

Guerric DeBona, O.S.B.

## Real Presence: "Jesus Christ" and the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

What is at stake in popular representations of Jesus of Nazareth? A full-page ad appeared in *America* magazine (September 18, 1999), advertising Stanley J. Gordon's depiction of Jesus in an oil painting. "Could This Be Jesus Christ?" . . . Many Think it is," announces the ad in bold letters above the portrait. The distributors claim that the replication of the "handsome, rugged man" gazing thoughtfully at the viewer and exhibited at Rockefeller Center is believed to be the "greatest image of Jesus in our history . . . what Christ *really* looked like . . . Look closely into the eyes of Jesus in this painting. You'll see a trusted friend, a teacher, with amazing strength and knowledge" (their emphasis). Forty dollars (plus shipping and handling) guarantees consumers an "authentic" gallery print which measures 16 x 20 and is "the best painting of Jesus in the three millenniums since Christ walked the Earth."

The claims made in this ad for a picture of a blue-eyed, fair skinned Jesus are nothing new. The Gordon reproduction shares certain cultural codes deployed in popular reproductions of the Savior: middle-class notions of taste, the beautiful and the sublime; subjective, highly personal representations of point-of-view; and, of course, a mandate for "authenticity." I intend to argue that all of these sociological conventions (and more) surround our imaginings of Christ in the modern world, most legibly in film culture. Although my analysis here is necessarily limited, even a cursory survey of the re-deployment of Jesus and the movies discloses a great deal about popular culture, religion and their interrelationship.

### "JESUS CHRIST" AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

From modernism to postmodernism, the history of Jesus on film is a kind of map of our economic, social and spiritual sensibility. For a number of years now, my colleagues Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford and I, have taught an elective class at Saint Meinrad School of Theology which challenged aspiring theologians to examine their *constructions* of Jesus. Why does Jesus have to look a certain way? What elements in our particular society make it possible to have this kind of Jesus? What societal codes are already in place in order to make this

Jesus more appealing than that one? The result of our scriptural, rhetorical and cultural investigation of film culture's use of Jesus resulted in a monograph, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Paulist Press, 1999).

The age of technology has raised the stakes in representations of Jesus. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) Walter Benjamin famously argued that groups of people in the modern world desire to see things nearer—spatially and humanly. Technology, then, permits "the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object produced" (221). For Benjamin, film would occupy a singular place precisely because of the medium's enviable ability "to present an object for simultaneous collective experience," in other words, to bestow a kind of sacred "aura" on its subject and "change the reaction of the masses toward art" (234). Photographic reproductions absorb us collectively because of their ability to invoke real presence as they displace cult value with exhibition value (Benjamin, 225).

Representations of the Savior on the silver screen have their roots in the nineteenth century, where popular culture and devotional piety worked together to invent ways of retelling the life of Jesus. With exhibition value closely linked to cultic and religious knowledge, film culture was fascinated with representations of the Jesus story; it ultimately evolved into a discrete, though marginal, genre all its own. The first series of these early movies were simply recorded performances of Passion plays in New York City, Fontainebleau, France, and, of course, Oberammergau, Germany; these date as early as 1897. Later, longer format "Lives of Christ" were produced by early film pioneer companies Edison and Pathe. Although these films resembled something like photographed plays (one might even call them variations on "The Stations of the Cross," as Andre Bazin observed), a few marketed technical experiments which would later become a hallmark of biblical features. *The Birth of Jesus* (1909), for example, used a primitive color process to boost the film's production value, thereby anticipating the full-scale epic with its fantastic sets, trick photography and wide screen formats such as CinemaScope and Ultra-Panavision 70mm Technicolor. Additionally, production companies carefully yoked these religious films for exhibition to the European immigrant-consumer on devotional holidays. The Joliette Theater in Boston showed Gaumont's Passion Play during Holy Week from 1906–11 and drew record attendance (Bowser, 129). Historically, companies knew that exhibiting the Bible had the potential to engage a large aggregate of people into a theatrical space. Filming the story of Jesus would become cultural capital for the movie business.

Reproducing the "aura" of Jesus would bring its share of controversies within a conflicted history as well. Early films of Christ already

contained some degree of economic, sociological and ideological freight. Among these early movies about the life of Jesus, perhaps the most important contribution remains *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), a five-reel feature produced for the Kalem Company. Now there are a number of issues that begin to surface with the release of this film that are worth noticing. Audiences were increasingly looking for more realistic formats, especially from historical and religious dramas. *From the Manger to the Cross* was shot on location in the Holy Land, thereby jettisoning the theater props used in early filmed plays of Jesus. Moreover, production houses hoped that religious material (and adaptations of classic novels) would bestow a degree of middle-class respectability on an industry that seemed more and more interested in material of questionable moral value. Indeed, a number of groups were already threatening to boycott films because of racy subject matter.

