

Images of Christ in the Cinema

Media and Theology Project Public Lectures

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A. Introduction

1. Christ in the Cinema

i. The Bible/Christ In The History Of The Cinema.

In referring to Jesus as a 'star', and indeed as 'the bright morning star' (Rev. 22.16), the writer of the Book of Revelation may have predicted more than he intended! As we celebrate one hundred years of moving pictures, it is worth recalling the place that the Bible, and Jesus in particular, have occupied in the history of the cinema. At its dawning, two subjects dominated the new medium, namely, the Bible and pornography, the former lending respectability to this infant art form much as the latter was bringing it into disrepute. 'The Holy Bible', as one critic has observed, 'was one of the first dramatic works adapted to the screen, simply because it presented filmmakers with material that was not only popular but dignified' (Kinnard and Davis, 1992, p. 19). The first serious motion picture presentations at the end of the nineteenth century were based on passion plays (such as that performed at Oberammergau in Bavaria), 'the story of Christ's sufferings from the Last Supper through his death [providing] screen practitioners with one of their most vibrant genres' (Musser, 1993, p. 420). Films involving biblical characters or set in biblical times have been a staple of filmmaking from the very beginning, and one of the earliest 'stars' of the silent era, and one of the brightest 'stars' to shine in the cinema's firmament has been Jesus of Nazareth. Before Cecil B. DeMille created his epic *The King of Kings* (1927), there had been at least thirty-nine earlier versions of the Christ story, among them, and most notably, Sidney Olcock's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912).

ii. The Popularity Of The Biblical Epic/Christ Film.

Despite the scorn often directed at the Hollywood biblical epic, the genre has in fact enjoyed considerable popularity, a high degree of commercial success, and, and in its own day, much critical acclaim (Babington and Evans, 1993, pp. 5-6). When released in the late forties and fifties, films such as *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba*, *Quo Vadis?*, *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Ben-Hur* became top box-office hits, with *Ben-Hur*, for example, setting an unsurpassed record by gaining eleven Academy Awards. In the biblical epic, audiences were offered rich production values, high aesthetic standards and no few technical innovations. Such epics have been major agents in the popularization of religion and the Bible, dramatizing, as they have done, scriptural themes of good and evil, love and hate, oppression and liberation, vengeance and forgiveness.

iii. The Influence Of The Biblical Epic/Christ Film.

Moreover, given its popularity, the Christ film is arguably the most significant

medium through which popular culture this century has absorbed its knowledge of the Gospel story and formed its impression of Christianity's founder. Cecil B. DeMille claimed in his autobiography that 'probably more people have been told the story of Jesus of Nazareth through *The King of Kings* than through any other single work, except the Bible itself' (Hayne, 1960, p. 258). Although, on its first commercial release, it seems to have just managed to break even, in its non-commercial form it 'was one of the most viewed films of all time' (Babington and Evans, 1993, p. 5), and one, indeed, whose image of Jesus has influenced a generation.

iv. The Contempt For The Genre.

The features of the genre are now well known and firmly established in the popular mind, the pattern and visual style having been set by the epic's early and supreme practitioners, D. W. Griffiths (*Intolerance*, 1916) and Cecil B. DeMille (*The Ten Commandments*, 1923; *The King of Kings*, 1927). In the Channel Four documentary, 'Jesus Christ Movie-Star' (1992), the critic Sheila Johnston (in connection with *The King of Kings*) gives these features as showmanship, eroticism, vulgarity, faux naïveté and picture-postcard piety. Johnston's less than flattering list reflects the negative light in which the biblical epic has now come to be viewed. Typical of the derision the genre often encounters is this early comment from Time Magazine which greeted the appearance of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* in 1956:

One result of all these stupendous efforts? Something roughly comparable to an eight-foot chorus girl - pretty well put together, but much too big and much too flashy.... What de Mille has really done is to throw sex and sand into the movie-goer's eyes for almost twice as long as anyone else has ever dared to. (Walker, 1995, p. 1123)

In his autobiography, DeMille gives his own defence against such charges, claiming that, in presenting sex and violence in his epics, he had merely sought to present biblical characters in their true humanity. Nevertheless, the biblical epic has repeatedly been accused of presenting two-dimensional heroes and simplistic plots ('Rome is divided as sharply as usual: naughty, gaudy Emperors, simple, ungaudy Christians, and, in between, tormented but finally clear-eyed converts' (Butler, 1969, p. 31, of *The Robe*, 1953). The epic has been criticized for pandering to lower instincts by offering spectacle rather than drama or spirituality. On another level, with its pietistic handling of the biblical text, it has been seen to reinforce traditional conservative teaching on the literal inerrancy of scripture. Undoubtedly, many of these films evince a religious conservatism, particularly the Christ film, governed as it is by the restrictions imposed by its subject-matter, the Gospel narratives and the constant threat of religious censorship. Indeed, in the words of two recent commentators, 'the greatest constraint on the Hollywood Christ narrative is its requirement at least formally to accept Christ's divinity' (Babington and Evans, 1993, p. 99).

v. The Rehabilitation Of The Genre.

