

Christography:  
Filming the Saviour



A Cinema of Passion

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The motion picture image is without question one of the single most influential and culturally significant means of communication of our time. For more than a century, from early Kinescopes to IMAX screens and digital projection systems, Americans have interpreted their world at 24 frames per second. It is no wonder that this simple idea turned powerful artistic tool has assimilated into its scope almost since the very beginning the age-old tradition of the Passion Play.

When discussing the history of the Passion Play, especially on the stage, it is prudent to mention a small village in Germany called Oberammergau. In the year of 1633, the village was ravaged by the Black Plague. Assuming the disease was a chastisement upon the town from God, the citizens of Oberammergau decided they should perform a Passion Play as an act of penance. The people made their vow while assembling around a cross and, according to town records, not a single death occurred as a result of the plague from that day forth. The play was staged in 1634 and, save the years 1770 and 1940,<sup>1</sup> it has been performed there once every decade since. By its most recent performance in 2000, some 1,600 adults and 550 children participated in the production.<sup>2</sup> It has grown from a small, desperate act of faith to a breathtakingly opulent production and likely the largest, most famous Passion Play in the world.

In 1897, these two great arcs of dramatic progress in Oberammergau and Hollywood merged in the film, *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* – at least in appearance. The idea to film a Passion Play in Horwitz, Bohemia, had been suggested to producer Richard G. Hollaman by W.B. Hurd earlier that year. Hurd, a representative from an up and coming French production house, had taken his idea elsewhere and Hollaman, realizing that morally serious fare would be a profitable new venue, took it upon himself to stage and film his own. Using costumes and set pieces from a defunct stage production of *The Passion Play*, the film was shot in December, 1897, on the roof of Grand Central Palace in New York City. What it was exactly that convinced Hollaman that claiming the film had been shot in Oberammergau was a good idea, history does not reveal. At the film's release in 1898, however, it was seen as an obvious fake and a poorly made one at that. So, with a great and mighty flop, the tradition of what would become a cinema of Passion was born.

In the silent age of the early 1900's, cinema began as little more than a sideshow attraction and was hardly known as a respectable art form. It was, however, insanely popular. Though early attempts had been made at religious fare, in the 1920's age of flapper girls, jazz clubs and rising hemlines, ministers across the country strictly forbade their congregates to enter movie houses. As a result, a serious effort was made by those in the burgeoning filmmaking community (some of whom were faithful and some of whom were just savvy businessmen) to make film versions of Bible stories. These films were accepted by the clergy, attended by the faithful and became enormously popular. In fact, the gala Hollywood premiere itself now so common to today's blockbuster releases was birthed by films with titles like, *Noah's Ark* and *The King of Kings*.

Chief in the Biblical cinema were, of course, the Jesus movies and chief among the filmmakers of the era was Cecil B. DeMille, the auteur the first truly classic portrayal

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<sup>1</sup> In 1770, the Catholic Church banned all Passion Play performances and in 1940, Germany was embroiled in the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> *The Passion Play 2000 – Oberammergau*, Edited by the Community of Oberammergau, Prestel Verlag, Munich, London, New York, 2000

of Christ on celluloid, the 1927 production, *The King of Kings*. DeMille was an artist on a grand scale and his vast production scope for *The King of Kings* made it easily the silent era's most opulent and complex Jesus film. Christ, played by H.B. Warner, literally glows to the extent that one almost expects him to float away. Even still, in an age marked by melodramatic and exaggerated acting methods, Wells manages a surprisingly sincere performance and DeMille's use of early Technicolor techniques for sequences in the film add to its lovely photography, making it a visual standout from its contemporaries. Cecil B. DeMille may have been the Steven Spielberg of his day, but he believed the greatest stories in the world were contained in the pages of the Bible and his deep convictions have resulted in that rare combination of Hollywood epic and stirring spiritual fervor.

