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Noah, Sara, M.A.

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HISTORICAL FIGURES IN FILM

The Celluloid Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sara Noah

May, 1993

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

Karl Toepfer

Dr. Karl Toepfer

Ethel Walker

Dr. Ethel Walker

David Kahn

Dr. David Kahn

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

M. Lou Lewandowski

ABSTRACT

HISTORICAL FIGURES IN FILM
THE CELLULOID CHRIST

by Sara Noah

This thesis examines how filmmakers are able to influence audience perceptions of historical figures by infusing their cinematic interpretations with their own belief systems. Four films on the life and identity of Jesus Christ are examined. The problem is examined by analyzing the backgrounds of the filmmakers, the appearance and performance of the actor chosen to portray Jesus Christ, the treatment of events in the film in relation to the chosen historical texts, and response to the film in religious and non-religious journals.

The study of these elements reveals four distinctly personal portraits of Jesus Christ. The filmmakers present a modification of historical information, based on their own intention for the film, which leads audiences to different conclusions about the historical and religious identity of Jesus Christ.

Advisor: Karl Toepfer

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Chapter 1
The Issue: Explanation and Methodology

Imagine two films on the life of Hitler, one created by a Jewish filmmaker and the other created by a Nazi filmmaker. Each film would be true and realistic in the eyes of its creator, but there would clearly be conflict in relation to the picture of Hitler that each film portrayed. The medium of film allows filmmakers to create celluloid portraits of historical persons, and yet these portraits are often colored by the filmmaker's personal bias and may, in turn, color the audiences' perception of this historical person. What influences govern a filmmaker's re-creation on film of a particular historical figure? How are personal biases revealed in historical films? This thesis will examine how the backgrounds and convictions of filmmakers have influenced their cinematic portraits of historical figures.

Many people throughout history have made an impact on society. This thesis will focus on the one person who, arguably, has influenced the lives and beliefs of more people than any other historical figure: Jesus Christ. Josh McDowell aptly notes in his book, *More Than a Carpenter*, that the life of Jesus—in fact his very *name*—causes a great deal of irritation among the millions who, throughout history, have questioned his self-proclaimed identity with God (4). This great controversy of the figure of Jesus Christ begins with an inquiry he made to his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Luke 9:20). The question of Jesus' true identity is the same question that will be posed to a selected group of four prominent filmmakers who attempted to re-create on celluloid the life, times, and spiritual identity of

Jesus Christ.

The films that will be studied in this thesis have been chosen because they are attempts to portray Jesus Christ in the closest representation possible of the period during which he lived. In terms of this thesis, realism will be determined by historical setting and narrative based on historical documents. This study is confined to the more standard perception of Jesus' historical setting in compliance with the descriptive texts of the New Testament as well as available archeological information. Again, this thesis deals with how filmmakers responded to Jesus' question regarding his identity. Therefore, to further clarify the term "realistic," it is assumed that each filmmaker accepted that Jesus lived and worked in Palestine at the beginning of the common era, and the settings of these films reflect that assumption.

Realism implies that the filmmaker attempted to paint Jesus Christ in the most historically accurate light possible in relation to the confines of the medium of film. In Peter Malone's book, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, Jesus-figures are identified as "any representation of Jesus himself" (17). He states that such representations can be further broken down into representations of Jesus in a realistic or stylized way. The films chosen for this thesis are films that present Jesus as he was thought to be, according to both the archeological evidence available as well as the common perception of life during his time.

Films, such as *Godspell* (1973), that are stylized representations will not be considered. To answer the question that Jesus posed, "Who do you say I am?" requires, in this context, an answer in part based on the acceptance

that Jesus did live on earth. This paper will be limited to films that have been identified as realistic portrayals of Jesus Christ.

To further delimit the course of this study, only the works of more prominent filmmakers will be considered. The term "filmmaker" is used here to denote the individual with the most artistic influence over the film, generally billed as the film's director. There have been many films made about Jesus Christ, but in order to analyze the response to these films, they must be films that received a considerable amount of press. Also, for research purposes, one can discover more about a filmmaker's motivations for creating such a work if that person is a more prominent member of the film community and thus one that has been studied and written about previously.

The films included in this study are Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Through the course of this study these four films will be referred to as *Kings*, *Gospel*, *Jesus*, and *Temptation,* respectively. Each of these films meet the required criteria: Jesus Christ is portrayed in a realistic manner, and the film was created by a prominent filmmaker.

This paper will analyze each work in the following areas:

- Background motivations and convictions of each filmmaker
- Selection and performance of the actor playing the role of Jesus
- Story and scenic elements of the film as the text of the filmmaker's answer to the central question
- Critical responses received for the film from both the non-religious and religious presses

Chapter 2 will focus on the possible reasons why each filmmaker created a film about Jesus. Because dialogues about the historical figure of Jesus have led to such differing and sometimes violent reactions throughout the ages, the background of each filmmaker may be an important tool for analyzing his creative works. Specific attention will be paid to the available information regarding the conscious and unconscious influences that helped to establish each filmmaker's belief system and value system as expressed through his filmmaking.

The second section of Chapter 2 will deal with the industry's involvement in the early planning stages of these projects and each filmmaker's reaction to industry response. In this thesis the term "industry" will include both the industry centered in Hollywood and the foreign industries involved in the making of the films studied. In his book *Reel Power*, Mark Litwak writes of the conflicts between filmmakers and studio executives.

> The executive cajoles filmmakers to work for him [and] at the same time he placates a board of directors concerned with the financial soundness of his decisions. It's a difficult job because the artistic desires of filmmakers often conflict directly with the studio's desire to maximize profits (65).

Therefore, in response to Litwak's premise, did the influence of industry executives in any way alter the filmmaker's original concept of the films studied here? After discussing what each filmmaker brought to the film in terms of personal motivation and intentions and how—if at all—those motivations and intentions were shaped or changed by the business arrangements involved in the pursuit of his project, the analysis will center on the film itself.

Chapter 3 will focus on the character of Jesus Christ as portrayed in each film. Few actors would covet the role of Jesus Christ, as there are many from both the religious and non-religious communities who might be hyper-critical of *any* actor's portrayal of Jesus Christ. This paper will not delve into each actor's decisions to take the role and their experiences in playing the character of Jesus Christ. Rather, the focus in Chapter 3 will be on each filmmaker's decisions regarding the casting of the actor playing Jesus and what directorial choices he made regarding the portrayal.

In some films depicting historical figures, filmmakers are limited in their choice of performers. Clearly in films such as *Patton* (1970) and *Ghandi* (1982) the physicality of the actor would need to be in line with the existing physical descriptions and photographs of the historical figure. However, lack of documentation about the physical characteristics of certain historical figures leads to a filmmaker's being forced to make casting choices based on personal impressions of what a particular historical figure must have looked like. In films depicting the life of Jesus, filmmakers do not have to comply with historical documentation about the physical appearance of Jesus and can present their own interpretation of what they think Jesus looked like.

Denis Thomas' book, *The Face of Christ*, contains a collection of photographs of works of art that reveal artists' attempts to capture the image of Jesus Christ.

> No likeness exists of the most famous man who ever lived. We do not know what he looked like, whether he was short or tall, dark or fair skinned, noble or commonplace in appearance. No physical description of him is to be found in accounts of his life (12).

There is no evidence of what Christ's appearance was, but there is a certain physical standard apparent in the images collected in Thomas' book. Have the filmmakers conformed to this standard, or have they in some way challenged this conventional image of Jesus?

Unlike the portraits in Thomas' book, cinematic portraits of Christ add the dimensions of movement and sound (in the case of the later films studied here) to the visual image of Christ. Therefore, not only did these filmmakers have to contend with casting an actor who resembled their image of Jesus, but also had to direct the performer's use of his voice and body to further exemplify their idea of who Jesus Christ was.

Chapter 3 will detail each filmmaker's casting decisions regarding the actor portraying Jesus. In most cases it will not be possible to ascertain which acting choices were suggested by the filmmaker and which were generated by the actor himself, but because the emphasis of this thesis is the filmmaker, each actor's performance will be evaluated as a response from specific directions. In this way, it is assumed that the final acting choices were influenced by the filmmakers and therefore reinforcement of their intentions for creating their films.

Not only will the physical characteristics and acting style of the performer playing Jesus be studied, but also an analysis of how this actor was filmed will be taken into account. What angles are used to film the actor? Does Jesus appear to fit into his surroundings or is he filmed in such a way as to be set apart from other characters in the film? The filmmakers' answer to the question of who Jesus was may influence the way in which the character of Jesus is filmed.

After analyzing the performance and filming of the character of Jesus, Chapter 4 will contain a broader analysis of the film. Although the screenplays of these films will be used as part of the research if they are available, the analysis of the literal text of the film will not be the primary consideration here. Chapter 4 will focus first on the literal sources of the story and their treatment and then analyze the visual and audio images contained in the film that emphasize the filmmaker's answer to the main question.

The most widely accepted evidence of Jesus' existence are the four Gospels of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, there are many other gospels and writings. The first section of Chapter 4 will analyze the story of the film in relation to the historical text or texts the filmmaker used for his starting point. Which accounts of Jesus did each filmmaker use and why, in light of his particular background and motivations, did he use them? In relation to the known writings of the life of Jesus, which events and words did the filmmaker choose to include in his film? Did the filmmaker emphasize Jesus' words or his actions? Also, which may be more enlightening than what was used from existing accounts, what did the filmmaker add to the story to personalize it?

After the history of the literal text of the film has been examined, the visual and audio outcome of the filming of the text will be studied. Several specific aspects of the life of Christ will be taken into account. Where does the film begin in relation to the known historical aspects of Jesus' life? In order to emphasize his deity and his humanity, how are both miracles and Jesus' response to temptations handled? How does the filmmaker present

the events of the last week of Jesus' life which led to his trial and death? Most importantly, to answer the question of Jesus' identity as a religious figure, how do each of the filmmakers conclude their stories? Viewing the film in this way will help to answer the question of how filmmakers are influenced by their own backgrounds when they portray historical figures on film.

How these portrayals are received by the press and the public may be a factor in determining the filmmaker's success at revealing his intention to his audience. Critical response to these four films will be the subject of Chapter 5. Specifically, the response of critics will be weighed against the filmmaker's anticipated reaction. Did the critics fully understand the intentions of the filmmakers? Also, was the potential critical response a factor in the filmmaker's choice of story, character, and so on?

Because Jesus is a religious leader, the critical reactions will be taken from both the religious and the non-religious press. However, because the exact beliefs of reviewers in the non-religious press cannot always be ascertained, dividing the criticism between responses of believers and unbelievers is not possible.

In either religious or non-religious journals, several key questions regarding critical understanding of the films can be asked. What did the critics perceive as the filmmaker's reason for their portraying Jesus as they did? To what extent did the religious values dominate or determine the significance of the film? In any historical portrait on film, there will always be factions of critics who disagree with both the portrayal of the character as well as the events included or excluded from the film.

Because filmmakers are constrained by the standard durations of film and television, they must choose which areas of history to include and which to leave out. Thus, they wield great power in painting a portrait of history that will emphasize their particular world view. This thesis also considers the natural tension that exists between perceptions of historical and religious truth. This study, will, perhaps, lead to further research on the effects of historical films on society's view of a particular historical event or person. The medium of film can influence audience perception of history, and this study may give film viewers the ability to analyze historical films with a more critical eye.

Chapter 2
The Filmmakers: Backgrounds and Motivations

When Franco Zeffirelli was scouting locations for *Jesus* in the Middle East, he arrived in Israel and was met by a delegation led by the Israeli Minister of Communications. The Minister was concerned about the subject matter of Zeffirelli's latest project. In his *Autobiography*, Zeffirelli recounts the Minister's comments concerning the film. " 'It's a pity you've come here for a project like this,' he said after the exchange of courtesies was over. 'Why not Shakespeare or Verdi, something a little less problematic?' " (275).

Artistic works presenting the story of Jesus have been problematic throughout the centuries. Like many other artists, these four filmmakers were so drawn to the idea presenting a new artistic work about Jesus that they took the risk of arousing the ire of the public. The idea of creating a cinematic answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" was provocative to these filmmakers. As Jesus challenged his disciples to answer his pointed question, these filmmakers also accepted the challenge and attempted to answer it within the confines of their medium.

Religious Backgrounds of the Filmmakers

Each of these filmmakers brought their own backgrounds and belief systems into their cinematic presentations of Christ. This chapter will discuss the backgrounds and specific motivations of the filmmakers that led to the making of their films. Although they were making films about the same person, these four filmmakers looked at the story of Jesus Christ from

very different angles. Their own personal belief systems, modified by the limitations of film and the influence of the film industry, helped to individualize their cinematic portraits of Jesus.

DeMille's Protestant Heritage

DeMille is the most distanced by both time and heritage from the other three filmmakers. Born in the United States in 1881, he did not grow up in a film culture as did Pasolini, Zeffirelli, and Scorsese. Nor was he of the same cultural background as they. DeMille's ancestors on his father's side were Dutch and had been living in America for several generations. In his *Autobiography*, DeMille spends a great deal of time tracing the DeMille family's ancestry and their ties to the Episcopalian church. Aware of the importance of appearances, he chose to ally his religious views with the majority of the American population by emphasizing his Christian heritage. His mother's Jewish heritage was not mentioned.[1]

According to DeMille, his religious education began early and was a part of daily life for the DeMilles. Every night his father, who had studied to become a minister, read his children a chapter of the Old Testament, a chapter of the New Testament, and a chapter from various other pieces of classical literature. DeMille recalled the influence of these times in his *Autobiography*.

> His [father's] reading of the Bible and the classics of literature reached a boy's heart. . . . *The King of Kings* and *The Ten Commandments* were born in those evenings at Pompton, when Father sat under the big lamp and a small boy sat near his chair and listened (DeMille 31).

These readings, intoned in his father's "beautifully modulated voice"

(31), brought the stories of the Bible to life. It is not clear if this story is true, however, as DeMille had a bent for glamorizing his life experiences in his writings. According to Anne Edwards and Phil Koury, who worked for DeMille for many years, many events that DeMille recorded were not consistent with the recollections of other family members and co-workers. DeMille may have fabricated this story in order to legitimize his authority as a creator of Bible epics. Whether or not this story is false or glamorized truth, it is clear that DeMille had some knowledge of the Bible. His love of the stories of the Bible led him to return to these texts for the subject matter for several of his films.[2]

DeMille described another event that deepened his sense of God. As a young boy, he went to church alone during Holy Week and found that he was the only member of the congregation. The minister conducted the service

> exactly as if he had a congregation of a thousand people. . . . What I saw that morning was a man's faith—alive. He was not reading that service to me or for me, or to or for himself. It was for Someone Else, whose Presence was more real to him that mine or his own. Young as I was, that minister's conduct gave me a deep sense of the reality of God; and it has never left me since that day (42).

DeMille continued throughout his career to make Biblical pictures, even though the industry urged him not to. Although the story he included in his book suggests that he created these films for "Someone Else," DeMille was quite concerned that millions see his pictures. He would have liked his reading public to believe that his films were created solely for God, but this anecdote serves to reinforce DeMille's necessity to be a showman in every aspect of his life, even in the area of the driving force behind his films. DeMille must have believed that his public would have responded to him

better if they believed that he created the films purely for a higher being rather than for a buck.

DeMille's mother had persuaded his father to leave the ministry and deliver his message to the theatre, where he would have a much larger audience. Although his father's early influence on his life is seen in DeMille's choice of subject matter for some of his films, it was his mother who led him to believe that his work in the entertainment field was an opportunity for evangelism. When DeMille was 12, his father died. DeMille stated in an interview with Phil Koury that, with his father's death "the mantle fell upon my shoulders in a new form which was the motion picture, and I was able to reach hundreds of millions" (Koury 49). Thus, DeMille looked upon his craft as a form of evangelism, which led to a decidedly un-Hollywood-like distribution plan for *Kings* which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Although DeMille is defined by Higham as being a "deeply committed Episcopalian" (Higham 1973b x), he was not a church-goer. He did call himself religious, but was not one who observed religious rituals and prescribed forms of worship. His impression of Jesus was that he gave "a very careful method of approaching contact with the Supreme Being and he was against form most of the time" (Koury 54). Although DeMille's father was a church-goer and followed religious form, he did not teach this religious form to his children because he believed that forms, if they are not understood, can be harmful to a person because they stop "individual thinking and . . . individual contact with the Supreme Being" (54). DeMille found that connection with the Divine was personal: the "Mind is always

there, ready for us to touch and draw upon and reflect in our own minds more and more" (DeMille 1959 433). It was with these philosophies and influences that DeMille entered into the production of his Biblical epics.

He was also influenced by two scandals that occurred in 1922. Hollywood was becoming, according to some, a "citadel of sin," and DeMille was discouraged by the crumbling moral tone. He arranged an audience with Pope Benedict XV and arrived at the Vatican to find that the Pope had died that morning. DeMille decided that it was up to him—with his ability to influence millions through his films—to change the moral tone of Hollywood society.

Pasolini's Eclectic Belief System

In direct contrast to DeMille's fireside Biblical exposure, Pasolini did not have a strong religious upbringing. Born in Italy in 1922, he was the son of a career military officer and a teacher. Because of his father's work, the family moved frequently during Pasolini's youth. He was never grounded in a particular place or community, and William von Watson notes that this constant mobility "contributed to the sense of isolation he was to feel throughout his life" (3).

Pasolini was much closer to his mother than his father, and in an interview he described his relationship with his father as one containing a "classical Oedipal tension" (Watson 3). His father deserted the family from time to time, so his mother devoted her affections and her time to Pasolini. Pasolini idealized his mother, writing poems to her and even casting her as the mother of Jesus in *Gospel*.

Watson wrote that the Pasolini family were never avid church-goers. However, in an interview with Oswald Stack, Pasolini claims that his father sometimes took the family to mass on Sunday for "social" reasons. He believed that his family was "too bourgeois to be tinged with any sort of fanaticism" (Watson 7). Pasolini, after having spent time with the peasant relatives of his mother during World War II, was more drawn to his mother's religion.

Like DeMille's rejection of "form," Pasolini also rejected the institutional church. He claimed his religion was "of a fairly atypical kind, it doesn't fit into a pattern" (Stack 14). This lack of form was what drew him to the religious tradition of his mother, a tradition "which is absolutely natural and has nothing conformist or bigoted about it" (14). Throughout his life, Pasolini's rebellion against form and structure caused him to be both ridiculed and misunderstood.[3]

During his evacuation to the Friuli region in World War II, Pasolini first came to grips with the reality of the class struggle. He had formerly been anti-fascist purely for aesthetic and cultural reasons (and also because his father was a fascist), but became interested in Communism when he observed the Friulian peasants struggling against their landlords. He joined the Communist Party in 1947.

Because of his interest in Marxism, Pasolini has often been described as a Catholic-Marxist. However, this term does not adequately define Pasolini's particular philosophy. He himself states that "everybody in Italy is a Marxist, just as everybody in Italy is a Catholic" (Stack 22). He was not a religious Catholic, because he did not attend mass or believe in the

sacraments of the church. Nor was he a completely devout Marxist, as he often challenged their views of religion. He also criticized both groups in his writings and this caused each group to view him suspiciously.

Pasolini claimed to stop believing in God when he was fourteen. During the war years, he began believing in God again, and this God was "a God of wrath . . . with omnipotent cosmic authority" (Watson 7). As he watched the Friuli peasants' faith and participation in Catholic rituals, he came to believe in a "nurturing identity with whom [he] could identify as he had identified with his own mother" (8). Being bourgeois, however, he could not accept this primitive religion for his own.

> Having rejected the degenerate, fallen God of the bourgeoisie, and incapable of fully immersing himself in primitive religions, Pasolini sought the 'immediate, primitive and original' in sex. He writes, 'I believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I believe in tender lips and strong hands. I believe in the Church and in the fourteen-year-old boys who smilingly masturbate on the banks of the Taliamento River' " (Carotenuto qtd. in Watson 9).

Thus, Pasolini transmutes these philosophies into something much more primitive. In fact, the scandal of his attraction to one of his students led him to voluntarily exile himself from the Friuli region and be expelled from the Communist Party.

Pasolini describes his world as being of an "epical-religious nature." The meshing of his spiritual nature with his Marxist education

> resulted in a vision of process and historical change which is not defined exclusively by the idealistic logic of dialectical materialism. Change is more irrational and violent in Pasolini's vision than in Marx's, capable of erupting mysteriously without precedent (Snyder 28).

His world was not stable, and indeed, much of Pasolini's adult life was spent in trouble of some form or another. His murder, which was unsolved and the subject of much debate, was a death experience that seemed to mirror his view of the world.[4]

Pasolini's isolation as a child continued throughout his life in many ways. He was an Italian and he was also expected to be a Catholic, but he could not embrace the emptiness of Catholic ritual and its denigration at the hands of the bourgeois. He was also called a Marxist, but could not be loyal to the organized working class because of his desire to associate more with the lowest strata of society. He was bourgeois, so he could not embrace the primitive religion of his mother, nor could he ever be completely accepted by the sub-proletariat. He was a homosexual, an orientation that, at that time, was neither acceptable to the Catholic church nor the Communist Party.[5]

Zeffirelli's Social and Spiritual Catholicism

Whereas Pasolini's heart was with the sub-proletariat, Zeffirelli's heart was with the rich, privileged, and artistic class. A contemporary of Pasolini, Zeffirelli was also born in Italy in 1922. An illegitimate child, Zeffirelli was not acknowledged by his father's or his mother's family, but was given an invented name and whisked off to a Tuscan wetnurse. His father came to visit him occasionally, but secretly, and the relationship between them was strained throughout his father's life. After his mother died, when he was five, he was raised by his father's cousin.

As quoted above, Pasolini stated that everyone in Italy was a Catholic, and Zeffirelli was no exception. He attended Catholic schools, and writes in

his *Autobiography* that at age thirteen, "what little sense of belonging I had centered on the Church and around the Catholic Club." Unlike Pasolini's father, Zeffirelli's father was skeptical of the Fascists, and Zeffirelli's contempt for the Fascist government, perhaps learned from his father, is clear in his statement that "the church was the counterbalance to the Fascist government's attempts *to control our minds*" [italics added] (Zeffirelli 1986 14).

Zeffirelli's belief system developed through the years in response to outward circumstances in his life. Zeffirelli writes of three occasions in his life when he was near death:

> twice by firing squad and once in a motorcar accident—so it is hardly surprising that I have a firm belief in God and a superstitious affection for the idea of destiny (xi).

It wasn't until he was struggling to recover from the injuries he received in the car accident that Zeffirelli solidified his religious beliefs.

After he had helped transport a busload of injured priests to a hospital, Father Arrupe, the Vicar-General of the College of the Jesuit Order said, "Whenever you have suffering, God will be there" (232). It was on the same stretch of road where the Jesuits crashed that Zeffirelli was seriously injured. In the hospital, he tried to recite the prayers he had learned as a child.

> Confined to a hospital bed, far from the distractions of a church—the ceremony, the paintings, the people—the very ordinariness of prayer suddenly became meaningful. When you are absolutely alone, you can talk to God (237).

Zeffirelli's revelation in solitude is reminiscent of DeMille's need to be alone with God. However, although Zeffirelli understood the meaning of prayer

outside of a church, he believed fully in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Zeffirelli's homosexuality did not cause tension for him within the Catholic church as it had for Pasolini, rather he accepted the fact that the Church regards the homosexual lifestyle as sinful. Zeffirelli sees his position as a Catholic homosexual as an advantage over Protestant homosexuals:

> The Protestant with his conviction that there is nothing between himself and God would find such a situation intolerable and would therefore be forced either to renounce his worldly needs or his Creator. But Catholics believe they have the Church to intercede for them and that the Church, being both Divine and Human, will be forgiving. We Latins have always been able to accommodate the rigors of belief with the needs of the body without forgoing one or the other, and I see no reason for the Church to bend to the easy solution of changing its age-old morality to suit the promiscuity of our day (241).

In response to his brush with death and his work on *Jesus,* Zeffirelli returned to Catholicism as an adult and found the structure and formality of the Church satisfying and necessary for him.

Scorsese's Devout, Personal Catholicism

Scorsese, like Zeffirelli and Pasolini, was brought up Catholic, but his parents were not very passionate about their beliefs. They were Italian, so the Church was a part of their social structure. Scorsese was an altar boy and was "initiated into the priestly caste" (Kelly 1991 9). Scorsese felt a much deeper conviction to the faith than his parents and eventually decided to study for the priesthood.

Scorsese grew up in Little Italy in New York, where he claims he was raised with "the gangsters and the priests. That's it. Nothing in between" (31). A small, asthmatic child, he headed for the church as a means of

survival, but decided that it was impossible to combine the lawlessness he saw on the streets of Little Italy with the teachings of Jesus and his love.

Much of Scorsese's formal education took place in Catholic schools. At fourteen he entered Cathedral College, a junior seminary, but left after a year because of poor grades, poor behavior, and a decision to not follow the calling of the priesthood. He then attended a Catholic high school and intended to enter Fordham College's divinity program, but claimed that he failed his exams. He began to move further away from the church, even though the teachings of the church continue to influence his life and his work.

> People are usually the product of where they came from. The bonds that you made, the codes that were there, all have an influence on you later in life. You can reject them. You can say, 'Okay those codes don't exist for me because I'm not of that world anymore.' But the reasons for those codes—why people live that way—are very strong lessons. The most important reason is survival (DeCurtis 58).

Scorsese, like Zeffirelli, recognized that to be a Catholic does not mean one needs to be perfect. "I'm a devout Catholic even if I'm not a 'good' Catholic. I'm not even a practicing Catholic, but I believe and I pray" (Kelly 1991 242).

Within this group of four filmmakers there are three Catholics, one practicing and two who left the church. There are three Italians and one Dutch/Jewish American. These four men all had strong ideas about their faith and how their religion would influence their lives and actions. They were all four confronted with the idea of painting a cinematic portrait of Christ and all of them brought to their projects the religious convictions and backgrounds that have been outlined here.

Motivations for the Creation of the Films

DeMille's Vision: A Holy but Publicly Appealing Film

Many pioneer filmmakers attempted to create a portrait of Christ on film, but undoubtedly the film that most influenced DeMille's treatment of the subject was Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916). The story of Christ in Griffith's film was depicted simultaneously with three other stories dealing with the theme of intolerance, which caused an abbreviation in the treatment of the life and works of Christ. DeMille was eventually to present a film based solely on the life of Christ.

Although DeMille claimed the story of Jesus was one that he had always had a desire to do, at that point in his career *Kings* was not DeMille's first choice. He had originally intended, after his great success with *The Ten Commandments* (1923), to do a film called *The Deluge*, based on the story of Noah's ark, but before DeMille began working, Warner Brothers' studios announced they were planning on a film on the same subject.[6] DeMille decided to work on a treatment of the story of Jesus and turned to his research assistants to have them present to him as many facts about the New Testament era as they could find.

DeMille's intent for making a film of Christ's life is described in his own words:

> I wanted simply to take the four Gospels and tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, as He appeared to those around Him, a figure no less human than divine, to tell that story in a way that might bring millions of people throughout the world to know him better, might bring many to know Him for the first time (DeMille 1959 267).

This quote reinforces DeMille's intention to establish his work in films as a

form of evangelism. His statement that the story be "simply" taken from the Gospels was an attempt to refute the public's criticism that DeMille often elaborated the Scriptures beyond reasonable boundaries of extrapolation. Nevertheless, DeMille had a public to please, and a film about the life of Christ had great potential for drawing large audiences.

DeMille went to Jeremiah Milbank, a Christian businessman, to solicit financial backing for the film. When Milbank learned that DeMille wanted to make a film about the life of Christ, he did not hesitate to finance the film. He also vowed to "donate any or all profits that might come to him through the film to charity" (Edwards 101). DeMille did the same. DeMille also was not given author credit, although large portions of the script were written in his hand (101).

There is some contradictory information about how the script treatment for *Kings* began. Phil Koury wrote that DeMille originally intended to divide the film into two parts as he had done with *The Ten Commandments*. The first section would deal with the life of Christ, while the second would be a modern story. According to Koury, DeMille had told his scenarist, Jeannie MacPherson, "that he wanted 'a story of Christ with popular appeal,' indicating the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John lacked 'boxoffice' " (Koury 116). In contrast to Koury's explanation, DeMille wrote in his article, "The Public is Always Right," (reprinted in Koszarski 161-170): "From the start of *The King of Kings* I have never had any idea except to put the actual story on the screen." He also wrote that "*The King of Kings* does not contain any story or a suggestion of a story that is not actually in the four Gospels" (165).[7] DeMille covers the inclusion of non-

biblical material by stating that the film does not contain a "suggestion" of a story. He could rationalize most of the additions to his film as material that was suggested by Biblical text. DeMille implied that nothing was added to the Gospels while Koury wrote that a modern "razzmatazz" story was suggested by DeMille to ensure a box-office success. Thus, DeMille's declaration to the readers of *The Ladies Home Journal* is indicative of his ability to stretch or modify the truth in order to please his public.

DeMille was often criticized for the racy content of some of his films, so perhaps this statement was an attempt to appease those who were concerned about his treatment of such a reverent subject.