Despite such criticisms, there is evidence of a renewed interest in the genre, and indeed of some rehabilitation of it, at least at the scholarly level. The words I have just quoted are from Bruce Babington and Peter Evans' recent book, *Biblical Epics. Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (1993). This book treats the biblical epic with seriousness, examining with sharp insight how ethnicity, sexuality and gender as well as religion have had their effect upon the genre. Both commentators - colleagues

of mine, as it happens, at Newcastle University (although Evans has now moved on) - expose the banality of what passes for criticism of it. Other recent reappraisals of the significance of biblical epics have stressed their championing of the place of the Judaeo-Christian moral code in a world (especially that of the 1950s) in which religion was under attack, as well as their reinforcement of American notions of liberty and religious truth. By offering 'an unconscious allegory of meanings central to American mythology' and, in particular, by '... the association of the oppressing ruling class with the British, and of the oppressed but ultimately triumphant Israelites or Christians with Americans ...', the biblical epic '... reworks the American Revolution scenario'. In this respect, it has as its counterpart the western 'with its enacting of America's coming to birth as the Promised Land', both genres 'sympiotically command[ing] the whole field of American cinema' (Babington and Evans, 1993, pp. 9-11, citing Wood, 1975). Further, by raising questions of faith and doubt, belief and scepticism, biblical epics 'also dramatise the encounter of religion and secularism in twentieth-century America' (Babington and Evans, 1993, p. 16).

2. Approaching The Genre.

i. The Methods.

The biblical epic can be approached by critics in a variety of ways. It can be subjected to narrative analysis and its plot, characterization, point of view etc. explored, or to an aesthetic analysis which considers its use of music, art, locations, and settings. It can be used in sociological analysis and interrogated in light of its depiction of sexuality, gender, ethnicity or religion, or in intertextual analysis with respect to the sources by which it may have been influenced. Of the three sub-genres (the Old Testament epic, The Roman-Christian epic and the Christ film), it is the Christ film which is of most interest to New Testament scholars like myself, and for a variety of reasons. In sum, these concern the forms it employs, the sources it uses, the social context it addresses, the ideology it communicates, the style it adopts, and the issues it raises.

ii. The Forms.

As can be seen from 'the twelve' I have appropriately chosen as exemplars, and which are listed on the reverse side of the synopsis, the Christ film has appeared in a variety of forms, such as the classic **biopic** (cf. *From the Manger to the Cross*, 1912; *The King of Kings*, 1927; *Golgotha*, 1935; *King of Kings*, 1961; *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 1964; *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965; *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977 and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988), the **musical** (cf. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1973; *Godspell*, 1973), the **satire** (cf. *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979) and the **allegory** (cf. *Jesus of Montreal*, 1989).

iii. The Sources.

In addition to its professed dependence on the results of biblical scholarship and archaeology, it has used a variety of literary sources such as the canonical Gospels, the apocryphal Gospels, Josephus, and the historical novel, as well as a long and varied tradition of Christian art and music.

iv. The Style.

Where style is concerned, it is frequently distinguished for its innovative techniques and camerawork, its cinematography, its stunning locations, its artistic direction, its set and costume design and its musical score.

v. The Social Context and Ideology.

While pursuing an historical subject, it both reflects and addresses at the same time the preoccupations and concerns of the contemporary audience, revealing much about the social context and ideology of the movie-goer and the film-maker.

vi. The Issues.

The Christ film raises a number of issues which tax modern critics. Chief among them have been its depiction of Jews, its depiction of women and, supremely, of course, its representation of Jesus, the last of which is our concern in this lecture.

3. Ways Of Portraying Jesus In Film.

i. The Allegorical Appearance.

ii. The Symbolic Appearance.

iii. The Guest Appearance.

iv. Jesus as 'Leading Man'.

Jesus' appearances in film have taken four distinct forms. These we may describe as the **allegorical** appearance (his indirect manifestation in a hero with Christlike qualities, as, for example, in Stuart Rosenberg's *Cool-Hand Luke*, (1967)), the **symbolic** appearance (an implied screen presence in a hand, both hands, his feet or even his headless trunk, as in *Ben-Hur*, 1927/1959), the **guest** appearance (for example, in the form of visions granted to the principals, as in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1935), finally his appearance as a **'leading man'**. In the excerpts I am about to show, I shall be concerned with the classic Christ films in which Jesus has appeared in this last category.

B. The Reel Jesus: Style and Representation in the Christ Film

1. The King Of Kings (1927).

Introduction.

The first of these is Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927). 'Descended from a distinguished playwright who had written in his diary that he learned Greek by studying the New Testament, DeMille', according to a recent commentator, 'did not need much prodding to mount a lavish production about the biblical past' (Higashi, 1994, p. 179). Working in collaboration with his script-writer, Jeanie McPherson, and with religious consultants such as Bruce Barton, one of the founding figures of modern advertising, DeMille produced the first full-length, silent Hollywood epic on the life of Jesus, as seen from the perspective of Mary Magdalene.

