

Jesus @ the movies

The opportunities and the risks of using Jesus films in RE.
How to (not) *Recontextualise* the Catholic faith
and promote *Post-Critical Belief* through Jesus films.

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KU Leuven, 2014 ©

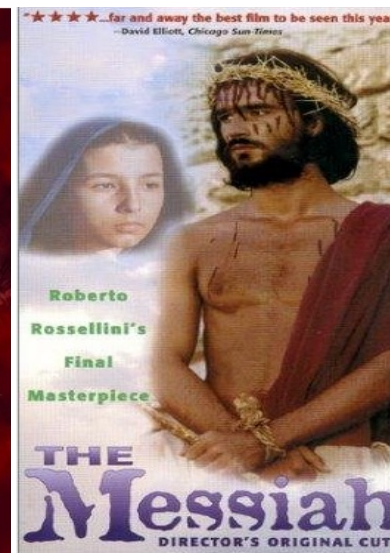
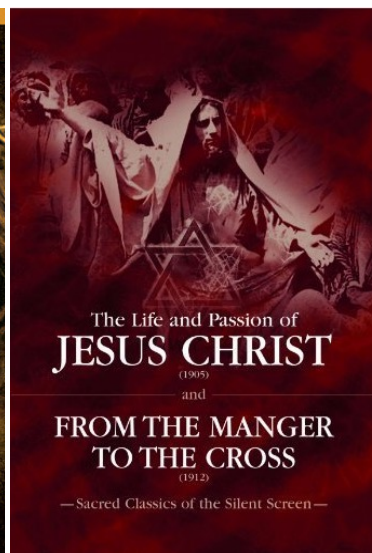
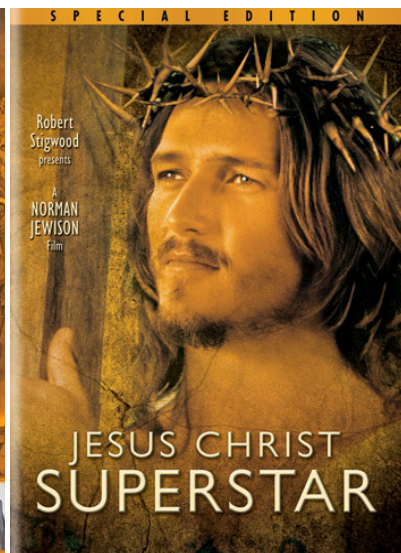
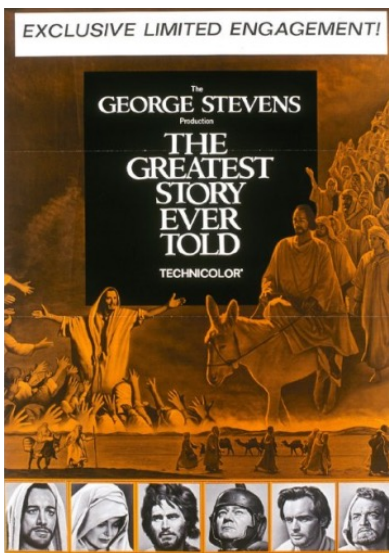
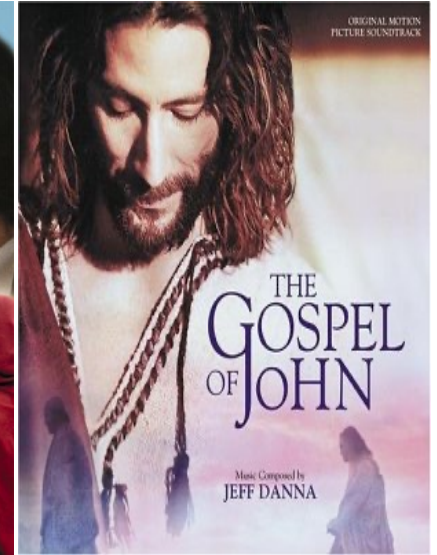
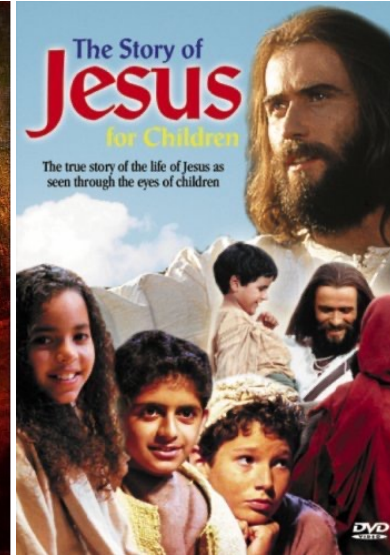
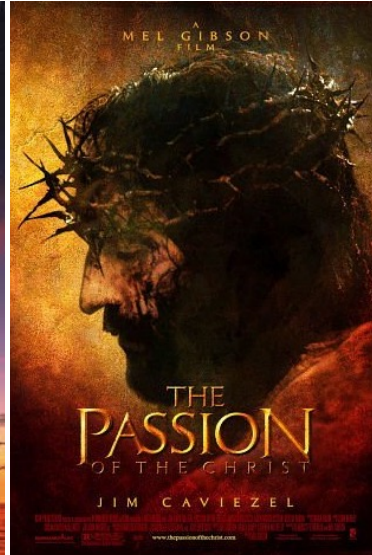
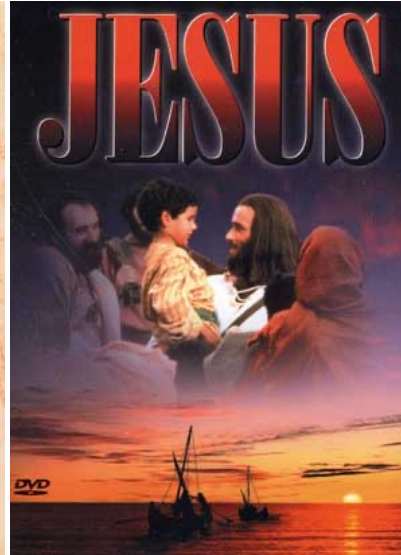
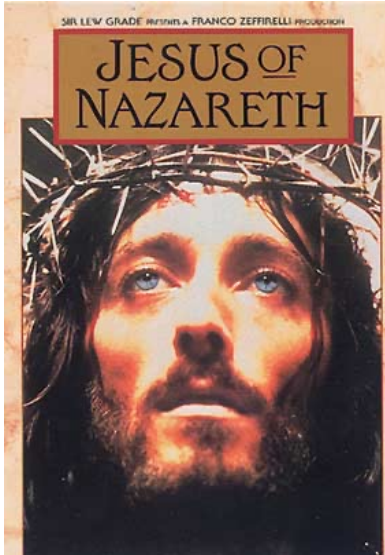


