

TEXT AND CONTEXT: “*THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*”

Peter Gilmour

“We adore thee O Christ and we bless thee because by Thy Holy Cross Thou Hast Redeemed the World.” So began the prayers at each Station of the Cross in the pre-Vatican II era of the Roman Catholic Church. The priest vested in a cope, with acolyte on either side of him, processed to each of the fourteen stations which hung on the perimeter walls of the church, and led the prayers. It was one of the few pre Vatican II rituals conducted in the vernacular, and the active participation of the people in the pews, a rarity back then, was an essential part of this ritual.

This participatory ritual carried out in the vernacular was intimately connected to the celebration of the Eucharist, in pre Vatican II terminology, “the Mass.” The Mass was taught to be the “unbloody reenactment of the sacrifice on Calvary.”¹ This pre Vatican II Eucharistic theology linked the Stations of the Cross with the Mass in Catholic popular religious consciousness.

The Stations of the Cross played a prominent part in the pre restoration of Holy Week Good Friday service popularly known as the “Tre Ore” service. They also were part of other communal devotions, e.g., novenas and parish missions. In addition to the communal Stations of the Cross, individuals could privately “say the stations” in church. It was not uncommon to see individuals in Catholic

churches walking around to each Station and praying privately. The Stations of the Cross was an significant form of pre Vatican II piety in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, focuses on roughly the same time frame as the Stations of the Cross. The passion and death of the Christ as understood in the pre Vatican II Roman Catholicism is the context for this Jesus film. Gibson's film, through flashbacks, presents other episodes from Christ's life, some scriptural, others not, but always within the context of the Passion.

This relatively low budget film costing \$30 million² premiered in Spring, 2004 and recently was released in DVD format, has turned huge profits. Immediately before the release of this film in video/DVD, theater showings were reported to have grossed \$370 million dollars, the eighth largest grossing film to that date. On the first day of DVD sales, September 1st, 4.1 million copies were sold. Films released on DVD are known to equal or surpass their box office revenues.³ Fox Home Entertainment reports this first day sale of the DVD version

¹ The Mass as the ritual meal of the Lord's Supper did not enter rank and file Roman Catholic consciousness until Vatican II.(1962-1965).

² One must always approach the financial figures released by film companies with some caution. Some of the announced film costs in all probability represent more of a general range than a precise figure.

³This initial DVD release of *The Passion of the Christ* contains only the film seen in theaters. There are no special features added, e.g., director and/or actor interviews, cut scenes, etc.

of *The Passion of the Christ* makes it the best selling non-English language DVD film of all time and the best selling R-rated DVD film of all time.⁴

This 126 minute film starring James Caviezel as Jesus has stirred no end of controversy. It will surely be studied in the future, if not in theological curricula, for sure it will be included in business curricula. The carefully calculated and exquisitely executed advertising and marketing campaign for *The Passion of the Christ* no doubt will be the stuff of case studies in business schools. But will this film find its way into religious education curricula? Should this film find its way into religious education curricula?

Many religious educators have strong opinions on the suitability of this film for religious education. But, truth be told, it is not their decision. Jesus Christ belongs to the public domain. *The Passion of the Christ* already has become part of the public, cultural curriculum. This film proved the comment by Beatle John Lennon, “we’re more popular than Jesus” momentarily wrong! Gibson’s Jesus now seems more popular than the Beatles. So how best to deal with this text that has entered the public, cultural curriculum, to the delight of some, and to the horror of others?

⁴Anthony Breznican, “‘The Passion’ DVD sells 4.1 million.” Chicago Tribune, September 2, 2004, section 2, page 2.

One way to approach this film is through the genre of Jesus films.⁵ The history of the cinema reveals a plethora of films centering on Jesus. This celluloid tradition gives a glimpse into the history of the film industry, and how it overcame criticism from the religious establishment. This celluloid canon provides a context for viewing and reflecting on this most recent Jesus film, *The Passion of the Christ*. The Jesus film canon is diverse: “Some are silent, most are ‘talkies.’ Some are black-and-white, others are Technicolor. There are Hollywood epics with casts of thousands and international art films with English subtitles.”⁶

The first part of this paper presents some, not all, Jesus films which comprise this canon (readers already familiar with the history of Jesus films might prefer to move immediately to Part II of this paper beginning on page 16). Part II details some of the major contextualizations needed for a mature understanding of Jesus films and their appropriateness in religious education.