Combining sex and piety, the film presents Mary as a rich courtesan whose lover Judas has been snatched out of her clutches by the carpenter of Nazareth. Its many memorable scenes include Mary's riding off in her zebra-drawn chariot to rescue Judas ('Harness my zebras - gift of the Nubian king!'), her subsequent exorcism by Jesus in a swirl of exiting demons, and dramatic Raising of Lazarus, Cleansing Of The Temple, Crucifixion and Resurrection scenes' (Telford, 1997).

The sequence you are about to see is the first appearance of Jesus in the film, and it is a moment for which the audience has been kept in suspense. It takes place in the fisherman's hut where Jesus is staying. Jesus' various disciples have been introduced, but the audience is now to see Jesus for the first time, and from the point of view of a little blind girl who has been led to Jesus by a very young Mark. He has helped her through the window into the hands of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The two disciples shown are the clean-shaven Judas and the bearded Peter whom a caption has described as 'the Giant Disciple, a fisherman quick of temper but soft of heart'. Peter is later to adopt the young Mark.

Excerpt 1: The Giving Of Sight To The Little Blind Girl. (00.16.05-17.55) [1 m 50 s]

Comment.

One of the first things to comment on is of course the style. The film presents itself to us as if it were an illustrated Bible story book. This is no accident since DeMille drew upon not only the religious art and paintings of the Renaissance, but also on the Bible illustrations of the Victorian period based upon it, in particular those of the painter James Tissot and the engraver Gustave Doré.

You will also have noticed the music. When the film was re-issued in 1931 with synchronized music and sound-effects, as in this version, DeMille made effective use of traditional Christian hymns played at strategic moments ('Lead Kindly Light' as here, 'Blessed are the Pure in Heart' in the exorcism of Mary Magdalene, 'Abide with Me' in the Last Supper and his post-resurrection appearance in the upper room, 'Nearer My God to Thee' at his death, 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today' in the resurrection scene, and 'Rock of Ages' at the finale).

A third feature is the intimate use of the camera, with medium, close-up and point of view shots which do much to humanize the biblical characters. The stylized religious expressionism, however, a static camera, and special effects such as the beam of light and the halo preserve the image of an objective Christ, whose divinity is clearly recognizable.

While we may today shrink from such pietistic representation, it is worth recalling the climate of controversy and censorship which then surrounded the portrayal of Jesus in film. The New York Times review of *The King of Kings* claimed that the presence of Jesus created a feeling akin to resentment, largely because DeMille had insisted on having his camera too close to his leading man. DeMille's bold 'in your face' presentation of Jesus should also be set alongside the fact that in Britain at the time the depiction of Christ was banned altogether in films, and that this ban had operated from the founding of the British Board of Film Censors in 1912 until after the Second World War. A special licence indeed had been required for Jesus to be seen by London audiences in 1928.

The actor chosen by DeMille to portray Jesus was the distinguished British actor H. B. Warner, whose performance DeMille was later to eulogize in his autobiography. The extraordinary steps taken by DeMille to ensure a proper attitude of reverence in respect to the part are now legendary. As he recorded in his autobiography:

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 (Hayne, 1960, p. 256).

The fact that, at the time, Warner was drinking 'heroic quantities of illicit whisky' (Channel Four, 1992) was neither here nor there, for the image of Christ which he projected was so influential that an American minister is said to have later told Warner: 'I saw you in *The King of Kings* when I was a child, and now, every time I speak of Jesus, it is your face I see'. Other observers were not so charitable, one contemporary reviewer expressing the opinion that 'Mr Warner's expression is a little severe, and his smile, despite his obvious earnestness and sincerity, is more mundane than spiritual; it is not the smile of sympathy or piety' (Babington & Evans, 1993, p. 101).

What strikes us now is the age of the Jesus Warner portrays. Warner was over 50 when he played the part. Various social, cultural and psychological influences have been suggested for this mature portrayal, the relatively greater age of Victorian fathers, the tenor of Victorian religious painting and its brooding and melancholic iconography, the reflection of DeMille's own relationship with his audiences, and even the 'muscular Christianity' of Bruce Barton's 1924 bestseller *The Man Nobody Knows*, with its notion of a robust, middle-aged, middle class executive Jesus who had 'picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world' (Maltby, 1990, p. 199). Nobody, however, as far as I am aware, has posited a link with the tradition in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus was middle-aged (Jn 8.57).

Another noticeable feature of DeMille's *The King of Kings* is the selection of biblical quotations from the Authorized Version (some wrested from their original context) which are presented as captions ('I am come a light into the world - that whosoever believeth in me shall not abide in darkness' Jn 12.46) and which act as an unspoken commentary on the action. The rise of fundamentalism would have made the King James Bible familiar to the audiences of this period.

The supreme impression which this clip leaves us with, however, is of the *patriarchal* Jesus presented to us through Warner's performance, a mature, majestic, ethereal, composed and essentially controlled figure. Strong but also gentle, virile but with feminine qualities, possessing considerable 'form and comeliness' yet a 'man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Isa. 53.2-3), Warner is an avuncular Jesus with an asexual compassion for women and children.

2. King Of Kings (1961).

Introduction.

