

2 – Finding our Jesus in Film

notes...

In this session we're looking at the history of the cinematic Jesus, and in particular how the various portrayals relate to our own image of Jesus. Most people when they first start looking at films of Jesus are seeking to find a portrayal that matches the image they have in their heads.

Jesus has appeared in over 100 films over the 110 years since the cinema was invented. It is interesting to note how the image of the filmmakers themselves has drastically changed.

The first Jesus films were the *Horitz Passion Play* (1897), and *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) which despite its title was actually filmed on a roof in New York.

Here are some details about the more widely seen Jesus films:

The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ (1902-1908)

Director – Nonguet /Zecca ; Jesus – M. Norman

- Earliest Jesus film we have a complete copy of
- 100 years old
- Note the poor use of the camera – static and consisting only of mid-shots
- Special effects, colour
- Re-released with extra footage being added a number of times.

From the Manger to the Cross (1912)

Director – Sidney Olcott; Jesus – Robert Henderson-Bland

- Blue Filter – Colour again
- Use of The Pyramids and the Sphinx would have had big appeal – possibly the first time the audience would have “seen” these monuments.
- No resurrection scene.

Intolerance (1916)

Director - DW Griffith; Jesus – Howard Gaye

- Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation* groundbreaking but deemed racist – this is his reply / attempt to balance that out
- Huge Budget and length for those times (\$1.9M & 3 hours)
- Very Innovative – note cross imposition in this scene. Film had 4 parallel stories
- Film was anti-prohibition – Jesus becomes a poster boy for the campaign against intolerance and prohibition

The King of Kings (1927)

Director – Cecil B DeMille; Jesus HB Warner

- This film became the definitive version for years
- DeMille later became famous for his mix of sex and piety
- Film contains over 100 visual references to religious paintings
- Resurrection scene was in colour
- Jesus first appears from the “Point of View” of the blind girl he's healing

There then followed a big gap. A number of smaller Jesus film were made in this time such as *Ecce Homo* (aka *Golgotha*), *Last Days of Pompeii* & *The Lawton Story*, although only the last of these is a full blown Jesus film.

Eventually Jesus began to reappear, but initially, in cameos where his face was either not seen. Or only seen from a distance.

Quo Vadis (1951)

Director - Mervyn LeRoy; Jesus – Unknown

- First Jesus film for almost 25 years
- First proper Jesus in colour and sound
- Shown only in flashbacks and from the back or distance shots
- Note composition adopted from Da Vinci's Last Supper

Salome (1953)

Director – Willaim Dieterle; Jesus – Unknown

- Rita Hayworth vehicle
- Salome here trying to save John the Baptist

The Robe (1953)

Director – Henry Koster; Jesus - Cameron Mitchell

- First ever film in Cinemascope (widescreen)
- Richard Burton as a Roman Centurion “haunted” after winning Jesus’ robe
- Procession scene excellent; Crucifixion scene demystifies the cross
- Sequel followed filmed at the same time - *Demetrius and the Gladiators*

Day of Triumph (1954)

Director (Pichel / Coyle); Jesus – Robert Wilson

- Church production – also 1952 *I Beheld His Glory* (where Robert Wilson also plays Jesus, making him the only person to play Jesus twice)
- Judas a power-driven Zealot seeking to control the potential King Jesus

Ben Hur (1959)

Director – William Wyler; Jesus – Claude Heater

- Joint record holding Oscar winner
- Note how the music swells when this man appears after Ben Hur cries “God help me” – Never explicitly told it’s Jesus – depends on audio-visuals

Barabbas (1961)

Director – Richard Fleischer; Jesus – Roy Mangano

- Opening crucifixion scenes take place in a real eclipse – eerie feel – particularly having experienced one
- Most ambiguous of the Jesus Cameo films & best visuals.

So no major life of Christ film for 34 years (since advents of sound and full colour). Until...

King of Kings (1961)

Director - Nicholas Ray; Jesus – Jeffrey Hunter

- Same as DeMille flick in name only
- Like Day of Triumph it’s as much about the zealots as about Jesus
- Production in-fighting left the plot in a bit of a mess
- Jesus the messiah of peace vs Barabbas messiah of war (script compares them to fire and water)

Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo [Gospel According to Matthew] (1964)

Director – Pier Paolo Pasolini; Jesus – Enrique Irazoqui

- Pasolini, a Marxist, brings us an angry revolutionary Jesus
- Neo-realist style – low budget costumes, real peasant amateur actors
- Hand held camera moves amongst the crowd – contrast big budget films

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965)

Director – George Stevens; Jesus – Max von Sydow

- \$25million budget – huge (same as *The Passion*)
- All star cast (except von Sydow – unknown then) – distracting to many
- Visually brilliant in places – lighting, composition etc. But very slow
- In this scene (Gethsemane) the slowness works – emotion, but often fails.

