, inevitably, one's unique and apparently mutually exclusive reading against one's viewing of the text will often tend to dominate intellectual discussions, while the opposite in terms of one's viewing will tend to dominate a discourse between laymen, but I do not believe this necessarily has to be the case.

To position the sacred impulse against the aesthetic, my work must inevitably begin here by briefly citing the Church's historical conflict over the issue of icons and their relationship to the believer and worship by way of such texts as Abrosios Giakalis' Images of the Divine. How does one imitate the divine? What would such an enactment look like? What is at stake when the signifier of the divine becomes inseparable from the signified in such a way that

---

<sup>2</sup> By *reading* I mean engaging the movie theater space fully aware of the cinematic text as a production fraught with its own language, grammars, slangs, and both poetic and literal usages in terms of its primary commodity, the image itself. Like speaking, (which deals in sound), and writing (which deals in symbols), the cinema too is a language more complex and sophisticated than both speaking and writing because the cinema deals simultaneously in images, sounds, and symbols. But like the illiterate person who has not been taught how to read, the cinema too works from codes or grammars that must be learned: the Kuleshov effect, the 180 degree rule, the rule of thirds, the plot point, screenplay format, etc. Robert Stam's own theories and how they inform certain notions of reading will be discussed later. A viewer, unaware of these codes, is at a distinct disadvantage over the reader, who can recognize these manipulations, and presumably will not as easily be manipulated by them. A *viewing*, on the other hand, engages the cinema either believing these theoretical components of the cinema to be irrelevant or subordinate to the narrative in which they are engaged, taking the arguments and themes of the narrative at face value, or willingly suspending their awareness of the manipulation of these cinematic techniques in order to be informed, entertained, or otherwise arrested by the claims of the of cinematic text.

a devotional participant cannot access the one without the other? To contextualize this conflict, we must examine how man's "natural desire to make the holy tangible and accessible" became a question so volatile that proceeding the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 787 CE Christendom ultimately divided in the Great Schism of 1054 CE between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism over the issue of iconography, among other things (Giakalis ix). I am interested in contrasting the liturgical restraints placed on artists – most specifically, painters – by the clergy of the Middle Ages with the restraints placed on filmmakers today in their attempts to create gospel films. If the "icon and person represented must always be cosubstantial," how must one regard a representation that is photographic, and capable of "reproduc[ing] nature with a fidelity 'equal to nature itself'" to borrow from Siegfried Kracauer, and "mechanically-reproducible" to borrow from Walter Benjamin (Giakalis 135, Kracauer 4, and Benjamin 792). How do the aesthetics of the cinematic text complicate religious representation in ways that are different, and perhaps even more complicated than the icons of Eastern orthodoxy or the paintings of the Italian Renaissance? This question is useful to consider in terms of the gospel film of the twentieth and twenty-first century, especially with a filmmaker like Gibson who, on the one hand, asserts the historicity of his film while on the other hand unabashedly credits Caravaggio, Mantegna, and Masaccio as artistic inspirations.

If, as Peter Fraser argues, the “medium of film, like the devotional exercise, is displayed in fixed time periods, on a rotational basis, and with a regular sequence of participatory steps,” what is at stake when the main characters of these films become reducible to mere empty-protagonists, surrogate to the Christ-figure at the center of the Christian “devotional exercise” (Fraser 6)?<sup>3</sup> As broad of a stroke as it may be to suspect that movie-going itself has come to usurp the position of worship for many Americans, as Fraser’s comments readily imply, a clear indicator of the destabilization of the religious liturgy in America comes by considering Hollywood’s treatment not of vague “religious” subject matter, but of subject matter based upon the Bible – a literary text that has been considered in both aesthetic and religious terms simultaneously. However, in lieu of the fact that in The Bible on Film Richard H. Campbell and Michael R. Pitts list hundreds of Bible films alone that have been produced around the world from 1897 to 1980, I have chosen to explore the context of a very specific *genre* of Bible film – Bible films produced by Hollywood that by way of their *mise en scène* cinematically represent the figure of Jesus Christ through what I will call the *gospel film* or the *Jesus film*.

Yet, since gospel texts from the very beginning have relied upon other sources, it is important to determine whether or not these literary texts within their prospective communities have served more as witnesses to the

---

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term “devotional exercise” from Peter Fraser’s Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film Biblical Epics.

disseminated divine nature of the so-called Christ or exact presentations – that is, *re*-presentations of this divinity itself. This is an important distinction which speaks to the difference between the Christian notion of *incarnation* – i.e., the divine in the flesh – versus the Islamic notion of *illibration* and the literalist notion of *inscripturation* – i.e., the divine in the text. In their own unique ways, each of these terms complicate the intertextual relationship that the filmmaker has to his cinematic “portrait” of Jesus versus the supposed sacred “portrait” that has been presented by the more literary gospel texts themselves.

Specifically, in my film analysis, I will consider Ben-Hur (1959) – a film that not only achieved blockbuster status by being the highest grossing film of its era, but also enviable critical acclaim. In addition, as I have previously mentioned, in terms of *mise en scène* Ben-Hur signals Hollywood’s last efforts to “respect” the space between the aesthetic and the religious since William Wyler establishes his 70mm frames in such a way that the actor who plays Jesus in the film – which is ironically subtitled, “A Tale of the Christ” – never reveals his face. Drawing from sources such as the documentary Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic and Charlton Heston’s Hollywood by Charlton Heston and Jean-Pierre Isbouts, I will investigate whether or not the decision to portray Jesus as faceless was a religious consideration on the part of the filmmakers or an aesthetic one – or something else.

At this point, it will also be important to discuss Nicholas Ray’s 1961 film King of Kings, one of Hollywood’s first attempts at having an actor, Jeffrey



Hunter, portray Jesus in such a way that his face is seen and his voice is heard. This cinematic decision has drastic implications for the filmmaker and film viewer because once Hollywood depicts an image of Jesus that can be touched, or suggested to be real in some way, the cinema, by way of the conceit of its own apparatus, emerges then to put forth its own representations of the divine through a “devotional exercise” that arguably transcends the influence of such fine arts as sculpture and painting, or even such religious artifacts as icons.

Against the backdrop of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, Thomas E. Wartenberg speaks to the veracity attributed to the cinema in light of certain observations of Andre Bazin:

Beginning with the French film theorist and journalist, Andre Bazin, film scholars have been struck by the medium’s ability to capture reality accurately. For these thinkers, photography is distinguished from all other arts by its automaticity, its ability to present us with a world that is, in some sense, not mediated by the consciousness of a human being, once a photographer presses the shutter, the world is imprinted on his film no matter what he happens to think or desire. [...] This is significant because it gives films a verisimilitude that all the other arts lack. When we look at painting, we may be impressed by how much it looks like the object it depicts, but we remain aware that what we see depends upon the

painter's decisions about what to include and exclude. [...] A film benefits from the verisimilitude of photography. Viewers have a tendency to trust that what they are seeing is real, even when they know it isn't. Although analogue photography has become compromised by the advent of digital imagining, generally viewers still retain their faith in the realism of the medium. (Wartenberg 86)

While Wartenberg does a fairly adequate job in his brief essay of summarizing particular arguments made by Andre Bazin in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" relevant to his own – both of which will be discussed later – it is necessary for me to note here the inevitable distinctions that exist between the real and the sacred. To recognize the verisimilitude of something is not the same phenomenon as recognizing its divinity or consecrated nature. And yet, similarly, both divinity and verisimilitude as the essence or substance of a thing must first be apprehended through the perceptions and appearances left with a viewer or listener or participant, after an initial claim, impression, or devotional exercise, etc.

Briefly, I will acknowledge the racial implications of choosing an Anglo, blue-eyed Jeffrey Hunter to portray Jesus for the "first" time in Hollywood cinema, and thus set in motion a tradition that, over three decades later, has so informed the religious imagination of Americans that to make a film where Jesus

were portrayed, say, as African-American, most probably, would be considered subversive. Yet, since Jesus was neither Anglo, nor African-American, the cinematic portrayal of Jesus in Hollywood as a Caucasian comes at great cost to the “devotional exercise” of the inter-racial American public. My argument here will examine how Kings of Kings promulgates not only a tradition that prevents the casual viewer from imagining Jesus for his or herself due to the pre-set space between the gaze, but how it also initiates – through the filmmaking control mechanisms of Hollywood – a system whereby after 1961 there comes to be a perceived culturally acceptable way to represent Jesus on film, and thus, implicitly, there also, simultaneously in this event comes to be perceived subversive ways of representing Jesus cinematically that are, by definition, counter to that culture.

In addition to this, I will indicate two specific risks for the cinematic tradition in its representation of Jesus, regardless of his ethnicity. These two risks lie in characterization: in what the actor who plays Jesus says, and in what he does on screen. While obviously drawing from Biblical accounts, films such as King of Kings, The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), Jesus of Nazareth (1977) and Jesus (2000) still feature vast amounts of dialogue, scenes, and composite characters who remain absent from any gospel account. But what are the consequences of exercising such artistic license when it could be mistaken for religious authority given the gospel film’s intertextual relationship to particular narratives imagined by some to be sacred and real, or what might be called

*historical?* This is what Thomas Wartenberg wants to address when he referring to the The Passion when he uses the term “fictional historal,” referring of course to Gibson’s manipulation of “viewer’s trust in a film’s verisimilitude to present a work of fiction as historical truth” (Wartenberg 86).

What happens to the “devotional exercise” when a filmmaker puts words in Jesus’ mouth or attributes to him actions for which there is no historical evidence for the sake of art, and then a viewer comes to take this as, pardon the pun. . .*gospel*? A careful study of reception of the gospel film reveals an appeal to some sort of stabilization process against what seems very akin to what religious tradition has termed “canonization”. This project is deeply invested in taking into rigorous critical consideration what happens to the cultural climate of America for both filmmaker and viewer in the space between Ben-Hur (1959) and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), when Hollywood cinema moves from being unwilling to show an actor’s face during his portrayal of Jesus to being willing to show an actor, Willem Dafoe, completely nude on the cross and even quite graphically sexually involved with Mary Magdalene under the auspices of depicting a thought-process or temptation, as it might have occurred in Jesus’s mind. How is this potential devotional space complicated by the wide, overall acceptance of Ben-Hur against the thorough marginalization of The Last Temptation of Christ? Does this not say something about the inevitable tension that the “devotional participant” must face when responding to a cinematic

representation of the sacred in an American movie theater since Scorsese's film is rejected on dogmatic and not cinematic terms?

Thus, I am intrigued by creative space that allows a writer to literally rewrite Scripture in the name of screenwriting. For instance, the Bible never states overtly or implicitly that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, and yet when this is how she is characterized in each of these gospel films that this dissertation will discuss, the non-Catholic filmgoer is subtly coerced into accepting this very Catholic notion in regards to Mary Magdalene's social status by way of artistic tendencies that pretend to be "free," but in actuality remain fiercely loyal to doctrinal restraints. In this way, through the subtext of cinema, the seemingly non-denominational "devotional exercise" of going to the movies still manages to privilege certain religious impulses under the guise of an artistic license that, in the case of Hollywood, to date remains very conditional, and perhaps even overstated.

I will complicate this dilemma with an analysis of such film productions as The Visual Bible's Matthew (1997) where the text of the New International Version of the Bible works as a sort of screen treatment, becoming the only words that are spoken in the cinematic text. Though this move may seem to offset the artistic liberties that other gospel films take in their structure, and also work against certain religious biases that have pervaded Hollywood gospel films, still other dilemmas remain apparent within the *mise en scène* of this

particular cinematic text. However, citing the New International Version of Matthew's gospel, it will be very easy by the conclusion of my argument to challenge the project of The Visual Bible's Matthew because while imaginative, interpretive, and hermeneutical spaces remain in written texts, these same spaces shift considerably through the text of cinema, and this film, and its two sequels: The Visual Bible's Acts, and The Gospel of John proceed as if this is not the case. How the filmmakers portray baptism marks a clear example of this. When the New International Version text simply states, "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water," the filmmakers neglect the fact that they must still decide whether or not that baptism will be photographed as a sprinkling – a *rhantizo*, to be exact – or by immersion – *baptizo* – when it comes time to shoot the scene (Matt. 3:16). Thus, how the filmmakers decide to depict the "baptism" of Jesus, or any other character for that matter, then remains a doctrinal and not an aesthetic choice not only on the part of the filmmakers, but also on the part of any filmmaker attempting to reenact the life of Jesus on screen. If it were simply a matter of translating the Greek in which the gospels were written, how to photograph a scene of baptism could otherwise be stabilized by the literary and *literal* language source of the gospel text.

Finally, this dissertation will ultimately consider whether or not the gospel film can ever successfully wrest itself away from a theo-political religious agenda as a work of mechanically-reproducible cinematic art. I will carefully examine the difficulties in creating the gospel film by both discussing films that

have attempted to do so in the past, and also, because while not only a scholar and a reader of cinema, I am also a member of a priesthood myself, and a filmmaker, so I cannot help but consider what a more independent cinematic presentation of the gospel might look like in light of today's political context. By more independent, I mean an aesthetic production that works within the traditions of cinema, but yet, as a text, strongly resists the possibility of being undermined by the common appearances of the actors who have been chosen to play Jesus, and also resists certain other key political assumptions that ubiquitously inform both the narratives and the *mise en scène* of most films about Jesus thus far.

This ideal cinematic text must likewise resist being undermined by fictionalized scenes or actions that go beyond the evidence of the printed gospels themselves. And, lastly, this cinematic text must be able to resist a doctrinally or politically-biased *mise en scène*. Not that this film's *mise en scène* would be devoid of its own politics, but that these politics might somehow work to challenge and destabilize current notions of sovereignty as informed by the assumptions of many in the U.S. as opposed to complicitly reinforcing the false binaries many have grown accustomed to. To achieve such a text, a filmmaker may indeed have to push beyond current understandings of the cinematic – since today such a text hardly seems imaginable – but unless space can be made for such a text, the gospel film as a uniquely aesthetic, or uniquely religious text, ultimately must always fail in its enactment. And it is for this inevitable duality that I will

argue when it comes to the gospel film that there must always remain a fallacy in assuming there exists a distinct religious aesthetic in Hollywood cinema that is uniquely interested in art or the beauty of “free” religious expression.

But equally problematic is a cinematic space that instigates the possibility of an evangelistic, or worse yet, sacred understanding of the multiplex encounter. In this event, and I do mean *event*, the movie theater can be imagined as more than a movie theater, in much the same way that the liturgical experience distinguishes itself from other experiences. In fact, in this event, movie-going for some becomes a liturgical experience not because of what is done, but because of the subject that is represented by the filmmaker, and engaged by the viewer, and because of the pilgrimage-like approach that frames the viewer’s mind. Alison Griffiths notes this possibility in her discussion of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ:

But The Passion’s reverent pilgrims to the “multiplex shrine” only dimly echo the twelfth century epoch of pilgrimages and the Crusades, when individuals undertook long, hazardous journeys across “the threshold that separates the known from the unknown, the customary from the wonderful.” As David Morgan points out in Visual Piety, the Franciscan practice of *via crucis*, observing the fourteen stages of the cross while on pilgrimage, “amounted to the perfecting on a saint’s imitation of Christ”. (Griffiths 13)



Even my own experience of screening The Passion on Ash Wednesday with a congregation I was leading at the time where I arranged for the organization to pay for everyone's ticket only reinforces her claim. It was fascinating to me to note how one of our congregation's song leaders was able to stand up in front of the entire viewing audience and lead the entire group in two songs – one of which, included "Amazing Grace".<sup>4</sup>

But moments like this were not isolated incidents around the U.S. Alison Griffiths points out:

Many evangelical church congregations block-booked seats for Sunday screenings, inviting their clergy to worship before a celluloid altar. Two million dollars of advanced ticket sales for the film were generated by Christian churches that booked eight hundred theatres for two days before the film's official Ash Wednesday release. (Griffiths 11)

But this should come as no surprise. Throughout history it has always been the artist even more than the cleric whose vocation it has been to represent the divine. Even the distinction between artist and cleric is a tedious one, since in nearly every common example of priestly mediation that one can reference some form of art or aesthetic production lies central. From the Torah of Moses,

---

<sup>4</sup> Two other things intrigued me about this moment: one, that as I looked around the theater, I realized that it was not merely the fifty members of my congregation that were singing. In fact, we may have been in the minority amidst the sold-out crowd who were singing the hymn; two, there was not a snicker of protest that came from anyone in the audience. This is why there were two songs that were sung and not just one.

to the poetry of Homer, to the tribal drum beat of the medicine man's dance, to the sculptures of Romans gods and goddesses, to the Sistine chapel, to last week's Sunday sermon - and everywhere in between - humanity's understanding of the sacred has always been mediated by artistic production. In the Christian tradition, the liturgical space most often utilizes oral and poetic traditions, music, literature, paintings, and even movement within space itself to define and distinguish itself from other spaces. But what is interesting to me is how cinematic space uses these very same arts and spatial relations to define itself. Only the theater as a space approaches the same possibilities with its dialectical relationship between audience and performers. "[T]he film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance," Benjamin argues, "since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor" (Benjamin 800). But as Benjamin has already noted, it is precisely the mechanical reproducibility of the cinema that makes representing a sacredly-perceived icon like Jesus in a ubiquitous public space a most imposing enterprise.

On stage, representations can constantly be shifted and renegotiated through multiple productions, casting, and variant interpretations of the play script. Not so in cinema. The original screenplay is rarely accessed by the viewer. The only foundational text is the film itself, where the *mise en scène* itself is the authority. This places a tremendous amount of responsibility on the

director because ultimately he or she determines the *mise en scène*. Developing a strategy that will enable the viewer to interpret the nature of Jesus by way of cinematic language is a primary challenge for any director making a film based on the gospels, but not one so easily achieved. For the past one hundred years, directors have tended to forget about Jesus as a protagonist with goals and needs, and as a character whose dilemmas rise and fall with the reversals of each act within the narrative. Instead, many directors have approached their subject as an object of worship. This is problematic because as a visual medium, the cinema compliments and reinforces already existing iconographies that are deeply rooted in the politics of the image clung to by particular cultures. So in the end, the viewer tends not to be provoked into thought about looking at Jesus further beyond the screen, but rather, becomes provoked into thinking Jesus looks a particular way because of the screen. To date, the cinematic Jesus has not been a Jesus that has adequately within the possibilities of cinema enabled a greater understanding of the man as an historical figure, as a human being, and as an accessible literary character. Too often, the focus of such projects has been mired by attempts at representing God. This is why the Biblical film in general tends to be perceived as inferior cinema, not because of their narratives or subject matter – this is irrelevant to good cinema – but because so many Biblical films rely on theology and politics instead of the very language of cinema to inform the way in which its ideas are both presented and interpreted.

This counter-imagining did not retain itself to the movie theater, however, but also to the very persona of the filmmaker as a commodity. In this way, the filmmaker's persona – informed heavily by the genre system of classic Hollywood as one who transmits narrative through montage in a film that will last between 90 minutes to 3 and ½ hours long – becomes eventually undermined by latter notions of authorship and *auteurism*. This destabilization occurs not because those directors who would later come to be known as auteurs cease transmitting narrative, or somehow come to consistently remain indifferent to the time restraints most famously articulated by Hitchcock; but instead because character, plot, stylization, tone, subject matter, etc., come to be associated not with the film's genre but with the sensibilities of the film's director.

But the problem with these assumptions – and film theory has long since anticipated such problems – is that if the sole authorized meaning of a text lies with the director, or even the screenwriter, certainly priestly functions become almost a given when a particular text sets out to represent God in some way or another. The challenge that our society faces, however, is that while we are suspicious of the filmmaker who claims to be inspired by God, we are reluctant at least in public to likewise challenge the clergyman who makes such a claim if he is backed by a congregation – which more properly ought to be called an audience, since really, his or her claims remain as potentially non-credible and rooted in the imagination as the that of any filmmaker.

Yet, because we live in a society where sovereignty has not been something equally accessed or mediated by any and every citizen, immigrant, or slave – at least traditionally – there might only be two possibilities in moving forward towards globality beyond our current notions of sovereignty: one, to accept that sovereignty rests with all, and therefore, to accept that we all can mediate some ultimate authority to one another – however that authority might come to represent itself; or two, to accept that if such a sovereign authority does exist, it is only granted to certain individuals for the purposes of mediation, and since individuals, be they priests, kings, or statesman, are constantly competing for such status with mutually exclusive claims, we can only know for sure that certain individuals are lying, while we must likewise accept that we will never know unequivocally who is telling the truth.

Therefore, by way of an intriguing irony, the cinema – or some sort hypertext informed by it – has the potential through its investment in the image, and the uncanny way it exposes the existence of the space between the gaze to become a means by which the American citizen, and ultimately a global society, can more properly examine that which Jesus is professed to incarnate in the flesh...the Word...or what I might more properly refer to as the *Logos* – that is, the Inhuman Intelligence that both Stoic philosophers and the gospel of John argue has the potential to be apprehended, understood, and articulated by certain elect humans. Further, it must be noted that this election is not dependent on anything more than the human's ability to apprehend,

understand, and articulate the *logos* because it is for this very reason that every human being was created, if in fact, we were created at all.

But ultimately, this study argues that the representation of Jesus is not about theology at all, but instead about sovereignty and how it can be represented in particular spaces. In this dissertation, I also suggest that the necessary reason why Jesus, one of the most enduring icons and symbols of sovereignty and power for the West, may have only classically been imagined as a white male of Anglo descent, could perhaps also be directly related to how other positions of power such as the American presidency have traditionally been framed. I also speculate how increasing counter-cultural representations of Jesus as both light-skinned and dark-skinned African-American men offered up in such experimental mediums as the music videos of Kanye West in combination with the destabilization of traditional imaginings of the American presidency as a result of the 2008 elections forecasted and anticipated the possibility of new ways of representing Jesus in mainstream Hollywood cinema, or at the very least, for mainstream audiences via innovative technological and cinematic forms.

CHAPTER ONE:  
INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MINISTRY –  
THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE GRAVEN IMAGE

George Stevens's 1965 religious film The Greatest Story Ever Told begins with an awkward prologue that clearly indicates a significant transition in the thinking regarding the cinematic representation of the sacred in cinema because of the way he blends the sacrosanct text of the gospel narrative with his own carefully, yet artificially crafted *mise en scène* to create an innovative, yet quasi-aesthetic/quasi-religious tapestry of cinematic iconography that somehow manages to blur the necessary distinction between the holy canon and artistic license. As the last title of his opening credit sequence scrolls by, the screen fades out, and then fades back in on a glowing, bright sphere. As the camera moves, it becomes obvious that this sphere is a sky light of some sort. In fact, as the camera continues to pan down what looks like the decorated wall of a cathedral in relative close-up, the sphere begins to resemble the sun itself. (This ambiguity is noteworthy and telling, largely due to the ambiguity of the "Son" that is soon to be presented.) Still panning, with the sun-like orb above, a painted image of a pale figure, struggling with a wooden cross, can be seen amidst a band of Roman

soldiers. The non-ambient hum of a chorus is barely audible, as gentle horns whine in the background. Then an unseen narrator quotes from the opening passages of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .” At this precise moment, in his distinct Swedish accent Max Von Sydow can be heard stating, “I am [H]e.”<sup>5</sup> And though his physical image as an actor remains offscreen while he states this line, by now the camera pans towards a painted image of Sydow, bearded, with cropped hair. So careful in its imitation of religious art is this image that the wall upon which this image is painted even features various cracks and blemishes, as if to suggest age, and thus authenticity. The narrator continues, “. . . He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was made nothing that has been made.” A viewer can now see Sydow’s painted image quite clearly in his white robe with his arms outstretched, and the assertion is now complete. Jesus has been given the face of Max Von Sydow; and likewise, to play the part, Max Von Sydow has been given the *character* of Jesus.

“In him was life. . .” This duplicitous image of the Son of God lap dissolves into a collection of stars against a night sky. A viewer can note that the

---

<sup>5</sup> Even in the moment of transcribing Sydow’s line for the purposes of this dissertation, I am faced with the dilemma of the cinematic text. While the narrator’s lines are quoted directly from the first chapter of John’s Gospel, the line: “I am [H]e,” does not occur anywhere in this particular passage. If this were a direct quotation from Jesus in this particular context, Biblical tradition would dictate that the “H” in “[H]e” be capitalized. But since Sydow states this pronoun without any apparent antecedent other than the *mise en scène* of the film, the statement implies -- through the contrived iconography of the painted wall, not that Max Von Sydow is an actor portraying Jesus, but that he is Jesus. If I do not capitalize the “h” in “[h]e”, then I automatically assume that Sydow is not referring to the character he is playing but himself, thus undermining the statement in the first place. Yet, when merely spoken orally in the context of a cinematic production, the ambiguous and mercurial nature of this non-Biblically based assertion remains lost on the viewer.



brightest star emerges about where Sydow's neckline was in the previous image. ". . .and the life was the light of men. And the light shines on in the darkness. . ." Then as the image dissolves into the shadows of the next image, the flicker of a candle appears where the ebullient star used to be. ". . . and the darkness grasped it not . . ." A cloaked figure moves through the shadows, carrying a candle-lamp, and the ambience of a baby crying in the background can be heard. The narrator concludes, ". . .The Greatest Story Ever Told." And then as the camera draws in on the baby's hands, whose face remains unrevealed, the hands become engulfed in a halo of light. Diegetic trumpets blast in an obvious aural homage to MGM's own earlier 1959 biblical epic Ben-Hur, which bears its own implications – because in that film William Wyler refuses to show the face of the actor who plays Jesus; and so now, six years later, by way of these trumpets it is as if United Artists is proclaiming to the world its intent to finish what MGM had previously begun so tentatively – to reveal the Word of God – not made flesh, but made cinematically.

For almost two thousand years the written text has been widely accepted by the Christian community as one of the most reliable means of transmitting access to the Word of God. Written anonymously, these documents, referred to as *gospels* – meaning "good news" in Greek – have always been contextualized by a discursive process of intertextuality, homage, and quotation edited and redacted by clerical institutions of power for the express purpose of representing Jesus in a canonized, reproducible narrative as signified by the written word.

Stevens's prologue readily suggests how intertextuality, homage, and quotation still today are essential to the dialogic nature of the gospel-making process as signified by the cinematic image of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

In his essay "Multiculturalism, Race, and Representation", Robert Stam invokes multiculturalism to describe Europe as suspiciously positing itself as a "unique source of meaning," "the world's center of gravity," and the "ontological reality to the rest of the world's shadow" (Stam x). With Jesus's consistent Euro/Anglo representation in Western cinema, it is important to consider as to what extent this can be argued for a Hollywood cinema that has extended outward from America to dominate a new global market. In this essay Stam provides a plethora of useful questions to ponder in light of the apparent Eurocentric assumptions of both Hollywood and a global cinema that quite often has still remained dominated by Hollywood. I will apply some of Stam's questions here through a more detailed reading of the representation of Jesus in cinema beginning with the opening prologue of George Stevens's The Greatest Story Ever Told. By "reading," I mean what Stam argues as the particular identifications evidenced through POV and reaction shots that stabilize particular hermeneutics regarding a film text and its representation, and how these techniques can almost *cheat* an authentic reading of the diegesis. By "cheat" I do not mean break a set canon of rules of image interpretation *per se*. I am instead referring to the manner in which all film reading in one way or another remains an intertextual process reliant on homage and quotation. The

method in which shots borrow their meaning from how similar shots have been interpreted and contextualized by previous films will always in certain ways co-opt the casual viewers ability to truly look beyond the surface elements of a film text into the deeper workings of the image's multivalent relationships between narrative, sound, ideology, mode of production, etc., via what I call the space between the gaze. Like Stam, I am interested in a more dialogic and dialectical approach to representation, but if the camera situates representation beyond the *mise-en-scène* and in conjunction with it, as Stam asserts, there is much at stake in a cinematic image of Jesus that remains static politically, by way of casting.

And so what does it really mean for Max Von Sydow to state "I am [H]e"? Who, in fact, is Sydow in the moment he makes this statement? Is he merely an actor who has been contracted to symbolize Jesus in a particular photographed moment of cinema? Does the symbol, having no real potency, suggest instead that that which is symbolized - meaning Jesus himself - possesses the real power? And if so, what is there within the diegesis of the text to authoritatively suggest to the viewer that Sydow's likeness be interpreted as merely a symbol, and not as an actual, palpable effigy of the Son of God - not a representation, but a *re*-presentation? Is there even a difference? What marks such a difference? And how might this process of demarcation differ from that of the relationship between a model that might have been chosen by a classical painter and the actual work of art that was produced, only later to be co-opted by certain clerics

to quite literally frame their parishioners's access to the liturgical process? And, lastly, who determines such a difference?

More specifically, in regards to The Greatest Story Ever Told, the film *vis a vis* both homage and quotation seems to disrupt the notion of signification by operating somewhere outside of the accepted lines of the sign and the signified instead of between them. The film operates through homage because Miklos Rozsa's musical score as already stated snatches rifts most obviously from the work he does earlier for Wyler's Ben-Hur as if through quotation, intertextuality, and homage, to self-reflexively insinuate The Greatest Story Ever Told as a cinematic text to be a more careful and elaborate rendering of the gospel narrative. This insinuation works in much the same manner that the Gospel of John in certain ways sidesteps the synoptic gospels by disregarding, for the most part, Q as a source, instead drawing from some other more direct source, as evidenced by the extensive direct quotations of Jesus that are included in the text, many of which, if authentic, that could have only been initially transmitted by the most intimate of Jesus's disciples. The Greatest Story Ever Told's prologue operates through quotation both not only because this shot borrows from and literally cites another medium – that is, painting – but also because it borrows not only notes from Ben-Hur's score, but also its composer. In addition to this, regarding quotation one cannot fail to mention the narrator whose literal quotation of the Gospel of John during the opening shot complicates further any and all suspicions of an authentic and authoritative representation in much the

same way that it might be difficult to challenge the authenticity and authority of a Protestant minister's sermon merely on the basis that the Anglo Jesus which hangs from his pulpit remains to date an inaccurate and still unproven rendering. It is almost as if the uncredited narrator's quoting of that which is perceived by many to be Scripture attempts to validate the cinematic text in some unusual, but palpable manner. Not that the quotation of Scripture is unique in cinema. In fact, quite the opposite is true since this practice has been applied in features since 1912 with From the Manger to the Cross. It is not the audible word which I find so troubling with Stevens's prologue, but the slippage Stevens manages to exploit between the process of photography and that which is photographed. Thus Bazin states that photography:

[...] can even surpass art in creative power. The aesthetic world of the painter is of a different kind from that of the world about him. Its boundaries enclose a substantially and essentially different microcosm. The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore, photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it. [...] Hence photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, an hallucination that is also a fact. The fact that surrealist painting combines tricks of visual deception with meticulous attention to

detail substantiates this. [. . .] So, photography is clearly the most important event in the history of plastic arts [. . .] it has freed Western painting [. . .] from its obsession with realism and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy. (Bazin 15-16)

The Biblical film, especially films where an actor is cast to play Jesus, impedes this important event that Bazin anticipates because of the way in which painting is marked off not only as a reference point for the real in many Christian sacred traditions, but the way in which aesthetic autonomy is forfeited by the filmmaker in order to enable painting to maintain its higher rank not necessarily as an art form but as a way of representing actual objects or characters of Biblical significance.

Even if a viewer does somehow manage to withstand the tendency toward a willing suspension of disbelief while watching the opening of Stevens's film, an altogether different set of hermeneutics must be applied in order to convincingly destabilize the authenticity and value of the fresco itself which actually must be photographed in order for the scene to play and for which Sydow himself has come to serve as a model. Another way of imagining this hermeneutic booby-trap would be to consider whether or not it would be appropriate for the fresco of Sydow designed for the film to be apprehended for the purposes of liturgy, and what premises might inform an argument either way. Such rationale becomes especially sticky considering how the imagined representation of Jesus through painting to date has come to be widely accepted

not only as a reliable framework for the liturgical experience, but in terms of the veneration of icons, also as a prevalent and necessary means of worship for many.

But just what is the line between the sign and the signified? This question is not new. The iconoclasts have been asking this of the iconophiles for nearly two thousand years. In other words, how can the image of Max Von Sydow not come to be equated either accurately or inaccurately with that of Jesus? But how do the aesthetics of the cinematic text complicate religious representation in ways that are different, and perhaps even more complicated than the icons of Eastern orthodoxy or the paintings of the Italian Renaissance? Questions such as these are not only important to consider in terms of The Greatest Story Ever Told and the subsequent Jesus films of the twentieth and twenty-first century which followed, but also in terms of seven key films about Jesus that preceded Stevens's film in 1965: Cecil B. DeMille's The King of Kings (1927), Spencer William's The Blood of Jesus (1941), Hill Number One (1951), Ben-Hur (1959), Nicholas Ray's King of Kings (1961), Pier Pasolini's The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964), and Kenneth Anger's Scorpio Rising (1964).

In the late 1950s, when William Wyler decides to direct Ben-Hur there is a specific reason why he chooses not to reveal the face of the actor who plays Jesus, thus attempting somehow to bypass the political context of casting altogether. But while it is not possible to know for certain what that reason might have been, it is possible to investigate some of the discursive outcomes that this choice

enabled especially in light of the fact that this film not only achieved blockbuster status by being the highest grossing film of its era, but also enviable critical acclaim. This film is important because it arrives as Gerald Forshey observes in American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars at the end of decade when “Variety noted that in six of those ten years, religious spectaculars had been the most popular films” (Forshey 1). Therefore, due to Ben-Hur’s immense popularity many moments must have inevitably circulated between both speaker and listener, and audience and critic, whereby claims about the cinematic text’s ultimate stake in a discussion about the representation of Jesus in feature-length films could be both posited and challenged. Such discussions had been ongoing since 1912 – and even before that – but it was not until the 1950s that movies based on biblical material were for an entire decade privileged by the mainstream. Certainly, the 1920s had produced The Ten Commandments (1923), The King of Kings (1927), and Ben-Hur (1927). This same cycle literally repeats itself in terms of narrative – once again demonstrating the importance of quotation and intertextuality – between 1956 and 1961; but the Biblical epic as a genre does not fully come into its own until 1956 with Cecil B. DeMille’s The Ten Commandments. The Biblical epic about Jesus would follow three years later in 1959 with Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, as it is officially named after Civil War general Lew Wallace’s 1880 novel.

The Biblical epic was everything that TV was not, and in the 1950s that is exactly what moguls like DeMille wanted to prove not just through their *mise en*



scène, but through the underlying ideology and politics of their message. Consequently, Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments, the classic remake of his own earlier 1923 film of the same title, is undoubtedly the definitive Biblical epic. The prologues to many of DeMille's films are a case in point: although such prologues were a common practice for DeMille, it is interesting to consider how audiences responded to a cuff-linked director in a three-piece suit<sup>6</sup>, complete

---

<sup>6</sup> Like Alfred Hitchcock, DeMille understood the value of his own image as a commodity in relation to his films even before auteur theory would be popularized in America in subsequent decades. As a result, he consistently invests a great deal into his own public image by not only appearing as himself either to promote or introduce the prologues of his own films, but also by appearing as himself in the films of others – perhaps, most notably, as himself directing Samson and Delilah (1949) in Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (1950). Also like Hitchcock, who on one occasion infamously stated that actors should be “treated as cattle”, DeMille too, at times, could be known to take himself and his role as director a little too seriously. “Those who worked for him knew him as a tyrannical perfectionist,” observes Henry Stephens, The Bible According to Hollywood's narrator; while actor, Jerry Maren, admits that “[DeMille] could be kind of demanding” (The Bible According to Hollywood 2004). In Charlton Heston's Hollywood, Heston recounts one story of an extra pushed too far on the set of The Ten Commandments (1956) by DeMille's sometimes limitless expectations:

At first, the pretty extra girls he'd cast as the principal orgiasts threw themselves into their task with abandon, but by the fourth day their enthusiasm had dissipated somewhat. At last, one of the extra girls went over to the first assistant director. “Tell me, Eddie,” she said, “who do you have to sleep with to get off this picture?” It's a famous DeMille story, but it's true – I can vouch for it. (Heston and Isbouts 66)

In some ways, Ralph Richardson's portrayal of God or the Supreme Being in the final act of Terry Gilliam's Time Bandits (1981) could be interpreted with his balding head, three-piece suit, and dangling pocket watch as a sort of caricature not merely of DeMille but of how the director's station was perceived in general prior to the Film School Generation. This becomes especially evident in terms of the careless ease with which the Supreme Being in this film vanquishes the antagonists and rights all of the plot's dilemmas for a *deus ex machina* that, in this instance, is quite literal. This director-as-God-in-a-suit image would later be shattered in the seventies by the baseball caps and beards of the new guard of Hollywood directors Michael Pye and Lynda Myles would eventually dub “The Movie Brats”, including George Lucas, Brian De Palma, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, John Milius, and Steven Spielberg. However, such was not the case in the mid-fifties when it was still readily acceptable for a director to appear within his own narrative film and offer up a prologue directed at the audience in an overt effort to appeal to their political sensibilities.

DeMille, after all, to many was the grandfather of the cinema, including to Charlton Heston. “DeMille,” Heston begins, “who among other things was one of the guys that invented the movies in the first place – which gives me a curious historical connection to very beginning of the medium – he made the first feature film ever made in Hollywood” (The Bible According to Hollywood 2004). This status was informed largely not only by DeMille's vast filmography, but

with a dangling timepiece as he stands in front of a curtain in deliberate defiance of the fourth wall, to directly address the audience in The Ten Commandments's opening minutes. (A similar technique would later be repeated Richard Donner in the 1978 Superman with the late Christopher Reeve, but to a more aesthetic and less didactic end.) DeMille makes no attempt to conceal both his own political slant and the political bent of the film itself in his prologue, where he states:

The theme of this picture is whether man ought to be ruled by God's law, or whether they ought to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state? Or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today. Our intention was not to create a story but to be worthy of the divinely inspired story created 3,000 years ago - the five books of Moses. (The Ten Commandments 1956)

Like such latter films as Braveheart (1995), Malcolm X (1992), Gandhi (1982), and Schindler's List (1993), The Ten Commandments (1956) was epic in every sense of the word, beginning with a film length of 220 minutes that like most Best Picture winners, nominees, and prospective nominees, absolutely confounded the well-marketed paradigms of Syd Field and Robert McKee which privileged two hour running times and three-act structures for motion pictures.

---

also by the sheer grandeur of The Ten Commandments (1956) itself and how that film more than any other came to exemplify the most popular cinema of the 1950s.

DeMille was creating spectacle here and he knew it. And he did not apologize for it. After being warned by his personal physician, Max Jacobson, about continuing with shooting The Ten Commandments after suffering a heart attack on the set of the film, DeMille replied:

I'm seventy-three years old. I've lived long enough to know that if this project is going to be my last, so be it. But this is not a normal film. You know that. This is special. This is about the power of God. And if it is meant to be, I will have the strength to finish it.

(Heston and Isbouts 66)

Yet, apart from such vainglorious notions on the part of the director, in many respects – apart from its problematic ideology – many of the crucial scenes in The Ten Commandments (1956) are quite good, and are only epitomized through equally memorable and unforgettable images: from the massive exodus, to the raucous forging of the Golden Calf, to the parting of the Red Sea. Even as cliché or unimpressive as these sequences may seem to be to the modern viewer in terms of *mise en scène*, it is important to remember that The Ten Commandments in many respects was the best of what movies had to offer before CGI in terms of scale and scope. Like the actual ten commandments, whose symbolic meaning seems to resonate even with those who cannot recite them, this film speaks for itself, representing the ultimate in cinematic achievement, even for those who have never seen it. If there ever was a film to so capture the optimism, propaganda, spectacle, politics, and grand achievement of both the 1950s and the

Hollywood studio system, The Ten Commandments is it. In fact, in the 1995 documentary American Cinema: The Film School Generation Steven Spielberg basically laments over the bitter reality that films like DeMille's cannot be made anymore because of the prohibitive cost associated with producing such spectacle.<sup>7</sup>

The Ten Commandments (1956) is not a perfect film however, but it does set the standard for what most critics and historians would come to know as the biblical spectacular through a long string of cinematic homage, parody, and quotation. And just to indicate DeMille's influence, even some of his more whimsical choices in The Ten Commandments (1956) have now become stock clichés of latter biblical films. Like for instance his Egyptians that more times than not speak in British accents – or in the case of Yul Brynner, what debatably might be categorized as “Russian.” This manipulation of the English language

---

<sup>7</sup> Considering the sheer scale and magnitude of many of Spielberg's films, whose total US box-office as of 2003 totaled \$3,151,000,000 according to Russell Ash in The Top 10 of Film, the highest of any director ever, and the fact that the name “Spielberg” has come to be synonymous with such Hollywood notions as “big budget”, “special effects”, and “blockbuster”, his observations regarding DeMille's cinematic achievement in terms of *mise en scène* cannot be underestimated (Ash 100). With the exception of such films like Spartacus or Ben-Hur, even I must admit that what is accomplished onscreen in The Ten Commandments, or say in Scorsese's Gangs of New York (2004), is much more remarkable in terms of *mise en scène* through realism than anything formalistically fabricated by Lucas or Spielberg at the computer level. That the cinematically inferior pod-race sequence in Lucas's Episode One: The Phantom Menace is nothing more than a digitally rendered homage to Wyler's chariot race in Ben-Hur (1959) only demonstrates this point further. However, this is not meant to undermine the contributions of these two filmmakers. Unlike many critics and theorists, I am an avid fan of both Lucas and Spielberg, but in terms of the pure art of framing extras and directing action that actually takes place in front of the camera both DeMille and Scorsese at least up to this point have proven themselves to be superior filmmakers. Spielberg is correct when he argues that they do not make movies like DeMille's epics anymore; in fact, not only can such films be no longer made, but they can no longer be screened. Even the DVD as a format can only manage to digitally record a fraction of what was originally intended for the screen.

would later be Wyler's same choice when it came to casting the Romans for Ben-Hur (1959); and Martin Scorsese, having his own unique penchant for language, would do the precise thing with his Romans in The Last Temptation of Christ (1988). Accordingly, though only perhaps obvious to the musically astute, one can also notice in the sequence where Moses's mother is rescued from certain doom a few familiar musical chords that are repeated in a latter film that with its more historically-accurate and ethnically-rendered characters handles its *mise en scène* more responsibly than any Biblically-based film yet. (I am here referring to DreamWorks's animated film The Prince of Egypt (1998) – a film ironically-enough produced by a studio co-founded by none other than the aforementioned Steven Spielberg.)

Having just released Amistad (1997) that previous December, and perhaps still smarting from both the critical snub he received from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the chiding he faced from the African-American community for his exultantly quirky adaptation of Alice Walker's The Color Purple in 1985<sup>8</sup> – not to mention his recent success with Schindler's List – Spielberg and his colleagues at DreamWorks understandably emphasized a more proper ethnic representation as a top priority for their animated film.<sup>9</sup> But such was not the case with The Ten Commandments (1956) and most other Biblical films that preceded this animated feature. For instance, while I did find Cedric

---

<sup>8</sup> The Color Purple was nominated for 11 Academy Awards in 1986 and won none.

<sup>9</sup> However, it should be noted that in The Prince of Egypt Moses's complexion appears to get lighter throughout the narrative as his appearance evolves from that of an Egyptian prince to the more traditionally bearded Moses with staff and robe, despite extensive time spent in the desert.

Hardwicke's portrayal of Sethi somewhat compelling as he works the room like a cunning twentieth century politician in the first act of The Ten Commandments, the persistence with which Biblical epics always find some sort of way to subjugate African races is quite troublesome to me.<sup>10</sup> Biblical epics complicate these assumptions because while the ubiquitous casting of white actors to play roles of all ethnic and racial origin remains prevalent, most of these films still contain key sequences that work to reinforce basic racial identity stereotypes as contextualized by contemporary politics – especially in terms of black and white. Frank Niblo's 1927 version of Ben-Hur includes just prior to its inciting incident an intriguing series of title cards that explicitly make reference to both race and nationality, reading: "Under the ancient walls where the prophets walked and talked with God – black horsemen from Nubia – Celts from Britain, Helvetian mountaineers, Thracians of the Black Sea – warriors from every corner of the Empire." And then preceding a shot of the white Romans marching on

---

<sup>10</sup> Many of these films operate from a sort of nonracial aesthetic assumption that enables a white actor to play any character regardless of that character's background perhaps in the name of fantasy or the willing suspension of disbelief that coincides with much of what might otherwise be regarded as anachronistic filmmaking. White men in blackface portraying black female mammals in Birth of a Nation are troublesome instances of such suppositions, coupled with Mexican actress, Susan Kohner, being cast by Douglas Sirk to play Sarah Jane in Imitation of Life (1959) instead of a genuine bi-racial actress of both black and white descent as the diegesis of the narrative dictates. The subtle racial politics that contextualize images such as these suggest that while in many instances black actresses could not play mammals in 1915, black actresses could still not play their children in 1959. On the other hand, the prospect of black actors playing white characters in motion pictures is hardly possible without being the stuff of comedy. I am thinking now of Saul, the Jewish aficionado of the black barbershop – one of Eddie Murphy's many caricatures in Coming to America (1988) – or even two of the Wayans Brothers as the Wilson sisters in White Chicks (2004). Yet, even in these two instances, both latex and extensive makeup is used in order to offset the dark complexions and skin tones of the actors playing their parts in terms of the image, thus only reinforcing the inviolability of portraying ethnic whiteness onscreen despite the apparent accessibility by all – especially whites – in terms of portraying ethnic color.

horseback, “Clanking, grim and relentless, the conquerors.” Three decades later in The Ten Commandments, DeMille insists on featuring a throng of half-naked black actors playing Ethiopians jumping around to drumbeats before kneeling down in order to pay tribute to Egypt within the diegesis of the film, but at the purely political level what DeMille presents in actuality is a host of some Africans, and presumably many African-Americans, paying tribute instead to a host of Europeans for their great mercy after a much more recent conquest.<sup>11</sup> When Charlton Heston states years later in Bowling for Columbine that thanks “to dead white guys” he has his right to bear arms, once again privilege and the right to protect oneself against tyranny through violence if necessary gets unnecessarily assigned a racial preference (Bowling for Columbine 2002). When DeMille, in turn, rhetorically asks in the prologue to The Ten Commandments: “[W]hether [men] ought to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state? Or are they free souls under God?”, he too assumes that the answers to such questions rest with “dead white guys” because in his film both the dictators and the free souls are white, while the blacks

---

<sup>11</sup> When Heston’s Moses gestures to the British Cedric Hardwicke and the Russian Yul Brynner, exclaiming as an American: “Great One, I bring you Ethiopia!”, I am certain that the irony was not lost on everyone who originally screened the film. Considering the fact that this film first opened in 1956 – after such historic achievements in Civil Rights as the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 – such images of racial subjugation most certainly could have been interpreted by some with more volatile repercussions.

depicted remain the property of the Egyptian state (The Ten Commandments 1956).<sup>12</sup>

A parallel set of racist politics can also be observed in the practice of Biblical exegesis in regards to Egypt. Henry H. Halley writes in his famous and widely used Halley's Bible Handbook:

Descendants of Ham to be servant races; Shemites to preserve knowledge of the True God; Japhetic races to have largest portion of world, and to supplant Semitic races as teachers of God. It was fulfilled when Israelites took Canaan, Greeks took Sidon, and Rome conquered Carthage; and ever since Japhetic races have dominated the world, and have been converted to the God of Shem, while Semitic races have occupied a place of comparative insignificance; and Hamitic races a place of servitude. An amazing forecast!

(Halley 74)

As is evident from this passage, Halley has based his arguments on the errant “curse of Ham” notion, presumed to be the Biblical explanation for the subservience of much of the African world, and widely used as an explanation

---

<sup>12</sup> Such a political misrepresentation of both the African diaspora and the Egyptian nation is only complicated by a flawed and enduring Western conspiracy that for centuries now has tried to argue that Egypt and the subsequent cultural and intellectual heritage that has derived from that nation must be regarded separately from the rest of Africa. This is how an Elizabeth Taylor and not a Dorothy Dandridge could come to play Cleopatra in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1963 film – not necessarily because of Cleopatra's Greek, Ptolemaic heritage, which then might justify the casting choice, but because of the unremitting requisite for Caucasian actors to take on roles as Egyptians despite the contradictory historical and archaeological evidence. This practice has continued on even in the contemporary series of Bible films produced by Turner Network Television like Abraham (1994), Joseph (1995), and Moses (1996), where Maximilian Schell, Stefano Dionisi, and Christopher Lee all as Europeans play Pharaohs respectively.



and/or excuse for American slavery.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the prevalent whiteness and Eurocentric *mise en scène* of The Ten Commandments (1956) regarding the Egyptians still indicates similar assumptions, since even though as a film which takes place mainly in Africa, about both Africans and Semites, non-Africans and Semites dominate the cast. Unfortunately, there have been few iconoclastic efforts which exist to counter such Egyptian misrepresentations; and even then, these mostly wind up as marginalized sources apprehended only by the African-American Left, such as George G.M. James in his book Stolen Legacy, or KRS-One through rap songs like “Why is That?” and “Blackman in Effect.”

But in regards to the image *vis a vis* casting, I am still curious as to what motivated DeMille to hire actual blacks to portray the dancing Ethiopian slaves in relation to his “white” Egyptians in The Ten Commandments (1956). One might even suggest a subtle and erotic subtext at work all too reminiscent of

---

<sup>13</sup> This widely accepted interpretation goes on to presume that Noah’s three sons are the racial prototypes of the three major divisions of human beings: Mongoloid, Caucazoid, and Negroid. But on a more careful contextual reading of Genesis 9:25, the passage in question, one realizes that Noah did not, in fact, curse his son Ham and all of his descendants to be servants – which incidentally would include Cush, and Mizraim, or Egypt – but only Ham’s fourth son, Canaan. And, even if such a curse were the case, the subsequent enslavement of the Hebrews by the Egyptians as described in Exodus would then directly contradict Noah’s prophecy. Furthermore, if the curse of Ham did apply to Ham and all of his children, as an apparent explanation for African servitude, implicitly within this argument – as inconsistent as it may be – not only is it an admission that Cushites and Egyptians were prophetically destined to be servants – but also an admission that they too must be black. Biblical scholars with subtle, racist agendas cannot have it both ways, desiring a white Egypt but a curse of Ham intended only for the black races. However, with the aid of a myriad of painters from previous centuries, and the help of many filmmakers in the twentieth, and a whole host of churchgoers unwilling to read the Bible for themselves, and racist commentators like Henry H. Halley have all but succeeded. (But for the record, it must be noted that Egypt is a part of Africa, despite what some Western textbooks want to argue. It must also be added that our modern notion of the “Middle-East”, post World-War I, is more an invention of the English and the French, than the people indigenous to that so-called region.)