The Jesus of Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* is a very different one. A remake of the DeMille version in name only, this sixties Hollywood adaptation by the director of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), presents Judas and Barabbas as political revolutionaries, with Jesus as a reluctant pawn in their game. Reflecting the developing youth culture, the film offers us a more youthful Jesus, while preserving a traditional patriarchal role for John the Baptist (a part played uncomfortably by

Robert Ryan). Criticized by the Catholic Legion of Decency as 'theologically, historically, and scripturally inaccurate' (Kinnard and Davis, 1992, p. 132), the film is now viewed in retrospect as better than its critics made it out to be. Among its memorable moments are the opening scenes of Pompey's Entry into Jerusalem (with a voice-over by Orson Welles giving audiences a history lesson drawn from Josephus), The Baptism Of Jesus, The Sermon On The Mount, Jesus' (fictitious) Visit to John In Prison, The Last Supper and The Resurrection (the film ends with 'the shadow of the Galilean' falling over the abandoned nets of his followers to form a cross). What you are about to see are the opening moments of the Sermon on the Mount.

Excerpt 2: The Sermon On The Mount - The Beatitudes and the Questioners (01.24.25 - 01.26.43) [2 m 18 s]

Comment.

One of our first impressions in seeing this film is of its sense of style, its aesthetic look, its painterly quality. The costumes are immaculate, and the colours striking, especially the solid blocks of blue, brown, white and blood-red. Both majestic and monumental, and virtually epitomizing the biblical epic in the popular imagination nowadays is the stirring music of the Hungarian composer Miklos Rosza which gives the audience its emotional cue (cf. *Quo Vadis?*, 1951; *Ben-Hur*, 1959 the overture of which you heard at the beginning). The camera is placed either behind Jesus looking down at the vast crowd from his vantage point, or below Jesus looking up at his statuesque figure, with his traditional pose, the outstretched arms. Close-ups are given of individuals in the crowd, the actors' faces beautiful, intense and representative of idealized types. In statuesque silence and with rapt attention, they are totally focused on Jesus. There is no conversation between them, and (unlike the crowd in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*) they don't react or interrupt ('What's that he said?' 'I think it was, "Blessed are the cheesemakers"'. 'What's so special about cheesemakers?'. 'Well obviously it's not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturer of dairy products').

The part of Jesus in the film was played by Jeffrey Hunter, an American actor popular in the fifties, especially among teenagers. Even although Jeffrey Hunter was older than Max von Sydow (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*) and Willem Dafoe (*The Last Temptation of Christ*) when playing the part, by choosing a teenage idol as Jesus, the film attracted the pejorative sobriquet 'I was a Teenage Jesus' and tended, somewhat unfairly to be dismissed.

It is noticeable that Hunter's lines are in modern English (Revised Standard Version style) but are delivered in a traditional way, at a formal, measured pace, and in a smooth, mellifluous, controlled voice. The monumentality of the scene is broken up, however, by the series of interlocutors ('Prove to us who you are' ; 'When, when is the Kingdom of God coming?'; 'Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' and the faintly risible 'Huh, I'm a camel-driver. Who is my neighbour?'). These questions are answered by Jesus, using various conflated Gospel passages, and in the manner of a politician fielding a press conference ('Watch as your may, you will not see it come. For no one will say "Here it is, or there it is", for the Kingdom of God is within you'; 'What is written in the Law. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your power, and all your mind, and love your neighbour as you love yourself. Do that and you will live eternally').

Here then we have a beautiful, youthful, aesthetic Christ, a figure both picturesque and idealistic, at times moody and confused, at once compassionate and self-contained. '[W]hereas in the De Mille film Jesus takes on the role of the father, Ray's Jesus is much more son than father' (Babington and Evans, 1993, p. 133). Where Barabbas is 'the Messiah of war', this Jesus is 'the Messiah of peace'. 'I am fire', says Barabbas to Judas in words partly inspired by John's Gospel (cf. 4.14, etc.) 'and he is water' (Babington & Evans, 1993, p. 134). This Jesus, for the most part, is strong, firm, gentle, showing little passion, excitability or anger, even under the threat of death. When he is beaten - Hunter's shaven armpits were momentarily glimpsed at this point, causing apoplexy among the critics! - the agonies register on Judas who faints on seeing the cross being prepared for his friend. Here is a Christ without passion and 'without sweat glands', as critics complained in commenting on the crucifixion scene (Channel Four, 1992). Even in dying, Hunter's Jesus is strangely passive and controlled.

3. *The Gospel According To St. Matthew (1964).*

Introduction.

The same cannot be said for our next Jesus, that of the Marxist director, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Appearing in 1964, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* was a low-budget, black and white, European film, dedicated to Pope John XXIII, whose forthright treatment of its subject had more impact on audiences than the traditional, glossy Hollywood epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which was to follow it a year later. Although he complained that in the process of cinematic transmission, the simple 'Matthew' of his original title had acquired sainthood, Pasolini's unconventional adaptation of the Gospel was widely acclaimed, receiving no less than two international Catholic prizes as well as being projected officially before the Pope and the Cardinals in Rome. The film follows the text of Matthew closely and the sequence you are about to see depicts Jesus' Woes Against The Pharisees.