Jesus @ the movies

Introduction

Introduction

Many Jesus films have been created



Introduction

English films that portray Jesus Christ



The Birth, Life and Death of Christ (Alice Guy, 1906, France)
Color of the Cross (2006) (USA)
The First Christmas (Likien Bible Series) (2006) (USA)
From the Manger to the Cross (1912) (USA)
Godspell (1973) (USA)
Gospel of John (2003) (Canada/UK)
The Gospel of Mark (2006)
Gospel Road: A Story of Jesus (1973) (USA)
The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) (USA)
Intolerance (1916) (USA)
Jesus (1979) (USA)
Jesus (1999, TV) (USA)
Jesus of Nazareth (1977 miniseries) (Italy) (UK)
The Judas Project (1990) (USA)
The King of Kings (1927) (USA)
King of Kings (1961) (USA)

The Last Temptation of Christ (film) (1988) (USA)
Mary, Mother of Jesus (1999, TV) (USA)
The Miracle Maker (2000) (UK)
The Nativity (1978, TV)
The Nativity (2010 miniseries) (UK)
The Nativity Story (2006) (USA)
The New Media Bible: The Gospel According to St. Luke (1979) (USA)
The Passion (2008 miniseries) (UK)
The Passion of the Christ (2004) (USA) (Aramaic audio)
Passion Play (1903) (USA)
The Passover Plot (1976) (USA)
The Road to Emmaus (2009) (USA)
The Son of Man (2005) (South Africa)
Son of God (2014) (USA)
Wednesday Play: Son of Man (1969) (UK)
The Visual Bible: Matthew (1997) (South Africa)

Introduction

Jesus films



Jesus has been the subject of many movies: *a true movie star*...
Often successful at the box office.
Often received with great critical acclaim
but never without controversy, though.
Thankfully used in religious education of children and adults.