At the same time, however, *From the Manger to the Cross* raised some questions posed by the clergy about the appropriateness of exhibiting Jesus' image in the local theater at all, which probably has its roots in a longer, Puritan opposition to the legitimate theater in seventeenth-century England. Returning to Benjamin's argument, we will note that the quality of the photograph also brought Jesus' strong presence, indeed, even the aura of the sacred, into the theaters. On the other hand, not a few religious zealots were convinced that a viewing of the Passion play of Oberammergau by a few prodigals might lead them back from their wayward journey.

#### ENTER CECIL B. DEMILLE

Generally speaking, the public was accustomed to lowbrow, vaudeville entertainment at its theaters and was not entirely sold on highbrow fare, even purported cultural respectability. It would take Cecil B. DeMille and a more sophisticated Hollywood and post-World War I America, to make *The King of Kings* (1927) a blockbuster at the box office. The son of an Episcopalian minister, DeMille was particularly clever at combining titillating, lowbrow spectacle with the highbrow moral lessons of a Sunday school drama. Many of DeMille's breakthrough films, such as *Male and Female* (1919) and *The Ten Commandments* (1923) are crowd pleasers with a moral message. In *The Ten Commandments*, for example, retributions follow debaucheries. Similarly, in *The King of Kings*, the audience sees a scantily clad, seductive Mary Magdalene in the provocative opening sequence, only to be purged of her demons by Jesus' loving glance later in the film. After enjoying some guilty pleasures, the audience is brought back into a moral space by Jesus himself. "If Mary was associated with wild beasts, old action, and aggressive conversation before she met Christ, her encounter with him has left her utterly domesticated: she has been tamed

by Jesus . . . whose gaze has deeroticized and domesticated the spectacle of the woman into a silent, regularized space" (Stern, Jefford and DeBona, 52–53).

DeMille was able, then, to deploy the film techniques of a more advanced, standardized Hollywood to *The King of Kings*. By the late sound era, light Eyemo cameras could be used to simulate a unique point-of-view shot of Jesus (our first sight of him) when a blind child is restored to sight. Better "three-point lighting" created glamor shots of the Savior (much like a devotional painting); a rigorous, early soundtrack of hymns inspired seemingly every important event in the Gospel; and special effects, of course, (including a color version of the Resurrection) further enhanced *The King of Kings* production value for Paramount. Moreover, DeMille was certainly enabled by the strange confluence between religion, visual illustration and film production. The *vivant tableaux* in movies were made possible by the audiences familiarity with reproductions of Renaissance masters and the popular French illustrator Gustave Dore, which helped to build a bridge between sacred and the secular, painting and photography, the original and its reproduction. The "Last Supper" sequence in *The King of Kings*, with its elongated table and classic lighting, are more reminiscent of paintings found in the visual, artistic tradition than it is of any account found in the Gospels themselves.

In a certain sense, Hollywood was able to sanctify popular spectacle for its audience. Several critics have described the huge, opulent movie palaces of the 1920s, such as the Roxy, as resembling "cathedrals." What better place for a movie about Jesus than a "secular church?" Finally, we can also see how all these production values worked to blur a final distinction: between Jesus as Son of God and as movie star. The glamor shots of Jesus composed in 1927 may strike us today as sentimental, but for the 1920s audience, many of whom had claimed that they had seen "what Jesus really looked like," Jesus' aura was far from silly. As one American minister told H. B. Warner, the actor who played Jesus, sometime later: "I saw you in *The King of Kings* as a child and now, every time I speak of Jesus, it is your face I see" (quoted in Butler, 40). DeMille's version of Jesus reminds us of the power of the culture industry to restore the sacred, even to the face of God. *The King of Kings* was the third highest grossing film of the year.

#### "JESUS CHRIST" AND POST WORLD WAR II AMERICA

In some ways *The King of Kings* would be the zenith of the Hollywood biopics about Jesus. Although there were notable biblical epics produced in Hollywood from 1927–1960, such as *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben Hur* (1959), these narratives use Jesus and his story as background for special effects (CinemaScope's debut) and a melodrama with a

knock-out chariot race. It would not be until the 1960s before a major feature was released about Jesus himself. Taken together, Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) reveal the strain on this peculiar sub-genre. Although Ray was more comfortable with the social-problem film than the epic, he put his considerable talents to good use in *King of Kings*. Ray cast a very young Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus (in contrast to the fifty-year old H. B. Warner in DeMille's film). Hunter's Jesus typifies not only a typical, moody hero we might find in one of Ray's pictures, but seems very much like a post-World War II male—tired of big bureaucracy, hypocrisy, and violence. Ray's most important film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) cast the sullen James Dean in the picture to draw teenage audiences into a melodrama about family fragmentation, adolescent turmoil and loss of community. Similarly, *King of Kings* shows us a political Jesus, (often in extreme close up in 70mm Technicolor) who comes to save his people from Roman oppression.