Excerpt 3: Jesus' Preaching - The Woes Against The Pharisees [01.29.35-01.31.06] [1 m 31 s]

Comment.

One's first impression of this film is that it clearly lacks the rich 'production values' that we observed in connection with Ray's *King of Kings*. The style resembles that of a documentary or cinéma vérité, and the camera-work is active, rough and intimate. Through the lens of a loose, hand-held camera, we approach Jesus from the point of view of an observer in the crowd, at first finding it difficult to pick him out. A similar technique is used in the later trial scenes before Caiaphas and Pilate, thereby lending the film an unusual and unpredictable effect. The director is fond of lingering facial close-ups, especially of Jesus whose animated persona is often in sharp contrast to the passive acting, silent stares, and looks of awe from the supporting cast. Here, however, the unknown, untutored and unprofessional actors who make up the crowd, with their craggy, individualized peasant faces, are seen to react to Jesus' words as well as to each other.

The choral background here is also effective. Pasolini gives us a soundtrack throughout his film which draws upon the full range of the classical and Christian musical tradition: from Bach to Billie Holliday; from Prokofiev to the Congolese Missa Luba; from Mozart to Leadbelly; from the haunting sound of the flute to the

world-weary sound of the negro spiritual 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child'. The settings too are striking, the poor rural villages of southern Italy being chosen by Pasolini to provide his background. Jerusalem here is the old part of Matera, the part known as the Sassi.

Of all the Christ films, this one captures most of all the feel of the early passion play versions of Jesus' story. As here, the film also has numerous references to Christian art, the soldiers who arrive stepping out, as it were, of a Renaissance painting. 'I wanted to do the story of Christ plus two thousand years of Christianity', said Pasolini, and to an Italian like himself, 'painting ... is the major element in the Christological tradition' (Stack, 1969, p. 91). Piero della Francesca was the source for the Pharisee's clothes and Byzantine painting (via Georges Rouault) the inspiration for Christ's face.

The actor who played Jesus was likewise an unknown, a Spanish student, Enrique Irazoqui, who had never acted before. His thin, emaciated face, with its prominent forehead, piercing eyes, stubbly beard and sorrowful expression, creates a memorable impression as, dressed in a white robe and black shawl, he makes his vehement delivery of the Matthean text. Apart from two references to Isaiah, Matthean quotations form the oral core of the film, and although the language in which they are delivered is slightly antiquated, it would not have been considered strange to the average Italian. As you have heard, the pace is fast, even staccato, and the tone often harsh and full of emotion. The music, with its choral paean to religiosity, operates in tension or in counterpoint to the scene with its fierce words against the religious establishment.

This, then, is an angry, subversive Christ and a Christ of the people. Although based on a Gospel which would ordinarily lend support for a pacific Christ (Mt. 26.52), Pasolini gives us a conspiratorial Jesus (some even have said a Marxist Jesus) who goes round Palestine like 'a revolutionary whirlwind' (Stack, 1969, p. 95), gathering disciples, spitting out sermons and defending the poor against the priestly aristocracy. Grim, unsmiling, ascetic, disconcerting, Irazoqui's Jesus, though still somewhat distant and detached, displays a far wider range of emotions than previous celluloid Christs, and gives to the role a refreshing urgency and vitality.

4. The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965).

Introduction.

If one of the aims of Pasolini's film was to rescue the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel from centuries of religious orthodoxy and piety, and to return him to the people, then that of our next film, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, was to recover a sense of his intense spirituality as well as his compassion. Perfectionism in pursuit of the Perfect, George Stevens' highly underrated Christ film was the most expensive ever made. Though luminescent with its galaxy of stars, and presenting some memorable sequences (such as The Sermon On The Mount, The Raising Of Lazarus, The Last Supper, and The Crucifixion), this was a commercial failure which set the Christ film back where Hollywood was concerned. While it was difficult for critics to disparage Max von Sydow's mature and accomplished central performance, the choice of celebrities in cameo parts (especially John Wayne's craggy centurion and his earthen affirmation,

'Truly this man was the Son of God!') was distracting for audiences at the time, and much criticized.

The scene you are about to see is part of the famous Raising of Lazarus sequence. Jesus has just climbed to the tomb, and is about to perform the miracle. Among the characters you will see in the sequence are Judas (played by David McCallum) who thinks 'Jesus is the kindest man he has ever known' and blind Aram, an old man who has known Jesus from childhood and who first appears in the scene where he is rejected by his own countrymen. He later doubles up as the blind man of John 9 ('All I know is that whereas once I was blind ...'), being called as the first witness in Jesus' trial.

Excerpt 4: The Raising Of Lazarus (01.47.44-01.49.44) [2 m]

Comment.