American slavery when the alluring Ethiopian representative and sister to the Ethiopian king has her “personal” dialogue with Charlton Heston’s Moses. In this exchange, she slowly removes a green stone and gives it to Moses, stating that he is “kind as well as wise” (The Ten Commandments 1956). The immediate two-shot of Sethi and Nefretiri, played by Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Anne Baxter respectively, that also doubles as a reaction shot to reveal Nefretiri’s overt irritation with this exchange, as she sits in her throne panting with disgust, only bolsters the apparent intended erotic tension. In fact, she is so disturbed by the innuendo of the moment as Moses’s obvious woman-in-waiting that she cannot help but glare at the Ethiopian king and sister as they exit to the right of the frame – a glare that is only interrupted by a slight glance from Sethi.

Such instances only beg further the fact that a space must be carved by filmmakers within the cinema to confront the Judeo-Christian Anglo man with his Eurocentric, ego-centered, vain insistence that all history be rendered from his perspective, resulting in ubiquitous and repetitive scenarios where Orson Welles can play Othello, Charlton Heston can play Moses, and Yul Brynner can play Rameses. Sir Richard Attenborough could not even find an Indian actor to play Gandhi and instead cast the British Ben Kingsley to play the title role in the 1982 film. As in Ben-Hur (1927), this same sort of racial patronization can be observed as early as 1923 in DeMille’s earlier version of The Ten Commandments when the intertitles name all of the races that are represented in the tribute to the white Egyptians; and as late as 2004 in The Passion of the Christ, when in what

on the surface seems a raceless production, Gibson goes out of his way to depict an African slave in Herod's court, and an African spectator to the scourging who winces at Jesus's torture, as if to suggest through a bizarre manipulation of the Kuleshov effect a contrast between African slavery and Jesus's own torture. Each of these examples could be written off as hapless coincidences if casting were not such a crucial part to the film director's occupation – even the casting of extras, especially when their reactions shots are crucial to the affect of a particular shot or scene, as is often the case in these Biblical films.

Most notably, in Michael Moore's Bowling for Columbine (2002), Heston was referred to by Arthur Busch, the County Prosecutor for Flint, Michigan in regards to Heston's presidency of the NRA as "Moses himself" – a knowing nod to the socio-political ramifications of Heston's persona in our simultaneously waxing and waning Judeo-Christian society. Without question, Heston's larger-than-life Biblical persona stems directly from the power and magnitude of DeMille's film. As a motion picture, The Ten Commandments must be situated properly in its post World War II/pre-Film School Generation political context within Hollywood history. Whether accurate or not, DeMille declares in no uncertain terms his intent to direct a film that will promulgate and reinforce the convenient mainstream ideology of the time, that while perhaps more urgent in 1956, at the height of the Eisenhower era (1953-1961) and the dawn of the military industrial complex – when the country was just beginning to come to terms with its own injustices toward minorities, and later, women – proves

especially telling in regards to the Bush administration of the early twenty-first century.

In regards to the representation of Jesus, this moment between The Ten Commandments (1956) and Ben-Hur (1959) is again significant because it marks simultaneously the approximate time when *Cahiers du Cinema* critics like Chabrol and Godard begin making their own films, thus instigating new ways to discuss film authorship; the translation of Kazantzakis's formerly banned novel, The Last Temptation of Christ, into the English language in 1960; and the deaths of both Andre Bazin and Cecil B. DeMille, in 1958 and 1959, respectively. In addition, in terms of *mise en scène* Ben-Hur signals Hollywood's last efforts to consciously invite a more dialectical approach to the image of Jesus in cinema since Wyler photographs his Kracaueresque-reality without revealing the face of the actor he chooses to portray Jesus, making the politics of his own casting choices in terms of this role more difficult to determine merely from the film text itself; while there is still less difficulty in examining the politics of that which informs the casting choices of earlier films like The Blood of Jesus or Hill Number One.

Since 1959, however, one can observe a necessary shift in how the political implications of casting Jesus begin to operate beginning with Nicholas Ray's King of Kings in 1961 where a blue-eyed American named Jeffrey Hunter is thrust upon the global cinema market with the tagline: "A Story of the Christ. The Glory of His Spoken Words." Perhaps out of reaction to Hunter, who was often criticized as a "Teenage Jesus" – though, like Jesus in the gospels, he was in

his early 1930s at the time of production – two very important films, Scorpio Rising and The Gospel According to St. Matthew, emerge three years later out of very disparate aspects of a less mainstream tradition, often defined by the muddled term “art cinema.” While Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising slowly worked its way into notoriety by way of the experimental film tradition, Pier Paolo Pasolini, already having been tried under a Fascist law for his iconoclastic portrait of the crucifixion in RoGoPaG (1962), offers as a European director in The Gospel According to St. Matthew one of the first films about Jesus whose very title situates a discourse rooted within the very authority of the New Testament text.

It should come as no surprise now why in The Greatest Story Ever Told George Stevens chooses a Swedish actor, Max von Sydow, to play Jesus, perhaps to suggest a sort of political multi-nationalism that would not privilege the inherent American ideology that might have otherwise plagued the reception of his heavily Hollywood-determined production. This was a largely failed effort since King of Kings was a tremendous financial success, earning an impressive \$25 million dollars against its \$5 million dollar budget, while The Greatest Story Ever Told was a tremendous flop, earning approximately \$12 million dollars against its whopping \$25 million budget. But that Stevens with The Greatest Story Ever Told ever even had the audacity to open his film with a fresco of Jesus based on the likeness of Sydow clearly indicates a significant transition between the comfort-level of a filmmaker working in the mid-1960s and that of earlier

filmmakers like Wyler, when it comes to manipulating the distinction between the sacrosanct and the aesthetic. That the film was not well received, however, may indicate the degree to which Stevens may have actually not only been ahead of his time, but ahead of his audience.

While the popularity of the Biblical epic in the 1950s, and how Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ marked the last time Jesus was depicted in a mainstream film set in the first century without there being a need to show the face of the actor who portrayed him, might for some chiefly be an historical concern because it can be discussed against a particular historical moment – that is, a moment that focuses on box-office success, and begins in 1951 with Quo Vadis and ends with Ben-Hur – this is not the only way to consider this period in terms of cinema. Furthermore, it may not be irrelevant to consider box-office in this decade, since Quo Vadis earned \$30 million dollars and was the highest grossing film in 1951. And in 1953, The Robe grossed \$36 million dollars and was the second highest-grossing film of that year after Disney's Peter Pan. And in 1954, that Demetrius and the Gladiators, the sequel to The Robe earned \$26 million dollars and fell just short of Hitchcock's Rear Window which was the high grossing film that year, also earning \$26 million dollars. While The Ten Commandments was the highest grossing film of 1956, earning \$85 million dollars, and while Ben-Hur was the highest grossing film of 1959, earning \$73 million dollars, I would suggest a different way of understanding Ben-Hur not in terms of box-office or the 1950s as a decade, but in terms of casting and the military politics which constrained this

particular era through the space between the gaze, making the moment of entry not Quo Vadis, but The Blood of Jesus (1941).

Unlike most, who might want to attribute the success of the 1950s blockbuster to the anti-communist era of Eisenhower and the subsequent anxiety that ensued, I would argue that the issue was not local, via the administration of an American President, but international – wedged between World War II and Viet Nam, making the Biblical epic of increasingly less concern in exchange for films about the New Testament and the person of Jesus Christ as time progressed (1941-1973). This inevitably poses new challenges for the cinema and politics, as the casting of Jesus, or any other character for that matter, cannot easily shake away from the image its deep political roots in terms of *mise-en-scène* through issues of race and representation. This becomes even more pertinent as Hollywood comes to dominate the international box-office, just as the casting of the actor who plays Jesus comes to indicate a specific political agenda precisely because of the international implications of representing Jesus in particular ways to certain nations.

Because of these international implications and this specific political agenda, Spencer Williams's The Blood of Jesus (1941) must be analyzed as a pertinent intervention in terms of race and representation in so far as Jesus in the cinema goes that must be considered even before the great epics of the 1950s. In The Blood of Jesus it is important to note how Williams tackles the challenge of representing both Jesus and sacred space without succumbing completely to the

political pressures that would ultimately produce the pervasive tropes that would later become cliché in the bigger budget spectacles of mainstream Hollywood. While much of Williams's film clearly demonstrates how the image of Jesus had been stabilized prior to 1941 even beyond the confines of cinema through paintings and other such fine arts, The Blood of Jesus marks an important historical checkpoint which signifies what had become an increasingly prevalent taboo in cinema – that is, to represent Jesus's face as depicted by an actual human actor. With H. B. Warner and The King of Kings (1927), DeMille had been the last major filmmaker to depict Jesus's face through the face of an actor. Beginning with MGM's Ben-Hur in 1927, and continuing on through the 1950s with films like The Robe, and William Wyler's Ben-Hur (1959), not depicting Jesus's face through the visage of an actor would become commonplace for nearly thirty years.

Some critics and historians have speculated that this tentativeness might have arisen from both from the increasing decadence of Hollywood productions throughout the 1920s and the swelling opposition from certain religious groups to what Hollywood had rapidly come to represent. I, on the other hand, would tend to blame the absence of films depicting Jesus's face between the 1930s and 1950s – with the exception of the re-releases of The King of Kings and From the Manger to the Cross – on two primary historical factors. The first factor was a simple one: the emergence of sound. I suspect that once films began “talking” that this complicated how Jesus could be represented onscreen in all kinds of



ways because of the way in which dialogue added to the possibility of either including Scripture as an aural engagement, revising it through innovation in order to fit the dramatic needs of the story, or ignoring it altogether. Needless to say, there are inherent risks for a filmmaker to resort to any of these options in terms of reception.

The second factor was probably also the most empirical of the two – that is, the representation of Jesus’s face tended to be rare in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s due primarily to the overall lack of New Testament-based films that were produced in general during this period. With the rise of Fascism and Nazism becoming of increasing concern throughout the 1930s, and the overwhelming anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany swelling with it, it is not difficult to imagine the obstacles a filmmaker might have faced if he or she decided to undertake a New Testament-based film where even the depiction of the crucifixion as written in the Bible and some of Jesus’s own quotations would have had anti-Semitic implications.<sup>14</sup> In addition, with the imminent possibility of yet another World War, the pacifistic mandates of Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke were not all that likely to be popular either. For example,

---

<sup>14</sup> In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, between verses forty-three and forty-five, Jesus is quoted as saying to certain Jewish leaders, “Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of *your* father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.” This occurs just after he informs them in verse thirty-nine that they are not Abraham’s children. Likewise, regarding the Jews, Matthew 27:24-25 reads: “When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but *that* rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye *to it*. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood *be* on us, and on our children.”

while not a Biblical film in the strictest sense of the word, Civilization (1916), directed by Reginald B. Barker, Thomas H. Ince, and Raymond B. West, was both a critical and commercial success despite a Christ, as played by George Fisher, at the center of the narrative who championed a very anti-war message. Since the United States would enter World War I shortly after this, that similar films were not released afterward with the same political bent firmly demonstrates a conspicuous relationship between Jesus and politics – especially as these politics might be tolerated by an audience more easily manipulated by state-interests and certain invisible powers bent on framing how sovereignty is discussed in the space between the gaze.

Yet, somehow Spencer Williams still manages to present in 1941 a Jesus during wartime that manages to avoid some of these inevitable political snares. However, he does not achieve this without slipping into some imminent pitfalls of his own. While he demonstrates very unique aesthetic sensibilities as one of the few African-American filmmakers to grapple with the image of Jesus onscreen through the presentation of a curious *mise en scène* that couples the authentically sacred with the improvisational and the fictionalized, despite this, some of the choices he makes are still very much informed, if not by the cinema of his time, certainly by what was assumed about Jesus's image by such larger institutions as church and state. But in spite of these difficulties, Williams still produces a very provocative and important film – especially in terms of the frame itself.

The Blood of Jesus is a bold work of cinema that defies certain taboos about the sacred by using the camera to invade the sacrosanct space, and apprehend it as a point of cinematic articulation. There is an almost documentary-like quality to the baptisms that open the film in the way that they are photographed, while the Negro spirituals that are sung throughout the narrative lend a degree of authenticity to the picture since their improvisational nature offer a more genuine, and even ad-libbed ambience, as opposed to the taut more rehearsed modern attempts at representing Pentecostal-inspired worship that one gets in films like Gabrielle Muccino's The Pursuit of Happyness (2006). Likewise, when the congregation gets together to pray for Razz's wife, whom he has accidentally shot, there is not a sense that these prayers – which are in fact sung in Baptist tradition – are scripted. Instead, one gets the sense that these are actual prayers prayed in response to a fictitious circumstance – a sort of simulated sacred moment – a simulated sacred moment that seems to anticipate the possibility of what George Stevens attempts to invoke through his photographed, Sydow-inspired icon of the Christ.

But Williams achieves what I am calling the simulation of the sacred in a much different way – not through homage or quotation, but through the apprehension and invasion of actual sacred moments presided over and instigated by him not as minister or priest, but as the director. That both moments, the opening prologue of The Greatest Story Ever Told and the prayer sequences of The Blood of Jesus, simulate the sacred is undeniable. But the more

interesting consideration for me is the understanding as to what degree do these moments actually achieve the sacred; and more importantly, how would this be determined, and by whom?

Because Williams has no inhibitions about directing his camera to invade these sacred spaces, or directing his actors to actually invoke these sacred spaces, The Blood of Jesus works just as much as an historical document about the worship practices of the African-American in the early part of the twentieth century as a work of fiction. One may argue that these moments should not be considered authentic due to their fictional context, but then this would be to assume that the power of the religious experience rests not in the experience primarily but in the ontological truth of that which is attempted to be apprehended through the religious experience. This is problematic because adjacent to the ontological claims of nearly every major religion is also an exclusive claim to some universal and pervading truth – especially when it comes to one's interpretation of Jesus, or the God-man, or the avatar, or the prophet. But just in terms of Jesus, if one is to assume that all of the claims of varying religions about him specifically are true on their own terms, one would find oneself simultaneously grappling with mutually exclusive premises and suppositions at nearly every turn.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> For instance, the three major monotheistic religions in the world – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all make mutually exclusive claims as it pertains to the representation of Jesus in cinema. Christianity maintains that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Jewish law, and the Son of God. Judaism maintains that Jesus fails to fulfill all the necessary prophecies that were required to contextualize the Messiah. While Islam maintains that Allah is the only true God, and that he

So it is no easy task to merely dismiss what Williams photographs in The Blood of Jesus as sacred. In fact, instead of undermining the visceral nature of the sacred image as the standard production values of Hollywood cinema might suggest, the gritty nuances of the film actually lends to the authenticity of what it purports to present. Williams does not hesitate to load his *mise en scène* with bona fide and reliable Southern Baptist milieu in terms of the landscapes, the costumes, and even the figure behavior. Yet, how Jesus is depicted in the film – while authentically demonstrative of much of the Southern Baptist worldview of the time – once again provides evidence for how Jesus as a signifier for worship had already been stabilized, even in 1941, when it was becoming increasingly taboo to represent Jesus through actors.

Williams adheres to this stabilization not through casting, but through a much older religious practice – that of the graven image. It is interesting to note that in many places in The Blood of Jesus this work of stabilization is not achieved through the use of actors in traditional ways, but rather through a type of *objectification* – a combination of both actors and objects. There are many moments like this in The Blood of Jesus, where Jesus asserts himself as a character not through a visible actor's performance, but rather through an object. In most instances, the object is a painting that speaks. However, in the film's last act, this process of *objectification* occurs through a rugged cross where the

---

does not have any sons; therefore, it would be impossible for Jesus to be considered the Son of God. But in an interesting synthesis, many Muslims do consider Jesus the Messiah. However, according to Qur'an it was not Jesus who actually died on the cross.

sculpted image of an Anglo-looking Jesus has been depicted hanging from it by nails. The narrator in this scene quotes from the “woman-caught-in-adultery” narrative from the Gospel of John in order to resolve the narrative’s crisis in an innovative jumble of cinematic, theological, and cultural commentary about the African-American – especially the African-American female’s relationship to Jesus, the icon, as an object worship.

Razz’s own characterization as an atheist, as played by Spencer Williams, only reinforces the film’s inquiry and perhaps critique of the accepted ways that Jesus’s image had come to be objectified in that time. While it is difficult solely through the text of Williams’s film to be precisely certain what African-Americans at large felt about Jesus’s representation in the early 1940s, it is undeniable that African-Americans at large had to grapple with Eurocentric representations of Jesus in one way or another in order to make meaning of their own perceived hallowed spaces. In certain ways, The Blood of Jesus indicates this struggle, at least cinematically. Because The Blood of Jesus is a film produced as an all-black enterprise, the film itself becomes a crucial moment where the effects of the misrepresentation of Jesus on both African-Americans and Americans in general through the image can be pinpointed as evidenced, ironically, by Williams’s own text and subsequent cinematic choices. For instance, because Spencer Williams decides that it is more appropriate for a painting of a white Jesus to depict Jesus in his film, than a black actor, one must consider how the film might have worked differently if a person of color was

chosen to play Jesus, not just audibly, but also in terms of the image. I am also curious as to what the perceived difference might have been for both Williams and his audience, if any – especially in light of the fact that as the very text of the film indicates, Williams, as director, is perfectly comfortable with James B. Jones, a black actor, playing the devil and dressed in a red-devil costume, and Cathryn Caviness, the female lead, being associated with the “woman-caught-in-adultery.”

As a result, this cinematic text tacitly suggests, while there is no apparent consequence for an individual playing Satan – there just might be a consequence worth avoiding if one were to portray Jesus. Otherwise, why else avoid it? Some might argue that such an evasion in representation somehow enhances that dialogic means through which an audience might imagine Jesus, but even this still implies the perceived possibility of an unacceptable cinematic consequence by a director – that is, that his depiction might somehow impede an open interpretation. But how a film produced for and by African-Americans can rely on paintings of an Anglo-Jesus, and other graven images, but still somehow insinuate the possibility of a more open imagining of Jesus for viewers remains difficult for me to believe. Such a double-standard is only accentuated by the black angel, played by Rogenia Goldthwaite, who is characteristically yet problematically adorned in all white, as she guides Sister Martha Ann Jackson, Razz’s wife, throughout the film. With both the characterization of a female angel and a male Satan, Williams constructs a text that seems willing to depict

both the supernatural and the imaginary even contrary to the apparent gender bias that seems readily supported by the Bible<sup>16</sup> and Western tradition, so his resistance to likewise characterize Jesus remains difficult to explain apart from consideration of the larger context of the time in which Williams was making his film and the existence of a space between the gaze where a particular interpretation and reading of an icon is framed.

Since H. B. Warner's portrayal of Jesus in DeMille's The King of Kings no cinematic image of Jesus had been more proliferated, and by 1941 when The Blood of Jesus is released, it had long been commonplace to appropriate that particular work of cinema for both commercial and consecrated purposes. DeMille, a filmmaker whose very name, because of the seventy films in his filmography, by now had become synonymous not only with the epic, but specifically the Biblical epic, understood this phenomenon of the space between the gaze even better than anyone, and perhaps even placated to it as he would cultivate his public image throughout his career. Perhaps this is why he puts so much effort into representing himself as a devout Christian first – his filmmaking only an extension of his Christian duty as an evangelist by creating Biblically-based films. Whether true or not, his own statements tend to support such reasoning. He observes in his autobiography that while an exact count of how many had actually screened The King of Kings would be impossible to tally since

---

<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament, angels are exclusively depicted as males; this also seems consistent with the way that angels are represented in nearly all of the Hebrew Bible.



many of the prints were used in missionary work and even screened in prisoner-of-war camps, he calculated the number to be just shy of a billion people – a significant portion of the world’s population in 1959 (DeMille 281-282). The assumption that he takes for granted is that screening spaces such as these were not conducive to exact head counts since, in most instances, there were not even tickets to be sold. For DeMille, that The Kings of Kings was even screened in spaces such as these was not a matter of box office, but a matter of theology. Apparently, certain groups were so taken with the work that they believed it part of their Christian duty to get as many people to see the film as possible. DeMille even boasts: “It is enough to say, again as simple fact, that probably more people have been told the story of Jesus of Nazareth through The King of Kings than any other single work, except the Bible itself” (DeMille 281-282).

But once filmmakers begin to represent Jesus in cinema, what has been mislabeled in some instances the Christian<sup>17</sup> religious experience, begins very tentatively to wrest itself from the confines of the cathedral and the privacy of the home to a more open and public space. Now the movie theater itself becomes fraught with moments where the audience must confront questions not only of an aesthetic significance as it relates to the subject matter of Jesus’s representation in cinema, but also questions of a theological significance. I am

---

<sup>17</sup> “Christian” as a term was not used by the primitive church which for over a decade almost exclusively consisted of Jews who referred to themselves merely as followers of “The Way”. In addition, the term “Christian” only appears three times in the New Testament. While, the Apostle Paul, the widely influential thinker over both the church and Western culture, who championed the faith among the *goyim* or Gentiles never once uses the term “Christian” throughout the entire New Testament.

not suggesting that the possibility of theological investigation regarding the iconography of Christ could not somehow have predated the representation of Jesus in cinema, but since From the Manger to the Cross (1912), arguably one of the first feature films ever produced, tackles the representation of Jesus through its narrative and *mise en scène*, it suffices to state that such iconography remains of supreme importance to those responsible for circulating images. In fact, early productions such as From the Manger to the Cross indicate that for some there existed no perceived difference between the church and the movie theater at all in terms of the right of each to represent Jesus backed by the authority of the Bible to the masses. DeMille describes a period like this in Mexico, where his film enabled this sort of blurring in terms of reception. “[W]hen the churches were closed by government edict,” he explains, “people went to see The King of Kings and knelt in the theater to offer the prayers they could not say in church” (DeMille 284). He further corroborates his claims with a series of interesting accounts of proselytizing where the primary evangelistic tool is the very film itself. In great detail he recalls for his reader the chilling account of Pastor H. E. Wallner, who in the end claims, “If it were not for The King of Kings, I would not be a Lutheran pastor, and three hundred and fifty Jewish children would have died in the ditches” (DeMille 284). He also seems pleased to recount the story of a woman in Egypt who walked twenty miles with her children just to see the film. Similarly, he tells of a dying woman who is brought to a theater on a stretcher only after persuading the theater manager. After the film, she tells him,

referring to her impending death: “You have changed what must happen soon from a terror to a glorious anticipation” (DeMille 284). Each of these instances indicates how in certain moments the movie theater and the cinema itself can work to redefine the space between the theological and the cinematic. In each of these episodes, by either a first or second-hand account, the viewer undergoes very literally a kind of religious experience that is either precipitated or inflated by a direct engagement with Cecil B. DeMille’s film through a willing suspension of disbelief.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the very multivalent and intertextual nature of many people’s interpretation of Jesus’s message, the emphasis placed on conversion, and the theological and political implications of making movies bent on influencing viewer’s religious orientations towards Jesus, DeMille’s numerous anecdotes exert themselves as a prime example of the sort of possibilities and dangers that the representation of Jesus in cinema evokes at the hands of a filmmaker. But cloaked claims such as these that exploit the cinema – a space where notions of art and theology readily and enthusiastically co-mingle – are just the sort of statements Cecil B. DeMille would rely on to manipulate his audience into believing as indicated by an early promotional trailer for the 1956-version of The

---

<sup>18</sup> Like the suspension of disbelief necessary for the moviegoer to appropriately engage the narrative of a science fiction film – or the narrative of any other film in the cinema for that matter – a participant in a Catholic devotional exercise perceived to be sacred must also willingly yield to a suspension of disbelief that enables them to believe that the bread and wine as Eucharistic elements actually transform or come to signify the substance of the body and blood of Jesus. A similar willing suspension of disbelief is necessary in order to believe the discursive statements offered by priests who explain away the remaining taste, texture, and odor of bread and wine after transubstantiation as *accidents*, a theological term intended to distinguish between the substantial nature of the bread and wine and what might be perceived as the material.

Ten Commandments that there existed no better choice to play Moses than Charlton Heston. In this trailer, DeMille motions to a small replica statuette of Moses as sculpted by Michelangelo as he talks about the careful Biblical, archaeological, and historical research that went into producing the film, citing Philo and Josephus as inspirations among others. As if that were not enough, DeMille then urges the audience to note the likeness of Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses to that of Charlton Heston. What is even more surprising is that not only does he manage to pull off such bogus, sleight of hand manipulation as research, but he does so with a straight face. But this shrewd marketing ploy indicates even in 1956 the degree of influence the Renaissance still had on determining the *mise en scène* of DeMille's twentieth-century film. This should come as no surprise, however – the way in which filmmakers like DeMille were limited by the institutional pressures of widely canonized art in how they could represent Biblical characters.

What *is* surprising, though, is that these same hermeneutical practices seem to have undermined even how filmmakers *thought* of their Biblical characters when conceptualizing them in the first place. A few years earlier, while casting Samson and Delilah (1949), DeMille admits to studying hundreds of paintings in order to cast Delilah, though in the end he found it impossible to find an actress that he liked yet remained consistent with what he saw in the paintings. In the end, he settled on Hedy Lamarr to play Delilah, rationalizing that the role was not merely a matter of appearance, but also a matter of what the

character represented – a raw sexual energy that Lamarr most definitely exuded as an actress. DeMille's reasoning here on the surface is sound enough, but as an artist himself, I find it amusing that he pretends not to recognize that a conglomeration of artist's interpretation of Delilah through paintings were nothing more than mere representations in the first place with no necessary historical authority even worth worrying about in the first place. It is precisely this sort of blind egotism and subtle racism that the politics of Eurocentrism has left upon the cinema as a legacy – such hermeneutical practices that exalt Reason on the one hand, incidentally another definition for *logos*, all the while mercilessly applying the Scientific Method in a vainglorious attempt to achieve empirical, and presumably incontrovertible evidence to arrive at a conclusion. Yet, all the while, as evidenced by DeMille's casting practices for Samson and Delilah, simultaneously ignoring any evidence that might defy the European's unique legacy as the ultimate human mind. These shortcomings become especially evident in Biblically-based films, where all significant historical figures despite their true heritage can be recast as Europeans or white Americans under the guise of artistic license and then disseminated all over the world in the name of world commerce and historical accuracy.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> DeMille's claims as to the historical accuracy of his films can be regarded with no credible or intellectual value; likewise, as in many of his other films, in terms of The Ten Commandments, there are many Biblical inaccuracies that, as in many literary based films, more kindly get referenced under the auspices of poetic license. For instance, the Bible does not specify that the Hebrew who Moses defended was Joshua – as is depicted in DeMille's film – but I am grateful that Philo and Josephus do get some consideration here through some of DeMille's other textual indulgences. Also, it is important to consider that by 1956 with the discovery of the Dead Sea

DeMille perpetuates this practice during the production of The King of Kings especially in terms of his approach to the cinematography and backgrounds. According to Charles Higham:

DeMille instructed the cameraman Peverell Marley to study hundreds of Biblical paintings, examining precisely with what effects of light the old masters achieved their work. Two hundred and ninety eight paintings were fully reproduced in the film. Marley used seventy-five lenses as against his usual four, and seven different kinds of film stock, as well as special stock for the Technicolor sequences. (Higham 161)

As with previous films like Olcott's From the Manger to the Cross, DeMille's practice of consulting paintings as a reference point for cinematic art direction has interesting implications on the possibilities of the medium as a way of representing the real. In this regard, based on the tendency of DeMille to

---

Scrolls less than a decade earlier, Biblical archaeology at the time must have been held in a much higher regard than it is held today in certain key critical circles.

DeMille very shrewdly uses this regained ground for the Bible to reiterate certain political points for democracy that must have made him quite popular not only in America but abroad with didactic lines like: "Is life in bondage better than death?"; or when Joshua states, "God made men, men made slaves"; or when Moses declares, "It is not treason to want freedom." In keeping with this, DeMille's very obvious political status is made quite apparent in the documentary The Making of The Ten Commandments when newsreel footage indicates that DeMille is received in Egypt with all of the pomp and circumstance of an American ambassador, even down to being greeted by the nation's leaders when he arrives on his plane.

Though one could probably learn more about what was going on in America in the 1950s from this film than from newsreel footage, it is not the politics presented in The Ten Commandments that make it the pinnacle 1950s Biblical epic, but, instead, the lush *mise en scène*, with its longer, wider takes, spectacular sets, and vivid cinematography. By this same token, the Egyptian girls who accompany Moses's adopted mother-to-be as they bathe come across more like the 1950s teeny-boppers of a Douglas Sirk melodrama than an historically reminiscent treatment of Egyptian youth culture. But maybe this is the point; historical films are always more about the present than the past.

privilege painting as a higher ranking mode of representation for Biblical material, I believe he undermines certain possibilities of the cinematic language at a time when tremendous progress was being made.

Since there is no hard evidence to indicate that DeMille actually bought into the authenticity of the paintings or sculptures he referenced himself other than what he claims about how he would later cast Delilah, I think it is fair to regard these propaganda techniques as mere publicity stunts in order to garner a larger viewing audience. In fact, according to Higham, one particular moment on the set of The King of Kings in a fit of rage, DeMille might have suggested even such disbelief himself:

Paul Iribe excitedly began the great task of planning nothing less than a complete physical re-creation of Christ's era. But DeMille grew daily more dissatisfied with his sets, finding them too plain, too severe, too dull. When Iribe protested that he had drawn from the most scrupulously observed historical records, DeMille reminded him that he did not want accuracy so much as a painterly richness of imagination. Struck by the contradiction, Iribe reminded DeMille of his first address to the staff, in which he had spoken of adhering to the very letter of the text. DeMille retorted angrily that nobody knew exactly what Palestinian buildings of that time looked like anyway. (Higham 162-163)

Cecil B. DeMille comprehended perhaps better than any filmmaker of his time that politics and not religion was at the very root of representing Jesus in cinema. And while his 1927 attempt was not without opposition, DeMille managed to negotiate the given political climate well enough to present a cinematic Jesus that became so popular, not only was it embraced by a myriad of Hollywood spectators, but also by millions of both Christians and non-Christians alike around the world. Peter Matthews writes regarding DeMille's cinematic depiction of Jesus:

This isn't the struggling, humanized deity in Pier Paolo Pasolini's The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964) or Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ (1988). And he certainly isn't the flagellated, maimed, blood-spattered figure of Mel Gibson's recent, controversial The Passion of the Christ, which might be called *The Gospel According to the Marquis de Sade*. DeMille's Christ is the serenely glowing effigy of stained-glass windows, plaster figurines, and a million dog-eared holy pictures. Despite the baloney (or because of it), The King of Kings captures the fervor of naive devotion. Having once hit the mother lode, DeMille never budged. [. . .] DeMille didn't need to change, for he knew that his hokum incarnated the eternal and irresistible essence of show business. (Matthews 10)



Perhaps, it is for this reason that Spencer Williams follows suit by offering in his film a cinematic Jesus that is quite literally drawn from the same tradition of Western painting as DeMille's own Jesus. Yet, Williams's cinematic approach to this characterization is quite distinct from that of DeMille. For instance, when Sister Martha Ann Jackson, Razz's black wife, looks in her bedroom to the painting of a white, Anglo Jesus described earlier, which talks every now and then through narration by way of what can be assumed to be a black actor's performance, though uncredited, it becomes clear that despite the all-black cast, even Williams's seemingly independent text works hard not to destabilize contemporary notions of a white Jesus. Yet, by utilizing this narration technique and Williams's film thus betrays an intertextual dependence not only on other sacred objects but on previous films about Jesus – the most notable being that of Robert Henderson-Bland in From the Manger to the Cross, Howard Gaye in Intolerance, and H. B. Warner in The King of Kings. But it is important to keep in mind the degree of restraint that Olcott, Griffith, and DeMille exercise as filmmakers while producing their respective representations of Jesus. Even though each of these filmmakers – unlike Williams – while producing their films before the official rise of classic Hollywood – still, as is indicated by their work, seem limited and even controlled to a large degree by some palpable perception of what they could and could not appropriate in order to contextualize their given representation. With The Blood of Jesus, Spencer Williams in 1941 manages to defy some of the restraints of previous filmmakers

by abandoning the representation of Jesus *vis a vis* an actor almost altogether. The only exception is his use of a narrator. But this, as a cinematic device, is clever enough to deserve mention because of how this technique, in a roundabout manner enables Jesus to be portrayed by a black actor, while at the same time reinforcing his iconic representation as an Anglo male. Yet, this innovation is only made possible by the emergence of sound. But despite of the apparent progress made by Williams in terms of cinematically conceptualizing how Jesus might be represented onscreen in new ways that defied or even flouted mainstream taboos, the overall impact of the minor innovations indicated by The Blood of Jesus ultimately appear rather miniscule when one considers how little the cinema language introduced by the film actually influences subsequent films that attempt to represent Jesus *vis a vis* quotation or homage.

So when Arthur Pierson directs Hill Number One ten years later in 1951, a 56-minute television episode of the Catholic-owned Family Theater Productions, while like with Williams's earlier work, the tendency to resist the impulse to represent Jesus through an onscreen actor's portrayal remains, so do the imminent wartime politics that apparently dictate this otherwise inexplicable practice. As might be expected, Hill Number One perpetuates the cinematic language and grammars of the time of not showing Jesus's face, which had been maintained almost unfailingly since DeMille's The King of Kings (1927). As an obvious Catholic propaganda-piece to support and justify the practice of praying the rosary, unlike Williams, Pierson does not even attempt to represent Jesus

through narration – but only through objects. This is suggested by an interesting moment which occurs outside of the tomb where Nicodemus, played by Regis Toomey, and Joseph of Arimathea, played by Nelson Leigh, beleaguer Mary, Jesus's mother, played by Ruth Hussey, about why she would have them safeguard such items as his robe, the crown of thorns, and the nails that pierced his hands, when such accoutrements might only stir painful memories. So, as in the earlier The Blood of Jesus, the screen presence of these props do come to represent Jesus. This is especially complicated by the apparent veneration that Mary attributes to the revered items. "Oh no, Nicodemus," Mary says of the instruments when Nicodemus urges her to put them away, "these thorns were his crown. We must keep them because they were his." This primitively staged scene is accompanied by the lumbering score of Charles Koff, who provides the original music which, at times, continues almost incessantly throughout entire scenes and sequences.

Yet, unlike Williams, who used voice-over to enhance the representation of his Jesus through objectification, Pierson relies primarily on a more classic theatrical mode of characterization: that of learning about a character through what other characters actually say about that particular character. These third-person accounts of what Jesus said and did in the backstory of Hill Number One are presented in dialogue by such characters as Mary, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Pontius Pilate, and Abenadar, the Roman centurion who in this piece – and according to certain traditions – pierced Jesus's

side during the crucifixion. Through their exposition, this motley ensemble works hard in Pierson's film not only to characterize Jesus by repeatedly quoting certain tenets of his teachings, but also by describing and emphasizing certain actions evocative of particular works of art cherished not only by the viewer in general, but the *Catholic* viewer in particular.

Like DeMille, Pierson's Hill Number One relies on painting to contextualize his *mise en scène*, though not as heavily. But unlike DeMille, Pierson invokes these works through the word and not the image. When Joseph of Arimathea asks Nicodemus, "Did you hear him say, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do?'" this is an obvious reference to Luke 23:34. And when Nicodemus replies, stating, "Yes, my heart was wrenched when she held his body in her lap as if she would never part with it; she held his arms outstretched as if she were a living cross herself," this is an obvious reference to Michelangelo's *Pieta*. That the Bible fails to mention such an incident and that there is no historical evidence to support this occurrence, minus the artistic license of Michelangelo and the tradition that stems from it, only complicates this cinematic intermingling of religion and art in a way that ought to be regarded as a familiar trope for Biblical-based cinema. But that both the Bible and Renaissance painting in this moment are held in equal regard for Pierson as reference points in order to provide source material for the characterization and representation of Jesus through the third-person expository accounts in Hill Number One locates an important intertextual instance where the artistic image

of a Renaissance sculpture/painter can still inform the representation of Jesus – even though Jesus, like the painting itself, is never depicted.

However, although Hill Number One's *mise en scène* arguably never represents Jesus directly, his presence as a character is still felt throughout the narrative – even during the film's opening and final acts, which take place during World War II. While it may seem odd that a film about a man who taught his followers: "Turn the other cheek"; "Love your enemies"; and "Do not resist an evil person" would begin on a battlefield with armed soldiers and firing tanks, this is exactly how Hill Number One commences. But in historical context, this prologue insertion comes into more clarity when one considers that this program was televised at the height of the Korean War (1950 -1953), and just six years after the dropping of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II.

As stated earlier, it seems clear to me that it is precisely this tentative political climate which anticipates war by both Europe and America -- informed mostly by an increasing suspicion of the rise of Fascism, and subsequently Communism, between 1927 and 1961 – which lends itself most obviously to the neglect of mainstream Jesus narratives after 1927 with Cecil B. DeMille's The King of Kings, with the exception of recuts and rereleases. There are perhaps many explanations for this, but the most evident seem to pertain to the content of the New Testament itself. Not only is it clear from a careful reading of the New Testament that Jesus was a figure who stood against violence, but the gospels

also seems to suggest that Jesus had no interest in pressing the agenda or political ends of a state machinating its own interests toward some flawed notion of its own sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> It is also clear that many of the most influential filmmakers and political activists alike between DeMille's The King of Kings (1927) and William Wyler's Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1959) understood him that way. In fact, when Pilate enquires of Jesus as to his own culpability, Jesus responds in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (King James Version). According to the New Testament, Jesus understood himself to be a king, but not a king whose estate should be defended through violence. In fact, when one of his disciples does attempt to defend Jesus with a sword in Gethsemane prior to his encounter with Pilate, according to Matthew 26:52, Jesus rebukes him, stating: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (King James Version). And in keeping with such a reading of the Jesus of the New Testament, Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948), developed his own strategy of *Satyagraha* – nonviolent protest and resistance to tyranny and oppression through civil disobedience, that is – from what he

---

<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Jesus according to the four gospels maintained this position regarding Israel and Rome, the two states that might have been most relevant to his own project and/or that of his followers which sought to posit him as the promised Messiah or "Anointed One" of Israel. One must keep in mind that the term "Anointed One" – which when translated into Greek means "Christos" or *Christ* – in its original context is a political term, and not a religious one, referencing any and every king of Israel, since according to the Book of Samuel it was the practice of Samuel, the last judge of Israel to anoint with oil the man who would be king.

understood to be the tantamount practices of Jesus. “Nonviolence,” said Gandhi, “is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man” ([www.sfheart.com](http://www.sfheart.com)). Inspired by Gandhi and his adherents, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 – 1968), one of the most prominent leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement, relied heavily on nonviolence as a mode of social protest in the 1950s and 1960s, not only as a political practicality, but as a social necessity. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King stated:

Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. (King, Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1964)

Martin Luther King, Jr. developed his six-point philosophy for non-violent resistance from both his understanding of Jesus as a Baptist minister and Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* – or love-force/truth-force – and this discipline is still practiced today by many of the followers of his movement ([thekingcenter.org](http://thekingcenter.org)).

But not everybody understood Jesus the way Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi did. In fact, though the Jesus of Cecil B. DeMille’s The King of Kings (1927) clearly maintains his pacifistic New Testament leanings, by

1951, very few mainstream cinematic representations had emerged to intertextually comment on and/or challenge the ubiquity of DeMille's own work via homage, citation, quotation, or parody. Perhaps this is due to the overwhelming fact that nonviolence as a general rule was thought to be the rallying call for traitors and not patriots as indicated by the Espionage Act of 1917. This Federal Law was passed under Woodrow Wilson upon the U.S.'s entry into World War I forbidding citizens from speaking out against the government, or even conveying discontent or animosity toward military or naval forces. The law dictated that any citizen found guilty of such a crime could be punished by up to 20 years in jail, or a \$10,000 fine. That so few films were made depicting Jesus between 1927 and 1961 is not surprising in light of the potential counter-culture reading that might be applied to such a figure as Jesus via narratives which purport to cite the New Testament and its implicit nonviolent message as a source text. In addition, there is enough evidence in the New Testament to support such a pacifistic reading, and two of the greatest political and social revolutionaries of the twentieth century shared such a radical interpretation of the figure of Jesus. Both Gandhi and King's movements were active at times of immense White Supremacy in India and the United States, respectively. And, interestingly enough, in each case, both of the perceived oppressors – the British Empire and the United States government – functioned from a predominantly Christian worldview. That more filmmakers did not choose to represent Jesus through characterization that required acting and



speaking was not merely an appeal to the cinematic language of the time for representing Jesus, but I believe a political means of avoiding presenting a character that might otherwise disrupt the military agenda of the United States. This is why in 1951, during the Korean War, that Hill Number One must begin with scenes of battle and a chaplain defining for the soldiers involved the meaning of Easter. Because now they too can be included – not only as soldiers by trade, but right there in the midst of battle. In fact, one way of understanding Jesus's crucifixion, according to the film, is as one man's courageous taking of a hill – the very act in which these soldiers are engaged.

Working from the premise that Calvary, the hill upon which Jesus was crucified, was the first Hill to be taken in a warfare of sorts, thus earning the name "Hill Number One," this film and its subsequent metaphor equates the crucifixion of Jesus with the military action of storming a hill. Such an interpretation not only authorizes the very act of war in which the fictional soldiers in the film's opening prologue are engaged, but also succeeds in turning the most supreme act of nonviolence on its head. In this way, the covert ideology of Hill Number One operates much more like propaganda than theology. With Hill Number One, Arthur Pierson and the film's producers would have its audience believe that the cross itself can be understood to signify military prowess. This is not necessarily an innovative interpretation. In the past, many artists and theologians have relied on military metaphors to explain not just the cross, but several other components of church life. But what is of

particular interest to me about Hill Number One is how the film works as a supposedly *Catholic* text during the Korean War to actually endorse war itself by subtly reinforcing the relationship between Jesus on the cross and a soldier storming a hill on the battlefield. Unlike The Blood of Jesus which locates itself almost entirely in the contemporary world of the rural South, the bulk of Hill Number One's narrative occurs in the first century during the "three days" that transpired between Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. The Jesus represented in Hill Number One could be interpreted by some as the Jesus of the New Testament – or at least the Jesus of the New Testament as understood by the Catholic Church, since Family Theater Productions is a Catholic organization. But not until The Passion of the Christ (2004) when Jim Caviezel's Jesus would exit the tomb to the rat-a-tat of war drums after the implied and understated resurrection abbreviating perhaps the most gruesome crucifixion ever depicted for the screen would such a clever reinterpretation of the acts of a pacifist be co-opted for the purposes of the military-industrial complex.

Yet, the inclusion of the opening battle scene and the soldier narrative in general in both the first and last act of the film, through what might be deemed a protracted Kuleshov effect, totally undermines an apparent reading of the Jesus who is characterized in the middle acts of the film's narrative. Like the many others – predominantly artists and clergy – who have preceded him in attempting to represent Jesus to the masses, Pierson through his film is able to modify the cross as a symbol of the most superlative demonstration of passive

resistance, and reconstruct it as a symbol of war. But unlike others, Pierson achieves this cinematically, through a subtle exercise of montage – a method totally informed by the language of cinema. Yet, because Hill Number One was originally aired on television, the full possibilities of its scope as a cinematic achievement were somewhat limited. The potential Kuleshov effect initially intended by sandwiching a first-century-based account of the apostles's dilemmas of faith after the death of Jesus between two sequences about a group of soldiers blasting guns and then longing for coffee on a modern-day battlefield, was more than likely also diluted by the commercials and advertisements of the time. In addition, while the program was shot in color, it aired only in B&W, and so even the frame itself could not fully capitalize on all of the possibilities of the cinema language of the early fifties. When all of this is taken into consideration alongside the stagey sets and static camera work, once combined with the pithy running time, it is not difficult to see how Hill Number One failed to fully articulate what might be expressed cinematically in terms of the representation of Jesus not only in terms of its narrative trepidation, but also technically.

While this trepidation on the part of filmmakers to represent Jesus onscreen might possibly be attributed to the menacing atmospheres of both the Espionage Act and World War II, and the Korean War – or possibly the blacklists of McCarthyism paranoia that ensued during and even after the Eisenhower-era – it is certain only clever self-serving readings which sought to reinterpret the gospel narrative into that which was more conducive with the tendencies of a

violent regime found mentionable circulation. Most filmmakers, proving this, chose the path of least resistance: either to not depict Jesus at all, as Pierson does with Hill Number One; or to depict him in such a way that he would not have to speak, as is done in The Robe (1953) and Ben-Hur (1959), thus avoiding having to represent a counter-cultural Jesus and his more controversial tenets that, at the time, had come to be interpreted by certain key social revolutionaries as unabashedly both nonviolent and anti-war. But of all the films produced during this period, The Blood of Jesus from the outset of its narrative, in my opinion, is most poised to adequately comment on twentieth-century violence since Razz, one of the film's main characters, is set up from the beginning of the film as a murderer of his wife, albeit accidentally. But rather than directly contrasting this act of violence with Jesus's teachings in The Blood of Jesus, the victim, Martha Ann Jackson, instead becomes the protagonist who is enabled through this experience to interact not with the potentially historical Jesus of the New Testament, but rather a mythological Jesus represented through objects and solely invested in the contemporary context of Martha Ann Jackson's destiny. Though his Jesus does quote from the New Testament, he is not the Jesus of the New Testament. In this way, Spencer Williams completely and deliberately evades the quandary of representing Jesus during wartime almost altogether, thus failing to offer any lasting critique of violence as situated by the Jesus narrative.

Similarly, by including actual scenes of battle and simultaneously excluding an actor who might portray Jesus, Hill Number One as a cinematic text<sup>21</sup> works to not only endorse warfare as an enterprise, but also to endorse the Catholic Church as Jesus's most effective representative both politically and theologically. Not only are these endorsements achieved through the favorable

---

<sup>21</sup> To properly understand cinema as a language, one cannot ignore the television program's potential for *cinematicity* – along with the music video, the commercial, and the cable series, for that matter. But during the 1950s, most studio heads understood television's capacity to compete with the major motion picture as a cinematic medium and consequently toiled vigorously to distinguish the silver screen from the small screen as a superior medium. Edward Jay Epstein explains in The Big Picture:

Even though only 2 million or so households owned a television set by the late 1940s, TV had an indisputable advantage over movie theaters: it was free. [...] To counter this perceived threat, the studios relied on two principal tactics. The first was denial of their products. [...] The studios' other tactic aimed at differentiating their product from what could be seen on television. Instead of continuing to supply theaters with a program of news, sports, and fashion shows, all of which could now be seen on television, the studios closed their newsreel divisions and concentrated on producing spectacular sagas in wide-screen formats that the television sets of the 1950s could not match. (Epstein 220)

To put it bluntly, bigger was better. In other words, the moguls made it their duty to see to it that the most engaging of cinematic grammars and articulations were reserved only for the big screen. Some innovations, such as split screens and 3D, were modestly successful throughout the 1950s in their attempts to draw television audiences back to the movies . . . at least for a time.

While some less enduring gimmicks like Smell-O-Vision were almost laughable in terms of their ultimate appeal. Other "improvements", such as the actual widening of movie screens themselves through such formats as CinemaScope, proved to be very profitable. In fact, the Biblically-inspired epic The Robe (1953), one of the highest grossing films of the decade, was the first movie ever screened in CinemaScope. So, in a certain sense, it was both the impending threat of television and the success of such films as The Robe (1953) and Quo Vadis (1951) that began to position the 1950s as the decade that pushed the Hollywood film production to its very limit in terms of spectacle. And no other genre better exemplified both the simultaneous limits and excesses of Hollywood filmmaking than the Biblical epic. The gradual shift in terms of cinematic language indicated by many of the Biblical films of this decade demonstrate how the overt, milquetoast Judeo-Christian politics that had come to inform many Biblical representations had become increasingly unpalatable for Hollywood's swelling global audience – an audience targeted precisely because Hollywood had lost half of its domestic audience to television between 1948 and 1962 when the number of television homes expanded from 1 million to 55 million (Epstein 220). This shift in grammar can be observed most readily when comparing the Biblical films of the 1960s to that of the 1950s – especially in regards to the cinematic techniques employed by filmmakers in order to represent Jesus onscreen.

In a manner of speaking, the epic was perceived as mainstream Hollywood's last chance to distinguish motion pictures from television. During the 1950s, no other genre according to its conventions and tropes dictated the same degree of spectacle.

characterization of Gordon Oliver's "Padre," but also through Father Patrick Peyton's closing monologue in defense of praying the rosary, as intercut with stock footage of various groups of Catholic parishioners doing just this.

Eight years later, the release of Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ would mark a significant transition regarding the representation of Jesus in cinema. While The Ten Commandments could be considered the very apex of studio filmmaking – even though the opening scene plays out more like bad theatre than cinema, even down to the curtain in the background – the spectacle of DeMille's work remains delectable to look at. And though violence has been treated much more graphically in later films, especially post-1967, the image of Hebrew women huddled over their dead infants as Egyptian soldiers move away cleaning their blades is still quite jarring to behold. In fact, the entire baby massacre sequence remains a noteworthy instance of minimalism in what otherwise could be regarded as a maximized film. But in a decade where Variety noted that most of the blockbusters were Biblical epics like Quo Vadis (1951), The Robe (1953), and Ben-Hur (1959) – Ben-Hur distinguishes itself as the most definitive of all Biblical epics with its mega-blockbuster box-office returns and earning of 11 Academy Awards (a feat that has only been tied twice but never beaten, by Titanic in 1997, and most recently, Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King in 2003). For this reason, it is interesting that in the recent documentary, The Bible According to Hollywood, Charlton Heston, the ultimate icon of the Biblical epic in terms of casting, does not regard Ben-Hur as a Biblical epic.

Perhaps this is a rhetorical move, but certainly, at best, it can only be taken tongue-in-cheek since the film has the most familiar characteristics of the Biblical epic: the indulgent sense of spectacle with its stunning vistas and sweeping locales; the flamboyant, almost-period-but-not-quite investment in vibrant and colorful costumes; a protagonist who takes the hero's journey from the ordinary world of power, privilege, and prestige through the desert of betrayal and brokenness, only to return and ultimately embrace a theme of love, forgiveness, redemption; and the paradigm-defying running time that quite often exceeds three hours. And then there is Jesus. Though his face is never shown in Ben-Hur – the last notable Biblical epic to exercise this technique – Wyler has not forgotten that his film is also subtitled “A Tale of the Christ.” Yet the most telling aspect of the *mise en scène* that for many marks Ben-Hur as a Biblical epic is probably simultaneously also the most overrated – that is, Charlton Heston himself.<sup>22</sup>

But it is precisely Heston's role in The Ten Commandments and his subsequent star persona that proceeded from this portrayal which made the casting of Heston himself a seeming prerequisite for directing a Biblical epic, perhaps even lending to the misconception of Heston having performed in more Biblical epics than he actually did.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> In reality, Heston has only been in three Biblical epics in the fullest sense of the word in his career: Ben-Hur, where he plays the title character; The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), where he plays John the Baptist and; of course, The Ten Commandments (1956), where he plays Moses.

<sup>23</sup> To complicate this misconception, even currently, Heston has lent his voice to Bill Kowalchuck's recent 2003 animated version of Ben-Hur, and various CD and tape versions of the Bible. In addition, Heston has hosted at least one biblically-based television series, and has done countless documentaries at least peripherally attached to the Bible.