Son of Man (1969)

Director – Gareth Davies; Jesus – Colin Blakely

- Based on a play that Dennis Potter wrote in hospital
- Only on TV 3 times ever – last time 1987 when someone else video it – I copied it 15 years later after 3 years trying to get hold of it! It's rare – but excellent
- Fiery Jesus with colloquial speech
- Very controversial when released & still for some of Yancey's students!

Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)

Director – Norman Jewison; Jesus - Ted Neeley

- Play within a play – “improvised” costumes but in Palestine
- In this scene Jesus' lair is like a disco as Jesus sits in the spotlight
- Focuses on the clash between Judas and Jesus

Godspell (1973)

Director – David Greene; Jesus Victor Garber

- 2nd film based on a Jesus musical that year!
- Re-contextualised in “modern day” New York
- Very, very dated and seems very strange today (and maybe then?)
- However, the creativity of the parables is restored opposed to other films

Il Messia [The Messiah] (1975)

Director – Roberto Rossellini; Jesus – Pier Maria Rossi

- Also very rare – last film of a pioneering director
- This scene Jesus as a carpenter dispensing wisdom as he works
- Political angle – Very teaching focussed

Jesus of Nazareth (1977)

Director – Franco Zeffirelli; Jesus – Robert Powell

- Most popular with Christians – at least before *The Passion*
- Very good scene – powerful use
- Strengths of this film are the length (which allows for more scope) and its attention to realism and detail.
- Weaknesses - The way Powell speaks and the “safeness” of this Jesus

Jesus (1979)

Director – Krish / Sykes; Jesus – Brian Deacon

- Most watched film of all time.
- Cut from the longer “Genesis project” – a word for word version of Luke

- Cast largely Yemenite Jews – Jesus still English though.
- Biblical literalism feels awkward

Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979)

Director – Terry Jones; Jesus – Kenneth Colley

- Very controversial at the time – not so much today
- Not about Jesus, but about Brian
- Main targets – religious hypocrisy and biblical epics!
- Numerous similarities with other films – actually used sets left over from Jesus of Nazareth
- Brian meets an ungrateful leper – reminiscent of the ten lepers of Luke 17.
- Humour gives a unique angle on the stories – cuts through the false piety we often cover these stories in.

Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

Director – Martin Scorsese; Jesus – Willem Dafoe

- The most controversial of all Jesus films (at least before *The Passion*)
- For Scorsese this was a genuine expression of faith – he made it “to get to know Jesus better”¹, not to deliberately offend 1000s of Christians.
- Ironically whilst there are many difficulties with the film, the one that was most often trumpeted as its worst (final temptation scene with Mary Magdalene) is not inconsistent with scripture the way others scenes are.

Jesus de Montreal [Jesus of Montreal] (1989)

Director – Denys Arcand; 'Jesus' – Lothaire Bluteau

- Story of a group of actors putting on a Passion play whose leader, Daniel, finds his life increasingly mirroring that of Jesus.
- View of Jesus / church is less orthodox than *Last Temptation*, but also less emotive in its divergences, therefore less controversial.
- Only Jesus films to include the apocalyptic discourse of Mark 13, (cf, Matt 24 & Luke 21) which is interpreted it as judgement on Jerusalem.
- Contains lengthy scenes from the play. Here Jesus's death intertwines Daniel's arrest and trial.

Lamb of God (1993)

Director – Russ Holt; Jesus – Mark Deakins

- Made by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- High production values for a church project, but let down by poorly overdubbed King James Version dialogue.
- Free! Followed by *The Nativity* and *Joy to the World*

Visual Bible: Matthew (1996)

Director – Reghardt van den Bergh; Jesus – Bruce Marchiano

- Literal Word for Word – even interrupts speech with “he said”
- Same company made *Acts* and *Gospel of John (2003)* (different personel)
- Erroneously claims “No interpretation”
- As a drama it drags. Works best as a visual bible.