> Every time I have proposed making a Biblical picture, there have been those who were certain that I was heading for disaster—and now I was proposing to put on the screen the figure of Christ Himself? The church people would be up in arms at the irreverence of the very idea. The people who were indifferent to religion would be monumentally indifferent to a picture in which, presumably, sanctimonious characters would walk around in long robes. So I was told.
>
> There was some truth in it. I knew that there would be in the audience religious people fearful of how a subject dear and sacred to them would be treated, and people who were skeptics and had come to scoff, and people who were cynics and had come to witness DeMille's disaster (DeMille 1959 275).

Both his writings and his actions while filming *Kings* indicated to his public that he was trying to be sensitive to their concerns.

DeMille used representatives of the clergy to reinforce the fact that he would be approaching the subject of his film with the respect and reverence the public felt it deserved. DeMille conferred separately with each representative so that the men would be completely honest when they expressed their reactions to his treatment of the story. According to Phil

Koury, The Federated Churches of America were represented by Dr. George Reid Andrew, the Catholic Church was represented by Father Daniel A. Lord, and a Dr. Alkow represented the Jewish faith (118). DeMille mentions both Andrew and Lord, and also mentions that Bruce Barton and his father, Rev. William E. Barton advised him on the film. The Dr. Alkow mentioned by Koury is not mentioned in DeMille's account. Perhaps this omission was unintentional, but given DeMille's omission of his own Jewish heritage, it seems likely that DeMille again chose to ignore the Jewish influence on himself or his film.

Always the showman, DeMille created an aura of religiosity around the whole production of the film. All the players were given Bibles and expected to acquaint themselves with the four Gospels. To avoid scandal, the actors were also expected to conduct themselves with modesty.[8] On the first day of filming, prayers were offered by a Protestant bishop, a rabbi, a Catholic priest, a Salvation Army commanding officer, a Mohammedan teacher, and a Buddhist swami (120). DeMille's acute awareness of the public's power to make or break his film led him to such displays of piety.

One recorded incident reveals a deeper reverence on DeMille's part. DeMille's daughter Katherine, who was an extra in the movie, recalled a moment on Christmas Eve, the day they shot the Crucifixion scene, when DeMille impulsively asked his crew and actors to stop before they rushed home. " 'I would like you all to take five minutes' " he said,

> for you to just think about what you have seen tonight—and to remember that what we've seen tonight is the filming of something that truly happened. I want you to think what it has meant to you. I'd like you to take a few minutes of quiet (Edwards 103).

It was a poignant moment for many involved in the film, and Katherine said that her father "made *The King of Kings* because he loved the Lord" (104). Despite his flamboyance and showmanship, DeMille took his task of evangelism seriously, and attempted to use *Kings* to teach others about Jesus even before it was completed. His experience creating the film caused him to look at his life differently. The religious ethics he was brought up with became more valuable to him, and he tried to emulate the teachings of Jesus in his life.

Pasolini's Vision: A Demythicized Jesus

In contrast, Pasolini's experience with his film of Christ was not born out of his reverence for Jesus as Lord, but rather as a means to portray a man who understood the unity between spirit and flesh. In an interview with Oswald Stack in 1969, Pasolini stated that the film fitted him more than anything he had ever done because of his tendency "to see something sacred and mythic and epic in everything. . . . *The Gospel* was just right for me" (Stack qtd. in Snyder 25). This film gave Pasolini the opportunity to present the world a portrait of Christ from a different perspective.

Pasolini also told Stack in an interview, which took place after *Gospel* was made, that he didn't "believe in the divinity of Christ" (25). However, in 1963, before the film was made, he wrote a letter to Lucio Caruso of the Pro Civitate Christiana of Assisi, an ecumenical lay Catholic community. In this letter he confessed to Caruso that he was not a believer in Christ as the Son of God but he did believe that Christ was divine. To clarify he wrote, "I believe, that is, that in him humanity is so lofty, strict, and ideal as to exceed

the common terms of humanity" (270). Therefore, if Pasolini's confusion can be clarified, he saw Jesus as a man of elevated humanity, but not the Son of God as Jesus himself claimed.

In 1963, Pasolini produced a short film called *La Ricotta*. It caused a great scandal, as the main metaphor of the film was crucifixion, and Pasolini was brought to trial and given a suspended four-month jail sentence. The verdict was based on an old law that concerned "the defamation of the state religion" (Liehm 241). After this incident, the Church found him suspect, so it was with some amount of trepidation that Catholic leaders learned that Pasolini was embarking on a film based on the Gospel of Matthew.

Pasolini's connection to the Gospel of Matthew began when he reread the book in 1960. He visited the Pro Civitate Cristiana in Assisi. Beside his bed was a copy of the Gospels, and he read them from beginning to end, like a novel. The feeling he experienced from reading such a great work gave him the idea of making a film based on the Gospels.

According to Jon Solomon, Pasolini took into account the different treatments of Christ as presented by the four Gospels (115). This examination led Pasolini to choose to base his film solely on the Gospel of Matthew without any changes or additions. His original intent was to follow the book

> point by point, without making a script or adaptation of it. To translate it faithfully into images. . . . The dialogue too should be strictly that of Saint Matthew, without even a single explanatory or connecting sentence, because no image or inserted word could ever attain the poetic heights of the text (Siciliano 270).

Apart from being poetic in terms of its language, Matthew's portrayal of Christ was one that Pasolini found the most in keeping with his religious

view of the world. Pasolini liked the Christ of the Matthew account because

> he was rigorous, demanding, and absolute. This is the Christ who says—'I came not to bring peace but a sword,' the Christ who will 'burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire' and who calls his contemporaries 'a generation of vipers' (Blue 20).

Pasolini also wanted to use the film as a statement to Marxists. He criticized them for not considering the mysterious and miraculous side of life. "My film is a reaction against the conformity of Marxism. The mystery of life and of death and of suffering—and particularly of religion—is something which Marxists do not want to consider." By creating this film, Pasolini, who was often identified as a Marxist, hoped to influence other Marxists to accept a broader view of the world.

Pasolini enlisted the help of the Pro Civitate Cristiana film consultant Lucio S. Caruso. Alfredo Bini, who produced most of Pasolini's films, also produced *Gospel*. Pasolini wrote to Bini that he wanted "to create a purely poetic work" (Liehm 242). Pasolini wanted to re-create the myth of Christ not as it was in the first century, but rather, he wanted to present the story behind the veil of the 2,000 years of Christianity. Because he was not a believer, he chose instead to tell the story of Christ indirectly, as if through the eyes of a believer. In this way, he felt that he could 'remythicize' the story. He chose to film *Gospel* as an analogy, rather than attempting a historical reconstruction.

Zeffirelli's Vision: Jesus as a Religious Jew

Zeffirelli, on the other hand, desired to put Jesus' words into the "social, historical context of his times" (Zeffirelli 1984 viii). Zeffirelli's Jesus would be a man who could speak to his audiences with words he knew they

would understand. He chose to present Jesus as he was, the Jewish son of a carpenter who lived during the first century in Roman-occupied Palestine.

Unlike the other three filmmakers, Zeffirelli did not want to make a film of the life of Christ. In fact, he resisted it for a number of years before finally accepting the position offered him by the producers. In retrospect, he believed that he was "engulfed by a 'conspiracy of happenings'" (Zeffirelli 1984 1) and was somehow called by a higher source to make the film.

Zeffirelli had made *Brother Son, Sister Moon* in 1972. This film was conceived while he recovered from his car accident. He had a dream of St. Francis, his patron saint, and felt that it was a sign to do something positive with his filmmaking. Zeffirelli vowed to dedicate his work to God "whenever possible" (Zeffirelli 1986 238). After his recovery, he made the film, believing that the completion of the film marked the end of his need to create pictures with religious themes and characters.

Zeffirelli was first contacted about the prospect of a film on the life of Jesus in 1973. Pier Emilio Gennarini, Emanuele Milano, and Fabiano Fabiani, three evangelical Catholics, originally conceived the idea. Eventually, the project was managed by Sir Lew Grade, an English Jew (Zeffirelli 1984 3). Zeffirelli was interested in the idea of having six hours of television time with which to paint a picture of Jesus. The final event which convinced Zeffirelli to accept the director's position of this film was his rereading of the statement made by the Church at Vatican Council II in 1965 regarding the Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ. This document preached understanding and acceptance of all peoples, and Zeffirelli felt this film could be a vehicle for emphasizing the importance of the Church's

statement.[9] He accepted the job in December 1973.

He began assembling his all-star cast and scouting locations. Many prominent American and English film stars took part in the film and waived their legitimate salaries to take part in the production. Zeffirelli reminded them that "The only star of this project is the Star of Bethlehem" (21). Yet there was not a forced moral code imposed on the cast as there was with *Kings*. Because of his earlier commitment to dedicate his work to God, he expected those working on *Jesus* to dedicate their work as well.

> I firmly believe that all of us, in one way or another, are called to take upon ourselves a responsibility, an initiative, to perform a deed, accomplish an undertaking—in short, to become instruments of God (22).

For Zeffirelli, this project was an act of worship, an opportunity to be used by God to create something for the edification of people throughout the world. Like DeMille, Zeffirelli's experience in creating this cinematic portrait of Jesus would lead him to "changes in my very thinking, with revelations that struck me with the force of a hurricane" (viii).

Scorsese's Vision: A Spiritually Struggling Jesus

Scorsese also considered his film as "a prayer, an act of worship" (Kelly 1991 6). His idea for a film on the life of Jesus had been conceived at age ten, when he would often spend time creating story boards. Because of his asthma, he was frequently taken to movies and fell in love with the medium. He claimed in an interview at the 1988 Venice International Film Festival, where *Temptation* was previewed, that his "whole life has been movies and religion. That's it. Nothing else" (6).

During the filming of *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), Barbara Hershey, who

played Bertha, gave Scorsese a copy of Nikos Kazantzakis' book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This book deals with the theme of the struggle between flesh and spirit, a favorite theme of Pasolini also. Scorsese had originally intended to make a movie based on the novel, *King Jesus*, by Robert Graves. He also had a desire to make a documentary-style film of the Gospels, but Pasolini's *Gospel* filled that niche.

Scorsese optioned the rights to Kazantzakis' novel and in 1977 gave it to Paul Schrader, who had worked on the scripts for *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980). Schrader completed the script in 1982, and Paramount Pictures agreed to finance the film in 1983. David Kirkpatrick of Paramount worked with Scorsese, but soon realized that upper-management at Paramount were losing interest in the project. There was also a concern over the public's reaction to the film, as Gulf & Western, Paramount's parent company, was receiving over 500 letters a day from members of the public who were concerned about the film's content and how Scorsese would treat such a sensitive subject.

During this period, when work on the film was suspended as the studio executives made their decisions regarding the film's future, Scorsese commented that the film should not have been made through the Hollywood system. Rather, he should have made it like *Gospel*, which was shot for only $3 million. Scorsese, Harvey Keitel, who was to play Judas, and Aidan Quinn, who was to play Jesus, agreed to make the film without receiving salaries. Paramount still refused to go ahead with the picture.

Scorsese continued his quest to film *Temptation*. In 1986, Scorsese made *The Color of Money*, which starred Paul Newman and Tom Cruise. It

was a box-office success with mainstream actors, so Scorsese's agent, Michael Ovitz, used this ace to get Universal to agree to finance *Temptation*. Tom Pollock, chairman of Universal Pictures, agreed to do the film. The budget was set for $7 million and Scorsese shot the film in 58 days.

Scorsese, like DeMille and Zeffirelli, felt that the experience of creating *Temptation* led him to be closer to Jesus.

> I feel closer, but again, people have said that this is me seeing myself in Jesus. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that if you can see yourself in God, because it's your attempt to come to some sort of terms with God (242).

Conclusion

The result of Scorsese's connection with his religious picture was one of emotion, however, rather than a feeling which led him to make active changes in his behavior. Zeffirelli's and DeMille's work on their films changed their lives spiritually and actively. Pasolini, because he was not a believer to begin with, looked at Christ from a distance and undoubtedly admired his teachings, but did not commit himself to Christ or the cause of Christianity.

Each of these filmmakers, for differing reasons, wanted to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" They realized that they would have some difficulty in presenting their films. But for each filmmaker, the drive to create the film was stronger than the desire to circumvent any type of opposition, so they committed themselves to their projects.

Four different men: two Italians, two Americans; two Catholics, one Episcopalian, one atheist; two homosexuals, two heterosexuals. Four

different men coming from four different backgrounds all attempting to put the life of the most controversial religious figure in history on film. They all entered their work with belief systems which would undoubtedly influence their visions of who Christ was. Rather than working on a project, as the Israeli Minister of Communication suggested to Zeffirelli, which was a little less problematic, they chose to represent cinematically the most controversial religious figure in the history of mankind.

Notes

[1] DeMille devoted nine pages to the DeMilles, while the Samuel family received only two lines, without any mention of religious heritage: "A hundred and fifty years ago, one of my great-great-grandfathers was a small merchant in Liverpool, England" (3).

[2] DeMille has been widely quoted as saying that he could make a movie from any book of the Bible, except the book of Numbers.

[3] Pasolini appeared in court numerous times on various charges. Mira Liehm (352) quotes Laura Betti (213-227) as noting that "the list of Pasolini's appearances in court between 1947 and 1961 fill three printed pages. Those between 1961 and his death in 1975 fill another eleven pages."

[4] Pasolini was brutally murdered on November 2, 1975. The circumstances surrounding his death remain a mystery. Barth Schwartz's book, *Pasolini Requiem* contains a lengthy description of the investigation of Pasolini's death. "But so much about this death in particular is conjecture and a public record of contradictory confession, self-interested testimony, and mounting public confusion" (51). The confusion surrounding Pasolini's death seemed a fitting end to a man who had aroused so much public confusion about his work and personal philosophy.

[5] Steven Snyder reiterates the dilemma of Pasolini's isolation when he writes "Pasolini seems to have remained, in his phrase, 'beyond the edges of the city,' outside of the institutions he supported, yet precisely upon the edge of life, unowned by anyone or any system: a man of spiritual perception without a church; an unorthodox Marxist without a party" (20).

[6] The film, *Noah's Ark*, was not released until 1929.

[7] DeMille did add extra elements to the Gospel accounts, which will be

discussed in Chapter 4. However, the modern element of the story was dropped and the film concentrates solely on the historical story of Jesus.

[8] H. B. Warner and Dorothy Cummings, who played Jesus and the Virgin Mary, signed contracts "stipulating they would not accept any film role which might lessen the dignity of their parts in *The King of Kings*" (Koury 122). They were also urged not to attend night clubs, ball games, ride in convertibles, swim, or play cards until the production was finished.

[9] A portion of this statement encompasses Zeffirelli's commitment to present Jesus as a man who was a religious Jew. "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this Sacred Synod wants to foster and recommend . . . mutual understanding and respect. . . . Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures" (Zeffirelli 1984 6).

Chapter 3
The Actor: Filmmaker's Selection and Analysis of Performance

When attempting to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" people have not only responded in terms of his spiritual existence, but also his physical appearance. Countless artists have tried to re-create a portrait of Jesus using paint, marble, glass, and any other substance they felt would truly reveal Christ's physical appearance. Using these various media, artists created pictures of how they saw Jesus in their mind's eye. Indeed, Albert Schweitzer writes in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* that people who have created images of Jesus throughout the centuries have "created him in accordance with [their] own character" (4).

To what extent did Scorsese, Zeffirelli, Pasolini, and DeMille create Jesus in accordance with their own characters? In this chapter, the focus will be on the physical Jesus in each film. The first section will deal with the choice of actor and how that choice was made by the filmmaker. The second section examines each actor as they attempt to play the most difficult and criticized role they have ever played and how the filmmakers directed their actors to help bring meaning to their celluloid portrait of Jesus Christ.

Because of the Mosaic law prohibiting "graven" images, Hebrew literature is void of physical descriptions. Therefore, there is no mention of Jesus' physical appearance in the Bible.[1] Luke 2:52 states that "Jesus grew in wisdom *and stature* and in favor with God and men" (italics added). This may or may not imply that he was tall, but both Zeffirelli's and DeMille's

Jesus appear to be fairly tall. Other than that loosely interpreted verse, there is no indication that Jesus was of any particular color or size. Those artists who were intent on portraying Jesus as the sacrifice for the sins of mankind surmised from the Levitical law that Jesus was not particularly disfigured in any way.[2]

There is a traditional image of Christ that is common to most Western art. In his book, *The Face of Christ*, Denis Thomas discusses the roots of that image. Several legends exist surrounding cloths that touched Jesus and were imprinted with his image. The earliest of these was a piece of cloth owned by King Abgar of Edessa some time during the first century A.D. This cloth, which reappeared in the sixth century, was known as The Mandilion. The likeness on the cloth "has a strikingly byzantine cast: a symmetrical composition showing a grave, bearded visage framed in long hair" (Thomas 50).

The most famous cloth that is purported by some to be imprinted with the image of Christ is the Shroud of Turin, which dates back six hundred years and is thought to have been the burial cloth of Jesus. Some religious historians have proposed that this cloth is The Mandilion. This image, which gained considerable exposure in the late nineteenth century after a negative image was taken of it, reveals the "likeness of a recognizable man" (50). Numerous studies of the Shroud have been undertaken and the wounds evident on the body coincide with the description of the crucifixion in the Bible as well as the evidence of the Roman practices of crucifixion at that time.[3]

Interestingly, the face on the Shroud bears resemblance to some early

representations of Christ. Through time, this image began to emerge as the standard image of Christ. Thomas describes this image: "full-face with long hair parted in the middle, a forked beard, a Semitic nose, and deep eyes with large pupils" (51). Many modern artists, including the four filmmakers studied here, were aware of this traditional image and had to consider the image when making decisions about the type of Christ they would present to their audiences.

Artists wanted to capture the image of Jesus as both God and man, so Jesus' divinity is often shown in art by the inclusion of halos, angels, and other such symbolic objects. In film, however, this symbolism is rarely used because these objects are difficult to portray cinematically without becoming ridiculous and distancing the audience. But because his divinity cannot be shown with symbolic images on film, some critics, like Judith Crist in her article, "A Story Too Great to Be Told?," believe that when shown on screen, Jesus' power as man-god is diminished.

> I wonder if there is not instant diminution when we put a figure of Christ upon the screen. How to personify the mystery and divinity and, once personified, how to make the figure move among men (qtd. in Forshey 801).

Crist implies that a mortal actor—although he attempts to play divine—cannot do it because he is, in fact, only human. The task of moving the audience's perceptions to believe that the man on screen is both man and God falls to the actor. In these four films, few cinematic techniques are used to point out Jesus' divinity.

That he was a man who lived in Palestine at the beginning of the first century is an accepted premise on the part of both Christians and non-

Christians. What is debated, however, is his deity. Good men can be easily portrayed on screen, but to attempt to put the divine on celluloid can be difficult. Several filmmakers have taken the route of not showing Jesus on screen, rather, his feet or back are shown or his voice heard, but not his entire person.[4] This technique tells the viewer one of two things. Either the filmmakers were afraid of stirring controversy invoked by audience's reactions to having an actor play Jesus, or they felt that the divinity of Christ cannot possibly be captured on film. DeMille, Pasolini, Zeffirelli, and Scorsese chose to take the dangerous route and presented to the public a film showing a man who was both human and divine.

Choice of Actor

H. B. Warner

Where does a filmmaker begin to find an actor who can successfully portray human and divine without appearing false? DeMille, in his *Autobiography*, writes that there was no choice involved for him.

> There was only one man, I felt, who could portray the Christ with all the virility, and all the tenderness, with all the strength, and with the touch of gentle humor and enjoyment of small simple things and human love of friends and divine love of His enemies that the man of Nazareth had (276).

DeMille wanted a man who looked as if he had the physical ability to fast 40 days in the desert, travel long distances on foot, spend entire nights awake in prayer, and still have a mind "as sharp as a razor and balanced as a precision scale" (276). H. B. Warner was that man.

If Warner were able to portray Jesus as a man of great strength and

intelligence as well as tenderness and mercy, DeMille's mission for portraying a truer picture of Jesus would be accomplished. DeMille's medium reached millions, and it was his mission with his cinematic portrayal of Jesus to show the world a Jesus that counteracted the "effeminate, sanctimonious, machine-made Christs of second-rate so-called art" (276) that encompassed the public's visual image of Jesus previous to the release of *Kings*.

H. B. Warner was a well-known actor, so his face must have been familiar to audiences of the time. However, this film was shown in all corners of the world and to many people Warner's countenance became their personal image of Jesus. Many years after the film was made, a minister told Warner that he had seen him in *Kings* and that ever after, whenever he spoke of Jesus, he saw Warner's face (276). This anecdote gives a clear indication of how the choice of actor can affect a viewer's image of the historical figure portrayed. This association of Warner's face with the character of Jesus Christ is probably the main reason why Warner struggled to land other significant parts after his portrayal of Jesus.

The public's association with Warner's face and the person of Christ was not helpful for Warner's future career. Because *Kings* was viewed by millions of people around the world, the public linked Warner inextricably to his role. Despite his critically acclaimed performance in *Kings*, few other roles were available to him. He did play the Head Lama in *Lost Horizon*, but other than that role, for the most part his career ended with *Kings*. It was the ultimate type-cast, and once he had been identified visually with the Savior of mankind, most other roles would have only stained that image.

Enrique Irazoqui

It was Pasolini's intention with Enrique Irazoqui that he most decidedly not desire to become a professional actor. He wanted to cast a non-actor with a common face who would not be seen again on the screen. Unlike DeMille's unequivocal choice of Warner, Pasolini spent more than a year looking for the man who would portray Jesus. He considered using a poet to coincide with his approach to create the film as an analogy.

> As I thought of representing Christ as an intellectual in a world of the poor available for revolution and as I was looking for an analogy between what Christ was and the person who might interpret him, I felt the only real possibility would be to use a poet (Stack 78).

No poets satisfied Pasolini, so he continued his search.[5]

Pasolini had almost decided on a German actor when he met Irazoqui, who, while vacationing in Rome, had made an appointment with Pasolini to discuss Pasolini's novel *Ragazzi di vita*. In his article, "Pasolini's Passion," Stanley Kauffmann noted that Pasolini had two requirements for his choice of Jesus: "An El Greco face and no professional ambition as an actor" (53). As soon as Pasolini saw Irazoqui's "El Greco face," he asked him to be in the film. Irazoqui was not initially willing to work on the film. The son of a Basque father and a Jewish mother, Irazoqui was not a believer, and was therefore hesitant to play Christ, but finally Pasolini persuaded him.

> The first problem was that I had playing Christ a fellow who didn't even believe in Christ. Naturally this caused inhibitions. This young student wasn't an extrovert or a simple, normal type of person. He was psychologically very complex, and for this reason it was difficult the first few days to get him to win out over his timidity, his restraint, his inhibitions (Blue 28).

Pasolini's filming style was in sharp contrast to DeMille's, and he also did not desire to generate too much publicity during the filming of *Gospel*. Irazoqui was not isolated or treated reverently, but was only asked to be who he was. Pasolini did not believe that his Christ needed to be created.

Pasolini's technique of filming made use of short takes, so this enabled Pasolini to reveal the story to Irazoqui bit by bit. Irazoqui never knew anything beyond the fact that he would be playing the character of Christ, so he had no preconceived notions about how the story was to be told. Pasolini filmed in very short segments without preparation, and was able to talk to Irazoqui while they were filming since they were filming without sound. Pasolini's preference for non-actors allowed him to film characters whose emotional responses were not calculated or mimed, but, in Pasolini's opinion, completely truthful.

Robert Powell

Zeffirelli, in his book *Jesus: A Spiritual Diary*, openly criticized Pasolini's practice of using non-actors. Because of Zeffirelli's faith and his desire that the film be evangelistic, he felt that he should use only the best actors. In his *Autobiography* he writes that he "saw what we were doing as an offering in the way the Renaissance painters looked on their work, and thus only the best in acting was possible" (279). After Lawrence Olivier agreed to play the part of Nicodemus for a low fee, other famous actors clamored for roles in the miniseries. The casting of Christ, however, was another story.

Zeffirelli had not decided whether he wanted to cast a Jesus who

would look like the classical image of Christ in Western art or one who would be "physically unprepossessing" (281). Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino were both considered. It wasn't until Robert Powell, a stage-trained British actor, was being tested for the role of Judas that Zeffirelli noticed that his eyes would be good enough for the eyes of Christ. Powell was made up to resemble classical images of Christ: hair parted in the middle, bearded, robed. Zeffirelli looked into the camera and "there was Christ" (281).

In working with Powell, Zeffirelli attempted to disclose the dual nature of Christ. Every gesture, even ordinary activities, needed to reveal Christ as man and as God. Zeffirelli, like Pasolini, tried to keep Powell from using actor's techniques to create his character of Christ. He tried to keep Powell from resorting to tricks and subtly tried to steer him to a new style that would present human and divine characteristics on the screen.

Powell's great task, according to Zeffirelli, was to create a Jesus that was convincing to the millions of people who would see the film, many of whom had already created a mental image of Christ in their minds. Powell was well-trained and very dedicated to his role. Zeffirelli claimed that during the entire shoot there was not "a single problem, a word, a solution reached together, to which he did not dedicate himself with total absorption" (Zeffirelli 1984 51).

Willem Dafoe

Like Zeffirelli, Scorsese greatly admired the determination and professionalism of the actor he used in the role of Jesus, Willem Dafoe. Scorsese's original choice had not been Dafoe, however. In 1983, when the

film was in its early stages at Paramount, Scorsese approached Robert De Niro, who had worked with Scorsese on several films. De Niro was not interested in playing Christ, as he is not interested in religion and felt that playing Christ would be "like playing Hamlet" (Kelly 1991 171).

Scorsese realized, unlike DeMille, that many actors could play Jesus, because the character of Jesus is multifaceted and could be interpreted in many different ways. After an unsuccessful negotiation with Christopher Walken, Scorsese chose Aiden Quinn for the role. The film was dropped by Paramount, and later, when Scorsese was ready to begin filming for Universal, Quinn was unable to take the part.

Scorsese met with Dafoe, who was willing to take the part and available for filming. Scorsese wrote that Dafoe looked

> like Jesus as we know him in religious images. They all had blue eyes. . . . Willem looks like the Jesus we've known over the years. . . . It made it comfortable, especially after he comes out of the desert and takes his heart out. From that point on we intentionally made him look more like the Jesus we know from the traditional art (204).

Scorsese used an untraditional text for his story but hired an actor who resembled the traditional image of the Jesus: long hair, a beard, and a slender, muscular frame. Although Scorsese wanted to challenge some traditional beliefs about Jesus, he gave his Jesus a familiar face, which creates tension between the visual aspects of the film and the use of a more controversial text.

Because of budget constraints, *Temptation* was shot in a short amount of time. For Dafoe, the schedule was grueling, but his fellow actors and Scorsese greatly admired him. In Mary Pat Kelly's series of interviews with the artists involved in the film, comments about Dafoe's work are all positive.

Michael Ballhaus, who was Scorsese's cinematographer said, "He didn't complain; he didn't say a word. . . . Willem was living for this movie" (228). Dafoe, unlike Warner, has gone on to other successful films. But he told Mary Pat Kelly that the role "never left me" (230).

These four actors were chosen to play the character of Jesus by directors who felt that the actors were able to convey the person of Christ to the audience. Each man is different and unique in appearance, and yet, at least in the director's opinions, they present film audiences with a glimpse of what Christ may have looked like.

Analysis of the Presentation of the Character of Jesus Christ

As Scorsese realized during his search for his Jesus, many different actors could play Jesus, but no one actor could satisfy all audiences. What follows is a description and analysis of each actor's physical appearance in the film and how the character of Jesus was presented cinematically by each filmmaker. There are any number of approaches that could be taken when examining these characters, but in this thesis, the focus will be on three extremes of emotions felt by Jesus: joy, anger, and agony. How these actors balanced extreme emotions contributed to the type of Jesus that the filmmaker wanted his audience to remember.

Warner as DeMille's Jesus

Just as each of the four Gospels in the New Testament reveal or emphasize a different aspect of Jesus' life and ministry, so each of these four films presents a different type of Christ. DeMille's portrait of Jesus can be linked most closely in mood with the Gospel of John, a poetic, loving

description of Jesus by one who knew him. DeMille's intent was to present a loving, divine Jesus in order that his audience might believe.

DeMille's desire to present a reverent portrait of Jesus translated cinematically into a Jesus who has the appearance of a religious icon. Warner was fair-haired and bearded, but his hair was not styled in the traditional long, parted style common in much Western art. DeMille chose to have Warner's hair styled in a very stiff and sculpted way, which gives Jesus the appearance of a statue. It is interesting that the curled dip in the front of Warner's hair is identical to that of the dark-haired Judas, played by Joseph Schildkraut. Jesus always looks made up and neat, even as he goes to the cross, which is in direct contrast with Judas' appearance. Judas' hair is neatly formed during most of the film, but whenever he is speaking with the Pharisees regarding Jesus' betrayal, his hair is wild and unkempt, symbolizing his inner state.

