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Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Peter Malone, *Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film* (Boulder, CO: Roman & Littlefield, 2012).

Author Notes

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Peter Malone, *Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film* (Boulder, CO: Roman & Littlefield, 2012), 348pgs.

In his book *Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film*, Peter Malone catalogues the various depictions of Jesus Christ since the invention of film more than one hundred years ago. The history covered in this book stretches from *Christ Walking on the Water* (1899), produced only four years after the Lumiere brothers showed their first movie, to *The Passion* (2008). While there have been numerous depictions of Jesus on screen since 2008, publishing deadlines limit what may be included in a printed volume. Malone briefly mentions some of these post-2008 Jesus films in the latter chapters of *Screen Jesus*, however, these are given a few sentences at most.

To begin his consideration of Jesus on screen, Malone first takes the time to define exactly what the book will be addressing. Malone differentiates between a Christ-figure and a Jesus-figure by stating, “The Jesus-figure is any representation of Jesus himself. The Christ-figure is a character...who is presented as resembling Jesus in a significant way (1).” The former is the focus of *Screen Jesus*, with Malone further dividing Jesus characters into realistic depictions of Jesus, as in Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), and a more stylized Jesus, as in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). Despite this distinction, Malone is sure to point out that even these so called “realistic” depictions of Jesus are stylized according

to expectations, usually from the West, of what the setting and characterization of the Gospel story should be.

In the second chapter of *Screen Jesus*, “Biblical Portraits of Jesus,” Malone discusses several scriptural portrayals of Jesus in the New Testament, and Messiah in Hebrew Scripture. These include, Jesus Redeemer, Jesus Savior, and Jesus Liberator. Next Malone compares these three characterizations with the offices of prophet, priest, and king (12). Finally Malone discusses the way Jesus fits into the biblical tradition of the Holy Fool. Malone seems to have included this chapter to connect the various depictions of Jesus on screen with the various depictions of Jesus in the bible. Unfortunately, these categories don’t appear again, though they might have been useful in the analysis of the films that follow.

Having laid this ground work, Malone turns to the films themselves, beginning with “The Jesus Films: The Early Twentieth Century.” This chapter covers the earliest era of film production, and briefly discusses some of the earliest films made, which were mostly passion plays. About these Malone laments: “Unfortunately none of them exist today because of the corrosion of the materials on which they were filmed” (15). Malone spends more time covering the films *Civilization* (1915), D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), and *I.N.R.I.* (rereleased as *Crown of Thorns* in 1934). Most of the chapter is devoted to *Intolerance*, and includes a description of the film including notes on which events from the gospel are included, how the film handles the woman caught in adultery, and Jesus’

appearance. Malone also comments on the actor's portrayal of Jesus, writing, "Jesus was personality-less, going through familiar reverent movements and moments that were aimed at inspiring audiences" (20). These observations are characteristic of all the films to which Malone devotes special attention.

Next, Malone looks at "The Jesus Films: The 1920s and Cecil B DeMille." In this chapter Malone covers *Ben Hur* (1925), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Le Berceau De Dieu* (1926), *Chizome No Jujika*, and *Jesus of Nazareth* (1928). Of these *The King of Kings* looms large given its influence over subsequent Jesus films. Despite the film's somewhat austere depiction of Jesus, Malone writes: "It shows us that DeMille was conscious of Jesus' humanity and Jesus' divinity, and sometimes they fuse" (24). Beyond this Malone describes the film's depiction of Judas, the woman caught in adultery and the Jews in the film. Connections are also drawn between the Last Supper depicted in this film and in the painting by da Vinci.

In the decades that followed the release of *The King of Kings*, mainstream depictions of Jesus virtually vanished from screen in the English-speaking world. Due to negative attitudes regarding direct depictions of Jesus on screen, chapter 5, "The Jesus Films: 1930s, 1940s and 1950s—Jesus' absence from Mainstream and Evangelical Jesus-Figures," focuses on the independently produced Jesus films of the 1930s-1950s. Films covered in this section include the French film *Golgotha* (1935); *The Great Commandment* (1939) in which Jesus is heard, but not seen due to production restrictions; *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), which was produced by and

for African Americans; and a handful of other small productions including *The Living Christ Series*, produced for church audiences.