Jesus [Mini-Series] (1999)

Director – Roger Young; Jesus - Jeremy Sisto

- Made by the 'Bible Collection' team, who made 13 films on major biblical characters, plus a further four embellishing the story of minor characters

¹ Scorsese on Scorsese

- One of the most human Christs, but he goofs around so much that he loses his divinity / authority.
- Still a very liberating portrayal and poses some of the questions *Last Temptation* did without going as far and giving offence.
- Canaanite Woman incident again – compare portrayal to previous film. Here raises the question of at what point did Jesus acquire the full extent of his knowledge.

Jesus Christ Superstar (1999)

Director – Nick Morris; Jesus – Glen Carter

- Studio filmed version of the updated west end version of the musical
- Note visual differences from the 1973 film
- Jesus here pouts and is very effeminate
- This scene also has the worst line from the musical “a jaded, faded, faded, jaded, jaded mandarin”

Miracle Maker (1999)

Director - Derek W. Hayes / Stanislav Sokolov; Jesus – Ralph Fiennes

- Russian Welsh collaboration with the Bible Society 10 years in the making
- Uses 3D claymation normally, but cleverly uses a variety of 2D animation to show flashbacks and other subjective / non-natural scenes
- Little girl here is Jairus’s daughter who acts as “a focus for children and families”.² She is our way into the film.
- is ‘our way into the film’, particularly gives children someone to identify with.
- Despite being a puppet this is one of the most human Christs.

Mary the Mother of Jesus (1999)

Director – Kevin Connor; Jesus – Christian Bale

- Really about Mary – venerates her more than any film prior to *The Passion* – we only see Jesus in scenes with Mary, through her eyes.
- In one scene Mary tells the boy Jesus a bedtime story, which we know as the Good Samaritan.
- Mary of the nativity story is realistically just a girl (unfortunately Joseph looks too much like Eric Idle in *Life of Brian*)
- Older actress playing Mary also played the virgin mother of Anakin Skywalker in the *Star Wars* prequel *The Phantom Menace*.

The next few Jesus films started to focus on Jesus’s return / second coming

Book of Life (1999)

Director – Hal Hartley; Jesus – Martin Donovan

- Imaginary telling of Jesus’s return on New Year’s Eve 1999, but not sci-fi / apocalyptic.
- Donovan’s suited Jesus is struggling with the dilemma of whether he can destroy the world and the race he loves.
- Very sharp black comedy – brilliant dialogue
- Hartley also likes pushing the conventions of the medium and frequently draws attention to the fact that it’s a film.

Inquisition (2002)

Director - Betsan Morris Evans; Jesus – Stephen Billington

- Fictional story of Jesus’ return into the midst of the Spanish Inquisition.

² Official website <http://www.themiraclemaker.com/main/index1.html> link now defunct.

- Based on Chapter 5 of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* – “The Grand Inquisitor”
- Jesus returns to bring hope to the suffering only to be arrested and interrogated by Derek Jacobi's Grand Inquisitor
- High view of Jesus, but low view of the historic church.

The Second Coming (2003)

Director – Adrian Shergold; Stephen / Jesus – Christopher Eccleston

- The Son of God comes back to Manchester as a video shop worker
- First Miracle gains worldwide attention, prompting the search for a third testament
- A promising first half loses its way in part 2. The ultimate motive behind the film is the need to kill off (the idea of) God so humanity can “grow up”

Man Dancin' (2003)

Director – Norman Stone; Jimmy / Jesus – Alex Fearn

- Glaswegian version of *Jesus of Montreal* by a former BBC director
- A Jesus angry at society's evils (emphasises the 7 Woes of Matt 23)
- When Jimmy saves people from prostitution & drugs he gets into trouble with the local gang leader and the corrupt policemen that work for them
- Bold re-contextualising of a radical story

Gospel of John (2003)

Director – Philip Saville; Jesus – Henry Ian Cusick

- Word for word version of John
- Second film by the Visual Bible team this was a great improvement on their previous effort (Matthew). Jesus is more convincing, the acting is generally better, the longer speeches are more dynamic and its shorter.
- Avoided anti-Semitism criticisms in the midst of Gibson's crisis by explaining context at the start of the film and using an advisory panel
- Same actor will play Jesus in forthcoming Gospel of Mark.

The Passion of the Christ (2004)

Director – Mel Gibson; Jesus – James Caviezel

- What can be said that's not been said already!
- Really an adaptation of Catherine Emmerich's Dolorous Passion of Christ
- Much trumpeted claims of realism are questionable – largely seemed mean graphic violence.
- Incredibly wide ranging use of camera, and powerful use of flashbacks, great cinematography – annoyingly these things were never really praised in most of the Christian press (or in the criticisms of the film)

