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Media and Culture

Scorsese's Man, Jesus

American religious films have presented a pristine irreproachable Jesus who only showed his humanity as he bled on the cross. Martin Scorsese presented a very unconventional and less austere Jesus struggling in a realistically depicted world in the 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ. Many people objected to the idea that the traditional story and image of Christ was greatly altered for the purpose entertainment. But the convincing medium of film levels Jesus' experience to mirror our own human struggles. Though it challenges Christianity by its premise and execution, it affectively created a picture of Jesus that reflects the contemporary tug of war between the secular and the spiritual.

Process The foremost function of the film is entertainment. The film also functions to further the career of its cast and creators by its risky plot and imagery. The media communicators off-screen are a deceased Greek man, and a successful Hollywood Italian-American filmmaker, and Anglo Calvinist screenwriter. The film is based on a 1955 novel of the same name by a Greek Orthodox believer and philosopher, Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), who also wrote "Zorba the Greek" (Intikriti). The director Martin Scorsese originally intended to be a priest but left to attend film school (IMDb). Paul Schrader wrote the screen play and had also done so for Scorsese on the 1976 film "Taxi Driver" (IMDb). It is notable that Schrader added the sex scene with Magdalene in

the dream sequence (Corliss). A 33 year-old Willem Dafoe plays a fair haired Caucasian Jesus and displays his achingly lean muscular body often throughout the film. Harvey Keitel plays a strong loyal Judas with a slight New York accent. Barbara Hershey plays Magdalene, a prostitute who almost serves as an adjunct to the apostles.

The novel was “quite controversial when first published in 1955, and prompted angry reactions from both the Roman Catholic Church which banned it, and from the Greek Orthodox Church which tried to excommunicate him” (Interkriti). The choice to make a film from it fueled even more controversy because of the convincing power of the medium. As Silverblatt acknowledges, it can “create a distorted picture of reality” which protesters claimed it did (Silverblatt 29). Scorsese’s film adaptation was initially in preproduction in 1983, the casting complete, when Paramount pictures pulled funding fearing failure. With the backing of Universal Studios Scorsese picked up again in 1987. Universal only gave the risk a very small budget of just under \$7million and was in only 123 theaters nationwide and grossed just over \$8 million (Boxoffice).

The film was targeted to primarily a small sector of the American audience, those who would be willing to accept the premise out of a nation of which 85% claim to be Christian (McKibben). Among those would be non-believers, Jews, Muslims, other religions, and of course, Christians. The open-minded target audience would desire fact over faith as a trait of religious modernism, a centrist strain of religious liberalism, thought to be the dominating theory among modern faith (Wacker). The thinking embraces Victorian values central to U.S. culture, values intellectual findings over supernatural attribution, and seeks to redefine Christianity in the light of scientific advancement (Wacker). Religious modernists feel that “Christian teachings can be

retained when, and only when, they can be validated by recent secular thought”

(Wacker). The movie represents the meeting ground of faith and intellect in the U.S.,

including freedom of expression. One critic crystallizes the struggle:

“One side wants to keep the symbol inviolate. It stands for everything they treasure. The other side wants to assert an equal and opposite right to take liberties with the symbol ... and impute its own values to it” (Sobran).

Nathan Gardels, editor of “New Perspectives Quarterly” points to sociologist Pitrim Sorokin’ “division of society into ‘sensate’ and ‘ideational’ aspects, sensate being based on empirical reality and dependent upon the natural sciences; ideational being mystical, anti-intellectual and based on faith and authority” (Gardels). Most people function under both. This film describes Jesus with an eye to both documented information and spiritual thinking.

Context The top grossing films in 1988 were Rainman, which won Picture of the Year, and Who Framed Roger Rabbit. “The Cosby Show” and “Roseanne” shared the top spots on TV, followed by Cosby’s spin-off “A Different World” (In the 80’s). Salman Rushdie’s “Satanic Verses”, the famous object of political protest leading to a fatwa on Rushdie, was published in the UK several weeks after Temptation. Ronald Reagan’s presidency was coming to an end, his vice president George H.W. Bush to succeed him. The film emerged from a largely conservative era. Some felt it was a challenge to Christ and Christianity including Franco Zeffrelli, Director of Jesus of Nazareth (Corliss). But the reputation of conservative religion in 1988 had been damaged by scandals of prominent evangelists, Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. Sobran suggests the broad

protest and call to arms among fundamentalist Christians was an effort to repair their image (Sobran).

The film received an R rating though it contains full frontal female nudity and very close to that of men. Some countries placed higher age requirements for admission, and several banned its release altogether (IMDb). Some Christians were upset that Les Wasserman, the head of Universal Studios, which created and promoted this film that brings Jesus down to human vulnerability, was Jewish (Corliss).

The worldview is harsh and bleak. It is set in Israel under Roman rule when the Jews could not worship freely in the temple. It is a class based society, not charitable but very judgmental and condemning. The world is going to hell. The Jews want to revolt against the Romans. They await salvation by a Messiah who was prophesied in the Old Testament, the Jewish Torah. The supernatural exists alongside the natural world. Trees appear in an instant, Jesus exhibits the stigmata, sees visions, heals the blind, and removes his heart from his body. A diversity of people are represented as extras in the film, shot in Morocco. But the main characters are white and mostly male. There is a strain of feminism in the Last Supper, in which Magdalene, Mary, and Martha partake as equals. And even though Magdalene is a prostitute, she comes across as a working woman who is far more adorned in a beautiful way than the other women, her chamber as well.

The first image of the movie is Jesus lying among a grove of trees, eyes closed. The viewer comes upon him from above accompanied by the sounds that signify the presence of God descending upon Jesus, a screeching bird and wind. The audience has God's point of view and then hears Jesus' thoughts about the feelings he is experiencing.