So if for a moment one were to consider films about Jesus in standard terms of genre analysis one might regard Cecil B. DeMille's The King of Kings (1927) as the superlative example of the primitive gospel film text. This of course would then place From the Manger to the Cross, Birth of a Nation, and Intolerance as early experiments within this same stage of the genre. The Robe, Ben-Hur, King of Kings, and The Greatest Story Ever Told all speak intertextually to the innovations and cinematic grammars laid out and stabilized by each other through sound, image, and narrative innovation, marking what even in the minds of the most casual viewer would come to be recognized as the classical tropes of the Jesus film genre: a blonde haired and blue-eyed Jesus, over-orchestrated music contextualized by earlier sacred symphonies handed down from earlier centuries, an infidelity to the narrative text that exploits the necessary slippage enabled by the movie theater space between the sacred and the aesthetic, and a convenient infidelity to the original gospel narrative despite the mass and rapid dissemination of these new cinematic texts to a public not merely for the purposes of entertainment, but also religious education<sup>24</sup>; needless

---

<sup>24</sup> DeMille undeniably maintained the significance of The King of Kings project, not only as a portrait of one of the greatest men who ever lived, but also quite specifically as a technological means of educating a "class" of young, college educated Americans who through a recent examination – many of the statistical results of which DeMille aptly recites throughout his speech – exhibited a considerable lack of familiarity with both the Old and New Testament (Birchard 220). As DeMille would have it, it was the responsibility of his The King of Kings to remedy such error through the increasingly popular medium of film. DeMille writes in his essay, "The Screen as a Religious Teacher":

I believe it will be found that, just as appropriate motion pictures greatly shorten the pupils' acquirement of the essential factors of history, geography, and other literary studies, so Bible pictures will enable the boys and girls to get the outlines of the Old and New Testament stories in briefest time with the greatest pleasure and delight and with



to say, such infidelity problematized the original notions of authenticity and authorship regarded as so critical to the canonization process enacted by the church fathers regarding the New Testament. As might be expected, such classic tropes would exist not only in tension with other contemporary films that might seek to undermine or critique such classic tropes – like The Gospel According to St. Matthew and Scorpio Rising – but also that this circulating vocabulary of cinematic grammars would ultimately be flanked by an awkward if not brief period of parody and tongue-in-cheek self-reflexiveness. And after the failure of The Greatest Story Ever Told, this is precisely what happened.

In the early 1970s, with Godspell (1973) and Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) these formalistic double entendres, in terms of their cinematic debut, worked together to facilitate the musical genre's most widely acclaimed representations of Jesus. Prior to this moment, in terms of mainstream cinema, Jesus's cinematic representation had only been codified by the subgenre of the Biblical epic, which took many of its cues from religious spectacles like DeMille's The Ten Commandments (1956). But these Broadway adaptations to cinema provided fresh fodder for a new type of counter-cultural dialectic where narrative and

---

the utmost reverence for the subjects and the arousing of the religious emotions. [. . .] At no time in the world's history has humanity so hungered for the truth. Science has declared there is a God. And a groping, eager world cries, "How may we find we find Him?" (DeMille 1927)

DeMille understood that if The King of Kings could come to be regarded as an appropriate means to shorten a pupil's acquirement of Old and New Testament stories, and if simultaneously these same pupils perceived the Old and New Testament as a source of truth, then somewhere in the middle of this pedagogical *coup de tat*, DeMille himself could find his own perceived agency not only more authoritative, but also more closely aligned with the perspicaciously acquired truths of the Bible.

music itself conjoined within the diegesis of films about Jesus through a discourse that now employed sound, not as a mere non-ambient cue for pathos – as was the case with much of 1950s melodrama – but now as an actual active textual component of which the film’s characters are fully aware. Pasolini’s inclusion of “Motherless Child” to his film’s soundtrack in 1964 hints at the function of lyrics a decade earlier, but in Pasolini’s version of The Gospel According to St. Matthew this music remains non-diegetic, like the music in most religious films – with perhaps the exception of The Last Temptation of Christ, where Scorsese characteristically makes considerable use of ambient music.

From an iconic sense though, there are two troubling components to these musicals: one, the Superman-like “G” on the chest of Victor Garber’s clown-faced, suspender-wearing Jesus in David Greene’s Godspell since this referent, by its very nature, is bound by the very politically-determined meanings of “truth, justice, and the American way” and the deeply intertextual comic book mythology between the Jewish Immigrant, the Nativity Story, and Right-Wing American Ideology that has come to be associated with Superman. The second troubling aspect for me is the decision by Norman Jewison in Jesus Christ Superstar to have Judas of all characters be the only major role portrayed by an African-American. This casting choice is especially loaded when one considers the multiple ways the lyrics to Judas’s opening song can be interpreted as played by Carl Anderson:

If you strip away the man you will see where we will all be. . .

Listen, Jesus, I don't like what I see. . .  
I remember when this whole thing began  
No talk of God then we called you a man  
And believe me my admiration for you hasn't died. . .  
Listen, Jesus, do you care for your race?  
Don't you see we must keep in our place  
We are occupied, have you forgotten how put down we are?

But the duplicity of putting these words in the mouth of a black actor in 1973 about a white Jesus seems lost on the very same filmmaker whose apparent sympathy for the African-American male experience inspired him to direct such films as In the Heat of the Night (1967), A Soldier's Story (1984), and The Hurricane (1999).

Such questions of race and politics, as posed by Carl Anderson's Judas, are noticeably absent by the time Franco Zeffirelli's highly literate and reverent Jesus of Nazareth comes to the format of the television miniseries in 1977 with his seemingly-international cast and Shakespearean approach to the King James language of not one, but all four of the gospels. This production's parallel release with the 1977 Easter season makes it difficult to deny a particular co-working with various institutions to stabilize a conspired political interest in the reception of Jesus not only as a cinematic commodity, but also as a theological one. Understanding perhaps the limits of television, Zeffirelli favors a deliberate and discursive narrative as opposed to the grand sweeping panoramas that once marked these kinds of stories. With this film, Zeffirelli casts Robert Powell as a Jesus who looks as if he walked on the set straight from a classic Western painting. In fact, Zeffirelli's *mise en scène* at times is so concerned with Powell's

face as framed in close-up that in one instance, as Powell's Jesus cries out as the Romans hammer in the nails during the crucifixion, one can see the fillings in Powell's teeth.

The last film that I believe needs to be considered in order to properly consider the politics that have contextualized Jesus's cinematic image up to the moment Scorsese makes The Last Temptation of Christ in 1988 is John Krish and Peter Sykes's Jesus (1979). What is interesting about this particular film is not so much how Jesus is represented since by now that ought to be predictable, but the way its reception has come to be commodified. According to the Jesus Film Project website ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org)), an internet marketing tool devised by certain evangelicals "to reach every nation, tribe, people and tongue, helping them see and hear the story of Jesus in a language they can understand," the film itself arose out of a vision Dr. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, first conceived - as if it should be any surprise - in the 1950s ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org)). With a budget of \$6 million dollars, since 1979, this film whose initial release David van Biema of Time Online Edition deemed a "pious oddity" has gone on to be subtitled, translated, or dubbed into over 830 languages and "screened in every country on earth" ([www.time.com](http://www.time.com)). Under the leadership of Bill Bright, who also led a political lobby against Last Temptation that will be more adequately discussed in the next chapter, Campus Crusade has since institutionalized the distribution process of Krish and Sykes's film. (However, in light of certain understandings of film authorship, it might

hardly be called their film at all.) In the ultimate checkmate of the space between film and religion, this movie has been promulgated by American evangelicals as the ultimate proselytizing tool, perhaps more invasive and ubiquitous than even the Bible itself. Through what has now been officially called The Jesus Film Project, film authorship has explicitly been undermined by a political agenda to such a degree that not even the film's original title matters – much less its two directors, who are not even cited as the visionaries behind the film. This film is not about art; it is about conversion. The language of the project's website easily attests to this:

Many mission experts have acclaimed the “JESUS” film as one of the greatest evangelistic success stories of all time. The ultimate success of this project won't be measured by how many people have already seen it, but by how many will follow Him after seeing this film. . .Through use by The JESUS Film Project, and more than 1,500 Christian agencies, this powerful film has had more than 5 billion viewings worldwide since 1979...As a result, more than 176 million people have indicated decisions to accept Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org))

But my concern here is not theology, but authorship and the politics that aim to limit a filmmaker's ability to participate freely in the exchange of commodified images perceived to be sacred through what I have called the space between the gaze. As proof of this political aim, one might ask why an

evangelical overseeing an enterprise intended from its outset for the entire world would bother to assemble a team of over 500 scholars with the stated intention of developing a film as “archaeologically, historically and theologically accurate as humanly possible” with a presentation that “must be unbiased” and “acceptable to all as a true depiction of Christ’s life” if it would ultimately decide on having Brian Deacon, a British and Shakespearean actor, perform the title role amidst a cast that consisted almost entirely of Yemenite Jews ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org); [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)). If the film was genuinely intended to be dubbed later so that it “became an evangelistic aid for people whose illiteracy ruled out the written word” and thus the ability to read subtitles in some cases, why would the diction and theatrical heritage of the lead actor really matter ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org))? Because language, like the image, carries with it the unshakeable import of politics. While casting choices alone, in certain ways almost always position a director within the constraints of politics, one must also consider language, accent, cadence, tone, even the race or appearance of actors and performers on screen. Race, after all, is a just another ideological construct that has always been primarily situated in culture, politics, and history. In 1979, amidst a tentative political climate not unlike that of today, the choice of positioning a British actor as the lead of a Yemenite cast could have been and should have been read in all sorts of ways. However, as archaeologically and historically accurate as *humanly* possible is not one of them, unless of course, Harold Bloom is correct when he

argues that through discourse framed by drama it was, in fact, Shakespeare who invented the human.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> This, of course, is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Harold Bloom's 1998 book Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human that may not be so tongue-in-cheek after all.

CHAPTER TWO:  
PRIEST OF CINEMA, OR POET OF GORE? -  
SCORSESE'S THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

This chapter will consider the possibility of the movie-going experience as a means for informing, reinforcing, and manipulating beliefs about Jesus, regardless of their validity, for people of all faiths since the movie theater is probably the widest public space where religious ideology can still be disseminated to a public in a very short period of time under the guise of cinematic discourse. The reception of The Last Temptation of Christ both in and before 1988 exemplifies the ultimate trajectory of a popular culture that for six decades had been straddling the divergent spaces between the religious and the secular through the cinema. "The controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ," in the words of Robin Riley, "was one of the most prominent episodes in the recent history of popular culture to challenge fundamental beliefs about the sacred" (Riley 1). He states further that Last Temptation "reflects deep levels of social and cultural insecurity produced by the shifting role of religion and religious language in a secularized society. The controversy surrounding the film demonstrates how a popular film about



Jesus captured, inflamed, and strengthened existing animosity between the religious conservative community and liberal progressives” (Riley 1).

When engaging representations of Jesus in cinema throughout film history from Olcott and Gauntier to Sykes and Kirsh, it has never been necessary to determine whether or not one agrees with what the cinematic image of Jesus implies; this in the past has always been the work of theology. Only in the late 1980s, with the impending production and eventual release of The Last Temptation of Christ, does the very ability to appreciate this movie on almost any level suggest a particular theological and political bent regarding one’s understanding of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> But unlike most previous instances, I consider this moment an unavoidable outcome of a much deeper social and political context, and not the result of Scorsese’s prophetic, aesthetic, or even artistic genius – and thus his authorship – as some would have it. This film, or a film received like it at some point was inevitable, not because of the creativity of any particular artist, but because of the way Jesus’s cinematic image had been historically constructed and stabilized in America up to that point. Therefore, it is instead Last Temptation’s fidelity to this precisely constructed image and simultaneous anteriority to the discourse that linked this image with the sacred text that irritates so many. This is not because of a genuine concern for the text on the part of critics, as other films have defied the text in numerous ways before Last

---

<sup>26</sup> This is not to state that politics and/or theology did not play into the reception of Cecil B. DeMille’s The King of Kings (1927), or any other Jesus or gospel film, for that matter; but, rather to state that with The Last Temptation, because of how the discourse was framed for the public by certain critics, a theological reading was virtually unavoidable.

Temptation; but, rather this is because of the particular political groupings Scorsese's film agitates, inadvertently, exposing the very ideological construct this traditional image of Jesus has come to approximate. But like the resistance to the film's representation of Jesus itself, it is important to remember that this process of agitation is ideologically and institutionally informed by groups, and not any particular individual. It is also important to remember that this informing takes place in a particular space – the space between the gaze.

Robin Riley argues that “secular culture transforms and reinstitutes religious processes and rituals in secular languages and images,” but when these secular languages and images involve the cinema I would go so far as to state that a new type of discourse for cinematic authorship emerges that has more to do with the priest than, in actuality, the director or the screenwriter (Riley 2). By *priest*, I do not mean a particular person *per se*, but rather, that particular negotiation and mediation of a space between the sacred and the secular that until a particular political lobby added the cinema to its arsenal, resided almost exclusively with what had been deemed, up until this point, the clergy. Baudrillard understood this mediation in these terms:

This way the stake will always have been the murderous power of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model, as the Byzantine icons could be those of divine identity. To this murderous power is opposed that of representations as a dialectical power, the visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All

Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? (Baudrillard 5)

When Pope Pius XII, by way of the Pontifical Commission for Cinema, estimates the cinema as one of the “most important discoveries of our time” because of its potential to be a “worthy instrument by which men can be guided towards salvation” this clerical institution assumes an apparent optimism that the cinematic apparatus will enable a more open discursive access to the text and Church tradition, not only for its constituents, but future converts. It is ironic then that this same institution would later critique Scorsese’s cinema purely on the grounds of theology and not on the grounds of the actual image/sound binary posed by the cinematic apparatus.

It is apparent that a genuine critique of cinema cannot merely be rooted in belief, or theological meaning – or even in the semiotics of language, with no regard for that which is the very essence of cinema, the image. Theology is irrelevant – as it is impossible to attend to merely in cinematic terms. Yet, Scorsese’s critics appeal to the dissonant relationship of his film’s narrative to the New Testament without considering not only the infidelities of past cinematic renderings, but the very ontological infidelity that has informed the flawed Eurocentric politics of all Western representations of Jesus in cinema in

the age of mechanical reproduction. Unfortunately, this *processing* of the image both discursively and photographically, inevitably renders only an *imagined* subject of Jesus; I say “imagined” because in this case even the original is a copy, or worse than a copy – a reenactment, an impostor, a fiction. And yet through the cinema this former subjectivity on the part of a filmmaker, which supposedly derives from an interior meaning, literally *develops* into a mechanically reproducible object that becomes both reel and *real*. Lesley Stern keenly identifies the precise moment in Scorsese’s film where the viewer is confronted with this paradox:

In a gesture of remarkable literality, Christ (Willem Dafoe) reaches into the bloody enclaves of his body and pulls out his heart as evidence of an interiority, of palpable humanity conjoined with superhuman attributes, of an isomorphism between flesh and spirit. I take it as a somewhat sick joke which functions precisely to test the faith or capacity for belief of the audience – their faith in the cinema, that is, and in filmic characters more than their faith in God. (Stern 185)

But Benjamin and Baudrillard are theoretically insufficient to properly situate what is at stake in what Stern rightly claims – because, one, the *aura* of the original in a film about Jesus is not the original negative that spooled through the camera, but rather the very subject of Jesus himself. And, two, an overemphasis on the simulacra as object without regard to the politics behind

that mediation reduces everything into a perpetual state of relativism. Only through Kracauer can what's at stake be properly positioned when he speaks of "the camera's unique ability to record as well as reveal physical reality" (Kracauer 4). If those he regards as "discerning" recognize "that photography reproduces nature with a fidelity 'equal to nature itself'" in order to properly consider what is at stake in Stern's example we must first determine what is meant by "physical reality" (Kracauer 4). If by physical reality, Kracauer merely intends to invoke that which exists directly in front of the camera in contradistinction to what a director might cinematically impose later through formalistic technique there is no problem. But Kracauer admits that "filmmakers have never confined themselves to exploring only physical reality in front of the camera but, from the outset, persistently tried to penetrate the realms of history and fantasy" (Kracauer 35). Assuming this is the case, I am interested in what happens to notions of physical reality when one photographs an actor playing Jesus, since without theology one can only appropriate the physical reality of Jesus through history, fantasy, and myth. The Last Temptation of Christ indicates why it is important to attend to this blurring of reality, and a spectator's sense of it. In the words of Les and Barbara Keyser, "Church and cinema co-exists, commingle, and frequently compete in modern life. Each offers a vision of reality so complete that it threatens to preempt the other's existence" (Keyser and Keyser xii).

At some point, the cinema emerges to reduce the clergy's influence over the sacred imaginary, because while the Biblical epic's increasing popularity throughout the 1950s signaled an expanding audience undivided by theological affiliation, this increase in popularity also simultaneously indicated the true limitations of the clergyman, whose influence inevitably remained bound by a constituency confined by the prejudices and superstitions of theological affiliation. Not so in the movie theater, where atheist, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jew join together to participate in the devotional exercise of movie-going. In a recent Time article about the impending threat of the digital age on the filmic experience, Richard Corliss put it this way:

[T]o directors, moviegoing is an almost religious act: a Mass experience. You walk into a cathedral, feel your spirit soar with hundreds of other communicants and watch the transubstantiation of images into feelings. The audience becomes a community, the movie the Communion. (Corliss 70)

This is especially true for films that attempt to represent Jesus, the very essence of communion. Once the cinema enters into a discourse that represents the sacred for the masses in society, a new type of space is forged, where the clergy are now only allowed in either as spectators or critics. Now the real sacred text is no longer the negotiation of "the Word made flesh" through words or tradition, but *the word made cinematic* through images in space and time; and so the real agency lies not with the authors, but with those who work to engage a

discourse that stabilizes what the author sees and transmits in the first place as sign or symbol for the movie theater.

These cinematic representations draw their agency from some other “function of discourse,” to borrow from Foucault (Grist 5). For the auteur, perhaps even more so than for the cleric, any transgressive public assertion or radical attempt to misalign or destabilize the representation of Jesus in the name of auteurism hardly seems possible if this discourse is defined by the public and political space between the mainstream filmmaker and his audience. Certainly, there is not enough evidence in the cinema between 1912 and 1988 to counter this claim. A careful consideration of the most significant films about Jesus during this period lends very clearly to this notion that Jesus cannot be represented freely in cinema in any practical way; the entire history of motion picture representing Jesus in cinema attests unswervingly to an unwritten protocol that must be acknowledged and placated to if the commodified image of Jesus is to be disseminated to the masses.

In fact, one of the most prevalent but also most insidious appeals to theology as a point of legitimizing how one might respond to this secular work of art is indicated by the persistent use of the term “blasphemy.” The ubiquity of “blasphemous” as a categorical term for describing The Last Temptation of Christ suggests perhaps more than any other claim exchanged between theologians and critics how a statement can be appropriated from one hermeneutical model and grafted into another. As a point of critical exchange,

the term “blasphemous” operates more like a code word apprehended at first only through the hermeneutics of theology. But when this term is violently thrust against accepted notions of aesthetics and film criticism one suddenly discovers a discourse where both audience and critics are polarized not along lines of personal, autonomous analysis or rigorous critical engagement, but lines of theology and politics. It is important not to overlook how the alliances of particular theological groups – who by way of their amalgamated resistance to Scorsese’s perceived authorship choices in the name of theology – reveal not a religious tolerance for theological difference, but rather, a collective political agenda that, while not necessarily aiming to do so, has managed to synthesize aesthetics and theology through the “devotional exercise” of cinematic spectatorship (Fraser 6).<sup>27</sup> Yet, the “theological” implications of how Jesus is represented in cinema, on the other hand, is perhaps the most difficult to talk about because, in all actuality, often what has come to be marked off as theology remains nothing more than politics in disguise. Therefore, in discussing nearly any aspect of Jesus in cinema I think it is important not to begin with any particular denominational creed, or even any presumptions about the authority of the Bible, but instead with the cinema experience itself in the movie theater, where movie-going itself becomes the *devotional exercise*.

---

<sup>27</sup> While it is of interest to note how competing theology and traditionally-grounded religious iconography works to complicate the aesthetic boundaries of cinema as a text in its own right, it is even more useful to examine the relationship of The Last Temptation of Christ to earlier films, both foreign and domestic, and television programs that have depicted Jesus; and how Scorsese chooses to negotiate this cinematic-canon-like tradition, while still tackling his subject matter as a self-perceived auteur.



The truth is, while theological in nature, the term “blasphemy,” as uttered by so many of Scorsese’s critics, worked to stabilize a certain political group that in actuality was too diverse and divided theologically at the time, and even now, to ever truly suggest a unified canonical authority or access to the sacred to enable a recognition of the profane. . .and thus the *blasphemous*. In fact, the unified and wholesale rejection of Last Temptation was the only position that many such groups held in common. That in nearly every instance this position was justified by theology only further implies some sort of appeal to an overarching canonical construct of Christian orthodoxy from which such conclusions were drawn in order to somehow supersede and, in many cases, even override specific categories of denominational difference. Riley explains:

According to this way of thinking, “blasphemy” was the first alarm sent to rally religious conservatives, activating defensive processes. “Censorship” was the same forewarning for liberal progressive advocates of First Amendment rights. In the war of words and ritualized behavior of alienation the enemy is turned into an object of ridicule and mockery through public demonstrations of dominance (Girard 210). (Riley 3)

However, much of my investment in the representation of Jesus in cinema is targeted at determining whether or not one can discuss such films as Last Temptation authoritatively without having to appeal to such polarizing and ritualized theological and religious terms as “blasphemy,” while at the same

time not having to exclusively rely on the equally flawed hermeneutics of an often cryptic and obtuse university-driven language of film studies. I am especially interested in avoiding this dichotomy since, to a large degree, both theology and film studies as disciplines operate in much the same manner. Both practices assume a canon of thinkers, texts, and terms that by definition can only be fully articulated – and implicitly fully understood – with authority, by those fully initiated into the ranks of these respective orders whether through personal study or institutional authorization at the hands of a university.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, such authority comes to be quantified ultimately by the aforementioned speakers not solely through their claims, statements, and articulations, but by way of what spaces these initiates are provided access to via various institutions – whether these spaces be classrooms, graduate seminars, pulpits, altars, or even, in the case of their texts, through publication, spaces on bookshelves in commercial bookstores, or libraries. But I assume even if certain terms could be arrived at and agreed upon that simultaneously resisted the political tendencies of theology and film studies, it is most likely that such terms would still be wrought with their own equally dangerous and limiting political assumptions.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> That the modern-day university system emerged out of the Roman Catholic Church's model for educating clergy in the Middle Ages only begs this correlation further.

<sup>29</sup> In order to do this, I believe it is important to consider Baudrillard's claim that "[b]ehind the baroque of images hides the eminent grise of politics" and so this chapter will consider whether the iconography of Jesus in cinema remains an issue of theology, ideology, or politics – not for the audience only, but also for the filmmaker (Baudrillard 5). I agree with Baudrillard when he insists: "Power itself has for a long time produced nothing but the signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for *signs* of power – a holy union that is reconstructed around its disappearance"

Yet, while one might assume that the film text itself, due to the apparent creative autonomy of the filmmaker, might be the most effective means of combating the claims of film critics and theologians, once so-called artistic freedom links itself to the hermeneutical hierarchy of Hollywood production *vis-a-vis* the sellable commodity of the auteur, these productions themselves become biased expositors of their own set of rules. However, I would argue that these rules do not remain “in constant flux,” like what Andrew Sarris states about the auteur theory itself, but fixed, as if stabilized by some other agenda that is not readily made apparent to a spectator preoccupied with merely narrative or *mise en scène* (Wexman 22).

Having analyzed how the cinema proper and other mediums have established a sort of tradition in terms of the representation of Jesus on film, I will discuss particular cinematic choices that Scorsese makes as a perceived auteur filmmaker, especially in terms of casting and characterizing Jesus that expose the actual limited nature of his actual authorship in cinema, and thus challenge Scorsese’s own claims that this film emerges out of a “desire to make a spiritual film that expressed his convictions” (Riley 12).<sup>30</sup> Second, I will not only

---

(Baudrillard 23). Though possibly no other image holds more potential power than that which suggests that God is man.

<sup>30</sup> Contrary to the way mainstream readings would have it, a goal here is to provide further evidence through a careful analysis of The Last Temptation of Christ as to why the filmmaker is not an individual voice, or mogul presenting a unique and personal view of his subject matter, but instead a businessperson seeking not to offend the majority because he or she wants the majority to come see his or her film because of the economic conditions that contextualize their production. The problem is that there is no all-pervading theological method that determines how one should interpret Jesus. Christianity is divided into at least three major divisions:

discuss how Last Temptation works differently as a cinematic text, but how the volatile responses to Last Temptation indicate a perceived difference on the part of both audiences and critics. Third, through a careful analysis of the production considerations which produced certain key scenes, I will indicate how Last Temptation embraces particular cinematic traditions when representing Jesus through its *mise en scène*, so as not to destabilize the apparent politics of that image as established by former cinematic representations discussed in the previous chapter.

For this very reason, a more thorough study of The Last Temptation of Christ indicates that Jesus's cinematic representation is not a product of individual authors/auteurs, but of specific political groups whose assertion of power reconstructed through this *sign* spans many historical moments. The theological resistance to Temptation merely empowers an insidious discourse that authorizes the politics that have tended to dominate how the cinematic image of Jesus ought to be received and commodified. In terms of cinematic authorship, I wonder then whether or not Scorsese's film, as a work of mechanically reproducible cinematic art, could have ever successfully wrested itself away from the cinematic image of Jesus stabilized by the theological, and even more so, political discourse that had come to contextualize perceived orthodox readings of the New Testament. This process is especially troubling

---

Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism; and in America alone there are at least five hundred different denominations of Protestantism.

when one considers that Last Temptation is not even based on the New Testament, but a novel.

When Nikos Kazantzakis's novel The Last Temptation of Christ was first published in Greek in 1955, he claims, "I wanted to renew and supplement the sacred myth. . . setting aside the dross, falsehoods and pettiness which all churches and all the cassocked representatives of Christianity have heaped upon his figure thereby distorting it" (Riley 36). In writing his novel, Kazantzakis perceived that the representation of Christianity, and thus Christ – given his use of the term "his" – had been *distorted*. Unlike most, however, as a writer, Kazantzakis felt empowered enough to resist and counter this distortion with a representation of his own. As a Greek Orthodox, he took it upon himself to challenge various religious institutions through the creative space where religious and secular representations often tended to meet – that is, aesthetically, through the imagination and myth. But if as Jean Baudrillard argues in Simulacra and Simulations, "History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth" then perhaps it is not just the representation of Jesus that Kazantzakis wants to *renew* and *supplement* but history itself in its construction of the Jesus figure (Baudrillard 43).

Contrary to Plato, who would reduce art by arguing for its mimetic propensity towards untruth in relation to the ideal state of the Republic, Robert Stam – like Kazantzakis – understands that like history, art too is constructed. But while Stam would have us engage a work of art critically, asking for whom

it was constructed and in conjunction with what ideologies and discourses, Kazantzakis confronts the representation of the institutional Jesus with the same questions, but a very different methodology (Stam 276-278). What is problematic, however, is that Kazantzakis authors his critique of particular institutional representations with yet another ideologically informed work of art, lending itself to a representation that is also institutional, and inevitably distorted – his 1955 novel. Years later, speaking of how art is a representation *politically* and not so much *mimetically*, Stam indicates key difficulties with Kazantzakis's approach – or that of any other artist who might attempt to challenge the institutional politics of religious discourse with art – yet another discourse with politics of its own. In light of Stam's observations, it is fundamental to understand this discourse that allows a writer to, in a certain way, *renew* so-called distorted representations in the name of authorship drawn from yet another text – the New Testament – which is also bound by its own ideologies and discourses, even before the *auteur* treatment of an adapted text can be discussed in depth.

For Kazantzakis, it was important to apprehend the subject of the New Testament from institutional distortion not through donning his own cassock, but through authorship. And so Kazantzakis pens his dissonant novel with iconoclastic results. While he received the International Peace Award in Vienna in 1956, and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature on more than one occasion, the Catholic Church banned the book, and the Greek Orthodox Church

for all intents and purposes excommunicated him. Kazantzakis's own seemingly self-determined effort to clarify the representation of Jesus through writing his novel alienated him from mainstream religious institutions, and many were denied access to his work for several years through various forms of institutional ostracism. It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of his iconoclastic methods against the *dross*, *falsehoods*, and *pettiness* of the very churches that while unable to prevent his manuscript, most certainly were able to limit, regulate, and censure its accessibility as a mechanically-reproducible, published text. But something different happens when the cinema is considered.

When Mikhail Bakhtin states in his introduction to The Dialogic Imagination that the novel "by contrast, dramatizes the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive and narrative asymmetries" he rightly notes the dialogic nature of language and meaning, and successfully argues for the novel's placement among literary canons that in his mind up to that point mostly considered only drama and poetry (Bakhtin xxviii). But in acknowledging the discursive contribution of the novel to literature, the differences between how a single author of a written text participates in this dialogic nature versus a screenwriter whose work will most likely be mediated several times over before it is commodified as a motion picture must not be overlooked. Even if a screenplay is eventually published, one must not forget that this seldom ever occurs for a screenplay that did not

first exist as a marketed cinematic production. From the very outset, the cinematic production does not and cannot begin with a single author. In general terms – excluding certain marginal cinemas that mostly stem from the experimental, student, or amateur tradition – cinematic productions cannot be developed through pre-production, production, and post-production exclusively through the efforts of a single artist. In fact, in all likelihood, even if a technical genius, the experimental, student, and amateur filmmaker too will be forced to rely on external resources either in the form of Talent, processing of film stock, or both – though the advent of digital video does problematize this claim to a certain degree. But either way, in both 1954 and 1988, the precise historical moments when Kazantzakis wrote his novel, The Last Temptation of Christ, and when Scorsese produces his film of the same title, which was adapted from Kazantzakis's text, such production constraints invariably would have been the rule and not the exception.

Michael Bliss states in The Word Made Flesh, “Thanks to the work of screenwriter Paul Schrader, Last Temptation turns out to be a film with an appeal that cuts across religious and doctrinaire grounds” (Bliss 90). But unlike novels, screenplays have yet to be disseminated or engaged as independent works of literature. For this reason, the audience and critic rarely engage the screenplay directly, and almost never engage the screenplay independent of film



production considerations.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the essence of the screenplay text – apart from script readers, producers, Talent, and production personnel – most often can only be apprehended by audiences through the mediation of filmmakers. Yet, if religious and doctrinaire grounds are indeed being *cut* and negotiated by the screenwriter, to what degree the film director also instigates this mass appeal remains an important question that must be addressed not only before more specific notions of reception can adequately be discussed, but also before a close reading of certain Last Temptation’s scenes can take place.

Lawrence Friedman begins his book The Cinema of Martin Scorsese by quoting Francois Truffaut, who said, “There are no works, there are only auteurs” (Friedman 8). He further states:

The many fragmentations of postmodern American society, the advent and triumph of television, the prohibitive cost and

---

<sup>31</sup> Film scholars and critics have generally excluded the screenplay from the literary canon. Most film scholars, when discussing film narrative or even the creative choices of the screenwriter, only position their projects in relation to the film production itself, and not back to the screenplay as a text. Dana Polan’s analysis of Pulp Fiction, as published by the British Film Institute, is an enactment of this phenomenon. But that the literary establishment has positioned the classic American screenplay against other more traditional forms of literature, and that Hollywood has empowered and even encouraged the academy to do so, remains indisputable. The crisis and contradiction involved in a canonization that includes the dramatic script for stage, while simultaneously excluding the dramatic script for cinema, based on reasons that initially seem to relate to technology, but prove contradictory upon further interrogation must be exposed for what it is – a prime example of how marketability and capitalistic concerns inform and co-opt literary taste, and thus, the literary canon, above and beyond even the traditional notions of aesthetics. If the literary canon is to remain a reliable “body of writings [. . .] which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form,” the literary canon must include the screenplay (Oxford English Dictionary 342). If it does not, while allowing the stage play and even the film to remain, without at least some sort of explanation, not only do literary critics become inconsistent in their judgment, but the canon itself becomes jeopardized by intellectual hypocrisy. Double jeopardy ensues if the screenplay can be argued to accomplish the same literary ends as the epic, the short story, the novel, or the stage play to an equal or even greater degree of aesthetic deft.

competition of making movies would appear to offer the *politique des auteurs* slim prospects for survival. Add the demise of the sometime stultifying but frequently sustaining Hollywood studio system, and the likelihood of an American New Wave is remote. Yet in the mid-1970s, along came a group of brash young directors whose sudden emergence and revolutionary filmmaking evoked memories of the French *nouvelle vague* of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like Truffaut and his famous cohorts—Jean Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette – the new American auteurs – Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Brian De Palma, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese – made intensely personal films that bore their sometimes quirky always unique signatures. (Friedman 8-9)

Problematically, he even maintains that Lucas and Spielberg are “peerless technocrats”, who have never succeeded in creating personal cinema like Scorsese (Friedman 10). But at its surface, such musings strike me as contradictory, especially when once one considers Lucas’s early student work and the early amateur work of Spielberg (Friedman 9, 10).

Yet, despite such inconsistencies, Friedman’s articulation of Scorsese’s personal touch remains important. Friedman insists that Scorsese is J.R. from Who’s That Knocking at My Door? (1969) and Charlie from Mean Streets (1973). For Friedman, somehow J.R.’s relationship with the unnamed girl and his

inability to see her as anything more than a Madonna or whore remains indicative of Scorsese's own cinematic angst as a Catholic filmmaker (Friedman 25). Therefore, the question "Can you really be a saint in this day?" is asked not only by Scorsese but by Charlie who states in Mean Streets, "You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home" (Friedman 12). Interestingly enough, Scorsese's own stated anxieties do tend to confirm this, when on the commentary track to The Last Temptation of Christ DVD he asserts:

I grew up trying to place in proper balance the Christian teaching and the law of the street; I think it's very hard to do, to say the least. And I saw both exist together - coexist - in the streets, and it's something that I'll just never get past. . . That's what I come from, and that's who I am. And that's what interests me. (Scorsese, Last Temptation, DVD Commentary)

While Friedman's overall tendency to want to rescue both Scorsese and auteur theory from postmodern sensibilities that have challenged his and seemingly Scorsese's own understanding of the filmmaker as an institutionally-defined station, it is still useful for the moment to consider film authorship through the lens of auteurism.

Like Leighton Grist, I agree that the flawed conceptualization of the author/filmmaker as a "unified, freely creative and even self-determined individual" comes to be concealed within the slippage that exists between

narrative and *mise en scène*; and between that of the screenwriter and the director in terms of the development of the cinematic text (Grist 3). In this way, the overall trajectory of authorship – and more properly *auteurism* in cinema – remains limited and directed perhaps by what Bazin called the “institutional and ideological contextualization of the *auteur*”, or what I am referring to as the space between the gaze (Grist 3). So for me, the so-called *free, creative, and self-determined* aesthetic choices of the author/filmmaker seem more an ideal than a reality. As Timothy Corrigan indicates in A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam, the *auteur* exists as a commercial strategy for directing audience reception in America. And Grist notes rightly that “[Martin] Scorsese’s experience of different production situations offers a paradigm for that of many other filmmakers associated with New Hollywood Cinema” (Grist 8). As Bazin would have it, Grist, when speaking of Scorsese, insists, “No less than meanings and consistencies, the film’s contextual determinants are ideologically informed. Consequently, the subsequent readings cannot be restricted to their authorial or cinematic placement, but encompass the film’s wider historical context; one marked by the acute social and political upheaval of sixties and seventies USA” though in the case of Martin Scorsese, his film debuts in 1988 (Grist 7).

In the introduction to his text Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neorealism, Hollywood, New Wave, editor Jim Hillier mentions that it was Fereydown Hoveyda who states:

The originality of the *auteur* lies not in the subject matter he chooses, but in the technique he employs, i.e. the *mise en scène*, through which everything on the screen is expressed. . . As Sartre said: "One isn't a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way." Why should it be any different for cinema? . . . the thought of a cineaste appears through his *mise en scène* [. . .] *Mise en scène* is nothing other than the technique invented by each director to express the idea and establish the specific quality of his work . . . The task of the critic thus becomes immense: to discover behind the images the particular "manner" of the auteur and, thanks to this knowledge, to be able to elucidate the meaning of the work in question. (Hillier 8-9)

In a general sense, to what degree this process can be discussed in light of the postmodern critique of authorship, any current notion of authorship must inevitably depend largely on what one considers to be the *élan* of cinema itself: narrative or *mise-en-scene* – the word or image, if you will. But most critics of Last Temptation would want to have it both ways. To support his earlier claims further, Hillier references Elsaesser who claims: "Given the fact that in Hollywood the director often had no more than token control over choice of subject, the cast, the quality of the dialogue, all the weight of creativity, all the evidence of personal expression and statement had to be found in the *mise en*

*scène*, the visual orchestration of the story, the rhythm of the action, the plasticity and dynamism of the image, the pace and causality introduced through editing” (Hillier 10).

But in a problematic jumble of authorial responsibility, when a self-perceived auteur *chooses* the subject matter of Jesus his *unique signature* on the one hand becomes the impetus for the placement of blame on what Corliss would have us call his *interpretive artistry* – but yet if there is no author, not only is there no place to direct blame, but there is no way for the “author” to anticipate a reader or viewer’s response since he does not exist. In reacting to Last Temptation and against Scorsese – a director who considers himself an auteur while tackling the subject matter of a novel about Jesus – I believe it is only possible to offer a truly informed cinematic critique against Scorsese that attends to the *mise en scène*, not the subject matter. Unless, of course, one might want to critique Scorsese’s choice of subject matter, but then this would undermine the whole foundation of what an auteur is, since choice of subject matter theoretically does not matter. To do this would be to let Scorsese off the hook from the outset, since one cannot blame Scorsese for Last Temptation unless one regards the film as his.

Yet, because of how Scorsese was blamed by critics, audiences, and fellow filmmakers, The Last Temptation of Christ, a film adapted from a novel and whose screenplay he did not write, remains perhaps one of the single most

important films to the authorship debate.<sup>32</sup> Even without an individual author, the very institutional and ideological contextualization that socially determined how a Reagan-Bush era director would be blamed for a particular film through what David Ehrenstein claims was “little more than a ploy to regain ground lost in the wake of the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart money and sex scandals” indicates a very different sense of authorship from that accounted for in nearly all of the rest of the debate: an authorship literally determined by society itself through a process of blame (Last Temptation, DVD Liner Notes). If as Ehrenstein maintains, that “opportunists. . . have created a powerful reactionary political lobby within the Republican Party that calls itself ‘Christian’ while harboring beliefs and attitudes that are more political than spiritual” I wonder what happens when film authorship comes to be attributed not through a process of interpretation or creativity, but a process of political resistance and scapegoating (Last Temptation, DVD Liner Notes).

Prior to Last Temptation’s 1988 debut, Universal Studios claimed in defense of Scorsese against the political resistance and scapegoating faced by Last Temptation that in “the United States no one sect or coalition has power to

---

<sup>32</sup> Though Richard Barsam states that auteur theory “has roots in France of the 1920s”, perhaps alluding to Jean Epstein’s initial use of the term “auteur” to refer to a film’s director in 1921, the controversy did not ultimately swell into a full blown intellectual debate in film studies until 1962 when Andrew Sarris first published “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” in Film Culture (Barsam 428; Wexman 2). This is not to state that other critics had not taken up the question of cinematic authorship prior to this. In fact, in France the 1950s marked a sort of proving ground for the theory as up and coming *Cahiers du Cinema* critics like Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Francois Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard radically resisted then contemporary notions of French cinema under the knowing influence of Andre Bazin, founder and editor of the journal which at its peak had a circulation of fifteen thousand readers (Wexman 24).

set boundaries around each person's freedom to explore religious and philosophical questions" (Riley 23). However, in reality the *auteur* does remain constrained, bound, and under the influence of Hollywood and other such apparatuses that determine the outcome and discursive positioning for cinematic productions. The unspoken consistencies both aesthetically and theologically in films that depict Jesus across decades of film history and between artists readily expose the limitations of the author/filmmaker, and readily indicate how the seemingly non-theological "devotional exercise" of going to the movies still manages to privilege certain religious impulses under the auspices of aesthetics and *auteuristic* freedom, while simultaneously denying others. Grist argues:

Any of the text's elements or inputs can be separated or analyzed in isolation or in combination with any of the others. But while each is determined by and brings the text into a (frequently displaced and highly mediated) relation with its broader cultural context, it also mutually interacts with and disrupts the text's other elements and inputs to produce an historically specific collocation of structures, representations and determinants. (Grist 5)

To date, with regards to cinema, this discourse remains deviously invested in a particular politic that overrides both theological difference and aesthetics as it relates to the mechanically-reproducible image of Jesus. The cinematic representation of Jesus indicates how the cinematic text has emerged



as a bargaining chip for certain political groups invested in a particular reading of the so-called sacred New Testament text under the guise of aesthetics and art. For instance, regarding the controversy centered around The Last Temptation of Christ's reception, Martin Scorsese's blend of the sacrosanct text of the gospel narrative with his own carefully, yet artificially crafted *mise en scène* creates an innovative, yet quasi-aesthetic/quasi-religious tapestry of cinematic iconography that somehow manages to blur the seemingly necessary distinction between the holy canon and artistic license. Inevitably, this process occurs both for those who claim to be bound by the canon, and for those who remain suspicious and resistant to it through the cinematic space of a director who, coincidentally, first wanted to be a man of the cloth.

In defense of his efforts, Scorsese claims, "For people who don't know, I wanted to create something new - through the novel, not the gospel - something fresh about Jesus and make it new and accessible to people who haven't thought about God in a long time," he insists when asked about his intentions in producing The Last Temptation of Christ (Dougan 87). He continues, "I don't think this film will destroy anyone's faith, in fact I think it will be just the opposite" (Dougan 87). Scorsese states elsewhere, "I made it as a prayer, an act of worship. I wanted to be a priest. My whole life has been movies and religion. That's it. Nothing else" (Friedman 186). Unlike Joli Jensen who argues that "Scorsese's motivation and stated intentions are consistent with a belief in the 'social power of art,'" I find Scorsese's stated intentions useful for

different reasons, since Jensen apparently takes for granted that the filmmaker's own assertions can be trusted and taken at face value (Jensen 365). Like Jensen, I want to challenge the notion that "[i]t is the artist's task to act as catalyst and a cut through the mystical forms common to the Christ film and reveal the true Christ" where "Scorsese [sees] himself as an important instigator of social change, bringing about new ways of viewing Jesus Christ" (Riley 38). Though Scorsese might want this of his audience, to naively approach the director in this manner would be a critical mistake, especially regarding a filmmaker who admittedly in the BFI documentary A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies characterizes American *auteurs* either as storytellers, smugglers, illusionists, or iconoclasts. (It could be presumed, of course, that Scorsese desires to be viewed not only as an *auteur*, but as each of these as well.)

Still, what is at stake in Scorsese's claims must be considered carefully for reasons other than veracity. As a filmmaker who has long considered himself an *auteur*, Scorsese's statements remain suspicious – not so much in their epistemological value, but because of the very fact that through the discourse that produces such claims, Scorsese cannot help but be aware of how such statements work to construct his own persona as a commodity that inevitably drives the market value of the products he creates for his listeners or audience. But regardless of Scorsese's intentions, which can never truly be known, one *can* know that as both a critically-proclaimed and self-perceived *auteur*, Scorsese is

fully aware of his own persona and how his various statements comprise and complicate the subsequent commodification of the images he produces.

Countering Scorsese's sentiments, "[t]he Rev. Jack Hayford likened the depiction of Christ in the scripture to a caricature and said 'it was as if George Washington was portrayed as a combination of Benedict Arnold and Gomer Pyle'" (Poland 230). For Hayford, the movie (referring to the pirated script) defamed Christ in a way that blacks and Moslems would not be allowed to be demeaned" (Riley 22). Either way, whether such a claim is correct or not, it is fair to state that the representation of Jesus in America has become sacred myth when such iconography can be likened to that of George Washington. Yet, Hayford's critique assumes that all depictions of Christ must draw from the New Testament and fails to acknowledge that Scorsese's film is in fact based on a novel. Likewise, Hayford intriguingly faults a director for the contents of a screenplay that he isn't even credited with authoring. Not only are Hayford's conclusions loaded with a pungent sense of Judeo-Christian privilege and assumption, but they are also highly inaccurate. Problematically, Hayford wants to assume that blacks and Muslims have somehow successfully limited the degree to which both groups are demeaned in cinema through a flawed appeal to both history and fiction. If his concern for history is to be taken seriously, the representation of Jesus, if historically accurate, should be rooted in being played by an actor who is of color (non-Anglo) and Middle Eastern descent; so it is ironic that this quote appeals to a misrepresentation of sorts and

justifies it against yet another misrepresentation in terms of the historical. Hayford, like so many, does not realize that representing Jesus as an Anglo, at its very root could be construed as demeaning to both people of color – blacks and others; and people of Middle Eastern descent, Muslims and others. Yet, Hayford hardly seems aware of the racial and political ignorance that guides his reasoning. In his own terms, now Jesus is likened to the father of our nation in terms of importance with Scorsese's iconoclasm marked by an act of treason (Benedict Arnold) and mental incompetence (Gomer Pyle). Yet, even this is contradictory – since Gomer Pyle was a faithful and pure-hearted Marine, loyal and devoted to his country. Kentucky congressman, Robert Hubbard, expressed a similar sentiment when he quipped, "One difference between Judas Iscariot and Martin Scorsese is that Mr. Scorsese will earn more than 30 pieces of silver from his betraying Jesus Christ" (Riley 29).

For whatever reason, the reception of Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ by both audience and critics marks a distinct difference for most viewer's perceived relationship to the commodified image of Jesus in terms of how it had typically been presented by the cinema. I am interested in just why that might be, and will subsequently attempt to assert my suspicions. On the one hand, Scorsese's stated intentions are unreliable since he sees himself as an auteur and works out of a historical moment in the 1980s where the "auteur persona" is now promoted as a potential blockbuster commodity. On the other hand, it is difficult not to be suspicious of a political discourse disguised theologically and

aesthetically that would vilify Scorsese's artistic, and dare I say, *auteuristic* interpretation of Kazantzakis's already controversial novel with no regard for Scorsese's stylistic track record as a filmmaker. To properly do this through the lens of auteur theory, Scorsese's cinematic approaches to his previous subjects must be explained to demonstrate how his stylistics in Last Temptation do not become anomalies aimed at provoking the conservative Right, or blaspheming a holy canon, but rather a consistent exhibition of "recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as [Scorsese's] signature" whether one accepts auteur theory or not (Sarris 516). If, as Sarris's assertion of the auteur theory stipulates, "The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels," it is unfair to single out Last Temptation as transgressive simply because of the protagonist at the center of the drama.

Film critics engaged in the authorship debate ought to take note of how Scorsese's pending production was perceived to suggest *blasphemy* for a political lobby of denominational leaders in ways that Schrader's screenplay alone did not – a noteworthy indicator of how the reception of Last Temptation provides a necessary turning point in the authorship debate. And even if this were a legitimate point of contention, it is interesting how a problem foundational to both the novel and the screenplay ultimately become the director's responsibility – not only before the film is screened, but in certain cases, even before it is shot. Prior to Scorsese's second production attempt after failing to shoot his film in 1983 with Paramount, some of these resisters managed to get

copies of Schrader's early script, presumably from Tim Penland of MasterMedia, who was hired by Scorsese's camp as a liason to various religious organizations across America, but resigned after reading the screenplay (Riley 21).

Understandably seized by such lines as "God sleeps between your legs," many dozens of the pirated script were photocopied and sent to various heads of denominations in order to be disseminated to their respective pastorate (Schrader, Screenplay 82). These misgivings were only compounded by certain moments in Schrader's 90-page text "such as the embrace between John the Baptist and Jesus which goes into detail, via voice-over, to tell us that the Baptist's tongue was like 'hot coal in [Jesus'] mouth'" even though "Schrader confessed, however, that much of this was just a Calvinist teasing his Catholic friend and in subsequent drafts the scenes had been removed or toned down" (Sangster 167). It could be argued that the early resistance Scorsese encountered was due to an old draft of a screenplay, and not his film, but I'm certain it was only the impending possibility of this screenplay's production that even made this particular text an issue. Interestingly enough, however, neither moment occurs in the film, which in retrospect problematizes even further a ritual of spectatorship that censures a director for the musings of a screenwriter whose literary notions aren't even produced cinematically. It is no wonder David Ehrenstein describes many of Scorsese's critics as a "yowling mob of right-wing zealots who have stood in the way of all discussions of the work since it was first released in 1988" in the liner notes of the Criterion DVD for the film, noting

the apparent politics behind Last Temptation's reception (Ehrenstein, Last Temptation DVD Liner Notes).

While I admit that the conservative Right has stood in the way of discussing this particular film in a very general way, I cannot agree that this political front has stood in the way of "all discussion." In fact, it has been their frequent investment in the film's reception that makes the discussion, or perhaps the debate, so interesting. Instead, I maintain that a political interest much larger and more influential than a lobby which stands not in the way of all discussion, but in the way of all representation of Jesus in cinema in a more global sense counter to its interests because nearly all mainstream cinematic representations of the Jesus figure have been Anglo/Euro depictions that remarkably in terms of casting have yielded very little protest. It seems to me that if blasphemy were truly the issue, the case must be taken up with Schrader, who quite surprisingly has no problem owning up to the accusation:

This notion that we come to God informs the book and therefore informs the character of Jesus who would be a metaphor. And when the critics of the film accuse it of blasphemy they are right in a way. They are right at a highly intellectual level, not at a kind of visceral, superficial level. To use Jesus Christ as a character, as a metaphor for the human condition is technically a form of blasphemy since as God how can he be a metaphor for man? But that's also the conundrum of Christianity because it contends that

Christ was both fully human and fully divine and that has caused the Church no small amount of trouble over the years. (Schrader, Last Temptation DVD)

Yet, not every critic launches their assault against Scorsese prior to the film's production. In terms of distribution, in an effort of resistance that continues to this day, Blockbuster Video refuses to carry the title even as a part of their BSI, or basic store inventory. While, during post-production, Bill Bright offered to purchase the film's prints for destruction purposes; Universal, however, published its refusal in the Los Angeles Times, The Atlanta Constitution, Variety, the Washington Post, the Hollywood Reporter, and the New York Times. Not going quite so far as to rip a page from William Randolph Hearst, Bishop Anthony Bosco, head of U.S. Catholic Council Communication Committee said, "I believe Scorsese has failed to treat the topic well. . .As it is, the film is flawed both as theology and as cinema" (Riley 21). It must be noted how Bishop Bosco's statements assume that there is a "well" or good, or appropriate way to treat *the* topic; and while his statement is not explicit as to what Scorsese's actual topic is, he certainly implies its theological and cinematic culpability. While Bosco's status as a bishop may inform a theological critique of Scorsese's film for many, I wonder what informs the cinematic critique implicit in the dubious phrase – *as cinema*. Is it not enough for Scorsese's film to be flawed theologically? What does it mean for a film to be flawed as cinema? I tend to doubt Bosco's answer would be satisfactory for the



purposes of my investigation. After all, it is *this* question that I find most fascinating: are claims against cinema like “blasphemy” and “flawed theology” valid when posed against an auteur in light of the authorship debate and the necessary tentativeness with which this term must be regarded in light of this debate? I don’t think so – especially in the case of Scorsese. And so I must ask myself why Last Temptation becomes the only film singled out from Scorsese’s vast body of work as the lone offender when its *interior meaning*, to borrow from Sarris, reflects the same sensibility that can be recognized through auteur theory in most – if not every – Scorsese film. So when Lloyd Ogilvie, a Presbyterian pastor calls Last Temptation “the most serious misuse of film craft in the history of movie making” I wonder if “serious” film scholars can regard this conclusion with any credibility (Riley 22). If so, then Ogilvie assumes that somehow the representation of Jesus becomes the most potentially abusive end to which cinematic tools can be managed – not American Slavery, or the Holocaust, or racism, or gender privilege, or some other socio-historical ill. I am curious what informs such a conclusion for Ogilvie. And if this is so, must I, as his statement indicates, truly assume that Ogilvie believes that only Scorsese’s film has failed the *film craft* to such a monumental degree? What other films might be included by Ogilvie on his list?