'Jesus films' as a separate movie genre:

- Purpose: making a credible testimony of Jesus' life.
- Tension between *Reel Jesus* (the Jesus from the movies) vs. *Real Jesus* (the historic Jesus).
- Convenient for faith communication:
 - Jesus films use the power of contemporary film to reach people.
 - Jesus films provoke reflection on an actualised presentation of the central figure of Christianity: who was Jesus, what is the significance of this life, death and resurrection? Jesus films effectively *Recontextualise* the Gospel account.

*Under which conditions can Jesus films contribute to
a contemporary faith communication?*



Jesus @ the movies

Opportunities and risks of using Jesus films in RE

Jesus @ the movies in RE

The advantage of film



- More interest for the medium of film in education:
 - An outstanding medium for complete human learning and development.
 - Movie education should be a part of every school project.
- Films appeal to many human capacities simultaneously:



Logical (the movie plot)

Linguistic (story telling, dialogues)

Visual (colours, pictures, symbols)

Musical (sounds and pieces of music)

Interpersonal (relations between characters in the story)

Kinetic (movements)

Psychological and spiritual capacities.

- Images have a power that words do not always possess (*seeing comes before words*).
- Danger: *the video teacher*.

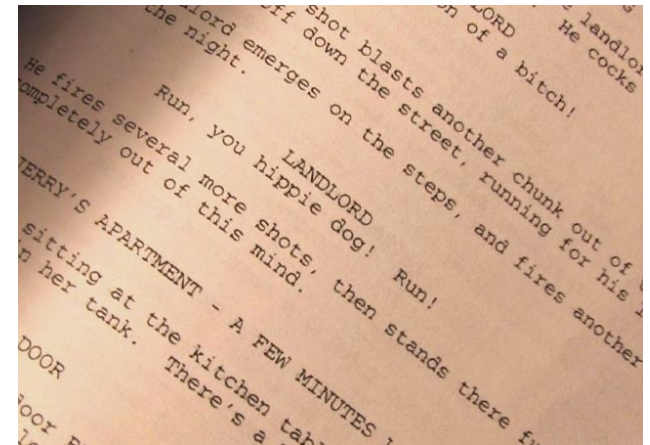
The Gospels as screenplay?

Critical considerations



Too easily it is presumed that Biblical texts and the Gospels in particular are written as if they were the script of a movie. They are not! There is no simple and straightforward transition from a Bible text to screenplay.

If not careful, then the risks for faith communication can outweigh the benefits. However, if one is aware of the tension between the Biblical texts and the Jesus film, then there exist great possibilities for faith communication through movies.



Reasons to be hesitant about and even reject the use of the Bible as the screenplay of a film:

- **Objections from the Gospel genre:** the Gospels contain very little actual information.
- **Objections from the cinematic world:** the Gospels themselves are unsuitable to create an attractive and 'state of the art' movie.
- **Theological objections:** *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image* (idolatry), problematic interpretations, uniformisation of the four Gospels, visualisation of the supernatural such as miracles.

The Gospels as screenplay?

Objections from the Gospel genre



The Gospels contain very little actual information to put the life of Jesus on screen.

The Bible contains very few or no specific directions concerning: scenery, clothes, food, climate, people's mentality, character traits of protagonists, et cetera. Specific details about the person of Jesus are hard to find in the Gospels (the evangelists did not personally know Jesus).

The Gospels are not written to describe the person of Jesus (certainly not in the way characters are portrayed in contemporary literature). The evangelists made use of **roles in the religious literature of their times** (e.g. prophet, priest, king, teacher, Son of God, ...) to make clear the identity and meaning of Jesus.

Consequently, when converting a Bible story into a screenplay, many **new elements are added** that do not originate from the Bible. Inevitably they bear the signature of the film's maker. J.H. Mahan: *"Each telling of the Jesus story projects the teller's own issues of faith onto Jesus."*

It is very important not to overlook the big difference in GENRE between the Gospels and a contemporary screenplay.

The Gospels as screenplay?

Objections from the cinematic world



The Gospels themselves are unsuitable to create an attractive and 'state of the art' movie.

The medium of film poses a number of specific demands to create an attractive product, but the 'raw' Bible text does not meet these demands. Jesus films that stick close to the literal Gospel text are easily experienced as 'slow' and 'boring' and do not appeal to a wide audience.