The rest of the characters which inhabit the film have their appeal as well: the Roman soldier, Lucius, who is a kind of secular humanist; a free-thinking woman, Pilate's wife, Claudia; and a group of somewhat ambivalent disciples. Ray, of course, was appealing to a much more diversified audience than DeMille. Indeed, the late 1950s film consumer was not made up of working class, European (Christian) immigrants, but composed of various age groups (among them teenagers); those who had seen the brutality of war either in person or at the movies; unchurched, secular humanists and the new, independent thinking woman. If the late 1920s American audience could rally around the visage of Jesus, there was little common ground to do so in the early 1960s. Unlike the hymn-laced sound track for DeMille's film, Miklos Rozsa's lush score for *King of Kings* barely contains a hint of any religious sensibility; it could just as well be the soundtrack for an epic love story. Unlike DeMille, Ray also uses characters (Barabbas and Jesus) in order to politicize the Gospel and even dramatizes biblical scenes which could speak to contemporary audiences. Indeed, the mass murder of the Jews in the beginning of *King of Kings* could only recall the fairly recent memory of the Holocaust itself.

Broadly speaking, the America of the 1960s could never have realistically supported a traditional period piece about Jesus. George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) remains Hollywood's most bloated portrait of Christ on the screen. Facing increasing economic pressure from television and even foreign film imports, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* was filmed in Ultra-Panavision 70mm Technicolor; it cost twenty million dollars, making it the most expensive life of Jesus. United Artists seemed to be hoping that an all-star cast (including Ingmar Bergman's Swedish star, Max von Sydow as Jesus) would entice a large audience

to see their favorite biblical character come to life. It backfired. Bringing any adaptation from a book to the screen is riddled with problems.

How a film studio “matches” a literary character with a screen persona raises only the most obvious problem. An all-star cast only made the problem of “text into film” even worse in adapting the New Testament, perhaps because of the strongly personal nature of the text source itself. Von Sydow’s European mystique was supposed to give Jesus a flair of the exotic, but what, precisely were audiences supposed to do with John Wayne as the Roman Centurion? As Felix Barber later wrote after seeing Shelley Winters come down with leprosy, “no one blames Hollywood stars for wanting to arrange a little personal atonement. But couldn’t George Stevens the director see that this sort of casting was death to sincerity and realism” (Stern, Jefford and DeBona, 1999:151).

Neither Stevens nor anyone else could have known that the Jesus epic, which they had inherited from DeMille, was just about finished. How long could the film business keep recycling old movie stars into apostles, sinners and saviors? The collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the influence of the French New Wave, the increasing use of film stylistics borrowed from television, together with other factors all competed with the highly expensive epic form. In a way, filming the Bible simply became old fashioned, while, at the same time, a new kind of Hollywood style came to dominate American movie culture the end of the decade.

As their interests changed with the collapse of the Production Code and Studio system, American audiences attended films which addressed current issues of crime and morality. They went to a movie about two runaway criminals (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967); a story about an adulterous relationship between a young college graduate and an older woman (*The Graduate*, 1968); and an X-rated film about a naïve male prostitute which won an academy award for best picture (*Midnight Cowboy*, 1969). A conventional translation of the “Bible into film” would never be a possibility on the big screen after 1968, with its long days of bloody demonstrations, the Tet Offensive in Southeast Asia (reported in detail on television) and heartbreaking assassinations.

#### “JESUS” IN THE DECADE OF THE SIXTIES

But audiences never gave up the idea of Jesus in the movies completely; they just renegotiated him into yet another popular cultural narrative. Jesus conformed to the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s by becoming relevant and radical. Although it was not a Hollywood movie, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, an Italian film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, received a lot of attention when it was released in the United States in 1966, two years after its premiere in Europe. Pasolini’s film is charac-

terized by jump cuts, (an editing style, popular with the European avant-garde which contrasted with Hollywood's invisible style or "continuity editing"), an anti-epic form, and a Marxist subtext. In contrast to Hollywood style, then, new foreign imports often emphasized a neomodernist aesthetic of "defamiliarization." In other words, this arty film was not vulgar entertainment for the masses, or what Pasolini would refer to as "bourgeois history." Pasolini's film, though, represented only a small portion of the growing interest among film connoisseurs in the United States and elsewhere for a more intellectual, art house cinema. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* seems to have succeeded, at least in part, because of its very *difference* from what some claimed to be an aura induced, glamorized apparatus—making Jesus into a spectacle just to appeal to consumers.