⁵ In this paper I define this genre as commercially made films (not church sponsored) centering substantially on Jesus as the major character, either directly or indirectly, e.g., through such literary conventions as “a play within a play.” Many other films portray Jesus as a character, but not the main character, e.g., *Salome* (1923), *The Robe* (1953) *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Ben-Hur* (1925 and 1959), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *Barabbas* (1962), *Pontius Pilate* (1967), *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), *Dogma* (1999). Other films produced by church groups, e.g., *Day of Triumph* (1954) and *Jesus* (1979) focus on Jesus as the main character but were not produced for commercial distribution. Still other films focus on overt Christ figures, e.g., *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* (1917 and 1936), *Destination Unknown* (1933), *Strange Cargo* (1940), and *The Lawton Story* (1954). These related genres of films certainly are worth serious study and have relevance to the field of religious education, but are not the focal point of this paper.

⁶Peter Gilmour, “Jesus of Hollywood” in *U. S. Catholic*, September, 1999, page 6

The Silent Era

Just two years after the first public screening of film in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris, France the first Jesus film appeared in 1897. *La Vie et la Passion de Jesus-Christ* was directed by Georges Hatot, and had the distinction of being among the first multiple-shot films. Other Jesus films appeared in France, *La Vie de Christ* (1899), *La Vie et passion du Christ* (1900), and another film with the title, *La Vie et la Passion de Jesus-Christ* (1903).⁷ These French films did not tend to follow the passion play motif, as many American Jesus films of the same time did, but had an “original scenario.” These early films of course were not anything like films today. They were extremely short, e.g, *La Vie et la Passion de Jesus-Christ* was only fifteen minutes in length, black and white, and without sound.

Across the ocean in the United States, *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* premiered in 1898. The script and scenery for this film were originally developed for a Broadway play written by Salmi Morse some years earlier. The play was never performed because the mayor of New York, fearing problems resulting from having such a sensitive subject on stage, banned its production. This film, nineteen minutes in length containing 23 scenes, was shot on the roof of New York’s Grand

⁷ Richard Abel, *The Cine Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

Central Palace. Frank Russell who portrayed Jesus was banned from attending the opening of the film. Either the producers wanted to keep alive the myth that it was shot on location, and/or they thought “Jesus” in the audience would be too much of a distraction for film goers to bear. Regretfully, only a fragment of this film survives today.

The first feature length Jesus film (80 minutes) appeared in 1913, *From the Manger to the Cross*, and was reported to have cost \$100,000. Directed by Sidney Olcott (who also directed *Ben Hur* in 1907), written by a woman, Gene Gauntier who also played Mary, this film was shot in Palestine and Egypt. One scene shows Joseph and Mary resting with the Sphinx in the background. Robert Henderson-Bland⁸ plays a subdued Jesus in contrast to the style of much acting found in silent films. The title cards in this film are taken directly from the King James version of the Bible. *From the Manger to the Cross* is often cited as the best silent Jesus film ever made. This film was reissued in 1937 with music and sound effects.

Illustrations from the Tissot Bible functioned as a visual source book for this film.⁹

⁸ So taken with his role, Robert Henderson-Bland wrote two books about his role in this film: *From the Manger to the Cross* (1922) and *Actor-Soldier-Poet* (1939)

⁹ Herbert Reynolds, “From the Palette to the Screen: The Tissot Bible as Sourcebook for *From the Manger to the Cross*” in *Une Invention Du Diable? Cinema Des Premiers Temps et Religion*, pp. 275-283..

Ads for this film claimed it “destined to be more far-reaching than the Bible in telling the story of the Saviour.”¹⁰

From the Manger to the Cross has the static character of a pageant with little dramatic movement.¹¹ Women’s roles are highlighted in this film, perhaps due to its writer. There is no resurrection scene. This film had initial screenings before selected audiences prior to its public release. “The Moving Picture World,” a publication for theater owners/managers, offered ways to market this film. Suggested techniques included issuing Gothic-lettered invitations to the initial screenings, and having incense burning in the lobby of the theater.