Filmmakers work with cinematic elements in an active and creative way. They select texts and images, put them in a new order and suggest connections between different story elements.



The Gospels as screenplay?

Theological objections



Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. Is it acceptable to convert the person of Christ into a motion picture? Is this not a violation of the *ban of images*?

Idolatry: fixing the Divine into a specific image that, in turn, starts ruling over people.

Warning: do not allow your own religious imagination to be distorted or overshadowed by an image of Jesus constructed in a movie. Some believers have testified that watching a Jesus film disturbed their faith life: a too realistic image is *forced upon them*.



The Gospels as screenplay?

Other theological objections



Jesus films may contain representations and interpretations that can and should be rejected from a theological point of view.

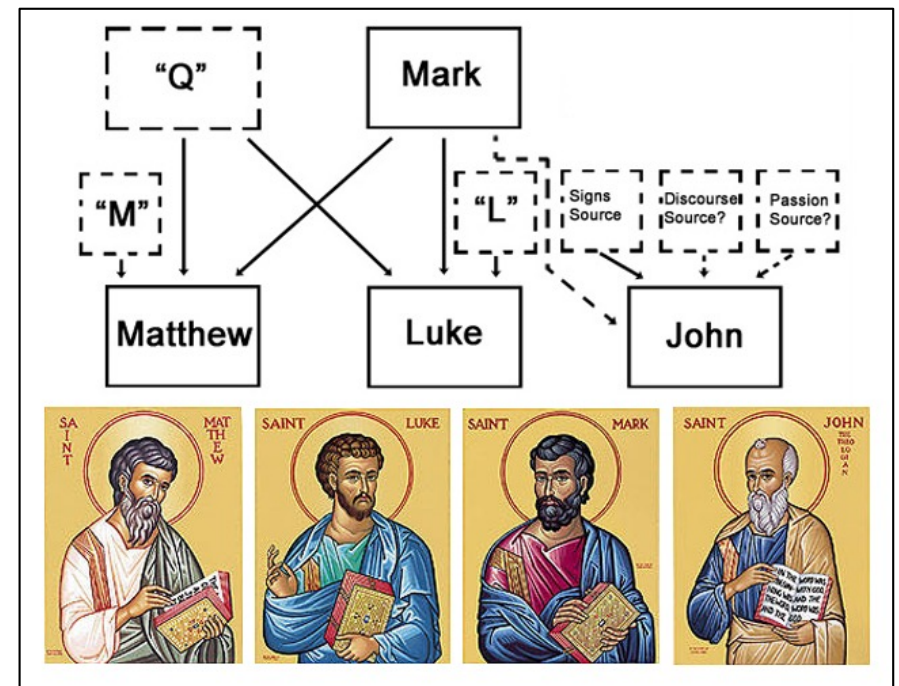
The dramatisation of the Biblical story can be historically and theologically inaccurate. The presentation of the story may offend certain believers or it may be heretical from a dogmatic or Church perspective.

The Gospels as screenplay?

Other theological objections



Often, four different Gospels are reduced into one coherent screenplay. Such **uniformisation of the Gospel accounts** (a modern kind of *Diatessaron*) rejects the diversity within the original texts. It ignores the complexity of their historical interdependence that is needed to read and interpret the texts correctly. The harmonised screenplay is a subjective selection and re-composition of elements according to the filmmaker's own perspective and interpretation, at the cost of other presentations that are present in the Bible texts.



Reduced to ONE screenplay ?

The Gospels as screenplay?

Other theological objections



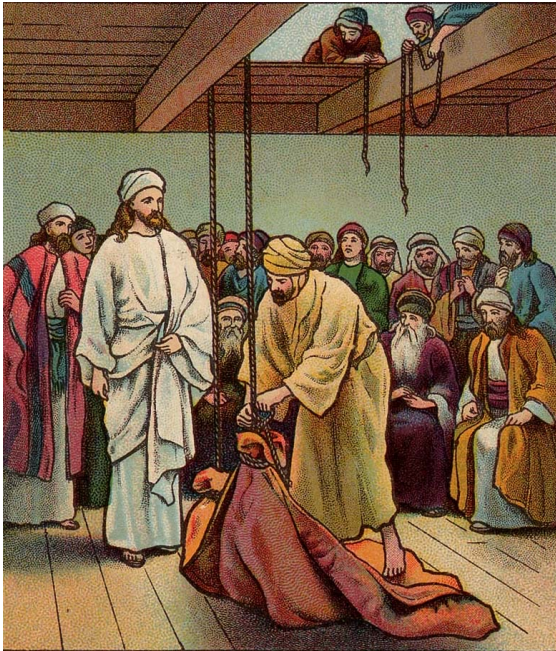
The visualisation of the supernatural in many Jesus films deserves theological critique. All too often, supernatural events such as miracles, healings, multiplication of bread, walking on water, raising of the dead, etc. are portrayed literally on the screen.