In the 1930's and '40's, the Jesus movie scene was quite bare. Most "religious" films were allegories or fictions. A particularly unusual film of the decade was the 1949 film, *The Lawton Story*, whose first half documented the citizens of Lawton, Oklahoma, as they prepared to present their annual Passion Play. The second half covered the play itself.

More direct representations of the life and passion of Jesus began to come back into fashion in the 1950's, but none of them were produced by major studios. Many of the production houses focusing on the life of Christ at the time were sponsored by denominational organizations, the majority of which were Catholic. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Warner Bros. each released films depicting the fictional journeys of relics from the life of Christ with *The Robe* and *The Silver Chalice*, respectively. Cathedral Films, on the other hand, released a pair of unique independent Jesus films. The first, 1952's *I Beheld His Glory*, starred Robert Wilson, whose role as Jesus he would reprise in Cathedral's second release of the 1950's, *Day of Triumph*, in 1954. *Variety* lauded his performance saying, "his humble, saintly and reverent interpretation comes close to duplicating the picture of Christ as seen through the Bible."<sup>3</sup> That very idea of duplicating the Christ of the Bible on screen is probably what most portrayals from the silent age into the Fifties were aiming for. In the second half of this century of Christography, however, the dividing line became strong between those who wished to continue in that tradition and those who sought to re-interpret the Gospel, for reasons both sinister and sincere.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *The King of Kings* was the first of several more traditional tellings of the Gospel story during the 1960's. It marked early in the decade the return of the major studios to the confined subject of the life of Jesus. Directed by Nicholas Ray, the film starred teen heartthrob Jeffery Hunter as Jesus, earning it the nickname, *I Was a Teenage Jesus*. While the production is grand in scale, it lacks emotional vibrance and genuine humanity. The film means well enough and on some technical levels manages to pull off some rather epic moments, but they are just moments. For most, however, the real star of 1960's Christography is the film whose name has become synonymous with the Gospel itself, George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Like *The King of Kings*, this 1965 production is of epic proportions in both scope and length, but it is woven with a great deal more passion and humanity than its predecessor. Producer/Director George Stevens was involved heavily in every detail from shooting thorough coverage of every scene from multiple angles to having real flowers planted and false ones painted on the rocks and sand of the Arizona desert to give

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the winter shoot the illusion of Spring. Shooting proved to be arduous and time-consuming, but Stevens was determined to bring his vision of what he called a much more human Jesus to the screen. That Jesus was Swedish-born actor Max Von Sydow, who has become one of the most recognizable Christ figures in film. Reviews of the film were mixed. While *Variety* said, “the sum of its merits are impressive,”<sup>4</sup> *Time Magazine* curtly remarked, “Stevens has outdone himself by producing an austere Christian epic that offers few excitements of any kind.”<sup>5</sup>

If *The King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* represent a more traditional approach, the next truly important Jesus film of the 1960’s offers the first inklings of rebellion against the accepted norms of the Biblical epic. The first film to truly shatter the Hollywood grandeur of the time was Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo Secondo Mateo*, or *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The film is often referred to in English as *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, but the word “Saint” or “Santo” does not appear in the original Italian title. The word was added by distributors, a decidedly pious move that was contrary to Pasolini’s wishes.<sup>6</sup> Though it was not released until 1966, Pasolini was inspired to make his film in 1962 or ‘63 upon a fresh reading of the Gospels. His motives for making *Il Vangelo* and his desire to stick strictly to the Gospel texts sound similar to those of many Hollywood directors and producers of Jesus films. However, there are two distinctions that make the film stand in stark contrast to its contemporaries and even to later films up to our present time. First, he shot the film on a very small budget in black and white, using mostly non-actors and scoring it with existing music from Bach, Mozart and Billie Holiday. Second, Pasolini was not only a Marxist and a homosexual, but also a self-professed atheist. Even in the midst of his unbelief, Pasolini was certainly deeply moved by the Gospel accounts, especially *Matthew*, and the history of Christography is better for it.

