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## Divinity, Incarnation, and the Strange Body of Jesus in Horror Films

Mike Kugler

Northwestern College - Orange City, [kugler@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:kugler@nwcsiowa.edu)

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## Divinity, Incarnation, and the Strange Body of Jesus in Horror Films

### Abstract

Through an analysis of a number of horror films or films with horror-infused aspects, such as *The Last Temptation Christ*, *Passion of the Christ*, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, *Jesus*, and *Fist of Jesus*, the author uses theology to reflect not only on the horror genre but also on the doctrine of the Incarnation.

### About the Author

Dr. Mike Kugler primarily teaches European history from the Reformation through the modern era. His research and writing include the Enlightenment era, particularly in Scotland; historical narrative in a variety of forms, including formal history but also film and graphic novels; and more recently, the history of incarnational theology. He has presented papers at a wide variety of conferences and has published reviews and essays in *Fides et Historia*, *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*, and *Scotia*.

## **Divinity, Incarnation, and the Strange Body of Jesus in Horror Films**

by Mike Kugler, Ph.D.

### **Introduction**

I think of films as carefully-built dreams, our imagined narrated desires created and performed in front of us.<sup>1</sup> They are also, in a complementary way, emotion machines intended to move viewers powerfully through story, character, vivid cinematography, and score.<sup>2</sup> Among the things we want to see, if movies are any indication, is Jesus. What was he like? What did he look like? Jesus films satisfy our desire to see the Son of God in that odd condition of being human as well as divine. This desire assumes he was a person like us in significant ways, a flesh and blood human.

Films about Jesus and horror films meet at one of the places where we are most curious to look at visions of our condition as flesh and blood creatures. I will discuss a few moments in films expressing what the Incarnation “looks like” in horror, to see if we can’t find some interesting connections between them. My final hope is that doing so we can raise in a different manner our fears and desires concerning the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. I don’t think I

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Fellini: “Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams; years can pass in a second and you can hop from one place to another. It’s a language made of image. And in the real cinema, every object and every light means something, as in a dream.” Quoted in Matt Levine, “A Ribbon of Dreams: Dreams and Cinema,” *The Walker Magazine*, at: <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2012/dreams-cinema-history-matt-levine>. See also Stephen Sharot, “Dreams as Films and Films as Dreams: Surrealism and Popular American Cinema,” *The Canadian Journal of Film Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ebert, “Ten Greatest Films of All Time,” *Roger Ebert’s Journal* (April 1, 1991), at: <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/ten-greatest-films-of-all-time>.

can overestimate the importance and power of the dogma of the Incarnation for Christian reflection and life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a Nazi prison,

In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name. In Christ all things exist (Col. 1:17). From now on one cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus are abstractions.<sup>3</sup>

If I can speculate a bit from Bonhoeffer’s words, horror movies depict desires and fears about “the reality of the world.” Horror films about Jesus, like the Jesus films, don’t seem much different from earlier traditions of visual depiction, in their attempt to satisfy this refusal to accept an oral, literary, or static portrayal of Jesus. But perhaps they take seriously His flesh, and that’s an important goal.

Jesus has been the subject of a range of movies since the medium’s invention. Ferdinand Zecca’s 45-minute long *Life and Passion of Christ* in 1906 was probably the first feature-length portrait. D.W. Griffith’s 1916 silent epic *Intolerance* also offered an early movie of Jesus debating Jewish scholars and rabbis, forgiving the woman caught in adultery, before His betrayal, trial, and death. Jesus films seem to come in bunches, inviting speculation about the movie Jesus each age needs. Robert Wiene’s 1923 *Crown of Thorns* preceded the first blockbuster version, Cecile DeMille’s *King of Kings* (1927). The 1950s and early 60s were dominated by “sandal and sword” movies generally, some of which like *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953) and *Ben Hur* (William Wyler’s 1959 remake of Fed Niblo’s 1925 epic) strongly

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005), 54.

implied the presence of Jesus. Nicholas Ray’s 1961 remake of *King of Kings* and, four years later, George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* prompted a run of such stories. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964; released in North America in 1966), recast Jesus directly from one of the Gospels. His Italian neorealist style and socialist convictions stripped the pious pretenses from the big studio bathrobe dramatizations of the Savior.

Several versions appeared in the 1970s, likely inspired by the counter-cultural challenges of the era and attempts to have Jesus’ teachings and actions speak directly to them. Norman Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) followed the successful play, the TV mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977), and the evangelizing tool *The Jesus Film* (Peter Sykes, John Krish, and John Heyman [uncredited], 1979). Martin Scorsese’s controversial *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) probably inspired in the 1990s and later the making of several far more conventional and reverent versions. It is also likely that countering Scorsese’s version was one reason for Mel Gibson’s remarkably successful *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).<sup>4</sup>

Horror films at first gasp could hardly seem more distant from the Jesus movie genre. Yet horror movies are also among the most popular and most explicit cultural portraits of the mystery of the flesh. Even bad films, for their lack of subtlety or artfulness, further expose the dream of

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<sup>4</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1997; third ed., 2013); Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Sheed and Ward, 1997); and *Savior on the Silver Screen*, ed. Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford and Guerric Debona (Paulist Press, 1999); Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2003). For a nice synopsis of much of this work along with his own wise reflections, see Peter C. Chattaway, “Jesus at the Movies,” *Books and Culture* (March/April, 2000), at: <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2000/marapr/2.10.html>

the body. Dreams can't feel more important than in the threat to the body. Dread and the excitement slowly ratchet the threats and assaults horror promises. In this essay I'll discuss depictions of the strange body of Jesus in recent low budget horror films such as *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* and *Fist of Jesus*, as well as the use of horror cinematography in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. I'll argue that in some significant ways viewing the Savior's body through the depiction of horror gets us closer to the strangeness, the confusion, even the revulsion, with which the Incarnation as well as the death and resurrection of Jesus is depicted in the Gospels and perhaps even in theology.

A note: In this essay reproducing the artwork and movie scenes I discuss is not possible. I try to describe its relevant aspects. For all of it simply searching the names of any of them will yield not only images but typically the very images I'm discussing in this essay. I encourage you if possible to do that as you read.