Besides, if there is that much at stake in Scorsese’s film, then, by definition, there is that much at stake in any film that attempts to represent Christ – and so I must challenge Ogilvie for not claiming that all Jesus films have

been serious misuses of the film craft. From a certain vantage point, all Jesus films are flawed theologically because they all pose differing views regarding fundamental theological issues, and many, if not most, have been apt to offer up competing theological readings. The negotiation of Jesus's humanity and divinity as expressed through characterization; the sexuality of Magdalene, the woman who held the highest esteem in his ministry according to the New Testament; and the motives for Judas, the disciple who betrayed him, are each profound theological issues that are treated very differently in each of the films that emerge between 1912 and 1988 about Jesus. Furthermore, in terms of adaptation, the cinema has been notorious for its infidelity to its literary sources, especially after that advent of *la politique de auteurs*, and films about Jesus have been no exception in the liberties they have taken with the New Testament.

I am troubled by how many of Scorsese's critics, at various times since the film's release, but especially in 1988, have bought into the notion that bad theology might have *that* much cinematic consequence when presumably cinema is not a fundamentally theological tradition. Last Temptation is not the first film to misrepresent Mary Magdalene not only as a prostitute, but also as "the woman caught in adultery." Yet, this apparent gender bias of previous films that have represented Jesus holds little consequence for Ogilvie, even though a careful study of the New Testament reveals the fact that the Bible never even implies that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, nor does it imply that

she was “the woman caught in adultery.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, Linda Kulman and Jay Tolson recently observed that “[t]he Roman Catholic Church acknowledged as far back as 1969 that Mary Magdalene was not a fallen woman, but somehow the word has not gotten out” (U.S. News & World Report, December 22, 2003). Apparently, Ogilvie and others tolerate such gender bias and misrepresentation in Jesus films, perhaps because it is only the representation of Jesus in terms of casting that matters. Yet, how can Ogilvie overlook the racism and prevalent White Supremacy that governs the casting of Jesus? Besides economic advantage, which is an issue in and of itself, why is it that most directors are content for the background artists in Biblical films to be indigenous and ethnic, while insisting that speaking Talent either be Anglo or of European descent? If Jesus’ representation is so important, how come nobody insists that he be Israeli, or Jewish? I believe it is because most are not truly interested in Jesus’s representation as it is a product of *mise en scène*, but rather as it is a product of Judeo-Christian first-world politics in the context of world cinema – that is, as an image, and as an icon for the most potent of Western ideas. Like most, Ogilvie must realize that if he were to in fact offer a cinematic critique of Scorsese’s

---

<sup>33</sup> Mary Magdalene is only referenced by name twelve times in the New Testament, and only one of these verses provides any biographical information about her prior to her joining Jesus’ ministry. Luke 8:2 mentions that she had seven demons cast out of her, but nothing of her sexuality. Further, while fiction books like Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code have speculated as to the motives behind this misrepresentation of Mary Magdalene, it is a matter of historical record that in 1969 the Second Vatican Council rescinded their position that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute shortly after Vatican II, which opened under Pope John XXIII in 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI in 1965. Most scholars believe this original misrepresentation of Mary Magdalene began in 591 CE when Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon or homily that confused the identity of Mary Magdalene with Mary, Lazarus’ sister, and the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet before a group of religious leaders in Luke 7:38.

cinematic Jesus, it would be difficult to do so without indicting previous cinematic representations as well. Scorsese's film, for whatever reason, denotes an exception for both Ogilve and certain audiences in general in terms of reception. But most who resist Last Temptation offer no engaging cinematic critiques of substance, but rather uninformed and polarizing theological verdicts of textual infidelity that curiously are only applied to Scorsese's novel-based cinematic text, and not to the more New Testament-based cinematic texts of Scorsese's auteur predecessors. Though films about Jesus have met with varying degrees of controversy prior to 1988, in this precise moment many of Scorsese's critics want to thrust a particular theological responsibility upon the author/filmmaker, insinuating art more as a matter of devotion rather than a matter of expression.

Understanding certain aspects of these reception issues, Riley states about Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ:

The film reignited underlying tensions between religious and secular constituencies. Opposing segments within society formed, solidified positions, and engaged in a pitched contest over what could, and what could not, be publicly said about the historic figure of Jesus. Film critics were talking about God and religion as were studio executives, directors, commentators, actors, movie producers, movie critics, and film exhibitors. The rhetoric of these positions became more adversarial and confrontational as the

drama played out. By July 1989 religious conservatives had lost the battle, although it is not entirely clear what Universal had won.

(Riley 33)

Clearly, Riley understands and attempts to articulate the volatile space between the gaze for the religious and the secular that, at times, I believe is negotiated by auteurs who make films about – in his words – the historical figure of Jesus. But instead of elaborating on and defining more precisely this secular-religious space, Riley's analysis conveniently detours into an adamant, almost fixated obsession with merely the social. Riley's own claim that "[a]s enduring religious rituals, Christ films convert collective societal guilt into forms of blame in a ritual cleansing of guilt" draws much from Rene Girard's work in The Scapegoat (Riley 34-35). Contrary to Riley, I insist that the *theological*, the *ideological*, and the *aesthetic* must also be considered in a post-modern discourse that lends itself to the mechanically-reproduced text; but, ultimately, one may best come to gain an understanding of the Jesus film by way of examining the *political*.

This is not to say that Riley completely reduces the Jesus film with no consideration for the political, but in certain moments, his arguments seem inappropriately preoccupied with this social phenomenon. For Riley, "How The Last Temptation of Christ reproduces the Christ story as a process of scapegoating provides important insights into its meaning as a rhetorical document," but the weaknesses and limitations of this position become readily apparent in his film analysis and flawed description of the film's *mise en scène* by

way of mystification, which I will discuss later (Riley 34-35). I agree that “Christ films operate as vehicles for the transfer of this blame to appropriate sacrificial victims, thus reaffirming and renewing the foundational beliefs of its producers and the cultural segment they represent,” but it is not enough to consider only the social implications of so-called Christ films (Riley 34-35). Nor is it enough to consider films about Jesus only in their social context. By reducing the “Christ film” to a “ritual reenactment of the New Testament Gospels” or “a system of accusation and blame through their story lines, production values, and characters” Riley grossly misconstrues the full implications of the discourse surrounding Last Temptation, but his conclusions regarding certain social spaces do illuminate particular aspects of reception as it relates to films about Jesus and my own previous articulated notions of the space between the gaze (Riley 35).

In this way, when Catholic priest and fiction author, Andrew Greely responds to Last Temptation by stating, “Although Mr. Scorsese’s Jesus is not the Jesus of the scriptures, the film makes us think about God” it is insufficient to merely consider the social implications of such a statement because not only does Greely subtly imply that at least some other cinematic representations of Jesus *have* been the Jesus of scriptures, his discourse implies that this legitimacy be determined by a particular sort of fidelity to the New Testament text (Riley 21). But if, in fact, the fidelity of a cinematic Jesus representation is merely a narrative issue, i.e., a concern of a screenwriter, then why does Greely use such

terms as “Mr. Scorsese’s Jesus”? Why not “Paul Schrader’s Jesus”? One issue that the authorship debate settles quite nicely when tackling this issue is that since Scorsese cannot officially be credited with writing the screenplay for Last Temptation, all serious talk of Scorsese’s Jesus must consider not only the narrative, but more importantly, the *mise en scène*. Yet, if Last Temptation stylistically can be proven consistent with Scorsese’s auteur sensibility, as established by his previous films, I can demonstrate more clearly what I mean when I state that the film’s reception was never truly an issue of the cinematic. And so I will do so.

After dropping out of the seminary in 1956, Martin Scorsese enrolled in NYU Film School where he photographed Inesita for Robert Siegal; but it was in 1963 that Scorsese directed his first film, a student film described by David Thompson and Ian Christie where “[a]lmost continuous voice-over narration accompanies a fast-paced montage of still photographs, animated objects and occasional live action to tell the story of Algernon – called Harry by his friends – who is obsessed by a picture of a boat on a lake” (Thompson and Christie 15). Scorsese would go on to make two more films, It’s Not Just You, Murray! (1964) and The Big Shave (1967) before making Who’s That Knocking at My Door? in 1969. But even with Inesita, Thompson and Christie rightly note that Scorsese’s work on this short anticipates editing techniques that would later be used in New York, New York (Thompson and Christie 15).

While not necessarily an auteurist in the purest sense of the term, like Thompson and Christie, I believe that Scorsese's films do tend to exhibit certain familiar signatures in terms of technique and style in at least six different areas relevant to the Last Temptation. These six different areas include the use of voice-over which often illustrates the protagonist's own struggle to maintain psychological stability throughout the course of the narrative; guerilla-style camera work and what I would call a gritty *mise en scène*; a self-conscious use of language; a stylized depiction of violence; a peculiar fetishization of the romantic foil; and plot points positioned against the male protagonist's struggle with his own sexuality often instigated through the romantic foil, who tends to wear white at key moments in the protagonist's gaze. Lawrence S. Friedman admits in The Cinema of Martin Scorsese that Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and Last Temptation are "of the same cloth: they're about lonely, self-deluded, sexually inactive people" (Friedman 152). Friedman further recognizes that "Schrader's startling identification of Christ with the likes of Travis Bickle and Jake LaMotta saturates the screenplay he crafted from the Kazantzakis novel" (Friedman 152). As a filmmaker who articulates himself as an auteur, Scorsese stays very aware of these concerns in each of these films, and so The Last Temptation of Christ in many regards becomes the rule and not the exception in how he treats these six categories.

While David Ehrenstein acknowledges that for most fundamentalists of the Right, Scorsese's film depicted "a mentally deranged, lust-driven man who,



in a dream sequence, comes down off the cross and has a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene” this should have come as no surprise to those familiar with Scorsese’s previous work (Last Temptation, DVD Liner Notes). Like many of Scorsese’s protagonists, Jesus is not so much *mentally deranged* as he is sociopathic – a pariah desiring acceptance into the mainstream society of his day; but in Jesus’s case, with this acceptance, also comes a rejection of his very identity, and a resistance to the very resolution of the film’s narrative.

In accordance with Syd Field’s screenplay paradigm at 27 minutes and 20 seconds into the film, Dafoe’s Jesus utters the unresolved dilemma that immediately establishes the first plot point of the script, “I want to rebel against everything, but I’m afraid. . .You want to know who my mother and father is: fear. . .Lucifer is inside of me.”<sup>34</sup> Then he continues by describing the psychological anguish Lucifer torments him with: “You’re not the son of king David, you’re not a man. You’re the son of man, and more. . .the son of God and more than that. . .God.” Realizing that everything has two meanings, and stating so in voice-over, Jesus faces his fears and shouts for the serpent that crawls into his tent in the next scene to leave him. This confrontation enables him to stand up to Judas, who comes to kill him. But Jesus states: “Maybe God

---

<sup>34</sup> In his book Screenplay, Syd Field articulates his notion of the three-act paradigm. In this paradigm, each screenplay is divided into three unique Acts with three unique purposes: The Setup, The Confrontation, and The Resolution. In a two hour film, or 120 page screenplay, The Setup lasts 30 pages, or approximately 30 minutes; the Confrontation lasts 60 pages, or approximately 60 minutes; and the Resolution lasts 30 pages, or approximately 30 minutes. Each Act is separated from the subsequent Act by a plot point which is a reversal that, based on an action of the protagonist, usually thrusts the narrative in a different direction.

didn't send you here to kill me, but to follow me," thus commencing Act Two of the film. While it could be argued that the interior monologues of Jesus expressed in voice-over in Last Temptation do intimate a struggle for psychological stability, this is not so much a struggle for sanity, as it is a grappling with a familiar destiny for Scorsese protagonists that often has critical psychological implications. I do not think that a protagonist's musings and rantings in voice-over in a Scorsese film are intended as evidence towards making psychiatric diagnoses as much as they are cinematic devices that characterize the protagonist's interior world through the diegetic sound of thought in contradistinction to the external world that Scorsese presents in the *mise en scène*.

What Travis Bickle thinks in Taxi Driver (1976) is not as important as *the way* he thinks in relation to his environment. He sees himself as an outsider, and his voice-over is an enactment, not a revelation, as is the case with the oft-quoted "You talking to me?" sequence. Jake LaMotta's incessant rehearsal of his comedy act works in the same way. It is not the words, "I could've been a contender" that are important; we all know this line is merely an homage to Kazan and Brando's character in On the Waterfront (1954). What matters is how LaMotta's relationship to these words demonstrate his relationship to his environment, which in this case, happens to be his past. Scorsese achieves a similar result through voice-over in Goodfellas (1990) in the last act, as Henry Hill spirals downward into a drug-induced paranoia. Yet, I don't think Scorsese

would have his audience believe that it is only illegal substance abuse that has brought on Hill's paranoia at this particular point in the plot. It is also his compromised relationship with both the Mafia and the authorities that has precipitated this sense of delusion, as visually symbolized by the police helicopter that may or may not be following him. As in Taxi Driver, as in Raging Bull, and as in The Last Temptation of Christ, it is the protagonist's monologue with himself that enables a more social reading and characterization, and not a psychological one. Bickle, LaMotta, Hill, and even Jesus are each men whose struggles are located within particular social contexts. To remove them from those contexts would be to change their struggles, their stories, their characters, and even their narratives.

Ehrenstein rightly takes issue with the notion of a "mentally deranged" Jesus, but defends the film for the wrong reasons when he claims:

The Last Temptation of Christ is a stirring affirmation of faith both in the person of Jesus and in his teachings. This affirmation is unorthodox only in that it requires a viewer to think about the meaning of the gospels for every one of the film's 163 minutes. And it is this process of thought that the film's attackers can't abide—particularly as such thought involves the paradox of Jesus' simultaneous divinity and humanity. (Ehrenstein, DVD Liner Notes)

But in his zeal to defend the picture Ehrenstein does not specify how a film supposedly not based on the gospels can require a viewer to think about the meaning of the gospels for its entire length. While he optimistically concludes, “By experiencing Jesus’s divinity as a process, we come to learn how the divine might enter our own lives,” in my opinion, this sort of thinking merely replaces one blurred theological response with another (Ehrenstein, DVD Liner Notes). To try to combat erroneous theological understandings with other erroneous theological understandings almost assumes that at the end of the film when Dafoe’s Jesus states, “It is accomplished!”, one requires some sort of accurate theological understanding to comprehend just what exactly *it* is. Yet, in narrative terms, this moment is an inevitable resolution to the conflict that has driven the whole film – a conflict expressed at length throughout the film in voice-over. Scorsese articulates the dilemma in this way:

He’s God. He’s not deluded. I think Kazantzakis thought that, I think the movie says that, and I know I believe that. The beauty of Kazantzakis’ concept is that Jesus has to put up with everything we go through, all the doubts and fears and angers. He makes me *feel* like he’s sinning – but he’s not sinning, he’s just human. As well as divine. And he has to deal with all this double, triple guilt on the cross. That’s the way I directed it, and that’s what I wanted, because my own religious feelings are the same. (Friedman 154)

Ehrenstein, on the other hand, might have us believe that only at this point when confronted with death within the diegesis of the film does Jesus attain divinity, but the film's opening monologue suggests something very different – that at this point the struggle between the mortal and the divine in Jesus's psyche has now found resolution, not ascension:

The dual substance of Christ – the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain God. . .has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. My principle anguish and source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh...and soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met.

(Nikos Kazantzakis from the book The Last Temptation of Christ)

Riley, on the other hand, embraces the notion of Jesus's psychological instability as a necessary departure from previous Jesus films, when he states, "Scorsese's film sheds elements of mystification through an array of devices suggesting subjectivization and psychological instability, resulting in a collapse of all formal boundaries separating holy from profane" (Riley 47). He further argues about POV shots and voice over:

In this innovative departure from traditional cinematic representations, Scorsese inserts specific thoughts and images into Jesus' head, thus colonizing the mind of Christ. As a result, Scorsese gains access to an area inaccessible to the Church itself,

Jesus' conscience. By subjectivizing the Christ figure through point-of-view and voiceover, the film effectively changes the ground rules for debating the identity of Christ. Questions about Jesus' dual nature are no longer important; now the contest centers on whose thoughts and ideas will be inserted into Jesus' mind. The rhetorical effect of these subjectivizing techniques is to scandalize the traditional filmic presentation of Christ by putting into his mind images and words that seriously limit Jesus' appeal as a universal source of redemption. (Riley 47)

In basic terms, I agree with Riley, but once he uses the phrase *colonizing the mind* I believe he must go a step further because it is not merely Jesus's mind that is colonized through the process of representation, whether it be *subjectivized* – as Riley would have it – or *objectivized*, as I would have it, but also the mind of the viewer. For instance, while Riley's explanation is telling, his slightly tongue-in-cheek conclusion is even more revealing. He starts by saying, "After a brief argument over who should baptize whom, John dunks Jesus. . ." (Riley 47). But it must be noted that John doesn't *dunk* Jesus at all in The Last Temptation of Christ – the water is too shallow, so he *pours* water on Jesus's head. In this way, from a literal standpoint in terms of what *baptism* means, some Bible scholars would question whether or not this is even an actual baptism that is depicted. This classic scene that has been tackled by nearly every filmmaker treating the subject of Jesus once again indicates the true limits of film authorship because

how a filmmaker decides to depict the “baptism” of Jesus will always remain an issue of theology and politics, and not merely that of aesthetic license because if it were simply a matter of translating the Greek word *baptizo* into English and then acting it out – or even relying on the historical record of the primitive Church regarding this practice and the concurrent art that depicts it – how to photograph a baptism scene could otherwise be stabilized by the literary and literal language source of the gospel text, which would demand full immersion, not pouring. But in the context of a multi-denominational nation bent on preserving a Judeo-Christian political front that has since reinterpreted Christian doctrine hundreds of times over, one quickly realizes that Scorsese depicts the “baptism” in this way because he is Catholic, not because he is an artist.

Michael Bliss speaks to this issue of Scorsese’s theological background:

The most notable characteristic of Scorsese’s films derives from what I refer to as the director’s Catholic sensibility. Scorsese is indebted to Catholicism for suggesting the manner in which his characters attempt to resolve the opposition between the word and the flesh, between the behests of Catholicism as derived from the Bible and the rigorous demands of living in the world and dealing with all of its nagging adjustments, deceits, and compromises.

(Bliss xv)

For me, this Catholic sensibility has far more than mere narrative implications, i.e., the manner in which particular characters resolve conflict, however; as this

baptism sequence indicates, Scorsese's politically and institutionally-informed theology also in certain ways determines and situates the supposedly auteur-determined *mise en scène*.

However, Riley ignores these apparent politics of the image as stabilized by earlier films, by instead favoring the politics of time and history:

Likewise, demystifying production techniques used to internalize the theological debate have the effect of placing Jesus outside history, dislocating him from the cultural and political forces of his time. In an inside-out world of Jesus' guilty conscience, all historical markers lose their mooring. His attempts to resolve spiritual and social conflicts around him are ineffective because the primary struggle between good and evil occurs within his conscience, not in the external world. (Riley 48)

But on this point I tend to disagree with Riley. Voice-over and POV shots are not possibly enough to dislocate Jesus as a protagonist from the cultural and political forces of history, in and of themselves. Besides, it is the language of this particular voice-over that accomplishes the dislocation to an even greater degree than the technique itself. Riley's claim is too lofty, too broad, and too ambitious. Here, he oversimplifies Scorsese's camera work, and overstates his own point, since even in spite of Scorsese's camera work and use of language, Jesus as a protagonist cannot be dislocated from time altogether. And if Riley wishes to speak of the historical Jesus he would have already realized that any attempt at



representation dislocates the actual Jesus from his own time, be it cinematic or not – as all representations of the past to some degree or another have to contend with anachronistic treatments of the primary subject from a point in the future. Such is the problem of history. But more importantly, this oversimplification stems from Riley’s understanding of the term “mystification” and its process in cinema:

Through mystification, filmic narratives make Jesus “obscure or mysterious” (American Heritage Dictionary 869). These cinematic techniques used to mystify the Christ character include, but are not confined to, camera work, dialogue, lighting, sound, music, costumes, scenes, acting, and special effects. The presence or absence of mystification in a Christ film helps explain Jesus’ role as a sacrificial victim and identify the rhetorical message embedded in the narrative. (Riley 42)

While I agree that these various cinematic techniques enable particular approaches to the image, the crux of Riley’s argument here – which deals mainly with various takes on “the woman-caught-in-adultery” sequence – would in the end have us assume that through this same sequence, in relation to previous cinematic attempts, “Last Temptation thoroughly demystifies the Christ character bringing him down to earth and making him real” (Riley 43). But this is not the case, since in terms of the physical reality of the actual image, Scorsese’s Jesus is no different than the same cinematic representations Riley

wants to posit as being thoroughly mystified. This argument only works if one removes casting from the cinematic devices at a director's disposal. Yet, Riley offers no such justification for this oversight, even though a competent director must consider the impact of casting in the pre-production phase of filmmaking as a cinematic device long before the other aspects Riley conveniently mentions ever become an issue.

To attempt to prove his point, Riley offers an interesting comparison of "the woman-caught-adultery" sequence from Last Temptation with that of Nicholas Ray's King of Kings (1961). For Riley, Ray's Jesus "remains above scrutiny and gives no explanation for his behavior and does not justify his position" with cinematic device in turn doing all the work for the viewer (Riley 44). With Scorsese's Jesus, on the other hand, Riley identifies what he calls "a very real sense of danger" in Last Temptation when Dafoe's character intervenes to rescue a condemned Magdalene "being dragged by her hair into an open area where bystanders wait with stones" (Riley 43). Riley properly points out that the crowd actually pelts Scorsese's Jesus with stones, but reduces the response of those in Ray's film to merely a "ritualized pursuit" of the condemned woman, who Ray also characterizes as Mary Magdalene (Riley 44).

But a closer reading of this scene in King of Kings (1961) defies Riley's argument since there is real danger for Jesus in this film as well. When Jeffrey Hunter tells the crowd, "Then let him who is without sin amongst you cast the first stone," Riley fails to mention the bystander who immediately cocks back to

throw a stone, only for his arm to be stayed by the Barabbas character. In fact, it is the cinematic device of shot-counter-shot that implies a danger not only for Magdalene but for Jesus, since as Ray composes the shot, Hunter's Jesus remains absent from the frame where Barabbas deters the would-be stoner. It is therefore difficult to determine whether or not the stone is intended for Jesus or Magdalene. Riley offers a flawed reading of this scene, where the camera operates as some sort of objective observer, without implying from whose perspective or point of view it gazes. Riley properly notes the formalistic use of Miklos Rozsa's score in this particular scene, but fails to differentiate this from how differently the non-diegetic Peter Gabriel score in Scorsese's film works. He wrongfully assumes from King of Kings that "the production techniques give the impression that Jesus is holy and has divine authority, which sanctions his intercessory act of forgiveness" where "[c]inematic mystification enhances the contrast between divine and human qualities, allowing the scene to develop a story about God's forgiveness" (Riley 43). I do not think cinematic device alone codifies this as "a story about God's forgiveness," as Riley would suggest. Such a frame of reference can only derive from a discourse that the viewer is already engaged in prior to positioning themselves in the audience via the space between the gaze. A great example of how the gaze of a viewer can be informed by a culturally-informed hermeneutic – or what I am calling a *space* – is how Kenneth Anger's Scorpio Rising (1964) works differently for viewers depending on their context precisely because he leaves the image of a previous director's

depiction of Jesus intact, while compounding its potential meaning through sound and montage by introducing his own *mise en scène* that is both internal and external to the Jesus footage he appropriates via montage.

Just three years after King of Kings, Scorpio Rising provides a great example of how the image can be demystified through context, without adjusting the cinematic strategies for recording the image. Yet, I imagine that Anger's film would work differently if the Jesus images he intercut into his film were already a counter-cultural image at the outset in terms of either casting or other such politics that might have governed how Jesus had come to be represented in cinema up to that point. Riley's argument here is too presumptuous; though cinematically informed, it is incomplete and takes too much for granted. He argues that the filmmaker is doing all this work to inform how the Jesus image is read, when I believe such a reading is already institutionally and ideologically informed not only for the filmmaker, but also for the audience.

However, I do find Riley's understanding of mystification a useful method for examining the cinematic techniques that directors attempting to represent Jesus have employed through their *mise en scène*, thus revealing not their degree of competence, as Sarris's auteur theory would have it, but rather, to disclose not the tensions between director's material and his personality, but as it should be: the tensions between the material and its institutional and ideological context. I suggest this method because while certain aspects of *mise*

*en scène* have been taken be into account in terms of the reception of films about Jesus, the Last Temptation becomes a moment in film history where it becomes undeniable how narrative, a supposed relationship to the New Testament text, and institutional constructs of what Kazantzakis labeled the “sacred myth” have worked together to commodify a particular reading of Jesus’s representation in film, all the while determining and limiting any actual cinematic authorship by way of casting Jesus in cinema.

While casting choices alone almost always position a director within the constraints of politics, one must also consider language, accent, cadence, tone, and even the race or appearance of actors and performers on screen. Race, after all, is an ideological construct that is always located in culture, politics, and history – not to mention, the image. Unlike Riley, however, Scorsese remains conscience of the intersection of language, race, and nationality when he readily admits:

We had to use American English rather than British accents, because if the American audience – and as an American I have to think in terms of the American audience – heard British accents, they would think about the old epics which were more about epic film-making than they were about Jesus. . . But what it is, is that I wanted this Jesus to engage the audience, and if an audience in America hears people speaking in beautifully turned English they will turn their ears off. They will realize they don’t have to think

because this is a safe movie. . .What I wanted to do is take a block like the one on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 48<sup>th</sup> Street in New York where we shot Taxi Driver. . .If you go there and say, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”, you’ll get killed. They’ll rob you and they’ll beat you up, and they’ll kill you. But if you go there and say, “Hey, I want to tell you about Jesus. I want to tell you about something he just said” – then it becomes a confrontation, and I wanted to make it a confrontation, especially the Sermon on the Mount. We had to destroy the beautiful poetry of it and invert it, almost as though he’s getting the idea for the first time. . .That all had to be American voices, and different accents too, which is why we had Harry Dean Stanton as a Southern Baptist and Gary Basaraba, who’s Canadian. When it came to the outside forces like the Romans and the world of Satan, they had to be a different accent but the same language. So the only thing I could do was what William Wyler did in Ben Hur and give it to the British.

(Dougan 84)

Because “Scorsese gave a great deal of thought to the language of the film” and “felt it was essential to use accents familiar to the audience,” when Keitel is criticized in Variety for “[putting] across Judas’ fierceness and loyalty, and only occasionally [letting] a New York accent and mannered modernism detract from total believability,” it might seem that Riley’s dislocation argument

gains momentum. Unfortunately, such a position only works if Last Temptation is divorced from Scorsese's overall body of work, since most of his films from Who's That Knocking at My Door? (1967) to Mean Streets (1973) to Goodfellas (1990) to Gangs of New York (2002), to name but a few, indicate the special attention that Scorsese pays to language, and the particular penchant and predilection he has for dialects from New York City, which take on particular meanings in his films (Dougan 83-84). It is completely in keeping with Scorsese's sensibilities that even though diegetically Last Temptation takes place in first century Palestine, that stylistically he still manages to work in a place for 20<sup>th</sup> century English dialects. (This after all makes more sense than the Shakespearean language of King James which is equally anachronistic in films about Jesus, but yet has remained stabilized by both theological and cinematic traditions ever since pictures could talk – but culminated with Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth in 1977). But for some strange reason, this does not seem to matter in this particular Variety review where there is a considerable amount of discussion about ethnicity as it relates through language; the aforementioned example is the third such reference. The first regarded scripture quoting, and the second, "prosaic, flattened" language. But I must enquire how the use of language truly complicates the cinematic representations of Jesus. And so I wonder if the same institutions of power are at work behind a Jesus that speaks Shakespearean English as with a Jesus that is blondish and white, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Riley dodges the issue of language by alluding to the relationship of the dialogue to the New Testament with previous portrayals of Jesus. For Riley, “Jeffrey Hunter’s Jesus, however uninteresting and static, is valid as a legitimate Christian sacrificial victim because his ideas and words come across to the believer as a relevant link to the language of the New Testament” (Riley 43). If Riley wants us to conclude that Dafoe’s Jesus is less valid, because his dialogue does not directly draw from the New Testament, but more from 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 48<sup>th</sup> Street confrontations, he assumes wrongly that most movie viewers actually know the New Testament well enough to mark the distinctions. Of course they sound different, but it is not what Jesus literally says that matters anyway since all cinematic translations are only dynamically equivalent with what might have actually come out of the mouth of the living person of Jesus in the first place. Riley’s statement is also problematized by the fact that language is not the only link to the New Testament. Scenarios, narrative events, and even certain behavior of characters also work as links to the New Testament, but it takes a very savvy viewer/New Testament reader to know just exactly how and when these divergences take place.

While a viewer concerned with language may be informed enough to take issue with the fact that Dafoe’s Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount explains that the seed the farmer sows is love, when Jesus explains in the New Testament that



the seed is the word of God and not love<sup>35</sup>; rarely, until recently, have critics begun to attack the ubiquitous depiction of Magdalene as a prostitute, which has no foundation in the New Testament. Little authority remains for Hunter's Jesus based on its linkage to New Testament language since the general reception of Jesus's representation in cinema as indicated by criticism, does not seem informed by a familiarity with the New Testament in the first place, but instead by a particular political agenda.

In terms of *mise en scène*, these politics are clearly indicated in Variety when it speaks of how "[b]londish and blue-eyed in the Anglo-Saxon physical tradition of Jesus, Willem Dafoe offers an utterly compelling reading of his character as conceived here, holding the screen with authority at all times" (Variety, August 10, 1988). I am also inclined to believe that Scorsese recognizes these politics of the image as it plays out in his *mise en scène* when he states:

There is a very, kind of candy-box Jesus that has been a popular figure over the years -- very sweet, very beautiful. But that's not necessarily how he looked for all we know. And it gives comfort to a lot of people so I'm not condemning it in any way; I'm not even looking down on it or even criticizing it, but it's a certain way -- it's a certain style of looking at Jesus. And, interestingly enough, what Schrader thought -- and I think Schrader was right. . .and that's

---

<sup>35</sup> Jesus very clearly explains what the Parable of the Sower means in Matthew 13:18, which incidentally does not even occur as a part of the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7.

why Willem was cast – is that this Jesus in this film based on Kazantzakis’ novel is so different from the other Jesuses that you normally see in movies. To make it a little more shocking so people would open their ears and open their eyes and see it with a new way of looking and listening was to make it look like the Jesus that you normally see. . .with the blonde hair, blue eyes, and small beard. That’s a comfortable Jesus that we all kind of know, and that’s a Jesus that’s white. In a way to engage an audience and take’em off guard and say, oh, you see this image of this person – oh, you think you know that – well, this is going to be different, you see. This is going to be different. (Last Temptation DVD, Commentary)

In keeping with Grist, who pinpoints how focusing on Hollywood is problematic for auteur theory because Hollywood production is a “collaborative, technically determined, highly regulated and largely generic medium”, I am suspicious of Scorsese’s claim that he has created a different Jesus, and something even more accessible to audiences in terms of how he regards his intentions (Grist 2). A closer analysis reveals that as an American filmmaker bound by particular production constraints, his Jesus – while in some very limited ways differs *narratively* in terms of characterization from that of the great Biblical epics he grew up admiring – admittedly remains virtually identical in terms of the image. So, in fact, even Scorsese’s Last Temptation

merely instigates the politics of this “candy-box Jesus” image as established by preceding cinematic traditions in its very attempt to confront the Jesus “you normally see in movies” without criticizing or condemning (Last Temptation, DVD Commentary).

Noting how Scorsese’s own casting choices were more informed by his institutional context than a self-determined aesthetic, I will now conclude by discussing Last Temptation more fully in terms of how its other images work in the context of Scorsese’s institutionally determined authorship. While most of my research does not indicate the violence and apparent gore of Last Temptation as a point of contention for many critics, it is still worth mentioning that in terms of its treatment of violence, Last Temptation remains very consistent with Scorsese’s sensibilities as a film author, and for Paul Schrader as a screenwriter. To his credit, Michael Bliss takes the time to mark the distinction between director and screenwriter. “In essence,” he begins, “Schrader makes of violence a religious artifact, part of a ceremony whose expected outcome is redemption. For Scorsese, violence – although it may lead to some change of character—is not a tool to be exploited, but merely a normal part of life” (Bliss xiii). My only issue with Bliss’s observation is the subtle ambiguity that the term “exploited” lends itself too. Without reliable access as to directorial intention, *exploitation*, as it were, can only be subjectively determined. But what is important, regardless of how one feels about the violence that is undeniably present in Scorsese’s films – and Schrader’s screenplays for that matter – is the

fact that there is a specific and unique approach to violence that has been, even up to the present moment, an imminent aspect of Scorsese's *mise en scène*. So whether it is the bloody shoot-out instigated by a Mohawked Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver; or Joe Pesci's crazed Tommy DeVito stabbing a near-dead victim in a trunk with his mother's steak knife in Goodfellas; or blood squirting in Jesus's face as he fastens an insurgent to a cross in Last Temptation; violence exists not so much as a necessary evil in a Scorsese film, but as a necessary aesthetic. Bliss describes Scorsese's approach in these terms:

I like to refer to Scorsese as the poet of violence because of the way that he stylizes exaggerated behavior in his films. It should be understood here that I am not talking about the kind of representation of killing exemplified in the work of Sam Peckinpah. Peckinpah's slow motion depiction of violence represents an attempt to reveal what the director sees as the balletic grace inherent in it. In contrast, even when he employs slow motion, Scorsese sees nothing romantic about violence. (Bliss xiv)

While I am suspicious of any attempt at articulating how Scorsese might feel about the violence in his films, that significant efforts have been made to distinguish his violence stylistically from other filmmakers known for depicting violence perhaps indicates a cinematic tapestry vast enough to justify a certain obligatory relationship to violence for a Scorsese protagonist in a Scorsese film. "Characters in Scorsese's films," Bliss continues, "often seem to derive their

most attractive qualities from a font of near-violent, aggressive behavior that is represented as an integral part of their personalities; thus, the volatile temper of men like J.R., Charlie, Johnny Boy, Travis, Jimmy, Jake, and Rupert both motivates them in playful moments and fuels their violent outbursts. [. . .] The aforementioned traits are significant, and form the basis of Scorsese's early filmmaking" (Bliss xv). But these traits are also evident in Scorsese's latter films as well. In Last Temptation the self-inflicted wounds on Jesus's back that are revealed in the film's opening indicate this same aggressive behavior and the equally familiar volatility of the personality of the protagonist. These violent outbursts may disturb an audience expecting a Jesus of the New Testament, but not those who rightfully expect a protagonist in the tradition of J.R., Charlie, Johnny Boy, Travis, Jimmy, Jake, and Rupert.

In the same way, Mary Magdalene as a romantic foil to Scorsese's Jesus can be understood in the context of other leading ladies in a Scorsese film, who, unlike Barbara Hershey, are typically blonde, but often are introduced in their opening scenes wearing white, i.e., Cybil Shepherd in Taxi Driver, Cathy Moriarty in Raging Bull, or as would be the case later with Sharon Stone in Casino. Yet, in Temptation this habit is conspicuously inverted. Magdalene is introduced wearing black, tattooed feet first, as she ambles toward Jesus only to spit in his face as he carries a cross he has just constructed for a condemned insurrectionist. It is only later, in the temptation/dream sequence when Magdalene and Jesus are to be wed that we finally see her adorned pristinely in

white. But like Travis Bickle, Jake LaMotta, and Ace Rothstein, it is the sexually-charged attraction to the “angelic” and “ethereal” female lead that becomes the catalyzing crisis of the narrative ([www.imbd.com](http://www.imbd.com)). Thus, it is fitting, that only once Jesus has given into to his attraction via the temptation sequence that Magdalene would take on the color coding of a typical Scorsese love interest. Taking cues from Kazantzakis’s novel, Scorsese through costuming positions Hershey’s Magdalene not as an reinterpretation of the New Testament character, but as yet another extension of the very same object of sexual desire for the protagonist that we have seen in many Scorsese films, precipitating yet another sexual tension and impotence that is all too symptomatic of Scorsese’s preoccupation with his own sense of authorship, whether such a sense be real or imagined.

Yet, while Scorsese felt fidelity important to Kazantzakis in terms of characterization for all intents and purposes, “Scorsese’s Christ must see Magdalene in (sexual) action” even though “Kazantzakis’s Christ remains outside in her courtyard sitting in front of her closed door” (Friedman 155). But in terms of the image, it is important to examine why Scorsese chooses the “candy-box” Christ as opposed to the image of Jesus that Kazantzakis draws through his novel. According to Kazantzakis, Friedman readily notes, in his physical description of Jesus: “[h]is nose was hooked, his lips thick . . . [His eyes] were large and black, full of light, full of darkness” (Sangster 166). “Significantly,” he adds, “Jesus is described less like the traditional Western

view that Scorsese went for” (Friedman 166). But in this regard, Scorsese resists the iconoclastic impulses of the novel to perpetuate a popularized image of Jesus that has been stabilized through art and cinema. But that Scorsese would deviate from Kazantzakis’s stated intentions of “renew[ing] and supplement[ing] the sacred myth” in regards to the actual image and iconography of Jesus, and not introduce his own aesthetic, supporting instead an already existing one, indicates some of the challenges that beset a so-called *auteur* when he attempts to represent Jesus in cinema.

And it is this very tendency of filmmakers when it comes to representing Jesus cinematically to *not* renew and supplement, but rather to reproduce and supply a commodified image that firmly situates the cinema, to borrow from Bazin, as an *institutionalized form*. Ever since 1961, in its efforts to homogenize this comfortable, “candy-box” Jesus under the guise of a genre marginally termed, *the religious film* – an offshoot of the Biblical epic – certain institutions have struggled to control the representation of Jesus *via* the commodity of the *auteur* in a way that challenges Sarris’s notions of a personal sensibility that is expressed through the interior meaning of a cinematic text. But such control does not begin with Hollywood. Though the limitations of the *auteur* as an author/director are most apparent when one considers first the representations of Jesus within the context of the Hollywood studio system put forth by MGM and Nicholas Ray in King of Kings in 1961 – a favorite *auteur* director of the *Cahiers* critics – such constraints can even be noted before this with films like

DeMille's King of Kings (1927) and Olcott's From the Manger to the Cross (1912). Each of these films were produced outside of the system and before classic Hollywood came into existence. Yet, instead of an independent or unique vision, these two films in certain ways laid the foundation for the cinematic imaginary that has subsequently restrained how Jesus's image has been represented onscreen ever since.

The institutional politics that both contextualized and constructed DeMille's own image and the images he presented have already been discussed at length in the previous chapter. And, in terms of From the Manger to the Cross, despite its narrative representation as the inspired vision of Gene Gauntier, like subsequent Jesus films, even From the Manger to the Cross tends to indicate in many places the "institutional and ideological contextualization of the *auteur*" that Andre Bazin so eloquently speaks of (Grist 3). So, like many critics, I remain suspicious of an auteurist approach to film studies that does not acknowledge the institutional and ideological limitations of the so-called auteur. In this same respect, Scorsese's own myriad of articulations and notions of authorship remain equally suspect once his indebtedness to particular historical moments, cinematic tradition, and his own socio-political context are brought to bear.

Yet, while Scorsese's Jesus may differ slightly from Wyler's Jesus, or Ray's Jesus, or Zeffirelli's Jesus in terms of style – as if there is some unknown Q



source<sup>36</sup> that determines what Jesus must look like in terms of cinematic iconography – these film depictions are virtually identical in terms of the image. And yet when Franco Zeffirelli objects to Scorsese’s depiction of Jesus, regarding it as “a deliberate operation to create controversy. . .a terrible film, vulgar and obscene, offending the most important personage in the history of mankind”, the filmmaker clearly perceives something more at stake than merely an image (Riley 31). When Zeffirelli withdraws Young Toscanini from the Venice Film Festival upon discovering that Last Temptation will also be screened, it is almost as if Zeffirelli believes not that Jesus himself is offended by Scorsese’s film, but that somehow Last Temptation offends the memory of Jesus that has been regarded in a particular way by the ideological constraints of history. But if Scorsese’s offense is historical, and not theological or aesthetic, why is the historical disregarded by Zeffirelli in his own 1977 Jesus of Nazareth where, as in Scorsese’s film, Robert Powell is cast to portray yet another Anglo-Jesus. And while this decision plainly discards and disregards history since it is a matter of historical fact that Jesus was not any more Anglo, than he was Chinese, or African-American, it is a matter of debate as to whether or not this would enable someone to deem Zeffirelli’s taking offense to history in the strictest sense of the word. However, what is more at stake in yet another Anglo

---

<sup>36</sup> “Q” is the name of the unknown document that theologians and New Testament scholars speculate provided the inspiration for the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because these texts are identical down to exact phrasing in certain key passages, scholars have speculated that this might indicate their reliance on a similar or *synoptic* source. This theorized document is called “Q” from the *Quelle*, the German word for “source.”

or white portrayal of Jesus, that distinguishes it from a Chinese or African-American portrayal, are the politics that have managed to stabilize this inaccurate representation in spite of history as if such a depiction were accurate and thus authentic and authoritative not only for those of Anglo descent, but for people everywhere. Historically, this process of stabilization has occurred through the icons of the Orthodox Church and the sanctioned art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, while more imminently, through Hollywood's globalization of the cinema, which has worked to stabilize this notion of a white Jesus not only for all of America, but for much of the world.

This fact is made evident by considering for a moment how representations counter to what has been common in cinema are regarded when it comes to Jesus's ethnic iconography. For instance, in Kevin Smith's Dogma (1999), the fact that Chris Rock plays Rufus, the thirteenth apostle is not so much the joke as the fact that he is black, implying, of course, that not only were Jesus and the twelve apostles white, but that the very notion of the apostles – and implicitly Jesus – being black can only be contextualized by the fantastic genre stylistics and narrative content characteristic of the social commentary that comes with satire, or the formalistic and fantastic approach to reality indicative of the musical – as in the case Jesus Christ Superstar (1973). Thankfully, in a magazine concerned primarily with the image of the Western white male about this so-called rock opera Tom Carson writes in GQ Magazine: “There can't be many sadder examples of Hollywood misreading the counterculture than

director Norman Jewison mistaking that glib atrocity of a score for hippie friskiness – hiring a hairy crew of Godspell rejects to act high-spirited and ultimately turning the rockin' Crucifixion into somebody's very odd idea of a romp" (pg. 163, GQ March 2004). Perhaps by *misreading counterculture* Carson wants to indicate Jewison's choice of having the Mary Magdalene character portrayed as a Native American by actress Yvonne Elliman; or perhaps he wants to indicate the choice of having the Judas character portrayed as an African-American by the late Carl Anderson – or perhaps he wants to indicate both. I can only hope so. Either way, that until 2004 or so author/directors had only managed to directly address and challenge the political construct of race in the religious film by way of genres rooted in fantastic representations of reality like the comedy and the musical is indisputable. Yet, even in these rare cases, iconoclastic representations of race have only been applied to secondary characters in the periphery of the Jesus narrative, and not to Jesus himself – as is the case with Jesus Christ Superstar; or in terms of both race and gender – as is the case with David Greene's casting choice of the late Lynne Thigpen as a black female disciple of Victor Garber's Jesus in Godspell.

This apparent resistance to representing Jesus in any way that might destabilize the familiar cinematic image on the part of filmmakers who hail from cinematic traditions as various and distinct as the 1950s melodrama and the 1960s experimental movement reveals that Jesus's cinematic representation is not a product of individual authors/auteurs but of a political interest that spans

many historical moments; even the apparent theological resistance to Last Temptation insidiously empowers yet another film that authorizes the politics behind a cinematic image of Jesus that has remained stable because Scorsese, while claiming to be an auteur of yet another grade of filmmakers labeled by Lynda Myles and Michael Pye as “the film school generation,” remains bound and limited by these same politics that dictate how Jesus should be represented on film. These limitations situated within the space between the gaze are made evident by how Last Temptation embraces certain cinematic traditions when representing Jesus, so as not to destabilize politics of that image. And though Bazin, had he lived beyond 1959, would have Scorsese reconsider his own understanding of authorship, to his credit, Scorsese readily admits these limitations and the politics and ideology that give it context:

It was Paul Schrader who first said that, “Now he is the Jesus we are familiar with.” We being him and I – a Calvinist and a Catholic! Oddly enough, the other men who might have played the part – Eric Roberts, Christopher Walken, and Aidan Quinn – are all blue-eyed, non-Jews. Sometimes you just want to feel a little more comfortable with it and that’s one of the reasons for casting Willem.

(Dogan 83)

If as Universal stipulates that in “the United States no one sect or coalition has power to set boundaries around each person’s freedom to explore religious and philosophical questions”, one must ask why the very image of

Jesus in a medium chiefly invested in the image has not indicated such freedom (Riley 23). Quite to the contrary, Jesus's cinematic representation has pointed toward a *coalition* of sorts bent on determining precisely what Jesus can look like in cinema so that even a controversial film like Last Temptation, while at first glance appears unconcerned and uninvested in a particular status quo in the name of art, still manages to expose the limited nature of this cinematic mode of thinking within a particular space. In Bazinian terms, regardless of what Universal might have us believe, the *social determinism* and inescapable *historical combination of circumstances* that *institutionally* and *ideologically* frame the auteur, have up to this point in 1988 limited the choices that Scorsese makes as a filmmaker, especially in terms of casting as it relates to the representation of Jesus in cinema (Grist 142).

With this being said, I cannot help but challenge Scorsese's own claims regarding the *difference* of his film, especially when he reverts to phraseology like "the Jesus we are all familiar with" (Dougan 83). While there is no way to determine how it is that Scorsese came to assume that there is a Jesus we are all familiar with, nor is it possible to comprehend what he understands to be the process by which this Jesus came to be familiar, this very notion of a "comfortable" Jesus betrays the underpinning of a film project aimed at "creativity" where "new arguments are put forth" for a "fresh, unorthodox approach to conventionally accepted wisdom" (Variety 10 August 1988). In addition, even if one dismisses the notion of *familiarity* to a strict reference to

that which can be accessed solely by Scorsese and Schrader, that both men hail from varying theological backgrounds, and that Scorsese even finds this denominational difference necessary to mention, only further emphasizes in Baudrillard's terms the "eminent grise of politics" regarding the image, even beyond religious affiliation (Baudrillard 5).

With Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ, film scholars have one of two choices: one, either to get honest and concede that somewhere along the line filmmakers either gave up their artistic freedoms regarding the representation of Jesus, or they never had these freedoms in the first place; or two, filmmakers, for some undetermined reason, have conspired to participate in a cooperative project that spans throughout history not only to politically stabilize Jesus's image in historical inaccuracy and dislocation – but likewise have they schemed to challenge how we *talk* about Jesus through cinema without actually challenging how we *see* him. Either option warns of a prospect that threatens to undermine not only the hermeneutical possibilities of the image as stabilized within the space between the gaze, but the cinema itself.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### WHAT'S LEFT GIVEN THE "RIGHT" REPRESENTATION OF JESUS? – THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGE AND THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

On February 25, 2004 Mel Gibson's film The Passion of the Christ opened on 4,643 screens across America in 3,006 theaters (Pittsburgh Post Gazette, February 26, 2004). In its opening weekend, the film had grossed approximately 76.2 million dollars – an unprecedented sum for an independent film and “more than twice what analysts expected” (USA Today, March 1, 2004). And by Monday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, this same film had already earned 135 million dollars, “surpassing Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon as the biggest foreign-language film ever released in the U.S.” (Entertainment Weekly, March 12, 2004). Robert Bucksbaum, an industry tracking analyst even speculated, “We may be looking at one of the highest grossing films of all time” (USA Today, March 1, 2004).<sup>37</sup> However, when pitting 2004's The Passion of the Christ, the favored Jesus film of the conservative Right, against 1988's The Last Temptation of Christ, the favored film of those with more leftist leanings, I am tempted to agree with the Merovingian, who in the second act of 2003's The Matrix Reloaded observed:

---

<sup>37</sup> Bucksbaum's forecast would prove correct as The Passion of the Christ would go on to earn 370 million dollars in domestic U.S. dollars, becoming the tenth highest grossing film of all time in America until it would be knocked to eleventh place in 2006 by Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest which earned 423 million dollars.

“[c]hoice is an illusion created between those with power and those without.” This is because in 1988, a casual observer had a much better chance of overtly determining one’s theology as opposed to one’s politics based on one’s reception of The Last Temptation of Christ; but, if one liked the film, even one’s politics would not be that hard to deduce. In the same respect – but through a slightly more paradoxical twist – by 2004, determining both one’s theology and politics was hardly difficult at all based on one’s reception of The Passion of the Christ. In other words, if you liked the film, chances are both your politics and your theology more than likely were Fundamentalist, Conservative, and Right.