Perhaps as a result of *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*’s arrival on the scene, or perhaps because of the counter-culture movement of the 1960’s, the straightforward Jesus epic tradition didn’t last. Radical new visions of the Gospel were about to take hold of popular culture.

The first of these films was released by Columbia Pictures in 1973. Based on a theatrical production written by John-Michel Tebelek and featuring the music and lyrics of Stephen Schwartz, *Godspell* brought to the screen the first musical cinematic adaptation of the life of Christ. Set in New York City in modern times, *Godspell* features some of the original players from major stage productions of the play and, complete with bushy, permed hair, clown shoes, rainbow pants, suspenders and a handmade Superman logo T-shirt, Victor Garber as Jesus. Incidentally, Mr. Garber can currently be seen as top CIA agent Jack Bristow on the ABC series *Alias*, a far cry from his days as a singing, dancing, downright giddy clown Jesus. Though this all may sound quite blasphemous, one has only to see the film to recognize a surprisingly genuine spiritual sincerity. The film follows Jesus and a small band of new disciples who forsake their former lives, donning colourful outfits and splashes of makeup similar to those worn by Jesus. For the

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<sup>4</sup> Kinnard, Roy and Davis, Tim, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen*, Citadel Press, Carol Publishing Group, New York, 1992

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Siciliano, Enzo, *Pasolini: A Biography*, Random House, Inc., 1982. Originally published as *Vita di Pasolini* by Rizzoli Editore, Milan, 1978

rest of the film, the troupe is given free reign of a completely empty New York City. Through songs, skits and comedy interspersed with touching and poignant dramatic moments, the teachings and Parables of Jesus are told until he is surprisingly betrayed by an unlikely member of the nameless group and “crucified” in a junkyard on a cyclone fence. While this adaptation is certainly out of the ordinary, its unique depiction of Jesus and the disciples as a band of colourful, childlike misfits in a great and corrupt city is a remarkable realization of Jesus’ admonition that, “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, and arguably more famous, in the line of Jesus musicals on film is *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. Released in 1973, the same year as *Godspell*, and directed by Norman Jewison, the film was an adaptation of a play by the same name, which was based on a double album composed by future Broadway legend Andrew Lloyd Webber and renowned lyricist Tim Rice. A true rock opera, almost every word of dialogue is sung by the cast members themselves, including Ted Neely as Jesus and the somewhat controversial casting of Carl Anderson as the first black Judas Iscariot. The album and its subsequent incarnations on stage and film emerge as a process of Webber’s own questions about the true nature of Jesus, which questions Rice shared. While it was lambasted in its day as blasphemous by Evangelical religious leaders, especially those on wholesale campaigns against rock music itself, the film does not exactly say anything subversive or present any sort of revisionist understanding of who the human Jesus was. It does, however, pose questions along these lines and so is misinterpreted by some as a direct attack on the Christian faith. It is not clear that Webber, who is Jewish, ever had such intentions.

It is also important to note at this point that while there has been a myth propagated by some that Jesus films tend not to include the Resurrection because “Hollywood” is afraid to show it, this is simply untrue. Almost every Jesus movie ever made, certainly among the major releases, portrays the Resurrection. Having said that, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are two examples of films that do not depict a bodily resurrection. While a resurrection, perhaps in a Gnostic, disembodied sense, as Christ embodied in all believers, is hinted at in *Godspell*, a true bodily resurrection of Jesus himself never takes place. On the other hand, while the same is true of *Superstar*, astute observers have noted that in the final shot of the cross, silhouetted against the sky, there is a faint but distinct image of Jesus or a Jesus-like figure leading a herd of sheep. It is almost as if the resurrection happened and no one noticed. This addition is controversial since the original album ends with an instrumental piece entitled *John Nineteen Forty-one*, squarely ending on the Scripture, “And there was a garden in the place where He was crucified, and a new tomb in the garden, in which no one yet ever had been placed.” Oddly enough, while *Superstar* contains more of a resurrection than *Godspell*, it was considered blasphemous while *Godspell* has found widespread acceptance in the Christian community.