### **Jesus' Strange Flesh**

The meeting of divine and human was a source of great drama throughout ancient literature. Often the gods appeared in human form to fool, coerce or even exact vengeance on their supplicants (for example, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Euripides' *The Bacchae*, etc.). In the ancient Near East the gods were often monstrous, like the Babylonian's Tiamat.<sup>5</sup> Humans who

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<sup>5</sup> *The Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian Creation) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as well as others, are easily available in older translations at the Internet Sacred Text Archive, at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/>. *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1998) and *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1997); *The Bacchae* (Woodruff edition; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998). For the monstrous Near Eastern gods, see Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2001), ch.1; Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch.5.

had sex with divine beings gave birth to semi-divine children, or in the Hebrew tradition to unnatural beings like the *Nephilim*.<sup>6</sup> The divine and human joined in the person of Jesus Christ was equally dramatic but in a quite different fashion. Christ in the Gospels could act in striking ways, such as walking on water, healing people with His touch, combining His saliva and dirt to cure one man of blindness, even in another story marvelously eluding a crowd bent on killing Him. The resurrected Jesus had an unusual body with strange, unpredictable if not frightening capacities like suddenly materializing in rooms, then just as quickly disappearing, going unrecognized by those who knew Him, etc.<sup>7</sup> The non-canonical Gospels extend such capacities further, as in the petulant magician child Jesus of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. The Christian story of the Descent into Hell or the Harrowing of Hell suggested then and even today the heroic rescue of captives in a terrifying prison, reminiscent later of Beowulf’s dive into the lair of Grendel’s mother.<sup>8</sup>

Ancient authors following the Gospels speculated widely upon the unusual physicality of the risen Savior. There was no firm iconic tradition portraying the Savior; Roman sarcophagi bear a wizard Jesus, the philosopher Jesus—bearded or unbearded—and others. Jesus the shepherd boy, Jesus the noble Roman administrator, adorned walls in churches and mausoleums. Eventually, Jesus the stern cosmic judge, the *Pantokratos*, dominated basilica churches and cathedrals until well into the medieval world east and west. Even the opponents of the Christian

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 6:4 and Numbers 13:33. For a reading of the monsters of Genesis and other Hebrews scriptural accounts, see Asma, and Beal, ch.2.

<sup>7</sup> The Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus’ sudden appearance and often shocking acts like commanding demons, calming a storm and raging sea, and ends with the disciples fleeing the empty tomb in terror. See also John.

<sup>8</sup> *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the Gnostic Society Library, at: <http://gnosis.org/library/inftoma.htm>; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

communities mocked the faith with physical depictions of Jesus. The earliest image of the crucifixion, scratched onto a house wall on the Palatine Hill in Rome around 200 CE, was the *Alexamenos graffito*, of Jesus as a crucified donkey. God in the flesh was perhaps not really different than any other animal.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early church began to speculate on the person of Christ, theologians and artists took up the strange, confusing, and even frightening character of Jesus’ divine flesh. The incarnational Christological account took form in a world where many ancient philosophers, perhaps most, could not imagine the divine ever willingly, happily sharing its spiritual purity and beauty with the dirty, impermanent meat of human creatures.<sup>10</sup> The anthropologist Mary Douglas, and especially as the theologian William Countryman has developed her ideas, emphasizes how the boundary of the clean/unclean or dirty, the pure/impure, is located in our flesh as well as out.<sup>11</sup> Medieval Christians did not as is popularly believed hate their own flesh or its desires. The Church taught a healthy distrust of physical desire as a distraction from dedication to God.<sup>12</sup> Medieval theology developed increasingly beautiful and challenging speculations on the metaphor of the body as a path into intimate knowledge of God in Christ. St. Francis made the human life of Jesus the highlight of his preaching and mysticism, including the

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<sup>9</sup>“Alexamenos Graffito”, *Encyclopaedia Romana*, at:

[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/gladiators/graffito.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/graffito.html).

<sup>10</sup> A dense but helpful survey in the context of Christology is Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London: Routledge, 2002); William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics and the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); and Noel Carroll’s use of Douglas in his philosophical exposition of horror. But for a dissenting argument on the usefulness of Douglas’ work on moral horror, see Robert Adams, “Moral Horror and the Sacred,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 201-224.

<sup>12</sup> *The Body and Society: Men, Woman, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).



Nativity. But the center of this understanding was the Crucifixion, culminated in his experience of the stigmata.<sup>13</sup> The Cult of the Virgin Mary put the Infant Jesus, gentle and dependent, in between them and the burning eyed Christ the Judge on the apex of every cathedral ceiling.<sup>14</sup>

Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that medieval scholastics affirmed the importance of flesh by speculating on the resurrection. At Jesus’ return all the broken, eaten, rotten and scattered flesh would be re-united by God’s power into the person of each resurrected individual. Artists imagined wild animals and sea creatures vomiting up consumed body parts on the Last Day.<sup>15</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux speculated in a vivid set of visions that Jesus could move him to greater levels of devotion in the form of a Savior with the full breasts of a nursing mother. He was not alone in such imaginative and mystical reflection on the quite physical, intimate love of God that in the hands of modern readers seems quite strange, even unsettling.<sup>16</sup>

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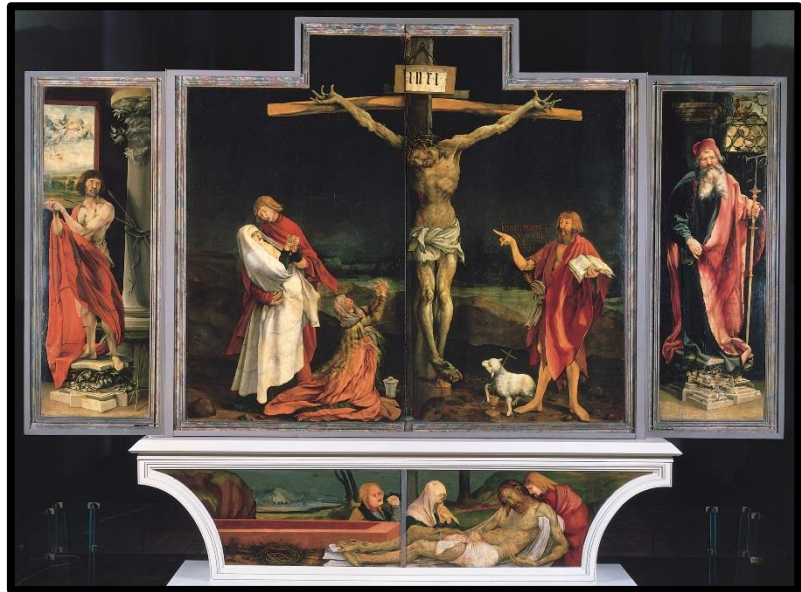
<sup>13</sup> Mark Galli, *St. Francis and His World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); for early biographies of St. Francis and recollections of his teaching by Celano, Bonaventura and the *Flowers of St. Francis*, see *The Franciscan Archives* at: <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/patriarcha/>.