In his essay, “The Passion as a Political Weapon: Anti-Semitism and Gibson’s Use of the Gospels,” Paul Kurtz describes the tension between these two political positions as “a political club; at least it is being so used against secularists by leading conservative Christians” (Kurtz 90). He adds further that, “TV pundit Bill O’Reilly clearly understands that Mel Gibson’s film is a weapon in the cultural war now being waged in America between traditional religionists and secular protagonists” (Kurtz 90). But the irony is how increasingly “religious,” or what more properly should be termed “dogmatic,” the language of both the Left and the Right tends to sound in their tirades against each other – especially since I have argued that their “religions” or dogmas upon a more careful analysis are one in the same, and deeply invested in situating and informing how the sovereignty of the individual will ultimately come to be represented and discussed in this country by perpetuating the illusion of only



two possible reactions to a representation of Jesus in cinema. So while Kurtz argues, "The Passion of the Christ reinforces a reality secularists dare not overlook: more than ever before, the Bible has become a powerful political force in America," and that "[t]he Religious Right is pulling no punches in order to defeat secularism and, it hopes, transform the United States into a God-fearing country that salutes 'one nation under God' and opposes gay marriages and the 'liberal agenda,'" it is still important to remember that even this dichotomous narrative as a heavily circulated argument within the space between or even *before* the gaze can still be understood as a means of situating power between speaker and listener to the benefit of certain champions of this very dubious discursive binary (Kurtz 90).

In fact, I believe it is for fear of the emergence of this inevitable time and space defying, and ultimately state-defying "language" for lack of a better word, that certain authorities have attempted to position much of the discourse around The Passion in terms of disingenuous polarities as opposed to a more honest and open dialogue at the juncture between the gaze. Such insidious double-talk and neglect of the panoramic space between the gaze can readily be observed when discussing not only the anti-Semitic claims mounted against The Passion, but also the film's violence. Unquestionably, by February of 2004 in reaction to The Passion, one could easily identify a certain almost pre-scripted position that had emerged for an audience member who imagined his or herself to possess a

particular theological posture when it came to the person of Jesus Christ – a position that perhaps would not have easily been discerned earlier.

Many critics have tended to ignore the existence of this pre-script which attempts to determine how particular viewers can read that curious space between the gaze when it comes not to the icon, but to that which the icon represents. Any art form or aesthetic artifact that aims to represent God or any perceived ultimate sovereign, whether state or monarch, by definition must be regarded as an icon of sorts – in much the same way that any individual or group who might challenge these representations might be regarded as an iconoclast. Therefore, it is useful to come to grips with the fact that Mel Gibson's film, no matter how troublesome one might claim it to be, has emerged to locate itself as a powerful icon<sup>38</sup> within our American culture. What I would argue, however, is that instead of introducing a new imaginary possibility to the discourse surrounding the representation of Jesus in cinema, which ultimately implicates how one might discuss sovereignty – whether in terms of religion and theology, or more loosely politics – The Passion has only more obviously laid bare that which has either in the past been more concealed to those who might participate in the discussion, or was in fact spoken about, but less openly and less directly, prior to The Passion.

But by this last statement, I am not assuming that the resulting ubiquity of discussion about The Passion in film studies, in religious studies, among movie-

---

<sup>38</sup> Not coincidentally, this is also the name of Mel Gibson's production company.

reviewers published in periodicals, journals and newspapers, between clerics of various faiths, and to the masses in general – while more open and more direct regarding its acceptance or rejection of the icon – remains no less forthright about that which the icon has come to represent. However, Nick James in his article “Hell in Jerusalem” does as a critic come close to acknowledging this space between the gaze that I have been referring to – this space which is essential to apprehend and discuss if as a society we are to ever explore new ways to make meaning of the icons that have both empowered and imprisoned us. In light of this fact, James in an uncharacteristic scholarly-move that to the benefit of my argument outs the very reality of this space between the gaze for those otherwise reticent critics who might want to deny its existence by talking of the film as if somehow they themselves were beyond belief. Towards the end of his article, James states:

When dealing with so contentious a subject as religious faith it's important to present one's credentials. For my part, I was educated in Catholic schools until I lapsed in my teens. As a child I attended the odd Latin Mass, and I experienced the techniques of violent coercion that were once common practice in RC schools (indeed all UK schools.) I therefore still have the imprint of centuries of Catholic thought and belief on me. I know how many-faceted and morally nuanced the teachings are, and how powerful and rich the imagery. I'm fairly sure I'm unlikely to encounter so all

encompassing a cultural experience elsewhere. [...] This grants the Christ myth a latent power to affect me that I usually resent. I tried to suppress this while watching the film, but during the long haul up Golgotha I found myself suddenly very moved. (James 18)

It is interesting that James equates his credentials with his theological beliefs as opposed to his scholarly accomplishments. By his assertion: "When dealing with so contentious a subject as religious faith," like me, James seems to intuitively recognize the fallacy in discussing religion as if one were a third-party observer without a vested interest or opinion on the topic oneself. Like James, I would imagine that a good many viewers found themselves simultaneously "moved" and repulsed by the film if not for the craft or lack thereof of Gibson's cinema, certainly for that which Gibson's cinema intended to represent. But unlike James, many critics of The Passion steer clear from acknowledging this space between the gaze. Most even fail to acknowledge the distinction that exists between how one truly responds to the film and how one actually talks about the film, depending on the setting and the audience. So instead, because of a failure to speak candidly about the institutions, ideologies, and discursive relationships which tend to frame the political climate of our culture, the cleric and the scholar, perhaps even more so than the laymen is forced to respond to the icon of Christ

as it has been passed down for the past 2,500 years from the ancient busts of Jupiter and Zeus with the same old, trite, pre-scripted binaries.<sup>39</sup>

Prior to 1988, as can readily be observed from From the Manger to the Cross (1912) to the Jesus of Nazareth (1977) how one might respond to a given a film about Jesus remained more a matter of personal choice and aesthetics than religious belief, at least as discussed publicly. This is evident as some films about Jesus would become spectacular blockbusters, like DeMille's The King of Kings, Wyler's Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, or Ray's King of Kings; while still other films about the controversial Palestinian-carpenter-turned-rabbi would either fizzle at the box-office like Stevens's The Greatest Story Ever Told and Garber's Godspell; or fade into virtual obscurity like Olcott's From the Manger to the Cross. Not until Krish and Sykes's 1979 "Jesus Movie" do Bible fundamentalists like Bill Bright begin to more fully co-opt the filmmaking process for their own theological purposes in a way that is overt, deliberate, and unapologetically indifferent to profitability. Unlike DeMille, who always managed to temper his religious undertones and sacred claims with a more secular and practical regard for box-office and marketability, with the "Jesus Movie," Bright and his Campus Crusade for Christ, as evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of free screenings through which the "Jesus Movie" was disseminated, shared no such regard for ticket sales ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org)). This is how the "Jesus Movie" can

---

<sup>39</sup> Some scholars have acknowledged that the common Anglo-representation of Jesus that has come to permeate his cinematic depiction was in fact originally based upon ancient sculptures of Zeus, which then became Jupiter upon being apprehended by the Roman Empire – among the most popular of these is John Romer in his book and film series Seven Wonders of the World.

simultaneously boast in being the most widely screened film of all time, but also be a movie that many Americans not only have never heard of, but even in the cases where they have heard of it, and even watched it, these same viewers have never actually paid to see the film.<sup>40</sup> Such flagrant apathy for the box-office remains in stark contrast with DeMille's own motives for producing The King of Kings in 1927.

Denison Clift, a writer under contract at DeMille's production company stated about the possibility of producing The King of Kings in a May 20, 1926 letter:

Why skirt around the one great single subject of all time and all ages - the commanding, majestic, and most sublime thing that any man can ever put upon the screen: the Life, Trial, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ: in other words, the Life of Christ, with it awe-inspiring power, its simplicity, and its unutterable tragedy. There are only one or two men who could possibly have within themselves the power and the understanding to do this thing. Certainly, to my mind, you are the one to do it.

The title of the picture would be: The King of Kings. (Birchard 217)

The proposal evidently persuaded DeMille, not only due to the magnitude of the subject matter, as Clift argued, but also due to the magnitude of DeMille

---

<sup>40</sup> Instead, the film in its VHS format was typically given away either by churches or local street evangelists in a mass effort of proselytizing a given region. Now that the film is available on DVD it can be purchased at Wal-Mart, but certainly via this means of distribution, the film has never had the demand of a New Release.

Pictures's increasing need for capital precipitated by nearly a dozen years "without the benefit of a string of box-office hits" (Birchard 217). According to Robert S. Birchard, author of Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood, "[b]y August 5, 1926, the situation was desperate" (Birchard 217). Less than three weeks later, DeMille would address both his staff and the cast after a read-through of the script "with an odd mix of reverence and ballyhoo":

Our story, ladies and gentleman, has to do with Jesus Christ, His life, His ideals, and what He stood for. [. . .] The story has to do with bringing to the public an understanding of the Greatest Man who ever lived - an understanding that is not as general as it should be. [. . .] The story will present to the coming generation who now fill our schools and colleges a picturization of the life and particularly the ideals of this Man of Galilee - Jesus of Nazareth. [...] The difficult thing of course is to tell the story so as not to offend any religion or sect, to attack certain usages of ancient Rome, and show the crucifixion of Christ, His persecution, not by the Jewish people, but by a group of Roman politicians who saw that the ideals of Jesus, accepted by the people, would sweep away the power of Rome, who saw their power being taken away by the man from Galilee. They saw their great system of graft being swept away, a system comparable to our Boss system of today. (Birchard 220-221)

Without question, DeMille's primary impetus for making The King of Kings in 1927 was first and foremost commercial. He was a showman first, who recognized that, because of the very political nature of theology, depicting Jesus onscreen had the potential to not only be a means of sacred exchange for generations of believers, but also, more importantly, to eventually *truly* come to be regarded as the greatest show on earth. The same cannot be said for likes of Bright, Krish, and Sykes. Unlike DeMille, if their motives had strictly been monetary, they might have given up on the Jesus Project a long time ago; but, as it stands, almost thirty years later, the film has spawned not only a website but a billion screenings in over one-hundred nations. Thus, the "Jesus Movie" marks a decided shift whereby theology more openly comes to inform and contextualize not only how a film about Jesus is received by an audience but also, more importantly, how it is marketed by its producers. While theology has always contributed to the discourse surrounding Jesus movies to one degree or another, it is not until 1979 that it would come to more fully load and situate the language of reception on such a major scale.

What resulted would be in the late 1980s what could only be described as the most volatile discussion around a Jesus film to date charged now with overt and conspicuous theological implications. But what is most ironic about the wholesale resistance on theological grounds to Scorsese's film by Bill Bright and other fundamentalists who with him proposed to destroy Scorsese's negative, is that – given the fact that Scorsese opted out of the priesthood before embarking



on a career in the cinema – by loading the discourse with such sacrosanct implications, these fundamentalist clergyman may have, instead of abating the relevance of Scorsese and his film, in fact through their theologically-charged statements and accusations, actually succeeded in authorizing Scorsese as a sort of priest of the highest order – one with a wider audience, a more enduring pulpit, and most importantly, the most convincing transubstantiation claim of all: the motion picture image.

While in subsequent years, Scorsese would never fully embrace the religious space paved by the strident reception of his film – instead positioning himself more as a film scholar, preservationist, and mainstream Hollywood filmmaker – Hollywood-superstar-turned-director Mel Gibson was all too eager to capitalize on both the theo-political assumptions and language that had come to inform not only how some audiences might resist a film about Jesus, but also how some critics might *embrace* such a film since the 1980s. What would result, would be a statistic-defying, but state-supporting picture in The Passion of the Christ that would contribute to the religio-cinematic discourse by so obviously exposing the seemingly sacred spatial relationship between the viewer and those who do their own gazing within the diegesis of what is depicted on screen. In this way The Passion of the Christ arguably marks a critical shift in understanding the filmmaker and his viewers by simultaneously offending, enthralling, inspiring, disgusting, disappointing, confusing, outraging, and even evangelizing – all the while going on to become the highest grossing R-rated

movie of all time – a spot that *up to that point* had been held briefly by The Matrix Reloaded. But while the third film in the Matrix Trilogy, The Matrix Revolutions (2003) met with disappointing financial returns, largely due to its overt Christian themes, I believe The Passion of the Christ successfully stabilizes its audience not through its overt theological claims, but rather through its subtle, or maybe not so subtle politics and intimations surrounding notions of sovereignty.

Accordingly, Paul Kurtz argues:

Movies are a powerful medium. Film series including Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Trek, The Terminator, and The Matrix all draw upon fantasy; and these have proved to be highly entertaining, captivating, and huge box office hits. The Passion of the Christ, however, is more than that, for it lays down a gauntlet challenging basic democratic secular values. (Kurtz 91)

But it is precisely how The Passion challenges these democratic secular values not by threatening to eradicate these values as Kurtz's language would suggest, but by instead stabilizing these values by serving as only one of two options for understanding one's orientation towards sovereignty within the space between the gaze. In this way, the film informs what politics contextualize how one might interpret the image – especially an image symbolic of such fundamentalist Right-wing notions as sovereignty – as Gibson's image of the Christ would inevitably be.

Francine Prose in the June 2004 edition of Harper's Magazine would write that "[The Passion] only increases our chances of hearing, from the current administration, more religious language, more quotations from the Bible, more references – this time without apology – to the Crusades, and more framing of our incursions in the Middle East as a holy war staged to prove, as Lieutenant General William Boykin put it, that our God is bigger than their God" (Prose 100). "But if 'The Passion' turns out to polarize Americans in general," David Gates observes in Newsweek, "it's pulling together Roman Catholics and Protestant evangelicals, who have a long history of mutual suspicion. Gibson is a Catholic traditionalist, but he's successfully cultivated the support of evangelicals; one Baptist businessman in Plano, Texas bought \$42,000 worth of tickets to distribute free of charge" (Gates 51). Therefore, the real question in terms of the reception of The Passion pertains more to the implications of such interdenominational support than the historical implications of its box-office success. In February, on ABC News's Nightline, Ted Koppel put it this way:

"Answering that question, 'So what do you think about the film?' is not without risk. For many centuries now, Christians have been killing Jews, Catholics have been killing Protestants, and Protestants have been killing Catholics for little more than giving the wrong answer to that kind of question. 'What do you think of the film?' is, in a way, just a variation on 'Do you believe this or that account of the story?'"', which sooner or later gets down to the

more fundamental questions having to do with the virgin birth, the death and resurrection, and ultimately, whether one accepts Christ as Savior. The movie, in other words, is sort of a Rorschach test – it is more likely to reflect existing beliefs and prejudices than to create new ones.” (Koppel, Nightline 2/25/2004)

But I also tend to believe that the enthusiastic reception of Gibson’s film by the mainstream indicates that there might be something more than mere theological beliefs and prejudices at stake in how one receives not just The Passion of the Christ but any film produced about Jesus post-1979.

In fact, while still unclear in 1988, as the Left gravitated towards Martin Scorsese’s raucous Last Temptation, and the Right, even against the divisive grain of denominational sectarianism, galvanized a unified front against the film, in 2004, with Mel Gibson’s The Passion, the subtle and often insidious politics that have come to stabilize the reception of the cinematic image of Jesus and its sovereign implications in the twentieth and twenty-first century surface once again to become almost chillingly apparent via their endorsement of the latter film and literal systematic banning of the former. Yet, what amuses me in terms of the reception of both of these films, is that a careful analysis of the apparent dissonance between these two films in all actuality reveals more similarity than difference – especially in terms of the negotiation of what has always been most at stake in the cinema – that is, the very image itself. These similarities are particularly visceral regarding the mechanisms utilized by the ideological

apparatuses that have tended to govern not only how the Christ image has been presented, but likewise how this image might be interpreted by a particular viewer in that space between the gaze.

In 2004, how viewers responded to The Passion was not merely in the interest of those invested in the business of motion pictures, or even theology, but also those partaking in a conspicuous political agenda that has continuously championed the White male as the ultimate symbol of power against the backdrop of a global society where people of color are the vast majority. That, for the most part, both Jesus and the President of the United States can be cast from the same narrow demographic and yet neither The Last Temptation nor The Passion were criticized for perpetuating such a power play on any major scale is both a sad reality and a sober reminder of how the incessant process of stabilizing the image of Jesus through racist casting practices – a political construct in its own right – has almost become a matter of triviality alongside such issues as whether or not Jesus was ever tempted with sexual desire, or how painful the crucifixion was. Meanwhile, New-Testament-dodging humanist polemics whose politics remain faintly cloaked under the guise of an anti-Semitism that persistently renders an undue focus on Gibson's film despite other contemporary films about Jesus that not only have been made, but even found to make use of more offensive anti-Semitic language – not to mention the fact that this inexplicable focus is coupled by a cine-illiterate and diversionary discussion of The Passion's violence. And yet with each theological and aesthetic premise,

no matter how obscure or mundane, such a loaded discourse only bolsters an ideological harmony to the note of one flawed accord – that Jesus, no matter how he was tempted, or how much he suffered, or who killed him, was a white man, or what Francine Prose refers to as an “air-brushed vanilla Jesus” (Prose 96).

William J. Whalen in his text Separated Brethren observes:

Despite the election and brief presidency of John F. Kennedy the ruling power in the U.S. remains as it has since the founding of the nation firmly in the hands of white Anglo Saxon Protestants. As such social analysts as Domhoff, Baltzell, and Lundberg amply demonstrate the WASP establishment furnishes the leaders who sit on the major corporation boards, control the private foundations, run the elite universities, decide the national candidates of both political parties, and ultimately make the major decisions of American society. Few Roman Catholics, Jews, blacks, Mexican-Americans, Orientals, Indians, or Protestants from non-Anglo-Saxon background (*e.g.*, Lutherans) ever enter the ruling class. The members of this class can be identified by their independent wealth, attendance at private prep schools and elite universities, listing in the various social registers, membership in exclusive clubs, etc. (Whalen 17-18)

Such an opinion, no matter how complicated by the 2008 election, is not without relevance. Even if Hilary Clinton or Barack Obama are to win the

democratic nomination, there is still the Presidency; and even if this were to happen – that a woman or a black man becoming President of the United States only then would become a first, would merely reinforce the dominance of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male's stronghold on arguably the most influential political position not only in the United States, but in the entire world up to that point. Unfortunately, that much of the very same political and ideological stake has been claimed by cinema, especially religious cinema, has been an issue sidestepped by even the most open-minded and rigorous of critics and scholars. I do not believe these evasions of the political stakes which contextualize casting practices centering around the role of Jesus are mere "timid expressions," to quote from Ted Koppel. But instead, I find much of the critical oversight to result from a particular paralysis deriving from increasingly problematic appeals to political correctness which stem not from a genuine sense of increasing tolerance and humanism, but, rather from the fact that from Birth of a Nation (1915) to The Jazz Singer (1927) to Gone with the Wind (1939) to King of Kings (1962) palatable White Supremacy has always coincided with both cinematic development and the evolution of the medium; thus, stabilizing the space between the gaze as a space where white is right. This fact has always suspiciously integrated the common end of both the American Left and Right, aptly expressed through cinematic, white-privileging reinterpretations of cultural conflict and history where, in keeping within the framework of the image, race and not theological creed remains the ultimate political and

ideological denominator that indicates where both conservative fundamentalists and liberals agree.

In this sense then, with both The Last Temptation and The Passion, what on the surface appears to be a contentious theological and historical debate in its persistent questioning and challenging of various interpretations of Jesus's temptations and sufferings, and ultimately, the culpability for his execution, in the final analysis only works to solidify his representation as an icon of insidious potency for the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male even though in both cases this dubious iconography posits itself by Roman Catholic filmmakers in a dispute with fundamentalists and Jews, respectively. Yet, after more careful scrutiny of both contexts, the ostensible penchant for the Jesus of the Left so expertly epitomized by Martin Scorsese in 1988 in contradistinction to the 2004 Jesus of the Right, recently woven by Mel Gibson, proves in all actuality - to borrow from Lambert Wilson's Merovingian - to be nothing more than "an illusion created between those with power and those without."

What do I mean by this? Well, to counter the ubiquitous claim by both the Left and the Right as to the assumption that Jesus's whiteness finds no significant place in the argument - one need only demonstrate that the consistent and unswerving misrepresentation of Jesus as an Anglo or Eurocized protagonist poses grave consequences for a global, multi-racial society. In fact, even in the rare instances where the discussion is taken up with any kind of regard for the political implications of such racially inadequate portraits, the most politically



correct effort by filmmakers in attending to the White Supremacy that has informed the cinematic image still in many cases betrays a sinister racism of its own. For instance, in an attempt to somehow mark his own film as a departure from such racism since he chose to colorize Jim Caviezel's otherwise blue eyes to brown in post-production, Gibson states:

“...I don't know, it's some kind of historical necessity that everybody always makes Jesus this blue-eyed guy, right? And I thought, I don't want to go that way, because it probably wasn't the case. [...] So I took that away from [Jim Caviezel].” (The Passion, DVD Commentary)

But what is interesting about this statement is how uncommitted Gibson remains as to whether or not Jesus's eyes were in fact blue. His use of the term “probably” undermines any apparent authority or conviction that such a public statement to the contrary otherwise might carry, and safely allows his own uncertainty about the issue to ride the proverbial fence. As further evidence of Gibson's bias towards Jesus's racial and ethnic identity, at an early screening when upon seeing Jim Caviezel, Denzel Washington protested to Gibson, “another blue-eyed Jesus”; whereby Gibson naively responded: “No, no Denzel. No, we're going to colorize them,” as if with the idiomatic cultural critique of a “blue-eyed Jesus” all Denzel was concerned about – as the most critically-acclaimed and marketable African-American actor of all time – was the color of Caviezel's eyes. It is fair to say, that Washington's complaint of “a blue-eyed

Jesus” is not merely a matter of eye color (because in fact, while Jeffrey Hunter’s eyes in King of Kings were in fact blue, a fair amount of the actors who have played Jesus have not had blue eyes) but something deeper and more relevant. I take Denzel’s “blue-eyed Jesus” comment as more the collective protest of an underrepresented people coming from a high-profile African-American actor and Bankable Star who in this case actually had the ear of the particular filmmaker in question. But what Gibson mistakes for a matter of mere eye-color – that is, aesthetics – it is safe to say Washington intended to be taken as a matter of race – that is, politics. I am reminded of the slogan that accompanied Ford’s Model T: “You can have any color you want, so long as it is black.” Only in this case, in terms of the Jesus of cinema: “You can have any color you want, so long as it is white.”

But I would have to go one step further and challenge any such claim that purports itself to be limited to aesthetics in regards to the image of Jesus in cinema, because the image – even a religious image – is always a matter of politics first, and aesthetics second. However, this should come as no surprise, since aesthetics throughout history has always had political implications. Yet, even while casting The Passion of the Christ – a practice where ever since DeMille first justified casting choices of Delilah and Moses by paintings and sculptures respectively – aesthetics have often been promulgated as fairly transparent excuses for appropriating political assumptions that have long informed the framing of the image. So perhaps there is even more to be gleaned

from the blunt philosophical ramblings of the Merovingian, the effete, Hades-esque Francophile in between expletives since coincidentally it can be assumed, as his name suggests, he draws much of his authority and right to power within the context of the second Matrix film from the fact that he just might be a descendant of Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup> And while this particular Merovingian functions within the diegesis of the Matrix trilogy as a surrogate for the Greek god of the underworld – a wife named Persephone, as played by Monica Bellucci, being just one clue – it is worth noting that certain faux French histories do suggest a whole lineage of kings who claimed the literal ancestry of both the Son of God and Mary Magdalene, his apparent mistress, in a suggested cover-up that has been at least intimated by such Nag Hammadi texts as the Gospel of Philip and perhaps exploited by the historical Merovingians hundreds of years before Dan Brown ever set pen to page for The Da Vinci Code.<sup>42</sup> But that Gibson, whether deliberately or coincidentally, would build upon such a framework as he would

---

<sup>41</sup> Deriving their name from Merovech or Merovius, a Frankish king who ruled parts of France and Germany from 447 to 457 AD, the Merovingians were a long line of kings who reigned over various principalities in Europe from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. And according to some, this theological claim to this day continues to be exploited by various European royal dynasties. In their 1982 book Holy Blood, Holy Grail Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln promulgated an alternative history of the Merovingians detailing their genealogy as a direct result of the coupling of both Jesus and Mary Magdalene after both fled to France following the events of the crucifixion. This esoteric, but oft-referenced account more than likely served as inspiration for the Wachowski Brothers 2003 character, the Merovingian, played by Lambert Wilson.

<sup>42</sup> Recently popularized by Dan Brown in his 2003 bestseller The Da Vinci Code, the Gospel of Philip includes the following passage which has prompted some to conjecture a romantic link between Jesus and Magdalene: “And the companion of [the Savior is] Mary Magdalene. The [Savior] loved her more than all his disciples, and frequently kissed her on the mouth. The rest of [the disciples] [got close to her to ask]. They told him: ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ The Savior responded and said: ‘Why do I not love you as I love her?’” (Gospel of Philip 63-64).

later cast Monica Bellucci as his Magdalene then becomes less so a coincidence and more so an almost foregone conclusion. From a political perspective, in terms of the image, who else but the voluptuous, cleavage-pouting wife of the Merovingian could be the wayward prostitute, Magdalene, for Gibson? But the incongruity of this politically-informed casting choice is that – as Brown rightly points out in his bestseller, and the Vatican readily admitted in 1969 – Magdalene was no prostitute. In fact, a careful study of the New Testament – or even a quick perusal of a good concordance – effectively indicates that nothing in the four gospels remotely even suggests that Magdalene was a prostitute, but at worst, rather, a former demoniac. And yet while such fraudulent conclusions undoubtedly resulted from the invasive influence of the omnipresent image via a century of movies and over a millennia of paintings, and not a meticulous study of Scripture, that nearly every Jesus film that has been produced before and after 1979, including both The Last Temptation and The Passion, have characterized Magdalene as a prostitute indicates the latent sway of the politics of the image not only on viewers but on filmmakers alike. Not only does this sway reveal itself through dramatic situations in The Last Temptation, such as where Barbara Hershey openly gropes an African client's hair in a public act of solicited sexual intercourse; but also when she tells Willem Dafoe's Jesus, "I hate you. Here's my body. . ." in a whisper as the camera zooms in past her naked breasts. The political sway of this image-informed false conclusion also reveals itself through understatement, via *mise en scène* in The Passion. Although Bellucci's Magdalene

is never openly declared a prostitute in the film, there is a brief flashback sequence in The Passion, where Bellucci's Magdalene is depicted as the woman caught in adultery. Yet, while the same woman remains unnamed in the gospel of John, the only gospel where such a woman is mentioned, like many filmmakers before him, Gibson chooses to link Magdalene with this promiscuous character, portraying Bellucci as a scarred and tattered adulteress who can be seen weeping at a defiant, fiery-eyed Jim Caviezel's feet while belligerent Pharisees lay their stones at a line literally drawn in the sand in slow-motion. At this same moment during the DVD commentary, Gibson even goes so far as to state about Bellucci in this scene: "I said to her, the more we mess you up, the better you look...", which further seems to indicate how Bellucci's apparent sensuality and beauty were so necessary for Gibson in terms of the portrait of her character on an aesthetic level (Gibson, The Passion, DVD Commentary).

Yet, it is not the varying but mutual Catholic sensibilities of both Scorsese and Gibson that are to blame for these depictions of Magdalene that otherwise might possibly be dismissed as artistic license if such portrayals were not also instituted by such assorted films as King of Kings (both versions), The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), Jesus of Nazareth (1977), and Jesus (2000). In this way, the sterile consistency that undeniably dictates the styles and methods by which both Jesus and his milieu become appropriated and commodified by filmmakers and viewers alike undermine any and all notions of an independent, self-determined authorship on the part of filmmakers – and

even a self-determined readership on the part of viewers. Without question, like in any sanctuary or religious ceremony somehow, someway, in the movie theater, viewers and filmmakers alike are being told both what to represent and how to interpret what to represent. But unlike a religious ceremony where ultimately a clergyman-authority can be appealed to as to enquire just what one is supposed to think, the very real, but inaccessible authority that determines how images are interpreted in the movie theater remains distant and aloof, hidden in the darkness of the space between the gaze. But there is no question that such an authority is real when one begins to examine not merely the films themselves, but the language that is used to describe one's spectatorship of the images on screen.

Another telling example of this lack of independence which indicates some sort authority which might inform reading can be observed in Gibson's casting of the character Simon of Cyrene, played by Jarreth Merz, whose rather ethnic appearance, being the son of a Nigerian father and Swiss mother, in contrast to that of Caviezel while aiding his Jesus with the task of carrying the cross hearkens back to George Stevens's choice in 1965 of casting Sidney Poitier to play the same role. While it could be argued that Merz's bronze skin, thick hair, and broad nose were just a matter of happenstance, bearing no implication on his character's suggested ethnicity when in one shot he interlocks arms with Caviezel along the *Via Dolorosa* in a blatant show of fraternity, Gibson's own explanation of the scene to Diane Sawyer on Primetime suggests otherwise:

“That’s his brother, you know. It’s about another human being. We’re all children of God. All of us. It doesn’t matter what you are. Whether you’ve got a bone through your nose, or whether you look like a Viking, or a Spanish Conquistador, or whatever you are, you know. We are all children of God.” (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04)

And while Gibson may expect the sequence to imply racial co-solidarity, the subtle political implications of his own statement perhaps in jest cause me to wonder what Gibson or any filmmaker who continually chooses to exclusively cast white actors as Jesus with anachronistic-shoulder-length hair might think of a South American Mayan or Incan with a bone through his nose being forced through colonization and conquest to worship an image of Jesus who looks like a Viking by a Spanish conquistador. But the answer to this question wouldn’t come, of course, until Gibson’s next film, Apocalypto (2006). In the same interview, Gibson’s own self-righteous rants against Hitler as a devil-worshipping, maniac-madman-occultist who “believed in the superiority of the Aryan race” and “all this old, Norse-Viking kind of stuff” are complicated by his own portrait of a long-haired white Jesus in the tradition of other Anglicized and even Aryan versions of Christ – like Jeffrey Hunter in King of Kings, Ted Neely in Jesus Christ Superstar, and Willem Dafoe in The Last Temptation of Christ (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04). Such depictions are doubly-complicated by both history and theology, considering the fact that in the New Testament epistle of 1

Corinthians 11:14-15, the Apostle Paul working from a precise Jewish tradition contemporary with that of Jesus writes: “Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” (Gibson, Primetime, 2/17/04; 1 Corinthians 11:14-15, The Holy Bible, New International Version). Thus, as a Torah-abiding Jew, it only stands to reason that Jesus would not have had shoulder-length hair. Gibson’s subsequent anti-Semitic remarks two years later after being arrested while driving under the influence of Cazadores Tequila in Malibu, California only bring into further question whether he is in fact a racist.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it may not be Gibson’s words in Malibu during this exchange that bring most into question Gibson’s bigotry; but, rather his conflicted public apology that contributes a rather confused acknowledgement of the distinction between word and image to the already rather torrid discourse. In this apology, Gibson states:

“I am a public person, and when I say something, either articulated and thought out, or blurted out in a moment of insanity, my words carry weight in the public arena. As a result, I must assume personal responsibility for my words and apologize directly to those who have been hurt and offended by these words. [...] But please know from my heart that I am not an anti-Semite. I am not a

---

<sup>43</sup> Seventeen days into the Israel-Lebanon Conflict on July 28, 2006, Mel Gibson was arrested for a DUI by Deputy James Mee at 2:36 AM Pacific Daylight Time. James Mee characterized Gibson’s behavior upon being arrested as “belligerent” and indicated that Gibson enquired as to whether or not Mee was Jewish after exclaiming, “Fucking Jews...the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world.” (www.tnz.com)



bigot. Hatred of any kind goes against my faith. [...] This is not about a film. Nor is it about artistic license. This is about real life and recognizing the consequences hurtful words can have. It's about existing in harmony in a world that seems to have gone mad." (msnbc.msn.com)

But I would argue to the contrary, that Gibson's own anti-Semitic sentiments and how they were perceived were very much about the film The Passion of the Christ, and not merely the fact that he was a public figure. It is not insignificant that Gibson had already been accused of being an anti-Semite both because of the political implications of producing a film that unapologetically blamed the Jews for the execution of Jesus, but also because of the very holocaust-denying political ideas of his father Hutton Gibson.<sup>44</sup> I am certain that the production of The Passion of the Christ two years earlier helped contextualize Gibson's drunken comments; otherwise, it makes no sense why a handful of statements with anti-Semitic implications from an inebriated celebrity would have received more press than the July 2006 Seattle Jewish Federation shootings.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Hutton Gibson is a controversial sedevacantist thinker within the Roman Catholic Church who has publicly resisted many of the reforms of Vatican II. He has also been accused publicly in the press of being a Holocaust-denier. Yet, like many Holocaust-deniers, while his official statements do not seem to deny the Holocaust outright, he more precisely questions whether, in fact, the number of Jews actually killed by the Nazis equals six to seven million, maintaining that it would have been impossible to dispose of that many bodies. (www.moviecitynews.com)

<sup>45</sup> Naveed Afzal Haq shot six women at the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle building in Seattle, Washington on July 28, 2006, exclaiming, "I'm a Muslim American; I'm angry at Israel." The victims included Christina Rexwood and Cheryl Stumbo, who were both shot in the abdomen; Layla Bush, who was shot in the shoulder, abdomen, and spine; Carol Goldman, who was shot in the knee; Dayna Klein, who was seventeen weeks pregnant at the time of her injuries; and Christina Rexroad, who was shot twice - once fatally in the head. (www.cnn.com)

But in terms of the politics of the image – and not that of words – very few have seriously questioned that aspect of the tableaux presented by Gibson which is similar to that of Scorsese, who actually thickens Dafoe's beard and lengthens his hair in the second act of Last Temptation as a visual cue signifying Christ's embracing of his Messianic destiny. While Gibson maintains that most former Jesuses have had "bad hair" and are "usually fairly effete, and not a powerful presence, which clearly he must have been," it is difficult to determine whether or not he is actually implicating Dafoe's performance since this segment of his interview is intercut with a montage of shots of from previous Jesus films like The Greatest Story Ever Told, Jesus Christ Superstar, and Godspell, but Scorsese's film is noticeably absent (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04). This absence may be attributed to the similar tradition through which both Scorsese and Gibson have come to understand Jesus as it is reflected in their casting. Scorsese explains:

There are times in the film when I lapse back into familiar images of Catholic iconography [says Scorsese, explaining his central casting choice]. One of those is the big rock in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prays. I imagined this picture of Him sweating blood which we got in Catholic school, and it just came right back out of my subconscious. When I saw Willem Dafoe it seemed to me I felt more comfortable with that image, especially when he comes out of the desert and at that moment when he takes

his heart out and consolidates his men around him. That's the point where he changes into the Jesus we are all familiar with. (Dougan 83)

Even though Jim Caviezel states of freedom that "[e]very generation needs to know that freedom exists not to do what you like, but having the right to do what you ought to," he further admits, "When it comes to the dollar sign, many of us look the other way" (Pendreigh 26). Unfortunately, the casting of Jim Caviezel as yet "another blue-eyed Jesus" in terms of cinematic representation seems to indicate a *coalition* of sorts bent on determining within proper parameters precisely what Jesus can look like in cinema. And it is through this apparent coalition that two controversial films like Last Temptation and The Passion, which, at first glance appear divested from any type of conformity in the name of art, as justified by the perceived individual vision of their seemingly persecuted directors, can still manage in terms of the image a cohesion of casting, underscoring the artistic limits of the filmmaker who chooses to depict religious subject matter where Jesus is involved. But I would argue that these freedoms are not limited by the dollar sign, as Caviezel assumes, but rather by those same politics that have given value to the dollar in the first place. And although Gibson admits of Jesus, "He was born in Judea into the House of David. [. . .] He was a child of Israel, among other children of Israel. There were Jews and Romans in Israel; there were no Norwegians there," like George Stevens – who insisted upon not upon a Norwegian Jesus, but one from Sweden in Max Von

Sydow – offering American-born, but Swiss-named Caviezel as the preacher from Nazareth seems somehow to undermine Gibson’s point (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04).

While Gibson readily denies any bigotry, stating “[. . .] for me [anti-Semitism] goes against the tenets of my faith. To be racist in any form – to be anti-Semitic – is a sin. It’s been condemned by one papal council after another. There’s encyclicals on it. [. . .] To be anti-Semitic is to be un-Christian, and I’m not,” his film still fails like nearly every other American Jesus film before it to present a Jesus that challenges our own political assumptions and flawed notions of Eurocentric sovereignty, as these depictions of Jesus wrongfully indicate (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04). Yet, instead of resisting a racism that has been institutionalized by Hollywood – and those, in a sense, independent of Hollywood if we are to properly consider the specific mode of production surrounding The Passion of the Christ – most of Gibson’s detractors opt to fixate on an alleged anti-Semitism that while true enough exerts itself almost in caricature through melodramatic images of scowling, rotten-teethed High Priests and temple guards with black Snidely-Whiplash eye patches. For most of these critics, The Passion in their own estimate does its most critical damage in the historical context of the bloody tradition of the passion play and through specific scenes that seem to insinuate a Jewish culpability in terms of the crucifixion. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar, properly notes, “Jews knowing the history of passion plays, knowing the affect of personally being called a ‘Christ-killer’ are

going to see a much different movie with much different resonances”; while Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League explains:

What I guess we want the non-Jews to understand is that the eyes that we see [The Passion of the Christ] with are that of with 2,000 years of history where the crucifixion – or the charge of the crucifixion – of deicide – placed upon the Jews was the underpinning, the legitimization, the rationale for 2,000 years of anti-Semitism. That it permitted people to kill Jews, expel Jews, burn Jews, because after all, they were only killing “Christ killers.”

(Levine, Primetime 2/17/04; Foxman, Nightline 2/25/04)

But for me claims such as these are problematized not by their legitimacy, but by their focus, and the apparent immediacy attached to Gibson’s film in particular. I am not convinced that the peril of anti-Semitism in a post-9/11 era, while potentially real, can be attributed without jeopardizing any type of credibility to Gibson’s film independent of the source text of his subject matter. But Rebecca De Nova of the University of Pittsburgh disagrees:

However, Gibson has incorporated the ecstatic visions of the passion of Christ received by Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). Noteworthy for their images of Jews as agents of Satan, Emmerich's details provide the non-Biblical scenes in the film. The brutal treatment of Jesus by the Jewish soldiers and the bribery by the high-priest's flunkies to assure large crowds at the court are

only some of the examples of his use of this material. And the dramatic staging of the Jews as demon-possessed monsters goes beyond anything in the Gospels. . . Therefore, yes, this film is anti-Semitic, in Gibson's decision to highlight the Jews in this manner.

(De Nova, The Post-Gazette 2/29/04)

While De Nova in her argument rightly notes the “troubling” anti-Semitic imagery in the subtitle of her article, in the actual text of her article itself she mostly diverts to yet another source from which Gibson draws, and not specifically to the diegesis of the film itself at a cinematic level. And while her observations are insightful, and essential to the debate, like most, it is this lack of engagement with the very *mise en scène* and cinematic substance of the film that invites an inevitable sidestepping of her argument by a more close reading of Gibson’s film. Keenly, calling many critics on this lack of engagement with Gibson’s cinema itself, Francine Prose explains:

. . . hesitancy pervaded the discourse on the film’s anti-Semitism, a debate that focused on the historical accuracy of Gibson’s version of the legal process in biblical Jerusalem rather than on the power (and the associations) of the actual images one saw on screen. A number of critics did point [out] that there was little question about the virulence with which the Jews were portrayed. But in fact any child (or at least any child reasonably well versed in the history of German cinema) might have remarked that not since such Nazi

propaganda films as The Eternal Jew has there been so unattractive an exercise in the sort of stereotyping that raises the specter of the snaggle-toothed, hook-nosed Jew. (Prose 99)

Yet, since The Passion of the Christ is a piece of cinema working within the history of a long line of cinematic images that have already tackled the crucifixion, Prose's point is well-stated. The assumption that subject matter alone in addition to the sources from which a filmmaker draws his inspiration as being enough to render indictment, however, for me remains very flawed. Such a notion undermines not only the artistic process of aesthetic interpretation and appreciation, but also the dialectical potential of engaging a mechanically-reproducible work of art such as a motion picture, once it is circulated among audiences, filmmakers, and critics alike. Further, specific to the cinema, the assumption that Gibson as the director is more responsible for the film than Gibson the co-screenwriter is one that could be challenged in light of an ongoing film authorship debate that has raged since Andrew Sarris first asserted his auteur theory in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962", ironically, the very same year that Jeffrey Hunter is thrust upon the silver screen as the King of Kings.

But, most critics of Gibson, it would seem, contrary to Pauline Kael and Richard Corliss work from the premise that auteur theory is a foregone conclusion and not an ongoing controversy within film studies, and it is for this reason why Benedict Fitzgerald, co-screenwriter and first author of The Passion's screenplay, scarcely ever enters the anti-Semitic debate. To be sure, unlike with

Last Temptation where the script was the fundamental underpinning for all assaults against the film and Scorsese prior to its August 1988 release, very little has been publicized about Gibson's screenplay. It is worth noting, however, that Maia Morgenstern, who plays Jesus's mother in the film, and is in fact Jewish, read the script with her father, a Holocaust survivor, and stated "we found the script beautiful, very poetic, and very philosophical" (Morgenstern, Primetime 2/17/04).

The rhetorical move to shift criticism from a cinematic to a historical context without first attending to Gibson's cinematic agenda is shortsighted and a clever discursive tactic by detractors that in the end only more fully reinforces the suspect notion of the director as author – a notion, that in end, carries with it considerable marketing and box-office advantages. However, if 2,000 years of history must come to bear on how a viewer must approach a film that depicts the crucifixion – and I think it should – then certainly the hundreds of years of a White Supremacy associated with certain readings of Christianity and the Jesus image that has justified slavery, colonization, lynching, Jim Crow, and now an occupation of Iraq despite a lack of U.N. consensus in terms of the United States cannot be ignored when coupled with the flagrant arrogance of Hollywood against non-whites in terms of approaching depictions of Jesus himself. In terms of politics, these same critics instead are far more apt to cite the creedal implications of Gibson's film as opposed to its racial ones. Abraham Foxman argues:



When you walk out of that movie you're not angry at God. [. . .]  
When you see Jesus suffering – and he suffers for 2 hours in front of  
your eyes – do you walk out and get angry at God? No. You're  
angry – you're angry at the people who set him up. It's very nice to  
say to me, "What are you talking about, all of humanity –" Well, I  
don't see all of humanity portrayed in the film. I don't even see the  
Romans portrayed in the film as evil – I see the Jews and the devil –  
the Jews and Satan – that's what I see. (Foxman, Nightline 2/25/04)

But what Foxman fails to see is that even if the Jews and Satan are being  
implicated in Christ's death by Gibson's film, at precisely the same time that a  
certain handful of Jews are implicitly associated with Satan, yet another Jew is  
being overtly declared God; Foxman also fails to see the consequences of  
Gibson's choosing yet another white actor to play this God-man. John Dominic  
Crossan, on the other hand, wants to ask Gibson the right questions, but for the  
wrong reasons:

Here is the question you have to ask [Mel Gibson]: in the light of  
2,000 years of what has happened from these stories, which you  
know as a conscientious Christian, were you careful enough, or  
were you irresponsible? Were you guilty of even depraved  
indifference of how this might be understood? You know what has  
happened from this story. Now it looks to me, I would say, Mr.

Gibson, like you were juggling dynamite and not worrying about collateral damage. (Crossan, Nightline 2/25/04)

Why Crossan only wants to query Gibson in light of his sensitivity to anti-Semitism and not race in general is puzzling, as if the “collateral damage” of telling an American audience what 60% of them have already come to believe as literal history is more dangerous than the social and historical climate that has produced a one-sided social monologue where filmmakers remain hesitant to exercise more ethnic and political consideration in their casting choices of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Even though on The Search for Jesus, an ABC program hosted by Peter Jennings, Crossan in describing Jesus admits that he must have been “dark and swarthy” and an “Eastern-Mediterranean-type,” the importance of casting a more ethnic-looking Jesus in light of the racist history of Hollywood White Supremacy seems to remain lost on Crossan, who like most scholars, believes an anti-Semitism that is difficult to locate *uniquely* within the diegesis of Gibson’s film – apart from the tradition of Jesus narratives in general – to be the more imperative issue (Crossan, The Search for Jesus 2000).

Unlike most scholars, Adam Shear, while ostensibly offering a more theological understanding of Gibson’s film, poses a more cine-literate approach in a February article in The Pitt News, a college newspaper at the University of Pittsburgh, when he openly challenges Gibson – not both Gibson and Fitzgerald

---

<sup>46</sup> In a recent ABC News Poll entitled “Six in 10 Take Bible Stories Literally, But Don’t Blame Jews for Death of Jesus” it was discovered that 60% of Americans take the Bible as literal history.

- over a controversial bit of dialogue that while it remains audible in the film, from a cinematic perspective, Gibson chooses not to subtitle. Shear writes:

[...] soundly or not, people have used Matthew [27:25] as “justification for hate.” Indeed, the concerns of most Jewish and Christian leaders about the film have less to do with theology and more to do with history and sociology. [...] At the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine outlined a theological framework for the tolerance of Jews within a Christian society that strongly influenced the Catholic Church's policies toward the Jews through the Middle Ages and well into the modern period: that Jews are not to be forcibly converted or killed, and that the Jews' adherence to the Old Testament testifies to the truth of Christianity. . . But the theological nuances of this position - his writing that Jews are rightly degraded, but not expelled or killed, and that Jews are rightly condemned for not accepting Christ's message while acting as witnesses to the truth of that message -- were often lost on the larger medieval population, not trained in theological dialectic. [...] Most people today, like most people in the Middle Ages, are not trained to think theologically. And the images and sounds of a well-made motion picture are as powerful (or moreso) than the images and sounds of a medieval passion play. Gibson said on “Primetime Live” that movies cannot be interrupted in the middle

for the kind of theological disclaimer that Miller provides. Hence, Gibson has prudently removed the phrase from Matthew 27:25 from the subtitles. For the Aramaic speakers in the audience, it's still there on the soundtrack. (Shear, The Pitt News 2/23/04)

However, it remains unclear from Shear's argument whether it is the actual direct quote from the gospel that is anti-Semitic, the fact that it remains quoted in Aramaic in the film, or the fact that some may use this specific scene as a "justification for hate" - which is a phrase Shear borrows from Eric Miller, a columnist who wrote in defense of The Passion in The Pitt News on February 17, 2004 in an article entitled, "Gibson's 'Passion' depicts love, not hate." But since the actual phrase, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" is a direct quote from the New Testament, which is translated in multiple English versions and available virtually everywhere in the U.S., pinning the blame on Gibson for quoting this Scripture in Aramaic deflects concerns from the real issue (Matthew 27:25, The Holy Bible, New International Version). What is really at stake is that while most Jewish scholars and critics by definition admittedly have a problem with the gospels, most seem unwilling to admit as much, at least directly or publicly. But Gibson understands this, stating, "You know critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me and this film, they have a problem with the four gospels - that's where their problem is" (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04). When questioned about the anti-Semitic possibilities of Gibson's film, Franklin Graham, son of the prominent evangelical minister Billy

Graham, adds, “[. . .] it’s following the Scriptures. We’d have to change the Bible. We’d have to go rip out the last chapters of the gospels. Every Bible that’s printed this account is there, and all Mel has done is put it to film” (Graham, Nightline 2/25/04).

Now granted, while Graham’s claim may be overstated, in terms of Matthew 27:25 and its inclusion The Passion’s subtitles, it really is a matter of whether or not this particular line from a book that the majority of Americans consider Scripture would be quoted verbatim. In this way, material that only secondarily and thus indirectly champions the New Testament becomes a more effective target for critics, since for a Jewish thinker to critique the New Testament in a public debate as anti-Semitic would be social and perhaps political suicide, considering the fact that not only is the U.S. 82% Christian and only 2% Jewish, but also that President Bush’s own rhetoric and justification for our current war so heavily relies on fundamentalist biblical assumptions about the very same text. Sharon Waxman warned in The New York Times, “Because passion plays historically preceded outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence in Europe, the film passage is a particularly sensitive matter with Jewish groups at a time when anti-Semitism is on the rise in parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia” (Waxman, The New York Times 2/4/04).

This tentative and apologetic relationship to the polemic of the New Testament for the Jewish scholar in America is then only exacerbated by the political climate of the age where the maintenance of healthy relations between

the United States and Israel are critical in what then was the mounting war on terror; and so national critiques of the New Testament by Jews both then and now will always have potential international consequences. In addition, Shear's concern for the Aramaic speakers that may still hear the dialogue is obscured by the fact that it has been widely publicized that it was Gibson's original intent to release the film entirely without subtitles. Only after the very real possibility of being unable to find a distributor did Gibson ultimately concede to including subtitles on his film and subsequently land a deal with Newmarket Films. The exaggerated, almost pantomime figure behavior of the actors – most notably by certain witnesses when contradicting charges are brought against Jesus as he stands before an illegal council of a partially assembled Sanhedrin and by Barabbas when he is selected by the crowd over Jesus as played by a very over-the-top Pedro Sarubbi – are residual of this original intent. Had Gibson held his ground, while perhaps hurting the box-office and ultimate reception of his film, much talk of anti-Semitism would have been curbed since viewers would have been forced first to the gospels for meaning and not history as a means of deciphering the hermeneutics that insulated the scene in question.

Yet, the gratuitous focus on The Passion's treatment of potentially anti-Semitic verses in the gospels despite Philip Saville's The Gospel of John (2003) is almost inexplicable. While some may argue that it is The Passion's success or Gibson's high-profile that justified such a critical spotlight, the ensuing popularity and influence of Gibson's film cannot excuse this lopsided focus for

two reasons: one, a sincere concern for anti-Semitism in cinema and Jewish-Christian relations ought to seek to expose and challenge it wherever present, independent of box-office; and two, very few even predicted the eventual box-office success of Gibson's film in the first place. In fact, in the December 1-7 edition of Variety, it was said of The Passion, "This lovingly crafted project should be called 'The Ego.' Yet as Christmas-themed (if you think about it) movies go, Mel Gibson's self-financed look at the death of Jesus is too grim to have much box office appeal; it makes 'The Last Temptation of Christ' look like 'Elf'" (Variety December 1-7, 2003). This phenomenon where both potential box-office and linkage to the New Testament failed to be the ultimate determinant for critics concern with anti-Semitism more than even content, history, and theology is proven by the virtual critical void with which Philip Saville's verbatim rendition the gospel of John was received.

Scholars and critics lack of concern for challenging this film and bringing it into the anti-Semitic debate also indicates the insincerity and duplicity with which Gibson's The Passion was approached. While The Gospel of John, based word for word on the American Bible Society's Good News Bible version of the gospel of John, began in limited to release in the fall of 2003, in Pittsburgh and in many other cities it was screenable if not simultaneously with The Passion, certainly simultaneously with the year-long debate of anti-Semitism which preceded Gibson's February 2004 release. But this third installment of the Visual Bible Series – following a production word for word of Acts, and ironically,

Matthew, from the New International Version – was the first to receive a theatrical release, but while still reviewed in the likes of Entertainment Weekly and The New York Times, The Gospel of John hit theaters like a proverbial thief in the night with virtually no concern by critics for anti-Semitism, though John's gospel – written by most estimates circa 90 CE after the other three synoptic gospels – historically presents Jesus's narrative with even more tension in regards to the Jews than that of the synoptic gospels.