*Monty Python’s The Life of Brian* (1979) was actually not a Jesus film at all but was taken to be a farcical slap in the face of the Gospel. In truth, it is the story of Brian who, born in another stable in Bethlehem on the same night as Jesus is mistaken by many to be the Messiah, despite his exasperated insistence to the contrary. It is a farcical

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<sup>7</sup> *Matthew* 18:3 (NIV)

comedy in true *Python* fashion but is actually more a comical and surprisingly astute commentary about the nature of misguided religious belief and dispute.

Finally, the '70's were capped by two films of great passion and wide acceptance in the Christian community, Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* and Campus Crusade for Christ's world-famous missionary film, *Jesus. Nazareth* was released in 1977 as a Television miniseries. Though criticized before its release based on a quote from Zeffirelli expressing his desire to portray a "more human" Jesus, the protest was easily quelled when the Catholic director's sprawling, six-hour epic hit the small screen. It immediately displayed itself as wholly reverent, at times almost to a fault and was quickly accepted as possibly the greatest film on the life of Christ of all time. It has since become one of the most celebrated and widely viewed Jesus films ever. It cannot hold the record for widest audience, however. When Campus Crusade's 1979 film *Jesus* (commonly referred to as *The Jesus Film*) was released, it was done so with the sole purpose of being shown throughout the entire world free of charge to anyone who wished to see it. The resulting missionary effort, The Jesus Film Project, has since made *Jesus* the most widely seen film on Earth. It has also been translated by the Project into more languages than any other movie. While technically inferior by far to its predecessor, careful attention to historical detail was painstakingly made. While it may be faulted in some regards as a piece of cinema, as an evangelical effort it reigns as one of the single most significant outreach projects ever devised by a Christian organization.

At this point, for the sake of time and space, I would like to jump ahead a bit chronologically to a more recent film of great importance in the history of Christography. Partially self-funded by a major Catholic director, it stands as one of the single most controversial films of all time. Jarring, even at times disquieting in its style and tone, its sometimes bloody and violent scenes are just one aspect of its production that embroiled it in heated public debate. It's unconventional approach, extra-Biblical additions and basis in a non-Gospel source also earned it scathing criticism from all sides. Major religious leaders around the country and around the world expressed fear of its content and intentions. It was thought by many to be a direct public attack on their faith. Attempts were made to sway the director to change his vision or to refrain from releasing the film. Protests, boycotts, slander and libel were hurled at the film and at its director. Political and religious criticisms blended neatly with personal attacks and insults on the director as a hateful, greedy, irreligious or even anti-religious person whose only motivation in making the film was to stir up controversy in order to pad his box office take. Many said that as a member of the "Hollywood" community, the director's sincerity and even his faith were to be questioned, doubted and even debunked. They pointed to a long line of films in his past that are filled with graphic and excessive violence, sexual situations, foul language, crime, murder and what some believe to be misogynist sentiments. All the while, the director defended his film and himself, saying that his intention was not to make a statement against a particular religion, but instead to show solidarity with the faithful and to inspire faith and hope. He identified himself a Christian and called his film, which was his passion for many years, an act of worship and his attempt to get to know Jesus better. He said that his film is like a prayer for him, but to no avail. His critics still hound him and his film remains one of the most passionate expressions of faith in the American cinema. The film to which I am referring is, of course,