Thus, Pasolini's film withholds traditional "authenticity" around Jesus. Stripped of anything like a devotional gaze directed at the audience, the Savior is deglamorized for the bourgeois spectator in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Pasolini catches Jesus on the radical fringes, occasionally angry, even desperate. Hollywood style previously went a long way to bolster Jesus as a personal, relevant Messiah (i.e., a devotional point-of-view shot). Pasolini's Christ, on the other hand, is small of stature and resembles a peasant rather than a Messiah (Pasolini, like the great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, engaged non-professional actors to deprive the narrative even of the aura of "star power"). Obviously, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* was destined for an increasingly college educated audience which was becoming more and more sophisticated, analytical and capable of reading the "grammar" of media; halos and glamour photography were passé, popular religious codes established in another era.

"Jesus Christ" was bound to be re-invented by the late 1960s; perhaps most notoriously, in the rock musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The soundtrack for *Superstar* was a smash, with one critic saying that it was "potentially the single most important recording since Edison waxed his first cylinder" (quoted in Stern, Jefford, DeBona, 189). Adapted for the screen by director Norman Jewison and Melvyn Bragg and released in 1973, *Superstar* is, of course, less interested in a realistic translation of the traditional narrative of Jesus than it is in questions of identity. As the song goes, "Jesus Christ Superstar, do you think you're what they say you are?" Only the 1960s, with its radical left-wing politics, "death of God" movement, and America's increasing distrust of authority and politics could have produced such a question.

Certainly, the nation's youth helped to shape the future of the United States during those turbulent years, and it would be young people who made the reinvention of Jesus possible, even forcing the Son of God to

ask their kinds of questions. Surely the various Christian denominations themselves would help to redefine this new Jesus for its youth, with numerous catechetical programs in the United States beginning to emphasize a more personal relationship with the Savior.

As if born only to speak to young adults, the Jesus-as-Superstar lacks any divine origins and spends his time on screen reacting to violence and the established order in a kind of make-shift “happening” in Palestine. Seen from our perspective, Ted Neeley’s Jesus appears to be constantly whining about everything from the unfortunate state of the human condition to over stress. Less God’s Son than a barometer of social unrest, the Superstar seeks his identity in a world that does not understand him. Even his dear friend, Mary Magdalene, cries her heart out in a production number which would become a platinum single, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him.” Although the use of an African-American as Judas caused some controversy at the time, it is easy to see that casting Carl Anderson was part of the film’s cultural politics towards racial integration; this Superstar wants everything “to be alright, now” in a world of war, prejudice, and hypocrisy. Predictably, perhaps, the hope the film offers is not an establishment of the Kingdom of God, or even the hope of a resurrection, but rather, the story of one man with a message to his generation. With countless revivals in small productions throughout the country, Web pages and a large cult following, *Superstar* still speaks to many in our own day.

#### “JESUS CHRIST” AND POSTMODERNISM

The fate of Jesus’ image in the age of mechanical reproduction is nowhere more provocative than in the age of postmodernity. An amorphous, complicated term, the advent of postmodernism has been likened to a profound cultural shift from the way we understand ourselves. For many critics, technology has propelled us from a (pre-World War II) world in which our source of knowledge was a master narrative or a “metanarrative,” into a more fragmented, rootless and ironic space; now there are only small stories and communities—micronarratives. Postmodernism has introduced a world which Robert Venturi and others have likened to Las Vegas: endlessly eclectic, a *bricolage* and pastiche of styles without an organic whole. The implications for the Christian community are immense since salvation history functions like a grand narrative. When the story of Jesus is told in the age of postmodernism, then, some characteristics are bound to surface, particularly in forms of allegory, intertextuality, and parody.

*Jesus of Montreal* (1990), a Canadian film by Denys Arcand, is a good example of allegory deployed to showcase a micro-narrative. Laced with occasional references to the gospel, *Jesus of Montreal* shows the movement of an actor, Daniel Coulombe, who is cast as Jesus in a pas-

sion play (a priest says in the film “it must be modernized”) to his gradual, real-life absorption of the Christ-role. For Arcand, the Christ film must become not another (Hollywood) spectacle, but a radically personal fusion with Our Lord as the Suffering Servant. The film goes out of its way to deconstruct the notion that an “authentic” representation of Jesus could be linked to middle class spectacle, or even a master narrative. On the contrary the film suggests, Jesus’ story can only be a micro-narrative, told in a world where many people live and absorb the personal story of Jesus Christ as their own.