As with Ray's *King of Kings*, this film has a decidedly aesthetic feel to it. As with other directors before him, Stevens immersed himself in centuries of Christian art, using Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, for example, as his model for the Last Supper. In place of Ray's predilection for a range of solid colours, Stevens preferred, a more limited number, many of his characters being dressed, as here, in plain white, grey or black, neutral colours which blend in more naturally with the background. The settings are spectacular. Shot with 70 mm film in Ultra Panavision and Technicolor, the film was made on location in the grand Mesa country of Utah, whose rugged buttes, imposing desert landscapes and shades of the western (Stevens directed *Shane*, 1953) give it a monumental quality.

Where water imagery is used in connection with Ray's Jesus, Stevens, also inspired by John's Gospel, uses light and light imagery to great effect (as, for example, in Jesus' speech in the Temple). In this scene, the backlighting is particularly striking, with Jesus appearing in silhouette, as seen from the darkness of the tomb. The juxtaposition of light and darkness, of sound and silence, together with the slow, thoughtful pace create a slightly otherworldly atmosphere. The scene begins in silence except for the faint, echoing wail of either the wind or of mourning. The dualisms of life and death, therefore, and of breath/spirit/wind interplay. Jesus is wearing a shroud-like garment. He himself looks like the figure of death as the stone is rolled away. His stylized but untraditional gestures mimic the tortured convolutions of a being struggling for life. When he arrives at the tomb, he is slightly breathless. There is a breathlessness too about his prayer, which in itself calls upon the four winds. He breathes the name of Lazarus. He takes a deep breath at the end.

Although a distinguished actor, von Sydow was little known at the time outside of Europe, where he had acted in a number of Ingmar Bergman films such as *The Seventh Seal* (1957). With his straight, black hair and beard, and Swedish accent, his Byzantine Jesus conveys a spiritual and unearthly quality. The American poet and historian Carl Sandburg was involved, among others, in the writing of the script and, while this is at times banal, it is also frequently beautiful, poetic and subtly nuanced. Unlike the other characters, Jesus' language, as also that of Charlton Heston's John the Baptist, is largely inspired by the King James Version of the Gospels. In this scene, however, von Sydow was allowed to improvise (from passages such as Ex. 15.11, Deut. 32.39 and Ezek. 37.9) the striking prayer which you heard.

Jesus' nobility of character, firmness of purpose, certainty of mind, and sadness of spirit are conveyed well by von Sydow. With his strange, otherworldly and ascetic demeanour, the actor then has brought us a mystical Christ in sharp contrast to the energetic and driven figure of Pasolini. Where the Italian director's presentation is at times frenetic, that of Stevens is slow and stately. Based on John's Gospel as well as on the Synoptics, and underscored by the thoughtful and contemplative music of Alfred Newman, Stevens' film allows von Sydow's Jesus time to speak for himself, and to develop a performance which in its strength, virility and compassion equals, if not surpasses, that of H. B. Warner.

5. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* (1973).

Introduction.

If Stevens' 'Christ for the sixties' reflected the softer, more contemplative, more introspective side of the counter-culture, then the musical *Christ of Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) offers us its raucous exterior. This film, together with *Godspell* (1973), produced a much more animated, more energetic, more contemporary figure, with song and dance routines - in the case of *Godspell* a soft shoe shuffle - and even the hint of a love relationship with Mary Magdalene. Based on the successful rock opera by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber (with a screenplay by Norman Jewison and Melvyn Bragg, and musical direction by André Previn), and filmed on a scaffolded archaeological site in Israel, where young tourists re-enact episodes of the life of Christ, this vibrant movie mixes the historical and the contemporary to good effect.

Like *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was filmed in 70 mm film, the last film to be made in this way with such large lenses. Unlike *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, it was an enormous money-spinner. Branded anti-Semitic in some quarters and anti-Christian in others, it nevertheless revitalized the Gospel story for seventies' audiences as well as bringing together the most unlikely people: the London Symphony orchestra, the St Paul's Boys' choir and members of the rock group, Deep Purple. It presents a Last Supper eaten al fresco in an olive-grove, a singing Jesus in the Garden Of Gethsemane, and a burlesque, Noel Coward-style Trial Before Herod Antipas ('If you are the Christ, the great Jesus Christ ... prove to me you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool!'). The scene you are about to see is The Triumphant Entry. The Jewish authorities are in black, with Orthodox-style, onion-domed hats and long dark beards and the disciples and the crowd in jeans and open shirts.

Excerpt: The Triumphant Entry. (00.26.35-00.28.35) [2 m]

Comment.

It is difficult to know how to comment on a singing, dancing Christ with a falsetto voice, for this film speaks for itself, as well as for a generation. All its characters indeed (the disciples, the Jewish authorities, Mary, Judas) can clearly be seen to be rehearsing the rhetoric and counter-rhetoric of the youth revolution of the late sixties and early seventies. The singing and dancing Jesus is not a Gospel image (although one might compare Mt. 11.16-19 = Lk. 7.31-35 where the Jesus of Q appears to identify with the children of this generation: 'We piped to you, and you did not dance'), but it is not, of course, unknown in our ancient texts. In the Gnostic Acts of John (94-97), Jesus sings and dances with his disciples in Gethsemane, a passage

reinvented in Sydney Carter's once popular 'Lord of the Dance'. With his casual and relaxed way of walking, and his strong, confident, outstretched fingers - palms down, one notes, rather than palms up in the traditional pietistic style of *King of Kings* (1961) - Ted Neeley's hippie Jesus is all movement. Posed characteristically with children, his hair 'blowing in the wind', amid waving palms and undulating and adulating crowds, he registers only in the worried freeze-frame at the end a hint of the dark fate to follow ('O JC, will you die for me').