DeMille used costume colors to emphasize Jesus' deity. DeMille chose to costume Warner in heavy robes of very light colored fabric, which make him appear larger than he was. His presence in scenes is noticeable because of his size and the contrast of his costume against the darkness of the sets or the costumes of the other characters. DeMille's grouping of people in scenes brought focus to Jesus as well. Jesus stands when all others sit, as in the Last Supper scene; or sits when all others stand, as in the scene in which the woman is caught in adultery.

DeMille also used his famous lighting techniques to emphasize the divinity of Christ. Drawing from the Western art tradition of depicting Jesus with a halo or nimbus, DeMille lit Warner in such a way as to create a halo

effect, which indicates to the audience that Jesus is more than an ordinary man. This lighting seems contrived at times, as other characters speaking to Jesus are not lit that way unless they are in a close shot together with Jesus. The Lasky lighting was DeMille's attempt to show Jesus' divinity without using too many distracting special effects.

In DeMille's attempt to create a living, breathing Jesus, he chose to have Warner present the character as more slow and controlled than other characters in the story. This Jesus is calm and serene, and moves in a slow, decided manner. DeMille's decision to present a slow, statuesque Jesus renders Warner's character as stiff and distant. Only rarely does the audience see an indication of the deep love Jesus professed to feel for all people.

The love that Jesus taught and DeMille wanted to convey to the millions watching was best revealed in some choices DeMille made regarding Warner's reactions to children. DeMille understood that his public would respond favorably to Jesus' reactions to innocents. In the now-famous introduction of Jesus in the film, DeMille revealed the face of Jesus through the eyes of a blind little girl as her sight is restored. After she can see, there is a close two-shot of Warner and the child as she laughs and wiggles her fingers as she sees them for the first time. Warner's focus on the child and the intimacy of the scene reveal Jesus as one who knew the joy of little children. This is one of the few scenes in which Jesus actually sits.

Warner's only genuine and full smile in the film comes when he is responding to children. A child brings him a doll to fix, and he spends time attaching the leg to the doll and then smiles fully at the child. This scene is

one of the few scenes in which Jesus' humanity is noticeable. DeMille depicts a living, breathing Jesus who takes the time for mundane tasks and enjoys seeing the response of those he has helped.

For the rest of the film, DeMille's Jesus is very serious and solemn. This portrayal of Jesus is in keeping with most artists' supposed opinion that Jesus never laughed. In popular Western art that depicts Jesus, never is he smiling a full-tooth smile. Artists somehow equate that sort of display of humanity on a lesser plane than where Jesus should be. And yet, if Jesus was such a dynamic person that he could simply ask people to follow him and they would drop everything and follow, he must have been a man who could not only smile, but also laugh and see the humor in many different situations.

This Jesus does, however, feel anger, and Warner interprets Jesus' anger in a manner consistent with DeMille's desire to portray a more divine Christ. This anger is not presented by violent actions. Rather, in the scene depicting the clearing of the temple, Warner displays anger in a controlled and authoritative manner. As Jesus enters the temple, he deliberately takes a leather strap from a vendor's booth and wraps it slowly around his wrist. As he does this, the moneychangers sense his presence and flee before Jesus even begins to clear the temple grounds.[6] This representation of Jesus as one who does become angry, but is able to control it so much that others cannot help but respond to it, points to Jesus as one who was able to exert his authority without force.

Although viewers of *Kings* realize through extraneous circumstances that Jesus was in agony during his last day on earth, DeMille's Jesus does

not appear to be in great agony. DeMille was so interested in revealing a divine and loving Jesus that the audience does not see him suffer as one who is fully man certainly would suffer. Warner continues to wear his solemn, beatific expression as he carries the cross along the road to the place of his crucifixion, Golgotha. He even stops, rests the cross on his shoulder, and blesses a child as he plods along. The agony of Christ in his final moments are not emphasized by DeMille. He would rather his audiences feel the great love of Jesus instead of empathizing with the pain Jesus felt on their behalf.

Because *Kings* was a silent film, the audience does not have the extra dimension of reacting to DeMille's idea of Jesus' voice. Because the audience reads the dialogue, they must use their imaginations to create the sound of Jesus' voice. But clearly for the four other filmmakers, Jesus' appearance, as well as his voice, was a factor in creating the image of Christ they wanted their audiences to accept.

Irazoqui as Pasolini's Jesus

In keeping with Pasolini's interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' mission on earth was to fulfill the Old Testament Laws by virtue of his divine authority. The Jesus of Matthew came "not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). This verse is only recorded in the Gospel of Matthew and reveals a Christ who was willing to instill revolutionary ideas into the minds of his followers. He was not the great preacher of love, as was the Jesus of John. This sword-bearing Jesus seemed to fit more with both Pasolini's political and religious philosophies.

Pasolini's Jesus is more the angry young man than the shepherd of

love. His dark hair is slicked back from his face. There is a hint of a beard on his face which makes him look like a student rebel. His brows are heavy, which gives him a stern appearance. His looks are decidedly Mediterranean. He is stern and street tough, a revolutionary.

Pasolini used Jesus' costume in an unsuccessful attempt to soften Irazoqui's stern image and depict the more tender side of Jesus. Irazoqui wears a dark wrap which is worn as a head covering. This image is most often associated with women, especially Mary, in Christian art. This head covering gives Irazoqui a decidedly feminine look, and Snyder notes that "Pasolini's Christ is given enough feminine qualities to have promoted one critic to assert that Pasolini drew Jesus to be an obvious homosexual" (22). Snyder does not name the critic, nor does he discuss what he perceives as the feminine qualities of Pasolini's Christ. Beyond the association, through Western art, of head coverings with the women of the New Testament era, Pasolini's Jesus is not feminine. The head covering looks as if Pasolini was trying to show a more gentle Jesus, but Irazoqui's continually stern visage negates any sort of sensitivity forced upon him by a costume piece.

Although Pasolini did not attempt to reveal Jesus' divinity visually, as DeMille had done, he chose to represent Jesus' divinity by giving him a powerful voice. The man who dubbed the voice of Jesus, Enrico Maria Salerno, was a professional actor with a deep, well-trained voice. Because Irazoqui's voice was not used in the film, some critics questioned Pasolini's self-proclaimed hatred for the naturalistic acting techniques of professional actors.[7] Salerno's voice distracted audiences and critics because it was obviously not the voice of the young Irazoqui.

Pasolini used both Irazoqui's size and the terrain of Southern Italy to emphasize Jesus' humanity. In several shots, Pasolini places Jesus against a large landscape, as in the walking on water scene and the scene after Jesus has been tempted in the desert. Jesus appears as an extremely small figure at the base of the screen, with the sky, water, and mountains dominating the rest of the shot. These long shots reveal how Jesus was indeed a man on earth, and although he was able to heal the sick and raise the dead, his body was human and insignificant in comparison to the immensity of the world.

To show Jesus' divinity cinematically, Pasolini did not resort to such tricks as back lighting and stage pictures as DeMille did. Rather, he filmed Irazoqui in extreme closeups against different backgrounds, as in the Sermon on the Mount scene. The entire sermon is made up of quick cuts of Jesus with light, darkness, or flashes of light behind him. The words of the sermon are a continuous stream against the quick changes of Irazoqui's appearance. Pasolini used this technique to reveal his Jesus as existing in all times and places at once, but whose words are unchanging. He wanted to show Jesus as he was after 2,000 years of history. Jesus throughout the ages has appeared in art in various forms, but his words still remain relatively unaltered.

Irazoqui moved more naturally than Warner. His Jesus was strong and energetic and perhaps a bit more erratic in his movement, which is in keeping with Pasolini's desire to present Jesus as human. Although his movement successfully revealed him as human, his emotional performance lacked human dimensions. This is obviously due to Pasolini's dislike for "miming." This tendency to limit the emotional response of the character

leaves the audience with the impression that Jesus had no emotions. Because of this lack of emotion, the audience does not feel as much sympathy for the character.

There is one moment in the film when Irazoqui reveals a joyful Jesus. Jesus has just cleared the temple, angering the merchants and moneychangers, when children arrive waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna." Pasolini's Jesus is standing in an elevated place surrounded by his disciples when the children enter shouting. A medium shot of Jesus shows him smiling down at the children and laughing.

This is a fleeting moment of affability. Pasolini's Jesus is much less warm and nurturing than Warner, which may serve to negate Snyder's comment about his feminine qualities, if one is to define such qualities as feminine. Throughout most of the film, Irazoqui wears a serious frown. There are two points in which genuine anger at a given situation is expressed. One example of the angry Jesus is at the clearing of the temple and the other is at the withering of the fig tree.

Irazoqui handles Jesus' anger much more differently than Warner in that his response is immediate rather than controlled. This Jesus of Matthew brings his "sword" without hesitation or calculation. When Jesus sees the merchants in the temple, he immediately takes action. He is wearing his dark shawl at the time and it falls off his shoulder. As he goes to overturn the tables he holds the shawl in his hand, which gives the appearance of him having some sort of whip. Jesus sets his focus on his task and effectively conveys his wrath by brushing aside with his elbow those who try to stop him.

In the scene with the fig tree, Jesus uses a long stick to look through the branches of the tree to find a fig to eat. He cannot find one, and suddenly throws down the stick and curses the tree. This is a sudden burst of anger which causes tremendous consequences to the tree, which is immediately withered.

Pasolini's Christ is an angry Christ, but not necessarily one who feels deep love for his fellow man. Pasolini's Christ, like DeMille's, does not emphasize the full range of emotions that one who was fully god and fully man would have felt. However, the agony he portrays as he prepares to die is much more human and effective than that of DeMille's. Pasolini's Christ does not fight his way to the cross, as he understands the necessity for his sacrifice. Being human, he indicates that he feels pain while experiencing the crucifixion. His cries on the cross are of a man who is not only angry, but in physical and emotional agony.

Powell as Zeffirelli's Jesus

Zeffirelli's film was an attempt to portray an image of Jesus as a human being and religious Jew, as well as the Son of God. This Jesus was to be the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Gospel is a beautiful biographical treatment of Jesus' life and plan of salvation, and Zeffirelli succeeded in translating the beauty of Luke, both physically and spiritually, onto the screen. Zeffirelli wanted to create a Jesus who was not only a common man, but also a man who accepted and understood his divinity.

Part of Zeffirelli's intent for accepting the directorial position of *Jesus* was that he would be able to present Jesus as a religious Jew who lived in

first century Palestine. This desire on Zeffirelli's part contradicts the physical image of his Jesus. Powell is fair-complexioned with bright blue eyes and dark brown hair. He does not look like the common perception of a Middle Eastern Jewish man.

Interestingly, both actors playing Jesus' parents, Olivia Hussey and Yorgo Voyagis, have dark hair and eyes and olive complexions. The baby Zeffirelli chose to portray Jesus was dark like Hussey and Voyagis. However, the child chosen to play Jesus at twelve, Lorenzo Monet, was distractingly unlike his parents and any other people or children around him. He has fair, curly hair, and extremely light blue eyes. A beautiful child to be sure, but his image destroys the credence of the people of Nazareth who can't accept Jesus as a prophet because he was just one of them. In the scenes depicting Jesus as a boy, it was clear that he was different than any other child, and surely would have gained some notice from his fellow Nazarenes.

In both Zeffirelli's *Autobiography* and his *Jesus: A Spiritual Diary*, Monet is not mentioned. This child had to be found by Zeffirelli and chosen for his striking beauty. And yet, Zeffirelli remains strangely silent on his choice of Monet for the young Jesus. Zeffirelli included this physically incongruous character merely for the sake of pleasing the eyes of his audience. Knowing his desire to move in sophisticated circles, Zeffirelli presents the boy Jesus as a Northern Italian: the blond, blue-eyed appearance which marks the privileged classes in Italy.

When Powell first appears on the screen, it is hard to connect him as a man to the image the audience knows is Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy. Obviously, audiences learn to suspend their disbelief when watching epic

works that use different actors to show a character at various stages in life, but it seems unlikely that Monet was the closest match Zeffirelli could find for Powell. His choice points out that, although he wanted to portray Jesus as a common man, he still needed to emphasize his divinity by setting him apart from the other characters.

Powell, like Warner, is tall and lean. He is costumed in a classic-style robe and tunic, and often, like Irazoqui, wears a shawl over his head. He wears a full beard and long, parted-in-the-middle hair. This particular image of Jesus is very much like many portraits of Christ. Powell's eyes are large and wide set, and their intensity was understandably a factor in Zeffirelli's choice to use him as Jesus.

Zeffirelli uses different methods than DeMille to show Jesus' divinity. He is often set apart not by lighting or special effects, but rather by small action choices that keep him distanced from the other characters. When he first meets Peter and tells him to return to the Sea of Galilee to fish, he does not help on the boat, but sits serenely as the other men work around him. Other times he appears to be sleeping when he is not, as in the scene when Judas presents his qualifications for being a disciple. Judas tries to convince closed-eyed Jesus that he is worthy of being a disciple. Finally Jesus sighs and drops his face into his hands, which reveals his discomfort with the knowledge of who Judas was and what he was going to do.

Like DeMille's film, however, there are scenes in *Jesus* in which Zeffirelli sets the character of Jesus apart. In the first miracle portrayed, the healing of a demon-possessed man, Zeffirelli uses reverberation on Powell's voice to represent Jesus' divinity. It is also filmed in such a way as to

present Jesus as a divine figure. Jesus is shot from below and the screen is filled with the figure of Jesus. The sky is bright light behind him. The audience has the point of view of the demon-possessed man as he looks to Jesus and realizes that this is no ordinary man.

Zeffirelli occasionally used lighting to represent Jesus' divinity, but his technique was not so obvious as DeMille's. The most obvious shot that indicates Jesus' existence as God on earth is in Peter's proclamation scene. When Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is, Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus then responds with the speech from Luke 9:22 predicting his death and resurrection.[8] As he tells of rising again in three days, the camera pans back to focus on Jesus, arms outstretched, wearing voluminous, classically-draped robes. The light in front of him fades, and he is silhouetted against a smoke-filled sky. This other-worldly lighting and mood change is reminiscent of the description of the transfiguration recorded in Matthew 17:10-13, Mark 9:2-13, and Luke 9:28-36.

Other scenes in the film show a relaxed, human Jesus. Before he preaches at Peter's house, he is sitting in a courtyard with his elbow on his knee, a rough cup in his hand. He surveys the crowd entering the courtyard and watches as Peter turns people away for lack of space. He needs to drink before he speaks, like most people do. Later in this same scene, Matthew the publican enters. Peter violently tries to force Matthew to leave his house. Jesus begins to chat with Matthew, but because of where Matthew is standing, the sun is in Jesus' eyes. He then holds his hand up to block out the sun and casually invites himself to eat dinner with Matthew.

Scenes like these are part of the reason why Zeffirelli was concerned

that some of the believing audiences would not be pleased with his Jesus. This Jesus was not always set apart from other characters by the use of lighting or costumes. Nor was he a militant fighting for a cause. Zeffirelli had the luxury of time in his work so that he was able to create a Jesus who appeared to be divine in both subtle and obvious ways.

The visual treatment of Powell did well to carry out Zeffirelli's intention of revealing to his audiences a Jewish man who was both God and man, but Zeffirelli set Jesus apart from his disciples by his decision to use an actor with a British accent. Powell's upper-class British accent implies that this Jesus was more than a humble carpenter. When Jesus discusses the Sabbath and the Commandments with the religious leaders, his accent is identical to that of the leaders, which indicates that Zeffirelli wanted to show Jesus as being of the same class as those leaders. In contrast, Peter, played by James Farentino, speaks with a more earthy language and has an American accent.

During the course of the film, Jesus' method of speaking changes. In the early scenes in the synagogue, he speaks slowly and pauses at great lengths for effect. In later scenes his speech pattern becomes much more animated. He enjoys telling his disciples stories and wants them to understand the meaning of those stories. Zeffirelli has created a film of Jesus from before his conception to his resurrection and uses the language pattern of the character of Jesus to further the story. The closer Jesus gets to his death, the more adamant he becomes in his preaching. It is as if this Jesus wants to get as many words of wisdom out to his disciples before he leaves them.

Because Zeffirelli did not have the more stringent time constraints as the other filmmakers, he was able to take more time to develop the character of Jesus. Incidents are recounted from all four Gospels, although most of the story is taken from Luke's account. In his intent to create a human Jesus, Zeffirelli led Powell to react to Jesus' situations as a normal man would. Therefore, this portrayal of Jesus shows a man who shows many different emotions in response to his surrounding circumstances. Zeffirelli's Jesus best expresses joy at the blessing of the children and his entrance into the Temple in Jerusalem.

Zeffirelli, like DeMille, used the presence of children to cause his audiences to feel sympathetic toward Jesus. Zeffirelli's Jesus, like Pasolini's, responds joyfully to the cries of the children. In *Jesus*, the children proclaim Jesus to be the Son of David and he catches one child in his arms and smiles. The Sanhedrin question the children's proclamations, and Jesus sits on the ground with the children and tells them the story of the vineyard owner and his two sons (Matthew 21:28-32). This idea of Zeffirelli's to portray Jesus as teaching children showed the audience that this was a Jesus who, like DeMille's Jesus, took the time for children and was concerned for their welfare.

One would expect any great man who professed love as Jesus did to respond similarly to children, but this Jesus expresses joy in a place where the other filmmakers did not. As Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem, his face is lit from above and is raised to the ceiling of the Temple. He is in awe of being in the building which, to him, is not just a building but the house of his Father. Jesus does not respond to other who speak to him because he is

enjoying being in the Temple so much.

This joyful entrance into the Temple is immediately preceded by Jesus' clearing of the Temple courtyard. This expression of Jesus' anger is more physically violent than the expressions of Warner and Irazoqui. The use of a hand-held camera and quick cuts between Jesus and the reactions of those around him give the scene a violent, tense feel. Powell takes a large staff and smashes the booths of the vendors in the Temple. He breaks open the cages of birds and spills out the money boxes, scattering money on the ground. His actions are violent and quick, and after he drives the sellers out of the area, he is seen standing on the steps leading to the inner courtyard of the temple and shouts in a loud voice, "It is written,. . . 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of thieves.'"[9] Powell's anger is less controlled and authoritative than Warner's, but it is consistent with the more human portrayal of Jesus that Zeffirelli intended to present to his audiences.

Because of his desire to convey a human Jesus, the audience is made to feel sympathetic to his pain and suffering as he is tried, flogged, and crucified. Zeffirelli chose to have Jesus tied to a crossbeam of a cross rather than carry a complete cross to his crucifixion. The further Powell walks along the road, the more stooped and less sure-footed he becomes. As the soldiers pull him forward to hang him on the cross, he moans and cries out. His eyes roll up into his head as he is nailed to the cross. He appears frightened as he breathes heavily, sweats, and looks with wide eyes at the crowds at his feet. Tears roll out of his eyes as he whispers "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Zeffirelli directed his actor to display emotions and bodily responses to the pain of this type of death. He wanted his audience to realize that the crucified Jesus was not a statue, as Zeffirelli must have seen many times in the Roman Catholic churches of Italy, but a man who felt the pain of this torture, even though he realized what the purpose of it was.

Dafoe as Scorsese's Jesus

Scorsese's Jesus is often confused about his purpose in life. Scorsese's desire to portray a Jesus who felt the human qualities of insecurity and confusion caused him to create a Jesus different from any Jesus portrayed before. He used a modern extrapolation of the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life for his text.

Although *Temptation* was not directly taken from the Gospels, this Jesus more closely resembles the Jesus of Mark's Gospel, who is portrayed as the Son of God who was sent to suffer for mankind. Mark wrote of Jesus' actions more often than his words and teachings. The introduction to the book of Mark in *The NIV Topical Study Bible* states that "Mark showed how an air of *mystery* surrounded Jesus, neither his friends nor his enemies were able to determine who he really was" (1085). In *Temptation*, Jesus' followers, especially Judas, are often confused about his actions and words.

Scorsese's film begins with Jesus sleeping peacefully in an olive grove as Dafoe's voice intones the opening words of Kazantzakis' book. Jesus rolls over and begins grabbing his head, tormented by dreams of claws digging into his skull. Scorsese's Jesus is unsure of the call he is receiving, and fights against who he is.

Dafoe has, like Warner, a light complexion. He has sandy brown hair and light hazel eyes. At the opening of the film, his hair is short, not below his neck, but later in the film when Jesus is preaching and healing, his hair is several inches longer. Dafoe also has a beard, like every other image of Christ studied here. Dafoe's body is seen much more than the other actors, as his tunics are open low in the front, and he is naked during the flogging scene as well as the crucifixion scene. Scorsese showed more of Dafoe's body to emphasize that this Jesus was one who was human in the sense that he had sexual feelings for women.

The costume choices for Dafoe convey Scorsese's intention that his Jesus vacillates between understanding his calling and being confused about God's purpose for him. At the opening of the film, before Jesus responds to God's call, he is dressed in a drab, dark gray tunic, but as the film progresses, the color of his tunics become lighter as he becomes more in tune with his role as Messiah. This choice of costume colors indicates to the audience the increasing consciousness of this Jesus as he follows God's will and understands it. There is one instance where the enlightened Jesus again wears the dark colors. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as he prays that God will spare him the death he foresees, he wears a light colored tunic, but has a dark shawl wrapped around his shoulders. This dark shawl represents Jesus' fear at facing what he is to face. As he experiences the last temptation, however, his costumes return to the brown earth tones of a common man.

Scorsese wanted this Jesus to speak particularly to Americans, as Scorsese's image of Jesus was built in America, so he did not lead his actors

to affect any sort of accent. Sometimes Dafoe's pronunciation, reminiscent of an East Coast pattern, is distracting because it sounds too regionally specific. This Jesus often sounds more like a New Yorker than a Palestinian. In some cases, this use of a regional speech pattern may have succeeded in bringing Scorsese's audiences closer to the character of Jesus.

Scorsese does not attempt to use lighting or sound effects to make his Jesus appear divine. His Jesus is scrutinized by the camera, filmed from many different angles. Scorsese, through all of his studies and experiences in the Roman Catholic church, has examined Jesus very closely, and his camera technique forces his audience to look at his cinematic portrait of Jesus from all angles.

In the opening shot, the audience looks down on the sleeping Jesus as if they look at him from God's point of view. Jesus is also shot from above as he dismounts the donkey after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. After Jesus enters Jerusalem, the time for his suffering has arrived, and as the audience watches him get off the donkey, they realize that he has stepped into a new phase. God's eyes are upon him as he moves into the last week of his life.

Other times the audience sees Jesus as they would see other men, in natural light and from the angle of human eyes. This Jesus is the human Jesus, and most of Scorsese's shots focus on him in this way. There are, however, a few shots that elevate Jesus, so that the audience looks up to him. After Jesus clears the Temple, he stands on the temple steps and rebukes the common people and the religious leaders. He is in full awareness of his divinity, and the audience looks up to him as if they look up to a god.

Dafoe's Jesus does not move in a slow reverent fashion, as older perceptions such as DeMille's would expect Jesus to. His movement reflects his confidence. During the opening sequences of the film, he moves erratically and timidly. Later in the film, he walks more confidently. In the scene in which Jesus calls his disciples, there is a long shot of Jesus walking alone, slowly. As he walks, groups of men are dissolved in to walk with him. His steps are confident and seem to exude more and more strength as more men follow his call.

Scorsese's Jesus is occasionally shown in a relaxed state, as Zeffirelli showed his Jesus. At the scene depicting the miracle of the wedding at Cana, Jesus rests at a table and eats with Mary Magdalene and some disciples. He is told that there is no wine left and smiles as he tells his friend to go look in the jars used for hand washing. His friend tastes the water and realizes that it has been turned to wine. A medium shot of Jesus shows him lifting his cup to his friend in toast, which shows Jesus relaxed in his powers to perform a miracle for his friends.

At this same wedding, Dafoe reveals a brief glimpse of Jesus as a joyful man. He is in a group of men, dancing. Jesus smiles and throws his head back and laughs as he dances. This is a joy often missing from most cinematic portraits of Jesus. He is full of joy because he is a part of a human celebration that he will never be able to experience for himself. The joy shown at this event in the film helps to set up Jesus' inability to withstand the last temptation.

Like the other cinematic portraits of Jesus examined here, Jesus reveals his ability to feel anger in the clearing of the Temple scene. Scorsese

films this scene in a narrow street which is lined with stalls. Jesus has entered triumphantly into Jerusalem. As he gets off the donkey, he looks to the Temple steps and sees, on either side, the booths displaying the wares of the merchants and moneychangers. He is shot from below and stands motionless and quiet when suddenly he cries out and begins bashing the booths with a stick. His anger appears to be uncontrollable and comes on without warning. There is not the sense that he does this for love for the Temple, however, as the line concerning God's house being a place of prayer is not spoken. Instead, Jesus mounts the steps and declares angrily that he has come to "Set the world on fire" (Scorsese 1988).

Scorsese's Jesus does not appear to feel much anger or joy in his existence, but does exhibit a great deal of agony in his confusion about himself and his fear about God's plan for him. In several early scenes, Jesus is gripped by pain in his head. He cries out, writhes on the floor, and clutches his head. Kazantzakis describes Jesus' headaches this way:

> suddenly he jolted with pain. Once more he felt the invisible vulture claw deeply into his scalp. . . . He felt the claws bore far down, crack open his skull, touch his brain (25).

Scorsese infuses this agonized Jesus with the human quality of confusion. All humans are often unsure of where they need to go in life, and if Jesus was fully human, he must have experienced this confusion too.

Scorsese's Jesus is in agony on the cross, and this scene is reminiscent of the scene in Zeffirelli's in that much time in the film is spent showing Jesus suffering on the cross. Dafoe is naked, which adds to the audience's perception of his agony in that he is ashamed of his nakedness. He is also covered with blood and sweat, which Jesus probably would have been. Dafoe

portrays Jesus' agony on the cross with his voice, by crying out, but also by the use of his body. His shoulders and arms are tense, and he makes it look as if he is having great trouble breathing.[10] This human Jesus created by Scorsese feels great pain, and the audience understands his agony as he suffers.

Conclusion

All four filmmakers have created images of Jesus which reveal him as human, but each filmmaker approached the concept of his divinity in different ways. DeMille attempted to stress Jesus' divinity by the use of lighting, costume, and staging so that Warner would be set apart in the audience's mind. Pasolini stressed the historical Jesus, offering a more biographical approach by keeping his story limited to one Gospel account. His Jesus is human, whose divinity is shown through quick cuts without comment other than occasional bursts of music. Zeffirelli took the biographical idea even further than Pasolini, and presented a Jesus within his correct social and religious context. His divinity was shown through his voice and camera angles more than by setting the character apart by lighting and costume. Scorsese presented the spiritual struggle of one who is human but also must contend with the fact that he is divine as well. His portrait was of the psychological difficulties that one who was both man and divine at the same time might face in reconciling his two distinct natures.

Although these four filmmakers attempted to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" they all were limited by both the humanity of their actors and by the limitation of film itself. In the case of the biography of

other historical figures, filmmakers only deal with their subject as a human. Of course, facts about the life of that person may be altered or glamorized to make that person more or less accepted by the public. Filmmakers know the power that even two hours of modified history may have on an audience.

The historical figure of Jesus Christ is an entirely different story. Although there is scriptural evidence that Jesus existed as a man and many historians and archeologists accept the Scriptures as viable sources of information,[11] the fact remains that Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God, the Messiah.[12] Not only do filmmakers have to present a man known from history, but they also present a man whom many in the film-going public believe is one with God. This Jesus, to Christians, is not a god, but The God.

It is impossible to completely capture on film a man who is both human and divine. These filmmakers did well to portray Jesus as a man, albeit a special sort of man, but to reveal him as wholly human and wholly divine is a limitation not possible. Not only were each of the filmmakers working with an actor who was wholly human, but also these filmmakers, having never seen Jesus, cannot know what a wholly divine man would look like.

Christians boast of a personal spiritual relationships with Jesus. To have that special relationship tampered with by films such as these may limit the religious significance of who Jesus was.

Notes

[1] In Exodus 20:4, the second of the Ten Commandments states that "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." Therefore, the attempt to re-create or capture an image of any part God's creation was against Mosaic Law. Jewish leaders interpreted this commandment to include images of people. For a discussion of some early theological discourse regarding artistic images of Christ, see Chapters 7 and 8 in Jaroslav Pelikan's book, *Jesus Through the Centuries.*

[2] In Leviticus 22:20, the Lord tells Moses that the Israelites must offer unblemished male animals for sacrifice. "Anything that has a defect must not be offered, for it will not be accepted." John the Baptist declared Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Because Jesus was sent to earth to be the ultimate and final sacrifice for the sins of mankind, many believers concur that he had to have been a perfect physical specimen.

[3] Thomas includes more information regarding the specific scientific studies performed on the Shroud on pages 49-51 of his book. For more detailed studies of the Shroud, see Ian Wilson's book, *The Mysterious Shroud* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1986), which also contains a lengthy bibliography on works relating to the Shroud.

[4] Many films have used this technique. Among them are *Ben Hur* (1926 and 1959), *The Robe* (1953), and *The Big Fisherman* (1959).

[5] Pasolini went so far as to hold screen tests for the role. He told James Blue that the tests were not for himself, however, but for the producer "who wanted a certain guarantee" (Blue 28).

[6] In his *Autobiography*, DeMille attributed this action choice to Warner (276).