<sup>14</sup> The Franciscan monk Jacopone de Todi’s (c.1230–1306) song on the Virgin Mary; Mary C. Athans, *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology, and Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). For the unusual examples of medieval visual representation of Jesus as a divinely powered child, see Mary F. Casey, “The Fourteenth-Century *Tring Tiles*: A Fresh Look at Their Origin and the Hebraic Aspects of the Child Jesus’ Actions,” *Peregrinations* 2, no. 2 (2007), at: <http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2-2/FeaturedSection/TringTiles.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

But it wasn't until medieval iconography in statue and painting that the horror of the crucified Savior's body became central to Christian spirituality, or a renewed spiritual desire demanded a new kind of iconography.<sup>17</sup> Late medieval teaching on penance invited new and more powerful depictions of the Crucifixion. Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516) is the best known example (though the crucifixion is only part of this magnificent,



Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald (1512-1516).

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

boundary-breaking devotional work). Medieval pietas carved of wood or stone emphasized Jesus' gaunt broken form. Late Renaissance artists exhibited their anatomical finesse in work

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<sup>17</sup> Surely depictions of Hell and the fate awaiting unredeemed sinners rendered on church walls and above the entryway were unsettling enough to encourage fear, even terror. Late Medieval paintings of the Last Judgment depicted grotesque demons and terrified, naked, and tortured people. Cathedral tympanums were similar; in the wake of the Black Death *Danse Macabre* art reinforced the leveling fortunes of Death. Terror and anxiety, perhaps coupled with a macabre fascination, prompted depictions of the female witch and the Black Sabbath including its grotesque blasphemies. Consult the portraits of witches and witchcraft by Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grein, Adrianus Hubertus, and Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen. Just as important were the dozens of pamphlets describing the salacious ceremonies of conspiracies of witches. See Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft in England 1558-1618* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) and Brian P. Levack, ed., *The Witchcraft Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For the appearance and behavior of “the Black Man,” or Satan, see Joyce Miller, “Men in Black: Appearances of the Devil in Early Modern Scottish Witchcraft Discourse,” in Martin Goodare and Joyce Miller, eds., *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (London: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2008), 144-65.

inspired by over a century of reflection on the Incarnation.<sup>18</sup> Still striking is Mantegna’s length-wise portrait of the Son of God in the tomb, *Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1480s), also the subject of Hans Holbein the Younger, whose *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-2) is closer to Grünewald in depicting Jesus as a wasted corpse. In contrast but with perhaps similar roots in the Incarnation were the Renaissance portraits of the Madonna emphasizing Jesus’ humanity.<sup>19</sup> For the most part all this fell away from most Protestant depictions of Jesus. Later, in the West and with a few notable exceptions, but especially in America, Jesus looked like the Caucasian male of the majority. In the last few decades portraits like Janet McKenzie’s *Jesus of the People* (1999), where the savior is a black African woman, have suggested how a savior of all people has to look like those of a diverse world. From a far less reverent motive popular culture represents Jesus as a gay man drawing all gay men to his side, or as a scientifically revived superman leading the fight against the forces of apocalypse.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Trinkhaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (1970; South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1985). For a perceptive contextual account of Steinberg’s scholarship see Diane Phillips, “Leo Steinberg’s Artistic Vision: It Took a Jewish Scholar to Restore Theology to Christian Art History,” *First Things* (December, 2011), at: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/12/leo-steinbergs-artistic-vision>.

<sup>20</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ In Modern Thought* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 1990). Shawn French and Mortimer Glum have created *Escape from Jesus Island*, in which DNA recovered from the Shroud of Turin permitted geneticists to clone Jesus. The process results in twins, one of whom, Damien, escapes and tries to initiate the Apocalypse. A crack team of Vatican commandos accompanied by the cloned Jesus have to track him and stop his mad plan; <https://jesusisland.com/>.

## **Sacred, Strange Flesh, and the Horror Film**

For a long time then, Jesus’ body has seemed strange. Perhaps it isn’t surprising then, but, for probably very different reasons, contemporary horror movies echo with this strangeness of Jesus’ body. Artistic depictions of Jesus are fascinated with the physical possibilities of the founder of the Christian faith and the Church, the Son of God, provocative teacher, apocalyptic preacher of the Kingdom of God, of the love of the Father in heaven, miracle worker, murdered messiah, and resurrected savior. Horror movies exploit the strangeness of Jesus’ flesh with the most creativity and energy, evoking the confusion, shock if not revulsion surrounding the divine body of the Savior. Horror retrieves the mystery and terror of the flesh combined with the divine. In *The Idea of the Holy* Rudolph Otto described terror as one symptom of experiencing the numinous. The holy on occasion appears in the passages narrating monsters and experience of holy fear.<sup>21</sup>

Noir, thrillers, whodunits, science fiction, action films: they overlap with the horror film. There are not clear boundaries between them, but we can make some working distinctions. Horror seems to fulfill different desires: our strange joy at being startled or frightened under safe circumstances; our desire to see the uncanny, the shocking, even the disturbing, the taboo. Horror film grew out of the nineteenth-century staged exhibitions of terror stories that fascinated the middle classes performing the bizarre, depraved, and violent. Film early on was fascinated with the monstrous and bizarre; however, it was German filmmaking that first explored seriously and creatively the opportunities the medium had for terror and horror in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

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<sup>21</sup> *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Divine*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), ch. IV.

