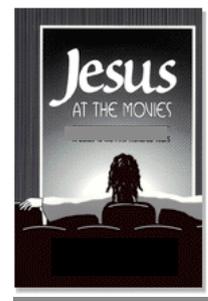


Should Jesus Win an Oscar?



THERE HAVE BEEN well over 100 portrayals of Jesus Christ on the screen. And for many years filmmakers dealt with this controversial figure by mysteriously implying his presence - by a hand, feet, a cloak or simply reactions of amazed onlookers. The God of Christianity was considered too sacred to be filmed in the normal way.

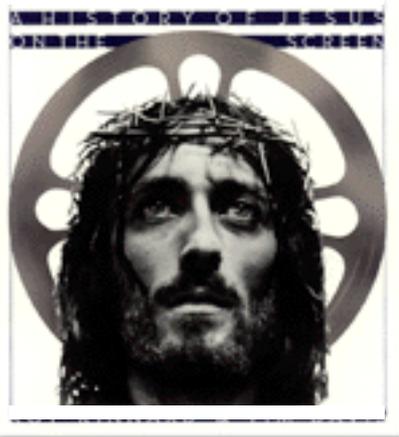
In the first ten years of the movies there were several versions of his life. Depending on the sources, the first commercial screenings began in France in 1895 or 1898. The American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) presented his first public screenings in the same decade. By 1912 Robert Henderson played the role in Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross*, which lasted over an hour and paved the way for full-length Jesus movies. It was shot in Palestine and Egypt with an American cast and crew.

In 1916 came *Civilisation*, with George Fisher as Jesus on the battlefields. In the same year D.W. Griffith's still impressive *Intolerance* was released, including a section about Jesus in its four stories of injustice from the Babylonian era to modern times. Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) had H.B. Warner (aged 50) playing Jesus, as some critics remarked, like a Victorian patriarch. It also tells us that Mary Magdalene was in love with Judas, which, of course, has nothing in common with the Gospel accounts.

These early silent films tended to be solemn, stoic and overwhelmingly reverential. Nothing of a critical or analytical nature, even if supported by sound scholarship, was permitted, a feature that still exists today. The effort to avoid offending the godly is prominent. The stories of Jesus were made to conform rigorously to a particular theological convention. This is achieved by a misleading cut-and-paste harmonising and blind acceptance of the Gospels as authentic history. Such simplicity may work on an audience who knows no better, or indeed your average Christian, but is frustrating for those who understand the material differently.

With the coming of sound, Jesus films became more spectacular and cinematic but no less Sunday School in sophistication. Look for instance at the silly way he is depicted as recently as the 1950s. In *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953) and especially *Ben Hur* (1959), whenever he's mentioned it's usually by someone who has been struck dumb in admiration. He is seen at a distance, or his hand or feet fill the screen and we overhear a few words briefly or hear others discuss him. It is the usual metaphorical nonsense on display. We get the impression that he's some sort of superior alien far re-

By William Burns



moved from the rest of us.

Apart from DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), the early filmmakers left it to our imagination what the Son of God looked like. This was probably done to please certain Christians - Protestants in particular - who believe it would violate God's commandment against graven images (Exodus 20:4) to show Jesus fully on the screen or anywhere else. However, there is no copyright on the Gospel accounts. In spite of their so-called concern, the story and images of Jesus continue to make money and have been translated into every art form. Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

has made more money than any other Jesus movie to date and largely because of fanatical Christians going to see it Jesus remained a kind of holy-bogyman on the screen until the 1960s, the decade when the taboo against showing him fully was destroyed for good.

Nothing much had really changed, though, for the new era of Jesus films still conformed to the traditional interpretation of the Gospels. Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) may be impressive to look at but are not representations of reality. Like the Gospel sources, they represent fairy tales. Stevens' *Greatest Story* is notable for being painfully slow-moving and the horrible miscasting of John Wayne supervising the crucifixion. Who can forget him utter the immortal words, "Truly, this man was the Son of Gaard"?

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According To St Matthew* (1966) is something of a departure in its documentary style and the way in which it plays down the supernatural. Although it was made by a Marxist, it is not nearly as radical and different as often suggested. In my view it is a cold, uninvolved and unimaginative film which sticks too closely to Matthew's Gospel as if it were true.

The best Jesus yet seen on celluloid for many is Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), originally shown in three parts on TV and with Robert Powell playing Jesus. Clearly a labour of love for Zeffirelli, it is an emotional and dramatic triumph whether you're a believer or not. And, importantly, his Jesus is a Jew. However, it has the



wrong idea that the 'best' kinds of Jews are those who believe Jesus to be their Messiah.

Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) is not strictly about Jesus; it satirises religious and political fanaticism and does it wonderfully. It would have been even better, though, if it had directly satirised the Jesus story instead of focusing on the fictional Brian Cohen. No mainstream movie has ever had the courage to poke fun directly at the Gospel myth.

Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is an adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The last Temptation*. I think it has the most interesting and earthly Jesus yet seen on the screen. This Jesus struggles with the demands of



**"I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free"
- Nikos Kazantzakis
(engraved on his tomb in Crete)**

God and expresses the flaws of his nature - deceit, hypocrisy, fear, lust and pride. He clearly comes across as a man of this world and not as some visitor from Heaven.

It is because of their selective reading and pious interpretation of the Gospels that Christians find this film so deeply offensive and blasphemous. Those same Gospels, however, reveal a man who is anything but God's perfect son. Scorsese's film cannot simply be dismissed as having nothing in common with the Gospel Jesus, as many would like to believe. His hypocrisy, for example, is clearly evident in Matthew 5:39, 44; Matthew 10:32-33; 12:34; 21:12-13; 23:15-33; Luke 11:40; John 18:22-23. And, according to Matthew's Gospel, he denies that he is morally perfect (19:17). What I like about this Jesus movie is that it can be understood in a secular sense - whether or not that was the intention of its Catholic director. And as fallible people we can identify with this Jesus, unlike the perfect image of Christianity.

This, of course, is not so with the most recent Jesus film, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* which, like the God of the Bible, is nothing more than an ugly work of sadism. It is one of the most violent and repulsive films I have ever seen. As such, it crucifies more than Jesus: it assaults the spirit rather than uplifting it. Jesus turns the other cheek in the face of relentless torture, but the film contradicts the message by raising your anger to boiling point.

I have yet to see a Jesus film made by a genuine freethinker or Humanist. All of the efforts so far have the mark of Christianity one way or the other, Scorsese's movie included. □