[7] In an interview with James Blue, Pasolini confirmed that he used both non-professional and professional actors for dubbing. For Christ, however, he was "obliged" to use a professional actor, which implies that Pasolini was not happy with Irazoqui's voice.

[8] The complete text of this prophecy is as follows: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Matthew and Mark both mention Jesus' prophecy, but do not record his words.

[9] This statement of Jesus is recorded in Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, and Luke 19:46. Jesus is quoting prophesies regarding the temple from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11.

[10] This action choice on the part of Scorsese was in keeping with current understanding of crucifixion. Crucifixion deaths were caused by asphyxiation, and Dafoe appeared to be experiencing respiratory failure (Ward 260).

[11] For a brief synopsis of archeological findings that support the Gospels as valid historical documents, see Chapter 4 of Josh McDowell's *More Than a Carpenter*.

[12] Jesus used many symbolic references to reveal himself as the Messiah. There are numerous instances in the Gospels in which Jesus declares his divinity to others, for example, see Matthew 11:27, Matthew 26:63-64, Mark 14:61-62, Luke 22:70, John 4:25-26, John 8:58.

Chapter 4
The Text: Sources and Cinematic Interpretation

The filmmakers had definite ideas about how the physical Jesus would be portrayed in their films. They chose actors who would embody the Christ that they wanted to reveal to their audience. Along with the right actor for the role of Jesus, the filmmakers needed a text to be created that would reveal their visions of Christ. Each filmmaker used different texts or combinations of texts to reiterate his intentions for his historical/religious portrait of Christ.

The first section of this chapter deals with the choice of text. On what text did the filmmaker base his film? Did he add or delete anything to the chosen text? Because the films, even Zeffirelli's six-hour epic, could not encompass all the events of Jesus' life as recorded in either the Gospel accounts or Kazantzakis' book, the filmmakers had to choose which events were important enough to include in the completed version of the film.

The second section of this chapter deals with the filming of these chosen events. How did the filmmaker infuse the text of the film with his intended statement about who Jesus Christ was? Several aspects of the films will be examined:

- o What is the first image in the film and where does the narrative begin?
- o How is the audience introduced to Jesus?
- o How does the filmmaker handle miracles and temptations?
- o What it the relationship between Jesus and Judas, and how is Judas' betrayal of Jesus handled?

- o How does the filmmaker present the events leading to the crucifixion?
- o How does the film end?

The way the figure of Jesus fits into these settings will influence the audience's opinion about the Jesus portrayed in each film. Before examining the treatment of Christ within the environment created by the filmmaker, however, it is necessary to understand the basic textual content of the film. The text used often influences the visual treatment of the events.

Sources of The Text

The King of Kings

DeMille, resorting to his childhood moments by the fire with his father, chose to use a combination of the New Testament Gospels. Text and events were used from each of the Gospels. However, DeMille, "Mr. Hollywood," modified the content to ensure that his audience would be pleased with the film.

DeMille's awareness of his public led him to attempt to add a sexual spark to the Gospel account of Jesus' life. A love triangle involving Mary Magdalene, Judas, and Jesus was added at the opening of the film. DeMille manufactured a love interest that he hoped would draw his audience into the film. In an article published in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1927, DeMille assured the *Journal's* readers that he "never had any idea except to put the actual story on the screen" (Hochman 168). However, he skillfully skirts the issue that his extrapolations were not quite Gospel truth by stating:

> I do not mean to write that I have not read between the lines, but such "reading between the lines" doesn't mean what is usually understood

by that phrase (168).

In other words, he believed he was showing the audience events leading up to the recorded events in the Bible. It seemed to make sense to DeMille that Judas' betrayal was based on something more than money: a woman. As the scenario of the Gospel story was being created, the added dimension to the story became more and more overshadowed by the Gospel story.

The majority of the narrative text followed the Gospel accounts. The screenplay is attributed to Jeannie MacPherson, but, as always, DeMille had a heavy hand in the creation of the story.[1] Because the film was silent, there was a limit to the amount of material that could be written on the subtitles. The board of editors, which included DeMille, MacPherson, Father Dan Lord, Dr. Andrews, and Clifford Howard, struggled to limit the text to 25 words per subtitle (Koury 124).

When DeMille used Scripture quotes, the reference was also listed on the subtitle. The Scriptures were taken from the King James version of the Bible, and the extrapolated dialogue incorporated the same formality, employing the use of words such as "hath," "thee," "thou," and so on. This use of an older form of language gave the film a more reverent tone, which is the effect DeMille wanted to create for his audience.

Aside from the liberties taken with the story of Mary Magdalene and Judas, DeMille also added other elements to the Gospels, often combining several Gospel stories to create one event. The character Mark, played by a young boy named Mickey Moore, was supposed to have been lame and was healed by Jesus. He was also "destined to be a great apostle" (DeMille 1927). Mark follows Jesus and the disciples around throughout the film, and cries

like a child being orphaned at the crucifixion. He even tells Simon the Cyrene that if he "was a big man" (DeMille 1927) he would carry Jesus' cross. DeMille "reads between the lines" to assume that Mark could have been a child, and presents this boy on screen. As mentioned in Chapter 3, DeMille understood that audiences have a great amount of sympathy for children on screen, and he used this orphan angle to draw his audiences emotionally deeper into the story.

Most of the Scripture dialogue that was attributed to the high priests in the New Testament was given to Caiaphas in the film. After Pilate questions Jesus and finds him innocent, it is not "the chief priests and the rulers and the people" (Luke 23:13) who cry for Barabbas' release and Jesus' crucifixion, but Caiaphas. As Caiaphas watches the temple curtain tear in two, he says "I alone am guilty" (DeMille 1927), which is an extrapolation probably meant by DeMille to take the guilt off the collective heads of the Jewish people and onto the head of one misguided man. Still, despite DeMille's caution, this one-man decision for Jesus' death must have been part of the impetus behind the Jewish community's protest over Rudolph Schildkraut's participation in the film, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

For the most part, after the opening scene in Mary Magdalene's lavish apartments, DeMille kept his text fairly close to the Gospel narrative. The majority of the extrapolations were minor and not disruptive to the mood or theology of the Gospels. He was quite familiar with the Gospels and intended for his story to mirror them as closely as possible with some "reading between the lines" added to please his audience.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew

Pasolini was not very familiar with the Gospels. He told Oswald Stack that "nobody in Italy reads the Gospel, really nobody. I asked every single person I knew and only three or four at the most had read the Gospel" (79). Although he had heard Scriptures read during Mass, he had not read the book of Matthew in its entirety until his experience at the Pro Civitate Christiana in Assisi. Pasolini himself wrote the screenplay, drawing all the film's material from the Gospel of Matthew.[2]

Unlike DeMille's treatment, there are few deviations from the Gospel narrative. Pasolini follows the narrative closely for the first few chapters, but then he jumps around the book instead of following it linearly. Some critics have questioned Pasolini's omission of certain events, such as many of Jesus' miracles.

Pasolini justified his omission of certain events by explaining his difficulty with the filmed version of some scenes. In one case, Pasolini had chosen two men from the Centro Sperimentale film school in Rome to play two men possessed by demons. After Pasolini viewed the footage of the scene, he felt it was too obvious that these men were actors from the Centro Sperimentale so he cut the scene (Blue 27). Some scenes were omitted because of time constraints while others were omitted because they did not mesh well with Pasolini's intent.

As Stephen Snyder noted, "Pasolini's narrative tends to focus upon the growth of Christ, whereas much more of Matthew is taken up specifically with Christ's sermonizing" (60). Pasolini created a film that emphasized the Jesus myth and therefore focused more on Jesus life rather than his words.

From an unbeliever's point of view, the content of Jesus' words are not as poignant as they would be for a believer, so Pasolini did not choose to focus on those words or their meaning.

Pasolini chose to include the Sermon on the Mount, but edited it quite a bit. The words of Christ were overshadowed by the technique with which Pasolini shot the sequence. The quick cuts of Irazoqui in various combinations of lighting and costume diminish the impact of the words of the sermon. Some of the most familiar words of Jesus are included in this sermon, but they are lost to Pasolini's audience because of his cinematic technique of presentation.

Pasolini does not present Jesus as speaking these words to a group of friends and followers. The words are spoken harshly and directly to the camera. The quick cuts between the different light settings break the flow of Jesus' words into individual, detached statements. Therefore, the audience loses the meaning and message of the sermon because they are so bombarded with quick visual images that the meaning of the message becomes unimportant. In this way, Pasolini reveals his intent to focus on the events of Jesus life, more in a biographical fashion, rather than on his words and teachings.

Pasolini also chose to extend the life of John the Baptist. He is the oppressed prophet, misunderstood and left in prison. Pasolini cuts back to John the Baptist in prison several times throughout the scenes of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew, John is beheaded in Chapter 14, right before the account of Jesus walking on the water. In Pasolini's film, John is shown in prison three times after the walking on the water scene. Finally, Pasolini

presents Salome's dance and John the Baptist is beheaded. This extension of John's story, which holds much less importance in the Gospel narrative, reveals Pasolini's intention that his Christ came with a sword. It is falsely accused men like John the Baptist (and perhaps Pasolini himself) who needed to be set free by that sword. But John is not set free and some critics believe, in light of his own violent death, Pasolini was not either.

Jesus of Nazareth

Because Pasolini's focus was more on events than on the sermons and teachings of Jesus, the film has a more biographical feel to it. Zeffirelli, who had much more time to present his treatment, also created a film that is in many respects like a biography on the life of Jesus.

Zeffirelli, like DeMille, used events from the four Gospels, but also relied on large amounts of extrapolated material about Jesus and those around him. Zeffirelli seemed to want to include all the conversations that are merely hinted at or insinuated in the Bible. Because he was so intent on presenting Jesus in his cultural context, he spent great amounts of time showing his audiences the political and religious reality of the time: the Romans storm through the villages on several occasions, the Zealots plot and are crushed by Herod, the religious Jews worship in the synagogue and follow the Jewish customs, the Sanhedrin debate Jesus' identity, and Judas ponders over Jesus' true identity with Zerah. Because of this attention to outside political and religious forces, many great actions and teachings of Jesus are left by the wayside in Zeffirelli's attempt to place him in the reality of his world. Therefore, the film misses some important events in Jesus' life

at the expense of some rather dull dialogue.

The idea for the film was given to Anthony Burgess, who wrote the majority of the treatment. Burgess, an agnostic who converted to Catholicism, wrote the treatment for the six-act story in sixteen days. Zeffirelli commented that Burgess had "obviously drawn on a wealth of sources, Biblical and Rabbinical, to weld the sometimes patchy history that the apostles have left us into a homogenous story" (Zeffirelli 1986 277). The sources Burgess used were not listed, although it is clear that he studied Jewish custom and religious practice in order to present Jesus as a practicing Jew.

Burgess' treatment put words into the mouths of Jesus and the other characters that were not in the Gospel accounts. Zeffirelli, who was "determined to make this film rigorously didactic" (Zeffirelli 1984 39), decided that Burgess' less rigid account needed to mirror the Gospels more closely. Burgess gave Zeffirelli a framework and Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Emilio Gennarini, and Zeffirelli clarified Burgess' more sketchy points.[3]

One of the difficulties Zeffirelli faced was how to write "a basic story with dialogue that was speakable yet still acceptable as the words of Christ" (Zeffirelli 1986 274). It wasn't until scenes were being filmed that some of the dialogue was finalized. Zeffirelli "offer[ed] the actors a set of paraphrases of the Gospel sayings amongst which they could choose in order to find speakable words" (277).

For other scenes, Zeffirelli simply gave the actors the words from the Gospel of John and they were filmed directly. Zeffirelli, impressed, wrote that John recounted the "dramatic and significant episodes of Jesus' life . . .

with such wonderful verbal imagery, almost as if he were a supremely gifted screenwriter!" (1984 viii). All the additions to the Gospel narrative are far too numerous to mention here, but several that are relevant to Zeffirelli's intention will be discussed. Zeffirelli wanted his film to focus on Rome's occupation of Palestine and the humility and oppression the Jews felt at the hands of the unclean Romans. By emphasizing world history during the first century, Zeffirelli could validate the story of Jesus as historically accurate.

The tension between the Romans and the Jews is evident in Zeffirelli's film, although it is hardly such a relevant focus in the Gospels. Zeffirelli had originally wanted to have the film begin "in the palace of Augustus at Rome [to] emphasize the aloofness with which the emperor regarded that remote corner of the empire" (29). However, he was forced to abandon the Augustus scenes because he had already exceeded his time limits.

> This was a painful sacrifice, and I deeply regretted not being able to fully delineate the context of the Roman world in confrontation with the Hebrew. It was a critical factor both for understanding the immense importance of Roman intervention with this troublemaker, Jesus, and for giving to the Gospel narrative . . . incontrovertible historical support from the history of Rome, that which we know intimately and in a wealth of detail (29).

The power and callousness of Rome is evident in the film, however, as Roman soldiers threaten the Jews on more than one occasion, the most memorable of which is at Jesus' *bar mitzvah*.

Perhaps the most marked addition to the Gospel story is the inclusion of the character Zerah. He is a scribe of the Sanhedrin, who became a key character in Zeffirelli's account of the last days of Jesus' life. Zeffirelli, like DeMille, had trouble with the Gospel account's attributing Judas' motive to

betray Jesus as purely for greed. Therefore, Zeffirelli created Zerah.

> In every power system there is always a Zerah, the secular arm, the executor. In my script I fancy that there was a Zerah to guide Judas, making him think that the destiny of Jesus was in his hands, hoping it would appeal to his political ambitions (Zeffirelli 1984 103).

Zerah, therefore, becomes the driving force behind Jesus' destruction. No longer is Judas, Caiaphas, or Annas guilty, but a fictional character.

Although some of the dialogue is extrapolated from the Gospel accounts, most of Jesus' words are taken directly from the Bible. Zeffirelli, although he does not cite the specific Biblical translation, does not use the King James version as DeMille did; rather, the translations are more modern in tone. As noted above, he wanted to keep the words of Jesus realistic, a difficult task for text so recognizable to audiences.

The Last Temptation of Christ

The text of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, taken almost entirely from Kazantzakis' book, was not always recognizable to audiences. Many of the words of Jesus in the book and film coincide with the Gospel accounts, but Kazantzakis infused them with his own philosophy.

Scorsese asked Paul Schrader to write a script because he "thought it would be very interesting to see what a Calvinist approach to the book would be" (Scorsese 1989 117). The book was quite long, and Scorsese wanted it to be a normal length film, so Schrader had to cut quite a bit from the book. In four months, Schrader had written a ninety-page script.

Much of the script was a skeletal version of the book. Schrader gave Jesus and Mary Magdalene's relationship much less focus. He also

diminished the relationships between the apostles. There were two important scenes that were added to the script. Scorsese commented on the first draft of the script.

> He [Schrader] felt that the supernatural should exist alongside the natural, so he added Jesus taking His heart out, as well as a literal version of the Last Supper in terms of swallowing the flesh and blood of Jesus. I said, 'Paul, come now,' but he said it was just between us, a Calvinist teasing a Catholic, and in his second draft that scene was taken out and we went back to Kazantzakis (Scorsese 1989 118).

Both of these scenes reappear in the final version of the film. He does not mention why these scenes are included in the film. The implication of the inclusion of these scenes is that Scorsese wanted to emphasize the Catholic religious tradition. The image of Christ taking out his heart was, according to Scorsese, from "the Catholic Sacred Heart motif" (126).

Scorsese rewrote Schrader's script throughout 1983. He had help from Jay Cocks. Both Scorsese and Cocks understood that they would not receive credit for their rewrites. After the film was picked up by Universal, Scorsese and Cocks wrote two more versions of the script. They struggled with the language of the book, as the English translation was very poetic and Scorsese felt it would distance the audience too much.

> We wanted a straightforward representation of speech, antipoetic in a way. Jay Cocks and I wrote the dialogue as if we were speaking together, putting ourselves in the scenes and saying, how would we react? (128).

The script that was finally used modified Kazantzakis language to speak to a modern American audience.

The filmmakers created their scripts using various accounts of Jesus. Although Scorsese was the only one to use a fictionalized account of Jesus'

life, both Zeffirelli and DeMille modified the existing Biblical accounts in such a way that their films remained unique to them. Pasolini, in his strict adherence to the book of Matthew, also created a film quite unique. The makers of films often modify novels so much as to render them unrecognizable. Such was not the case with any of these four filmmakers. The basic story of Jesus Christ is there, however, the emphasis on different aspects of his life and ministry create four very different and distinct presentations of who Jesus was and why he lived.

Cinematic Presentation of the Text

The filmmakers chose narratives which would help to emphasize their intentions. These aspects of the film will be presented here in a comparative manner. The areas of the film to be studied, when placed against each other, help to reinforce the filmmakers' intentions. Filmmaker's decisions to omit or include certain facts about a historical figure's life are relevant when studying four films of this type. How these areas of the historical figure's life are presented will also color the audience's perceptions of that figure.

Much of the story of Jesus' life is known to Western culture. However, many accounts are sketches of what may have actually occurred, and when filmmakers fill in the blanks left in the Scriptures, they have the power to create a unique image of Jesus Christ. In this section, all four films will be examined together in the following areas:

- Initial images
- Opening narrative
- First images of Jesus

- o Temptations
- o Miracles
- o Presentation of Judas and assignment of guilt
- o Jesus' last days
- o Resurrection

When these four different interpretations are studied side by side, one can understand more the different sign systems used by the filmmakers in order to impress upon their audiences their answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Initial Images

First, where does the film begin? What is the first image the audience receives when viewing the film? Music, subtitles, and other images signify to the viewer what type of Christ he or she should be ready to receive. Do the filmmakers use these initial images to begin to present their intentions to audiences? Each film begins quite differently, and these initial combinations of sound, words, and visual images help to establish the kind of Christ presented in the film.

DeMille

DeMille's film begins with images that assure his audience that his film is a reverential treatment of the life of Christ. As slow, reverent, orchestral music plays, text appears on the screen.

> The events portrayed by this picture occurred in Palestine nineteen centuries ago. When the Jews were under the complete subjection of Rome—even their own High Priest, being appointed by the Roman Procurator (DeMille 1927).

Under the text, at the right hand side of the screen, is Cecil B. DeMille's signature, testifying to the fact that he is in charge of this cinematic study and will not lead his viewers astray. Already he has shifted the blame for Jesus' death from the Jewish nation to the pagans of Rome, whose appointee to the position of High Priest is nothing but a Roman puppet.

The title of the film appears in Gothic lettering. Then DeMille begins the narrative of the story. "This is the story of Jesus of Nazareth" (1927). The words appear against a background of a stylized image of a sunrise. The half-circle of the sun is at the bottom center of the screen, and sun rays beam up and out to the edges of the screen. Jesus is the light that lit up the darkness of oppression as announced in the opening screen. Already DeMille has set up a conflict between good and evil, even before the visual images of the narrative begin.

The following screen announces DeMille's mission in creating the film. Now the audiences identify DeMille's part in this project as spiritual, rather than monetary. "He himself [Jesus] commanded that His message be carried to the uttermost parts of the earth. May this portrayal play a reverent part in the spirit of that great command" (1927). By the time the opening minutes are concluded, it is clear to viewers that this film will be a reverent treatment of the life of Jesus Christ, keeping close to the Gospels and not attempting to ask any difficult questions about Jesus' life or existence as both God and man. Now the audience knows that the film presents not only a conflict between good and evil, but also is an answer to DeMille's personal spiritual call to go and spread the Gospel to all nations.

Pasolini

Pasolini, intending to show his audiences a portrait of Christ stripped of its mythic connotations, begins his film quite simply, without comment on his material. The first screen is the title of the film, which for the English language version is *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. After this screen cuts away, the credits for the film appear. A percussive Gospel-style Gloria is heard, with vocalists performing in call-and-response style. This music does not set the reverent tone that the music for *Kings* did. As the credits continue, the Gloria fades out and music by Bach is faded in. This pastiche effect of music is used throughout the film, which Pasolini used to emphasize his desire to present Jesus Christ against the backdrop of two thousand years of Christian history.

The audience hears the contrasting styles of music and sees the simply presented credits. This signifies to the audience that the film will not be lavish, as DeMille's picture is, but simple and straightforward. The mixture of musical styles points to the juxtaposition of the Gospel story against history's varied interpretations of that story.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli's opening sequence is much more grandiose than Pasolini's. Zeffirelli's insistence on show-casing his all-star cast nearly overshadows his primary theme of portraying Jesus as an extraordinarily "common" man. The opening shot is a slow pan of the hillsides of Judea. The pan ends on a long shot of the town of Nazareth nestled in the hills. While this pan is shown on the screen, Zeffirelli superimposed character shots of all the actors

in costume. Under the stills of the actors are their names and the roles they will play.

Zeffirelli did not want his audience to view his film without realizing who was in the film. It was an all-star cast. The audience receives Zeffirelli's sign that they should expect greatness from his film, as the cast was a very impressive group of internationally known performers. None of these performers were common people, so the audience realizes that this treatment of Jesus will not be completely ordinary.

The slow pan of the hillsides, accompanied by the original orchestrated music, reveals to the audience that great pains were taken in this film to create a cinematographical masterpiece. The audience sees the care taken to show the beauty and apparent authenticity of the location. The music is slow and fully orchestrated, indicating that a tone of reverence will be employed when dealing with this subject.

Thus, Zeffirelli wanted the opening sequence of the film to indicate to the audience that this was to be a lavish, well-crafted work examining Jesus' life. Because he superimposed the cast shots with the shot of a Middle Eastern landscape and village, he hoped also to imply to his audience his desire that the film be as historically and culturally accurate as possible. However, the cast shots become the focal point of the opening sequence and thereby diminish the impact of the establishing shot of Nazareth.

Scorsese

Scorsese, sensing the explosive quality of the reactions to films that question the reality of the Jesus of the Gospels, begins his film with what

amounts to a disclaimer. There is a low drone of music in the background as text, which contains words from the prologue of Kazantzakis' book, scrolls upward.

> The dual substance of Christ—the yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain to God . . . has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. . . . My principle [sic] anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh. . . and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met (Scorsese 1988).

This quote indicates to audiences that this film will be a non-traditional vision of the life of Christ: a struggle between spirit and flesh, a metaphysical theme rather than a biographical treatment of the life of Christ. Immediately following the quote from Kazantzakis' novel, the disclaimer appears on screen. This text informs the audience that the film was not based on the Gospel accounts, but on Kazantzakis' "fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict" (Scorsese 1988).

The screen is then filled with dissolves of stylized black thorns against a red background. There is tension in the music, which builds from the original drone to include percussion and Middle Eastern instrumentation and melodic lines. The audience perceives that there will be tension created in this film between the preconceived notions about Jesus Christ as set forth in the Gospels and this film's treatment of Jesus Christ as a symbol for Kazantzakis' and Scorsese's personal spiritual struggles.

Thus, this film is not necessarily a Christian document, but rather a more generalized spiritual exploration, using Jesus Christ as the example of the broader struggle between spirit and flesh. Scorsese wanted his audience

to realize that his film was not a reverent treatment of the life of Jesus Christ, as DeMille's film was, nor was his film a biographical treatment of the life of Christ, as the films of Pasolini and Zeffirelli were. Rather, he wanted his audience to realize that he was trying something new with the story of Christ, which clashed with the more traditional approaches to other films on the life of Jesus Christ.

Opening Narrative

Each Gospel account begins at a different point in Jesus' life. Does the filmmaker assume that we already understand and know of the early life of Christ, or is his birth and early history relevant to the portrait of Christ? After the audiences have received the initial images as described above, do the filmmakers continue that style of imagery, or do they challenge their viewers' original impressions of the film?

DeMille

The opening scene of *Kings* breaks the reverential tone of the opening sequence, which distances the audience from the projected mood of the film. Rather than draw his audience in by the use of this technique, DeMille's mission statement seems dishonest. This distancing was a conscious choice of DeMille, who declared that he "decided to jolt them [the audience] all out of their preconceptions with an opening scene that none of them would be expecting" (Essoe and Lee 114).

DeMille's narrative begins with "Mary Magdala, the beautiful

courtesan who laughed alike at God and man" (DeMille 1927). DeMille did not miss the opportunity to present his characteristic spectacle, even in his treatment of the life of Jesus Christ. Magdalene, played by Josephine Logan, is in her lavish home wearing an elegant but revealing costume. She rides off in her zebra chariot to find her latest lover, Judas, who has left her to keep company with a common carpenter.

DeMille uses the comments of Magdalene's clients to establish the identity of Jesus Christ. When Magdalene is angered by Judas' absence, the men tell her that this carpenter has healed the blind and raised the dead. The audience is informed that this film will not treat the birth and youth of Christ, but will focus on his adult ministry, which implies that DeMille expected his audience to come to his film knowing some basic facts about Jesus' life. In light of his desire to evangelize, it seems strange that DeMille would not start his story with a spectacular treatment of Jesus' birth.

Pasolini

Pasolini's narrative begins with the opening dramatic sequence of the book of Matthew, which indicates to his audience that he intends to follow the narrative of the Biblical text. The film opens with a close up on the face of a young, troubled Mary, played by Marherita Caruso. The film then cuts to a close up of a balding, middle-aged Joseph, played by Marcello Morante, who looks angry. Another cut shows Mary, centered in an arched, stone doorway. Mary is obviously pregnant. Joseph walks alone down the road as Mary begins after him, then stops and watches him leave.

This scene takes place without any words. It is clear from the

expressions on the faces of Joseph and Mary that this pregnancy is not a happy event. A conflict is presented. Joseph is not pleased with the condition of his betrothed and walks through the village. He watches some children playing and then sits and rests his head on a rock. An angel appears and speaks the words in Matthew 1:20-21:

> Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

The first words spoken in the film are spoken by the angel. It is enough to Pasolini to follow the story of Mary and Joseph's difficulty with her pregnancy without words. The Bible does not present any dialogue between Joseph and Mary at this point, and Pasolini conveyed the situation without spoken words.

The audience realizes that this treatment of the life of Christ is mostly visual. The emotions are implied by the camera's focus on the actors, rather than on specific thoughts expressed by dialogue. This adherence to the narrative in Matthew kept the dialogue to a minimum, thereby creating a simple unencumbered vision of the story of Jesus. Pasolini chose to use little dialogue and instead created the story of Jesus with visual images, such as the opening sequence with Mary and Joseph described above.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli, who wanted to emphasize the Judaism of Jesus, begins his narrative far ahead of the Gospel account. The first scene of his film takes place in the synagogue in Nazareth. The Rabbi reads scripture promising

the coming Messiah. The men, who sit in the main room, wear prayer shawls and beards, and many wear long side curls. The women sit behind a screen and listen to the Rabbi speak.

This attempt at an authentic representation of a Jewish religious service is the first scene of the film. The audience is confronted with images that are clearly Jewish, which informs them that this aspect of the lives of the Hebrews, and Jesus in particular, was relevant when forming a picture of who Jesus was. Zeffirelli also emphasized his desire to use his large screen time allotment to create a more complete story of Jesus' life. After the service is over in the synagogue, the Rabbi approaches Joseph and whispers to him while pointing at Anna, the mother of Mary. Thus, this film begins before the Gospel narratives. Both Matthew and Luke, who wrote of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' conception and birth, begin their accounts with Jesus and Mary already betrothed. The film was not meant to be a strict adherence to the text of one of the Gospels as Pasolini's film was. Rather, it would incorporate text from all four Gospels and fill in the missing blanks with material that Zeffirelli felt would have logically taken place.

Scorsese

Scorsese's film begins with an explanation of the tormenting dreams of Jesus, which indicate that his film will present a Christ who is confused about his calling. The first shot is a quick hand-held shot through the green trees of an olive grove. The audience hears footsteps and a hawk's cry. Then the camera cuts to Jesus, sleeping on the ground.

Through the use of voice-over, Jesus explains how the dreams come on,

first like a caress, then like claws in his skull. The audience sees Jesus sleeping on the ground in an olive grove. As the voice-over explains the ferocity of the headaches, the camera moves in closer to Jesus and he slowly raises his hand to his head and begins to roll on the earth. He wakes from his dream and lays on his back, looking at the sky. The camera looks down at Jesus, who wears a troubled expression. This Jesus is alone, small, and afraid. The audience knows that this film will not be a typical film based on the life of Jesus.

First Images of Jesus

The first image that the audience has of Jesus is the image that will establish their view of him. The filmmakers, realizing the importance of this first impression, set up their scenes so that the first image of Jesus would help to reinforce their intention for their films. Where is Jesus when the audience first sees him? What does his posture indicate to the audience? Does the audience view him from a specific angle? The filmmakers carefully chose their first shots of Jesus so that their intentions for the presentation of the character of Jesus would be apparent to their audience.

DeMille

The first appearance of Jesus in *Kings* is spectacular, which causes the audience to immediately recognize that he is an extraordinary figure. Before Jesus appears, the screen contains only a soft halo of light. Gradually the halo slowly dissolves to the face of Jesus. When Jesus' face is clearly in focus, there is a distinct circular halo around his head. He is lit from behind,

so his shoulders and the top of his head appear to be glowing. Jesus is leaning forward, looking concerned. It is as if this Jesus is waiting in anticipation for the audience to come to him and accept him. His expression is one of concern, as if he is worried for those watching the film. This is the Jesus that DeMille wanted to present to the world: a Jesus who is divine and miraculous, a Jesus who is ready to accept and love all who would come to him, a Jesus who is concerned for all people.