(Robert Wiene, 1920) and *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922). This took off in America with Lon Chaney in later 1920s freak films and the 1930s with *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931). Expressionism and film noir became part of the film language for translating Gothic literature to the peculiar action of the screen. The far more violent, brutal if not nihilistic apocalyptic character of horror only gradually developed after 1945 as various popular culture genres and media (comic books, SF, Lovecraft horror fiction, and others) came together in the anxious world of total war, genocide, Cold War, and nuclear threat.<sup>22</sup>

Horror exploits the deep anxieties, dread and even terror we experience watching what seem like basic boundaries violated: personal security, purity, ritual, or sexual.<sup>23</sup> The Incarnation expresses the importance of the flesh to God, His joy and love in joining His divine life to the body. Despite that, for ancient philosophy and theology the Incarnation seemed obviously a violation of a boundary, a fundamental one. Perhaps the fascination with such a boundary violation of the divine and mundane still fascinates story tellers even if reverence has long evaporated. Those aspects of Christianity are rich sources of inspiration for the horror film. As St. Paul wrote (Romans 8), human flesh serves God or rebels against Him. In such accounts the

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<sup>22</sup> David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (1993); Asma, *On Monsters*; W. Scott Poole, *Monster in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Caroline Joan (Kay) S. Picart and David A. Frank, *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Thomas Fahy, ed., *The Philosophy of Horror* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2012). As Christians, Douglas and Countryman worked out their convictions about ritual purity and boundary violation as they reflected on the meaning of the Christ and the Good News.

divine spirit invades our world and our bodies; it sometimes causes us to act in odd and frightening ways.

The subjects of religion and horror readily overlap. Religions often dedicate great time and emphasis on the flesh—worship, narrative, disciplines of the body, purity codes, and ethical admonitions and warnings. Horror films often target religion as cultic practices which threaten to disrupt society, families, and only defeated by counter-ritual actions. They exploit our anxiety about, and fascination with, blood, torture, self-mutilation, self-denial, often sexualized in some way or another.<sup>24</sup> Horror also exploits quite often our resentments and disappointments towards, or violations at the hands of, religion, God, his ministers, or devout parents.

Fear of invasion of our body from outside, whether divine or malevolent, testifies to our anxiety over loss of control or the self. The biblical sources have many such stories, from King Saul in 1 Samuel to the prophets, in tales of demons from the Gospels, and medieval and early-modern Europe had more than its share of possession accounts or vampire legends. Horror films of possession including alien invasion stories often portrayed a spirit or divinity or creature from the “other side” coming to this world to inhabit bodies like ours. Some versions depict “entering” a body as a hunger to be encased in flesh—incarnated—like a classic science fiction tale. Assuming the spirit wants a body, and visualizing this, creates the opportunity for the viewer to see fantasies dramatized, particularly those of power and sexuality, even comedic reconciliation in stories of social reform.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> There is an old truism that the best horror film writers and directors are lapsed or perhaps still confessing Catholics.

<sup>25</sup> For classic *Star Trek*, see “Return to Tomorrow” (written by John T. Dugan, 1968) and “Turnabout Intruder” (written by Arthur H. Singer, 1969). An example from comedy can be found in *All of Me* (Carl Reiner, 1984).



Some horror films exhibit the flesh under extreme circumstances—our curiosity about “what that looks like” or “might feel like”, “what it would be like to do that” or “could I survive that?” Torture and slasher films typically achieve this, though often cutting corners on story, drama or character in order to get to scenes of hydraulic special effects depicting mayhem to bodies. Other horror films depict “the other” flesh transformed from inside (*The Fly*, David Cronenberg, 1986) or the intruder from outside that changes us (*From Beyond*, Stuart Gordon, 1986). Science has replaced God as the wild-card threat, the crazy cosmic uncle attacking or inhabiting our transformed bodies. In such stories science is an untrustworthy deity when badly misused or misunderstood by its acolytes; or it typically yields to some kind of mysticism when they struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible character of nature.<sup>26</sup>

“Resurrection” horror—*Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968), vampire films, *Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985)—are more explicitly Christian in their mythos, even when they deny or challenge it. The dead “go” elsewhere or “leave”—their return is a terribly shattered hope, and a disturbing change has occurred. In a world spiced by fear of mass destruction and social breakdown, the resurrection mythos is stripped of hope, beauty, healing and restoration.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore the horror movie exploits our interest in or fear of the flesh. That body is often chaotic, dirty and unpredictable, out of our control, a traitor to our true character or what we hope and believe we really are like. It confuses, betrays, coerces, and frustrates us. Film, this

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<sup>26</sup> For me, Cronenberg’s *The Fly* comes closest to capturing the human tragedy of the Frankenstein myth, doing so by compressing the Creature and Creator into one character, Seth Brundle.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008); Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

carefully staged narrated dream fulfilling our desire for a story, especially attracts us with the promise of showing us what is typically hidden from view. Some scholars have recently speculated that this fascination with the sublime and enjoyable terror is associated in some way with our religious sensibilities.<sup>28</sup> I don't know. But fascination of some films with the flesh under extreme circumstances in specifically or typically gothic settings seems connected to the same parts of ourselves that experience awe, fear and fulfillment in religious settings or in religious experiences.<sup>29</sup>

### Horror and the Sacred Savior

Consider the range of horror movies portraying or referencing sacred objects associated with Jesus' body. His Name, the sacraments of Chalice and Host, water blessed in His name, etc. exhibit power over evil, power to inspire and protect the good, to even transform a physical substance into something else benevolent. This includes the long associations of magic and the sacred with relics, pilgrimages, the power of prayer, and the sacraments. The role magic could play in the systems involving the supernatural invited such associations with Jesus' body. Death and resurrection are typical storylines in horror movies, so there's no surprise that Christian themes and elements run all through the horror genre.

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<sup>28</sup>For examples see the arguments of Cowan, Edmundson, Asma, and Poole.

<sup>29</sup> At this stage in film making, horror films (like other kinds of movies) can be as often about the previous films the writers and directors have loved as they can be about the story and character they are making. Rob Zombie's *House of a Thousand Corpses* (2003) is chock full of examples exhibiting his love of late night B-movie horror shows, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Creepshow*, and EC comics, etc. The opening sequence of the French director Christophe Gans' *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2003) is an homage to Steven Spielberg's 1975 *Jaws*; and Brian DePalma's films like *Carrie* (1976) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) pick up themes and camera work from Hitchcock's *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Frenzy*, and others.