From that point, the movie reflects Jesus' point of view, his internal monologue audible. This encapsulates the main premise which is Jesus' conflict between his imperfect humanity and his divinity, his human limits fighting against his spiritual guidance; again, the struggle between the mind and the supernatural. This is alluded to at the beginning of the film in a sort of disclaimer to those expecting the traditional story of Jesus: "This film is not based upon the Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict." (Temptation).

The plot shows Jesus' earthly struggles and spiritual development as he comes to accept his mission from God and a last hesitancy during crucifixion manifest in a dream sequence before he dies on the cross. The dream sequence, the deviation from the Gospels, was the root of the controversy. It was not ushered in with the trappings of a dream sequence; the image going blurry, the character saying "imagine if I could live the life of a man". It progresses in a believable way. Jesus is given amnesty by God as told to him by his guardian angel, a blonde girl about the age of ten. Once in the Dream, Jesus still bears his crucifixion wounds. His mortal life goes on; he marries Magdalene, consummates the marriage in the film, has children, and grows old. When he lay dying the angel is revealed to be Satan and he begs God to take him back to the cross. The scene cuts again to the crucifixion where it left off. Jesus realizes it was a dream, or he was given amnesty, proclaims, "It is accomplished!" and dies.

The journey from "struggling" to "accomplished!" is a difficult one for the protagonist and for the viewer. Scorsese's film elicits an affective response as the audience watches him bleed, be rebuked and mocked, doubt, falter at a pinnacle, burn with venom, but also joyously dance at a wedding, and be humbled by God's power

working through him as he raises Lazarus from the dead. He is pitiful at the beginning of the film. He is depicted as perhaps even schizophrenic. As he comes closer to realizing his mission, he is ugly with fire and brimstone. The desired effect is to align Jesus with human inadequacy, the audience's own faults. Therefore when Jesus is crucified and given another chance at earthly life, the reader is willing to give him that chance.

If the audience knew nothing of the Bible, it may read even the miracles as delusions. That doubt pervades the film though it lessens toward the end. The movie ends logically when he finally dies on the cross. This "ideational" conclusion legitimizes the "sensate" exploration of Jesus' humanity (Gardels). If he had not, the novel and the film would simply be considered as a blasphemous exploitation of the figure and would not have been made into a film. Temptation defies the genre of religious epics established by films like The Greatest Story Ever Told, The Ten Commandments, and Jesus of Nazareth. In this film we see a more realistic picture of the time and the struggle as contemporary culture would understand it. Scorsese designed the film with historical insight in dress, setting, and culture. This helps transcend time to bring the viewer closer to the man Jesus and his circumstance. In the film's commentary Scorsese describes these measures as efforts to create immediacy (Temptation).

Production Values The production values of the film support the premise of the film. The setting is Israel around 30 A.D.. The landscape is a harsh dessert with little vegetation except in the markedly lush dream sequence. The soundtrack is a blend of regional tribal music with a minimalist contemporary score composed by Peter Gabriel. Willem Dafoe's Jesus differs from the typical Hollywood model. He is, however, Caucasian fitting the mold of the Hollywood epic. Scorsese justifies the choice as an

effort to not alienate the audience from the traditional model completely (Temptation). Dafoe's Jesus is physical. His role as a laborer reinforces his physicality and humanity. The clothes of this protagonist are dusty and crude, even more so than the apostles'. The characters speak in contemporary American English with hints of regional accents, another connective element for the audience.

Jesus is mostly shot at eye level or from above, not suggestive of majesty. The palette of the film is of dead colors like beige, gray, and dusty tones except for red which accompanies moments of tension, passion, and fever and is manifest in lots of blood, red light, apples, and Judas's hair. According to Silverblatt the choice of dead colors make the viewer feel sad, alone, or uncomfortable (Silverblatt 115). Jesus sits in a circle inscribed in the stony sand desert as he awaits God's word. The circle separates him from the rest of the world, protects him from evil, and focuses energy on him. We see the man wither in the circle before the divine comes to him. The circle as a symbol separates the contents from the outside, protects the contents, the man (Silverblatt 122).

As mentioned above, the audience's point of view is Jesus'. We experience some of his struggle, just enough to dismiss the possibility of schizophrenia, and we also come to root for this vulnerable character. If one can watch the film and imagine that the character is not Jesus of Nazareth, Savior of humankind, his journey represents several core values of western culture: the struggle for success, triumph over self doubt, and the value of delayed gratification. One latent message that upset Christians was that belief in Christ was more important than truth. One of the disciples says "it doesn't matter if he said it, it's important because people believe it". And Paul says "I created the truth. I make it out of longing and faith. I don't struggle to find truth -- I build it. If it's necessary

to crucify you to save the world, then I'll crucify you. And I'll resurrect you too, whether you like it or not." Historically, Paul wrote the four gospels. This dialogue between he and Jesus suggests that the Gospels may be fabricated. It did not go unnoticed by the protesting Christians (Corliss).

As controversial as the movie was before and upon its release, it successfully depicted Jesus outside of the Hollywood model. Its significance extends beyond the genre of religious films due to the plot difference, and a fresh look at who might have been Jesus, and stands as a grain of sand in the Christian American ideal. It is not a film of complete reverence, nor or rejection. As a work of art, Scorsese's "act of faith" is not simply one of self-indulgence (Sobran). The film does acknowledge the concept that the Gospels are false, but it still elevates Jesus to be divine. This in itself reflects religious tolerance in the United States. The voices that spoke loudest against the film for the Christianity were the religious right, not centrists. Again, the spiritual "ideational" comes in direct conflict with the "sensate", that of the U.S. Bill of Rights.

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