One can not speak of the Jesus film tradition without mentioning *Intolerance* (1916) even though only one of the four stories¹² of this film, and the total film time devoted to the Jesus story is only twelve minutes in seven brief cuts. D. W. Griffiths’ now famous, highly revered film was filmed in Hollywood at a cost of \$1.9 million. As the film was shot, Griffiths had religious advisors on the set, a rabbi and a priest. Their various objections and concerns led Griffiths to pare

¹⁰Charles Keil, “From the Manger to the Cross: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation” in *Une Invention Du Diable? Cinema Des Premiers Temps et Religion*, p. 116.

¹¹Ibid. Keil points out two scenes which have dramatic movement, Jesus before Pilate and the Crucifixion as breaking the tableau-bound style in depicting Christ’s life. He sees these two scenes as important breakthroughs from the “stylistic retardation” surrounding many of the Jesus films up to and including *From the Manger to the Cross*. (pp. 118-119)

¹²The other three subject areas are the fall of Babylon, the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, and a modern tale of greed.

down the Jesus segments of this 163 minute film to just twelve minutes. Howard Gaye played Jesus. Two biblical stories are prominent, the miraculous water to wine (John 2) and the stoning of the adulterous woman (John 7:53-8:11). Griffiths highlights Jesus' Jewish context, and had a rabbi direct the details of the wedding miracle where "real, old time orthodox Jews" appear. The lack of any Jewish involvement in Jesus' death in this film was also due to the influence of Griffiths' religious advisors. Griffiths reshot several scenes at great expense in order to avoid the possibility of reinforcing the stereotype of Jews as Christ killers. This film initially was a commercial failure, perhaps too demanding for audiences still largely cinematically unsophisticated. Today this film enjoys high critical acclaim.

The last of the silent era Jesus films is *The King of Kings* (1927). This full length feature film, 115 minutes, directed and produced by Cecil B. DeMille and written by a woman, Jennie McPherson starred H. B. Warner as a much older than the traditional 33 year old Jesus. In his 1959 autobiography, DeMille claims that 800 million people have viewed this film.¹³ He relied on many religious advisors, and had an interfaith prayer session (including Muslim and Buddhist) on the set the first day of shooting. Rev. Daniel Lord, S.J. offered daily Mass on the outdoor set. "Jesus" when in costume could only be spoken to by the director. 300 traditional

¹³ Cecil B. DeMille (edited by Donald Hayne), *The Autobiography Of Cecil B. DeMille* (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959) p.275.

religious paintings have been identified as prototypes of the camera work of Peverall Marley.

The story is told from the point of view of Mary Magdalene. Judas Iscariot is portrayed as her lover. Jesus is presented as healer. DeMille worked hard to counter the prevailing anti-Semitism in his presentation of the Jews in this film. He presents the Jews as under domination. He has the high priest take individual responsibility for Jesus' blood. "...then let it be on me, and me alone" and later, "I alone am guilty." He does not include the trial scene with Caiaphas. Definite showmanship and spectacle, trademarks of Cecil B. DeMille films, inhabit this Jesus film.

DeMille exercised special reverence for H. B. Warner who played Jesus. In his autobiography, DeMille writes: "No one but the director spoke to H. B. Warner when he was in costume, unless it was absolutely necessary. He was veiled or transported in a closed car when he went between the set and his dressing-room or, when we were on location, his tent, where he took his meals alone."¹⁴

The King of Kings was reissued in 1931 with music and sound effects included.

The Sound Era

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 279-280.

The sound era of film begins with the premier of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. The first “talkie” Jesus film is a French film called *Golgotha* (1935), sometimes titled *Ecce Homo*, which covers only the events of Holy Week. No Jesus films appear for the next several decades although a number of biblically related films appear, e.g., *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Ben-Hur* (1959).

Then, in 1961 *King of Kings* makes its debut. In spite of the same similarity with its 1927 predecessor, this film is not a remake. Directed by Nicholas Ray, famous for *Rebel Without a Cause*, this 170 minute film cost eight million dollars to make. It was shot in Spain and Jeffrey Hunter, a teen age heart throb who reportedly was the only actor who would accept this role, played Jesus. His youthful appearance and blue eyes led one critic to dub his performance, “I was a teenage Jesus.” This film comes on the heels of decades of biblical epics, and in some ways, even though focusing on Jesus as the main character, mimics the biblical epic tradition. Jesus, who appears infrequently, and performs only one miracle, is portrayed as human and humane, a wise teacher with a peace and love motif amid revolutionary political machinations. The role of Barabbas, played by Harry Guardino, is portrayed as the revolutionary. This Jesus appealed to secular humanists and also those who embraced the 1950's “American Way of Life,” but it did not win favor with religious experts and authorities. Moira Walsh, film critic

for *America* magazine wrote: “there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will derive from the film any meaningful insight into what Christ’s life and sufferings signify for us....It is obvious that Bronston (producer), Ray (director) and Yordan (script writer) have no opinion on the subject of Christ except that He is a hot box-office property.”¹⁵ The Legion of Decency criticized the film as “theologically, historically, and scripturally inaccurate.”¹⁶