Horror especially came to popular cultural notice in movies after the Great War and again after World War II, as if God’s silence or absence in such a violent and chaotic world demanded visual explorations of the presence of now-defaced or impotent sacred icons (crosses, churches, priests, etc.). In a sense ever since Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) the modern vampire has been a parody of Christ in his power over aspects of nature, his negative response to the sacraments and the crucifix, a creature of night instead of day, of impurity and disease, and blasphemies of sacraments like baptism. Among the earliest and most influential were the Hammer vampire movies from 1958 into the 1960s, especially those directed by Englishman Terrance Fisher. As a Christian, Fisher considered the horror movie, the vampire film especially, to be well-suited to stories of the struggle of good against evil, of the power of the sacred over the profane. The power of the crucifix, of Latin prayers and faithful priests in contrast to unbelievers and frightened or faithless pastors, recurs again and again.<sup>30</sup> A later movie not directed by Fisher but of that ilk, *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (Freddie Francis, 1968) exploited this story. More recent movies of similar themes are *Dracula 2000* (Patrick Lussier), others on vampires as satanic cults, such as *Dusk Till Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996) and *Dracula Untold* (Gary Shore, 2014; in it the Wallachian count is told, “You are alive because of what I did to save you!”). Even the satanic, sadomasochistic Cenobites in *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) parody monasticism and the Son of God. Then of course there’s the modern zombie story, from *Night of*

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Leggett, *Terence Fisher: Horror, Myth and Religion* (2002). Decades earlier the Danish director Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr* (1932) made vampires, death and damnation very frightening, because the director was a believer and took such theological concepts seriously; Bruce E. Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (London: Anthem, 2012), 33-4. See also Cowan, 35-6, 138-9.

*the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1969) to the recent *The Walking Dead*, as parodies of the Apocalypse and general resurrection of the dead.<sup>31</sup>

The potent image of the crucifix is a staple in classic horror films. In John Whale’s *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) terrified peasants crucified the Creature. The power of the Cross drives away vampires from the first *Dracula* through remake after remake, sequel upon sequel, through the 1970s.<sup>32</sup> Much later in *Carrie* (1976) Brian DePalma staged the psychokinetic teenager crucifying her mother with kitchen knives on a door. In *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968) the Count is killed when he falls from a balcony and is impaled on a great golden cross removed from the doors of his castle. Crucifixions also occur in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: The Final Chapter* (Joseph Zito, 1984) and *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainright, 1999).

For Fisher’s *Dracula* (1966; in the US, *Dracula: Prince of Darkness*) the vampire promises a “new” body eternal and lovely. But the audience learns this is a lie. The “new” body is actually a demonic desire machine spreading something akin to a sexual disease, leading perhaps to the destruction of the soul. To end this they must destroy the vampire body, now a “shell” housing a demon, in order to save and liberate the victim. Driving a stake into the heart—in the Hammer films typically into the heaving and barely-clothed bosom of a seductive woman—is the only way to save the innocent soul imprisoned in the body. Fisher combined in a marvelous, trend-setting way the heightening of reverence for traditional sacred symbols while

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<sup>31</sup> Cowan, 85-6, 89; on zombies, see 156-65.

<sup>32</sup> This would not change until the seminal transformations of the vampire movie in which the disease is made less Satanic and is naturalized as something like a sexually transmitted illness, though still linked to aspects of the Bram Stoker mythology. Examples are *Vampires* (John Carpenter, 1998) and Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s *The Strain* book trilogy (2009-11), now an FX TV series (2014-).

giving the audience the titillating glance into the forbidden boudoir of sexual desire even if associated with a kind of sexualized violence. This association of purity, corruption, sexuality, and violence was of course taken directly from Bram Stoker’s revision of the vampire legend.<sup>33</sup>

### **Jesus in the Horror Film: Three Examples**

#### The Gothic Hero of the Strange Flesh

All these genre elements come together in horror film depictions of Jesus. One of the first to suggest the power of a true horror element for the Jesus story was a brief moment in Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of the Christ*.<sup>34</sup> During his temptation Jesus has a vision in which he pulls his heart from his chest. Scorsese referenced the Catholic tradition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, widely represented in stylized and reverent portraits of the savior pointing to his crowned, glowing-though-idealized heart. Willem Dafoe’s Jesus is front lit against a pitch-black background, and he opens his chest as if his hands are surgical tools. Reaching into his chest he pulls out a bloody, throbbing and graphically realistic heart. Other scenes depicting Jesus’ temptation are also eerie, unsettling, and clearly influenced by the horror and thriller tradition.

Six years later Mel Gibson made the horror genre central to his remarkable *Passion of the Christ* (written by Benedict Fitzgerald and Gibson, 2004). Gibson’s religious themes across his

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<sup>33</sup> Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) is a fair homage to the old Hammer/Terence Fisher films. But in what is actually a love story the vampire halts the corrupting effects of time on the body in exchange for the corruption of his soul and the corruption of others by spreading the plague of vampirism. Offering eternal life he seduces and captures a woman to replace an earlier love of centuries previous; yet unlike the Hammer films Coppola encourages us to pity Dracula. For such themes in vampire movies, see Cowan, ch.5.