6. *Jesus Of Nazareth* (1977).

Introduction.

A solid return to a more traditional Christ is to be seen in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). With a screenplay by Anthony Burgess and others (and later turned into a novel by William Barclay), this six and a half hour made-for-television movie was the result of a promise made by its producer Sir Lew Grade to the Pope to do for Jesus what he had done for Moses. If ever confirmation were needed of the attraction of the popular Christ over the academic Christ, then it comes with the thought, pointed out by Kenneth Wolfe, that at the very moment in 1977 when Don Cupitt and Peter Armstrong were airing on BBC2 their scholarly and open-ended investigation on the subject 'Who was Jesus?', Sir Lew's ITV epic was giving a long, firm and traditional answer to much larger audiences!

With its colourful costumes and realistic settings (filmed in North Africa), this is 'an immaculate conception', a Bible-stories-brought-alive production with little creative interpretation. The many distinguished actors, a number of them British, proclaim their lines in a clear, controlled and somewhat mannered way as if savouring every line of their cameo performances. The film's brief was that it should not offend anyone, and in this, despite some initial fears, it proved successful. It is now regarded as one of the most reverential portrayals of Christ ever filmed.

The script follows that of the Gospels, and because of its leisurely pace, it has time to fill in the gaps and iron out the creases in the biblical narrative in respect of character and motivation. One departure from the traditional story is the introduction of the scribe Zerah (played by Ian Holm) who manipulates a well-intentioned Judas (Ian McShane) to deliver Jesus up to the sanhedrin. Judas' betrayal is based on the understanding that this would give Jesus the opportunity to prove himself to the Jewish authorities before being proclaimed king of Judaea in the interests of peace. Zerah is the bare-headed figure in the scene you are about to see which depicts Jesus before Pilate after his flogging.

Excerpt: Jesus Before Pilate (Ecce Homo). (02.25.36-02.27.55) [2 m 19 s]

Comment.

Among the striking features of this scene, is the sharp contrast between the figures of Pilate and Jesus. There is a solidity and earthiness about Rod Steiger's bull-dog figure in his leather-studded garb, his latent imperial power reflected in but tempered by his world-weary face. Confronting him is the wraithlike, suffering, inward-looking figure of Jesus, with his pure, visionary, blue eyes and his regal but tattered, blood-red cloak. Elsewhere in this film, the music is grandiose, and at times obtrusive. Here the sound of a wind instrument enhances the ethereal quality of the scene. The part of Jesus is

played by the British actor Robert Powell, although Al Pacino and Dustin Hoffman were also considered for the role. The strength of the performance is its depiction of the power, clarity, wit and idealism of Jesus' teaching. Powell's Jesus comes over as a dignified and articulate pacifist, who, although perceptive, is strangely out of tune with the political and religious currents of his day. His is a monumental Christ certain of his divine status and without a hint of self-doubt. There is very little scepticism in this presentation, a believing ideology pervading the script.

7. *The Last Temptation Of Christ (1988).*

Introduction.

This is not so with our next and final Christ film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese. Scorsese, a one-time candidate for the Catholic priesthood, is one of the most gifted, courageous and internationally acclaimed of American directors. Demonstrating a recurrent theme of 'souls in stress', his boxing biopic, *Raging Bull* (1980) was voted by critics the best American film of the 1980s. The screenwriter for *The Last Temptation of Christ* as for *Raging Bull* and *Taxi-Driver*, was Paul Schrader, an ex-divinity student from a strict Calvinist background, whom critics have described as 'the most obsessively religious director in the contemporary American cinema' (Babington and Evans, 1993, p. 14). Together the two present us with a 'raging Messiah', a tortured human Jesus 'possessed by God and fighting it' (Thompson and Christie, 1989, 135-6).

Based on Kazantzakis' novel about 'the dual substance of Christ' and 'the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh', this, in my opinion, is one of the finest, most religious and yet most controversial Christ films ever made. Franco Zeffirelli called the movie 'damaging to the image of Christ' despite Scorsese's professed aim 'to make the life of Jesus immediate and accessible to people who haven't really thought about God in a long time' (Thompson and Christie, 1989, p. 124). From a New Testament, or even from a theological point of view, there is nothing in *The Last Temptation of Christ* that justifies the depth of opposition that there has been to it. It is sad, therefore, that the film has not had the audience it deserves, being shown only on British television (Channel Four), for example, as late as June, 1995.