In a featurette on the DVD of The Gospel of John, "Jesus, Son of God", Alan F. Segal of the Academic Advisory Committee for the Visual Bible International, Inc. points out:

What we tried to do is let the gospel of John speak for itself. It goes word for word, verse by verse, chapter by chapter of the gospel without any additional material from other gospels, and with nothing omitted. And that's a big challenge because the sensibilities of the first century are not our sensibilities and on top of which the gospel of John was edited at the end of the first century at a time when Judaism and early Christianity were considerably at odds with each other. What you see in the gospel of John is not a situation of Jews versus Christians of the time of Jesus but what you see is the polemic between the Jewish community and the Christian community at approximately the year 90 to 100. At that moment they were going through the crisis



that separated the two religions and so things were very, very vexant. That's why the trial scenes are so hard for us to watch.

(Segal, "Jesus, Son of God", The Gospel of John DVD)

So while evidently the Academic Advisory Committee was fully aware of the potential anti-Semitic discourse that might be drawn from the film, no attempts were made to edit or delete lines of dialogue taken from the gospels that might be misconstrued. But interestingly enough, while Patricia Dutcher Walls of the same committee admits that "[e]arly Christians would say in essence what Jesus did and who Jesus was, does, in a universal sense, overthrow all empires – overthrow all political realities because God is more important than all mundane political realities," these very same political realities do not seem as mundane considering the fact that the committee took no issue with British and Shakespearean actor Henry Ian Cusick being cast as Jesus, in a cinematic and directorial move reminiscent to the fundamentalist 1979 Jesus Project (Walls, "Jesus, Son of God", The Gospel of John DVD).

De Nova, on the other hand smartly refuses to accept the notion of an anti-Semitic interpretation of the gospels. She explains:

John's Gospel, perhaps the latest of the four, reflects the growing tension between the church and the synagogue, and he demonizes the whole Jewish nation by literally calling them "sons of the devil." This tension was both "religious" and "political." John introduces Jesus as a "divine man" from heaven, who was present

at creation (causing tidal waves through Jewish concepts of monotheism), and his Gospel reflects Christian bitterness that Rome was beginning to persecute Christians because of their refusal to participate in the Imperial cult, while Jews were exempt from such Imperial treatment. . . But these early Christian writers cannot be termed “anti-Semitic” in the sense that we understand it today. They were merely applying conventional methods of argument, used by all ancient writers (philosophers criticizing other philosophers were even nastier), to convince their respective audiences that their claims were “true.” (De Nova, The Post-Gazette 2/29/04)

And while it might seem that most critics and detractors of Gibson have come to agree with De Nova, thus justifying their preoccupation with The Passion and virtual snubbing of The Gospel of John, many still continue to fault Gibson’s film not for its cinema but for its mediation of two arguably anti-Semitic texts – the gospel of Matthew, not to mention John, and the writings of Anne-Catherine Emmerich. But in his defense of his Emmerich references, Gibson told Diane Sawyer on Primetime: “Here’s the deal: in my film I didn’t do a book on Anne Catherine Emmerich’s Passion, I did a book according to the gospels” (Gibson, Primetime 2/17/04). It is interesting that Gibson chooses to use the term “book” in reference to his film text, perhaps suggesting that The Passion of the Christ as Alan F. Segal points out of the gospels is “not neutral history” but an

“instrument of proselytization” – not necessarily to a particular theology, but I would argue to a particular political way of understanding Jesus’s image (Segal, “Jesus, Son of God”, The Gospel of John DVD).

But as a “book” aimed at conversion, politically, Gibson may already be preaching to the choir. The many institutions driving the critical debates of theology, aesthetics, and box-office have only worked to fortify this political way of understanding of Jesus’s image, evidenced by the persistent and unchallenged ahistorical representation of him as a white, Anglo, and/or European actor; the critical dodging of The Gospel of John; and distracting, uncritical readings of how The Passion’s violence is stylized without considering Gibson’s own persona and auteur sensibility as established by previous films. And so, though in 1988, The Last Temptation made a marginal profit as a result of an organized evangelical boycott and The Passion conversely has become one of the most profitable movies in film history due largely to the support of the same group that boycotted The Last Temptation, I would argue that in terms of the politics of the image both these Left and Right Jesuses remain the same. Regrettably, a careful study of Jesus’s track record in American cinema proves over and over again that despite artistic and theological differences, in terms of politics and in terms of the cinematic image if these parties have it their way, Jesus just may stay “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8, The Holy Bible, New International Version).

Yet, interestingly enough, from a political perspective even most anti-Semitic concerns tend to ignore casting, which is both troubling and revealing of the problem perhaps not relying with the representation of Jesus himself. Surprisingly, in most cases, it's not even important to those concerned with anti-Semitism that the actor playing Jesus be Jewish. As discussed earlier, this was the case with the widely popular "Jesus Movie" produced in 1979 as an evangelical tool in consultation with over 500 scholars with the stated intention of making a film as "archaeologically, historically and theologically accurate as humanly possible" with a presentation that "must be unbiased" and "acceptable to all as a true depiction of Christ's life" ([www.jesusfilm.org](http://www.jesusfilm.org); [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)). Despite the fact that this film may arguably be the most popular movie of all time, boasting a billion screenings worldwide as championed by thousands of Christian institutions, a remnant of imperialism and European colonization still lingers in the fact that many of these screenings featuring a British Jesus amongst a supporting cast of Yemenites have and continue to take place in Muslim countries, now further affecting the cinematic linkage between Jesus and Eurocentricity as an archaeological, historical, and theological "accuracy." Similar assumptions are made on Nightline when Jerry Leachman, one of seven white viewers chosen to screen The Passion with Ted Koppel states:

This doesn't seem to be a uniquely American movie. There wasn't a word of English spoken in that. You could put subtitles in any

language and show that in any country in the world. This seems to be unique. (Leachman, Nightline 2/25/04)

Like Bill Bright, whose production has now been subtitled, translated, or dubbed into over 830 languages and “screened in every country on earth,” Leachman assumes as would many, that apart from words the “unique” cinematics of The Passion offers no politically biased syntax or language ([www.time.com](http://www.time.com)). But the political implications regarding language of cinema through shot-countershot, montage versus long take, close up versus deep focus, diegetic versus non-diegetic sound, etc., have long been documented. Furthermore, Gibson’s attempt at universality is certainly not “unique” (Leachman, Nightline 2/25/04). Though interspersed with odd variations of King James English, the Mormon’s The Lamb of God, produced in 1993, likewise presents Christ’s passion in certain places as an unsubtitled spectacle of foreign languages a decade before The Passion was ever produced. But even Gibson’s choice of language gives away his politics as a Catholic traditionalist, depicting Christ and Pilate as having part of their direct exchange in Latin, which historically, much more likely would have occurred in Greek.

Gibson readily admits as much regarding this omission on the director’s commentary to The Passion:

And, of course, you know there are people who brought issue with the language issues. Of course Greek was in fact the classical, kind of official language of the time. But they would have spoken Latin,

and of course, Aramaic, as well. And I decided to avoid a lot of the confusion by not putting classical Greek in there. (Gibson, The Passion, DVD Commentary)

Interestingly enough, however, Gibson fails to provide a sufficient explanation as to what ostensibly might otherwise be considered an aesthetic preference of excluding classical Greek – which historically would have in fact not been classical, but *koine* or “common” Greek – adding further:

You know, there was a question about whether he would have been able to speak Latin, even amongst believers, and my answer to that is always, well, I guess not, but he could certainly stick that guy’s ear back on when they cut it off – which is harder! (Gibson, The Passion, DVD Commentary)

But verbal languages aside, the casting choices of Gibson, most notably with Magdalene and Jesus, maintain, if not an American grammar, certainly a European one. Gibson knows what he is doing, and though his film to the casual viewer with its vast international cast may suggest a sort of anachronistic transcendence of racial barriers, certain brief, almost subliminal shots undercut this position – such as the lone black extra amongst a throng of other non-black actors who winces during the infamous scourging sequence. Clearly Gibson, as an American director, who has starred in such seemingly political-correct rewrites of history in terms of American slavery like The Patriot (2000), understands the brutal past of America’s relationship to the African-American.

Gibson must also understand that with the exception of Glory! (1989), Roots (1977), and perhaps Unforgiven (1992), shamefully few American films have ever sought to responsibly depict a white actor flogging a black one. And even in the case of these three films – none of which were produced by African-Americans – the sheer brutality of the violence and violation of the beatings are reduced by frequent cutaways, and lapses in time that control and manipulate the audience's sense of the experience, and minimize the culpability of the various white characters who initiate the brutality.

However, that Gibson in The Passion – a film whose chief aim is to sensitize the viewer to its violence, and subsequently outrage – goes out of his way through a strategically-placed reaction shot to place a black extra in the position of wincing at one particular blow to Christ's body is both obvious and telling. I find such a Kuleshovian cinematic manipulation of the black man's image to reaffirm and reinforce the brutality of one white actor's scourging of another within the context of both American history and American cinema to be slightly underhanded and insensitive, but amazingly effective on a subliminal level for the cine-illiterate. This reaction shot is particularly inconsistent with a *mise en scène* that otherwise purports to transcend race and ethnicity. Francine Prose notes that “[t]oday only a few select witnesses are invited to observe our ‘humane’ executions, from which the rest of us sensibly avert our eyes. So it's only in the dark multiplex that we are permitted to behold – in close-up and living color – the sort of spectacle once staged for ordinary citizens throughout

Europe and the United States, where public hanging existed until the 1930s” and I would add where private terrorization of black citizens through lynching and murder – as is the case with Emmitt Teal, Medgar Evers, Yusef Hawkins, and others – continued well through the 1980s (Prose 93). In this respect, the placement of a black extra within a throng of non-blacks in an American film that has already supposedly placed itself ahistorically and anachronistically in regards to the politics of race must be read as deliberate.

But the gaze has always been of particular importance to cinema, and there is no question that Gibson’s intentions here with this black extra are likewise deliberate – a gaze within the context of the film that when fixed upon by an individual among the audience within the darkness of a multiplex has the potential to be interpreted as an almost reverential posture on the part of a man of color to the suffering white, God-man. In her essay, “The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ”, Alison Griffiths elaborates on what she calls the revered gaze in this manner:

The gargantuan proportions of the cathedral, especially the extraordinarily high ceiling, have more in common with the space of the contemporary IMAX theatre than that of the nineteenth century panorama, since in the same way that Gothic architecture invites an upward gaze to better appreciate the linear values, geometrical figures, and light that seems to filter through the Gothic wall, “permeating it, merging with it, transfiguring it,” in



von Simson's words, so too does the IMAX screen shift the viewer's focal direction slightly upward, requiring the head to be raised to take in the height of the screen. This upward gaze is repeatedly inscribed in IMAX publicity, with the spectator represented as looking awe-struck not directly out at the screen, but upwards, toward the top of the frame, a rapturous gaze evoking a quasi-religious sense of plenitude at the awesome size of brilliancy of the image. (Griffiths 8-9)

So it is not merely a matter of montage, but also space which stabilizes how one might respond to various sequences within Mel Gibson's Passion. That this wincing black man is one of the few men of color in Gibson's film, and the way in which this anachronistic racial uniqueness literally frames his close up as significant is not just a matter of editing, but also a matter of the viewer's relationship to the space of the movie theater itself – and even the space outside of it since Gibson must have been aware of the probability of at least some African-Americans seeing the film in the multiplex, and being confronted with such a deliberately racially-charged image around the issue of scourging<sup>47</sup> in a film that otherwise attempts to bypass any direct citation of race – at least as race is commonly positioned within an American context in terms of black and white.

---

<sup>47</sup> This is significant because in the American South, scourging or whipping was a common manner of discipline imposed upon the African-American slave by the white slave-owner for two hundred and fifty-eight years (1607-1865).

And so in many respects Mel Gibson's Passion becomes more about the gaze of the gaze, than the object of witness – that is, the passion of the Christ itself. Frame after frame of the film lingers in slow motion on eyes, faces, and even blank expressions that *a la* Kuleshov could be interpreted any number of ways, since it is really the audience that must ultimately do the work, depending on just exactly who and/or what Jesus means to them in that space between the gaze. Probably even more so than the initial experiments of Kuleshov, I am convinced that The Passion proves that the viewer cannot make meaning of an image independent of that image being contextualized either by previous frames, as was the case with Kuleshov – or by some other determining authority acting like previous frames within the space between the gaze through a process that I will loosely term a *politicizing* of the image.

Take, for instance, the sequence in the last act of the film when Jesus is carrying his cross, but then he drops it with Mary running towards him, but then, inexplicably Gibson cuts to a flashback of Mary running toward an-almost toddler Jesus who has just stumbled on the ground. Among almost everyone I have spoken to or interviewed about this film who was favorably disposed toward it, this sequence was most often referenced as the moment that invoked the most tears – but ironically, it is not Jesus's falling that invokes the tears, but instead the shot of young Jesus, stumbling – proving that without this random edit and universal appeal to the maternal, and even parental instinct – this moment might have had less affect on the viewer. But because shots such as

these through montage exist as one and not separately in The Passion, it would still be insufficient to state that Gibson fails to move his viewers in terms of the isolated image of Jesus carrying the cross, because as a filmmaker, he is well within his right to make use of the toddler-Jesus flashback whenever he or his editor deems fit. And formalistic moments like these are not infrequent throughout The Passion, which enables me to associate Gibson's project much more closely to what Kenneth Anger had attempted with Scorpio Rising than many may care to admit. Throughout The Passion, as Gibson flashes back to Jesus and Mary joking about making a table, to the Last Supper, to the Sermon on the Mount, etc., the film remains preoccupied and almost obsessed not only with the gaze but with how much pathos an image can possibly render from a sufficiently preconditioned audience.

Where The Passion fails is that a small portion of America's population has remained resistant to the claims necessary to buy into in order for The Passion to work. Like a magician, Gibson's third-act focused *prestige* in his telling of the Christ story will mesmerize those who have been conditioned within the space between the gaze by the necessary *pledge* and *turn*<sup>48</sup> respectively, initiated by particular institutions long before one enters the movie theater. But for those who have not been conditioned to regard Christ as God –

---

<sup>48</sup> The *pledge*, the *turn*, and the *prestige* are three respective acts of any magic trick according to the film The Prestige by Christopher Nolan. The film, which is based on Christopher Priest's 1995 novel of the same name, defines the *pledge* as the presentation or display of any seemingly ordinary object that, during second act, or *turn*, proves to be extraordinary. The *prestige*, then, is the process whereby the magician returns the object to its ordinary state, thus distinguishing him or herself as a true master of the illusion.

for instance, Jews – or for those who through rigorous training have learned how to resist the potency of both religious and political iconography – i.e., atheists, scholars, intellectuals, etc. – it stands to reason that Gibson’s cinematic trick remains unconvincing.

But there are two things to consider here: one, that both Jews and atheists, and scholars and intellectuals, remain the minority of America’s population; and two, while in denial, many atheists, scholars, and intellectuals still find free thinking difficult in the face of the icon. What I mean is The Passion arguably is much more about the space between the gaze of one spectator and another, and the commingling of associations that interplay as a result of that space. Let’s be frank: when one watches The Passion of the Christ, they are not watching The Passion of the Christ. They are watching others watch The Passion of the Christ – both on screen and in the audience. Everyone sits back in awe of the reaction that the film elicits from others, but somehow, it is inexplicable how they as audience members remain impervious to such a reaction themselves. Yet, for me, there is no distinction between the awe that contextualizes a viewer of The Passion, and that which contextualizes one who takes the Eucharist at mass. Both devotees through the space between the gaze – a space that some have mislabeled “reality” – are simultaneously presented with an emblem and image or accident and appearance by an authority that by definition must be contextualized by a space he or *she* presents – though in most cases – it is, in fact, a *he* we are talking about.

Yet, this space cannot be called reality, because like any other space, it is defined and limited by consciously constructed authorities, relationships, and discourses. Most importantly, like any other space, access comes to be a genuine commodity associated with power, for certainly one cannot come to inform the meaning of the icon without first accessing this space, which happens to be both between and before the gaze. For this reason, the casual viewer will always remain dumbfounded and manipulated by the image, because the casual viewer is not even aware that there exists a space between representation and interpretation. For the casual viewer, the two are intertwined, married, and fixed. But the free-thinker understands that the interpretation anticipates the icon and not the other way around. In fact, the ability to free think or to think critically might otherwise be classified as the ability to remain aware of the space between the gaze despite the ubiquity of the icon.

However, the problem with much of the so-called critical thinking surrounding The Passion is the fact that while seemingly resistant to some of Gibson's more questionable representations, many of these same scholars and intellectuals despite the appearance of free-thinking, when analyzed more closely merely reinforce the overarching icon of the White Anglo-Saxon God-Man that remains the pivotal protagonist of Gibson's drama. Based on the plethora of periodicals and publications, it would seem that no intelligent thinker who is not a clergyman of some sort liked the film. But since clergymen have a much larger audience in America than the intelligentsia – unless clergymen are

included – two things could be concluded: one, that the intellectual is an elite, isolated, and perhaps even ostracized vocation that is virtually ignored by the public; and two, that the masses are not intelligent since they cannot see the game that is being played that so many other critics could see regarding The Passion. But I would suggest a third option: that many of the so-called intellectuals are no different from the masses. If the concern is truly for how authorities manipulate the masses via the image, I must wonder why The Passion and not the Catholic mass, or Baptist pulpit, or Mega-church leader with alligator-skinned shoes and a Rolls-Royce becomes the entry point of conversation for these *so-called* free thinkers when discussing representations of Jesus. Could it be that the criticism of The Passion results not from free-thinking, but rather from an alternative way of reading the icon stabilized by particular authorities between the gaze equally committed to supporting the very same notions of sovereignty framed by the image as those notions supported by those who, without an awareness of this unique space, appear at first to be enemies – but, in actuality, are invested in circulating the same image?

In fact, as the eleventh highest grossing film of all time, The Passion of the Christ is probably the most popular disliked film of all time. But since overtly only a fundamentalist can like the film in public, all others must sit back and feign objectivity as they gaze at those who gaze at the film. While those narrow-minded right-wing fundamentalists – I’m being facetious here – so enthralled by

the film can only gaze at the represented first century Jewish disciples of Jesus, who like them, watch from crowds helplessly while Jesus is brutally put to death. But nobody is being honest in this space. This is not the space between the gaze, but the space of the gaze. Like the actor whose performance can invoke real emotion from a spectator, the space of the gaze is never genuine. It is all just a sham. Like the proverbial churchgoer who carouses throughout the week until Sunday, and even then, only goes through the motions during service, The Passion, because of its subject matter, automatically situates a person in relation to its truth claims even if they are unwilling to admit as much. For instance, even if a Jew does not believe that Jesus is God, they must still wrestle with the implications of being accused not of homicide, but of deicide. And yet, if Jesus is not who he says he is, the Torah would require that such a man be put to death, and so then for the Torah-abiding Jew in a Protestant-nation, the Catch-22 becomes readily apparent. However, the discourse turns not on the authority of the Torah, but on the belief of the deicide accuser, even if that belief is not regarded as credible by the Jew.

And so like the charge of deicide for the Jew, the incarnation claim for the non-religious remains inescapable, rendering the theological claims that position The Passion equally inescapable. This is why in the climate of 2004, to not see the film made as much of a statement as seeing the film. While liking the film made as much of a statement as not liking the film. But it is not as much about the film as it is about the foundational claims fundamental to any and all

discourse regarding Jesus and by way of how one might discuss the film – in particular if one chooses to discuss the film without acknowledging the space between the gaze. Alison Griffiths observes:

The experience of entering the multiplex to view Gibson's The Passion, while utterly familiar for the vast majority of viewers (although not for all, since this film drew people to the movies who had not attended in years), was an act of devotion. To enter a space and encounter phantasmagoric images is something the Christian faithful have done since time immemorial. But can locations that are designed primarily for entertainment purposes take on new identities when religious spectacle becomes the stock in trade? (Griffiths 10)

My problem with this question of space, or “locations” in this instance is with how Griffith's own assertions make the assumption of the undisputed holiness of any given location.<sup>49</sup> And so the question of one location designed for

---

<sup>49</sup> Clearly, there is no universally holy space for any people in terms of location. Jerusalem might come the closest, but the Dome of the Rock for all intents and purposes trumps the possibility, for the time being, of rebuilding the Jewish Temple, while the lack of a Jewish Temple trumps the possibility of the animal sacrifice and other forms of atonement stipulated by the Torah – making Jerusalem for now a point of mourning due to the absence and not the presence of a fulfilled holy possibility. Only the human body presents the possibility of what might come the closest to a universally holy space or vessel, in particular if one is to consider the womb – since truly, by almost any standard, this is a space that can only be accessed by one the woman would determine. Anything short of this would be rape, and the literal unholy violation of a holy or set apart space. That like the Holy of Holies, the womb is accessed through a vaginal gateway that must first be entered through the curtain-like vulva makes the metaphor almost too perfect; and that the womb or uterus is quite literally the first space which contextualizes human life is scientifically undeniable – regardless of whether you are pro-life or pro-choice. So very much unlike the tentative claims made within a cathedral by celibate clerics, or the phantasmagoric representations of promiscuous filmmakers in a cineplex, there is no doubt that when a baby



entertainment purposes as opposed to another location designed for religious or sacred purposes works from assumptions that are flawed to begin with since all locations, with perhaps the exception of the female body, must first be determined to be holy and separate by a political group attempting to maintain power between the gaze by claims and representations of power that ultimately can be disputed.<sup>50</sup> If they could not be disputed then mankind would only have one religion, and there, presumably, would only be one type of holy man.

Another way into this notion might be to ask: how does one talk about a film about Jesus without talking about Jesus? Well, the answer to that question is one that critics and scholars have pretended to answer since From the Manger to the Cross. But the problem is when one tries to talk about a Jesus film in purely cinematic terms without addressing what might mistakenly be called the theological context surrounding Jesus, one then reduces the moment of a viewer's engagement with such a representation to a matter of taste, whereby one could create a canon of good Jesus movies and bad Jesus movies and rank them from top to bottom. Now I am not saying that this cannot be done. I'm just

---

emerges from its mother that some higher sovereignty whether God, or Nature, or whatever name we might want to call it, has intervened to literally *authorize*, and I do mean *authorize*, a birth – which in my opinion is the only indisputable transubstantiation-miracle we have today.

<sup>50</sup> But it must be kept in mind that violation of human law, or disrupting the claims of those who might want to inform the politics of the image does not necessarily make something blasphemous. Blasphemy, while presuming to be an offense against God, can only be recognized practically as an offense against the laws of men since many men have claimed to know the mind of God, and at the same time, have disagreed as to what God's law is. So in a world where the law of God is disagreed upon, I am not saying that holiness ceases to be a possibility; but, if there is a God, and I believe there is, then holiness is always a possibility. But a building or location cannot be holy before God simply because a group of people got together and decide to consider it as much, because, by that same agency, another group of people can get together and curse that very same building as an abomination.

saying that such a canon would have no meaning for the majority of people who actually find value in films about Jesus in the first place, regardless of how seriously one takes oneself as a scholar. This is partly due to the fact that I don't suspect most people go to movies about Jesus to be entertained – at least not any more. By the same token, when audiences do find meaning with films based on Biblical material, this meaning seems to somehow transcend mere entertainment value as they perceive it. This is how Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments (1956) could come to be broadcast every Easter for the past forty years or so with many of the same people tuning into ABC to watch the film over and over and again as an almost religious ritual to do with the family, and with each subsequent viewing, initiating new members of the family.

But even though the time of study in this moment is fixed, this is not to say that two viewers will actually see the same things. In fact, I would argue that one of the functions of the space between the gaze is to minimize the possibility of the unlimited reading of a text. I am not saying I disagree with the possibility of an unlimited textual reading, but what I *am* saying is that because the citizen's notions of sovereignty are so critical to the state, a heavy investment is made through this space to facilitate a pre-read and pre-determine how texts informing notions of sovereignty are actually read. When Thomas Wartenberg states, "However, what struck me the moment I left the theater on the night before the discussion – I had put off viewing the film until the last moment, dissuaded by the press coverage – was my inability to understand how anyone could consider

this film to be spiritually uplifting in any sense,” he does not realize that his most telling statement is in between the lines. By his own admission, he has organized a discussion to create dialogue about a film that while he had not yet seen it, he had *read* it – read it through the lens of a press that was constantly interpreting the film for him as a Jew through the space between the gaze (Wartenberg 82).<sup>51</sup> For Wartenberg, in terms of The Passion, there are two films: “on the one hand, an anti-Semitic tract made by the son of a Holocaust denier that Jews and others like me saw and, on the other, a deeply spiritual portrayal of the agony of the Christ that moved a certain segment of the Christian community” (Wartenberg 83). So for Wartenberg, there are only two ways of reading The Passion worth noting, and, of course, one of them – the one that is counter to his own – is unacceptable and offensive, while his own is responsible and humane. This is why in his essay entitled “Passions of the Christ: Do Jews and Christians See the Same Film?” he writes:

---

<sup>51</sup> That early on in his essay, he overtly admits that he does not believe in a postmodern, multivalent, dynamic textual reading should come as no surprise, based on some of his latter conclusions. But his own inability to engage The Passion beyond the loaded discourse that sought to pre-frame it for him as a Jew makes his conclusions of anti-Semitism about the film both predictable and expected. Why else would someone wait until the day before a discussion to view the very film that prompted them to organize the discussion? The answer is that Wartenberg via the space between the gaze had already seen the film, even before he saw the film, because for whatever reason – be it outrage, fear, disgust, or procrastination – as a public intellectual he took the time to gaze at others as they were gazing at the film, before he took the time to take a gaze himself. My only problem with his intellectual project is that he never takes the time, unlike Nick James, to gaze at himself through the space between the gaze, while still remaining critical of the film, to determine just why he is reacting the way he is, and just what might validate his reaction over the reaction of others.

How can people have such radically different experiences of a single work of art? Aside from my concern about the film itself – what I saw as its anti-Semitism and the effect that this might have on Jewish people the world over, for example – it was a more abstract issue that kept gnawing at me: I couldn't understand how viewers of the same film could have experiences that appeared so completely to contradict one another. (Wartenberg 82)

Yet, to rant about why your reading of a text is superior to another's reading, and why someone else who cannot see what you see in a particular work of art ought to be regarded as inferior, insensitive, or somehow disturbed, seems to me to be the very epitome of the dilemma and danger of the religious imagination. I find it interesting how particular moments in Gibson's film, and the moment of Gibson's film in general as a cultural event at the beginning of 2004 – given the political context of the nation at the time – have worked to shift what we might imagine as religious language from being circulated as Scripture-talk among what might informally be called "Bible-thumpers" to now a type of scholar-speak circulated among intellectuals where the only ones who can possibly see the film for what it truly is percolate as an intelligentsia that while currently an overwhelming minority is fast becoming more and more aware of their own persecution at the hands of a dominant and growing perceived enemy called the Fundamentalist Right.

And in reaction, this same intelligentsia has conceptualized its own means for attempting to stabilize how The Passion can be discussed publicly in reaction to fundamentalist privileging as demonstrated by how many critics have argued falsely that The Passion somehow transgresses a standard of violence already stylized by previous Gibson films, other R-rated films that were released at the time, and biblical films in general. But nothing could be further from the truth. The discussion of the violence in The Passion amounts to nothing more than an uninformed squabble when one realizes that Gibson's film has a death count<sup>52</sup> of only four – Jesus, Judas, and the two thieves. Even the more scrutinized acts of violence, like the blows from the flogging and the scourging with the cat of nine-tails, if watched carefully, occur offscreen and are merely *suggested* through a clever montage of sound-effect and reaction shot.<sup>53</sup> In fact, much of The Passion's seeming brutality results from a kind of psychological affect – and I do mean *affect*.

---

<sup>52</sup> Death counts are traditionally the way violence is measured in film, while acts of violence are more characteristically measured as a means of tracking violence on television.

<sup>53</sup> Once again, here we are not watching the flagellation, but instead watching actors, who are pretending to watch the flagellation. But the space between the gaze allows one to interpret this, not as an audience member spectating as an actor watches Jim Caviezel pretend to be Jesus, but instead, as an audience member spectating while an actor watches the *actual historical* Jesus be flogged. This is possible due to both the imagination and devotion that contextualizes the audience member within his seat – the very same combination that in a liturgical space might be called “faith.” After all, if one can come into contact with the substance of Jesus in a cathedral, what would preclude the possibility of accessing this same substance within a movie theater? One might argue that the former depends on the authority of the Catholic priest, but this is an overstatement, as the faith of the one who takes the Eucharist must precede the authority of the one who gives it. If it only took a priest's authority, then it stands to reason that it would be impossible to ever take the Eucharist in an unworthy manner.

As Jim Caviezel points out in the August 22-28, 2004 edition of TV Guide, in a time where films with much more blood, acts of violence, and body counts like Kill Bill: Volume One and Volume Two can be released without resistance, overemphasis on The Passion's gore – especially in light of such Gibson vehicles as Braveheart and The Patriot – really fails to consider the undisputed fact that medical doctors and scholars alike have accepted the atrocious scientific reality of crucifixion since, and even before 1976, when Dr. C. Truman Davis first published his widely-circulated article, “The Medical Account of Christ’s Last Days and The Cross.” Tarantino’s film Kill Bill<sup>54</sup>, unlike Gibson’s work, however, manages to present a staged-violence stylized in such a way that audiences remain desensitized to it. Clint Eastwood, on the other hand, states of Unforgiven, “There is maybe an antiviolence statement in there that could be profound if we executed it properly” (Zmijewsky and Pfeiffer 279). And while this was Eastwood’s stated aim with Unforgiven, he structures his narrative both through David Webb Peoples’s screenplay and his own direction in such a way that I suspect most viewers experience a certain degree of satisfaction when Will Munny finally instigates the bloody climax of the film. A similar satisfaction, and even laughter, occurs when the Bride avenges herself in an episodic litany of violent confrontations in Kill Bill. Such is not the case with The Passion. While John Dominic Crossan argues, “My immediate reaction was extreme revulsion.

---

<sup>54</sup> Originally, Kill Bill was to be distributed by Tarantino as one three-hour film in late 2003, but was later divided into two features Kill Bill: Volume 1 (2003) and Kill Bill: Volume 2 (2004) by Miramax, but released only a few months apart.

[. . .] I thought I had been watching two hours of utter brutality – possibly the way it was, of course. But still I was watching it to the point I was wondering if this has become violent pornography,” I personally cannot fault a film director for presenting violent acts against one man in such a way that it makes an audience uncomfortable (Crossan, Nightline 2/25/04). For a filmmaker to achieve such affect regarding a depiction of violence within mainstream cinema is certainly an “antiviolence statement.” This is why I find Crossan’s rationale yet another flawed argument that distracts from The Passion’s more, pardon the pun, *crucial stakes*.

Like me, William Irwin remains suspicious of an overly critical take on The Passion’s violence, stating as much in his essay “Gibson’s Sublime Passion: In Defense of the Violence”:

The expectations and desires we bring to a work of art shape our reactions to it. A movie director must make choices concerning how to film and tell a story, and when the story is already well known the director’s choices will inevitably disappoint some. A beautiful movie would have been an ill-suited form of expression for the passion of Jesus. To be true to the subject matter Gibson was forced to make a movie that would be difficult to watch. [...] In the case of tragedies it may be that Aristotle is right, that we experience a cleansing, a catharsis. But as we saw, the story of the passion cannot be told as a tragedy. So are the controversial blood

and violence of The Passion simply gratuitous? No, they are justified by Gibson's attempt to deliver an experience of the sublime. (Irwin 60)

What Irwin means by "sublime" relies heavily on four features argued by Cynthia Freeland: first, a conflict between pleasure and pain; second, "greatness, power, vastness," even grandiosity; third, the indescribable; and fourth, "the prompting of moral reflection" (Irwin 56-58). Yet, it is not my purpose here to determine whether or not The Passion is beautiful or sublime, but rather I am more interested in how such loaded language inevitably supports my notion of the existence of a neglected space beyond the icon and the image where such judgments can be informed and even determined.

But nothing marks this point of neglect more than The Passion's usage of the image itself via the practice of casting itself – or what in a clever amalgamation of the classic tradition of Hollywood and the mythmaking of ancient civilizations could be called star-making, or even god-making.<sup>55</sup> So perhaps as many have argued that the racial constructs framed by casting in The Passion do not matter, but in terms of cinema, for me it is *precisely* in regards to the casting as an aspect of the *mise en scène* more than the stylization of violence

---

<sup>55</sup> To back this claim and secure this relationship, one need only consider Louis B. Mayer's popular boast regarding his MGM studio during the 1940s of having "more stars than the heavens." In the movies, casting has never been merely about filling roles, but has always been about making stars – literal icons whose popularity and influence through light and celluloid would transcend even their death – much like the stars in our own heavens, whose light still glosses our skies though many of these gaseous bodies have long since collapsed.



put forth by critics against The Passion where the responsibility lies solely with Gibson as both the director and a self-professed, unbigoted conscientious Christian. My only fault with The Passion's violence centers around the clever and subtle way in which Gibson politically and racially loads the violence through reaction shots, not with the way he stylizes the acts in more basic cinematic ways through CGI, slow-motion, sound effects, etc.

But it is precisely these effects which lend themselves to the spectacle or phantasmagoric aspects of The Passion, which many have argued are largely the reason for The Passion's visceral appeal to both the senses and the mind. It is interesting how as a film The Passion, like Jesus the man, was difficult to ignore. Even if one never got around to seeing the film, or waited to see the film until absolutely the last minute like Wartenberg, such moves in light of the heavy discussion about the film before and after its release can only be read more as protests than demonstrations of ambivalence or a lack of interest. Because like Jesus – a man who all have an opinion about whether they have ever taken the time to read the New Testament or not – likewise, nearly any media literate American who heard of The Passion of the Christ has an opinion about the film, whether they have seen it or not. The undeniable reality of this fact is probably the most compelling evidence of the existence of a space both between and before the gaze.

The space between the gaze reflects something akin to the pilgrimage in that while almost always a collective experience, at its root, the pilgrimage

remains something uniquely and individually apprehended by one's own reverentially-informed psychology. Alison Griffiths writes:

The pilgrimage quality of Passion spectatorship was the antithesis of the church-group organized pilgrimages to Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ in 1988, which brought the faithful to the movie theatres not to attend the screening, but to protest what they considered to be a work of blasphemy and to heckle audiences (pilgrimage-as-protest is a common feature of religious fundamentalist groups, particularly around the subject of abortion.) The controversy of Scorsese's The Last Temptation suggests the incendiary power of cinematic representations of theology; with a humanity (and latent sexuality) that outraged Christian fundamentalists, here was a celluloid Christ that was all too real for wrong reasons. (Griffiths 15)

So for the pilgrim, it is not just about the varying places of the journey, but also about how the place or space of the mind shifts and comes to revelation or some other type of knowledge or realization as a result of the journey. Alison Griffiths states:

The act of pilgrimage is a highly symbolic one, the journey shaped as much by the outward meanings attributed to it as to its inner resonances for individual travelers. The medieval mind was also preoccupied with the symbolic nature of the world of

appearances: “everywhere the visible seemed to reflect the invisible.” But there is a phantasmagorical dimension to the relationship between sign (religious icon) and referent (God) that the thirteenth century pilgrim would have to tacitly understand. By renouncing itself as an absolute referent – one cannot empirically prove the existence of a divine or holy being [...] The idea of God as an absent presence helps bridge the conceptual leap from thinking about spectatorial reactions to the religious iconography of medieval churches and to the panorama and motion pictures. (Griffiths 15)

However, while I see how one could argue that the movie theater, especially the multiplex, in a sort of stucco, post-modern way, seeks to invoke notions of the cathedral or sanctuary, Griffiths, I think, overemphasizes the three-dimensional space of the viewing area to the exclusion of the conscious, psychological space of the mind, which is much more akin to what I am referring to by the space between the gaze. She continues:

While the architectonics of the cathedral, the panorama rotunda, and cinema auditorium have several common phenomenological aspects – one could argue that each constructs an experience for spectators premised upon a dialectic of belief versus disbelief and the notion of an absent presence – there is no teleological link between them. They are clearly historically unique ways of

representing religious iconography, with their own ontologies, signifying practices, and ideologies. (Griffiths 5)

But I disagree that there is anything absent, at least in claim, about the agenda of both the movie theater and the cathedral. The star's image is present in a very real way in each and every movie theater, and Benjamin has much to say about this through his notion of the aura; and it is the *image* of the star, not the flesh or *sarx* of the star that the audience is most concerned with, after all, it is the fanatical even religious obsession with the star's image as a commodity that keeps the paparazzi in business.

Even the cathedral remains contextualized by a presence and not an absence via the transubstantiation claim. So in both the movie theater and the cathedral for those who have been rightly initiated previously, both spaces are about a *presence* and not an absence. A panorama rotunda such as the Sistine Chapel is still contextualized by its presence at the Vatican – a place where space is so important to impress upon the mind of the participant that the size of smaller Catholic cathedrals are actually marked off on the floor of St. Peter's Basilica so that pilgrims can visibly see how much larger the Vatican is as opposed to other Catholic cathedrals around the world.<sup>56</sup> Of these three

---

<sup>56</sup> However, even the notion of the cathedral is complicated by flawed notions of what church actually is. While for almost two millennia, believers have been duped into believing that church is a building, the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, means "those called out of"; and among the earliest adherents to the faith this term more approximated one's orientation to the uninitiated world, as opposed to referring to a building where one met. The primitive followers of The Way, as early Jewish-Christians called themselves met in homes and could not meet in buildings as

examples, only cinema in terms of the representation of Jesus seems to truly work from an absent presence – that presence being Jesus in the historical moment that is being represented through a film’s *mise en scène* in terms of what is being overtly claimed. A pilgrim in Rome at the Vatican gazing around at the Sistine Chapel expects God to be present. Likewise, upon taking the Eucharist one understands that they are literally eating the body and blood of Christ. No such divine claim accompanies the cinema as a general rule – although Gibson does complicate this through the religious language of his PR campaign – but assuming most audience members are not as willing to blindly accept these claims, the cinema still manages to assert an icon absent from the claim. This possibility, however, makes the cinema the most dangerous image-maker of all three, because while relying on the space between the gaze to do all the work of contextualizing interpretation, or to borrow from Irwin, inform “the expectations and desires we bring to a work of art” and “shape our reactions to it,” the cinema itself need not say anything about its own iconic assertions or intentions (Irwin 60).<sup>57</sup>

But this very reticence has also enabled the cinema to be a silent partner to the dominant religious ideologies of America for the past one hundred years. In

---

their religion, due to its seditious claim of Jesus being Lord as opposed to the Emperor, made it illegal.

<sup>57</sup> This makes the authorship debate in film studies relevant because when a film and a filmmaker can be divorced from each other in terms of any sort palpable or credible causal relationship, the space between the gaze and thus whatever current politics which inform the particular image are enabled with an even greater authority than authorship to make meaning for the viewer through the language that is introduced to the subsequent discourse.

fact, it could be argued that the Church – I mean this term as it is used colloquially, and not the *ekklesia* – has retired from the business of making images and left that to the cinema. And filmmakers, like the clerics that they in fact are, have picked up right where the priesthood has left off at defining how we imagine God and what our proximity is to ultimate sovereignty based on our access not only to this God, but based on our ability to become one of the representers who might also post an image to and for the public.

Religion has always been dangerous to the free thinker or the space of the mind in general because of its ability through discourse – via language, painting, music, drama – or aesthetics in general, like architecture, or sculpture, to disassociate the spectator from the sovereignty of his or her own conscience by dictating through what almost might be determined to be a mob mentality an alternative and collective means of identification with the single protagonist of the hero cult figure – a practice that while first described by Aristotle in Poetics is still taught and emphasized by screenwriting gurus like Syd Field and Robert McKee today. But once an individual conscience surrenders its own sovereignty by way of this collective association with the single protagonist, the small group of powers that remain hidden within the space between the gaze in the name of this protagonist can turn the group as one man to justify or condemn any and every moral paradigm. So in this way, Homer was a sort of icon-maker, while any lover of Homer before the gods were abandoned as actual entities to be believed in and worshipped, were iconophiles. Socrates, on the other hand, was

an heretical iconoclast because of his resistance to Homer's depiction of the gods, while those who condemned him were orthodox.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, by way of "the Christ" of the Roman Empire during the Crusades, an entire collective was encouraged to participate in war, murder, theft, slavery, and exploitation. The same could be argued for the Islam that the Roman Christians fought against, although that particular faith quite deliberately attempted to prevent the icon, at least in its most obvious form, in terms of the central protagonist of the religious drama, Muhammad.<sup>59</sup>

But like the cinema, I would argue that religion in actuality is not a belief system, but a process whereby an individual comes to identify with a particular hero or protagonist, and then willingly becomes an agent of that hero's narrative against another perceived villain or demonized group. Whether the hero is real or imagined does not matter because this process can only be invoked through art<sup>60</sup> in the first place. So to some degree the hero will always be imagined – that is, engaged only by image, icon, or representation. Therefore, going to the

---

<sup>58</sup> Of course, this is an aesthetic characterization of Socrates presented to us by Plato.

<sup>59</sup> The practice of not depicting the Prophet even carries over to cinema in 1976's The Message, where the film director Moustapha Akkad's decision to not show Muhammed's face was clearly religious in nature since in Akkad's own words about the film:

[The Message] was received fantastic but it was not American commercial [fare] for two reasons. You cannot see the prophet. I get upset when I see Jesus or Moses portrayed by an actor. To me, you don't touch these things. The film is about Muhammed but he's not portrayed. Therefore, the camera takes subjective angles. It's good for those who know the religion. (Akkad Interview)

Though not a Jesus film, The Message is useful to my discussion precisely because it is not about incarnation, but illibration.

<sup>60</sup> It could be argued that Judaism and Islam do not rely on art, but even here, language and text – art forms in and of themselves-- are both very central to these faiths, supporting my basic claims only further.

multiplex is just as much a religion as going to mass if one learns to identify with certain characters on the big screen, and then takes on the ideologies subsequently presented through the film to inform in the space before their gaze.

And so what's left given the right representation of Mel Gibson's Jesus? The cinema itself. In other words: space and time – the two self-determined aspects of this mechanically-reproducible medium. But what is unique about the cinema after 2004 where Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 and Gibson's film go seemingly head to head with Gibson's film apparently coming out the victor – both in terms of box-office and due to the fact that Bush is re-elected – is how collectively, these films accurately anticipate yet another space and time relationship to both cinema and how America in the upcoming years would come to regard sovereignty. In their own way, each filmmaker-artist through cinema unravels, dislocates, and possibly even resituates and restructures certain American notions of sovereignty that would be later built upon by later cinema makers. Thus, both of these films seem to forecast how both contemporary and future filmmakers might, in essence, through documentary-techniques, political diatribe, various self-persona-constructions like Moore's films, or through claiming the authority of the Bible text and iconically-re-representing the Jesus icon and sovereign as does Gibson, discover a sort of innovative cinematic possibility and a new way to understand and engage in discourse about the *Logos*, or Reason, or Truth.



CONCLUSION:  
CINEMATIC PARAOSIA -  
THE NEGRO AS TIME TRAVELLER  
AND THE FEAR OF A BLACK SOVEREIGN

We are ignoring something quite fundamental when we want to treat films that somehow attempt to represent God, or ultimate assertions of sovereignty, if you will, as merely more of the same dross that comes out of Hollywood. There remains a distinct, unique spatial possibility for such films. The Passion's record-breaking success as an Anti-Semitic, foreign-language, independently distributed, personally financed R-Rated film, speaks to this apparent space and its difference in terms of representations of sovereignty. Furthermore, the success of Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) hints also of this same space, though in a much different way.<sup>61</sup> And even for the minority of

---

<sup>61</sup> The Passion is not about God. The Passion is not about Jesus, at least not the *real* Jesus. The Passion is about sovereignty: who has it, who can represent it, and who can challenge it. (This much you can get simply from the narrative of the film.) But most importantly, The Passion is about who can circulate narratives about how sovereignty has come to rest with the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male. (This part you can only get by observing the gaze – not of those in the movie – but of those watching the movie. But to do that one must become aware of the space that exists between the gaze – the space most easily identified as that of the movie theater itself.) Fahrenheit 9/11 is also about sovereignty: the abuse of it, the arrogance of it, the limitations of it, and the failure of it. (But it too is also about who can circulate narratives about how a perceived sovereignty has come to rest with the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male. At the narrative level,

people who liked both films, despite how the space before the gaze has co-opted how notions of sovereignty can be discussed publicly, there would be little to no place for such a person to actually speak about their fondness for both films and maintain dialogue with any significantly sized public group because of apparent hermeneutics that have attempted to arrest dialogue via the news-media, religious institutions, and political parties.<sup>62</sup>

But neither of these possibilities could occur without first acknowledging the space between the gaze and the subsequent politics that inform our interpretation of the image. Cinema is different in this one major respect from many other art forms – that the time determined for the participant to engage the form, in the multiplex at least, is self-determined by the medium itself. Likewise, when one is engaging art via the devotional exercise, fixed rotations of time are also not only necessary, but essential, making devotion a time-and-space-based experience. And so very often, one misunderstands The Passion and how it

---

the film is quite overt in these assertions.) But when one analyzes the space before the gaze of these two films, one realizes that the notions of sovereignty offered by Michael's Moore's film and the notions of sovereignty posed by Gibson's film are both very different. This is further compounded by the unlikelihood of finding someone in America who liked both films since Moore's film by all definitions served as a rallying cry for Leftist, liberal, anti-war democrats, while Gibson's film, on the other hand, was a call to unity for Catholics, Protestants, and the Right-wing Bush-supporting Conservative, Fundamentalist.

<sup>62</sup> Now I am not saying that such a space would be impossible to carve, but instead, that in the moment that such a space were carved, to the degree that such space involved a significant number of people, by definition current notions of sovereignty for America would become permanently dislodged. As a result, new, more overt and arresting binaries and dichotomies would immediately emerge as such a protean engagement with the space between the gaze would yield not only a more novel notion of sovereignty, but also one of two possibilities: one, a new icon and subsequently new space before and between the gaze; or two, which would be my preference, a new oral language whereby notions of sovereignty might be circulated independent of the image, or the written word – which, in essence, would still be a type of image or sign, or signification.

works through cinema because very often one misunderstands both time and space and its relationship to the religious experience. "Thus the space between the religious spectacle and the spectator – ways in which worshippers are invited to project themselves into the image or the breakdown of distinctions between witness and image," as Alison Griffiths argues, should not simply be taken for granted as some mere abstract context, but as an actual interval or window that precedes even the icon (Griffiths 5).

This is why Kanye West's music video "Jesus Walks" is probably one of the most relevant films to be made in the past five years not only in terms of the cinematic, but in terms of the representation of Jesus in cinema. In the early moments of West's video, "Jesus Walks," a lone Kanye West sits in frame in mid close up in a sparse room on a mattress tying his shoes, ghetto-clad in a white tee and jeans. This image is preceded by a picture of an Anglo-Jesus on a mantle as the camera zooms in tighter. Each grainy, black and white frame flickers by at twenty-four frames per second to the non-ambient Negro spiritual "I'll Fly Away." Intercut between these images, the city of Chicago flanks a Jesus statuette sitting on a dashboard, and then back to a billboard reading: "Jesus Never Fails." Next, reflecting in a small-screen television is West approaching a handful of bills atop a table. West – apparently a drug dealer – moves to his table, grabbing a stack of large bills. He clutches them, coming into frame, and then folds them in preparation for another day of hustling. The final notes of "I'll Fly Away" come to a close as West's movement staggers to slow-motion. He

steals a glance back to a man sleeping deeply, and instantly, from his white robe, sandals, long hair and thick, glued-on beard, one is to assume that this is Jesus without a single word being spoken. West breaks into a sprint, perhaps attempting to escape, but in an instant Jesus snaps to attention, snatches his crown of thorns from a card table, and takes off after his rebellious disciple.

But there is more to this grainy short film with both its high and low key lighting than a montage of black and white, jump cut, slow-motion, and an occasional skipping-sprocket-to-film-leader effect. In contrast to many of the films discussed in previous chapters, the image of Jesus, both in how he is represented and how the audience is empowered to imagine him also marks “Jesus Walks” as a unique cinematic achievement. On a first glance such an image may want to automatically suggest parody, but after watching the images of this video several times, especially in contrast to its music, I am not so sure parody is what Kanye West is after – as the viewer journeys with Kanye from his home through the ghettos of Inglewood past a craps game, to his uncle’s house, to a storefront church. But as certain theorists indicate, it is difficult to talk about the intent of a filmmaker with any authority or persuasive leveragability. And so I will limit as best as possible my discussion to the film text. This way, one is invited to ask: as Jesus grabs his crown of thorns is this white Jesus here ironic, or is this yet another attempt by a black filmmaker and film conceptualist to

grapple agreeably with the limitations of how Jesus can be represented to a mainstream audience – even if that audience is black?<sup>63</sup>

In all its simplicity, this is for me perhaps one of the most engaging moments in my entire analysis of the representation of Jesus and cinema – second only to Jean Claude Lamarre’s performance as Jesus in Color of the Cross (2006) for reasons which I will get to in the latter part of this conclusion. This particular moment from Kanye West’s video “Jesus Walks” clearly indicates a fresh and counter cinematic Jesus not through a deft blend of modern and overly stylized video techniques, but via methods that could be applied by any amateur student filmmaker, especially before the advent of digital video in the late 1990s: Super 8mm, grainy footage, non-sync sound, functional voice-over, etc. It is also important to remember that this video cannot simply be referred to as “Jesus Walks” since Kanye West actually produced three distinct videos for the same song.

It is interesting how everything from Reality TV to Cloverfield (2008) now wants to demonstrate an appreciation and apparent nostalgia for the “improvisational” and stylistically “authentic” – that is, an attempt to imitate what might be mistaken for real, and more authentic through techniques such as shaky cam, the direct to camera address, a relatively low production value, and in the case of the Street Version of “Jesus Walks,” black and white photography.

---

<sup>63</sup> I recognize that Kanye West’s crossover appeal is mainstream and goes beyond an audience of exclusively African-American fans, but by his own admission on the making-of video, his main target with “Jesus Walks” was the African-American community.

But in the case of most Reality TV, Cloverfield, and “Jesus Walks,” these productions work so hard to elicit an appearance of reality in distinct ways, drawing from a various combination of these techniques, and yet produce a diegesis that is just as dependent on the “fictional” imaginings of a writer’s mind as any other type of film. In this way, the film spooling out of its sprockets becomes not a mistake in “Jesus Walks” but a seal of validation, indicating that what we are in fact engaging is rough and ready for the street audience for which it is intended. With “Jesus Walks” there is a suspicion of Technicolor, or the perfectly framed actors and actresses of such films as Ben-Hur (1959) or The Matrix Reloaded and other more classic Hollywood fare. But not only is the Street Version black and white, it is also grainy and intermittent with scratches and flash cuts from various “on-location” sets centered around a plethora of Jesus iconography. Unlike the two earlier West videos, which are in fact, short films which preceded the Street Version, one gets the sense of some sort of genuine verisimilitude in this video even in moments that by definition must be staged through a filmic phenomenon very similar to the invasion of the sacred space with the camera I spoke about with The Blood of Jesus. Along these lines even Kanye West’s Jesus, played by Danny Joe Sorge, looks more ready for a bad Passion play, than the cinema. But this time it is not just the camera that does the invasion, but instead notions of the sacrosanct itself.