<sup>34</sup>For a brief history of film portraits of the Crucifixion, in which the gothic or horror element is apparently absent, see Adele Reinhartz, “Passion-ate Moments in the Jesus Film Genre,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 8 (Special Issue), no. 1 (February 2004).

movies are well-known.<sup>35</sup> Still, it took guts to frame a reverential Jesus film with horror movie vocabulary.<sup>36</sup> That is especially true when considering Gibson’s counter-intuitive decisions to film entirely in ancient languages like Aramaic or Latin with subtitles. Perhaps his going to such enormous lengths to recreate the physical verisimilitude of ancient Palestine, in such a strange universe, the movie vocabulary of horror gave viewers some sense of the familiar.<sup>37</sup> This occurs most memorably three times, two of which occur in scenes depicting Satan’s interactions with the Savior. In the first the camera wanders slowly through a wooded area as if stalking someone. The scene is filtered blue, the night sky ruled by a full moon casting pale light on the garden. This signals the breaking of the border between this world and another: a spirit world, the supernatural, the dreamscape.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the camera finds Jesus in prayer, in agony. A lithe, sexually ambiguous hooded figure with no facial hair gazes at Jesus. It speaks in slow mockery, gesturing with sharp fingernails, while a maggot moves from one nostril to the other. This

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<sup>35</sup> Kelly Denton-Borhaug, “A Bloodthirsty Salvation: Behind the Popular Polarized Reaction to Gibson’s *The Passion*,” *The Journal of Religion and Film* 9, no. 1 (April 2005), at: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No1/DentonBorhaugBloodthirsty.htm>; John Laughland, “The Passion and Rene Girard: The Sacred Violence of the Crucifixion,” *The Daily Star* (April 17, 2004), at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2004/Apr-17/91630-the-passion-and-rene-girard-the-sacred-violence-of-the-crucifixion.ashx#axzz1YiESoC7C>; Robert L. Webb and Kathleen E. Corley, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), ch.5; Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, eds., *Mel Gibson’s Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and “The Passion of the Christ”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); “Matthew”, “Mel Gibson & The Scapegoat”, at: <http://www.bywayofbeauty.com/2011/09/mel-gibson-scapegoat.html>;

<sup>36</sup>Few scholars have pointed out Gibson’s horror motifs. One example, though in a tone of deep revulsion and attack on Gibson as a psychologically damaged political conservative and religious fanatic, is Robert Smart, “*The Passion of the Christ*: Reflections on Mel’s Monstrous Messiah Movie and the Culture Wars,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 47 (2004), at: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/melsPassion/4.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Though we should not get too excited about Gibson’s authentic recreation of ancient Palestine: Andrea Berlin and Jodi Magness, “Movie Commentary: Two Archaeologists Comment on *The Passion of the Christ*,” (March 1,, 2004), The Archeological Institute of America, at: <https://www.archaeological.org/news/movies/269>.

<sup>38</sup> Gibson used blue filter to similar effect for Wallace’s dream sequences in *Braveheart* (1995). Though he did not use a blue filter in *Apocalypto* (2006), he washed out the color with a different kind of filter to emphasize the vision of Leopard Paw of the coming attack on his village.

person’s hairless face and unclear gender instills a tone of unease. Finally, a snake winds its way from the folds of Satan’s cloak towards Jesus, recalling an earlier serpent in the first Garden. The score Gibson chose and lays over the top of this scene gradually increases the dread. In this, in the serpentine movements of Satan (played by Italian actress Rosalindo Celentano) Gibson linked the Gethsemane Garden temptation to the Eden temptation, implied by the Gospel accounts, and Jesus as the New Adam. Celentano’s feminine characteristics, obscured by the shaved head and robe as well as a voice deepened in post-production, lent a confusing feature to the character which suggests something seductive but quite unusual.<sup>39</sup>

Gibson also enlisted Satan’s forces. After Judas betrayed Jesus to the Sanhedrin guilt and remorse drive him out of the city. A clutch of boys begins to chase and taunt him, and in a brief close-up, one boy’s face becomes demonic. In despair the terrified Judas hangs himself. Gibson returned to Satan and his mockery for the flogging of Jesus. At the height of this brutally graphic scene Satan begins to move silently and unnoticed through the crowd. Mary alone sees the cruel mockery of her agony by Satan, who unwraps a cloak to reveal a hairless, ugly child held closely to the archfiend’s bosom. This blasphemous caricature of the Madonna and Child offers the viewer another skein of revulsion layered on the relentless violation from the beating of the innocent Jesus. Such mockery and violence combined with the unnaturalness of the child bears Gibson’s conviction that such obscenity against the sacred can only be depicted by the genre elements of horror.

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<sup>39</sup> Satan has been filmed in various ways over the years in Jesus movies. Yet Roma Downey, one of the producers of the TV miniseries *The Son of God* and who played Jesus’ mother, explained why they filmed but left out of the final cut any portrayal of Satan. <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/02/20/roma-downey-cut-satan-son-god/>

In what seems on reflection an odd theological conviction, Gibson highlighted Jesus’ superhuman capacity to take violence. By the time he is delivered for crucifixion and begins the Via Dolorosa Jesus is nearly unrecognizable. Yet he accepts, even asks for, greater and further punishment. Many viewers found this portrait of torture unwatchable, and other critics found Gibson’s atonement theology of divine violence hideous. The huge success of the movie was built especially on repeated viewings of evangelical Christians who often considered it the most authentic of Jesus films. This also revealed how Gibson’s pre-Vatican II theology and peculiar convictions about a world of violence and the peaceful man who through violence defeats those cruel forces touched a range of convictions and desires of his American audience.<sup>40</sup>

The horror genre has become well-known and acknowledged by movie makers and audiences. As serious an attempt to pay reverence to the Jesus story and its contemporary relevance as Gibson’s easily took up the visual tools of the macabre, the unnatural, the eerie, the grotesque, and the startling. Horror movies are just so mainstream that their value in a religiously-themed film, even if made by a religiously reverent filmmaker, seems to be their power to convince the viewer quickly that the story has entered a serious world where good battles evil, and the stakes of that struggle are very high. Horror elements highlight the mythology in the story.<sup>41</sup> Evil on film is magnified in its threat and seductiveness by iconic

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<sup>40</sup> On Gibson’s range of movies and the religious worldview they depict, see the sources cited in note 35. Peter Jackson began his career in horror, and even his enormously reverent *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is shot through with the visual elements and special effects of that genre, exploiting what is arguably merely implied in Tolkien’s classic. On Jackson’s monsters see Sharin Schroeder, “‘It’s Alive!’ Tolkien’s Monster on Screen”, in Janice M. Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny, eds., *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, 2011), 116-38.

<sup>41</sup> The first versions of modern horror fiction, from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through Stoker’s *Dracula* and the cultic elements of H.P. Lovecraft, highlight this.

representations from the Christian tradition. Even for a religiously illiterate viewer, the horror movie wields sacred symbols like the cross, the sanctuary and prayer to evoke the supernatural and provokes a particular kind of emotional power.