- How to 'capture' e.g. the resurrection on film for a post-modern audience?
- Is Jesus reduced to merely a 'wizard' or a 'miracle man'?
- Very hard to still interpret the event afterward. They induce **Literal Belief** rather than *Post-Critical Belief*.
- Rendering Jesus movies implausible and untrustworthy to a critical audience; they make them susceptible to **External Critique**.



The Gospels as screenplay?

Other theological objections



A possible solution in some Jesus films: simply **AVOID those scenes** that contain supernatural events. Focus on Jesus as merely a teacher, a priest and a prophet instead of a miracle worker. However, **does this selected presentation provide an honest and full image of Christ?**

The Gospels as screenplay?

The interpretive character of Jesus films



All Jesus films are interpretations of Gospel stories.

As such, there are no objections.

However, the danger arises if people are insufficiently aware of this fact. All Jesus films provide a specific message that is not just inspired by the Bible but also by the context in which the film was produced.

→ If people are unaware of this, then using films for faith communication can become problematic, counterproductive and even dangerous.

The Gospels as screenplay?

The interpretive character of Jesus films



How do various Jesus films relate to their own interpretive character?

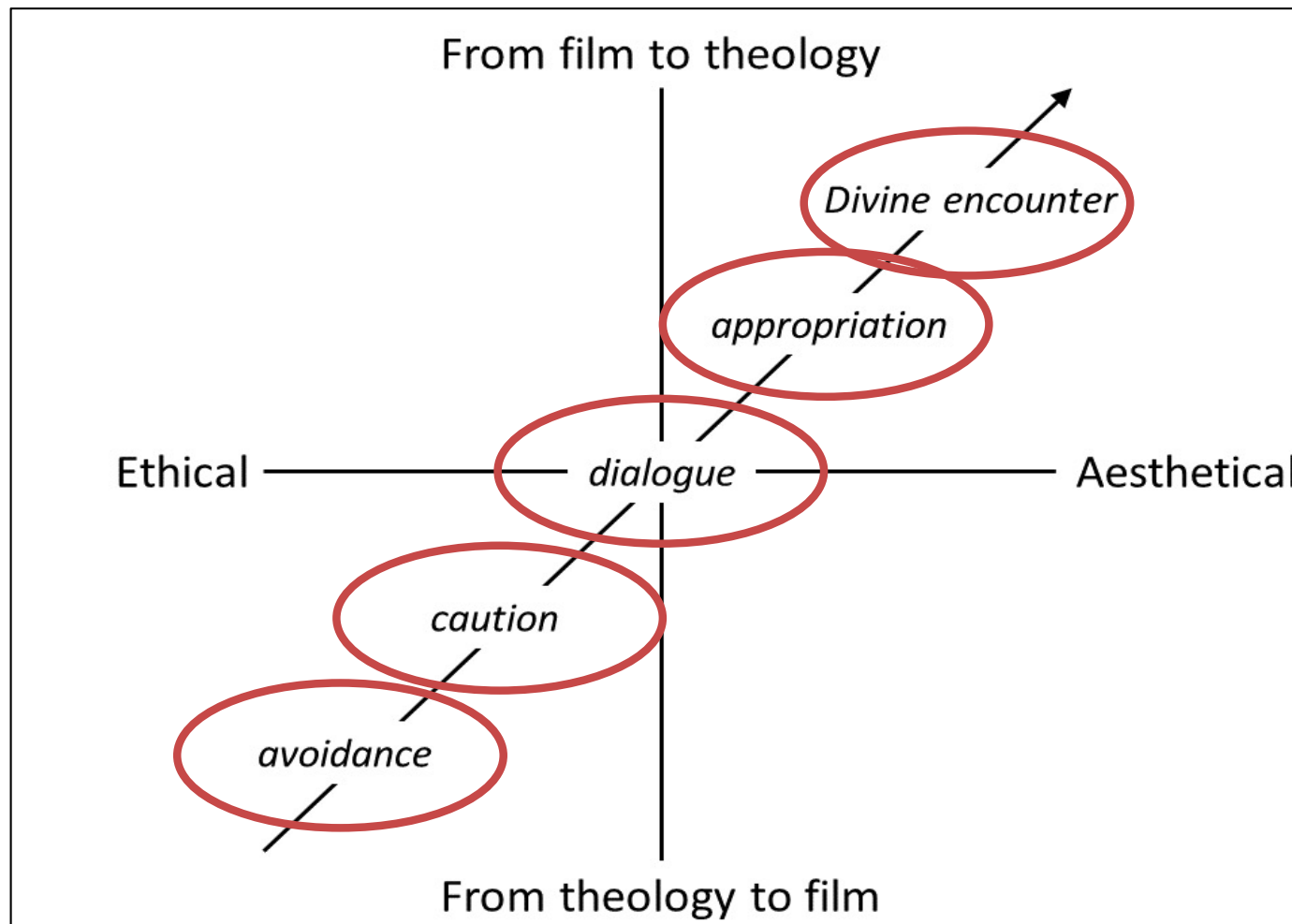
- Some movies are so obviously interpretive that it speak for itself.
E.g. Jesus Christ Superstar: the apostles wear jeans and drive around in a bus.
- Some movies start with a warning that the movie is not based solely on the Bible. *E.g. The Last Temptation of Christ*
- Some movies are so strongly interpretive that they no longer refer explicitly to Jesus. *E.g. De Intrede /The Entry*
- Some movies try to stick very close to the Bible text, claiming to add as little interpretation as possible. *E.g. The Gospel of John*
- Some movies pretend to be completely historic and free of interpretation, while this is not the case at all. *E.g. The Passion of the Christ*