This is because not only does Kanye West understand the need for three videos, he also understands that the videos would vary in degrees of

effectiveness depending on the audience, although the song would remain the same. While, in an interview on his making-of video, Kanye states: “Through the gate, I wanted to have multiple videos,” despite the fact that certain others in the making-of video insist that the three videos emerged as a result more of a revisionist process that began first with the \$850,000 Church Version, and then the Chris Milk Version, and then ultimately resulting in my personal favorite, the Street Version (West, Making-Of “Jesus Walks” Street Version). But regardless of which account of these conflicting narratives resulted in the three videos, I am interested in how these varying videos speak to each other intertextually? Do they contradict? Do they work together to make a collective statement that is somehow absent when viewing them merely as independent originals? Or do they cohesively merely reiterate what is already evident when one views each video individually as a single text?

According to West there are necessary and important distinctions between each of his music video texts. After apparently being dissatisfied to some degree with the second video, or Chris Milk version, West laments, “God does everything for a reason so this is obviously how God wanted the video to come out.” But there are distinct similarities and distinct differences between the God-talk of Kanye West, and the God-talk of Mel Gibson as he justified his production choices for The Passion. With Gibson’s film, there is an attempt to achieve the authentic and thus the real by recreating history through fantasy via cinematic techniques; but with Kanye West, there is attempt to express the

authentic and the real against the backdrop of a fantasy that has been thrust upon the legitimate suffering of people, which in this case happens to be the African-American under the oppression of four-hundred years of Slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the War on Drugs, and Black-on-Black Homicide. One might be able to argue about what Jesus historically looked like, and this is an argument that will never be won since the time of Jesus predates both photography and cinema; but one cannot argue the relevance of such a people's identification with such a liberating persona, after having continually experienced an alienation, oppression, and disenfranchisement at the hands of another particular group's notion not of God, but of Sovereignty – that is, how God can be described in the secular world, post-Enlightenment. In America, it is unnecessary to state that Jesus was not and cannot be black. It is enough for the nation to fail to acknowledge the sovereignty of the African-American in his very own nation of birth through countless narratives that have been constructed not with the African-American as the protagonist, or the woman, but with the White-Anglo-Saxon Male Protestant.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> That I write this text just as an African-American and a woman each make viable candidates for the presidency may be an indicator that, at last, America, and the world for that matter, is ready to imagine the Messiah as a black man. This is because certain powers that be like Caesar who has for the past two thousand years promoted the notion of the singular Imminent Alpha Male Sovereign for the Western world appear to be receding; and if my approximations are correct, some sort of aggressive move from Fundamentalists, Traditionalists, and Dogmatists can be expected in the immediate future as a sort of last ditch effort to consolidate the inhuman claim that only certain men in this world are sovereign material, as opposed to the vision of Jesus, who promulgated that men are not only brothers of their fellow man, but also sons and daughters of God.



So then who better than the Negro<sup>65</sup> to take us beyond a history that has depended on ego-driven logic, inhumane and alienating notions of intellect, and brother-denying sovereignty? Like the Jew, who has managed to maintain a sovereign law from Sinai to 9/11, unrevised and unammended, so too the Negro must remind every citizen that there must exist a higher ordeal, or harmony that we must all embrace if we are truly created equal, and therefore all Sovereign.

Du Bois's work in The Souls of Black Folk, as the title would suggest, concerns itself with issues that deal with the *soul* of a particular people. This terminology is crucial because the *soul* must invariably become an important component to any thorough discussion of sovereignty, history, and most importantly, time. In fact, it has been said that "[t]ime is the mind of soul, and souls are the body of time" (Gerard 6). I believe that Du Bois's aesthetic presentation of the Negro *soul* in The Souls of Black Folk could serve as the "body of time" for a people *unrecognized* by time, or more precisely unrecognized by history – for a people that "[t]hrough history [. . .] flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness" (Du Bois 3). It is only fitting then that this *body of time* would be expressed in a *body of work*, a body of essays to be exact, because, arguably, no single human endeavor has

---

<sup>65</sup> While "Negro" has subsequently been replaced since the 1960s by the term "Afro-American," and then "African-American," and now "black," I use the term here because through its connotation the very ahistorical conception of the Diasporic African is best conceptualized in tension with the Eurocentric/ American Project. But it is important to distinguish this Project from the more modern, bohemian American notion that has embraced Barack Obama, an American-born male with an African-father, and white mother, not only as "black", but as a very viable presidential candidate.

ever been more invested in the construction of history than that of writing. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states in “Darkly, as Through a Veil”, the 1989 introduction to Du Bois’s text:

How can a work be “more history-making than historical?” It becomes so when it crosses that barrier between mainly conveying information, and primarily signifying an act of language itself, an object to be experienced, analyzed, and enjoyed aesthetically.  
(Gates xvi-xvii)

After all, how can one begin to conceive of history, or *his*-story, while neglecting particular aspects of narrative tradition, writing, orality, and imagery? Yet, Gates does not present his concerns with the “act of language itself” without context. In his work, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism, Gates further develops his theory of the trope of the talking book. For Gates and others, this trope is common amidst African-American literature, where the book itself becomes a sort of character that speaks to and enlightens a particular protagonist, who otherwise might have remained unconscious, and implicitly, unable to participate in history according to the assumption of mainstream post-Enlightenment discourse. For Gates, “[b]lack people, the evidence suggests, [have] to represent themselves as ‘speaking subjects’ before they [can] even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities” (Gates 129). And so writing and the creation of other such artifacts has become regarded as the very act of knowledge formation and

history-making with the “verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans” being the very act of writing itself (Gates 128). But what does it mean to be outside of history? What is at stake in a history where certain peoples remain within, by way of their production of artifacts, while others remain without, beyond history, because of their apparent “ignorant” and “savage” indifference to enactments of Reason, as privileged by the Enlightenment? Before attending to these queries, I must first ask a more simple and basic question. What is history? And how does a particular definition of history correlate to my own concept of time, time travel, and the harmony of images through space and time in terms of cinema, and ideas through space and time in terms of music?<sup>66</sup>

Unlike the screenplay, whose dialogic nature has been questioned by the likes of Tony Kushner due to its ultimate static celluloid destiny, and indifference to its live audience, the music video arguably since the “visual

---

<sup>66</sup> It is nearly impossible to conceptualize time and time travel without being distracted by the narratives that have been presented to us by the science fiction of literature and film. Yet, instead of constructing an argument that attempts to ignore the ubiquity of these narratives, I will develop my own theory from a few of the very scenarios that science fiction has offered. Certainly, I am not of the belief that science fiction should be the foundation of rigorous intellectual discourse, at least solely; but, when these science fictions are compounded and complicated by the scientific and philosophical traditions of Einstein, Heidegger, Bergson, Russell, etc., history, time, and the traversing of time can come to be understood in many new, innovative, fascinating, and compelling ways.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. admits in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism that “[b]lack texts Signify upon other black texts” (Gates xxvii). I would go so far as to state that black texts Signify upon not only other black texts, but other texts in general. Even the Ralph Ellison title, “Invisible Man” hearkens back to the science-fiction of H.G. Wells in his 1897 work The Invisible Man. In keeping with this tradition, I have borrowed from another Wells’ source, The Time Machine, in developing my theory of the Negro as Time Traveler – a Signifying intertextual reference to the nameless protagonist of H.G. Wells’ 1895 science-fiction novel.

music” of Oskar Fischinger, or perhaps The Beatle’s A Hard Day’s Night (1964), has wrested the mainstream and the cinematic from narrative dependence. This is how Tony Kushner, about his play Angels in America, can state in the journal Salon:

Screenwriting is primarily a narrative art – and I don’t think that’s true of playwriting, which is dialogic and dialectic, and is fundamentally always more about an argument than it is about narrative progression. I suspect, in fact, that novel writing and screenwriting have more in common than playwriting has with either of the forms. (Kushner, Salon)

Yet like many other music videos “Jesus Walks” is not dependent on a screenplay, but a treatment – three distinct treatments as conceptualized by four different directors to be exact. But not only does the shorter music video format invite such a potent re-imagining of Jesus, Kanye West takes full advantage of it through a triple threat multi-layered interpretation of his song that is both dialogic and dialectic.<sup>67</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin in his work The Dialogic Imagination sought to define the interdependent relationship between language and meaning, history and tradition, and genre and audience (Bakhtin 426). He called this notion dialogism, recognizing that “there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will

---

<sup>67</sup> Michael Jackson’s music videos, Thriller (1983), Bad (1987), and Remember the Time (1991) do somewhat complicate the distinction between narrative film and the music video with their longer running times, non-music dependent, dialogue-segments, and auteur directors – John Landis, Martin Scorsese, and John Singleton, respectively.

affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled the moment of utterance” (Bakhtin 426). Hence, the dialogic becomes the process by which meaning is fixed beyond the production of the text, most frequently, when a text is engaged by an audience, or even when the audience’s very engagement becomes the frame of reference for analysis.<sup>68</sup> But to a lesser degree, the dialogic can also occur between the texts themselves.<sup>69</sup> Somehow the multiple versions of “Jesus Walks” suggest a dialogic nature if not between audience and text, certainly intertextually between each of the three videos themselves.

But in order to properly weigh this apparent intertextuality, the music video must first be understood for what it is: a cinematic format. Marita Sturken writes:

The burden of an art form that paradoxically combines both science and art as a technological medium is a culturally weighty one. Video is heir to the ideology sparked by kinetic sculpture and the art and technology movement of the 1960s (rooted in cubism, futurism, and the Bauhaus) in which the merging on art and the

---

<sup>68</sup> The dialectic, on the other hand, can be traced back much further than Bakhtin’s projects in the dialogic, claiming significance through Socrates as early as the fourth century B.C. in his search for truth up to Hegel, who effectively developed the dialectic as a means of forecasting ideological and economic systems. In this way, when literary genres or formats begin to be characterized by artists, or even critics, as being more dialogic or dialectic, a flawed but fundamental implication has been assumed regarding the literary text as a medium of truth, and the author a mediator of that truth.

<sup>69</sup> The dialogic nature of the music video is particularly interesting because of both the way the sound and image of the video work in tangent and in tension with one another, and due to the relative short length of videos, facilitating their necessary tendency toward being watched over and over again.

machine was seen as paramount. As the most recent addition to the camera arts, video shares (albeit not consciously) the legacy of photography as a infinitely reproducible art form. Yet video is an instantly reproducible medium with unprecedented powers of transmission, whose very essence is simultaneity. Not only does it retain those qualities of reproduction, it also signifies the electronic factor, which through television and computers has come to symbolize information in contemporary culture. (Sturken 110)

Sturken points out the paradoxical nature of the video as a cinematic format resulting from technology and reproducibility. In his book, Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes, Saul Austerlitz writes:

The history of the music video is that of an underappreciated, critically unnoticed subgenre of filmmaking. Its uncataloged depths, though, contain a panoply of the brilliant, fascinating, and simply odd, shedding enormous light on pop music, mythmaking, and the enduring, limitless possibility of the music video as short film, liberated from the feature-length narrative's requirements to proceed in logical order, follow an easily gleaned plot, etc. The music video marks the triumph of the visual over the oral, eschewing dialogue in favor of style, aura, and, occasionally, plot,

propelled forward by a dependence on the cinematic language of montage as a necessary means of communication. (Austerlitz 1)

Like photography, but unlike painting, video poses as an aesthetic experience that is mechanically-reproducible, but unlike photography, video is time-based and simultaneously disseminated – at least in terms of television – and in terms of public performance, still a collective encounter. But either way, the music video as a format, whether distributed by MTV, YouTube – or even out of the back somebody's trunk – because of its more loose, non-narrative based structure and shorter format, suggests the possibility of a more innovative space/time engagement than that which has tended to be demonstrative of typical, narrative-bound Hollywood cinema.

And that both Kanye West and I find the Street Version of the video to be the most effective and the most interesting of his three videos is telling, especially since in terms of production value it is also the most simplistic and easily achievable work to duplicate by almost any other filmmaker. This achievability is mostly due to the seemingly limited use of technology and low-budget of the Street Version, and yet is further proof of the innovative possibilities of the music video format and other hybrids that might eventually evolve from it as the new century proceeds. In some ways, the music video as a format destabilizes and allows what might not be allowed in more mainstream cinema by primarily being a format that invites not only open interpretation of the image, but also multiple viewings and multiple techniques for capturing the

image, including 35mm, 16mm, video, Mini-DV, Hi-Definition...and Super 8mm. . .in terms of “Jesus Walks” the Street Version. With an appealing aesthetic of roughness, the Street Version of “Jesus Walks” demonstrates how the rugged simplicity of the guerilla may in fact ultimately triumph over the pristine complexity of the mogul.

The opening moments of Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” Street Version exemplify in many ways why perhaps one of the most overlooked formats in terms of the cinematic and the possibilities of cinematicity by way of what many have now come to regard as multimedia is the music video. And yet, arguably, when considering the motion picture, the television program, and even the commercial, the music video may in fact be the most cinematic of all. In fact, in the introduction to their book, Illuminating Video, Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer write:

Traditionally, art historians have ignored social and political factors because they have been considered beyond their carefully delineated parameters. Video, as a product and process that represents many differently derived practices by numerous artist and social groups, resists this closed system. [...] Furthermore, video defines the art historical practice of ordering the field into a depoliticized hierarchy of stylistic categories. (Hall and Fifer 14)

Because of video’s apparent cultural relevancy, Hall and Fifer assume a potentially revolutionary aspect of the medium, both in terms of expediency due



to technology, and immediacy, due to reproducibility. In the forward to the very same book, David Ross writes:

Video art has continually benefited from its inherently radical character. On one hand, it has always been associated with the concepts of superindependent alternatives to the hegemony of commercial television. From its earliest portapak productions, video has been the purposeful outsider, attempting not merely a critical stance but models for a less alienated and alienating set of uses for the technology that has reshaped our century. On the other hand, its root within the art world linked it to the complex Fluxus sensibility and to those other conceptualists who used blank irony, appropriation, and inversion often to critique a commodified culture and its attendant forms of representation and reification. These oppositional practices, which tend to view the apparatus of television as anything but neutral, tended to explore the complex individual and social relationships within a culture undergoing extreme transformations. Accordingly, they were produced in a medium that challenged the standard commerce in works of art and the way that artist's ideas were located and historicized. (Ross 10 -11)

And while Ross might properly identify one particular dichotomy in terms of how one might cite the history and relevance of video, to what degree is the

medium of video radical both in terms of form and content is another question that might be posed.

I find this particular moment in “Jesus Walks” an ideal starting point because of the way in which an apparent “white” Jesus is depicted not indifferently to the racial construct of America but as a pivotal point of access to Kanye West’s stated intentions as defined by the lyrics of a song when he exclaims, “I ain’t here to argue about his facial features, or here to convert atheists into believers. I’m just trying to say the way school need teachers, the way Kathie Lee needed Regis – that’s the way I need Jesus!” And I cannot help but wonder to what degree the music video and, more likely, the short film or video never intended for wide distribution may provide a means of free expression granted the filmmaker – an expression that while talked about, remains virtually nonexistent within the context of the ideological state apparatus of Hollywood. This seeming independence is especially relevant when filmmakers want to talk about Jesus. Hall and Fifer observe that “[t]hough the extent of impact is questionable, the democratization of photography and video, their rapid and inexpensive reproducibility, idealized by early users, nonetheless challenges institutional power and privilege attached to public image making” (Hall and Fifer 14).

However, it would precisely be the artist’s ability to imagine and represent similar material in different ways that would ultimately prove the democratization of photography and video, and yet ever since MTV first

launched in 1981 with its twenty four music shows, inevitably “promotional clips” and “rock videos” as they were often called before they became known as the “music video” (Austerlitz 25-30). The economic tyranny of the movie business in the 1980s that would soon follow, venturing out now into this new form of cinema, within a few short years would quickly lead to it becoming customary for a radio-played band to have at least one music video on MTV (“music video”, [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).<sup>70</sup> But as it relates to “Jesus Walks” I find it unnecessary to begin here in order to construct a history of the music video in order to understand the cultural relevance of its cinematic possibilities. Likewise, Marita Sturken, in her essay “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History” states:

The making of history is an elaborate and highly regimented process – a complex structuring of a particular narrative that sets out to tell a single, well-contained story, replete with a delineated beginning, middle, and end, neatly sealed with closure, and governed by cause and effect. Histories do not simply evolve, they are *constructed* through certain agendas. As narratives, they adhere

---

<sup>70</sup> It is important to note that in many instances during the 1980s, music videos were not videos at all. Very often shot on 16mm, these musical montages were more akin to abstract films set to music like early silent films than the highly stylized digital advertisements of today. In fact, the history of the music video begins much earlier than 1981. But it is a history due to the radical nature of the medium both in terms of aesthetic impulse and technology that is disagreed upon. Some begin with Dziga Vertov’s forty minute Man with a Movie Camera. This film, while for some may be a bit unnerving to watch more than once, remains a fantastic study of movement in cinema and the black and white image. Others may want to begin with the early animated films of Walt Disney, or the work of Warner Brothers, with their aptly named Looney Tunes, and Merrie Melodies, which were centered around specific songs from upcoming Warner Brothers films.

to a specific set of cultural codes governing the nature of shared reality and the communicability of experience. (Sturken 101)

And so what history might be constructed in order to situate the radical nature Kanye West's three videos from a cultural standpoint? Furthermore, knowing that this is but a narrative process of editing and deleting, how can I expect one to take on or even consider my own dissertational narrative as authentic, given Sturken's undeniable observations? Well, this is precisely the same dilemma that a filmmaker confronts when attempting to represent Jesus in cinema as he or she determines what to include and what to exclude very often for fear of violating the real. Since I am not first and foremost concerned with history, rather than answering the question for myself, I will instead treat West's own handling of this dilemma of narrative construction through his work.

Because Kanye West creates *three* videos and not just one, a dialogic process is immediately invited because not only does the filmmaker not provide a running authoritative commentary on how to interpret his own work, but the work itself exists both in harmony and dissonance with the other two videos, liberating the image to some degree from its tyrannical hold on the mind towards a singular dogmatic ideal. Now the viewer can choose which video they like best, and which images and narratives they will imagine in their mind. But this is not a democratization invited by the long take as the realists would have it, or a dialogic audience-performer relationship as found on stage, but instead, a dialogic strategy totally initiated by a musician and artist whose vision

is arguably more singular in terms of concept and commodity than that of your standard filmmaker – especially those who are not marketed as auteurs.<sup>71</sup>

That Kanye West's three videos as cinematic achievements also happen to center around common conceptions and misconceptions of Jesus and iconography related to him in the black church, among the poor white classes, and in the ghetto streets of Inglewood is a serendipitous convenience reminiscent of the historic significance of the singular reels of From the Manger to the Cross being combined to produce the first feature film format. As already stated, while the video – or more properly videos – are as multifaceted in terms of formalistic technique as any average motion picture, television program, or commercial, the relevance of "Jesus Walks" largely derives from the dialogic nature that West invites through the fact that there are not one but three versions of the music video. But unlike many songs and music videos where the

---

<sup>71</sup> Since Sturken adds that very often in this process of narrative selection that it is women and people of color who are most often omitted from the record, it is interesting how the music video on the other hand has tended to become a format that has in turn celebrated the women and the person of color (Sturken 101). As a format, its co-dependence on notions of agency and authorship first informed by the French New Wave, and ultimately the Film School Generation, does not neglect people of color or women, but in the case of Michael Jackson's video "Thriller" and many of Madonna's videos, authorship is asserted from the starting point, making stars out of these two personas that in many ways were artificially constructed through the music video. According to Hall and Fifer:

For many artists, video's impermanence represents a denial of art as precious object. It also provides a medium for challenging art institutions because it is reproducible and because it deviates from art institutional agendas dedicated to the protection and display of unique artifacts. As Martha Rosler notes, video is not only reproducible, it also afford the viewer access to a two-way machine confusing the relationship between the maker and the consumer of art. (Hall and Fifer 14)

But just what is the relationship between the maker and not just the consumer, but the art itself? While I will not exhaust the issue here, it is important to keep in mind some key facts about the authorship debate as it has been couched by a myriad of thinkers and critics.

tendency to mix and remix and then mix again abounds, the multiple versions of “Jesus Walks” are not the result of a remix where the lyrics may remain the same but the samples change, or where a verse may be added or merely deleted. For each “Jesus Walks” video the song remains stabilized, untouched, and unmolested. However, the visuals and implied narrative that might subsequently inform one’s reading of the song collide dissonantly with each other, as each video apparently seems intended to reach and connect with a slightly different audience. This triple distinction is further evidenced by the fact that each video has its own name and number to distinguish it from the others. The first video is entitled, the Church Version; the second, the Chris Milk Version; while the third is called, the Street Version. The Church version is directed by Michael Haussman. The Chris Milk Version is directed by Chris Milk. While the Street Version is directed by Cooddie Simmons and Chicke Ozah.

Through a simultaneity of didactic pomp, traditional reverence, pastiche, and cultural critique, “Jesus Walks” demonstrates how compelling, controversial, innovative, and, most importantly, relevant in one musical moment the video format can be. Somehow this video manages without pandering or condescending to the institutional practices of any one approach to textual production and hermeneutic interpretation to blend both the comedic and the inspirational. Certainly, while I concede that one is open to interpret this moment as one might like, it is difficult to deny that the tone of the music, its

intentions, and the legitimate feelings that are stirred while listening tend to supersede whatever narrative or image that might manipulate through montage a reading of insignificance before one's gazing eye. While one could argue that the emotions invoked and stirred by a song are not universal – the evidence of that which has historically tended to contextualize the particular genre from which “Jesus Walks” emerges is clearly a hybrid of hip hop and gospel, which draws from the much earlier tradition of Jazz, Blues, and the Negro Spiritual.

But then again, since the middle of the twentieth century, gospel has always been co-opted by a litany of popular black artists for the purposes of secular music. While evidence of this fact abounds, the recent film Ray (2006) for which Jamie Foxx won the Academy Award provides a moment of particular note when examining this fact. Early on in the film, when the blind Ray Charles begins to play his piano in a public gin joint, because of his “dangerous” blend of gospel and blues, his music is considered sacrilegious and offensive. This scene raises notions of the blasphemous, the offensive, the obscene, and the inappropriate as apprehended through art and the creative process of the aesthetic work, as if to suggest not only that there is a “holy” or sacred possibility for the song, but also an unholy, or non-sacred possibility. Now on the surface, this is a most basic assumption. But conclusions such as these are complicated by implication and practice. What I mean by this, is how is one to determine what music is sacred and what is not, and who is left to make these determinations, especially in the age of the ipod and the MP3 player. This is

doubly complicated by the rather democratic means that the human being has historically exercised when determining the sacred from the Hindu, to the Jew, to the Christian, to the Muslim, and beyond. And so, therefore, these musical taboos, elaborated on in the film Ray, assume a literal false harmony that can somehow be violated by the human and his or her creative expression, as opposed to the absolute authority of a professed God or Sovereign. And so if in fact there is a holy, then by definition – any musician, or any artist for that matter – must always put his soul on the line by way of what he creates, since such a soul would lend itself to being perceived by another as offensive, taboo, or worse yet...blasphemous. Since Ray Charles is blind, an African-American, and a musician, the film Ray speaks to this reality on a number of levels, but it is sufficient for me to limit my discussion to “Jesus Walks” and Color of the Cross.

There is much talk about the holy and the sacred in American discourse. It is promulgated by the news media, by presidential candidates, and by clergy. But is it not obvious that a sacred that must be enforced by man and informed by man, is nothing more than a man-made sacred,<sup>72</sup> and therefore not universally sacred at all? Undoubtedly, the seed of man uniting with the womb of woman to birth the child human being is a sacred act that not only frustrates all authoritative explanation, but also simultaneously staggers the mysterious line of evolution, creation, and intelligent design. Human conception defies

---

<sup>72</sup> I am assuming here that the sacred means “set apart” solely for the purposes of God, or the *Logos*.



language, in that it cannot be explained, nor can it be willed. And yet throughout human history, nationalism, race, politics, economics have all been used as constant ploys to pit human against human – a focus on nation, color, human interest, or resources – that in the end has caused many to ignore the soul or *psyche* component of our existence, which as conception proves we as people do not even have the ability to as a matter of will bring about. And while difficult, lame, impotent arguments can be made toward the nonexistence of the psychic component of the global citizen amidst a mutual embrace of the six liberal arts – grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy – all such arguments begin to unpack with the seventh...music, or harmony. For through music does one not have the opportunity to encounter one's own soul? In fact, without the mind or *psyche*, how else can one identify music? And beyond that, there is philosophy – the search for truth. And this search must end with either the neophyte concluding that there is a truth beyond that which he has experienced, or that there is not. But either way...whether enlightened or not...the *psyche* or mind or soul will inevitably always return to what it has recognized as its own music. And so long as that being lives, who is to say that their song is not fit to be sung and shared in this world?

Du Bois speaks of this phenomenon in The Souls of Black Folk, elaborating on the dilemma of the African-American's psyche most reflected in his or her music: "The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan – on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and

drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde – could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. By poverty and ignorance of his people, the Negro minister or doctor was tempted toward quackery and demagoguery” (DuBois 3-4). And today who else but a demagogue would attempt to determine what is sacred for another without first having recognized the image of God present in every citizen of the world? And so there is a problem with any notion of the holy that might undermine the personality and possibility of expression for another soul. This is not to say that all expression is of equal value, effectiveness, or productivity towards a particular end, but the very law of harmony, as indicated in our astronomy, geometry, and arithmetic indicates that there is an order, time, and place for everything as abstract points that can be conceptualized and recognized in real time. The human being who attempts to suppress the ego of another human being in order to feel good about himself is at war with himself, and is at war with the universe; and this has been the condition of the relationship between whites and blacks in the United States for the past four hundred years. DuBois writes, “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (DuBois 2-3). He continues, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at

one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 2-3). And so another way of interpreting double-consciousness might be as a necessary consequence of a human arrogance resulting from the rejection of the collective expression of a people by another people, making inevitable the question: is there such a thing as secular and sacred music, or the banned tones of the royal court; and if there is, how is this complicated by a "secular" music video about Jesus? Such inquiries inevitably bring up once again the notion of the Authentic, the Real, and the Sacrosanct, and its implication when one attempts to photograph what for some has been interpreted as such, even if not by those doing the photographing.

I am reminded of a particular moment in the behind-the-scenes video for "Jesus Walks" the Street Version where Danny Joe Sorge's beard is being crafted and he is asked by the cinematographer what is being done, and Sorge responds, "Gluing this shit on..." referring to Jesus's mustache. The conversation commences into a tongue-in-cheek discourse about holy boogers, until Sorge concludes by stating: "I'm Jesus Christ. You can take my boogers and use'm to cure cancer, or I can spit in your eye and cure blindness" (Jorge, Making-Of "Jesus Walks"). But the humorous irony of this sort of off-color and perhaps even offensive language is that the New Testament seems to place a similar

value on Jesus's mucus and spittle.<sup>73</sup> Photographed exchanges such as these are a far cry from DeMille who for The King of Kings had his lead actor followed by private detectives in order to prevent scandal and maintain the appearance of sanctity both on set and in the actor's private life.

And so as a type of Jesus figure through the same type of montage editing that associated Napoleon with a peacock in Abel Gance's Napoleon (1927), Kanye West through his video operates as a sort of avatar for the Son of Man – but not a stuffy, King James reciting orator, who sits in the pulpit with his deacons awaiting his turn to preach the Word of God, but as a man of the streets, frustrated with the oppressed state of his people, sitting quietly in the pews, flanked by a patient Jesus, who waits for Kanye to stand and vent his prophetic frustration:

Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now check the method  
They be asking us questions, harass and arrest us  
Saying “we eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast”  
Huh? Y’all eat pieces of shit? What’s the basis?  
We ain’t ging nowhere but got suits and cases  
A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis  
My momma used to say only Jesus can save us  
Well momma I know I act a fool  
But I’ll be gone ‘til November I got packs to move I hope  
God show me the way because the devil trying to break me down  
The only thing that that I pray is that my feet don’t fail me now  
And I don’t think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs  
I want to talk to God but I’m afraid because we ain’t spoke in so long  
(Kanye West, “Jesus Walks”)

---

<sup>73</sup> In John 9:6, Jesus heals a blind man with a combination of mud and his own saliva, while in Mark 7:33, he heals a deaf-mute by sticking his fingers in his ears, and spitting and touching the man's tongue.

Kanye West uses expletives and weaves in and out of talk of the perceived sacred and the perceived profane with protean ease. And though Kanye West's Jesus, who looks like Robert Downey, Jr. in a bad Halloween costume, as stated earlier could perhaps be mistaken for parody, the earnest way in which the video represents the longing of an oppressed people, and the graphic relentlessness with which West is willing to depict "the hood" make this Jesus – as silly or paradoxical as he may appear – a very real symbol of the yearning of a people who have yet to find their true Savior or Deliverer. But that this Jesus flanks Kanye everywhere throughout the video, by way of montage and the Kuleshov effect, in many ways also suggests that Kanye West *is* a type of Savior, or new Son of Man, that instead of bringing parables to the people, has chosen to bring albums and music videos.

This is an important consideration when examining the persona of Kanye West, since like for most musical performers, and to an even greater degree for actors and actresses, the persona is everything. Ever since MTV first launched its first music video in 1981, The Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star", music videos have very often been compared to the silent film and its diva-making capacity ("music video", wikipedia.com). Prince, Madonna, and Michael Jackson are irrefutable evidence of the careful equilibrium that must be maintained between one's persona and one's popularity as each of these celebrities have personas that rival that of any film star living or dead – a

persona that was largely constructed through the music video, the musical film, the concert, or some combination of all three.

Like Michael Jackson, based on Kanye West's very own language, it is evident that he is very much aware of the historic potential of the medium and perhaps like Michael Jackson intends to distinguish his work as a musical artist not only through his songs, but also through his music videos.<sup>74</sup> Throughout the making-of video he makes constant reference to the significance not only of his song through braggart asides, but also to the video – almost to the point of arrogance, I would say – if I were not so impressed with the work myself (West, Making-Of "Jesus Walks"). For the African-American, Kanye West is more than a musician. He is one of a handful of spokesman for a misrepresented and underrepresented people. Through his music, he has risen to be one who like both Isaiah and Jesus can state: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. And release

---

<sup>74</sup> Michael Jackson's "Thriller" is a 14 minute music video released on December 2, 1983, directed by John Landis. It cost \$800,000, the most expensive video of its time and probably is more a short independent film than a music video. But its radical approach to the then ubiquitous photograph while performing approach revolutionized the music video. His choice of film director John Landis was also ahead of its time, proving that Jackson understood the music video to be a format worthy of the direction of filmmakers recognized for both their command and appreciation for cinematic *mise en scène*. Jackson would repeat this approach by having self-proclaimed auteur director Martin Scorsese direct "Bad" in 1987, and press-proclaimed auteur director John Singleton direct "Remember the Time" in 1992, where by that time on MTV and other rival cable music stations, director's were now openly being credited under the title of their videos, ushering in a whole new era for auteur notions and the music video.

the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God [...]'' (Isaiah 61:1-2a).

Hence, like Jesus, Kanye West becomes Plato's worse nightmare as a potential destabilizer of the sovereign philosopher-king statutes of an ideal Republic. Like Jesus, West's narratives both in their telling and retelling as art forms threaten to challenge authority either because of their imitation and thus inferiority to the real or truth, or precisely because of their more authentic and superior access to the truth that, by definition, undermine an entire polity based on untruth – that is, that some human beings are sovereign, while others are not. As a perceived representative of the African-American through media, I believe this is why West could feel compelled to not only chastise George Bush for not caring about black people after the levees broke in Louisiana, but why he was chosen as a spokesman in the first place to participate in the benefits concert where this statement was made.<sup>75</sup>

Kanye West is a prime example of how for Generation Y, and to some degree Generation X, the artist in many ways has become a new sort of priesthood and clergy. And so while Billy Graham and Joel Olsteen may still have the numbers, and Catholicism and Orthodoxy, the tradition, these evangelists, preachers, and traditions, to date, have not tended to carry the voice

---

<sup>75</sup> In addition, this avatar-spokesman role that has been carved for Kanye also attests to why when his mother Donda died in November of 2007 a whole generation of African-American youth mourned with him as if it was their own mother, not so much due to the circumstances – which were as a result of complications from cosmetic surgery – but from the surrogate role Kanye, and his mother subsequently had played for a grateful African-American community.

of the African-American people toward a prophetic understanding of their destiny that is politically relevant or revolutionary in relationship to their currently oppressed status. Instead, many of these models have moderately urged the African-American towards a sort of middle-class, race-denying status quo. But with Jesus Walks we have Kanye West, a new type of Savior, a new herald, not peddling an image to be sold and worshipped, but embodying a bold, radical idea as both artist and activist. And so, as we bob our heads to “Jesus Walks” whether in our cars, on our ipods, or on our televisions, as the notion of a black sovereign becomes circulated in our films and the rest of our culture, it will not matter what color Jesus is, but instead only our acknowledgement of human political possibility, democracy, and our willingness to share the intimate expressions of our very own souls with the soul of the next man or woman.

Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” is very much about history making, not the possibility of the video being studied in some distant classroom one-hundred years in the future in Classic Hip Hop 101, but about history in the making...in the now. This makes it very difficult in any of the three videos for “Jesus Walks” to distinguish between the persona of Jesus Christ that West invokes and Christ himself. This is not because West has a Messiah complex, but because of the way in which the Negro as author, intellectual, and thinking artist can by definition arrest the American-project that has for four hundred years denied him his



rightful place as a co-sovereign under God along with the other nation-producing peoples.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, the question I am interested in, however, is what happens when the Negro manages to access Reason. By this, I mean what becomes of the Negro Intellectual in America and his ahistorical relationship to historical consciousness? One, it would no longer be taboo to imagine Jesus as a black man,<sup>77</sup> and two, at last, an African-American could sit in the White House without fearing for his life any more than his predecessors. The beginnings of this first moment is already manifest in the fact that though appearing “white,” the Jesus in “Jesus Walks” is actually a light-skinned African-American Danny Joe Sarge. This re-imagining of race and color and its representation is also matched by the fact that the hillbilly KKK member who lugs a burning cross in the Chris Milk version is also a light-skinned black man and Kanye West’s bodyguard. So as in 1915 with The Birth of a Nation, where white men in black face played mammies and lust-driven escaped slaves, by 2004, black men with light skin are playing white Jesuses, and hate-filled KKK members being opposed by God for their sacrilegious rage. The image of a burning cross

---

<sup>76</sup> The impending possibility of the Negro Sovereign, while signifying Apocalypse for the old order, simultaneously, promises a New Age beyond the nation – a kingdom of co-Sovereigns, and a true Brotherhood of Man. However, this inevitable reality cannot come to fruition until the empty rhetoric of the War on Terror turns on its head, and the President’s vain attempts to equate national interest with “good,” and national conflict of interest with “evil,” exceeding the demands of nationalism which in the end always becomes fascism.

<sup>77</sup> It is important to keep in mind that if Jesus is the Word, or *Logos* made flesh as the first chapter of John testifies, then, by definition, He is the very incarnation of Reason. It also stands to reason then, if America as a nation-state has historically stood in the way of recognizing the Negro’s access to reason, that America would likewise fail to accept any iconography that might indicate or suggest Reason Incarnate as a Negro.

tumbling down a hillside, just as the KKK member all but triumphantly sets it to the ground, is a powerful image which suggests the futility of a nation's rage. And when the hillbilly races down the hillside after the cross, only to pick it up and become consumed by its flames, the metaphor is complete as Kayne, dressed in white with flames behind him, and collar up, in angelic fashion roars:

Yo, we are at war  
We are at war with terrorism, racism,  
And most of all we are at war with ourselves  
God show me the way because the devil's trying to break me down  
You know what the Midwest is?  
Young and Restless  
Where restless niggas might snatch your necklace  
And next these niggas might jack your Lexus  
Somebody tell these niggas who Kanye West is  
I walk through the valley of the shadow where death is  
Top floor the view alone will you breathless Uhhh!  
Try to catch it - uhhh! It's kinda hard hard  
Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now check the method  
They be asking us questions, harass and arrest us  
Saying "we eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast"  
Huh? Y'all eat pieces of shit? What's the basis?  
(Kanye West, "Jesus Walks")

Just one of Kanye West's "Jesus Walks" videos works on so many levels in terms of the authentic, the real, and the fantastic; but the three of them as intertextual referents both to each other and other texts including the New Testament make it a remarkable locator as to a shifting understanding in terms of how both Jesus and the Sovereign can be represented in America. In terms of race, the actor playing Jesus is finally a black man, although one would never realize this fact due to the lightness of his skin. But the relatable protagonist of this abstract musical narrative becomes Kanye West himself, who approaches the

pulpit in the Street Version as just another man on the hustle with a story to tell – a story that virtually anyone can relate to. No matter where he goes, there Jesus is, guiding his steps; but he is just a sinner trying to make his way through a crooked system.

In the Chris Milk Version, the KKK member grapples with his own understanding of Jesus – an understanding that ultimately literally consumes him in flame. This version obviously speaks to the Right-Wing notions of an American Christianity, while perhaps not as drastic as the Ku Klux Klan in sentiment, certainly, relies on such us-them Jesus-dichotomies and identifications which remain predicated on hatred toward some human other. And so in the third video, West's sainthood derives from his honesty and relatability, functionally represented in the grit and low-budget aesthetic of Chicke Ozah and Coodie Simmons's film, and not the hypocrisy which imprisons the KKK protagonist of the second film and attempts to invoke a more authentic Jesus through the ageless trope of tragedy as opposed to example and enactment.

The first film, on the other hand, is very direct. A gang-banger, a prostitute, and a drunk march to the beat of an unknown drummer through the streets to a church where Kanye West preaches in a black tie and suit, against a white shirt, *a la* Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X:

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers  
To the victims of Welfare for we lignin in hell here, hell yeah  
Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly  
I know he hear me when my feet get weary  
Cause we're the almost nearly extinct

We rappers are role models we rap we don't think  
(Kanye West, "Jesus Walks")  
No longer a hustling drug dealer, or an angry harbinger of God's judgment, in the first "Jesus Walks" video Kanye West operates as avatar or spokesman for God, rallying the seemingly sincere cries of a congregation that appears genuinely moved. As with The Blood of Jesus, one's sense of the authentic in "Jesus Walks" when it comes to the congregational experience, especially in the Church Version plays with a greater degree of sincerity than the stagey, narrative-dependent, but still moving equivalent moment in The Pursuit of Happyness referenced earlier.<sup>78</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that Michael Haussmann, according to the Behind-the-Scenes video, inspected over fifty churches before finally selecting the one that was chosen for the Church version of the "Jesus Walks" video. And I might also add that since West had the wherewithal to invite the congregation's actual members to participate in the video, the authenticity of the "worship" which is photographed is something interesting to consider. Since it is being directed by a filmmaker and not a minister or priest, is it real and genuine, or is it something else? If it is something else, what else it? If it is possible for worship to be insincere, why do the participants in Kanye West's video - me having

---

<sup>78</sup> This stageyness, though to a lesser degree may also apply to the congregational singing of the works of Tyler Perry, who from Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2004) to Why Did I Get Married? (2007), characteristically represents African-Americans as a Jesus-worshipping people. Although accurate overall, many of Perry's films while adequate in their depiction of dilemma of the "God-fearing" African-American imprisoned by the black experience, offers resolutions that all too often equate to merely participating in the singing experience of a "worship," that seems counter to what Jesus intended in John 4:21-26, where he implies that his true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth, and not in a particular place or space.

visited many Baptist and charismatic churches – strike me as being so authentic? Is my observation merely subjective? And if so, how is this subjectivity any different from the subjectivity from that of any other worship participant? What I am asking, and what I think Kanye West’s Church Version of the video invites me to ask, is what authenticates a worship experience, or what West may call a “walk” with Jesus. Does it really matter if you are a murderer, a drug dealer, a pimp, or a prostitute? Is it not the walk that authenticates the devotee, and not vice versa? So though Haussmann as a filmmaker instigates this “worship,” it is a mistake to invalidate it as inauthentic for the music video self-reflexively becomes that which it represents – a catchy, unforgettable drumbeat that invites whoever might choose, to walk toward what they understand to be truth – which in this particular instance, happens to be Jesus. But even with the Church video, the most complex and cinematic of the West videos, Jesus worship – or less didactically, liberation and freedom for the African-American soul plagued by the angst of double-consciousness – takes on many forms such as doves, an elderly man with angel wings, and even Kanye West himself as minister.

The Church Version of Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” begs the question as to whether this photographed worship is real or not. And since this film is a music video, and not a three-act narrative driven movie, this is a more complicated question, because music and harmony, and not the image ultimately lies at the center of West’s project. What also makes West’s video unique is that instead of trying to recreate and thus inevitably fall short of simulating what

Jesus's time might actually have looked like, West uses what a religious conservative might deem a secular video to reexamine what a literal walk with Jesus might look like in the twenty-first century, ultimately transmitting an undeniable verisimilitude and urgency that strict narrative approaches to the Jesus gospel have often lacked. "Jesus Walks" is a dynamic work of cinema. This remains true whether one considers the formalistic and flashy – but simultaneously desperately earnest, Church Version; or the most flawed, and forgettable Chris Milk Version – though probably the most ambitious in terms of ideology and its critique of KKK Christianity; or the simple and yet most resonating to the essence of the song's lyrics, Street Version – which does not merely attempt to recreate some past moment from the four gospels, and therefore construct an icon to tyrannize all who might take Jesus at his word in John 14:12, when he states "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." Instead, "Jesus Walks" both through its triple-threat dialogic nature with itself and with the viewer, embraces the icon, transforms it, and reenergizes through a conductive process that empowers Kanye's lyrics with the same potency as any King James English-speaking pastor, in a time-transcending manner of both literal and metaphorical harmony akin to that of a slave song.

Thus, a Negro Time Traveler must be a writer or artifact producer of some sort, and his particular method would be his particular time machine. Such is the case not only with W.E.B. Du Bois, who worked tirelessly not only at writing

in his efforts to *contradict* a history that denied the “rhythmic cry of the slave,” but also Kanye West, who through his recorded songs and cinematic music videos, labors toward rendering *extinct* the stereotype that Negroes are a “people whose ignorance [is] not simply of letters, but of life itself” (Du Bois 178, 68). David Levering Lewis, Du Bois’s Pulitzer-Prize winning biographer, observes that “[t]he author of The Souls of Black Folk comported himself as the avatar of a race whose troubled fate he was predestined to interpret and direct” while Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says that “in so very many ways, he was ‘the Negro’” (Lewis 2, Gates xi).<sup>79</sup> And without overstating the obvious, Kanye West in the moment of prophet/singer and not actor as recorded cinematically via the techniques of the music video suggests the possibility of a new type of avatar. A cinematic avatar that points both backward and forward toward the *logos* or truth that Jesus has come to represent for so many through what historically has been called prophecy, but what scientifically through the stabilized time and space of the cinema might also be called time travel as it can be testified to *vis a vis* the space both between and before the gaze.

To determine how appropriate Time Traveler is in terms of phraseology, I suggest a more thorough unpacking of the term “prophecy.” But how is this

---

<sup>79</sup> And, as if by some uncanny working of fate and destiny, his own soul departed from this planet on the eve of the March on Washington in 1963, almost as if to say that only then at precisely that moment, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his dream in terms of Civil Rights, was his own mission fulfilled. That DuBois saw things happening in America before they happened is almost certain.

term “prophecy” useful in a discussion of time travel? In describing Du Bois’s prophetic calling, Cornel West explains:

For Du Bois, the glorious life of the mind was a highly disciplined way of life and an intensely demanding way of struggle that facilitated transit between his study and the streets; whereas present-day black scholars tend to be mere academicians, narrowly confined to specialized disciplines with little sense of the broader life of the mind and hardly any engagement with battles in the streets. (West 40)

Undoubtedly, Cornel West clearly sees Du Bois as “race-transcending” prophet, but what happens when this biographical position is complicated by Du Bois’s own ability to produce double-voiced texts that remain “timeless” – both in the sense that many have gone on to become classics, and in the sense that though Du Bois is now gone, his texts remain, projecting his consciousness onward into the future to engage any such reader who would dare summon him (West 38-39)? I would even argue the same for Kanye West, if not in terms of his persona, certainly in the possibilities he suggests through the cinema – where the avatar can be situated and recognized in space and time as more than mere image – but also as an intelligence or genius flooded with the literal light of some Inhuman Reason beyond the mind of the young rapper recorded in celluloid.

But while “Jesus Walks” via cinema, through the implied relationship of Kanye West’s persona with that of Jesus, suggests a new possibility for



imagining notions of sovereignty in terms of the African-American, Jean Claude La Marre sidesteps mere implications and approaches the subject much more directly in Color of the Cross (2006). In this Jesus film, Jean Claude La Marre at last demonstrates what up until this point in the discussion could only be considered through theory – that the only way to understand Jesus’s theological message is to first understand his political message. And yet, in order for one living in the United States in 2006 to understand Jesus’s political message, one first had to understand how futile it was to imagine Jesus as a blonde-haired blue-eyed white male. In fact, not only is such an imagination futile, it is a precise example of the very spirit, iconography, and political stronghold that Jesus through his message set out not only to radically resist, but ultimately through his Second Advent, or *Paraousia*,<sup>80</sup> to finally overcome. Therefore, no film demonstrates the state-defying, history-countering, race-transcending, time-traveling possibilities of the Negro better than La Marre’s Color of the Cross.

When asked, “Is this historically accurate?” by Alan Colmes, Jean Claude La Marre about Color of the Cross – a film where Jesus is portrayed by an African-American, who also happens to be the film’s director – responds, “I think one would surmise that Jesus is probably a lot darker than has previously been portrayed. I think we are little more historically accurate than let’s say someone like Mel Gibson was in Passion of the Christ. But again color is not the

---

<sup>80</sup> *Paraousia* is often defined as the resulting presence with as invoked by an appearance, so from a certain perspective this is quite a fitting description of the cinema, a space or place where it has been determined as a means by which one can access and even be with characters and protagonists through their mere appearance.

issue here. What is the issue here is the message" (Hannity and Colmes, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY-lPdat2ZE>). And so finally, via the medium of cable television, the question of race and the identity and iconography of Jesus can be discussed openly, and not theoretically through a film that blatantly challenges the standard *mise en scène* of the Jesus film through that of its own. That historicity becomes a point of contention for Alan Colmes on his Fox program regarding La Marre's film is quite problematic, since the historicity of any Jesus film can be regarded with skepticism due to infidelities regarding such things as language, Jewish culpability, the morality of Mary Magdalene, the fashion and technique of the crucifixion, and even whether or not Jesus was capable of performing miracles.

However, few scholars today will doubt the existence of Jesus. Instead, what is historical and the question of historicity as in most narratives of past events is not so much a matter of truth as it is a matter of perspective, and a matter of the particular protagonist and ideology that the historian wants to champion. Yet, that an African-American championing an African-American perspective could be met with such simultaneous resistance and indifference is both tragic and indicative of the fact that America's history to date has not been written by or for African-Americans.<sup>81</sup> But this would make sense since the

---

<sup>81</sup> Color of the Cross had an extremely limited U.S. release domestically, and by most accounts did not even gross a profit in the United States.

process of writing itself is a type of time-determining history making – and dare I say it, even time travel.<sup>82</sup>

And so when Colmes asks, “Is it true and do you contend that race is one of the issues Jesus was persecuted [for]?”, La Marre responds:

“We believe that race in this film is used as a metaphor for Jesus’s station in life. We believe that he would have been a member of the disenfranchised, a member of the lowly class. He did not come as a high-ranking member of his community; he came as a member of the populous. [...] We know that his message fundamentally is why he was persecuted – his radical interpretation of the Torah. But one could surmise that the source of the message – the messenger himself – being a dark-skinned Jew may have

---

<sup>82</sup> Though I am speaking metaphorically in terms of time travel and not suggesting that writers, black or otherwise, can literally traverse the ether of time while still within their physical bodies as science fiction has suggested, such a description is quite useful when describing a narrative constructed to be interpreted as history, even in literal terms. And when one considers that the “facts” claimed by authors literally *can* transcend time by way of the book and the process of writing along the trajectory of what is conceptualized as history, but more adequately could be framed as human consciousness, all writers in a certain ways become time travelers. Consider this quote from the popular horror and science fiction author Stephen King:

My name is Stephen King. I’m writing the first draft of this part at my desk [. . .] on a snowy morning in December of 1997. [. . .] This book is scheduled to be published in the late summer or early fall of 2000. If that’s how things work out, then you are somewhere downstream the timeline from me. . .but you’re quite likely in your own far-seeing place, the one where you go to receive telepathic messages. [. . .] We’ll have to perform our mentalist routine not just over distance but time as well, yet that presents no real problem; if we can still read Dickens, Shakespeare, and [. . .] Herodotus, I think we can manage the gap between 1997 and 2000.

Or in this case, between 1997 and 2008. King notes, as many have before him, that both the writing and the reading process demonstrate the interconnectedness of consciousness through and against time, be it historical consciousness or otherwise.

contributed to Jesus' death... (Hannity and Colmes,  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY-lPdat2ZE>)

In this respect, La Marre states that Jesus's message was fundamentally about the nature of sovereignty more so even than religion, or theological inquiry. From their prophets, the Jews understood their destiny to be that of a super-kingdom to which all nations would pay tribute, but in Jesus's time they were oppressed by the Romans. Caesar was their legal High Priest, and an Edomite named Herod had been appointed their king. What the typical Jew understood and expected eschatologically was an overthrow of Roman rule, and this is what they understood to be the Messiah's mission. But since this apparently did not occur with Jesus's historical crucifixion, logic dictated that Jesus could not have been the Messiah. And yet, even Jewish assumption here is akin to the Western assumption of superiority since it is predicated on race and national identity as opposed to one's direct inalienable relationship with God. And so like the Negro, Jesus's project and sense of self clashed iconoclastically with the powers that be; but in addition, his sovereign claim of a "kingdom within" and a "kingdom at hand" also trumped that of his very own people. In this respect, nearly all Jesus films fall short, because the filmmakers fail to represent the double-bind of Jesus's dilemma. This is partially due in America to the fact that unlike in Judea in the first century, it was understood that politics and religion were one in the same, while in the U.S., the illusion of the difference between the

two makes it more difficult to address the very political nature of Jesus's mission in the face of a system of Caesars who uniquely claimed the title, "Lord."