Pasolini

Because Pasolini chose to follow the events of Jesus' life as recorded in Matthew, the first image of Jesus in *Gospel* is as a baby. He is not fully seen, but rather the audience sees the wise men, Mary, and Joseph as they look at the child. In the scene depicting the family in Egypt, Jesus is a toddler. He smiles and marches up a hill to be caught up in Joseph's arms. The camera watches him from Joseph's point of view. He is still a child, not ready for his mission. However, his gait is strong and determined. Even as a very young child, this Jesus is ready to bring a sword.

The first image of the adult Jesus in *Gospel* occurs at his Baptism. John the Baptist is verbally attacking the Pharisees. The camera is in close up on John the Baptist as he shouts, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). The next verse in Matthew reads, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John" (Matthew 3:13). Pasolini chose to show this transition by dissolving from John the Baptist's face to Jesus' face.

The dissolve onto Jesus' face reveals a stern face filmed straight on. A black shawl covers Jesus' head, and his head movement suggests that he is walking. Jesus' head is raised, signifying a certain defiance in his attitude. He does not blink his eyes as he walks. His look implies that he is ready to challenge the authorities. Pasolini's initial image of a determined, confident Jesus reinforces his Marxist perspective on the person of Jesus. Not only did Jesus profess to come to the world to die for the sins of mankind, which are represented in this first image by the black head shawl, but also this Jesus came to challenge the authorities of his day, which is evident in Irazoqui's stern expression.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli's first images of Jesus in various stages of life help to establish this portrait of Jesus as one in which his identity as a human is established. Zeffirelli, like Pasolini, includes scenes of Jesus as an infant and as a child. The audience first sees the baby Jesus at his birth, as Joseph places the sleeping child next to Mary. This scene is the mythic Christ, born in a stable. He is filmed from above as he lays beside his mother. The audience looks down at the sleeping child, this Jesus is just a powerless child, so the audience is initially established as being in a superior position to the baby. The audience looks at Jesus with the eyes of a parent, which helps to invoke the audience's sympathies for the character.

The child Jesus first appears as he plays in the courtyard of Joseph's carpenter shop. This Jesus is indistinguishable from the other children playing. To Zeffirelli, Jesus was just another boy playing in the streets of

Nazareth. Because he was still a young child, he has not yet been set apart from the other people in his village.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the first appearance of the boy Jesus is disconcerting because of his physical characteristics. In the scene revealing the boy Jesus, the camera slowly pans upward at the pulpit in the synagogue in Nazareth. The scrolls are seen, and eventually Jesus' head comes into view. Because Zeffirelli pans so slowly as the boy Jesus reads in Hebrew, the audience anticipates their first vision of the boy. The audience is made to wonder at this boy, who is quite small, because he can read and translate the Scriptures like an adult. Zeffirelli shows the audience that this Jesus is becoming a man and almost ready for his mission.

The first image of the adult Jesus in *Jesus,* as in *Gospel*, takes place at Jesus' baptism, a scene in which Jesus' deity is confirmed by God, who proclaims him to be his beloved son. John is bending to the river to cup water into his hands, when he looks up and an expression of recognition and awe crosses his face. The camera cuts to John the Baptist's point of view, and the audience sees the out-of-focus figure of the last person to be baptized cross the screen to reveal the face of Jesus. The sky is bright white behind Jesus. He is shot from slightly below. He has no covering on his head and his hair is windblown. Jesus looks serenely at John, understanding that John recognizes him.

This first image of the adult Jesus reveals the kind of Christ that Zeffirelli wanted to present to his audience. He made a conscious decision to present a more traditional-looking Jesus and even uses the bright white of the sky behind his head as the suggestion of a halo. The audience looks up to

Jesus, which causes them to consider him superior. His physical appearance, especially his slightly messy hair, suggests to the audience that although he is superior to them, as indicated by the camera angle, he is still a human.

Scorsese

The first image in Scorsese's film, unlike the other three films, is of Jesus himself. There is no set up for the audience to be introduced to his character. The voice-over pronounces his name and it is only then that the audience knows they are seeing Jesus. Scorsese, who did not want to create an image of Jesus like the spectacularized image in *Kings*, reveals to his audience a sleeping Jesus. The audience looks down on Jesus, who rests on his side. He sleeps like a child, reinforcing again this Jesus' immaturity and inability to understand his purpose.

This Jesus struggles with flesh and spirit. We see the flesh on the screen sleeping peacefully, but we hear the spirit's torment in the first shot as an unseen enemy rushes through the trees. Thus, the conflict that is set up in the opening of *Temptation* is that of a spiritual/psychological nature, rather than a conflict between evil and good forces, as in DeMille's version. Because this is a spiritual conflict, the only visible character in the conflict is Jesus, and it is his image the audience receives in the first scene. This is not a powerful Jesus, but a sleeping Jesus who is troubled and in pain. The audience first looks at Jesus from above, which suggests to the audience that they are in a superior position to this Jesus.

Temptations

Because these filmmakers were presenting a figure who is both God and man, events in Jesus' life had to be revealed that would emphasize his deity and humanity. How the filmmaker handled miracles may give some. insight into the filmmaker's portrayal of Jesus as divine. In contrast, how the filmmaker presents this Jesus resisting temptation may reveal the balance of the human tendencies of Jesus. All four of these Jesus characters are tempted, but the circumstances of the temptation are shown in different ways.

DeMille

In *Kings*, Jesus' melodramatic gestures that he uses when he is tempted are so dated that Jesus' resistance appears false. The emptiness of these gestures lessen DeMille's desire to portray a human Jesus, as this Jesus does not appear to be struggling inwardly to resist Satan's attack. Jesus leans against a stone pillar. A man dressed in black, who represents Satan, slinks up to Jesus. The subtitle contains the words from Matthew 4:9, "All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." Jesus beats his breast with his hand and shuts his eyes. Satan shows Jesus the city below him, which dissolves into a grand, rich parade of horses and fancy chariots. Jesus takes deep breaths and leans his head back against the pillar. The subtitle reveals Jesus' words from Luke 4:8 (KJV), "Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

In terms of the performance sign systems used in 1927, Warner's

acting choices would indicate that Jesus had difficulty resisting temptation. Today the gestures Warner used, such as Jesus beating his breast, are not received by audiences as a sign of inner struggle. Because of the dated acting style, this scene gives modern audiences the impression that Jesus does not really struggle much with Satan's temptation. However, because many other signs in the film indicate that DeMille was interested in portraying a Jesus more divine than human, it would have caused his audiences too much confusion if Jesus had too much difficulty resisting temptation.

Pasolini

Pasolini's Christ responds to Satan's temptations just as he responds to any other character in the film: without any outward indication of emotion or struggle. To an atheist, there are no temptations. Because there is no god to apply standards, there is no need to comply with any standards, thereby disseminating the concept of temptation. Jesus is out in the desert, praying on his knees with his arms outstretched and bent upwards at the elbows. In the distance, a man walks across the sand toward Jesus. Jesus rises as Satan reaches him. This Jesus expects Satan to try to tempt him and, after each temptation offered by Satan, immediately answers with the text from Matthew. After the conversation between Jesus and Satan is over, a close up shot of Satan's feet shows them turning and walking back the way he came. Jesus calmly watches him walk back across the desert.

This clinical treatment of Jesus' temptation is distracting. This Jesus no longer appears human, but takes on the qualities of an automaton in his emotionless rebuttals to Satan's temptations. Even though Jesus was divine,

one would expect him to struggle with his human side a little bit when confronted with the power Satan was offering. It is surprising that Pasolini, who was so fascinated with the spiritual realm, did not take more time with the character of Satan, who embodies the spirit of evil.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli questioned the ability of the medium to present such things as temptation. Zeffirelli does not use the character of Satan in the film. He had filmed the sequence, but decided against including it in the final film. He believed that the mystery of such a struggle between Jesus and Satan was "beyond portrayal" in cinema.

> Cinema impedes the necessary concentration and, with that, the kind of participation indispensable for approaching the supernatural, the mysterious. . . . The desert was impressive and the voice that resonated in that vast space became mysterious and disturbing; I had magnified the voice of Jesus. It was Jesus who uttered the words of the Devil as though he had captured them out of that space. An awesome, harsh, upsetting monologue ensued.
>
> But Jesus' torment, too profound to be externalized, could confuse the viewer dangerously.
>
> This was one of the instances in which the medium of film manifested its limitations. The effects were splendid, yes, but they seem contrived, ersatz, false (Zeffirelli 1986 80).

Because the struggle to resist temptation is within the mind of the one being tempted, it is difficult to present effectively on screen. Also, although the use of Powell's voice as Satan created an interesting effect, it could have prompted more theological debate about God's relationship to Satan, the great source of evil. Zeffirelli was not willing to provoke controversy by making statements about the nature of the existence and power of Satan and

his relationship to Jesus Christ, so he cut the sequence from his film.

Although Zeffirelli did not include the spectacular temptation scene, a smaller and perhaps more effective indication of temptation is included in the film. When Judas goes to Jesus to present himself as a disciple, Jesus is sitting against a wall with his eyes closed. Judas, thinking that he has not quite convinced Jesus of his credentials, continues to state his qualifications for being a good disciple. Jesus suddenly drops his head into his hands and rubs his eyes. This gesture shows the audience that Jesus knows already who Judas is and what he will do. The gesture indicates Jesus human desire to tell Judas no. However, Jesus raises his head and allows Judas to join them. He has resisted the temptation of excluding Judas from his exclusive group of disciples. This smaller, less grand example of Jesus' resistance of temptation helps to reinforce Zeffirelli's intent to portray Jesus as an ordinary man. This subtler depiction of temptation helps the audience to connect with Jesus, as most humans are tempted in more simple ways, which is the type of temptation Zeffirelli included in his film.

Scorsese

Because Scorsese's Jesus is not certain of his deity, he has more trouble resisting the spiritual struggle that the temptation represents. A very large portion of Scorsese's film deals with the last temptation of Jesus. There is an earlier scene in the film when Jesus is tempted in the desert. This temptation scene vaguely models the Gospel account. Scorsese's Jesus is confronted by a snake, a lion, and a pillar of fire who offer him sexual power, political power, and spiritual power. Jesus resists these temptations,

but he suffers greatly during his temptations. After he defies the snake, it explodes and Jesus collapses on the ground, sobbing.

The last temptation Scorsese's Jesus has to deal with takes up a large portion of the movie. In this temptation, Jesus is dying on the cross and a young girl comes and tells him that he has suffered enough and does not need to suffer any more. Jesus barely resists this temptation. It is not until the end of his life in this dream that he is confronted by his disciples and realizes that his redemption from the cross was not an act of God's, but of Satan's.

A Jesus who would take a lifetime to understand that he has not followed the path God chose for him, but took the easier way, is not the spiritually sure Jesus of the Gospels. Scorsese's Jesus did not learn the power of resistance in his earlier encounter with the devil in the desert, therefore his humanity is more apparent than his divine nature. Scorsese did not use grand special effects in the last temptation, but revealed Satan's more devious trick in tempting humans with smaller things. Satan did not offer Jesus control over the whole universe, but rather the life of a simple man who lived life fully as a father, husband, and carpenter.

Miracles

Conversely, the portrayal of miracles may be used to emphasize the deity of Jesus rather than his human side. Although there are many miracles recorded in the Bible, these four films do not contain the same miracle. *Kings*, *Jesus*, and *Temptation* all give an account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead.[4] As this account is recorded only in John, Pasolini's

film does not include it. Pasolini's account of Jesus healing of a leprous man will be examined instead.

DeMille

DeMille wanted his audience to believe that Jesus could perform any sort of miracle without hesitation. DeMille used music, lighting, and melodramatic acting to reveal the miraculous. The tomb is a sunken stone room with a large, covered stone table in it. Lazarus, wrapped in cloths, is on the stone table. Jesus raises one hand upwards and the other out to his side and orders Lazarus to rise. A medium shot of Lazarus' body shows him slowly stretching out one hand, then the other. The over-expressed reactions of those viewing the miracle are shown. The music swells as Lazarus rises. It is, without a doubt, a monumental event, but DeMille misses an opportunity to show a human Jesus in the possibilities of his emotional reactions to being reunited with his good friend.

Jesus stands calmly by the side of the stone table, watching the events as if he had no doubt at all that the miracle would occur. His Jesus was one who would ask those around him to act by doing things such as lifting a coffin lid or removing grave cloths. He did not need to work to accomplish his miracles. His Jesus could heal with the power of his voice.

Pasolini

Pasolini's Jesus is powerful and assured and, like Zeffirelli's Jesus, could heal with the power of his voice, even with one word. Of the many healing accounts given in Matthew, Pasolini chose to include the account in

Matthew 8:1-4, when Jesus healed a leprous man. Pasolini cut between close ups of Jesus and a disfigured man walking toward each other. The man is made up to suggest a leprous condition. The man confronts Jesus. The scene is shot from over Jesus' shoulder, giving the audience the impression that they are eavesdropping on the event. The man says "Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean" (Matthew 8:2). The next shot shows Jesus in close up saying, "I am willing. Be clean" (Matthew 8:3). Immediately, the music bursts out loudly with the same Gloria that opened the film. The camera shows a close up of the leprous man's face, which is completely healed. The camera cuts back to Jesus, who is smiling.

This use of cuts to reveal Jesus' miraculous healing powers is effective in its simplicity. The sense of miraculous is more heightened without special effects, because it challenges the audience to believe that Jesus' miracles occurred instantaneously. He spoke quietly and calmly to the man with leprosy and was pleased when he saw the results of his work. This is a Jesus who is sure of his power and does not need to create his own spectacle with his powers.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli, in a scene which emphasizes the deity of his Jesus, goes the route of DeMille in his scene of Jesus raising Lazarus. The tomb of Lazarus is situated in a small ravine. A large crowd gathers around the top of the hills surrounding the ravine. Jesus goes down to the tomb after the stone has been rolled away. His prayer at the opening of the tomb is the same prayer given in the John account but Zeffirelli also adds Jesus' earlier more

well known words from John 11:25: "I am the Resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

Jesus raises one hand to the sky and raises the other straight out to his side just as Warner did in DeMille's depiction of the raising of Lazarus. The camera cuts to Lazarus' point of view, showing Jesus centered in the opening of the tomb with the blue sky behind him. Then when Jesus says, "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43), the camera cuts back to the hillside. Lazarus slowly comes out of the tomb and all the people kneel. A cloud passes overhead, casting a shadow across the ravine, which inadvertently symbolizes Lazarus' escape from death and rebirth.

Zeffirelli does not use any special effects for this sequence to reveal Jesus' divine power. Rather he uses Powell's voice and the many different cuts in the scene to heighten the suspense before Lazarus actually emerges from the tomb. This is not a simple word from Christ that heals, as in the scene from *Gospel*. Zeffirelli's Jesus is sure of his power and abilities to perform miracles just as DeMille's Jesus was.

Scorsese

Scorsese also included the raising of Lazarus in his film but his Jesus is not entirely sure he will be able to perform the miracle, which emphasizes his confusion. As the stone is rolled away, Jesus and others hold their noses, indicating that Lazarus' flesh had indeed begun to rot.[5] Jesus stands at the door of the tomb. In a reverse angle shot, we see Jesus framed by the door of the tomb. In a slow-motion shot, Jesus scoops his arms around and flings them straight in front of his body, palms facing upwards. This gesture

indicates that Jesus is sending power from his body into the tomb, but, in light of the following shots, more adequately indicates that the tomb is attempting to suck Jesus into it.

The next shot shows Jesus leaning his head on the doorway. He quietly calls out to Lazarus. Nothing happens. A slow zoom shot from over Jesus' shoulder finishes on the blackness in the tomb. The audience is not sure that this confused Jesus will be able to penetrate the darkness of death with his powers. Jesus kneels at the opening of the tomb. He is shot again from the inside of the tomb as he waits for something to happen. Suddenly, Lazarus' green, swollen hand shoots up from the darkness of the tomb. This causes Jesus and the audience to jump, and is reminiscent of a scene in a horror film instead of a more artistic film such as *Temptation*. However distracting the shot is, it is clear that this Jesus never quite believed that he had the capacity to perform such a miracle.

Jesus, frightened, takes the green hand, which pulls Jesus back down into the tomb. Jesus fights back and is able to pull Lazarus out. Scorsese seems to be indicating the struggle between life and death. Jesus is frightened by this miracle. After Lazarus takes the cloths from his head, he hugs Jesus. The camera cuts to Jesus' face as Jesus says, "God help me." The audience sees that although this Jesus has the power to raise the dead, he does not want to have the power. He is frightened by the miracle he has just performed, and instead of being pleased that his friend is alive again, he fears for himself—again, the confused and bewildered Jesus.

Presentation of Judas and Assignment of Guilt

An interesting aspect of the accounts of Jesus is the assignment of guilt to Jesus' death. The details concerning Judas' betrayal are sketchy in the Bible, and many theologians have attempted to sort out the motivations behind Judas' decision to betray Jesus. Each filmmaker presented a different interpretation of Judas. The relationship between Jesus and Judas and Judas' subsequent betrayal leads audiences to view the betrayer of Jesus in different ways.

DeMille

DeMille wanted to assign the guilt of Jesus' death to two misguided men. One, Judas, was guilty because of his hunger for power. The other man, Caiaphas, was guilty because he became a pawn of the Roman Empire and betrayed the trust of the Jewish people. Both men finally recognize their misdeeds and take the guilt upon themselves, thereby absolving the Jewish people as a whole from the guilt of Jesus' murder.

DeMille initially struggled with the character of Judas. He found it hard to believe that Judas would have betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. "Why did Judas betray Christ? For money! Well, perhaps, but it was a trifling amount for so heinous a deed! No, there had to be something else—a woman's love!" (Koury 117). DeMille matched Judas up with Mary Magdalene and added the element of jealousy to Judas' character to make his motivation to commit his crime more palatable.

Judas is revealed from the beginning in DeMille's epic as a man driven by ambition. In the scene in which Jesus' disciples are introduced to the

audience, the screen introducing Judas calls him "Judas the ambitious" (DeMille 1927). Already the audience is made aware that this man wants to use his relationship with Jesus for personal gain. Judas wants to make Jesus the king so that he will have power also. After Jesus heals the blind little girl, Judas says, "Would he but shun the poor and heal the rich—they would straightaway make him king with me at his right hand" (DeMille 1927).

In DeMille's film, when the crowds surround Jesus as he stands on the temple steps, Judas tells the people that Jesus is their king and tries to crown Jesus. Jesus slips away, and Judas holds an empty crown. It is then that DeMille's Judas realizes that Jesus will not become king. Judas "bitter—panic stricken—all hope of earthly kingdom gone, betrayed his Lord for thirty pieces of silver" (DeMille 1927). A suspicious-looking, disheveled Judas goes to Caiaphas and cringes as Caiaphas counts out thirty pieces of silver.

DeMille's Judas is clearly guilty, but at the same time is upset about the choice he made. He continues to struggle with his decision to betray Christ, never entirely sure that his actions are right. In the Last Supper scene, he sits next to Jesus. Jesus hands him the bread, but Judas pretends to eat it and drops it to the ground. He also will not drink the wine that is offered him. His guilt is made clear to the audience by his actions and expression, but his posturing causes the audience to wonder why the disciples are not able to recognize which man will betray Jesus.

When Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, the picture is a study of good and evil. Jesus stands, dressed in white, with his hands clasped over his

heart. He looks up and off into the distance. As he stands, Judas, hair mussed and wearing a dark shawl, creeps up behind Jesus' shoulder and kisses him on the cheek, then sinks down below Jesus' shoulder and looks up at Jesus.

However, later scenes show Judas' remorse about his actions. He watches as Jesus is flogged, wincing at every stroke. He also watches Jesus being mocked by the Roman soldiers. Judas then confesses his sin to Caiaphas, offering the money back. Caiaphas refuses, and Judas cries out, dumping the money on the ground. Meanwhile, the soldiers are untying Jesus so that he can carry the cross. A soldier tosses away the rope used to tie Jesus and it lands at Judas' feet. He sees his answer and goes off to hang himself.

Although much of the guilt for the betrayal rests on Judas' shoulders in DeMille's account, the character of Caiaphas also takes on some of the blame for Jesus' death. As noted earlier in the chapter, DeMille placed the words which, in Scripture, are attributed to the group of priests into Caiaphas' mouth. Caiaphas tells the priests to bribe the crowds to call for Barabbas' release. He also is the one who tells Pilate to crucify Jesus. Pilate is not convinced of Jesus' guilt, and indeed, DeMille presents the audience with a Pilate who is quite troubled by having to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

Eventually, however, Caiaphas, like Judas, admits his guilt. After Jesus' death, when the Temple curtain is torn in two, Caiaphas falls to the floor. DeMille gives him a line of dialogue not found in the Gospels. "Lord God—visit not thy wrath on the people of Israel. I alone am guilty" (DeMille

1927). DeMille, not wishing to offend the Jews, as he himself was of Jewish heritage, tried to place the blame of Jesus' death squarely on the shoulders of two misguided men. Judas, who was driven by desire for power and money, and Caiaphas, who was also driven by desire for power. By making these characters responsible, DeMille hoped to refute the public's accusation of the Jewish people as a whole.

Pasolini

Pasolini's Judas was driven purely by his desire for money. Aside from being listed in Chapter 10 of Matthew as one of the disciples of Jesus, Judas is not mentioned until the description of Judas' agreement to betray Jesus. Pasolini added a scene not found in Matthew to establish Judas as the money keeper for the group. The disciples are following Jesus and they come to a place where there is food. Judas goes ahead and buys the food. This is a very simple scene, and Judas does not seem overly greedy, but the connection between Judas and money is established.

During the scenes depicting the last week of Jesus' life, Pasolini often cuts to close ups of Judas' face. Judas looks increasingly concerned and upset, and the audience understands that he is not contented with the course of events. Because there is no suggestion in Matthew that Judas wanted to make Jesus king, Pasolini's Judas is motivated by greed rather than ambition for earthly power as was the Judas in *Kings*.

Pasolini also chose to assign dialogue to Judas that was not specifically attributed to him in Matthew. Jesus is anointed by a woman and Judas, rather than "the disciples" as it is written in the Gospel account, says

"Why this waste? This perfume could have been sold at a higher price and the money given to the poor" (Matthew 26:9). Jesus rebukes Judas, who leaves angrily and walks down the hill. The camera follows him down the hill and Judas begins running until his figure disappears off the frame. The audience looks down on Judas as he runs down the hill and figuratively watches him head toward his own destruction.

The next scene shows Judas approaching the High Priest. He is clutching a shawl tightly around him in the same way that he clings to the idea of wealth. He taps the priest on the shoulder and asks how much they will pay him if he hands Christ over to them. The priest calmly answers, thirty pieces of silver. The next cut shows Judas, smiling fully, which reveals to the audience that Judas' motivation was indeed money.

Although Judas' betrayal results from his desire for money, he eventually realizes that he was wrong. The trial of Jesus is seen from the point of view of Judas, who moves through the crowd to get a better look at Jesus. After Judas hears the verdict, that Jesus will be put to death, he runs to the priests and confesses, "I have sinned" (Matthew 27:4). The priests do not accept his money, so he throws it at them. Judas is shown, collapsed on the ground. The next scene shows Judas running wildly along a hillside. He is frantically removing his clothes as he runs. As he climbs the tree, he wraps a strip of cloth around his neck. Then the audience sees Judas hanging. The frenetic camera movement during the suicide scene suggests the frenzy of Judas' emotions when he realized that, because of his greed, he has condemned his Master to death. Pasolini's technique tells the audience that Judas is remorseful over his deed.

Zeffirelli

Zeffirelli's Judas does not betray Jesus, rather he is duped into thinking that he is helping Jesus by handing him over to the Sanhedrin. Like DeMille, Zeffirelli was concerned about his film assigning the guilt to the Jewish people. He created a fictitious character named Zerah and placed the blame for Jesus' death on his shoulders. He presents several fictionalized conversations between Judas, who is portrayed as a Zealot, and Zerah, who is the scribe of the Sanhedrin. Zerah recognizes Judas' desire to rid the country of the Romans by establishing a powerful Hebrew king, and manipulates Judas into thinking that the Sanhedrin are willing to discuss, with Jesus, the possibility of placing Jesus in a position of authority. Judas believes that Jesus' kingdom will be established on earth.

Zeffirelli, with the twist to the plot created by the character of Zerah, turns Judas into a sympathetic character. In Scriptural accounts, it is evident that Judas did not understand the nature of the kingdom Jesus spoke of. However, the Scripture does not paint Judas in a sympathetic light. The Judas of the Gospels goes to the Jewish leaders and asks them how much money they will give him to take them to Jesus.

In *Jesus*, the audience aches for Judas in the scene when he arrives at the temple gate and asks Zerah if he can attend the meeting between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. Zerah tells Judas that there will be no meeting, only a trial. He thanks Judas for his assistance and hands him a purse containing, the audience assumes, thirty pieces of silver. His shock at this money indicates that Zeffirelli's Judas is not motivated at all by greed, nor is the subject of money a part of his decision to bring Zerah to Jesus. This new look

at Judas causes the audience to feel more sympathy toward Judas. Zeffirelli's Judas never intended to betray Jesus, and was just a puppet of the Sanhedrin.

Scorsese

Scorsese's Judas is not motivated to betray Jesus because of his love for power or money, as was DeMille's and Pasolini's Judas. Nor was he a political puppet like the Judas in *Jesus*. This Judas was led to betray Jesus by Jesus himself. Jesus knew that he would have to die, and in order to be given over to the Jewish leaders, someone would have to lead him to the leaders. He chose Judas, who fought against his destiny. Jesus, indicating the infamy that would surround Judas' character throughout the centuries, noted that he had the easier job, which was to be crucified.

Scorsese creates a sympathetic Judas, as did Zeffirelli, in that Judas is presented throughout the film as Jesus' best friend and closest disciple. It is Judas who spends the most time with Jesus. He is the one who tries to get Jesus to act at the opening of the film. In one scene, Jesus sleeps on Judas' shoulder, which shows the audience that this Jesus needs to be protected by Judas.

This Judas, although he betrays Jesus, knows that Jesus has sanctified it, so he does not kill himself as the other three Judas' do. He appears in the last temptation as an old man, who renounces Jesus' cowardice at not staying on the cross when he himself showed such courage by betraying his Master.

Jesus' Last Days

The events that occurred during the last week of Jesus' life are included in all four films as well as in all four Gospels. Many historians conclude that Jesus probably was crucified, although there is some circumspection about his death. How do the filmmakers present a man whose entry into Jerusalem captured the hearts of the Jewish only to be crucified less than a week later? How do the filmmakers present the Last Supper? This event is particularly relevant, in light of the division between Catholics and Protestants regarding the concept of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine of communion literally become the flesh and blood of Jesus. Finally, the trial and crucifixion scenes, despite the similarity in content, are scenes in which the filmmaker can infuse his intention for his presentation of Jesus Christ.

Triumphal Entry

The triumphal entry is included in all four films. Pasolini, Zeffirelli, and Scorsese follow the scriptural narrative that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. In these three films there are great crowds who wave palm branches and lay their garments on the ground in front of Jesus, indicating their reverence for him. The difference in these three scenes is only evident in the cinematic style of each filmmaker.

In DeMille's film, however, there is no triumphal entry, which again reveals that DeMille set his Jesus apart from the common people. This divine Jesus would not be seen riding on a donkey. Jesus is on the steps of the temple, having just driven away the moneychangers. He is being

confronted by Caiaphas when the people come to him waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna. Jesus remains up on the Temple steps, dressed in white, while the people are down below him. The audience does not see Jesus revered as he enters the city with the people, which would indicate his connection and concern for them. Rather, they must come to him. DeMille, using this film as an affirmation of Jesus' deity as well as a tool to bring people to Christ, tries to lift him up above the common pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Passover. Actually, DeMille only succeeds in distancing this Jesus from his followers, as he is not seen entering the city with them as is seen in the three other films.

The Last Supper

As in the Triumphal Entry scenes, the Last Supper scenes are fairly consistent with the style and intention of each filmmaker. DeMille's Last Supper scene, which is modeled after the famous DaVinci painting, shows a Jesus separated from his disciples even at the meal which is his private farewell to his closest friends. Jesus stands, wearing a white robe and is lit from behind to create a halo effect, while he reverently passes out the bread and wine. He passes the bread to his disciples, who break the bread and pass it to each other. In this scene, DeMille depicts the distance that Jesus' divinity establishes from his disciples.

Pasolini's Last Supper scene shows a Jesus who symbolically offers himself as a sacrifice to each of the disciples. What distinguishes this scene from the other three is that Jesus breaks the bread and passes it to each of his disciples himself. This seems more in keeping with Pasolini's Christ, who

was much more connected to the common people than was the holy, distanced Jesus of *Kings*.