*The Last Temptation of Christ*. Released in 1988 as a co-venture from Universal Pictures and Cineplex-Odeon Films, this hotly debated, much misunderstood and unfairly maligned film suffered the unfortunate consequences of being judged by the court of public opinion long before its release. Based on tragic misconceptions and cruel attacks by the Evangelical majority in America, millions of Americans decided before they saw the film that it was a blasphemous attack on the personal character of Jesus because their favourite TV preacher told them so. Based on the novel of the same name by Nikos Kazantzakis and directed by renowned filmmaker Martin Scorsese, the film was truly a labor of love. It was the realization of a desire spawned in Scorsese when he was only ten years old to make a film on the life of Jesus as a way of expressing his deep love for Christ. The film received minimal release and made a small profit of only \$1 Million. Campus Crusade for Christ had offered to buy the film for its production cost of only \$7 Million in order that all prints of the film might be destroyed. In either case, despite the beliefs of the film's sincere, if misguided critics, money was not the reason *Last Temptation* was made. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was indeed, as attested by its original title, Martin Scorsese's *Passion*.

On that note, it is obvious that I have at this point involved my listening and reading audience in something of a ruse. Indeed, the lengthy description on the prior page could be directly applied to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* with only minor alterations to conform it with Gibson's exact words on his film. Otherwise, for all intents and purposes, almost exactly the same events surrounding the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 have happened again with *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. There are, of course, some major differences. *The Passion's* extra-Biblical source is the book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic mystic, Anne Catherine Emerich. While the visions she describes in her book are not a historical account and are somewhat controversial, the film itself is based largely on the Gospels and Christian tradition. Make no mistake, however. *The Passion* stands as a singularly unique vision unlike any before it. It rocks conventions of Jesus films and Passion Plays, opting to use dialogue written in Latin and Aramaic and unnerves audiences with its brutally graphic depictions of Jesus' torture and flogging, scenes which stand as the most historically accurate and outright shocking sequences of their kind. Having made Jesus films an area of deep personal study for some fifteen years, I can honestly say it ranks among the greatest of all time and there is nothing else quite like it.

Another diversion from the pattern of *Last Temptation* is that, while Scorsese's film preemptively offended Christians, *The Passion* raised the ire of Jewish religious leaders. Additionally, Gibson's production had the financial backing to combat its critics on a large scale through an impressive advertising campaign which was easily the most ambitious ever launched for a Jesus film. Scorsese was left only a few quotes in magazines with which to clear his name. As well, the Christian community used its own enormous media power in both situations, flooding its TV and radio programs with endorsements for *The Passion* and condemnation for *Last Temptation*. Though the Jewish community had equally strong concerns about *The Passion* as Christians had had in 1988, their cause was never able to generate a large degree of public sympathy. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that *The Passion's* detractors, while often mean-spirited and hateful, were for the most part reserved and intelligent, calmly voicing their concerns, rather than creating a bombastic onslaught of propaganda.

Chiefly, however, the story of these two films is the story of the long and rocky relationship (or lack thereof) between the filmmaking community and the religious community. Since the beginning of the art of filmmaking, the two have been at odds. Suddenly, however, we see the Christian community rallying around *The Passion of the Christ*, a film which, despite its status as an independent film, is seen to come from “Hollywood” because of Gibson’s involvement. This change in reaction is due at least in part to the diminishing of two major biases in the Evangelical Christian world. Protestant Christians in America are, to a large degree, less disparaging of Catholics and less prejudiced toward members of the “Hollywood” community than they were sixteen years ago. Claims by Martin Scorsese of his Christian faith were generally met with the response that he wasn’t a Christian, but a Catholic and not a very good one at that. Gibson is not only a Catholic but has said publicly that he believes that people of any religion can get to Heaven but that one can only be assured of Salvation through faith in Christ, a popular heresy embraced by some major Protestant denominations. If Scorsese had said that publicly in 1988, he would have been pummeled by the Christian media. Gibson is polished off and placed on the shelf as the new prize Christian in Hollywood. When Scorsese made statements that his film was made out of an act of worship and not greed, Christians doggedly pursued the line of thinking that money is the only thing “Hollywood” understands. They said that Scorsese was willing to fight for twelve years to get his film made, endure a grueling, fast-paced shooting schedule under the Moroccan sun and open himself to public ridicule and slander because he was a liar who would say anything to get his big paycheck. Gibson is just as innocent of charges of greed, but Christians believe him. Ironically, his film is a huge box office success. Thankfully, Christian attitudes seem to have improved for the better. Unfortunately, it has only come because they see the tide turning their way. Perhaps if Gibson had made *The Last Temptation of Christ* today and Scorsese had made *The Passion of the Christ* in 1988, history would tell a different story.