Different ways to relate to Jesus films

Johnston's typology



R.K. Johnston (2000) proposes five different models concerning the relation between theology and film. **Five ways to relate to Jesus films:**



Different ways to relate to Jesus films

Johnston's typology



1) The model of avoidance

Some theologians oppose the appearance of Jesus in films. They refuse to watch Jesus films and recommend believers to do the same. They are possibly against all Jesus movies or just some. Some films are dismissed out of principle without even being watched.

2) The model of caution

Jesus films are confronted selectively and careful, armed with a pre-determined theological and ethical image of Jesus. When the movie fits in the faith tradition, it will be appreciated. When it differs from the faith tradition, it will be disparaged. A hermeneutic of suspicion and impeachment without real dialogue between film and faith exists.

3) The model of dialogue

Jesus films are approached with an open view, without prejudice or judgement. The movie is a dialogue partner: it is allowed to speak, it can ask questions to theology and give answers. But theology is a dialogue partner as well: faith can also question the movie and justify and/or criticise it. The dialogue with the film is a learning process for the viewer.

Different ways to relate to Jesus films

Johnston's typology



4) The model of appropriation

Through the encounter with the film, theology gains new insights, it grows and changes. The film aspires to shed its own, independent light on the human condition. It asks new and often unexpected questions to theology, opening new and unsuspected possibilities.

5) The model of divine encounter

The film is ascribed the ability to call on the transcendent and bring people in direct contact with the divine. The film is able to mediate God's grace in a privileged and contemporary way. It has almost 'sacramental' qualities: it contains moments of 'transparency' where God reaches out and touches people.

Transfer of authority

Films as *targums*



TARGUMS are Arameic translations of the Jewish Bible, created in the first centuries AD:

- Contained a strict translation of the original Hebrew texts,
- but also **additional explanations** for illiterate worshipers.
- After a while, both textual layers **merged together**. Most people became unable to discern the difference between the original and the addition.
- The interpretation that was brought in by the additional explanations received the **same authority than the original**; it was elevated to the level of revelation.

→ This process is called ***transfer of authority*** (Flesher and Torry, 2004).

An analogous process occurs in many Jesus films!

When a Bible text is turned into a screenplay, many interpretive elements are added to it. New interpretative elements become merged with elements that have a Biblical origin. Scriptural elements transfer their authority to non-Scriptural elements.