Zeffirelli's Last Supper scene again is an attempt to convey the Judaism of Jesus and his disciples. At the opening of the scene, there is music and several of the disciples are dancing. Zeffirelli attempted to re-create a more traditional Passover feast. The men recline on the floor, rather than on a bench or chairs as in DeMille's and Pasolini's films. As the bread and wine are passed around the table, the camera reveals the disciples from Jesus' point of view. In this scene, Zeffirelli wanted his audience to recognize a Jesus who cared about his disciples individually. After Jesus passes the cup, he cries as he tells them, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me" (John 14:6). The disciples, too, are tearful, which gives this scene the feel of close friends parting.

Scorsese's Last Supper scene reveals a graphic visualization of transubstantiation. First thought to be a joke between a Calvinist and a Catholic, the scene managed to find its way into the final version of the film. Instead of emphasizing a Catholic belief, this scene merely succeeds in showing gratuitous gore, which diminishes the emotional essence of the event. The wine in the cups turns into blood, and Judas pulls from his mouth a piece of raw flesh. The inclusion of these scene points out Scorsese's Catholic heritage as well as his penchant for portraying the more gruesome aspects of life.

Trial and Crucifixion

The trial and crucifixion of Jesus is recorded in all four Gospels as well as in Kazantzakis' book. The four treatments of Jesus trial and execution are fairly similar, although there are a few minor differences that are of importance. Jesus' trial before Pilate, the account of the people's choice between Barabbas and Jesus, the carrying of the cross, and the crucifixion are all elements of the final day in Jesus' life.

In DeMille's trial scene, Jesus appears small in the spectacular setting of Pilate's gigantic throne room, yet the lightness of his costume still sets him apart. The line of questioning followed the Gospel accounts, but, as noted above, Caiaphas was the instigator of the result of Jesus trial. DeMille's Jesus appears to become smaller in stature during his last day, which would create a greater contrast to the enormity of the risen Christ.

Pasolini's Jesus is seen from a distance as he is tried. The camera focuses on the scene from the point of view of a spectator. The sound of the questioning comes from a distance which removes the audience from what Jesus is experiencing because they must struggle to hear what is being said. Because of the distance, Pasolini suggests part of the reason for the Jesus myth's expansion. He shows the event as a quick trial of a rebel, rather than a spectacular confrontation between the sinless Son of God and his accusers.

In Zeffirelli's film, like DeMille's, Jesus appears smaller and weaker during his trial so as to emphasize his humanity. The trial occurs with Pilate and the delegation from the Sanhedrin. During Pilate's questioning of Jesus, the camera shoots Pilate from slightly below and Jesus from slightly above, making Jesus appear small.

In *Temptation*, the trial is a quiet conversation between Pilate and Jesus, which lessens the significance of the event. This man does not appear to be condemned, but rather has a quiet, intimate discussion with his judge.

In the cross-carrying scenes, the audience again sees the event as a reinforcement of the filmmaker's intention. DeMille's Jesus is still divine and distanced from the humility and rejection a man in that situation should have been feeling. It is more a moving statue of a man carrying a cross than a suffering, innocent man on the way to his execution.

Pasolini's cross scene shows a man frightened and in pain and is much less picturesque than DeMille's. There is a mob surrounding Jesus as he carries the cross out of Jerusalem. The sound consists of indistinct voices shouting. Throughout the cross-carrying scene, Pasolini focused more on the characters of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John. Thus, the audience witnesses the impact of the event by watching the reactions of those who knew him, which again emphasizes Pasolini's desire to show Jesus through the eyes of others. The hand-held camera held in the midst of the crowd scenes builds tension as the audience understands the fear of being caught in such a mob. Pasolini also has Jesus' cross carried by Simon the Cyrene.

Zeffirelli's cross-bearing scene focused on the pain and suffering of an innocent man, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus. Jesus was lashed to the crossbeam of the cross, so he was unable to use his hands to steady himself. Zeffirelli filmed some of this scene from Jesus' point of view as he stumbled down the road. People are seen jeering as well as pleading with him to try to save his life. Zeffirelli also used shots from crowd member's points of view. He, like Pasolini, used a hand-held camera, which added more tension to the

scene.

Scorsese showed his Jesus still confused about his purpose. Scorsese also had his Jesus lashed to a cross. Much of this scene was shot in slow motion, indicating this Jesus' resistance to following God's plan for him. Scorsese used hand-held shots, shots from Jesus' point of view, and slow-motion to prolong the audience's impression of the agony of the event.

All four filmmaker's treatments of the crucifixion itself were in keeping with the style and mood of the rest of the film. DeMille's crucifixion scene reinforces the heavenly response to the death of God's only Son. Jesus is in white on the center cross, with the two dark thieves on either side. The sky is dark and filled with dark clouds. A forceful wind blows after Jesus dies, and the earthquake that follows Jesus' death is a typical DeMille spectacle. The sound track contains human voices moaning, thunder, and wind. His Jesus did not die quietly, and it is the audience, rather than the Centurion, who gets the impression from the tremendous response of nature at the event of Jesus' death and thinks, "Surely this was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39 and Luke 23:47).

Pasolini's crucifixion is also in line with the mood and treatment of the rest of Jesus' story in that he does not treat it as an event that affected the forces of heaven. It is told simply. The scene is fairly short, unlike DeMille's lengthy treatment. The audience watches Jesus being nailed to the cross and hears him cry out. The camera focuses on the crowd from behind the cross, and moves through the crowd as if examining their reactions to this event. The main object of the focus during the crucifixion scene is not Jesus, but Mary, his mother. Pasolini presented the Gospel as recorded in Matthew and

allowed the audience to react to this event.

There is no sound of the crowds during the last section of the crucifixion scene. As the film cuts between Jesus on the cross, the sun behind him, and Mary weeping and being supported by her friends, Mozart plays serenely in the background. Pasolini used this piece of reverent music, written by a Christian, juxtaposed against the agony of a man dying and his mother watching him die to break the distanced emotions that centuries of Christian art had molded in Christian people. Pasolini stripped away the notion of that event as art and showed his audiences the painful reality of the situation: an innocent man dies in agony on a cross while his mother, unable to save him, uncontrollably mourns the loss of her firstborn son.

After Jesus dies, Pasolini included the earthquake as DeMille had done. However, this scene was short and, after the poignancy of the treatment of the crucifixion scene, seemed unnecessary because it is not in keeping with Pasolini's attempt to demythicize the events of Jesus' life. Still, Pasolini was determined to follow the text of Matthew, which states "The earth shook and the rocks split" (27:51). There are several cuts of buildings crumbling. It seems as if the inclusion of this event was Pasolini's way of reinforcing public opinion that Jesus was divine.

Zeffirelli wanted his audience to feel the frustration of knowing this man was innocent of any crime and yet was condemned to die. He wanted them to recognize that this man, who was also divine, was dying for the sake of the audience, so he filmed the reactions of other characters who proclaim Jesus to be the Christ. These proclamations indicate to the audience that they should also see the unique purpose for the crucifixion.

Zeffirelli's crucifixion scene is quite lengthy. The camera zooms back from a medium shot of Jesus over the people in the crowd. Zeffirelli wanted to show many different reactions to the death of Christ. The Centurion, watching from a distance, proclaims him as the Son of God. Nicodemus watches from a distance and quotes the prophecy of Jesus' death in Isaiah 53.

Thunder rolls, as in DeMille's film, but Zeffirelli does not include a great spectacle or even an earthquake after Jesus dies. In the scene following Jesus' death, a heavy rain falls, and Mary, Mary Magdalene and John come to get Jesus' body. Mary weeps uncontrollably as she rocks the body of Jesus. The pain of Jesus' death is personal, which is what Zeffirelli intended. He did not want to create a Hollywood spectacle, which would distance the audience from the reality of Jesus' death, rather he wanted his audience to feel the same pain Mary expressed as she saw her dead son.

Scorsese's depiction of the crucifixion also is in keeping with his style of filmmaking, in that he graphically presents the death of a man who responds to the pain in a human way. There is a lot of blood and screaming as Jesus is nailed on the cross. Scorsese researched documents concerning the details of first century crucifixion and tried to follow those descriptions as closely as possible. His Jesus is the only one who is naked on the cross. However, Dafoe's legs are bent to one side, which awkwardly suggests that Scorsese was unwilling to shame his Jesus completely by having his nakedness show. Although the depiction of crucifixion may be historically accurate, its distracting graphic quality does not allow for the audience to connect sympathetically with Jesus' plight.

The sounds of the crowd during this scene eventually fade out and

there is silence as Jesus watches the faces of those mocking him. The silence indicates that Jesus was already denying that his crucifixion was necessary. It was at this point, that Jesus was confronted by the "angel" who takes him from the cross and allows him to live as a normal man.

Resurrection

The last image of the film will leave the audience with definite impressions about who Jesus was. One of the biggest issues that separate Jesus from being a prophet is the Biblical account of his resurrection. If Jesus could raise himself from the dead, then he must have been God. If, on the other hand, he was a man who was misunderstood by the religious leaders of his day and crucified, he was only a teacher who had aspirations to be a god. How the filmmakers handle the resurrection aspect of Jesus' story will leave a strong impression on audiences as to whether or not he was the Son of God.

There is no doubt in DeMille's film that this Jesus was the Son of God, which reinforces DeMille's desire to spread the Gospel to his audience. DeMille ends his film with characteristic spectacle. The film switches to color after Jesus has died. At the tomb the soldiers are suddenly fearful of a light coming from the stone. DeMille, using a double exposure, has Jesus appear through the stone before it rolls away. After it rolls away, the light dims and Jesus is lit in natural light. In his first encounter with the disciples, Jesus appears through the door in exactly the same manner as he appeared through the stone of the tomb. As he appears, the Easter hymn by Charles Wesley, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" is heard. DeMille wanted to be sure

that audiences knew that this Jesus had risen from the dead. He had a new body, but he was still accessible and recognizable to his followers.

When Jesus appears to his disciples, they touch him and hug him. He stands at the back of the room, his arms outstretched, and gives his disciples the same commission DeMille was compelled to follow, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). The disciples stretch out their hands towards Jesus as the camera slowly zooms in to a medium shot of Jesus. Smoke billows around Jesus, symbolizing the clouds, and the figure of Jesus is superimposed above the skyline of a city. Then a subtitle appears across Jesus' white robes, "Lo I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

In the closing scene of *Kings*, the audience reads the Great Commission of Jesus, which tells them that not only should they personally respond to Jesus message as presented in the film, but also they should tell everyone the story. DeMille also wanted his audiences to be left with the comfort that this divine and somewhat human Jesus he presented to them promised to be with them always. By superimposing the figure of Jesus against a more modern skyline, DeMille indicated that this promise spoken two thousand years ago is still relevant today.

Pasolini's film ends with a version of Jesus' resurrection that does not indicate to the audience that this man was divine. Pasolini filmed the sequence in such an understated way that it is not entirely clear whether he rose from the dead or had simply been gone and returned. On Easter morning, a group of people including Jesus' mother goes to the tomb. The angel, who was the same one who appeared to Joseph in the early parts of

the film, tells Mary that Jesus has risen. The "Gloria" is heard as quick cuts of people running and laughing appear on the screen. As they run, the voice of Jesus is heard speaking the last words of the book of Matthew. The next shot shows Jesus, wearing the light tunic and dark shawl he wore throughout most of the film, sitting on a hillside speaking. The camera cuts to a close-up of Jesus as he says, "I am with you always, even to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20). The film ends.

There are no clouds, no cinematic tricks, to show Pasolini's Jesus in his glorified state. Instead, the resurrection is handled more through the reaction of the people who learn of the resurrection rather than through special effects showing Jesus' new resurrected state. This is what Pasolini was trying to show his audiences, the life of Jesus as seen through the eyes of his followers throughout history. But Pasolini's intent is not clear, because the implications of what his resurrection meant for his followers is not discussed. There is no indication that Jesus has been changed in any way because his appearance does not change. It was his follower's reactions that are presented. They project happiness at seeing an old friend again, but not awe at the realization that this man had risen from the dead.

Zeffirelli's resurrection account, like Pasolini's, is understated, but is shown with enough detailed dialogue that the audience is able to comprehend the awesome quality of the event. It begins with the women going to the tomb to attend to Jesus' body. As the guards lead them to the tomb, they pass a man working in the garden, who asks them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Zeffirelli 1977). After the women see the empty tomb, they pass by the place where the gardener was working and he

is gone. The scene shifts to the hideout of the disciples. Mary arrives and tells them of her encounter with Jesus in the garden as recorded in John 20:10-17. The disciples do not believe Mary and she leaves them in anger. Peter then confesses that he believes Jesus rose from the dead.

After these scenes taken out of Scripture, Zeffirelli wanted to film a scene in which the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples.

> Jesus would appear at the door left open by Magdalene. A nail-pierced hand would be the first shot. At this point a wave of fear, or incredulity and discomfort comes over the apostles and they draw back like frightened animals. But Jesus approaches them and one by one reassures them, calling them by name and overcoming Thomas's resistance by urging him to put his hand on his wounds (Zeffirelli 1984 95).

Zeffirelli felt that this scenario was not effective on film and "veered our project toward the perilous shores of a Hollywood epic" (95-96). The scene was abandoned until Zeffirelli could come up with another treatment.

Following the scene of Peter's affirmation of his belief that Jesus had risen was a scene of Zerah going to the empty tomb. The camera focuses on Zerah entering the stone tomb. He walks slowly down the stairs and looks into the tomb. In a reverse angle shot, the audience sees what Zerah sees, the grave cloths lying on the stone slab. The audience realizes, with Zerah, that if the disciples had taken the body, they would have left the cloths on it. Despite his attempts to squelch the power of Jesus, Zerah recognizes that such power cannot be squelched and says, "Now it begins, now it all begins" (Zeffirelli 1977). For some time, Zeffirelli thought of ending *Jesus* with that scene.

Zeffirelli wanted to leave the audience with some sort of image of the

resurrected Jesus, however, and eventually found a photographic test of the scene where the resurrected Jesus leaves his disciples. In this scene, which is the final scene of the film, Jesus sits on a low bench and talks to his disciples. He gives them the commission as did both Jesus characters in DeMille's and Pasolini's films. Jesus puts his arms around Peter and John and draws them into him. When Peter asks Jesus not to leave them, Jesus tells them not to be afraid, "I am with you every day to the end of time" (Zeffirelli 1977). The camera zooms in close to Jesus as he says this, and Jesus looks directly into the camera as he speaks.

The close shot of Jesus' face dissolves to the scene of the empty tomb again. This quiet ending to the film, although it wasn't originally what Zeffirelli wanted, left the audience with the impression that Zeffirelli's Jesus was one who was not set apart from them, as DeMille's Christ was. He was close to the people he loved, and he looked as he did when he was first alive as did Pasolini's Christ. This personable Jesus, who spoke the same words as the Christ in DeMille's and Pasolini's closing scenes, indicates to Zeffirelli's audience that this Jesus as portrayed in this film is more accessible and concerned with individuals.

Scorsese, who does not present a Jesus who saved mankind by his death, ends the film with Jesus on the cross. After Jesus resists the last temptation and finds himself back on the cross, he cries out, "It is accomplished" (Scorsese 1988). The film ends at that moment. For Scorsese, the resurrection is not the important factor in Jesus' life, rather his struggle between his human and his divine natures become the most important focus of the film. After Jesus has resisted the final temptation and is able to follow

God's plan for him, he accepts his death. This struggle between the spirit and the flesh is overcome by Jesus' will, and there is nothing more for him to do. He has accomplished all he has set out to do.

This struggle between flesh and spirit becomes wholly personal, as Scorsese's Jesus does not need to die on the cross for others, only for himself. For Scorsese, the resurrection is not a necessary element in the story of Jesus Christ. It is enough that Jesus struggled with his dual nature and died for a good cause, although the lack of resurrection discounts any promise of redemption for those who believe.

Conclusion

All four filmmakers sought to include as much information about Jesus Christ's life and teachings as they could in their films. The four Gospels and Kazantzakis' book are both lengthy documents, and it would have been impossible for the filmmakers to include all the events recorded in these texts in a feature length film. Even Zeffirelli was forced to cut scenes because of time constraints. Therefore, in light of the need to cut the texts, the filmmakers controlled their image of Jesus by selecting which elements of the texts would be included in the film.

DeMille's focus on the text is to reveal Jesus as divine. He sought to reveal a man who walked on earth, but was never quite *of* the earth. The audience knows that this man was the Son of God, but DeMille's use of staging distanced the character of Jesus from his environment so much that he is not recognized for his humanity.

Pasolini used music and camera technique to visually portray the

biography of Jesus. His treatment is straightforward, but the dual nature of Jesus is not sufficiently examined. His presentation of his text reveals the life of an interesting man who was a good teacher and divine, but not the Son of God. Pasolini, who did not believe that Jesus was God's Son, did not attempt to emphasize Jesus' divine qualities.

Zeffirelli's desire to portray Jesus in his historical setting caused him to add so much material merely hinted at in the Bible that the Gospel story is overshadowed at times by Zeffirelli's extrapolations. He does succeed in his attempt to create his film as an educational tool. By the end of the film, Jesus' deity and humanity are sufficiently presented, so that the audience has no doubt that this man was both extraordinarily human and uniquely the Son of God.

Scorsese's choice of text was used to open up discussion about Jesus. Although the concept of the film is interesting, Scorsese's cinematic presentation of the text has the somewhat negative result of distancing the audience. Scorsese attempted to show the struggle between the spirit and flesh of Jesus. But in the end, Scorsese's Jesus is neither attractively human nor incredibly divine.

From the opening image of each film, the audience is introduced to the types of cinematic images that the individual filmmakers will use to present their narrative. The text, made visible on film, now becomes an audio-visual document that declares the filmmaker's intention. Although there are many events in Jesus' life that are included in these four films, they are handled quite differently by each filmmaker. The on-screen treatment of these events helped to present a portrait of Jesus unique to each filmmaker. Each

filmmaker attached a significance to the events included in the film, and the revelation of these elements in the films form each filmmaker's particular testimonies to Jesus' life and existence as the Son of Man and the Son of God.

Notes

[1] DeMille noted in his *Autobiography* that he and MacPherson were assisted in the writing of the script by Denison Clift, Clifford Howard, and Jack Jungmeyer.

[2] There is no screenplay or writer title given in the credits.

[3] Credit for the script is given, in order as presented on the screen, to Burgess, d'Amico, and Zeffirelli.

[4] The account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is recorded in John 11:1-44.

[5] In the Gospel story, Lazarus has been dead and in the tomb for four days. His sisters, Mary and Martha, protest Jesus' request that the stone be rolled away because of the odor (John 11:39).

Chapter 5
The Result: Public Response and Critical Analysis

In DeMille's article, "The Public is Always Right," he criticizes producers who claim that they know public taste. DeMille states:

> No one knows what the public wants. But the chances are that the man who had the original inspiration, who was present at all the conferences, who determined upon the treatment, who worked on a cogent development of the story and then translated it into photographic material and created it on the screen, knows more about its appeal to the public than the executive who comes in fresh—but late (161-162).

His argument suggests that filmmakers understand public taste better than studio executives. This may have been the case for DeMille, who had an uncanny ability to read his public, but it is not always the case for other filmmakers.

Although filmmakers are often right in their assessment of what the public wants to see on film, they will occasionally misread public taste.

Each of these four filmmakers believed that his film painted an audience-pleasing, relevant portrait of the historical figure of Jesus Christ. Although these filmmakers anticipated audience reactions to their intentions, audiences did not always understand the films. In this chapter, the reaction of the public and of critics will be examined in relation to the desired intent of the filmmakers.

Because this historical figure represents the main religion of Western society, the criticism of the films is voiced in terms of the film's artistic

content as well as its spiritual content. Criticism collected for this chapter was published in both religious and non-religious journals. Because the religious persuasion of critics in non-religious journals cannot always be ascertained, it is not possible to qualify whether or not the religious persuasion of the critic affected his or her understanding of the meaning of the film.

This chapter will focus mainly on critical response rather than using box-office figures as an indication of a positive reception to the films. The financial success of these films is not a clear indication of audiences' understanding of the meaning of Christ's life as presented by the filmmaker. With the advent of video, box-office receipts as a measure of success is not an adequate indicator. Quantifying the response of this wider audience is impossible. However, the cost of the films may be important when discussing any sort of advanced notions the public may have had about the films.

Because of the sensitive content of these films, several received much publicity in the pre-release stage. This publicity may have colored critical response, and will be examined, if relevant, as a factor in influencing critical opinion. Because the public was exposed to advanced publicity about the films generated by the press or by the filmmakers themselves, critics may have formed opinions about the films before they viewed them. Several areas of criticism will be examined in relation to the films. How did the critics understand the film? These four filmmakers had some preconceived notions about how their films would be perceived and understood. They were aware of the influential power of advanced publicity and realized that the public would also have some preconceived notions about these films. Yet once the

film is on screen and seen by audiences with differing religious sign systems, the filmmaker's intentions may not be clear. How did the critics receive the projected image of Christ in the film? How did the critics respond to the film as a whole? Was the film viewed as a religious document or as a work of art, and how did that perception influence the criticism?

Critical Response to *The King of Kings*

Despite some amount of negative criticism, *Kings* was a huge success, and the audience response indicates that DeMille's desire to reach millions would be fulfilled. *Kings* was the first successful full length treatment of the life of Jesus. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the distribution agreement for *Kings* was unique. Jeremiah Milbank, who financed the film, would not accept for himself any profits made on the film. DeMille also waived his share of the profits. All money made on the film was, first, used to make more prints of the film to be sent to missionaries and clergy and, second, given to charity. Because of this unique arrangement, the profit from this film cannot be calculated. It cost $2 million to make, which was a large sum of money for 1927, but the actual return on that $2 million is unknown.

The film was distributed worldwide. The titles were translated into 23 languages and the film was shown all around the world in "motor chapels," vehicles that generated enough electricity to project the film in areas without electrical power. In his *Autobiography*, DeMille guessed, perhaps generously, knowing his bent for exaggerated spectacle, that the film had been seen by eight hundred million people (281).[1]

DeMille was aware of the power of advanced publicity during the

filming of *Kings*. He made sure the press noticed the air of piety on the set. Unfortunately, one day H. B. Warner was photographed in his Biblical robes while smoking a cigarette and reading the sports pages. DeMille was alerted "to the dangerous possibilities of the wrong kind of publicity" (Koury 121). After that incident, Warner was confined to his dressing room unless he was filming. He was disguised and transported secretly to the set.

DeMille, perhaps inadvertently, reinforced his intention for his film in the manner in which the crucifixion scene was handled. No one was allowed to see Warner placed upon the cross. A drape was dropped over it as Warner was bound to the cross, then, when the cross was in place, the drape was removed so that the cast and crew would see Jesus placed picturesquely on the cross. This elimination of the pain, the suffering, the tedium of crucifixion in place of something more aesthetic and pleasing exemplifies DeMille's view of Christ. DeMille's Christ came to love and heal, not to suffer and be punished for crimes he did not commit. Although DeMille wanted to show his audience a living, breathing Christ, he is not entirely human because his humanity is hidden by a drape and a dressing room door.

DeMille's concern with proper advanced publicity and his desire to create an aura of piety and mystery around his production did influence some critics. The reviewer from *Variety* noted that the film came when North Americans needed a film on such a subject. "*The King of Kings* should make more church-goers. It most certainly will further respect for religion" (15). As noted in Chapter 2, it was DeMille's frustration with the immorality of some Hollywood personalities that led him to make the film.

Critics hailed his production and many of them understood his film as

it was presented. Most probably aware of the mood DeMille had set for the filming of such a subject, they viewed the film as reverently as DeMille wanted them to. Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* noted that at the initial screening at the Gaiety Theatre "hardly a whispered word was uttered among the audience" (*New York Times Film Reviews* 360).

Many reviewers accepted DeMille's tone of reverence at face value, while others understood what DeMille was trying to do with both his staging of the film's production and the film itself. Welford Beaton of the *Film Spectator* noted that DeMille had "one of the best business minds in pictures and the making of *The King of Kings* was the most brilliant stroke of his business career" (qtd. in Hochman 84). To Beaton, this creation of DeMille's was a business venture rather than a statement of faith.[2]

Indeed, one contemporary critic was caught up in the beauty and novelty of the film, but, after reflection, resented the fact that DeMille purposely manipulated the audience's emotions.

> I think his is the kind of picture which grips the eye at the moment, but which on reflection (and I believe nearly everyone does reflect a little after seeing the picture) one is bound to shrug off as silly because his psychological values, even in their own convention, are false (Barry 231).

She was swept away by DeMille's artistry and ability to read his audiences, but she also could distance herself enough in retrospect to critically view DeMille's cinematic attempts to sway the audience's sympathies.

Gilbert Seldes, writing for *New Republic*, confessed that he already had a bias against DeMille films. He found the advanced publicity to be about "the usual thing," which he wrote was "commonly known as tripe" (298). He recognized DeMille's use of famous art in his cinematic pictures,

but felt that this adherence to Renaissance art rendered the picture lifeless and static. Other critics, however, praised the film for its obvious cinematic reenactment of famous art:

> The film's beautifully textured visuals, now making dramatic use of chiaroscuro, now saturated in diffused light, pay homage to a thousand years of Christian art; and the picture moves with a measured dignity perfectly in tune with this reverential style (Elley 45).

Not only did the film provoke different responses in regards to its visual image, but it also created tension among the public in regards to its religious content. The *Variety* critic, who gave the film a rave review, thought that the film was "predestined to provoke many and strong arguments, according to the faith, and likely of all faiths" ("*The King of Kings*" 15). However, this critic also recognized that the film had been "scrupulously produced to prevent adverse religious criticism" (15). The film may have appeared somewhat controversial to contemporary critics, but in light of the arguments provoked by recent films on the same subject, any arguments that *Kings* may have provoked pale in comparison.

Most of the opposition to the film was from the Jewish community. DeMille sympathized with the Jews who were sensitive to the fact that there were those around them who believed that they were responsible for Jesus' death. DeMille's awareness of this sensitivity led him to go to great lengths in *The King of Kings* to show that "The Jewish people of Jesus' time followed and heard Him gladly, that His death came at the hands of a few unrepresentative, corrupt religious leaders and the cowardly and callous Roman government" (DeMille 1959 282). DeMille's intention to appease the Jews was misunderstood by some people, however, and the film was banned

from some screens in "certain American cities" (282).[3]

The largest objection to the film from the Jewish community concerned two of the leading actors in the film. Rudolph Schildkraut and his son Joseph Schildkraut, who played Caiaphas and Judas, respectively, were Jewish. They had, in the words of DeMille, "taken their roles as artists with no thought of credal prejudice" but were "caught in the wash of opposition to the film and condemned by some of their fellow Jews as traitors" (283). DeMille, knowing the Schildkrauts were Jews, chose to cast them as the villains of the film which, had he understood his Jewish audiences, should have alerted him to the possibility of controversy.

In his *Autobiography*, DeMille gives an account of a man who, after having seen *Kings* as a boy, entered the ministry and during World War II was able to save many Jewish children through the Czech underground. DeMille wished that Rudolph Schildkraut would have heard the story, as he looked at it as an exoneration of any guilt the Schildkrauts may have felt for angering fellow Jews.

DeMille was also accused, on more than one occasion, of plagiarizing the story for his film. He told the press: "I was always under the impression that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the accepted version of the life of Christ" (285). He suggested that if that were not so, the records should be changed. The case was dropped. However, the charges of plagiarism indicate that there were many in the public who wanted to denounce the film in whatever way they could. Although the reasons for these attacks were not always known, much of the opposition stems from the film being looked upon as a religious document on the life of Christ, rather than an artistic

treatment of a well-known story.

Not only was there some misunderstanding of the film in terms of DeMille's intention, but also critics did not all agree that this cinematic picture of Christ was accurate. Some did accept Warner as the type of Christ that DeMille wanted them to see. The reviewer in *Outlook* wrote:

> It is a manly Christ that is depicted, masculine, gracious, restrained, and dignified, human and not lacking in a human sense of humor. In this respect the figure of Christ in this moving picture seems truer than it is in many a well-known painting (73).

In this case, the critic accepted DeMille's intention for his Jesus; the antithesis of the "effeminate, sanctimonious, machine-made Christs of second-rate so-called art" (DeMille 1959 276).

Many critics who saw the film when it opened touted Warner's portrayal as the best they had ever seen. Of course, considering how few films of Christ had been made at that time, that claim may have been true. Warner's portrayal has passed the test of time for many modern critics, however. Richard Campbell and Michael Pitts write in their book, *The Bible on Film*, that Warner's performance "is one of the finest ever put on film. He gives a quiet, yet very masculine, portrayal of The Savior and his work is truly inspirational" (108). Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis call Warner's acting "impeccable; as Jesus he is a virile, charismatic figure, both convincingly human and convincingly divine" (44).

Yet despite all the positive impressions of the film, there were many who did not share DeMille's belief that Warner was indeed the manly, virile image of Christ. Ivan Butler saw Warner in appearance as "halfway between the silken-haired, fragile, feminine figure of Victorian colour supplements

and the tougher, more realistic portrayals of later years" (40). To Butler, DeMille's portrait fell short in presenting a Jesus who was both divine and human.

> H. B. Warner, for all the beauty, tenderness and dignity of his portrayal, or perhaps because of these very virtues, never quite convinced as the Son of Man as well as the Son of God (48).