Just four years later, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was released. This hours-long film¹⁷, directed by George Stevens, famous for his film, *Shane*, might well set the standard for Jesus film failures. Budgeted at ten million dollars, this film actually cost close to \$20 million, the most expensive Jesus film then produced. This film had many name actors, Pat Boone, Jose Ferrer, Charlton Heston, Angela Lansbury, Sal Mineo, Sidney Poitner, Telly Savalas, John Wayne, and Ed Wynn to name only some. Jesus, played by Max von Sydow, is presented as the messianic fulfillment, centering on ideas rather than spectacle, particularly man’s humanity to man, and gently critiques materialism/consumerism. It was shot in Utah and Arizona. Snow capped mountains can be seen in the background on occasion. As the temperature grew colder and production continued, the

¹⁵ As quoted in *Divine Images*, p. 132.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The Greatest Story Ever Told was originally released at a running time of four hours and twenty minutes; after disappointing box-office returns it was recut to three hours and fifty-eight

vaporized breath of actors can be noticed in some scenes. Split second moments showing Jesus wearing sneakers in one scene and another scene with Jesus wearing a watch reflect the inability to reshoot because of tremendous budget overruns. A 32 page promotional book accompanied the release of this film.

In 1964 Pier Paolo Pasolini directed *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (*Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*). This 142 minute film was shot in Italy in black and white. The director, controversial as Marxist, atheist, and avowed homosexual, created Jesus as prophet and sage, and substantially relied on one specific Gospel. No professional actors were employed in this film. The director's mother played the older mother of Jesus. Enrique Irazoqui, a Spaniard, played Jesus, and, as a result, Franco's government confiscated his passport for a year and Irazoqui was required to serve fifteen months of hard labor in the National Service interrupting his university studies. Pasolini dedicated this film to the memory of Pope John XXIII. There was a special screening for the Second Vatican Council fathers during its last session. This film, in Italian, reflects the strong European art film tradition of the time, vastly different from the American Hollywood tradition, and was well reviewed.

Godspell (1973) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1977) represent yet another radical departure from previous Jesus films. These are contemporary musicals.

minutes, then to three hours and seventeen minutes, and finally to three hours and ten minutes.”

Both are screen adaptation of stage plays and rely on the literary convention of a “play within a play.” *Godspell* is set in New York City. Jesus, played by Victor Garber, is costumed as a clown wearing a Superman tee shirt. The film claims to be the Gospel according to Matthew, but contains a number of parables from Luke, and the removing of makeup scene echoes John’s foot washing.

Jesus Christ, Superstar, directed by Norman Jewison with music by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, was filmed in Israel starring Ted Neeley as Jesus. This 107 minute rock opera film focuses on the last week of Jesus’ life, blends traditional with modern, e.g., Roman soldiers carrying machine guns. The film was criticized for casting an African-American, Carl Anderson as Judas, and also for the lack of a resurrection scene.

In both *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, Jesus is portrayed as young, antimaterialist, and revolutionary, appealing both to Christian evangelicals and humanistic ‘60’s generation young people.

Jesus of Nazareth (1977), the first Jesus film made for a television mini-series, runs 382 minutes. Written by Anthony Burgess, famous for *A Clockwork Orange*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli with Robert Powell as Jesus, this film presents Jesus as the suffering/messiah servant. This film employed several name actors, e.g., Sir Laurence Olivier, Anthony Quinn, Rod Steiger, Anne Bancroft,

James Mason, and Ernest Borgnine. It relies on all four gospels, with an emphasis on John. Jesus' Jewishness and his humanity is taken very seriously in this film. In fact, the director spoke about the humanity of Jesus as a hallmark of this film before its release. This pre release information caused General Motors to withdraw its sponsorship, and several religious leaders to attack the film without having seen it. It eventually won praise from Pope Paul VI.