In both cases, it is possible that Christians have erred too much on the side of either acceptance or rejection of a film. Christian leaders wanted to silence Scorsese in a land where we are supposed to value free speech. Today, they want to silence Gibson’s critics, teaming up three against one on the *700 Club* and squashing the opinions of the lone Gibson detractor, interrupting rudely with evangelical clichés and repeatedly fighting to be the loudest voice of the moment. In 1988, Christians feared that any film from Scorsese would be too violent for any decent person to view even as the violence of *Last Temptation* paled in comparison in many ways to the brutality seen in some of his other films. Today, I can personally attest that I have seen *The Passion of the Christ* three times because I love it dearly with all my heart and will see it with anyone at any time. I can also attest that at all three screenings I saw parents thoughtlessly bringing their infants, toddlers and young children into an R-rated picture for the most gruesome and graphically violent experiences of their young lives. In a recent issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, famed novelist and *EW* columnist Stephen King told the story of a young girl, probably eight to ten years old who sat next to him at a screening of *The Passion*. He chose to call her Alicia. Her mother had brought her and her brother into the theatre and was presently complaining on her cell phone that the management of the theatre had suggested this might not be the best place for small children. She had angrily retorted, “if it gets too bloody, they can just cover their eyes.” King went on to describe the little girl

crouching and hiding her face in her seat, obviously wanting to escape the experience, but eventually giving up and watching in still, quiet horror. King remarked that Alicia would surely remember this experience in her dreams and that in those dreams, she would not see love and grace and redemption, but, “a skinless, nightmare Christ with one eye swollen shut.”

When asked in an interview why there is such strong conflict between the filmmaking community and the Christian community, Television writer and Christian Coleman Luck responded:

“Both groups underestimate the importance the other places in its system of faith. Hollywood's faith is in the First Amendment right to free speech. I think evangelicals cannot believe Hollywood is motivated by anything other than money. While money is a factor, most people in Hollywood believe passionately in the films and television they make. ... It's too easy simply to criticize Hollywood for producing films that aren't culturally or spiritually sensitive. ... I remember during *The Last Temptation of Christ* I was working with Universal Television, and thousands of people began picketing outside our studios. For us inside, it was frightening. I remember driving with a friend through a crowd of people who were shoving placards with ‘John 3:16’ written on them in front of our car. These were Christians, but believe me, they didn't look very loving. My friend, who was not a Christian and was a producer for *Equalizer*, turned to me and said, ‘I would hate these people if I didn't know you.’”<sup>8</sup>

After more than one hundred years of culture wars, accusations and bad blood between filmmakers and the faithful, Christians can no longer afford to deal so over-zealously and drastically with such a powerful thing as the motion picture image and the people who pour their lives into what they do. It is not enough to simply “take a stand” and fight it to the last. Christians must come to terms with how they can express their views honestly and allow others to do the same. Our fervor to label everything in our culture as “Christian” or “Anti-Christian” may be prescient of a time to come when such battle lines are clearly drawn by the Evil One. Right now, however, it is doing nothing but make of the Gospel a broad, unwieldy cultural weapon instead of a sure-burning flame that passes from heart to heart. Like the Passion Play at Oberammergau, both cinema and Christianity have grown enormously from a small faithful few to huge productions on a grand scale. As Christians, let us pray for the grace to echo the attitudes of the citizens of Oberammergau who carry in them a cultural memory of the simple faith that spawned their great tradition and seek only to keep it alive.

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<sup>8</sup>Cagney, Mary, *Christianity Today*, August 10, 1998 (page 64)