Undoubtedly, the force of Arcand’s political allegory is leveled at the culture of the Hollywood blockbuster and Jesus’ absurd role in that epic form, but his critique also raises issues of intertextually. Intertextuality cannot be separated from postmodern representations of Jesus because we have been supersaturated with Christ’s image through film, television and the Internet; everything has a reference to something else. Any image—even Jesus—can be manipulated and replaced with yet another, or part of another. One journal used a very traditional, familiar representation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with the head of Elvis Presley.

In the era of cyberspace and digital manipulation, nothing is sacred because everything can be “deconstructed.” No image can reproduce integrity or the aura of (divine) presence; everything photographed can be decontextualized, re-oriented, and recycled. “Remastered” is the benign term for old movies now on videotape, restored in order to recycle them to film connoisseurs. Yesterday’s canonical “masterpiece,” such as the Mona Lisa or The Last Supper, becomes today’s hip collage on wallpaper, lunchbox, or shower curtain.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Martin Scorsese’s movie about Christ’s life based on the controversial novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, is ultimately an intertextual, theological response to movies about Jesus. If mass culture has made Jesus beautiful, authentic, and capable of a subjective encounter with his audience, Scorsese deconstructs these very representations of the Savior by raising a traditional, theological principle all the way back to the Council of Chalcedon—that Christ is both God and Man.

A director with an astute knowledge of film history, Scorsese uses numerous allusions or “citations” of previous movies about Jesus throughout *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The earlier Hollywood from DeMille to Stevens readily pictured a Jesus of fully divine origin. In a certain sense, the “aura” of Classical studio style, together with constructions of middle-class notions of the sublime and taste, made portraying the exclusively divine image) the only possibility. From the point of view of popular culture and religion, there is a very close relationship between glamour and the sacred. Thus it is here where *The*

*Last Temptation* strikes at the root of our need to make God over in our own image. The opening shot of Willem Dafoe's Jesus is vulnerable, doubting and even weak. While he does endure a last temptation, this is no Gnostic Jesus, but one who is both fully human and fully divine.

Despite what one might think about *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it remains an important film. The issues the film raises remind us of our own ideation of God and how mass culture renegotiates those needs into cultural capital. Mass media helps us to canonize the figures we admire, while parody often pokes fun at the very process of building such images. Parody (together with its first cousin, irony) is a powerful force today because of the fragmented, self-conscious intertextual world of the postmodern condition. Since Jesus is the most reproduced face in the history of the West, it stands to reason that his image would continue to circulate, even as a political weapon. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* uses the Jesus narrative less to ridicule Christ's life than to burlesque our own secular conventions, which tend to make those images possible. The real targets for the Python group are the gated suburbs, authority in the Church, and our most cherished ideals.

#### CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, representations of Jesus Christ will continue to be controversial, and postmodernism is destined to complicate all of them. It seems to me that since mid-century, the destiny of the image of Jesus on celluloid has continued towards bifurcation, split between the legacy of "aura" on the one hand, and the desire to deconstruct that middle-class appeal on the other. Mass culture will continue to bestow authenticity on the face of Jesus, as Hollywood has long demonstrated. The difference is that today folks will gather not at Radio City Music Hall to see spectacles like *The King of Kings* but around their television sets, an instrument which speaks to the small, diverse community, allows for viewing flexibility and provides endless opportunity for discussion. Consider the amazing popularity of *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), Franco Zeffirelli's beautiful, but flawed made-for-TV film (this time the superhuman Savior not only possesses blue eyes and pale skin, but an Oxbridge accent as well).

Meanwhile, more dissonant images of Jesus will continue to invigorate the dialectic between religion and popular culture, challenging the Hollywood Dream Factory. Robbed of middle-class taste, authenticity, and the ontology of the photograph, such films can be instructive in an ongoing, cogent discussion of religious hermeneutics. What is at stake in our representations of the Savior may be our formative habits as consumers in late capitalism. We tend to like our messiahs made over in our image, and American film culture has eagerly cooperated with our fantasies, which are poised so gingerly between secular glamour and

religious devotion. And ultimately our interrogation of the history of Jesus on film must cause the Christian community of the third millennium to ask a further, more probing question: does not the Suffering Servant of Isaiah come to his people scarred to the bone and barely recognizable?

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*Gueric DeBona, O.S.B., teaches homiletics at Saint Meinrad School of Theology.*