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Willem Dafoe as Jesus (one of the few name actors cast in this role) is based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel by the same name, and presents Jesus as a reluctant, human messiah. It makes no claim to be based on the gospels. This 163 minute film contains many flashpoints, e.g., Jesus' marriages and children, a "Sacred Heart" scene, and a last temptation scene when Jesus is on the cross. This film was shot in Morocco on a small budget of \$6.5 million dollars.

Scorsese himself sees the film as an expression of his own Catholic piety. It engendered great controversy and was often picketed by a coalition of Christian church groups at debuts in major cities across the United States. Scorsese responded to criticism of his film: "Ultimately, it was all a choice between my wrong version, and your wrong version, and somebody else's wrong version."¹⁸

¹⁸See *Chattaway 1988: 45*.

Jesus of Montreal (1989) directed by Denys Arcand with script in French runs a 119 minutes, presents Jesus as apocalyptic prophet. This film uses the convention of a play within a play, as does *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. An annual passion play production sponsored by a Catholic shrine in Montreal, Canada no longer attracts people, and its producers hire a young actor to revitalize it. This film presents findings from contemporary biblical scholarship and recent archeological discoveries, including how crucifixion was carried out – far different from most all traditional artistic representations. Contemporary society is portrayed as spiritually hollow and excessively materialistic. The resurrection scene is extraordinarily clinical; the dead Christ’s organs are harvested for transplant to other people so that they might see and live.

Part II

The canon of Jesus films presents unique opportunities for religious educators to explore some of the multifaceted aspects of film’s presentations and interpretations of the life, ministry, and message of the Christ. Among them are: the problems and possibilities the nascent film industry faced, and its growth as an artistic endeavor yoked to its commercial enterprise; the relationship between art and theology as manifested in narrative theology; the formation, content, and inspiration/ inerrancy of scripture; and the tradition of midrash.

Jesus Films and the Early Film Industry

The American religious culture was at least suspicious of and, at most, downright hostile towards the commercial film industry at first. Like any innovation, some religious figures saw films as a waste of time, “a kind of pulp fiction, a form of low entertainment.”¹⁹ Others more stridently labeled film as “an instrument of the devil.”²⁰ The early film industry no doubt brought some of this criticism upon itself by producing pornographic motion pictures. Pornographic films, like religious films, virtually assured high attendance numbers, thus helping to defray the production costs of this new and expensive art form.

Jesus films also took the subject of the Christ out of the pulpit and into the public domain. Preachers and churches suddenly had competition, and this competition was taking ownership of the Jesus story by presenting visualizations of Jesus through an extraordinarily intriguing medium, moving pictures. As the commercial film industry became more widespread and successful, some religious leaders began to realize the power of this art form for their own purposes, i.e., evangelization, became far less hostile to it.

The Sabbatical movement which urged Sunday closing of all business and entertainment venues locked horns with the early film industry. “Blue laws (rather

¹⁹See Swicord in Telford 1997: 115

²⁰See for example, Roland Cossandey, et al, *Une Invention du diable?: cinema des premiers temps et religion* (Sainte-Foy: Lausanne: Presses de l’Universite Laval, 1992).

than blue films) hounded film exhibitors with threats to the profits.”²¹ By 1920 Methodists and Episcopalians were using motion pictures as part of their missionary efforts in Africa, China, India, and Malaysia, and, in New York, more than 100 churches were using motion pictures as part of their ministries.²²

Other visual art forms, particularly Renaissance painting and sculpture, implanted in people’s consciousness models of what Jesus looked like, even though the visual representations of Christ by Renaissance artists were in themselves highly imaginative. “The filmmakers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had nowhere to turn for visual inspiration except the Renaissance-Baroque paintings by the great masters of European art, and it was from this rich iconography that much of the cinematic imagery so familiar to movie audiences was derived; the first simple movie representations of Jesus Christ were adapted from traditional Bible illustrations.”²³ So entrenched was this iconography that one early Jesus film was criticized because it eliminated the nimbus from the head of Jesus.

But it was not until film’s “talkie” era that the question of what Jesus sounded like became much of an issue. Film makers now needed to launch out

²¹ Terry Lindvall, *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2001) pp. 102-103.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 217.

²³ Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (NY: Citidel Press, 1992) p. 14.

into totally uncharted religious waters much like the artists who crafted original visual depictions of Jesus where only their imaginations functioned as guides.