The next two chapters “The Jesus Films: The 1950s and 1960s—Mainstream images” and “The Jesus Films: The 1960s,” cover the shift back toward overt images of Jesus on screen. While Mexico continued to make films depicting Jesus, like *Maria Magdalena*, *Pecadora de Magdala*, and *El Martir Del Calvario*, most American films in this era still refrained from showing Jesus. *Ben-Hur* (1959) marks a shift in mainstream American cinema by showing part of Jesus, though never his face. It wasn’t until the 1960s that Jesus returned in full form to the silver screen with *King of Kings*. Malone writes, “It was the first time that a worldwide audience had heard a Jesus speak on-screen” (56).

In contrast with the more faithful, and at times dour, characterizations of Jesus in the 1960s, the 1970s reacted with flamboyance in its Jesus films, which are the subject of “The Jesus Films: The 1970s.” Perhaps the best known of these are the musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* is also mentioned in this chapter. More traditional is Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, though this too is a bit extravagant in its eight hour running time. Malone devotes some time to the *Jesus Project*, and the evangelical use of what has become known as *The Jesus Film*.

“The Jesus Films: The 1980s” discusses the way Jesus films of the era found new ways of interacting with the gospel on screen, most notably with *The Last*

Temptation of Christ and *The Fourth Wise Man*. Malone spends several pages on the *Last Temptation of Christ*, both examining its unique depiction of “An ‘Everyman’ Jesus (116)” as well as the protests that arose upon the film’s release. Also mentioned in this chapter is *Jesus of Montreal*, which places a Christ figure in the context of the production of a passion play, mixing both a literal gospel retelling, in the play, with allegory. The freedom of expression displayed in the 1980s leads to chapter 10, “The Jesus Films: Cinema Freedom and Images of Jesus,” and its discussion of the image of Jesus in films not about Jesus, such as *A Clockwork Orange*, *History of the World: Part I*, and *Leon the Pig Farmer*.

Following the developments of the previous three decades, screen depictions of Jesus became smaller in scale during the 1990s, particularly in the United States. “The Jesus Films: The 1990s,” talks about how independent productions like *The Visual Bible* and *The Revolutionary* were more characteristic of this period, though notable television productions such as *Jesus* (1999) appeared. Malone also notes the influence of the approaching millennium on the content of several productions of this period.

The Passion of the Christ looms large in Malone’s chapter, “The Jesus Films: The Twenty-First Century,” rightly committing several pages to the film. Malone also devotes significant time to *The Gospel of John*, which debuted at the Toronto Film Festival in 2003, *Color of the Cross*, and its sequel *Color of the Cross*

2: *The Resurrection*, which depict Jesus as black. Malone finishes the chapter with a section on Mormon Jesus Films.

In “The Jesus Films: Jesus in Our World Today,” Malone turns to a series of films that place Jesus in modern settings. These go beyond Christ figures, like *Cool Hand Luke*, and focus on “incarnate [Jesus] in the present.” Most notable of these are *Joshua* and *Son of Man*, the latter of which is a South African production. The following chapter, “The Jesus Films: Verbal Jesus-Figures,” deals with films “that talk about Jesus, creating a portrait from the verbal descriptions” (201). There are a wide variety of films covered in this chapter, though none in great detail. Some of the films mentioned include, *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *Dogma* (1999), and *Tales of From the Madhouse* (2000), a BBC production of dramatic monologues from people claiming to have met Jesus.

One of the more intriguing chapters of *Screen Jesus*, “Interest in Jesus and Film Beyond Christianity,” deals with Jesus films that originate from countries and producers outside of the Christian tradition. Malone looks at *Jesus, The Spirit of God/The Messiah*, the latter of which tells a version of the story of Jesus from Islamic sources. *Jesus, The Spirit of God* uses much of the same footage, with a second ending added from Christian sources. Malone also includes three films from India, most notably *Jesus Comes to India*. The entry for this film is primarily a correspondence between the film’s director and Malone during the time that Malone was president of the International Catholic Organization for Cinema. While

this section is interesting, its greatest value is the glimpse it gives into Hindu/Christian reactions to art rather than about the film itself.