Charles Higham saw Warner as a fragile and gentle Jesus, not one with the strength to physically withstand all that Jesus had to withstand (1973b 166). Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 3, although Warner had moments of genuine humanity, his portrayal fell short of revealing a wholly human Jesus.

Derek Elley, writing in 1984, looked back at DeMille's controlled publicity concerning his intended portrait of Christ with a certain amount of discernment.

> Though one may take with a pinch of salt DeMille's statement that he wished to break with the Sunday School representation of Christ —Warner's performance, though soulful, hardly does that, and he again perpetuates the notion that Christ was middle aged (46).

Other critics, both in the film's early reviews, and in modern commentary, found fault in Warner's appearance in that he was too heavily made up and did not look young enough to portray Christ. Even Scorsese, who saw the film as a child, complained that Warner was "obviously much older than he's playing" (1989 131), which was the truth. Scorsese's childish eyes saw the falseness of a middle-aged man trying to play thirty-three-year-old Jesus.

Despite the criticism of DeMille's methods and his choice of Warner for Christ, the film was enormously successful and has probably been seen by more people than any other film. It was DeMille's personal favorite. He screened it frequently and "always wept unashamedly during its running"

(Ringgold 12). He never compared the picture with any of his other films. Curiously DeMille, when asked to select his choice for the ten best films ever made for a Brussels art and film festival in 1951, modestly placed *Kings* in fifth place, while his original *Ten Commandments* (1923) is ranked fourth. If DeMille had been truly honest in his listing, he would have placed *Kings* first, or not included it in the list at all.

Clearly the film affected DeMille emotionally, as it did many others. He received scores of letters from viewers of the film, most of them favorable. The critical letters were placed in a secret vault, while the positive letters were bound into three thick volumes and kept in DeMille's office. Letters implored DeMille to "carry on his ministry" and thanked him for his film which would increase the "power for good in sin-laden Hollywood" (Koury 127). Time and again, DeMille's commission from his mother was reinforced by the accounts of changed lives in response to *Kings*.

In 1927 Welford Beaton wrote that DeMille had created a film "which will tend to standardize the world's conception of the New Testament" (qtd. in Hochman 84). Beaton would not have known how true that statement was. DeMille's film was so widely seen and accepted as an accurate portrayal of the story of Christ, that it effectively became a standard for more than thirty years. So deeply had DeMille's epic embedded the images of the Christ story into the public's and the film industry's minds that another major film version of Christ's life was not produced until *King of Kings* in 1961.

Critical Response to *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*

Gospel, which is full of incongruities and unclear in presenting Pasolini's intentions, caused confusion among critics and audiences. It was not well-received by the general public, but delegated to the status of "art film." It has become more a vehicle for studying the complexities of Pasolini's creations, rather than an accepted historical treatment on the life of Jesus Christ.

While DeMille's film was produced amidst a furor of publicity and showy piety, Pasolini, while working on his version of the life of Jesus Christ, hoped to avoid publicity. Pasolini was unable to stop the flow of advanced publicity for the project, which divided Italians into two groups, those who denounced the film completely and those who supported Pasolini in his work. Pasolini began work on *Gospel* during the controversy surrounding his film *La Ricotta*, which "invok[ed] the wrath of the old establishment" (Snyder Preface) and caused Pasolini to be convicted of slandering the church. Understandably, the church was suspect when Pasolini's newest project, a film on the life of Christ as described in the book of Matthew, was announced.

Pasolini understood the difficulty of mounting such a project. He felt driven to the project, but knew enough of public opinion to realize that the choice of subject matter for this film so close on the heels of his court trials about *La Ricotta* might pose some problems for him and those concerned with the film. He wrote his producer Alfredo Bini in June 1963:

> The idea of making a film on the Gospels, and the technical intuition that goes with it, are instead, I must confess, the fruit of a furious wave of irrationalism. . . . All this once again calls my whole career as

> a writer dangerously into question, I know. But it would be a fine thing if, loving the Christ of Matthew as I do with all my heart, I should then be afraid to call something into question (Siciliano 273).

Pasolini soon realized that his film had the potential to invoke even more controversy than *La Ricotta* had done.

The film was a strenuous project for Pasolini, and cost a great deal of money for a film of that type, which "aroused great suspicion among potential backers" (Siciliano 266). Alfredo Bini, the producer, worked very hard to get the picture mounted, but to others, the film seemed to be "doomed to failure" (266). To some Italians, familiar with both the *La Ricotta* trials and the type of work Pasolini created, the idea that Pasolini was to create a film of Christ was blasphemous.

One of the major backers of the film, however, was the Christian group, Pro Civitate Christiana of Assisi to which "in November 1959 the papal brief of John XXIII had assigned the goal of 'leading society back to the principles of the Gospels' " (272). The knowledge that this group was financing the film of a known Communist, even though the film was about Christ, aroused a great deal of public outcry. The Pro Civitate Christiana remained firm in their decision to back the film and supported their choice.

> We have had an excellent impression of Pier Paolo Pasolini, as we have of everyone whom we have the good fortune to approach. Indeed in every human face we see reflected the wonderful face of the Lord. . . . To all those who tell us that Pasolini is not only an unbeliever but a sinner as well, we humbly reply that even if true, this does not seem to us any reason to shut the door in his face and deny him the help he has asked us for. . . . To certain kinds of attacks we have not responded, since the Pro Civitate Christiana is not in the habit of engaging in controversy. We have however submissively observed that if all of us were truly Christian on each human sore we would not pour vinegar but the oil of kindness. Jesus died to help everyone, to save everyone (272).

The group closed the door on further debates, clearly noting that they were responding to the Pope's admonition to use the cinema as an evangelical tool.[4]

The preconceived notions about the film were not orchestrated by Pasolini, as DeMille had done with his film, rather, it was the public's opinions about Pasolini's past works and political affiliations that influenced the general opinions about the film. Pasolini's name was associated with Marxism, and many Christians could not conceive of Pasolini creating a portrait of a Jesus who was anything but a Communist revolutionary. Therefore, the opening of the film was not without incident.

Kauffmann describes the first showing of *Gospel* at the Venice Film Festival on September 4, 1964.[5]

> [There were] Catholic and neo-fascist pickets outside the hall protesting that this atheistic Red had dared to sully this sacred subject. When Pasolini was introduced before the showing, as every director is, some well-rehearsed agitators in the audience jumped to their feet and started blowing whistles. They were ejected and more trouble was foreseen. Then the picture started, and everybody shut up (33).

Indeed, many present at the first screening were surprised at the finished product. Pasolini had told reporters before the screening that he was a Marxist and therefore an atheist, so audiences and critics entered the theatre expecting a Marxist declaration rather than a fairly sympathetic treatment of the Christ of Matthew.

Critics continued to struggle to understand the film in terms of Pasolini's varying philosophies. Schwartz noted in his book, *Pasolini Requiem*, that these critics "became apoplectic trying to decide whether to

label the work Marxist or Catholic" (454). Although the film was often defined in terms of Pasolini's personal philosophical and political connections, it was accepted by the artistic community as a work of art rather than propaganda. The film won a special jury prize in Venice and went on to receive three Academy Award nominations, a Best Foreign Film award by the National Board of Review, and a citation by OCIC, the international Catholic cinema office (Pitman 1990 179).[6]

Although the OCIC was pleased with the film, other Catholics accused Pasolini of "subtly using religion to promote Communist ideology" ("Biblical Film Stirs Dispute" 3559). Not only were some Catholics unhappy with Pasolini's portrayal of the Christ story, but also some Communists "accused him of turning out religious propaganda" (3559). Thus, the differing philosophical factions were split about the film. Some Catholics thought it a fair treatment of Christ and others did not, while some Communists thought it an interesting film, and others felt that Pasolini was clearly denouncing his ties with Marxism and embracing the church.

Pasolini's public persona was a mystery and his film was viewed and criticized not as an artistic and religious document, but also a political one. In 1965 Gunner Kumlien wrote of the influence of the film among Communists.

> There is no doubt *Gospel* has had considerable impact on the Communist rank and file in Italy, and that it has swept away most objections to the dialogue. Pasolini himself tours the country urging at Communist meetings that the traditional hostile attitude of Marxists toward religion is passe (472).

Thus, the film is thought to have been used as an instructional piece.

Pasolini confronted the Marxists with their anti-religious bias and attempted to use his work to show others his unique blend of philosophies.

Gospel received international attention. Before its release in New York in 1966, there was a special showing of *Gospel* to bishops and members of the ecumenical council. Coming close on the heels of the Hollywood spectacles *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Gospel* was viewed by the group as "more impressive and reverently moving than any of the star-studded, million dollar Biblical epics recently shown in the city" ("Biblical Film Stirs Dispute" 3559).

Although the film was accepted as an artistically important film, many critics seem unable to divorce themselves from Pasolini's philosophies and review the film as a work of art. Pasolini's meaning for the film was clouded over by the public's interest in him as a dichotomy of a man torn between belief systems. Kauffman misunderstood Pasolini's attempt to portray Christ, and presents his understanding of Pasolini's intention as if the film were a skirmish in a battle Pasolini was waging against the church. "Pasolini, the atheistic Communist, had beaten his opponents by making the best film about Jesus in cinema history" (33). Kauffmann goes on to refute his own definition of Pasolini by stating that the "film was made for only one reason: love of Jesus" (34). Why would an atheist make a film because they loved Jesus, who claimed to be God?

Such opposing statements are typical of the criticism of *Gospel*. Because of Pasolini's own struggle to reconcile his concerns with Marx, Christ, and Freud, his critics seem to mirror his confusion in their response to his film. G. Nowell-Smith, in his article, "Pasolini's Originality," tries to

classify possible readings of the film. He describes his classification as Catholic, Protestant, and agnostic. He cannot define the film as Marxist because he views the film as "populist, but not communist. Its view of history is critical but not materialist" (12).

Pasolini did not try, as DeMille did, to influence his audiences to accept the film as a political or religious document. Rather, he presented his film as a work of an avowed non-believer, and let the audience respond to the ideas presented. Therefore, some critics did not comment on political undertones, but expressed their understanding of Pasolini's desire to present, without comment, the juxtaposition of natural and supernatural. Pasolini had set out to demythicize the figure of Christ, and used a young Spanish student to allegorically represent Christ on the screen.

By and large, those commenting on Pasolini's choice of Irazoqui were fascinated by the fact that he was a non-actor and that he did not fit the previous cinematic representations of Christ. Susan MacDonald wrote of Irazoqui's Christ from a Marxist perspective.

> Like Pasolini's other heroes he is a rebel. His Lenin-like figure, neurotic and fanatic, moves among the peasantry, a passionate revolutionary threatening and cajoling, a man with a mission who has 'come not to bring peace but a sword.' There is little, or nothing, of the gentle divine in Pasolini's Christ (25).

For a generation brought up on Warner's Christ, Irazoqui was, to some, a threat, and, to others, a breath of fresh air.

Many critics did not understand Pasolini's decision to portray such a harsh Christ. Pasolini's reasoning for reinforcing the idea that Jesus came with a sword was clear to critics, but some felt Irazoqui's sternness left this Jesus too one-dimensional.

> Christ . . . becomes a strangely unlovable figure; almost, in fact, a bit of a bore at times, despite much fire, authority, and passion. Surely, one feels, despite the stern duties before him, despite the necessity for grave commitment, and knowledge of tragedy to come, surely this Christ smiled more often than this? (Butler 52).

Irazoqui was noted by a few critics for his simplicity, but not at all for his brilliance. Pasolini consciously made the choice not to use professional actors, who would have used their technique to create brilliance on the screen. He felt such performances would not have allowed him to demythicize the portrait of Christ he was painting on screen. The critical response to his choice, however, was that he presented an unapproachable Jesus.

It was not Pasolini's representation of Christ that earned praise, but rather the simplicity of the film as a whole. After viewing Hollywood spectacles with all-star casts, it was refreshing for audiences to see a straghtforward, low-budget film with an unknown cast. In 1990, after evaluating several films on the life of Christ, Randy Pitman writes that "*The Gospel According to St. Matthew* is, at the same time, the most beautiful, most accurate, and most spiritual life of Christ yet filmed" (Dec. 1990 179). What most critics owed this simplicity to was the fact that Pasolini's treatment strictly adhered to one Gospel account.

Nearly all the critics saw this adherence to the Gospel as an advantage for Pasolini. Bored with the wizardry of Hollywood at the expense of a good story, they appreciated Pasolini's ability to stay within the boundaries he had set for himself.

> In some ways this self-imposed limitation works to his advantage. It is, as it were, the finite artist's hedge against the infinite. To attempt

> to put Christ on the screen is perhaps inexcusable arrogance. On the other hand, to attempt to capture on the screen in a dynamic and imagination-stirring way what Matthew told us about Christ is a project of more manageable proportions (Walsh 308).

The perceived modesty with which Pasolini treated his portrait of Jesus was greatly admired by critics.

Pasolini's treatment of Christ was well-received for the most part, but the movie was not as widely seen as *Kings*. The film has been classified by many as an art film, and is not readily available. Pasolini's intention for the film was at times misunderstood, and he was criticized for even creating the work, but there were some critics who believed the film was a good balance of practicality and spirituality. In *Sight and Sound*, (Winter 1964-65), Elizabeth Sussex wrote

> [Pasolini] managed to avoid most excesses of cinematic piety or special-effect-department omnipotence, and seems to have captured as much mystery as social message (qtd in Blue 20).

Thus, while there were many critics who discussed the film as a work of art, there were many others who based their opinions on the film not on its content, but on the political philosophies of its maker. Most critics agreed that Irazoqui was an interesting choice for Jesus, but they were not particularly moved by his performance. This was not a Christ image that would live in audience memories as Warner did. But the film as a whole would continue to challenge "traditional visual concepts of the Gospel and its people" ("Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo" 17).

Critical Response to *Jesus of Nazareth*

In direct contrast to Pasolini's limited scope of *Gospel* is Zeffirelli's *Jesus*, which was an expensive, elaborate production that critics and the general public almost unanimously hailed as the most honest, reverent treatment of Jesus' life yet filmed. There was a certain amount of advanced publicity that threatened to cause the film to be banned. When the film was finally televised, the public was pleasantly surprised by the film and wondered at the opposition.

Zeffirelli's film took eight months to film, and many scoffed as it was being made, again with presuppositions about what the film would be like. The film cost $18 million, so many people expected a "Cecil B. DeMille operation with all the bass drum and fanfare to open up a parade of movie stars on the posters" (Zeffirelli 1984 21). At the time of its initial broadcasting, *Jesus* had cost more than any other television movie ever produced, which indicated to the audience that they should expect a spectacular and well-made film.

Like the other films studied here, there was a great deal of interest in the film as it was being created. Zeffirelli's film captured international attention because it boasted a cast which was a veritable who's who in the British and American film industry. The fact that Jesus was not a film, but rather a television miniseries also aroused some attention. Zeffirelli had six hours with which to tell the story of Jesus, which was at least twice as long as any other major film on the life of Christ. This film would also be shown in homes across Europe and America, so the viewership would be immense. Zeffirelli predicted that 300 million viewers would see the film in its initial

airing.

Zeffirelli stayed committed to keeping the portrayal of Jesus as palatable as possible to the Jewish and Christian communities. His producer, Lew Grade, continued to emphasize to Zeffirelli that the film had to be acceptable to people of all denominations. Zeffirelli realized he had more than just Grade to satisfy. Because of the subject matter he was presenting and the violent emotions that have been evoked in defense of Jesus, he was treading on unstable ground while the film was in production. Only the finished product would determine whether he was successful in his intended portrait of Jesus.

In his *Autobiography*, Zeffirelli recalled his realization that he was not working on an ordinary film.

> It was an unnerving thought that for once I would not simply have a producer to contend with but church leaders, theologians, historians and even the ordinary faithful. Also much of the potential audience would be unbelievers who, without the forgiveness of faith, would readily find any bad dialogue or over-sentimentality ridiculous. All those Hollywood epics were stacked in the background ready to provide an all-too-easy batch of clichés and schmaltzy scenarios. If any hint of that should creep in we would be pilloried (Zeffirelli 1986 274).

Zeffirelli is referring specifically to DeMille's *Kings*, *King of Kings* (1961), and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) in this statement. He clearly did not want his film to contain a revamping of the clichés and schmaltzy scenarios he felt were contained in these films. He wanted his film to dispel those images and replace them with images of Jesus which were more realistic representations of who he was and how he lived. Because he had what he felt were inadequate presentations "stacked in the background," he fancied

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A public statement was issued from the company which told the reason for the withdrawal, but the statement did not reflect the more relevant reason for GM's decision not the sponsor the film. Although GM was clearly worried that Christians protesting the film would take their business elsewhere, the statement did not reflect that concern. "General Motors found the program so sensitive and beautiful that they think it would be wrong for a commercial company to take advantage of it" (Solomon 121). The humility expressed in the statement sounds like a throwback to the public declarations of DeMille about his film. Eventually, a new sponsor, Procter & Gamble, was found and the film proceeded.[8]

The National Council of Churches and NBC both came to the defense of the film. The NCC admonished Jones and his followers as leading a "biased, uninformed and repressive attack on the film" (Hickey A-3). They affirmed that the film would not be an attack on the divinity of Jesus. NBC, who had a vested interest in a smooth airing, "produced testimonials from a score of Catholic, Protestant, Moslem, Jewish, and Mormon experts attesting to the film's historical and theological validity" (A-3). From one misinterpreted remark of Zeffirelli came an emotionally charged public reaction. This reaction reinforces the great risk these four filmmakers took in choosing to present the life of Jesus Christ.

Zeffirelli experienced similar experiences to DeMille in regards to the public demands that his cast continue to live their roles off-screen. While filming in a Muslim village in Morocco, Olivia Hussey caused a bit of a stir among the local villagers. Moslems accept the truth of the virginity of Mary, who was the mother of the prophet the Moslems call Issa. The villagers came

to identify Hussey with Mary.

> Olivia arrived one day dressed, unexceptionally to us, in tight jeans and a t-shirt. A village elder came to see me to beg me to ask her to dress modestly because of the reverence they had for her (Zeffirelli 1986 281).

Although this was not a highly publicized encounter as was the photograph of Warner, it pointed out to Zeffirelli how careful he had to be with his larger audience's perception of how he was portraying his material.

DeMille, fifty years earlier, understood that his actors would be identified inextricably with their roles. He realized that no man was truly worthy of playing Jesus Christ, but due to his acute knowledge of his public, he knew that Warner would have to play his role both on and off the screen. Zeffirelli, on the other hand, did not realize with what intensity those viewing the filming would identify actors with their roles. Although he was filming in a country that did not have a strong film culture, their ready identification of Hussey with the character of the Virgin Mary indicated an interesting human identification phenomenon.

People identify with a character more easily if they have a visual image of them rather than just an audio or written image. Although audiences knew intellectually that actors were not, in reality, the characters, they could not prevent the impression of the face of the actor onto their personal image of the historical figure. Hussey gave the Moroccan villagers a face to their knowledge of the Virgin Mary, just as Warner, Irazoqui, Powell, and Dafoe gave their audiences a visual image for Jesus Christ. Because of the identification with a divine character, the public demanded that these actors demonstrate the characteristics of their roles, both on and off the

screen.

To make sure believers would accept the finished product, the film was screened before its airing. Twenty religious leaders representing Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant faiths attending the special screening. It was well received by this group. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee noted that the film "avoided all the negative treatment of Jews" (Waters 78). This pleased Zeffirelli, as it was one of his main concerns that the film not paint the Jews in a bad light.

During Easter week, 1977, *Jesus* was shown in the United States, England, Italy, and several other European countries. Before the showing on April 10 in Italy, Pope Paul VI mentioned the film in his Sunday Blessing before Saint Peter's Square.

> Tonight you are going to see an example of a fine use that can be made of the new ways of communication that God is offering man. But keep in mind that, whatever good feelings and effects this experience will have on you, this must only mark the beginning of your search for God. Only the beginning (Zeffirelli 1984 ix).

For the Italian people, this advance stamp of approval from the Pope left them little choice but to watch and accept the film. Zeffirelli described the "astronomical" viewership of the program in Italy and his dramatic vision of the effect of his work.

> In Italy between 80% and 83% of the population watched the programmes. In practical terms this meant that only babies, the blind and the otherwise infirm did not see the films. The police reported that theft dropped to near zero, which gave rise to my fantasy of a bunch of hard-bitten crooks in the back room of some sleazy bar gazing remorsefully at the flickering television (1986 296).

Although Zeffirelli had no indication that such a scenario of repentance occurred during the showing of Jesus, he was overwhelmed by the positive

response.

Zeffirelli, like DeMille, received scores of letters each time the film was shown.[9] Zeffirelli recorded several examples of letters he had received in *Jesus: A Spiritual Diary*. In Zeffirelli's introduction to the English version of the book, he writes:

> I only wish I had the space to reproduce in detail some of the letters from every kind, nationality, race, and class of person telling me of the impact that the film has had on their lives. . . .
>
> If only one person in the world is moved for the good by my film, then all effort and sacrifice will have been worthwhile.
>
> Time—and such letters as those I have just outlined—have fulfilled my hopes more than I dreamed possible.
>
> And more than I deserve (xi).

Zeffirelli's words appear to demonstrate a false humility and prideful reverence even greater than DeMille's. Zeffirelli had set out early on in the process of making Jesus to stay away from the clichés of the Hollywood epics that had preceded his film. The public response to the film indicated that he had achieved his goal. The fatuous tone of his words imply that he cast himself as a modern day saint, who sacrificed greatly to reach even one person with the good news. Of course, being a Christian, he realized that the praise was more than he deserved and actually should have gone to "the only star of this project . . . the Star of Bethlehem" (21).

There is great difficulty involved in presenting religious material without it appearing trite and sanctimonious. Although Zeffirelli has a deep faith and was truly surprised at the outcome of the film, his words, though obviously heartfelt, ring false. It is as if such feelings, based on personal convictions, are too deep to be adequately expressed in words, or, perhaps, on

film.

Zeffirelli's careful treatment of the life of Jesus did not ring false with the public. As soon as the film aired, the reactions against Zeffirelli's comments about his "common" Jesus disappeared. It was obvious that his remark was misinterpreted, as those who saw the film understood that Zeffirelli intended that his audiences see Jesus as a Jewish man who lived and breathed in first-century Palestine. He also intended that his audiences recognize that this man was set apart and different because of his divinity.

Most critics understood what Zeffirelli was trying to do with his film, as his intent was widely publicized during the controversy surrounding the film. There was a presupposition among critics that the film would be a picture of Jesus as merely man, but once the film was seen, Zeffirelli's comments were reinterpreted by critics. They realized, when viewing the many cinematic treatments of Jesus' life as a Jew, that Zeffirelli wanted to reveal Jesus Christ as he really was, a religious Jew.

Robert Powell, a trained actor, but one who was not widely known internationally, received positive criticism for his work. Richard Campbell and Michael Pitts wrote that Powell gave "both a powerful and sympathetic portrayal of Jesus Christ" (179). Several critics, however, did notice that Zeffirelli's common Jesus did not resemble a typical Middle Eastern man, but rather the "same stereotyped, blue-eyed, softly speaking Jesus that had been used since the silent era" (Solomon 121). John O'Connor of the *New York Times* had some difficulty in reconciling the scripted Jesus with his physical appearance.

Robert Powell's Jesus is oddly disturbing in the initial scenes.

> Physically Powell is not the sort of tiger limned in Burgess' script. He is lean, almost frail, and is attractive in a soft, somewhat feline manner (33).

Some critics, therefore, saw Zeffirelli's Jesus in the way some saw DeMille's, soft and gentle rather than the Jesus who came not to bring peace but a sword.

Nor did critics view him as common in terms of his humanity. A reporter for *TV Guide* in the column "As We See It" noted that "the Jesus portrayed by Powell is human, but certainly not ordinary" (A-2). O'Connor did not see much evidence of the humanity of Jesus, pointing out that "this Jesus can hardly raise His hand without performing a miracle, and the script underlines His role as the Messiah, the Son of God" (33).

Some critics noted that Powell's command over the character grew in intensity as the film progressed. O'Connor writes that as the film proceeds, Powell's performance "gains in strength, his conception of the role has increased impact. This is a quietly confident Jesus, never doubting His divinity" (33). Other critics also noted this growth in Powell's portrayal ("Late Blooming 'Jesus' " 94). Although there was some criticism about the physical appearance of Zeffirelli's Jesus, the affirmation of Powell's ability to portray a believable Jesus was overwhelming.

In retrospect, both the Christian and non-Christian communities looked at the Rev. Bob Jones' vehement denunciation of the film as ridiculous. *Jesus* was applauded by the larger community of viewers as being a fine piece of art. O'Connor called the film a superspectacular, and a film that "ranks among the best and most impressive efforts to tackle a subject that is both delicate and monumental" (33). *TV Guide* effusively

praised the film.

> It was visually beautiful, splendidly cast, sensitively directed, effectively produced, historically evocative, emotionally stirring, and profoundly reverent. Of the various attempts to portray the life of Christ, it is easily the most praiseworthy ("As We See It" A-2).

Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis noted that the film was "something of a revelation in comparison to the many previous movie versions of the Savior's life" (187).

The fact that the film was a television movie rather than a theatre movie must have affected the criticism. Jesus was viewed in homes, where the public was comfortable. The criticisms reflect a certain amount of gratitude on the part of the viewers that Zeffirelli had brought a portrait of the life of Jesus Christ right into their homes. Some critics had difficulty with the fact that the film was aired on two Sundays, rather than on back to back nights, but this did not seem to affect their praise of the film.

The negative treatment the film received was not in response to the treatment of the subject or its cinematography, but rather the method in which the subject was depicted. Some felt the film moved too slowly and reverently at times. Others criticized Zeffirelli for not keeping to the narratives in the Gospel. Although the added material was not controversial, some critics felt that the inclusion of additional material was at the expense of presenting many of the important events in Jesus' life.

The film was applauded by the Christian community as a sensitive treatment of the life of Christ. No protest was raised against the portrayal of Jesus. Most criticism in religious journals, although praising the artistic accomplishments of the film, realized that it was not a religious document,

but a television movie about Christ's life. Charles Henderson writes in *The Christian Century* of the film's failure as a religious document.

> If it [the film] fails as a religious statement, as I think it does, the failure does not indicate any devious intention to denigrate the image of Jesus Christ. Rather, it illustrates once again that the mystery of the incarnation lies beyond the ken of the camera's eye (374).

The reviews of the film in both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* were published after the film was aired, which revealed a cautionary tendency on the part of NBC to prerelease the film to the religious press.

The reporters at *Christianity Today*, well aware of the controversy surrounding the film, wanted to review the film in their March 19 issue so that their Christian readership could read a review of the film before it was aired. NBC told them the film was still being edited, which was not true, as *Christianity Today* later learned that the film had already been screened by some religious leaders, including Billy Graham and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade as well as by selected members of the press. NBC's neglect of the religious press, in light of Jones' attack, foreshadowed the controversy that surrounded Scorsese's *Temptation*.

Critical Response to *The Last Temptation of Christ*

The criticism of *Temptation* was almost solely confined to criticism of the choice of text and the controversy the text invoked rather than the film itself. Because of the intense controversy surrounding the film before and after its release, some critic's opinions may have been preformed. The responses to the film became a reviewer's political statement rather than an honest critique of the film as a work of art.

Unlike the other three films studied in this thesis, *Temptation* was considered low budget for the type of film it was. With a budget of $6.5 million, Universal wanted to make sure the film did not cost them too much money, as it had already sparked controversy when it was in pre-production stages at Paramount and was not expected to be a box-office hit.[10]

There was a great deal of confusion surrounding the sources and events of the controversy. While books and articles written by and about Scorsese explain the controversy in one way, books and articles written by those who protested the film explain the controversy quite differently. Larry Poland, who worked with Tim Penland during the production of *Temptation*, wrote a book called *The Last Temptation of Hollywood*, in which he told Penland's side of the story. Both Poland and Scorsese claimed to be telling the truth, and yet numerous conflicts arise when studying the varying reports of the controversy.

Universal, hoping to avoid too much conflict, had hired Tim Penland, a marketing consultant for the Christian community, to act as a liaison between the producers and the Christian community. In Penland's first meeting with Tom Pollock, the Chairman of the Board at Universal, he suggested that Pollock "set up screenings with religious leaders as soon as possible to get a feel for what kind of challenges you face" (Polland 17).

Pollock agreed to the idea of a screening. Penland arranged for several evangelical Christian leaders to attend a screening that was set for June 10. In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Penland assured Christians that he would not stay with the project if he discovered that the film was in any way blasphemous (Rabey 43).

Some Christian leaders who knew the content of Kazantzakis' book, were skeptical that a treatment of the book could end up being anything but blasphemous. Steve Lawhead, a Christian writer wrote that "Unless they [Scorsese] take great liberties of personal interpretation, it would be very difficult to get a faith-affirming story out of that book" (43). Penland continued to assure Christians that they should not "prejudge the film" or "criticize it until they can comment intelligently" (43). The screening for evangelicals was to act as a buffer against premature protest.