Jesus Films as Narrative Theology

Film makers, like the visual artists before them, participate in narrative theology, i.e., reflecting on the divine by telling human stories. Jesus' humanness needed to have shape and form on the silver screen for his divine life, ministry, and message to be effectively communicated. Artistic insight rather than historical accuracy, always impossible to achieve totally and completely, embodies meaning in all art forms, scripture included, and Jesus films are no exception. To approach any art form otherwise becomes extraordinarily problematic if not downright dishonest. When Pope John Paul II was reported to have said, "It is as it was" after seeing a private screening of *The Passion of the Christ*, he, regretfully, reinforced imaginative expression as historical fact.

Since narrative theology is an art form, and all art ultimately relies on a response from viewers, narrative theology, like all art forms, is both subjective and participatory. It does not communicate certitude nor completeness. Rather, narrative theology has the potential to engender reflective wisdom on the part of viewers provided they can enter into a relationship with the artistry of the story. But not all people are able to form a relationship with all art. That is why all artistic subjects, narrative theology included, need to have a multiplicity of

expressions. Some people form relationships with particular styles of art; others form relationships with other styles of art. Jesus films are no exceptions. This genre is a body of narrative theology that has the potential to engender reflective wisdom among viewers through some, not all, of its individual expressions.

Religious educators who understand these dynamics of narrative theology will be able to effectively employ Jesus films in their work. To present any Jesus film exclusively either as history or as doctrine is counterproductive. Rather, the artistic genre calls for a “reader response” and this is narrative theology’s great strength. It has the potential to be an involving and engaging participatory process leading to reflective wisdom. Reader response is dependent upon the relationship that an individual establishes with a specific art form, and the insights which flow from that relationship. So it is with the narrative theology of Jesus films.²⁴

Jesus Films and Scripture

Jesus films also are intimately connected with scripture, often viewed as the primary source book for all Jesus films. But within the context of narrative theology, the four gospels are, like Jesus films, approached as imaginative expressions and creative interpretations of Jesus’ life. Each of the four gospels has an overall artistic literary structure, and is a creative expression of Jesus’ life.

²⁴ In his book, *Jesus at the Movies* Tatum establishes two distinct categories of Jesus films: (1) harmonizing and (2) alternative. These categories as presented by Tatum, useful to a degree, do

There were no tape recorders to transcribe Jesus' exact words, and Jesus, like most preachers, in all probability preached various versions of the same sermon in differing circumstances and at different times. The historical message of Jesus' preachings eventually became embodied in the many different artistic endeavors collected as scripture.

The use of imagination in scripture, as well as in Jesus films, is the entry point into fundamental reflective wisdom that flows from the relationship one can establish with these texts. It is no doubt easier for some people to enter into such an imaginative relationship with the canon of Jesus films than the canon of scripture. By encouraging this relational process, first with Jesus films, and subsequently with scripture, some people will be able to more easily "reverse the hermenutical flow,"²⁵ i.e., use Jesus films as a lens to see the artistic qualities and subsequent insights of scripture more clearly.

One should not approach any particular Jesus film as a text separated either from scripture or from other Jesus films. Each Jesus film is a palimpsest, "a text written in relation to a previous text, showing simultaneously a new text and,

not take adequately take into account reader response theory. What is harmonizing for one viewer might well be alternative for another viewer.

²⁵ Larry J. Kreitzer, *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film* (NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 15.

through it, a reference to a previous one.”²⁶ With Jesus films there are the obvious references to scripture, but also there are references to other Jesus films, passion plays, stations of the cross, and religious art. Intertextuality and pentimento abound, e.g., the superman costume from *Godspell* appears on a background character in a scene in *Jesus of Montreal*; the late-medieval and Renaissance Deposition tableaux found in the paintings of masters such as Rogier van der Weyden and Raphael is the prototype for the dying Jesus character in this same film. Scripture, therefore, should not be the one and only lens or litmus test for approaching Jesus films.