Chapters 16, “The Reverent/Serious,” and 17, “The Bizarre” briefly deal with a handful of experimental films, documentaries, short films, and a few videos on YouTube. In Chapter 18, “After *The Passion of the Christ*,” the films and television programs mentioned are given at most a couple sentences explaining their synopsis. The films in this section are arranged according to genres: documentaries, television programs, horror, satire and spoof, and serious films. In the final chapter, “Afterword, More than A Hundred Years of Jesus Films,” Malone reflects on the broad history of Jesus on film, drawing on some of the observations made in previous chapters. *Screen Jesus* also includes several appendices that include an interview with the director of the Iranian film, *The Messiah*; a list of the significant Jesus films by date; and discussions of the representation of the crucifix in film, and issues regarding the sexuality of Jesus.

Malone is not the first person to record the history of Jesus on screen. However, *Screen Jesus* stands out from other texts in large part because of its scope. Not only does Malone try to cover all appearances of Jesus on film *and* television from their introduction in 1899, he does so on a global level, including films from Mexico, India, Japan and beyond. However, while notable films are given several pages of description and brief analyses, less notable films are given a few lines at most. For example, while 10 pages are devoted to *The Passion of the Christ*, the

entirety of the entry for *Processo A Jesus* reads, “A Spanish film of 1973 in which a group of Sephardic Jews want to reenact the trial of Jesus to determine whether there was enough evidence to condemn him to death” (99). Without ignoring the impact of films like *The Passion of the Christ*, Malone would have benefitted by expanding his consideration of these smaller films.

Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992) by Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis comes close to matching the scope of *Screen Jesus*, similarly mentioning less influential films briefly at the end of each chapter. More prominent films are given less space in *Divine Images* and are therefore more focused than in *Screen Jesus*. *Divine Images* also stands out by including credits, brief film reviews, and several screen shots from the movies discussed. Published in 1992, *Divine Images* ends with *A Child Called Jesus* (1989) leaving a large gap in cinema history. W Barnes Tatum’s *Jesus at the Movie: A Guide to the First Hundred Years and Beyond* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013) is more selective in its material, covering the history of Jesus and film through only a selection of films representative of their era. However, this curated approach allows for closer analysis of the selected films than even the longest entries in *Screen Jesus*. Finally, Adele Reinhartz’s *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford, 2009) takes a topical approach instead of a chronological approach to the history of Jesus and film.

Throughout, Malone seems more concerned with describing these television and film productions than analyzing them. Though Malone comments on some of the same elements in many movies, for example how an actor portrayed Jesus, this is often done along with the plot description of the movie. These comments rarely go beyond observation, and are only occasionally developed across multiple entries. As a result the book as a whole lacks cohesion, though several of the individual essays in *Screen Jesus* provide unique insight.

Since the history of Jesus films continues to unfold, attempts to capture it in print will always remain incomplete. In *Screen Jesus* Malone says the Internet Movie Database contains 349 instances of Jesus as a character in television or film (15). Between the book's publication in 2011 and 2015, that number has jumped to 613. Malone recognizes this limitation: "There could be a need for another larger chapter before many years have passed" (269). However, instead of trying to capture this moving target in print, it would seem that an online resource, perhaps a wiki, would be better suited to this task.

Screen Jesus provides a helpful catalogue of depictions of Jesus on screen for those interested in further research in this area. While seeking out these films and television productions first hand would be the best option, *Screen Jesus* sadly provides little information on distribution or availability. Occasionally Malone will mention production details, but even things like release dates are spotty.

In this reviewer's opinion, the flaws of *Screen Jesus* prevent it from standing on its own as a classroom textbook. However, the sections of the book covering televised productions, independent, and foreign Jesus films are valuable as supplementary reading to textbooks covering only the key points in film history.