### Jesus as Hero of the Weird Flesh

A striking version of Jesus’ unusual flesh is the campy, low-budget diversity-pamphlet *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* (Canada: Lee Gordon Demarbre; written by Ian Driscoll, 2001).<sup>42</sup> Director Demarbre followed the recent cultural move to revise Jesus’ image by putting him into a contemporary world threatened by a conspiracy of vampires and mad scientists. These fiends plot to harvest the flesh of lesbians—no one will miss such deviants—to graft onto vampires, permitting them to tolerate sunlight. The Church begs Jesus to return and lead the war against this horrible cabal.<sup>43</sup> Jesus fights the vampires with martial arts moves and supernatural powers like sanctifying sea water as a weapon against the undead, recalling other superheroes with unusual bodies and abilities. In the final fight scene one of the vampires drives a stake through the savior’s heart. Jesus seems to die, but actually descends into Hell. Exclaiming “There’s nothing deviant about love,” Demarbre’s Jesus defends the deviant physical desires of the gay community as legitimate love. To protect the strange love of the gay community, Jesus therefore pits his own strange flesh against the strange flesh of the vampiric enemy. Returning from Hell

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<sup>42</sup> For a profile of Demarbre, see: <http://kickasscanadians.ca/lee-demarbre>. Jesus’ association with vampires didn’t begin with the Canadians. J. G. Eccarius wrote of Jesus as a vampire in *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire* (Ill Pub, 1990). The novel spawned a short lived comic run; *Christ the Vampire: The Comic*, story by Henry Brooks, art by Nick Gonne (Questing Beast; no longer in print, but see at: <http://www.iipublishing.com/books/cvcomic.htm>).

<sup>43</sup> There is a political dimension to the claim Demarbre makes. Murderers of the last few decades have preyed on prostitutes and runaway teens with impunity, apparently because the victims were not missed by family or friends, or because police departments put little effort into finding them. This is reminiscent of circumstances surrounding the Canadian murderers Paul Kenneth Bernardo with Karla Homolka, Robert “Willie” Pickton, and John Wayne Gacy in the US.



Jesus pulls the stake from his chest, and a blazing divine light erupts from the wound to destroy the vampire army. Yet Jesus is as good as his loving word, healing some of the vampires of their deviant hatred and restoring them to life. Demarbre’s movie has all the elements of tongue in cheek shlock: wild-eyed scientists working with gooey fake organs and blood, goofy choreography of fight scenes, wooden dialogue and low-resolution lighting. *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is probably 30 minutes too long, but while it pitches itself enthusiastically right at the midnight movie crowd it also reveals again just how fascinated many of us are with the idea that Jesus, however compassionate, is in the flesh unlike us, quite strange.

#### Divinity at the Mercy of Strange Flesh

There are now a host of “Jesus” films by creators with little stake in sticking to the biblical or traditional accounts.<sup>44</sup> The zombie film *Jesus* pits the ultimate (other than Superman) hero of superhuman purity of intentions and goodness against the villains of the current pop moment, the nihilistic apocalyptic undead.<sup>45</sup> Jesus’ power to heal the handicapped, to bring the dead back to life, His own resurrection from the dead and promise to restore the dead on the Last Day, make Him an even more appropriate opponent of hoards of ravenous corpses. By 2000 many versions of the zombie-Jesus combination began to appear in web art and short films.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Consider the 2008 MAD TV skit “The Greatest Action Story Ever Told,” about Jesus and the Terminator, elsewhere parodies of Gibson’s *Passion* where a post-resurrection Jesus gets revenge for his murder, etc.

<sup>45</sup> On zombies and Jesus in this cultural moment, see how irreverent wags celebrate Easter as “Zombie Day” (examples are widely available on the web); Rob Leifeld’s *Zombie Jesus* comic depicts a zombie apocalypse unleashed by the death of Christ (Math.27:51-52), fought by Lazarus the Immortal; <https://robliefeldcreations.com/zombie-jesus/>.

<sup>46</sup> *Worst Horror Movie Ever Made* (2005) has a zombie Jesus who is crucified by Muslim terrorists: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfi4jSt1160> at 17:00. Two years later came *Zombie Jesus* (2007): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q1LF0itMvE>; website: <http://www.zombiejesusisback.com/index.html>. For *Zombie Jesus* animation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hzuIRPVRIY>. Another example is *Jesus vs Zombies*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y2BrmcVf6c>.



The most ambitious example in its production values and commitment to the horror/parody genre of the B-movie tradition is the as-of-now unfinished Spanish film *Fist of Jesus* (directed by Adrián Cardona and David Muñoz; written by David Muñoz, 2013). Shot in high-quality, it combines the “bathrobe” biblical films and classic Jesus movies since the 1950s, with Sergio Leone’s “spaghetti westerns” of the next decade or so.

Jesus is preaching to his disciples that they are men “of another country” unlike the citizens of “this dark world.” They are to live like Him: loving enemies, treating them as they wish to be treated. Lazarus’ father Jacob interrupts Jesus to tell him that his son has died. Jesus tells him that he must have faith that He is “the resurrection and the life.” He arrives confident, cheerful, even smug. Jesus takes hold of the corpses’ feet. “Lazarus, rise and walk!” Everyone celebrates as he awakes, but are shocked and terrified when he attacks his father and tears out his throat. Jesus and Judas flee in terror as Lazarus attacks everyone. Roman soldiers try to restore order but are overwhelmed and within moments an army of zombies made up of peasants, Pharisees, soldiers and—without explanation, cowboys—moves through the countryside. Judas accuses Jesus of showing off; the Savior responds, “Hey, I’d never tried this before. It’s natural I didn’t get it right the first time.” Frightened and in despair, Judas hangs himself. Jesus brings him back to life but forgets to remove the rope and he strangles again.<sup>47</sup>

Only Jesus and Judas remain, but how to fight them? Judas demands a miracle, but the only one Jesus can perform is to make fish from nothing. Suddenly he has a weapon; using fish as projectiles, making piranhas and swordfish for weapons, soon a gore-covered savior wades

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<sup>47</sup>For the sacred as a technology which in the horror film can go very badly, see Cowan, 136.

through mounds of zombie corpses. In a scene that beggars the reverent imagination Jesus pulls a cross from the ground and with it still attached to its rotting corpse he destroys the remaining horde of zombies.<sup>48</sup> Judas alone feels revulsion and sorrow.