Jesus Films and Midrash

Approaching scripture as narrative theology, i.e., an art form with which people may enter into a relationship leading to reflective wisdom, is a bold hermenutical shift for some religious educators and also for some of their students. Knowledge of midrash, a Jewish storytelling tradition which probes scriptural texts imaginatively rather than analytically, can help to facilitate this shift. This storytelling tradition looks to scriptural stories more for what they do not say -- gaps in the text -- and begins to fill them in by telling stories about things not told. This storytelling tradition also imaginatively retells biblical stories by casting them in contemporary situations. By participating in this imaginative hermenutical

²⁶ Tom Gunning, “Passion Play as Palimpsest: The Nature of the Text in the History of Early

process, people arrive at new insights about old stories, and establish connections between their own lives now and the lives of the heroes and heroines of the Bible. Furthermore, through the process of questioning and probing their scriptures imaginatively, people manifest reverence and honor for these sacred texts.²⁷

Jesus films continue this midrashic tradition. Many Jesus films imaginatively fill in the many lacunae in the scriptural record. Other Jesus films render a contemporary retelling of the Christ story. If film viewers understand not only the dynamics and value of this imaginative process, but also the ancient and revered religious tradition it follows, then the Jesus film genre becomes even a richer vein of reflective wisdom to be mined by religious educators and their students.

A Reader Response to one Jesus Film

Looking at *The Passion of the Christ* from the context of the Jesus film canon, one sees both similarities to and differences with other Jesus films. Mel Gibson relied on advisors in the production of this film much like directors of other Jesus films did. His advisors were largely people whose interpretation of Roman Catholicism was similar to his – post Trent and pre Vatican II. The pre release film publicity, particularly organizing private screening for religious leaders, had also

Cinema” in *Une Invention Du Diable? Cinema Des Premiers Temps et Religion*, p. 102.

been done before. Gibson had a four-color flyer sent to churches with the headline, “Dying was Jesus’ Reason for Living,”²⁸ yet one more marketing technique borrowed from the Jesus film tradition.

Mel Gibson relies on a 1824 book written by Anne Catherine Emmerick, a 19th century Bavarian nun, reportedly an anti-Semite who bore the stigmata, for some of his non scriptural material. These stories in some ways parallel midrash, but their source of authority, for Gibson, relies on the private visions Emmerick claims to have had rather than on the midrashic tradition.

My own theological reflection on *The Passion of the Christ* is not positive.

It’s a horror film. The opening scenes immersed in foggy bluish hues take place in the dark of night. The harrowing sound of rattling and scraping chains contribute to the consternation. Characters in silhouette add to the trepidation. Blood and violence further the dread.

Like all horror films, the viewer waits both in fascination and in fear for the first appearance of the monster. This movie, however, pulls a fast one on the audience. The monster never appears. Maybe this is the reason that few people consider *The Passion of the Christ* a horror film. But it is.

Even though the monster never traverses the screen, this film leads to a disturbing realization. The unseen monstrosity is none other than God. I doubt this is what Mel Gibson intended, but it is surely what he has produced. Think about it. Only a

²⁷ For some wonderful examples of midrash see Elie Wiesel’s *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (NY: Random House, 1976). His introduction is particularly instructive in the midrashic tradition.

²⁸ See “Mel Gibson’s Passion and Fascism’s Piety of Pain” by Matthew Fox at <http://www.matthewfox.org/sys-tmpl/response/>

monster would demand beatings, flaying of flesh, crowning with thorns, and eventual crucifixion.

God as monster is a significant theological problem. This problem has been created by a punitive model of redemption that exacts grizzly payment for wrongs done. This approach sees Adam and Eve's disobedience ruining everything for us, slamming shut the gates of heaven, only to be pried open by Jesus' bloody sacrifice that eventually balanced humanity's ledger sheet in the divine accounting books. Gibson's focus on "not my will but thine be done" gives approbation to this punitive model of redemption.

Of course I don't see God as monster. Nor do I think God exacting retribution in the form of Jesus' suffering and death particularly insightful or accurate. Luckily, in the Christian story there are other images of God. Take the father in the Prodigal Son story who treats his returned wayward son with esteem and gratitude. Hardly a monster, this father prepares a banquet to celebrate his son's return. No beatings, no blood, no punishment is demanded in this story to right aberrant behavior. The father of the prodigal son presents a radically different view of God than does Gibson's film.

Christ's life and teachings give his death meaning. Yet Gibson's focus on Christ's last days on earth independent of his life and teachings skews this film toward the horror genre. The few flashbacks Gibson chooses to include do not adequately communicate Christ's life and teachings, nor do they establish a context for understanding his death. Gibson's brief resurrection scene, which appears more as a tacked on afterthought than an integral part of the narrative, doesn't alleviate the God as monster motif.