Like the novel, the film begins with Jesus' mission and ends with his crucifixion, declining to depict the discovery of the empty tomb and his subsequent post-resurrection appearances. Its plot begins with an unusual twist: Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, makes crosses for the Romans on which they crucify Jewish rebels. Racked with guilt for this, as well as for his childhood sweetheart Mary Magdalene's descent into prostitution, he begins a spiritual journey to save the world. In an entirely fresh and highly original way, the plot follows that of the traditional passion narratives with Jesus finding himself on the cross confronting his last temptation - a series of visions in which he is presented by his guardian angel with an alternative to his redemptive but suicidal mission, namely, the pleasures of the body, sex, procreation, home, wife, family, domestic bliss, and happy longevity, all mediated through the figures of Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha. This last temptation is resisted and he achieves his victory. The clip you are about to see comes from one of these fantasies on the cross. It presents a chance encounter between Paul and Jesus, the young girl accompanying him being this guardian angel who is really Satan in disguise.

Excerpt: *Jesus Meets Paul*. (02.16.12-02.21.12)

Comment

In respect of style, *The Last Temptation of Christ's* camera-work, art direction, musical score and locations are striking. With its atmospheric 'world music' soundtrack by Peter Gabriel and its exotic Moroccan locations (as well as its painterly allusions), the film gives an air of strangeness and unpredictability to what is otherwise a familiar story. The thirty-five minute 'last temptation' sequence was filmed in the Atlas Mountains, this scene around the Roman ruins of Volubilis. Inspired by Pasolini, Scorsese uses a very mobile and intimate camera, which frequently captures the turbulence of its central character, played here by Willem Dafoe, an actor with a considerable body of work behind him (*Platoon*; *Born on the Fourth of July*; *Body of Evidence*; *Mississippi Burning*).

Where the characterization of Jesus is concerned, one notes immediately the use of contemporary, idiomatic speech. One of the remarkable elements of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is its much more fluid use of the New Testament text, presenting us with a Christ who, speaking in an American accent, thinks on his feet and uses language spontaneously in the cut and thrust of debate ('I've got something to tell you ... uh ... I'm ... I'm sorry', he says before the parable of the Sower, '... but the easiest way to make myself clear is to tell you a story'). The audience is hence offered his words at a refreshing remove from the process which later crystallized such teaching into holy writ. Here the contemporary element is reinforced by Harry Dean Stanton's Paul, played as an American evangelist, in a Southern Baptist, perhaps Appalachian accent, and with all the traditional gestures. (This is the only classic Christ film incidentally to engage the question of Paul's influence on Christianity.)

Along with the revisionist treatment of the apostle, an equally contemporary note is struck by the very human Jesus, whose actions as well as language is uncharacteristic. 'I'm a man just like everyone else', 'He's a liar!' (he says of Paul), he grabs Paul by the lapels. Dafoe presents a sexualized, sinful Jesus, a 'subjective', doubting figure who is demented and confused, a weak, dithering individual who only gradually comes to see himself as the Messiah, a man struggling with his own neurotic, obsessive and masochistic tendencies and seeking to resolve these conflicts in a final act of self-destruction, a person torn between a violent but significant destiny and a peaceful, if bland domesticity.

In his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), Albert Schweitzer stated (of nineteenth century study of the life of Jesus) that it 'loosed the bands by which He had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more' (Schweitzer, 1954, p. 397). This observation can be transferred to the Christ film where, since the sixties, such vitality has become more and more apparent. In Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), we have one of the most striking and complex portraits of Jesus in recent years. Here is the human Christ and one, it seems, with all his tortured introspection, at an opposite pole from Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) with which we began. Scorsese's Jesus, like that of Kazantzakis before him, is a truly human figure grappling with the possibility and the pain of the divine. And of all the Jesuses of film, Scorsese's Jesus, like Paul's, 'is much more important and much more powerful'.

C. Conclusion

I began this lecture by referring to Jesus as a 'star'. In the course of this presentation, we, like the wise men, have noted when that star appeared, and have observed his birth in the cradle of the cinema itself. I have commented on the classic Christ film, on the importance it holds, the approaches taken to it, the forms in which it has appeared, the sources it has used, the social contexts it has addressed, the ideologies it has communicated, and the issues it raises. In focusing in particular on style and representation, I have given you examples from seven Christ films. Like the Gnostic Christians of old, we have found a Christ who has appeared in many shapes and forms (the patriarchal Christ, the youthful Christ, the subversive Christ, the mystical Christ, the musical Christ, the pacific Christ, and the human Christ). The Christ we have found, the Jesus depicted in the cinema, has been influenced by the tradition of the New Testament evangelist, the imagination of the film-maker and the social context of the audience. In an age which has demystified its saints, removed its icons from their pedestals, and demoted its heroes, it is fitting that the more realistic and introspective Christ of the nineties, as brought to us by Scorsese, should share our human capacity for doubt as well as faith, for scepticism as well as hope, and that his struggle, if it is to be ours, should be seen as both real and genuine. The screen image of Jesus has varied with the shifts and currents of society itself, in line with its changing social, political and religious perspectives and values. I hope I have shown that these films deserve more respectful attention than they have hitherto enjoyed, and that the Jesus of popular culture, the Jesus of the cinema, the 'reel Jesus' can be as rewarding a subject of study as the historical Jesus or the Christ of faith.