Promoting their film to raise money, directors and writers Cardona and Muñoz had cards made declaring, “Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem,” a reference to the Leone westerns that inspired *Fist of Jesus*’ visual style. Above are written various Gospel passages in which Jesus taught not about love but struggle, war, and violence.<sup>49</sup> The hot desert environment of the typical sandal and sword movie, the similar environments of Leone’s classics like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), the already well-parodied elements of that world from Monty Python’s classic *Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979), and the status of Jesus’ supernatural powers in our superhero and horror-movie rich movie culture seemed ripe for exploitation.

### **Conclusion: Scars of the Risen Body**

The Incarnation, the story of God in the flesh, is strange, confusing, and perhaps a foolish divine act compared to what might seem the best resources of an omnipotent, all wise and loving God.<sup>50</sup> We might combine what you could call a “Christology from above” in which we begin with Christ’s divinity and proceeding then in our interpretation of the New Testament, but trying at the same time to accomplish a “Christology from below” in which we concentrate on the New

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.fistofjesus.com/the-short-film/>.

<sup>49</sup> “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already burning!” (Luke 12:49); “But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.” (Luke 19:27); and “If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.” (Luke 22:36).

<sup>50</sup> St. Paul’s description of a community of the Cross in 1 Cor. 1:18-31; see similar sentiments in the Letter to the Colossians.

Testament as a historical record of Jesus in time and space.<sup>51</sup> How might it be possible to do both, moving back and forth from one to the other?

God overcomes the “metaphysical size gap” between Himself and us; that is why no amount of effort, good intentions let alone actions, can make up for the shame we suffer as sinners, rebels, and participants in earthly horrors. It is not so much guilt and God’s canceling of our debt to Him; rather, it is our shame and the honor He does us by taking our shame on Himself. Morality is too small and frail an intellectual container to account for the consequences of horrors both human and natural upon us and the creation. The more we learn of our bodies and cognition in an evolved natural system, the less able we are to confidently assign thick cosmic responsibilities for human action. Only God can make up that distance. He does so by assuming human form and taking our shame on Himself, giving His glory to us as his dependents, and if possible we in turn honor Him by honoring, i.e. caring for, others.<sup>52</sup>

The relevant issue perhaps is that horror movies exhibit and provoke our visceral reflection of moral catastrophes, no-win scenarios, the overthrow of pride and the triumph of unintended consequences, choosing the best of dreadful options, and the violation of our frail

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<sup>51</sup> For an incarnational theology “from below,” see Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 14–15. On making the Incarnation central to an entire life of faith, and not only atonement theology, consider John Macquarrie’s claim: “To think in that way would be to miss the whole meaning of incarnation and passion, which is that God comes among us in weakness and humility to stand with us in the midst of the created order.” *The Humility of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 60. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 34.

<sup>52</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 123-8. I should make clear that I do not share McCord-Adams’ conviction that God’s assumption of flesh had some measure of shame in it. Divine humility was fully accomplished by crossing the unimaginable metaphysical gap between the Godhead and humanity.

bodies.<sup>53</sup> God is responsible for taking flesh as the container for achieving His will to enter into relationship with creation. Seeking a relationship with creatures, He chose an evolved world where we could seek and know Him. But in an evolved world our flesh is compromised, vulnerable, frail. God condescends to take on compromised, frail time-and-space-bound flesh to become Incarnate in Jesus. Jesus the God-man was willing to be bound by the conditions of His own creation.<sup>54</sup> The risk of God being human meant the risk of being misunderstood, misrepresented, abused. After all, divine condescension, a central idea of Incarnational theology, includes the likelihood of dishonor and scandal.<sup>55</sup> As Marilyn McCord Adams suggests, “Christ, in His human nature, participates in a representative sample of horrors sufficient to guarantee His appreciation of the depth of their ruinous potential.”<sup>56</sup> Perhaps horror of all the genres of popular culture takes most seriously this risk, the risk of being confined to the limits of the body in time.

The Gospels tell us that this God in human form experiences strong emotions, mourns, weeps, tires, seeks solitude, and defecates. This God is perfectly suited to exploitation by horror. To repeat, horror films make the flesh a symbol, a metaphor. It also satisfies a desire to see what is hidden or should not be revealed. It tests boundaries we often resist discussing aloud, and

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<sup>53</sup> This is perhaps one consequence of a post-Auschwitz world of moral reflection. See of course Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989); and also Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), and *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

<sup>54</sup> For further reflections on this see my “At the Mercy of the Flesh: The Incarnation and Historical Contemplation,” *Fides et Historia* 47, no. 1 (2015), 128-40.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 2005). For a conservative evangelical response to Enns, see K. Scott Oliphint, *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2012). For divine accommodation generally, see Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993).

<sup>56</sup> McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 174.

rarely cross in our public lives. In those movies the flesh is a metaphor for suffering, for power, for weakness and vulnerability; for capacity to resist; of the source of our fear or suffering, our enemy. We dream and imagine seeing Jesus in some form, in related versions in novels, comic books, and fan art which are often irreverent. They are occasionally mocking; even to some, blasphemous. These hope to see in a skeptical attack on Jesus’ integrity a symbolic victory over a symbol of the morally smug, of moral techniques of control and domestication, against hypocrisy, and against unrealistic and oppressive religious utopianism.

All such speculation is of a kind, I think, with the horror movie. As Timothy K. Beal suggested there is something interesting to learn from “the monstrous as a form of theological expression.”<sup>57</sup> Years of Sunday School, creeds, liturgy, and Scripture perhaps leave us with contentment about the Incarnation. The Scripture testifies to its confusion and shock; the subsequent history of Christology testifies to the revulsion at the idea of a God who would become truly human. The horror film portrait of Christ might just jar loose our contentment and retrieve some small part of the freshness of that story of the God who not merely wore a skin suit, but poured His essence into it.

This God shocks us.

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<sup>57</sup>Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, 8.