If one cannot understand Jesus in his political context, it is impossible to understand him in terms of a theological one, because inevitably the Jews were both a religious and political people, and the theology proceeded from their politics first, and not vice versa. And so when La Marre tells Sean Hannity, "This film is a fundamentally American film. [...] It is the ultimate display of democracy...spiritual democracy," this is not merely question-dodging mumbo jumbo on the part of La Marre as Hannity would have it, but the very heart of the matter. If America, and American cinema is truly the apex of democracy and freedom of speech and the press, then what better way to express such a notion than a black Jesus? But the reality is that while democracy and the sovereignty of American citizenship is the ideal upon which this nation is built, there still exists within our nation certain strongholds of White Supremacy that must be systematically exposed and deconstructed, first within America, and then throughout the world – since much of the same damage globally has now been inflicted upon the world by America and its corporations in the name of a commerce that has constructed a new type of international slave through the slave wage.

The king and queen are no longer living and breathing as they were with the French Revolution; now the monarchy is merely an image, an idea still clung to in Great Britain – but this image must be purged by the real – not simply with

images, but with truth...and power. With an unrelenting narrative that rewrites history with the effectiveness of a paradox-inducing time traveler. And in terms of cinema, Color of the Cross is that fatal blow. Throughout the overly brief and sensational Fox interview, it is almost maddening to see La Marre, who speaks in pristine American English with a stronger diction and command and presence than either Hannity or Colmes, maintain his unfazed posture, with his perfectly dimpled red tie, while both Hannity and Colmes take turns taking shots at him, repeatedly changing the subject before he has an opportunity to get a word in or otherwise spark an authentic intellectual engagement. Fully aware of the political implications of his work, both Hannity and Colmes attempt to undermine the sophistication of La Marre's project through playground rhetorical techniques such as cutting off his sentences, changing tones to that of the threatening or almost irritated and cocksure, and ending the segment just as it seems La Marre begins to gain logical ground. This "public" TV interview is a tragic example of how unopen some mainstream media is when it comes to seriously analyzing the image of Jesus democratically. This resistance, of course, stems from the fact that the apprehension of this image *as is* remains paramount to the White Supremacist project of America.<sup>83</sup> But at the same time, that such a film has finally been produced, and is being talked about at all, by definition,

---

<sup>83</sup> That this White Supremacist project exist in the United States is not the question. The real question is how much influence does the Project still have over the American people. It stands to reason, that since the images are changing, so too must the forces behind them.

also marks the beginning of the end for an American sovereignty that can only be imagined in the form of a white male.<sup>84</sup>

For a brief moment during the Hannity and Colmes interview, a visual reference is made to a digitally-constructed facial representation from what they refer to as a “Discovery Channel documentary”, and La Marre is asked whether or not he agrees with the rendering. Now I must note that in my opinion this rendering appears more like the old GI-Joe figures of the early 1970s that frequently caught lint in their beards, or some sort of brown-skinned Cro-Magnon man being developed as the next Boss for a fantasy role-playing video game than a first century Israeli. But La Marre exercises more tact than I would have in such a situation. Quickly searching for words, La Marre responds: “He was, yes, somewhere in that neighborhood...yes...and I’m sure they will attest that is not a 100% accurate depiction of Jesus. [...] But we know he was of darker skin” (La Marre, Hannity and Colmes).

But if one takes a closer look at the particular documentary from which Hannity and Colmes have drawn their admittedly questionable portrait of Jesus, it is actually entitled Jesus: The Complete Story (2004) and was produced by the BBC. It was later released in parts for the Discovery Channel and, re-narrated by Avery Brooks, but is now available in its entirety on DVD at many retail outlets.

---

<sup>84</sup> That Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton would not only put in their respective bids as Presidential candidates the following year, but that they would also prove to be reasonable contenders could be interpreted as an unrelated coincidence, or the natural progression of a sovereign ideal in America that especially since the polarizing implications of The Passion of the Christ, has begun to change.

Their computer rendering composite is quite alarming because, in my opinion, the CGI bust looks so subhuman, that their Jesus appears to be more a caveman with medium complexion than the actual sculpted human busts we have from that era and earlier as a matter of historical record. In addition, the idea of constructing what Jesus might have looked like from skulls of people at the time – particularly Jews – supposes somehow that anatomically Jews differed from other humans – a supposition that is as equally preposterous as it is dangerous.<sup>85</sup> A more likely, though perhaps not intentional rationale for this Cro-Magnon Jesus, might be as a subtle attempt to present an alternative conception of Jesus so strident, that viewers quite naturally would in their minds come to reinforce the more systematic *goy* representations that have so predominated the Western world – that is, the Jesus we are all comfortable with.

Yet, a more telling aspect of the overall unreliability of the computer-rendered Jesus that Jesus: The Complete Story presents are the actual reenactments within the diegesis of this documentary themselves. Conversely, these reenactments are some of the most accurate and effective that I have seen in terms of what Jesus and the apostles might have looked like. And yet because of how the documentary works as a format, the computer image is presented as being more historical, indicating a tragic moment in cinema where the

---

<sup>85</sup> Even if such a skeletal difference had existed at one time, which I believe is anti-Semitic to even suggest, the historical record of the Hebrew Bible indicates that Hebrews and subsequently Jews have ultimately intermarried, or been forced into intermarriage through respective slavery to the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks, and Romans, therefore, indicating at least in part that such distinction would hardly be detectable two-thousand years after the first century.



computer-generated digital image can be regarded with more authenticity than an image cast and captured by man and of men. Max Von Sydow's icon-like presentation in the prologue to The Greatest Story Ever Told was the anticipation of this degradation of the real, in terms of how one might imagine and engage Christ, and thus the *Logos*, independently and for themselves; but the digital image in Jesus: The Complete Story is perhaps the final and desolating simulacrum. That this image coincides with probably the most realistic and authentic cinematic portrait of Jesus in terms of imitation in other parts of the documentary, since the Jesus here is a youthful, Middle-Eastern man with bronze skin, bears witness to a truth more through cinematic confession via montage than prophetic assertion.

Additionally, via the Kuleshov effect, Jesus: The Complete Story now invites the viewer to either dialogically reject both images and imagine their own innovative icon, or retroactively reinforce the more popular Anglo image that has so commonly circulated in America. Yet, since Jesus: The Complete Story is a documentary, it is an important film because like Color of the Cross, this film rejects the notion of a white Jesus, and, in fact, rejects the notion of imagining Jesus in merely one way altogether – instead offering not only two visual presentations of Jesus by way of reenactment and CGI, but also through a litany of oral narratives provided by both scholars and clergy, as complimented by a conglomeration of international artwork and iconography from the past 1,900 or so years. Undoubtedly, Jesus: The Complete Story is a complex and relevant

film. In fact, I would say that it is a groundbreaking film, and stands alone probably as the most authentic cinematic presentation of Jesus produced to date, in terms of the image. This authenticity stems in part from the dialogic manner in which the film engages the viewer – not tyrannically through linear and rigid images and plotlines characteristic of narrative Hollywood film – but dialectically, through a conversation that invites the viewer to consider and imagine not only what Jesus might have looked like, but what his motivations were, and how and why his mission was interpreted so radically by his generation, not just in terms of theology, but also politics. In Jesus: The Complete Story, Jesus is described as “trying to break down barriers that separated people – all these tremendous barriers. Jesus is a barrier breaker. Now when you attack a barrier, you run into the problem of being destroyed by its collapse” (Jesus: The Complete Story, 2004).

Jesus: The Complete Story does not merely speak to future films in terms of how Jesus might be represented in terms of casting – though there is evidence of a new movement towards more ethnically accurate actors and actresses, as is the case with The Nativity Story (2006) – a theatrically-released, beautifully photographed film about Joseph and Mary’s courtship, the three magi, Herod and his maniacal paranoia, and the subsequent birth of the Messiah. Obviously prompted by intellectual discussions about the apparent racism that has so stifled previous Biblical films, The Nativity Story presents a strong and handsome cast of Middle Eastern, African, and Asiatic performers, who both in

language, accent, and appearance construct a milieu that is more imitative of what one was most likely to see in the first century than nearly every Jesus or gospel film before it in terms of history.<sup>86</sup> And by that same token, in terms of the scientific, unlike in Ben-Hur (1959), where the star of Bethlehem appears as this effervescent floating, and moving star that can be beheld by everyone on earth below until it stops in order to hover directly above the manger, in The Nativity Story the star of Bethlehem instead appears as an astrological<sup>87</sup> sign that can only be interpreted by the shrewdest of astrologers.<sup>88</sup> But even this idea of the star of Bethlehem as an astrological sign in terms of the academic community popularized by Michael Molnar is first introduced in terms of cinema through Jesus: The Complete Story, and subsequently built upon by The Nativity Story, where the three wise men calculate the birth of Jesus by studying horoscope-based mechanical contraptions and reading the Hebrew Scriptures,

---

<sup>86</sup> One Night with the King (2006) on the other hand, is an example of a film that openly resists the forward thinking movement instigated by such films as Jesus: The Complete Story and The Nativity Story in terms of hiring Middle-Eastern-looking actors to play Biblical – and in this case – Persian roles. Not that there are not non-Anglo actors in this film, because there are: Tony “Tiny” Lister, Omar Shariff, and John Rhys-Davies. The problem is that Esther or Hadassah, played by Tiffany Dupont, performs her role with such American teeny-bopper verve that you almost expect her at any moment to start texting, or at least to begin complain because her ipod doesn’t work. In this film, audience relatability and identification wins out of over history, or cultural authenticity. This is not new for the Biblical film, but in contrast to such efforts as that of Kayne West, Jesus: The Complete Story, and Color of the Cross, this tired strategy now appears exceedingly moot, and unfortunately there is no greater proof of this than One Night with the King.

<sup>87</sup> It is important to keep in mind that in the first century astronomy and astrology were one science.

<sup>88</sup> According to Jesus: The Complete Story, Molnar argues that in 6 BC, Aries would have been the sign that represented Judea. On April 17, Saturn, and the Sun entered Aries, as did the Moon, which eclipsed to reveal Jupiter. Such a rare alignment in the sign of Aries would have symbolized the birth of a super-king in Aries, or Judea, as the movement of Jupiter always indicated the activity of kings. That all of this activity would culminate in Jupiter rising as a Morning Star at dawn, for any astrologer in the East, this could have been interpreted as a significant political, and perhaps even spiritual event.

not merely staring at the sky with the naked eye. This is yet another indicator of Jesus: The Complete Story's impact on future films about Jesus, and how the past four and five years have marked a decided shift in the representation of Jesus in cinema.

But beyond astronomy, there is cinema where space and time are locked or synched together in such a way that they can be scientifically observed again and again through mechanical-reproducibility. This is beyond philosophy, because philosophy remains open-ended and inconclusive regarding Truth as it can be observed in space and time. Cinema on the other hand, in the hands of man, can suggest many "truths" that remain fixed and true within the diegesis of a particular cinematic text. And now space and time are apprehended in order to bear witness to that which man sees or wants to see, or wants a viewer to see in his diegetic world and not the other way around. And so immediately one has to grapple with the power of iconography in cinema, as one's mind either resists or comes to accept not only the diegesis of the world presented in cinema, but also how these images inform and guide the mind in the world of space and time beyond cinema. This world of space and time beyond the cinema is what I have often referred to as the space between the gaze, because in this space, while one finds oneself between the cinema and other cinemas, one still discovers within the limbo of this space that it is the cinema that has

informed this space as well.<sup>89</sup> Such considerations are fascinating when it comes to the figure of Jesus, a figure who according to John 14:6 claimed to be the Truth, and therefore, the ultimate Sovereign.

And no film better articulates this sovereignty and the time traveling possibilities of the narrative Jesus constructed than Color of the Cross. As Color of the Cross opens, a lone cross – distinct from the images of at least two others crosses accompanying that which we get from the New Testament – sits atop a hill as a brooding a thematic image. And then, a few minutes in to the film one sees Nazareth, contextualized by a subtitle which reads “33 AD”.<sup>90</sup> But though the film’s conclusion is ingenious, even I must admit that Color of the Cross is a near brilliant film that gets off only to a shaky start. In its attempts to remain relevant to America, some of the accents comes off as overly-acted, unrealistic, or just plain bad in a much different way, than how Scorsese managed to distinguish his various accents for The Last Temptation of the Christ. In terms of its *mise en scène* and production value, Color of the Cross takes some getting used to. The costuming and the sets are believable enough, but instinctively

---

<sup>89</sup> What I am talking about here is “panopticonsciousness”. By definition, if there is a space between the gaze, then a viewer who remains aware of this space, not just in relation to one moment in cinema, but to many moments in cinema – and in relation to the panoply of moments constructed by the overarching history of cinema – would consequently find his or herself aware of the many eyes or gazes, or possibilities for spaces, in relation to those presented by cinema.

<sup>90</sup> But even a slight detail such as this reveals a more conservative reading of history since most scholars believe Christ to have been crucified closer to 30 AD, since the Gregorian calendar has since been argued by many to start 3 or 4 years before the birth of Christ. But La Marre’s overt leaning on the conservative Gregorian date, indicates his attempt to provide a narrative that is consistent and not at odds with the most traditional of historical readings of Jesus’ life in terms of the facts. This factual consistency could be argued as a useful strategy since in terms of the image itself, La Marre is well aware of how repugnant his protagonist will be to the average American audience.

because I know that this film centers around a black Jesus, I want it to be flawless, but immediately my own sense of flawlessness is disappointed in the first act by poorly-performed lines of dialogue, referencing, “This dark-skinned Jew,” and other overly didactic slurs from white actors.

While the female lover in Song of Songs does ask Solomon not to look down upon her since she is dark, I am not certain that one-thousand years later in the time of Jesus that complexion was as much of a political issue as it is today in America amongst the Jews as a people in the first century while under Roman rule. Even among African-Americans, you have those who are dark-skinned, and those who are light-skinned – so light-skinned, in fact, that whites do not even know that they are black. But nothing in the gospels or even in the extra-Biblical records seems to indicate a racial-based caste system for Jews. Everything had to do with one’s reading of the Torah, and to what degree one submitted to the authority of Rome and the Edomite Herod-puppet king.<sup>91</sup>

But this is not to say that La Marre naively invokes race without some sense of its American interpretive context, as I would say occurs with Norman Jewison’s Jesus Christ: Superstar where Judas is African-American and Mary Magdalene is a Native American, while Jesus is blonde-haired and blue-eyed. Instead, La Marrre, being an African-American himself, acutely comprehends not only the political subtleties of race in the United States – not only amongst

---

<sup>91</sup> This non-racial, but Torah-based interpretative system would fundamentally mark a Jew in the first century as either being a Zealot, a Pharisee, a Sadducee, or an Essene.

African-Americans – but also how these subtleties can be explored, challenged, interrogated, and complicated through the *mise en scène* and images of cinema. La Marre himself, a chocolate-skinned African-American portrays Jesus; but shrewdly he also makes sure that Judas is a dark-skinned African-American. This is a point overlooked by many critics, who can only understand race as an issue of black and white, and not what it is – a political caste system that while in the U.S. finds its most extreme distinction between the Anglo-white and the African-American, still even amongst African-Americans plays out as a means of division, based on hue, skin tone, and complexion.<sup>92</sup> As a highly insightful African-American, La Marre instinctively understands that if Judas were light-skinned or white, the film would immediately fall apart, because now one tired racial trope would merely be replaced with another one. But now, instead of it being impossible for Jesus to be black, the thematic assertion of La Marre's film would be that Satan and evil must come to be associated not only with white, but with light-skin. So instead of tearing down the icon of exclusive white sovereignty, only a counter icon of exclusive black sovereignty would be promulgated. And in the absence of power, or a community backing such an icon, the statement, idea, and image would be rendered impotent, and in effect, achieving the opposite effect – that is, proving the durability and the power of the white-Anglo, sovereign Jesus icon.

---

<sup>92</sup> Spike Lee does an excellent job of pointing out this reality of distinction between blacks along the lines of skin complexion in his film School Daze (1987), as does the PBS documentary Wiley Avenue Days (1992).

But this is not to say that La Marre does not make use of light skin, or even whites among his disciples. The film does just this and even makes use of an obligatory character-development sequence where it is made more than obvious that Jesus's twelve apostles are in fact of many races, white and black. It is also important to note that Peter is a light-skinned black, and toward the end of the film, in a moment reminiscent of Kubrick's Spartacus when Peter in order to protect his master claims to be Jesus, stating "I am he," a Roman guard responds almost humorously, "You're not black enough."<sup>93</sup> And while I understand what La Marre intends here, I suspect that it is not humor – but even as humor, a very potent signifying notion of what Jesus ought not or ought to be is exposed in the mind of the viewer even before one has time to think. This is the value of humor – how it speaks to our psyches before our minds have time to reason.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> "But he's black!" another line in the film, while humorous to me, is a very real protest that has been uttered over or under the breath of the European for hundreds of years. This moment is funny to me for several reasons: one, it is either unconvincingly acted, or so ridiculous a protest that it is hard not to be funny; but it cannot merely be written off as poor writing since almost one hundred years of Jesus films seem to reinforce the notion that Jesus cannot be imagined as black.

<sup>94</sup> The past eighteen months was a revolutionary in terms of the interplay between race and humor, especially in regard to the word "nigger". Michael Richard's outburst now forever memorialized on YouTube, and Don Imus' 2007 "nappy-headed hoes" comment – referring to the Rutgers Women's Basketball team – both speak to how even public humor has come to a point of accountability with regards to the African-American. In terms of sovereignty, this would make the African-American a new type of sovereign, one intolerant of a jester other than himself, and one who is unable to laugh at himself unless he is the one cracking the jokes. Even a tertiary look at such a phenomenon so long as it continues indicates that it is not sovereignty, but a type of creative fascism that African-Americans may unwittingly be pushing the nation towards, where Hip Hop artists through their unaccountable usage of "nigger" and "hoe" become the new Nazis – not through the extermination of the Jew or fascism, but through extermination of free speech and the true white artist, since unlike the Hip Hop artist, he cannot speak his mind.



Yet, La Marre's film is not subtle, and for this reason it will put off more people than necessary with its overly preachy message. There is a moment in the film where La Marre's Jesus kneels down to embrace a black sheep in an over the top aside, where La Marre as Jesus states: "Such beautiful fur. If only mankind would embrace that which is different." However, I would say that Color of the Cross is relevant because of its assertion of race since race as a politic in our own times is such a critical obstacle to the core of Jesus's message: brotherly love, tolerance, and the universal divinity and sovereignty of all mankind since "the kingdom of God is within."<sup>95</sup>

But like many filmmakers before him, La Marre also manages to fall into the similar traps of his textual reading of the gospels which based on his "33 AD" subtitle, one should assume are more literal than, say, a novel-based Last Temptation of Christ. And so, as with most Jesus films, Magdalene here too is a prostitute of some sort, and worse yet, *a la* Cecil B. DeMille in The King of Kings involved in an inexplicable affair with Judas that can either be interpreted as a rape, or a date-rape based on the fact that the two have had a previous relationship. Magdalene's line in Color of the Cross, "Fine...but you lack a feast your master has yet to enjoy," to Judas before their sex act is especially problematic and puzzling. One, that she agrees, makes the act less a rape and more a complicit act of passion; and two, because it is Magdalene stating that

---

<sup>95</sup> In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus states: "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Jesus has yet to enjoy this feast, it is uncertain whether she refers to her own body, or the consummation of Christ with the Church itself since in many traditions and in even in the book of Revelation this is described as a marriage.<sup>96</sup> Logically, within the diegesis of the text, Magdalene cannot be referring to herself, because the film only focuses on the last forty eight hours of his life, and if Jesus had not “known” Magdalene up to that time, the narrative is so fast paced there is hardly a point, nor a motivation for Jesus to take time out from his suffering in order to copulate with Magdalene prior to going to the cross. And so this line in many ways intertextually speaks to The Da Vinci Code and films of similar leanings which want to make Jesus and Magdalene lovers. They are not lovers here. La Marre’s Jesus has either never known sex at all, or at least for certain, has never known Magdalene, and so the possibility of a human bloodline through this curious moment between Judas and Magdalene overrides that possibility. Implicitly, the film seems to indicate that if Magdalene does end up with child, the father would be Judas and not Jesus – which is a far cry from other counter readings that began to receive attention with Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln’s Holy Blood, Holy Grail, and skyrocketed in popularity with Dan Brown’s novel, The Da Vinci Code.

And so, La Marre’s Jesus consciously seems to not only be resisting the racist portraits of Jesus as presented by previous Hollywood films, but also

---

<sup>96</sup> Traditionally, in Christianity the Church is often referred to as the Bride of Christ and the second advent of Christ is commonly understood to be the marriage of the Lamb.

certain “New Age” assertions about the Christ as providing mankind with a bloodline that might ultimately rule the world through an overt political kingdom. He not only achieves this by making it clear that his Jesus had no such relationship with Magdalene, but also through flashback, where a twelve-year-old Jesus amazes the scribes with his wisdom, stating that he knows these things because he *is* the Son of God. And so La Marre’s Jesus is not an avatar who has to go through a series of initiations in order to fully realize his destiny as being tested and trained by a series of masters at various mysteries schools between twelve and thirty.<sup>97</sup> La Marre’s Jesus is the Word of God, certain of his destiny even at the time of his bar-mitzvah. His calling is not something learned and confirmed via men, or through secret rites, but instead prophetic, and something he knows through revelation directly from God...his Father.

But when La Marre reference’s his “Father” it is not in the static, Shakespearean tones of a performer and preacher, or even priest – but more like that of a lost orphan speaking of a very real personality, that though physically distant remains very present in his heart and mind. But it is precisely the use of language, not narratively, but politically, in Color of the Cross which compounds and reinforces this inhuman, time-defying characterization, since as proven by the Hannity and Colmes interview that La Marre is capable of

---

<sup>97</sup> There exist many texts and manuscripts that suggest that Jesus was trained by various mystical traditions between the ages of 13 and 30, and that this is why all four gospels are silent about this period of his life. Some of these texts include: H. Spencer Lewis’ The Mystical Life of Jesus, Elizabeth Claire Prophet’s The Lost Years of Jesus, and Levi’s The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus, among others.

speaking without the slightest hint of an accent. And yet his Jesus sounds more Caribbean than he does Hebrew or Jewish, in terms of cadences and pronunciations. There are others in the film both black and white who speak English with Hassidic, Aramaic, or Israeli accents, but La Marre's Jesus is different. He is resolute, and even his language speaks to the fact that he is from another place, which at the language level, whether consciously or unconsciously hearkens forward to the West Indian slave trade.

By the same token, La Marre's Roman's are unconvincing. Unlike Wyler or Scorsese who made them British, or even Gibson, who made them brutal, and almost ape-like as they barked Latin, La Marre's Romans speak ordinary English. Perhaps this is deliberate, as if to make culpable every American, in terms of the ahistorical placement of the Negro, or African-American. Yet, this does not work for me precisely because the other accents are so strong among the Jews who would condemn La Marre's Jesus, among his apostles, and among the everyday black Jews who participate in a compelling Passover-montage sequence.<sup>98</sup> That here, La Marre, directing his actors to speak Hebrew and not English for the necessary prayers in a cinematic moment that is quite stirring, photographs a potentially unique and even sacred moment that, by definition, cannot be repeated in time and space is unique precisely because of both space and time. What is this sacred moment? Well, this sacred moment could be

---

<sup>98</sup> I must say that there is something potent to be said for the image of a black family coming together to celebrate the Passover, invoking not only the Exodus, but the expectation of a deliverance from four-hundred years of bondage in Egypt, historically, Rome, cinematically, and now America via the space between the gaze.

perceived by some to be the moment where a black family, playing Jews, utter a Hebrew prayer<sup>99</sup> of acknowledgement of God's deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt, while they themselves as African-American remain in the 399<sup>th</sup> year of their own bondage since La Marre's film is released in 2006, and since Jamestown officially commenced in 1607 what would eventually evolve into the slave trade for this nation. This is a moment that based in time, can never be repeated again, in order to be photographed or contextualized.

This estrangement of God's people in relation to the ruling super-state cannot be ignored as a sort of prerequisite for prophetic intervention. For the super-state by definition will always want to write a history that displaces the human, for a true testament of the human would level the global playing field and undo any national agenda apart from perhaps the Torah. Therefore, in Color of the Cross with a black Jesus, La Marre presents Jesus as a Negro Time Traveler via narrative, and story – not necessarily as some sort of logic-transcending, miraculous-magician, physics-defying, death-dodger. This is a potent and trumping reading of Jesus because now the question of miracles and resurrection becomes almost irrelevant. Yet, there is at least one miracle in the cinematic narrative, so this is not an irreverent or faithless portrait that a Fundamentalist might completely discredit. But more importantly, there is no

---

<sup>99</sup> Prayer most often occurs in historical languages such as Hebrew or Aramaic in Color of the Cross. During Gethsemane, Jesus prays in Aramaic, in addition to when he speaks from the cross. Unlike The Passion of the Christ, which attempted to authorize every frame and image as authentic through historical language, La Marre in Color of the Cross only wants his audience to think in these terms in regards to prayer, which is interesting, since prayer – particular the prayers of the Jews – have a sort history-defying, time traveling, prophetic nature themselves.

cinematically constructed resurrection, almost as if instinctively La Marre understands that somehow by “faking” the resurrection through the cinema, something is taken away from the enduring nature of Jesus’s narrative and message, and the prophetic way that it continues to speak to each and every subsequent generation. Better than any other film, La Marre gets this right.

For this reason, the Jesus of Color of the Cross is perhaps the most intelligent Jesus yet depicted onscreen. He is a thinking Messiah. He is not omniscient, nor is he ignorant, but instead actively engaged in the present at all times. Scorsese’s Jesus comes close to achieving this sort of intellectual brilliance, but the instability and paranoia which makes this protagonist teeter back and forth between a divine sense of purpose and a Satanic sense of condemnation finds no resolution until his final resistance to his ultimate temptation and death, distinguishes him from the far more poised Jesus of La Marre. Only in Gethsemane, as his mind begins to implode as he stares up at three moons, perhaps symbolizing trial, or the three-temptations that he had already overcome at the beginning of his ministry, which re-emerge now to tempt him before he would confront Death at Golgotha.<sup>100</sup> In this state, the once-poised Jesus is like a regressed child, frightened in the night, reaching out for a Father that is more distant, and perhaps aloof, or even silent. The moment is authentic, for La Marre’s Jesus is a personality that has derived its complete

---

<sup>100</sup> It is no coincidence that Golgotha also means “Place of the Skull”, an appropriate name for the eerie place where Jesus would be confronted with his own death.

identity from what he calls the Father, but now as that identity is being unpacked and dissected, not as a result of some sort of chemical imbalance, or mental disorder – as is even suggested earlier in the film – but by the state of Rome as they are going to strip this man via crucifixion of all his dignity in an attempt to counter his sovereign claims.<sup>101</sup> It is important to note, however, that Color of the Cross is not a film which denies the divinity of Jesus, but instead remains more invested in the uniqueness and value of humanity and the possibility of finding a more divine and uplifting love and connection for mankind both through intimacy and through acknowledging the sovereignty in us all.

But until Gethsemane, when La Marre's Jesus speaks of his "Father," I believe him, and there is a certain intimacy in the expression of this humanoid who refers to God as a loving parent, and not some iconically-accessed shadow of an ogre-like authority to be feared. Instead detached, but not unnecessarily giddy, like Bruce Marchiano's Jesus in The Visual Bible's: The Gospel According to Matthew, La Marre's Jesus comes off more like a wise extra-terrestrial alien, or a yoda-like sage. More specifically, what I mean here is that Jean Claude La Marre's performance presents Jesus more like a custodial extra-terrestrial among a realm of his own people, who have rejected their own extra-terrestrial nature. In this respect, La Marre's detached indifference can either be

---

<sup>101</sup> As if intertextually speaking to and signifying upon The Passion of the Christ, The Color of the Cross skips the scourging and the trial sequences which were so critical to Gibson's project, and jump cuts straight to La Marre's head dripping blood, and falling limp from the cross.

read as madness – a conclusion inconsistent within the diegesis of the text; or artistic brilliance – an understated notion of genius, considering the fact that this Jesus was literally willing to die for his art – though this would not be beyond possibility. But even Color of the Cross's very human portrayal of Jesus does not preclude, but in fact insists upon an inhuman or divine intelligence behind this black Messiah, as evidenced by the scene of Jesus healing of Malchus's ear. Though this film, like the written gospel of John, focuses mainly on the final forty eight hours before the crucifixion, the inclusion of this miracle indicates that La Marre as actor/filmmaker wants his audience to contextualize his Jesus not as a madman, or merely a storyteller with a message that can change the world, but as an authoritative enactment of the *Logos* itself – and thus he empowers his protagonist with the ability to work miracles that defy the rules of natural law – for any true act of the *Logos* must inevitably be able to conceive its will on the physical plane in such a way that it remains inexplicable and truly sublime in its enactment. In diegetic context, this is not a Jesus that just anybody can become; no, this is a Jesus that one must first submit to, before one can imitate him.<sup>102</sup> But that he can be imitated at all, is what distinguishes this Jesus, from the Jesus of previous cinema up to this point.

This is because even though this Jesus does miracles, his real power as indicated by what he tells his disciples rests in his message – in the narrative he

---

<sup>102</sup> This fact is most notably indicated by the call to his disciples to carry on his message. After all, how could one carry on his message without first believing and submitting to his message?



leaves to the world, that is. He states emphatically, "After I die my work and message must not die. They will win only if they succeed in silencing my message." And so it remains irrelevant to La Marre, or at least, within the context of his film whether or not Jesus resurrected, for it is his message that matters, and it is his message which cannot die. And so language, that is, the Word, organized through narrative under the authority of an intelligence, or what I have called the *Logos*, remains the foundational theme of this particular Jesus project. Yet, for Jean Claude La Marre as both filmmaker and actor, this moment also becomes self-reflexive since the film has been created cinematically by he and his crew to convey a particular message, and thus in the precise cinematic moment of this statement, one could argue that *the word is made cinematic...*

But understandably, some viewers of Color of the Cross may wonder if by both directing and starring in the film, whether or not Jean Claude La Marre suffers from a sort of Messiah complex. But I wonder if this is even an appropriate question within the context of filmmaking, since it presumes a violation of some sort of unwritten law on the part of La Marre for him to both play Jesus and direct the film. For this alone Color of the Cross is both innovative and unique. One might want to ignore some of the more relevant positions of the authorship debate here,<sup>103</sup> but when the author is also

---

<sup>103</sup> One side of the authorship debate has often wanted to distinguish between a director's choice of material and his persona, but this moment in Color of the Cross, makes such a distinction decidedly difficult.

protagonist and implicitly Christ in a particular context, the director as creative agent and active participant moves beyond the theoretical as an issue of authorship and becomes actualized cinematically as in the case where the director is also an actor, playing the role of The Word, the ultimate symbol of authorship. Whether or not one accepts or rejects the cinematic world La Marre presents is totally a matter of choice; but the reasons why one accepts or rejects this world, especially if one has come to embrace artistically created icons as idols more potent than that which they signify in other contexts – I am talking now about the appearance of Jesus versus obedience to Jesus – then one's own imprisonment to the image and its deceptive power is not only actual but undeniable.

And so if this film is so important, why has no one seen it? Color of the Cross remains an underground film for one simple reason. Very few people are interested in seeing or talking about a film where Jesus is black. The mere thought of the Son of God as a black man is so arresting to the Eurocentric mind that it cannot be taken seriously, not on aesthetic grounds, but because of the political implications of an African-American male coming to be equated with perhaps the most potent symbol of sovereignty in the Western world. And so despite the proclamation of a myriad of clergy to the contrary, both Jesus's message and subsequently his image are profoundly political. Jesus's message was a message of revolution in that this lone man dared to suggest that God was everyone's Father, and that no man had the right to assert sovereignty over

another. Jesus's project suggested that there existed a sovereign kingdom within the heart of each and every human being, and one need only dare to unlock this authority so that God's will could truly be done "on earth as it is heaven."<sup>104</sup> But this is not the traditional theological reading, because most clergy at the end of the day somehow receive their backing from the state – and as Hobbes has observed and has been proven over and over again, all states assert their most power through the threat of homicide and violence – which runs counter to the very nature of Jesus's non-violent kingdom.

On the other hand, the representation of Jesus remains a profoundly political issue because of how particular institutions such as the Church and Hollywood have systematically attempted to control and manipulate precisely how and who can represent him. But in a world where representation, through multimedia in particular, is arguably becoming increasingly democratic – as the silent short has evolved into the silent feature, and then into the "talkie," and from there to the "promotional clip," to the music video on YouTube and beyond – a new possibility might be imagined not only for how filmmakers can represent Jesus, but also how they might represent themselves as democratically thinking individuals, actively engaged with Reason, and as sovereign conduits of the *Logos*.

---

<sup>104</sup> According to Matthew 6:10, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus asks his disciples to pray for, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

## Works Cited

- ABC News Nightline. Host Ted Koppel. February, 25, 2004.
- Allen, Richard. Projecting Illusion: Film Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Ash, Russell. The Top 10 of Film. New York: DK Publishing, 2003.
- Austerlitz, Saul. Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2007.
- Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. Holy Blood, Holy Grail. NY: Dell Publishing, 1982.
- Bakhtin, M.M. The Dialogic Imagination. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barsam, Richard. Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004.
- Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Bazin, Andre. What is Cinema? Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967.
- Birchard, Robert S. Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

- Brown, Dan. The Da Vinci Code. NY: Doubleday, 2003.
- Carson, Tom. "Jesus Christ! Can't Anybody Get It Right?" Gentleman's Quarterly. March, 2004.
- Corliss, Richard. "The Hollywood Screenwriter". Film Theory and Criticism. Eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. NY, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- . "Can this Man Save the Movies? (Again?)". Time. March 20, 2006.
- Davis, C. Truman. "The Medical Account of Christ's Last Days and The Cross." The Review of News, April 14, 1976.
- DeMille, Cecil B. The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille. Ed. Donald Hayne. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc, 1959.
- . "The Screen as a Religious Teacher". Theatre. June, 1927.
- De Nova, Rebecca. "Forum: The Gospels and Gibson". The Post-Gazette, February 29, 2004.
- "Don't need to see'em to review 'em". Variety, December 1-7, 2003.
- Dougan, Andy. Martin Scorsese. NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.
- Ehrenstein, David. "The Last Temptation of Christ". DVD Liner Notes: The Criterion Collection, 2000.
- Epstein, Edward Jay. The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood. NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

- Essoe, Gabe and Raymond Lee. DeMille: The Man and His Pictures. NY: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1970.
- Forshey, Gerald E. American Religious Spectaculars. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992.
- Fraser, Peter. Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film Biblical Epics. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998.
- Friedman, Lawrence S. The Cinema of Martin Scorsese. NY: Continuum, 1997.
- Gates, David. "Jesus Christ Moviestar." Newsweek. March 8, 2004.
- Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Griffiths, Alison. "The Revered Gaze: The Medieval Imaginary of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ". Cinema Journal 46, No. 2, Winter 2007.
- Grist, Leighton. The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1963-77: Authorship and Context. NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Halley, Henry H. Halley's Bible Handbook. Revised Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965.
- Heston, Charlton and Jean-Pierre Isbouts. Charlton Heston's Hollywood: 50 Years in American Film. NY: GT Publishing, 1998.
- Higham, Charles. Cecil B. DeMille. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973.
- Hillier, Jim. Cahiers du Cinema. London: Routledge and K. in assoc. with BFI, 1985.
- James, Nick. "Hell in Jerusalem". Sight & Sound. Volume 14/Issue 4, April

- 2004.
- Keyser, Les and Barbara. Hollywood and the Catholic Church: The Image of Roman Catholicism in American Movies. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. "The Quest for Peace and Justice." Nobel Lecture. December 11, 1964.
- King, Stephen. On Writing. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Kulman, Linda and Jay Tolson. "Jesus in America". U.S. News & World Report, December 22, 2003.
- Kurtz, Paul. "The Passion as a Political Weapon: Anti-Semitism and Gibson's Use of the Gospels". Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, and the Controversy. Ed. Gracia, Jorge, J.E. Chicago, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 2004.
- "The Last Temptation of Christ". Variety. August 10, 1988.
- Matthews, Peter. "Showman of Piety". The King of Kings. DVD Liner Notes: The Criterion Collection, 2004.
- "Mel Gibson's Passion." ABC Primetime Special Event. Host Diane Sawyer. February 17, 2004.
- Miller, Eric. "Gibson's 'Passion' depicts love, not hate". The Pitt News, February 17, 2004.

Mikkelsen, Douglas K. The Greatest Story Ever Told: A Silver Screen Gospel.

Dallas, TX: University Press of America, 2004.

Murphy, Mary. "The Secret Passion of Mel Gibson". TV Guide. August 22-28, 2004.

Pendreigh, Brian. "The Passion of James Caviezel". Razor Magazine. February, 2004.

Peter Jennings Reporting: The Search for Jesus. Host Peter Jennings. ABC News, 2000.

Prose, Francine. "Invitation to a Crucifixion: Fundamentalism goes to Hollywood." Harper's Magazine. June, 2004.

Riley, Robin. Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.

Said, Edward. Representations of the Intellectual. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.

Rausch, Andrew J. Turning Points in Film History. NY: Citadel Press, 2004.

Ringgold, Gene and DeWitt Bodeen. The Films of Cecil B. DeMille. NY: Citadel Press, 1969.

Sangster, Jim. Scorsese. London: Virgin Books Ltd, 2002.

Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962". Film Theory and Criticism. Eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. NY, Oxford University Press, 1992.

-----, "The Auteur Theory Revisited". Film and Authorship. Ed.



- Virginia Wright Wexman. New Brunswick, N J: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- Shear, Adam. "A historical, as well as theological, view of the passion". The Pitt News, February 23, 2004.
- Sklar, Robert. Film: An International History of the Medium. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2002.
- Stam, Robert and Toby Miller. Film and Theory: An Anthology. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Stam, Robert. Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- ". "Multiculturalism, Race, and Representation". Film Theory: An Introduction. Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- Stanback, C. Foster. Into All Nations: A History of the International Churches of Christ. Newton, MA: Illumination Publishers 2005.
- Stern, Lesley. The Scorsese Connection. Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Stokes, Melvyn and Richard Maltby. Ed. Hollywood Spectatorship. Suffolk, UK: St. Edmundsbury Press, 2001.
- The Qur'an. Trans. M. H. Shakir. Twelfth ed. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Qur'an, Inc., 2001.
- Thompson, David and Ian Christie. Ed. Scorsese on Scorsese. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1989.

- Wartenberg, Thomas. "Passions of the Christ: Do Jews and Christians See the Same Film?". Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, and the Controversy. Ed. Gracia, Jorge, J.E. Chicago: Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 2004.
- Waxman, Sharon. "Gibson to Delete a Scene in 'Passion'". The New York Times, February 4, 2004.
- Wells, H.G. The Time Machine. New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1988.
- West, Cornel. Race Matters. Boston, MA: Beacon P, 1993.
- Whalen, William J. Separated Brethren. Huntington, ID: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1966.
- Wheelock, Stefan. Lect. ENGLIT 2035. Graduate Seminar: The Black Intellectual. University of Pittsburgh, 2003.
- Wollen, Peter. "The Auteur Theory". Eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy. Film Theory and Criticism. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. NY, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Wright, Richard. The Outsider. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993.
- Zmijewsky, Boris and Lee Pfeiffer. The Films of Clint Eastwood. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1996.

## Bibliography

### Literature, Film History, and Theory

Aristotle. Poetics. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. NY: Schocken Books, 1969.

Bloom, Harold. Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. NY: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949.

Connelly, Marie Kathryn. Martin Scorsese: An Analysis of his Feature Films, with a filmography of his entire directorial career. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. The Early Film Criticism of Francois Truffaut. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York: Vintage International, 1990.

Field, Syd. Screenplay. NY: Dell Publishing, 1979.

Hays, Michael and Anastasia Nikolopoulou. Ed. Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996, 1999.

Kael, Pauline. "Circles and Square". Film Theory and Criticism Introductory Readings. Eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Kelly, Mary Pat. Martin Scorsese: A Journey. NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991.

Keyser, Lester J. Martin Scorsese. NY: Maxwell Macmillan Intl., 1992.

- MacCabe, Colin. "The Revenge of the Author". Film and Authorship. Ed. Virginia Wright Wexman. New Brunswick, N J: Rutgers U P, 2003.
- MacCann, Richard Dyer. Film: A Montage of Theories. NY E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966.
- Mast, Gerald and Marshall Cohen. Film Theory and Criticism Introductory Readings. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.
- McKee, Robert. Story. NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997.
- Nichols, Bill. Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema And Other Media. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1981.
- Movies and Methods: An Anthology. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976.
- Polan, Dana. Pulp Fiction. London: BFI Publishing, 2000.
- Pye, Michael and Lynda Myles. The Movie Brats: How the Film School Generation Took Over Hollywood. NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.
- Sarris, Andrew. The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia. Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1998.
- Tarantino, Quentin. Pulp Fiction. New York: Miramax Books, 1994.
- Trottier, David. The Screenwriter's Bible. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1998.
- Turner, Graeme. The Film Cultures Reader. London : Routledge, 2002.
- Film as a Social Practice. London: Routledge, 1988.

Vacche, Angela Dalle. Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History.

New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2003.

Vogler, Christopher. The Writer's Journey. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese

Productions, 1998.

Wexman, Virginia Wright. Film and Authorship. New Brunswick, N J:

Rutgers University Press, 2003.

Wolff, Jurgen & Kerry Cox. Successful Scriptwriting. Cincinnati, OH:

Writer's Digest Books, 1988.

### **Religion and Film, and Historical Theory**

Aurelius, Marcus. Meditations. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997.

Babington, Bruce and Peter William Evans. Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in

the Hollywood Cinema. Manchester, New York: Manchester University

Press, 1993.

Bergson, Henri. Duration and Simultaneity. Trans. Leon Jacobson.

Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965.

Brann, Eva. What, Then, Is Time? Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,

Inc., 1999.

Butler, Ivan. Religion in the Cinema. NY: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1969.

Campbell, Richard H. and Michael R. Pitts. The Bible on Film. Metuchen, NJ:

The Scarecrow Press, 1981.

Carr, David. Time, Narrative, and History. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1986.

- Farmer, David J. Being in Time: The Nature of Time in Light of McTaggart's Paradox. Lanham, MD: U of P America, Inc., 1990.
- Fraser, Peter. Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film Biblical Epics. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998.
- Gerard, Robert V. Time: Man's Cosmic Locator. Livermore, CA: Oughten House Publications, 1991.
- Heidegger, Martin. History of the Concept of Time. Trans. Theodore Kisiel. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1985.
- , Being and Time and the Possibility of Political Philosophy. Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1981.
- Heston, Charlton and Jean-Pierre Isbouts. Charlton Heston's Hollywood: 50 Years in American Film. NY: GT Publishing Corp, 1998.
- "History." The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1989.
- Hurley, Neil P. Theology through Film. NY: Harper & Row, 1970.
- Kinnard, R. and T. Davis. Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen. NY: Citadel Press, 1992.
- Loizou, Andros. Time, Embodiment and the Self. Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2000.
- Lyden, John C. Film as Religion: Myth, Morals, and Rituals. NY: New York University Press, 2003.

May, John R. and Michael Bird. Ed. Religion in Film. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

Miles, Margaret R. Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

### **Religious History and Iconography**

Ayoub, Mahmoud M. The Qur'an and its Interpreters. Volume One. Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1984.

Belting, Hans. The Image and its Public: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion. New Rochelle, NY: A.D. Caratzas, 1990.

Belting, Hans. Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era Of Art. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Caughey, Ellen. John Wycliffe. Urichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2001.

Comfort, Philip Wesley. Ed. The Origin of the Bible. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Edwards, Brian. William Tyndale: The Father of the English Bible. Farmington Hills, Mich.: William Tyndale Collge, 1982.

Fish, Bruce and Becky Durost Fish. William Tyndale. Uhrichsville, OH:

- Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Giakalis, Abrosios. Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988.
- The Holy Bible. New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973.
- The Authorized King James Version, 1611.
- The English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001.
- Maus, Cynthia Pearl. Christ and the Fine Arts. NY: Harper & Bros. Publishers, 1959.
- The Qur'an. Trans. M. H. Shakir. Twelfth ed. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Qur'an, Inc., 2001.
- Sahas, Daniel J. Icon and Logos. Toronto ; Buffalo : University of Toronto Press, 1986.
- Schweitzer, A. The Quest of the Historical Jesus. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1954.
- Spatharakis, Iohannis. Studies in Byzantine Manuscript Illumination and Iconography. London : Pindar Press, 1996.
- Temple, Richard. Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity. Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1990.
- Wagner, Peter. Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1996.



Weber, Max. The Sociology of Religion. Boston: Beacon P, 1991.

Whitehouse, Harvey. Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

### **Online Sources**

Answers in Genesis. [www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v14/i4/hollywood.asp](http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v14/i4/hollywood.asp).

"Gibson's Anti-Semitic Tirade – Alleged Cover Up".

[www.tmz.com/2006/07/28/gibsons-anti-semitic-tirade-alleged-cover-up/](http://www.tmz.com/2006/07/28/gibsons-anti-semitic-tirade-alleged-cover-up/).

"Gibson's statement about anti-Semitic remarks".

<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/14135592/>.

"Hannity and Colmes". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY-IPdat2ZE>.

Online Interview. [www.lukeford.net/profiles/profiles/moustapha\\_akkad.htm](http://www.lukeford.net/profiles/profiles/moustapha_akkad.htm).

"Partial Transcript of the Steve Feurenstein Radio Interview with Hutton

Gibson" [http://www.moviecitynews.com/notepad/2004/040303\\_npd.html](http://www.moviecitynews.com/notepad/2004/040303_npd.html).

Quotes of Gandhi. <http://www.sfheart.com/Gandhi.html>.

"Suspect ticketed on the way to Jewish center shootings:".

<http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/07/29/seattle.shooting/index.html>.

"The Jesus Film Project". <http://www.jesusfilm.org/aboutus/index.html>.

The King Center. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/>.

Time Online Edition. <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101030630/sofilm.html>.

TMe: Box-Office Statistics. <http://www.teako170.com/statsamania.html>.

## Filmography

Abraham. Dir. Joseph Sargent. Turner Network Television, 1994.

American Cinema: The Film School Generation. New York Center for Visual History. CBS/Fox Video, 1995.

American Masters: Sam Goldwyn. Dir. Peter Jones. PBS, 2005.

Amistad. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Dreamworks, 1997.

Ben-Hur. Dir. Frank Niblo. MGM, 1927.

Ben-Hur. Dir. William Wyler. MGM, 1959.

Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic. Host. Christopher Plummer, 1993.

Birth of a Nation. Dir. D.W. Griffith, 1915.

The Bible According to Hollywood. Passport Video, 2004.

The Blood of Jesus. Dir. Spencer Williams. Sack Amusement Enterprises, 1941.

Braveheart. Dir. Mel Gibson. Paramount, 1995.

Bowling for Columbine. Dir. Michael Moore. United Artists, 2002.

Cleopatra. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1963.

Cloverfield. Dir. Matt Reeves. Paramount Pictures, 2008.

Dogma. Dir. Kevin Smith. Miramax/Lions Gate Pictures, 1999.

The Empire Strikes Back: Special Edition. Dir. Irvin Kershner. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1980/1997.

From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians. Documentary, Frontline/WGBH Education Foundation, 1998.

From the Manger to the Cross. Dir. Sidney Olcott. Warner Bros./Vitagraph,  
1912.

Gandhi. Dir. Richard Attenborough. Columbia Pictures, 1983.

Glory! Dir. Edward Zwick. TriStar Pictures, 1989.

Godspell. Dir. David Greene. Columbia Pictures, 1973.

Gone with the Wind. Dir. Victor Fleming. MGM, 1939.

The Greatest Story Ever Told. Dir. George Stevens. United Artists, 1965.

The Gospel According to John. Dir. Philip Saville. Visual Bible International,  
Inc., 2003.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew. Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini.  
Titanus/Arco/Lux, 1964.

Hill Number One. Dir. Arthur Pierson. 1951.

The Jazz Singer. Dir. Alan Crosland. Warner Brothers, 1927.

Jesus. Dir. Peter Sykes and John Kirsh. Warner Bros, 1978.

Jesus. Dir. Roger Young. International Program Consultants, Inc., 2000.

Jesus: His Life. A&E Television Networks, 1995.

Jesus of Nazareth. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. NBC Television, 1977.

“Jesus Walks”. Chris Milk Version. Dir. Chris Milk and Kanye West. Roc-A-Fella  
Records, 2004.

----- Church Version. Dir. Michael Haussman and Kanye West.  
Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.

----- Street Version. Dir. Cooddie Simmons, Chicke Ozah, and Kanye

West. Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.

Joseph. Dir. Roger Young. Turner Pictures and Lube Productions, 1995.

Kill Bill: Volume One. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Miramax, 2003.

Kill Bill: Volume Two. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Miramax, 2004.

King of Kings. Dir. Nicholas Ray. MGM, 1961.

The King of Kings. Cecil B. DeMille, 1927.

The Lamb of God. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Universal Pictures, 1988.

Malcolm X. Dir. Spike Lee. Warner Brothers, 1992.

The Matrix Reloaded. Dirs. The Wachowski Brothers. Warner Brothers, 2003.

The Message. Dir. Moustapha Akkad. 1976.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Dirs. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975.

Moses. Dir. Roger Young. Turner Pictures Worldwide and Lube Productions, 1996.

Napoleon. Dir. Abel Gance. MGM, 1927.

The Passion of the Christ. Dir. Mel Gibson. Newmarket, 2004.

A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies. Dirs. Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, 1995.

The Prince of Egypt. Dir. Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner, Simon Wells. Dreamworks, 1998.

The Prodigal. Dir. Richard Thorpe. MGM, 1955.

Pulp Fiction. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Miramax, 1993.

Quo Vadis. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. MGM, 1951.

Ray. Dir. Taylor Hackford. Universal Pictures, 2004.

The Robe. Dir. Henry Koster. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1953.

RoGoPaG. Dirs. Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini,  
Ugo Gregoretti, 1962.

Roots. Dirs. Marvin J. Chomsky, John Erman, David Greene, and Gilbert Moses.  
Warner Brothers Television, 1977.

Samson and Delilah. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1949.

Schindler's List. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal, 1993.

Scorpio Rising. Dir. Kenneth Anger, 1964.

Spartacus. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Universal Pictures, 1960.

Superman. Dir. Richard Donner. Warner Brothers, 1978.

Sunset Boulevard. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount, 1950.

The Ten Commandments. Cecil B. DeMille, 1923.

The Ten Commandments. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Paramount, 1956.

Time Bandits. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Handmade Films, Ltd., 1981.

Unforgiven. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Warner Brothers, 1992.

The Visual Bible: Acts. Visual International, 1997.

The Visual Bible: Matthew. Visual International, 1997.

White Chicks. Dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans. Columbia Pictures, 2004.