However, as the date for the screening approached, Universal told Penland that the film was behind schedule and would not be available for screening until July. Penland read an article that was printed in the June 4 issue of the *Philadelphia Enquirer* which mentioned that Scorsese "has scheduled a series of secret New York screenings" because he "clearly anticipates trouble when he releases his newest film" (Polland 52). Penland argued that Universal was not being honest with him about the film's availability for screening. He resigned his position on June 12, two days after the film was to be screened by the evangelical leaders.[11]

Although the delayed screening was one event that led to Penland's resignation, there was a much more publicized element that contributed to his decision. Reports explaining its source greatly conflict, but somehow a script of the film was circulated throughout the Christian community. This script contained some material that was offensive to Christians, which caused an uproar of protest.

Universal claimed that that version of the script was very old and none of the offensive material would be in the final version of the film. David

Thompson and Ian Christie suggested that Scorsese suspected that the early version of the script was obtained by actors who had access to copies for the 1983 auditions (Scorsese 1989 xxi). Tom Pollock stated that "Marty [Scorsese] told me he did not even have it. No one knows how they got it, but they got it" (Kelly 1991 236). But the content of the script was causing waves, which Universal was never quite able to calm.

Scorsese reiterated throughout the controversy that the film would not be offensive to Christians and that it would be a faith-affirming film. In a letter which invokes memories of DeMille's religious humility, Scorsese is quoting as saying:

> Both as a filmmaker and a Christian, I believe with all my heart that the film I am making is a deeply religious one. . . . I have made a film which is an affirmation of faith and I urge everyone not to judge my film until they see it (Polland 38).

Scorsese's words, which urge the public to see the film first before judging it, mirror Penland's words in *Christianity Today*, and yet the press and the public continued to take sides and make accusations about the film before it had even been screened.[12] Scorsese wrote that, when he read the book, he "didn't have the feeling that it would be deeply offensive to anyone, especially because I knew my own intent" (Scorsese 1989 xxiv). However, as the time drew nearer for the release of the film, he realized that there would be controversy. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Scorsese admitted that he "knew there would be some problems" with the public reception of the film. But despite this knowledge, Scorsese said, "I can't let anything tell me, 'Don't do that, it will offend people.' I can't do that" (58). He was as determined to show the film as the Christian community was to keep it off the screen.

Like the highly publicized protest led by Bob Jones during the controversy surrounding Jesus, the press latched on to the protesting techniques of a small faction of Christians. Led by the Reverend R. L. Hymers, the members of the Fundamentalist Baptist Tabernacle of Los Angeles turned the protest of the film into an anti-Semitic statement. The group picketed the home of Lew Wasserman, the Chairman of MCA. A mock crucifixion was staged, with a church member made up to look like Wasserman leading the ceremony. A plane flew overhead with a banner that read "Wasserman fans Jewish hatred with Last Temptation" (Scorsese 1989 xxii).

Hymers' over publicized, overblown protest was an embarrassment to the larger Christian community, who wanted to peacefully make their concerns about the film known to Universal. The group of Christian leaders who were originally scheduled to attend the screening came to the decision that they should buy the film outright and then destroy all copies. Universal refused to bargain with Bill Bright of Campus Crusades, who presented the offer. Tom Pollock decided to move the film's release date up six weeks in hopes to calm some of the protest (Ansen 56). On August 11, the day before the film opened, a protest was held at Universal at which 25,000 people attended.[13]

The film was released August 12, 1988 in nine cities: Los Angeles, Toronto, Chicago, Seattle, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Minneapolis, Montreal, and New York. The protest continued but not as violently in the United States as before the release of the film. After screening the film, the National Association of Evangelicals urged " 'evangelical Christians not to

patronize the film,' but also recognized the 'right of Universal Pictures to make and distribute it'" (Bird 41).

The controversy surrounding the film was worldwide. The film was banned in South Africa and Israel. Violent protests occurred in France in several cities when the film opened on September 28. Irish theatres showed the film with the condition that no patrons be admitted after the disclaimer at the opening of the film that states: "This film is not based upon the Gospels but on this fictional exploration [Kazantzakis' book] of the eternal spiritual conflict" (Scorsese 1988). In Britain the film was given an adult's only classification.

The film was shown at the Venice Film Festival in 1988, which angered some Italians, including Franco Zeffirelli. Zeffirelli pulled his latest film, *The Young Toscanini* (1988), from the Festival when it was announced that *Temptation* would be shown at the Festival. Zeffirelli called the film " 'truly horrible and deranged' [and] said he had 'no intention whatsoever' to get mixed up in the scandals, controversies and protests that w[ould] mark the next Venice Film Festival" (Poland 171). In light of Zeffirelli's battle with the media's misconception about his own film, his vehement denunciation of *Temptation* seem to reflect a callousness. He did not pause to consider, before withdrawing his film, that the public may have jumped to conclusions about *Temptation* as they had with Jesus.

The advanced publicity, even though some of it was negative, served as a draw for many audiences who would not have otherwise seen the film. People wanted to see what all the fuss was about, and in the first three days of the United States run, Thompson and Christie state that the film had

earned $400,000 in box-office receipts (Scorsese 1989 xxiv). Although this was not a net amount, the dollar figure indicates that the film was not being boycotted, but was being seen by curious Americans.

Now that the film was finally being seen, the critics were able to voice their opinions about the film. Most of the criticism focused on the ridiculous immensity of the protest. Critics and public alike felt that much of the protest was moot until validated by the fact that those protesting its content had indeed seen the film. Many members of the Christian community followed the suggestion of the National Association of Evangelicals and simply did not go to see the film. Other churches sent delegates to the film who then discussed its content with larger groups.

Critics expressed their understanding of Scorsese's intent to portray a different side of Jesus' humanity. David Ansen of *Newsweek* wrote that Scorsese "has given us a very contemporary image of Jesus, torn between body and soul, whose triumph is ultimately one of the will" (56). Andrew Greeley of the *New York Times* also understood Scorsese's intention to portray a more human Christ. He saw the conflict in the movie as not a human one, not between flesh and spirit, but "between the generous, self-giving propensities of the human personality and its fearful, self-protecting dimensions" (Sec2 1). Frank Gabrenyo of *The Columbus Dispatch* wrote that the film was made for "an audience willing to re-examine basic beliefs, in search of a fresh understanding of Jesus" (qtd. in Poland 255).

Other critics, most of them writing from a Christian perspective, understood Scorsese's intent but felt that it diminished Jesus' power as a religious figure. Paul Schrader, in an interview with *Christianity Today*

admitted that the film may "err on the side of Christ's humanity" (41). Bart Cardullo did not feel the last temptation dream sequence blasphemous. To him the blasphemy was that "for much of its first half [the movie] portrays Christ as a sinner who rebels against being chosen by God to save mankind (109-110). In Appendix B of his book, Larry Poland describes the movie in a brief synopsis and comments on the areas that are not consistent with Christian doctrine. This section was meant to be read by Christians who were unsure about the theological validity of the film in terms of Christian doctrine.

Although the film did not receive rave reviews, the relatively positive reviews received may have been in response to the controversy. In an interview with Dr. James Dobson, Michael Medved recounted his experience when he saw the film with another critic.

> I remember coming out of the film and his immediate gesture was . . . to put his index finger in his mouth as if he was throwing up. And we said isn't that the worst thing you've ever seen? Can you imagine that Martin Scorsese made such a horrible film? And we agreed. And then I saw his review. His review was just positive: it's great, Martin Scorsese should be nominated for best director. I called the guy up and I said, 'What happened here? I thought that you agreed with me on this.' And he said, 'Look, I thought about it. I just don't want to be on the same side with the right-wingers and the Jerry Falwells' (Medved).

Medved's comments indicate that the positive reviews for *Temptation* may have been written solely for political reasons. If reviewers felt that a negative review would hurt their careers, then they would write a positive review. With this knowledge, the rave reviews given the film become somewhat circumspect.

Some critics, perhaps to avoid making any sort of conclusive comment

about the film, reviewed the controversy instead of the content of the film. Christopher Sharrett of *USA Today* saw the film as "a cultural document, a representation of the reaction and intolerance of the 1980s in the overwrought reception the film had from fundamentalists of various stripes" (69).

In response to the cries of intolerance and censorship, the Christian community stood firm in voicing their right to protest the film. David Neff in *Christianity Today* defended the right of Christians to protest the film.

> If, for example, some Hollywood mogul were to produce a film portraying [Martin Luther King] as a communist dupe, would there be howls of protest? Of course there would. Would the film make it to the local mall theatres? Maybe it would—but probably not. But such protest, whether it is over a film interpretation of Jesus or King, or over some other leader with whom people identify closely, could hardly be called censorship (13).

The criticism of the film covered a broad spectrum. However, the critics, from both the non-religious and religious presses, were mostly in agreement in their dislike of Dafoe's portrayal of Jesus.

Most of the criticisms of Dafoe's Christ were quite negative. Neff recounted C. S. Lewis' statement that

> Jesus was either the Son of God, the devil of hell, or a lunatic—on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg. In filming *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Martin Scorsese apparently opted for the poached-egg Christ (12).

Brian D. Johnson of *Macleans* writes that Dafoe portrays Jesus as "a mumbling wimp who admits to being a liar, a hypocrite and a coward" who emerges from his temptations in the desert as "a wild-eyed demagogue" (55).

Joseph Sobran, in his tongue-in-cheek entitled article, "Jesus, We Hardly Knew Ye," refutes even the possibility of the last temptation.

> Whatever you think Jesus was, he wasn't this fumbling pretty boy, torn between being a Messiah and settling down with a whore-turned-Hausfrau. The options are too opposite. They belong to different scales of personality. You might as well imagine Napoleon torn between conquering Europe and becoming a Parisian chef (33).

Despite Scorsese's claims that he believed Jesus was "fully divine" (1989 . 124), critics did not accept his interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' humanity. This Jesus' confusion and weakness was not a type of Jesus that audiences wanted to see.

Not only was Dafoe's acting portrayal of Jesus negatively received, critics had difficulty with his appearance and voice. John Simon criticized the poor language spoken in the film and gave several examples of grammatically incorrect dialogue. He also has a problem with Dafoe's accent, "a somewhat hippified Middle American accent which, for example Jerusalem becomes 'Jeruzlem' " (54). Duane Byrge, in *The Hollywood Reporter*, wrote that "so muted and metallic sounding are Dafoe's numerous voice-overs that one is shocked into thinking that the voice of God sounds just like the Kentucky Fried Chicken order machine" (qtd. in Poland 181). Scorsese made a conscious choice to direct his actors to use distinctly American speech patterns, but his choice was not understood by most critics.

Scorsese knew that there might be some criticism about the choice of accents. He felt that, because he is an American, the film should speak to American audiences first. He thought of how the more formal style of language as used in other Biblical epics would have been received in a dangerous area of Manhattan.

> If you were to go there . . . and say, 'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth,' you'd get robbed, or beaten up, or killed. But if you

> go there and grab people and say, look, I want to tell you about 'Jesus; I want to tell you about something He just said,' then it's a confrontation (127).

Scorsese's choice of accent was used to confront his American audiences with the words of Jesus, but many were not ready for that type of Christ. This accent choice only serves to confuse the audience, who know that Jesus did not live in America, so for him to speak with a regionally specific accent limited the impact of the portrayal of Jesus as a historical figure.

Richard A. Blake, in *America*, calls Dafoe's Jesus "too American, too aw-shucks, to be a convincing Jesus" (101). Joseph Sobran notes that Dafoe's looks cause him to stand out from the rest of the cast. John Simon writes, "Willem Dafoe, if you like your Jesus as a Zen hippie, is good enough and very nice-looking, but wouldn't you think that the Son of God would have better teeth?" (55). It seems as if the critics, tired of the uproar of the controversy, tried to release tension by poking fun at Scorsese's Christ.

After the uproar at the film's opening died down and the film was no longer shown, MCA decided to release the film on video. It was clear that the controversy surrounding the film was not yet over. When the film was ready to be released on video, protesters came back to life and sent letters to leading video chains. Blockbuster, one of the larger chains in the United States, would not carry the video. In the U. K., the two largest video chains did not carry the film. Robert Blattner, MCA Home Video President, released the video quietly, stating that "we didn't want to provoke another controversy" (2). From the controversy before the film was released to its hushed up release on video, it is clear from the reactions of the public that they did not understand or accept Scorsese's intention.

Conclusion

It is interesting that all four of these films were subjects of numerous debates about the validity of such presentations. David Neff recognizes the inevitability of controversy when a film of such kind is made.

> Any time influential filmmakers take it upon themselves to offer an interpretation of a historical figure whose life and teachings have shaped the identity of vast numbers of people, there is bound to be protest (13).

Each of them challenged different areas of the perceived notions about Christ. All the films were surprises, but not all of them were well received. The two that were most successful in the United States were *Kings* and *Jesus*: two films that followed more closely the image of Jesus as a self-assured, gentle yet firm man. The public was not quite ready for Pasolini's angry Christ or Scorsese's confused Christ. It was clear from the reaction to *Gospel* and *Temptation* that the public wanted to see a Jesus who was an important historical figure as well as a religious leader. These two films were not as successful as the other two films because they broke with traditional notions about who Jesus was and how a film treatment of his life should be presented.

It is clear from the response to these films that most Christians, and some non-believers as well, are not ready for a cinematic portrait of Jesus that challenges the accepted images of Christ as laid out in the four Gospels and much of Renaissance art. Jesus Christ is, to many, the Son of God, and his words should not be tampered with or edited to make him into something that, if the entire Gospel accounts were taken into consideration, denies his deity or his humanity.

Notes

[1] Although the film is available on video, it is not, in light of more recent films based on the life of Christ, a popular title. Higashi's book, *Cecil B. DeMille: A Guide to References and Resources*, lists 27 film distributors that carry DeMille's films. Twenty-two of those distributors carry *Kings*. She writes, "Curiously, the DeMille film most available for rent is *The King of Kings*" (xiii). For one who is aware of the distribution history of the film, it should not be a curious fact. More curious than her statement is the fact that *The King of Kings* is not mentioned in her critical survey of DeMille's work.

[2] Beaton also predicted that the film would "gross more money than any picture ever made" (qtd. in Hochman 84). This may have been an accurate prediction if the film had been distributed in the usual manner. However, because of the distribution agreement of the film as outlined above, it will never be known how much money this film would have made.

[3] DeMille does not name these certain American cities, but does note that the documentation of the opposition to the film was in his private files. He hoped that one day when "men learn to discuss religious prejudice dispassionately" (DeMille 1959 282), the information would be published.

[4] To show his gratitude for the support of members of the church when he made *Gospel*, Pasolini dedicated the film to Pope John XXIII.

[5] Pasolini originally titled the film, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The "Saint" was added during the distribution of the film, much to Pasolini's dismay, who did not want to add that divine implication to the title of his film.

[6] When Pasolini's film, *Teorema* (1969), received the Catholic Film Office's award, it was denounced by the Vatican and the award was later revoked. Pasolini returned the award along with the one he had received for *Gospel*

(Liehm 353). Pasolini's gesture indicated his anger at the Catholic Film Office's bending under the pressure of Papal opinion. Because *Teorema*'s award was revoked, Pasolini probably saw the earlier award for *Gospel* as nothing other than a political move by the Catholic Film Office, who gave the award to show their agreement with the Vatican's acceptance of the film.

[7] When the film was aired in the U.S., the last one and a half hours were shown without commercial interruption. There were no breaks from the scenes depicting the Last Supper through the Resurrection, as the producers felt any breaks during that point in the film would be detrimental to the film. Due to the already shaky history of controversy surrounding the film, they probably also realized that there would be a great deal of public outcry if the film were interrupted during those scenes.

[8] Along with the Procter & Gamble sponsorship, the film was paid for by "subscribers from a variety of world television networks" (Leprohon 383).

[9] The film was initially shown in the U.S. on Sunday, April 3 and Sunday, April 10 on NBC-TV. It was re-telecast on April 1, 2, 3, and 8, 1979 in an expanded version that ran eight hours.

[10] According to Ken Sidey in *Christianity Today*, the film grossed between $10 million and $12 million. Estimates of the total cost of the film ranged from $16 million to $20 million. Sidey noted that Universal had not released figures about the film's financial success (36).

[11] Penland had wanted to take this job so that he could build a bridge between Christians and the Hollywood community. Like Zeffirelli, his work was in response to a commission from the Pope. Pope John Paul II had addressed leading Hollywood figures on Sept. 15, 1987. "Your profession subjects you to a great measure of accountability—accountability to God, to the community, and before the witness of history. . . . Your work can be a great force for good or a great force for evil" (Poland 25). Penland, realizing

that the truth of the Jesus of the Gospels was not being presented in *Temptation*, ultimately regretted his "role in recommending the project to the Christian community" ("Publicist Quits Film Project" 52).

[12] The screening that was to take place among evangelical leaders in Los Angeles was held, but due to Penland's resignation, the invited leaders chose to voice their support for Penland's mistreatment by not attending. Another screening was held in New York City, where 30-40 liberal Protestant and Catholic leaders previewed the film. The response of this group was, for the most part, positive (Dart 1).

[13] For a more detailed explanation of the evangelical Christian community's involvement in the protest, see Larry Poland's *The Last Temptation of Hollywood*.

Chapter 6

The Significance: Jesus Christ as a Cinematic Subject

These four filmmakers chose to take their personal beliefs about the historical and religious figure of Jesus Christ and mold his history and their perception of it into a cinematic work. They each brought different belief systems to their projects as well as different ideas about how they were to present the story of Jesus. This study has examined how these works were created and how the filmmaker's intentions were or were not conveyed to the audience.

There have been ongoing debates throughout Christian history concerning the appropriateness of artistic works that portray the image of Jesus. With film, artists have gone beyond the ability to paint or sculpt an image contained in their minds. Now these images move and speak; Jesus is portrayed by an actor. Because people, and believers in particular, have preconceived concepts of what Jesus should look and act like, these images will never satisfy entire audiences. Not only do these actors not look like images held in the minds of audiences, but also the audience knows that this man is an actor playing the part of Jesus, and cannot represent Jesus' divinity. Of course there are those, like the minister mentioned in Chapter 3, who will implant the cinematic images in their minds to fill the void left by the fact that no one really knows what Jesus looked like.

Despite the lack of information about Jesus' physical appearance, most believers have an image of Jesus Christ set in their imaginations. These images are culled from various sources of art and imagination. These images

can be very strong and audiences often criticize films about Jesus because the images on film do not coincide with their internal images. The audiences also know that an actor, being human, could never completely capture the true essence of Jesus, who, for many, was not only human, but also divine.

These four filmmakers, understandably, had difficulty presenting Jesus' dual personality on the screen. Jesus was a human, but the claim is that he was also the Son of God. He "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6) because his status as God's equal was not something that he was striving to attain.

The Son of God

DeMille's Jesus was clearly aware of his divinity and equality with God, but he was so different from the humble people he came to save that it is hard to believe, from watching the film, that people would have been so drawn to him. DeMille set Warner apart from the rest of the characters in many different ways: lighting, costume, and physical position. It is only when DeMille allowed Warner to play intimately with the other characters that the audience sees a glimpse of what an overpowering effect Jesus must have had on those around him.

These intimate scenes in *Kings* are few and far between, but when they occur, those watching the film more than half a century after its creation are able to forget the dated aspects of the piece and see not only a divine Jesus, but one who was truly concerned with the people he came to save. DeMille's crowd-pleasing technique of using children, especially the doll-mending scene, allow the audience to look beyond DeMille's

manipulative devices and view something much deeper. Warner transcends his impersonation of the divine Christ and shows us something much more relevant—a Jesus who touches, laughs, and walks among men. That DeMille's Jesus was equal with God is a fact that is never in question, but there are few moments when the audience can really believe that this divine man "made himself nothing" and took "the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). DeMille, in his haste to present the "Servant of God," neglected to present the "Servant of Man."

The Social Revolutionary

Pasolini's Jesus is as enigmatic as Pasolini. His treatment of the life and teachings of Jesus leaves the audience bewildered about just who he was. To be sure, the audience learns of this man's life and hears of his teachings, but there is nothing upon which to hang any ultimate meaning. Pasolini took this revolutionary life and reinforced its social significance while neglecting its religious significance.

Jesus was truly a revolutionary figure who challenged not only the biased and close-minded religious leaders of the Jewish people, but also he challenged the Roman rulers and their claims to divine rule. When the Pharisees tried to corner Jesus by asking him if it was right to pay taxes, he told them to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's," but he also told them to "give to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Pasolini presents a Christ who seems the rebellious student, full of angry passion and fierce words, but there is no rendering up to God what is God's; in Pasolini's *Gospel*, we do not see Jesus bending to the authority of his Father. Pasolini's Jesus is a solitary man

fighting for a social cause.

Although many critics admired the simplicity of Pasolini's treatment of Jesus, and indeed, the film is interesting to look at because of this simplicity, in the end it is not satisfying. To merely present a biographical sketch on the life of Christ without allowing the audience enough material to be able to fully understand and comprehend its significance limits the enormity of the claims of Jesus. Pasolini presents the life of Jesus as a reporter would, attempting to present the facts without bias. But clearly, there is bias here. Pasolini chooses to ignore the "other" revolutionary side of Jesus' teachings: his emphasis on the Inner Man.

Pasolini's unbelief is apparent in his treatment of the more mystical elements of Jesus' life. Pasolini includes the resurrection in his film, but it seems like an afterthought. When Jesus tells his disciples that he will be with them until the end of time, the audience wonders why he would want to do that or why they should find that important. There is no emphasis on the reason for Jesus' sacrifice. That he came to die for all sins is a message Pasolini did not believe in, and therefore this basic tenet of the Christian faith is not presented in any meaningful detail.

Because Pasolini did not care for Jesus Christ as a Savior, he does not present Jesus as a man that the audience should particularly care for. Irazoqui does not endear himself to the audience as Warner did. His one-dimensional portrayal of Jesus is too static. The audience sees a man, full of revolutionary ideas to be sure, but not a man who is equal with God. His resurrection is more a freak accident than an event planned by God to redeem mankind.

The Son of Man

Zeffirelli's film, on the other hand is clearly made by a man who believes in the deity of Jesus and is struggling to marry the divine and human dimensions of Jesus' life and ministry. The film is an act of love to a Savior who was divine first, and then took the nature of a servant, "being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7).

Powell's performance is exemplary. His portrayal of Jesus' humanity is natural and relaxed. He does not resort to the forced piety and posturing that Warner used to impersonate divinity. Nor does he present a stiff, one-dimensional Jesus like Irazoqui. He is a well-trained actor, but Zeffirelli's direction restrained him from relying on the type of acting tricks that Warner used. At the same time, though, Zeffirelli allowed Powell the freedom to explore the emotions that Jesus, as a man in wrenching situations, would have felt.

Zeffirelli's frequent excursions away from his focus on Jesus are often distracting. In *Jesus*, Zeffirelli spent far too much time concentrating on events that occurred while Jesus was elsewhere. He was so interested in having his audiences understand the social and political pressures of Jesus' time that he oftentimes neglected Jesus' story. It would have been a better picture of Jesus for Zeffirelli to briefly suggest the oppression of the Jews at the hands of the Romans, as in the frightening slaughter of the innocents scene, and trust the audience to interpret the difficulty of the times for themselves. There is simply not enough of Jesus in Zeffirelli's film.

Powell is so entrancing and magnetic, that the scenes between his appearances often seem belabored and unnecessary. Zeffirelli should have

trusted his judgment in his choice of Powell and used Powell's abilities to show his audience more of the life and teachings of Jesus. The audience wants to see Jesus of Nazareth rather than those around him who question who he is and why he came. People have heard those questions for two thousand years, and most audiences of the film would have been aware of much of the public debate concerning Jesus' true nature and purpose.

Of the four films studied, Jesus presents the best view of Jesus as a man. He laughs, he jokes, he cries, he shouts, he sleeps, he eats, and he clearly loves those for whom he came. The audience recognizes this Jesus as one of them, and is moved to see him in pain. Zeffirelli develops the character of Jesus to such an extent that the audience really does care when he dies.

Zeffirelli's choice to understate the divinity of Christ, but not deny it (as Pasolini seemed to have done), generates more power for Jesus' claims than DeMille's forced presentation of Jesus' divinity. Zeffirelli's Jesus never has a doubt that he is equal with God, but restrains himself from using his power. There is an unspoken impression that this Jesus is always frustrated by the difficult conditions of the people around him. He inwardly wishes he could solve the problems with a wave of his hand, but like a loving parent, he watches silently as the disciples and others respond to his words and begin to act on them.

Although Zeffirelli occasionally becomes bogged down with his mission to reveal the political and religious situation of Palestine in the first century, his portrait of Jesus is infused with beauty and quiet reverence. This is a Jesus whom people would leave their work and families to follow. This is a

Jesus who was sure of his divinity but at the same time sure of his limitations in his human form. He is a man whom others could confess as Lord.

The Reluctant Messiah

Scorsese did not intend for his audiences to call his Jesus Lord, rather this Jesus portrait was a suggestion of a "possibility." In *Temptation*, Scorsese presents a Jesus who is fully human in that he feels all the emotions that humans feel, including confusion, doubt, and sexual desire; emotions that many believers refuse to acknowledge as the types of feelings Jesus may have had.

The idea that the ultimate temptation for Jesus was that he lived his life as a normal man is an interesting concept. When the main premise of the film is taken at face value, it does not seem so blasphemous that it should have provoked so much heated controversy. Still, the controversy indicated that the majority of Christians do not want their established beliefs questioned or presented in a way that is contrary to the Gospels. Jesus is the historical figure who has most changed the course of Western History. The spiritual bond between the unseen Jesus and his believers is a bond of such strength that a film such as Scorsese's, which questions the validity of that bond, is bound to be challenged.

The implication that such a film would destroy faith puts far too much power in the hands of filmmakers such as Scorsese. Those who claimed to have faith in the Jesus of the Gospels would not see their Christ in this film and would see the film for what it was, the exploration of an idea rather than

an attempt to evangelize or embellish the story of Jesus. It was for the unbelieving audience that the boycotting faithful were most concerned. To those who have not yet found faith in Jesus Christ, the resultant response to the film is quite different from the response of believers. Those who were not knowledgeable of the Gospel accounts would perhaps recognize stories and events depicted in the film and think that this was a true portrait of Jesus Christ, but the Jesus presented in the film is not the Jesus of the Bible.

Scorsese's Jesus consistently projects a mood of confusion: about his sexual identity, his vocation, his friends, and his divinity. There are a few points in this film when this Jesus has moments of lucidity and recognizes that God is calling him. When Jesus arrives in the desert, he draws a circle in the sand and sits in the middle, declaring that he will not move until he receives some answers from God. He acknowledges his confusion at this point, but is willing to listen to God to affirm his identity.

Most of the time, however, Dafoe mumbles and speaks distractedly, and one wonders why the twelve disciples, especially Judas, would drop everything to follow such a bewildered character. This Jesus does not exude a magnetism that would attract men in this way. Because he is not sure what he is doing or why he is doing it, it is hard to believe that a man with such a lack of self-confidence could be an influential leader, much less the Son of God.

This Jesus spouts ideas that sound more like New Age theology than Christian theology. However, despite this Jesus' claim that "Everyone's a part of God" (Scorsese 1988), Scorsese's Jesus cannot be a man who is both human and divine. He is almost too human in his vacillation and inability to

act. Scorsese uses many special effects in his film, but none of them are used to add mystery to the character of Jesus as DeMille did with his special effects in *Kings*. The divinity of Scorsese's Jesus is lost. He does not perform miracles because he chooses to tap into his divine power force, rather he stumbles upon them, is moved by unseen hands to perform them, and is terrified at the results of his actions. Instead of accepting his power and divine nature as Zeffirelli's Jesus appeared to, this Jesus continues to rebel against performing the work that God sent him to do.

This Jesus is also unsure about what he needs to say. He first tells the people that his mission is about love, but later claims that he has come to set the world on fire. His teachings do not further reveal his intent by his actions. A man like Jesus, whose influence changed the course of history, would have been a man of action. Not only would his words have been relevant and precise, but also his actions would have reinforced his teachings. In *Temptation*, Jesus falls short of convincing audiences that he has the power to save souls or change the world.

In this study, four films about the most famous man who ever lived have been examined. The Christian claim is that Jesus was, and is, man and God at the same time. These filmmakers faced a tremendous task in presenting this dualistic nature on film. For the most part, these films reveal the filmmaker's intentions, but all four fall short of completely embracing the nature of Jesus Christ. Instead of a completed picture, these films each capture a different aspect, but only a part, of who Jesus was and why he lived. The Gospel accounts are so full of his eloquent words and astounding works that to limit these accounts with a few short hours on film is to

diminish the significance of Jesus' influence on history.

The New Testament Gospels are like a mosaic depicting the life, teachings, and character of Jesus Christ: Each Gospel emphasizes a different aspect of Jesus and is a piece of that mosaic and momentous in its own right. When these individual pieces are taken together, they comprise a complete portrait of this multifaceted historical figure.

In the written Gospel mosaic as well as the cinematic mosaic, there are pieces that present Jesus as Son of God, Social Revolutionary, Son of Man, and even Reluctant Messiah. No cinematic work could ever completely convey the complexity of the lives of prominent historical figures, let alone the magnitude of the life of Jesus Christ.

DeMille, Pasolini, Zeffirelli, and Scorsese each contributed a separate piece to the complex mosaic making up the celluloid Christ.

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