Mel Gibson's Jesus film, perhaps unintentionally, creates a lot of collateral damage. God, who is no monster, is made one in *The Passion of the Christ*. Gibson of course did not invent the retribution theory of redemption. He walks in the footsteps of a long line of people who championed this theory,

and turned God into the monster he is not. But Gibson's horror film, regrettably, reinforces retribution to the max.

Theologically, this horror film called *The Passion of the Christ* is a horrible film.²⁹

Conclusion

I have had the pleasure the past several years to co-teach a course in the Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University Chicago titled, "Jesus: Real to Reel" with my colleague Richard Ascough,³⁰ We have learned there is no way to use any particular Jesus film as a quick and easy methodology to inculcate thinking people into any particular denominational tradition. Reader response theory disqualifies such a simplistic approach. More and more people today approach films, including Jesus films, as "open texts," i.e., films that do not supply definitive answers but raise probing questions left to the viewer for reflection. The post modern position that proclaims a multiplicity of interpretations for any given text has been confirmed by our classroom discussions of each and every Jesus film.

Nonetheless, we have learned the power of Jesus films to present artistic interpretations of Jesus' life, ministry, and message as the first stage in an interactive process with viewers. This initiatory process occasioned by a specific

²⁹Peter Gilmour, "Horror Flick" in U. S. Catholic, June, 2004, page 6.

³⁰I am indebted to Dr. Ascough for many of the insights contained in this paper that I learned from him as we worked together teaching this course. Visit the course's web site at: <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/Real2Reel/realreel.htm>

Jesus film then leads to further explorations, of other Jesus films, of other artistic representations of Jesus, of religious rituals, of the canonical scriptures and the apocryphal scriptures, of midrash, and of non scriptural stories, to name a few of the more prominent interrelated explorations occasioned by a particular Jesus film.

The fact that I do not hold *The Passion of the Christ* in high regard does not then mean that I as a religious educator should simply ignore it or speak against it. Rather, the Gibson film is an occasion for religious educators to contextualize this text through worthwhile explorations of the above mentioned areas. *The Passion of the Christ* certainly is not the ultimate nor is it the final Jesus film. It is simply the latest. Other film makers are at work on Jesus films, Paul Verhoeven³¹ among them.³² These yet to be made films will be occasions for religious educators to once again link up with yet other interpretations of the public domain Jesus, and supply resources for audiences who enter into relationships with these future texts.

Three unexplored but fascinating contexts for future Jesus films are the natural world, Christ in relation to other religions, and extraterrestrial life. The

³¹ See for example, Richard Ascough, "Symbolic Power and Religious Impotence in Paul Verhoeven's *Spetters*." *Journal of Religion and Film* 7/2.

³² Some notable directors were always interested in doing a Jesus film but never accomplished their interest. Orsen Welles, for example, in 1940 wrote in a letter to religious leaders, "...It seems to me that the story of Christ, more particularly the story of the Passion, told without recourse to theatrical sentimentality or to Hollywood overtones...might accomplish much in these times." "I am convinced that a film which created controversy would not have the special validity I wish to achieve." he wrote in a letter to Fulton J. Sheen in 1940. At one point Welles wanted to set his Jesus film in the American West. ("Does this idea sound familiar?" by Robert K. Elder, *Chicago Tribune*, Tempo Section, p. 1, July 20, 2004).

natural world as primary context for religious reality, championed by Thomas Berry, would be a challenging and relevant opportunity for the genre of Jesus films to evolve.³³ Likewise, Christ in relationship to other religious luminaries, particularly the Buddha and the prophet Mohammed, would be yet another intriguing context for a Jesus film.³⁴ And lastly, should intelligent life be discovered on other planets or other solar systems in the universe, one more intriguing, though at this point unknown, context would be established for the Jesus film industry.³⁵

The context of the Stations of the Cross and Passion Plays have become quite limiting ways for religious educators to educate people into the life, ministry, and message of Jesus. The ever increasing canon of Jesus films, on the other hand, offers limitless opportunities for religious educators to explore the Christ event and its significances with their students.

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³³See for example Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (NY: Bell Tower, 1999).

³⁴See for example Jacques Dupuis, *S. J. Christianity and the Religions: from Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

³⁵See for example *The Sparrow* (NY: Villard Books, 1996) and *The Children of God*, (NY: Villard Books, 1998) science fiction novels by Mary Doria Russell.

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