The filmmaker controls this process and provides the meaning of the screenplay that is truly a NEW text.

Much depends on the spectators

Typology of three kinds of spectators



Three kinds of spectators	Attitude towards the film
<p>Spectators with a solid Biblical background</p> <p>They will enjoy the movie the most because they see the tension between text and interpretation. But they will also be the most critical when the movie differs from the Bible text.</p> <p>Note: it is good that Jesus films are being scrutinised by <u>biblical scholars</u>, so that problematic and erroneous interpretations and trends of <i>Relativism</i> are detected and criticised. Not just <i>any</i> interpretation is legitimate if one intends to be loyal to the Biblical tradition!</p>	<p>→ <i>dialogue</i>, possibly <i>appropriation</i>.</p> <p>→ <i>caution</i>, possibly <i>avoidance</i>.</p>
<p>Spectators with an elementary Biblical knowledge</p> <p>Basic knowledge based on religious upbringing and participation in a culture with Jewish-Christian roots. Jesus films are an accessible and agreeable repetition or deepening of Christian knowledge and experience. <u>But this is also a vulnerable group: little resistance against problematic transfers of authority.</u></p> <p>The movie sometimes calls into question and corrects the image people have of Jesus Christ: their established narrative about Jesus is 'interrupted' and new meaning comes in. However, the Biblical Jesus must remain the touchstone ("I had pictured my Jesus differently").</p>	<p>→ <i>dialogue</i>, <i>appropriation</i>.</p> <p>→ preferably maintain the model of <i>caution</i></p> <p>→ <i>appropriation</i>.</p>
<p>Spectators without Biblical knowledge</p> <p>Post-Christian culture: there exists a large group of spectators with no Biblical background (anymore). Jesus films are often the <i>only</i> way for these people to gain an image of Christ, which is then <i>entirely</i> created by the film. The many interpretive interventions of the filmmaker will be very influential because these spectators have no Biblical reference point to tell the difference between Scriptural and non-Scriptural elements.</p> <p>Process of <u>inverted</u> transfer of authority: non-Biblical additions are used authoritatively to interpret Scriptural elements. The Christian message gets influenced and possibly distorted – from their point of view – by the (silent or imposed) interpretation offered in the film. <u>Risk: a wrong perception of Christianity!</u></p>	<p>→ susceptible for the model of <i>divine encounter</i></p> <p>→ preferably maintain the model of <i>caution</i> or even <i>avoidance</i></p>

Jesus films as contemporary faith communication



Johnston's model of *dialogue*, supplemented by the models of *appropriation* and *caution*, offer the best opportunity for faith communication using Jesus films.

Jesus films are situated as part of the ongoing dialogue with the story of Jesus. The film is one attempt among many to respond to the gospel with the storytelling tools of the day and answer the question of the meaning of the life of Jesus today.

Educators need to confront their students with the interpretative perspective that is at work in the film and bring this perspective into dialogue with the Scriptures, the Christian tradition and the human and religious experiences of people today.

Under prudent guidance, **faith communication happens as a balanced dialogue between tradition and modern media, theology and film.**

Jesus films as contemporary faith communication



The most fruitful audience to work with when using Jesus films as faith communication are the spectators of the second category, namely those with **elementary Biblical knowledge**. Note that all three categories of spectators are likely to be present in a group of students. A teacher should be familiar with the students' knowledge of the Bible!

A crucial outcome of good faith communication should be **setting people free from *interpretation blindness***. Help them to discover and *unmask* the film as an interpretation of the Jesus story that contains not just elements from the past, but also from the present and the future.

Resistant reading: a critical wrestle with the questionable Jesus film might also serve faith communication.

Jesus films as contemporary faith communication



A catechist or RE teacher should be **wary regarding the model of divine encounter**, where the Jesus film is regarded as a medium for transcendental experience – especially when this is applied to the Christian faith.

Having some kind of 'transcendental experience' when watching a movie does not imply that the goals of a (Christian inspired) faith communication are met. E.g. themes like 'forgiveness' and 'salvation' in films.

Faith communication requires a **critical reflection about the relation between film, experience and religious tradition**.

The significance of religion can be understood and lived as a **process of continuous creative re-appropriation of and existential re-initiation in the Christian tradition**. A dialogue with a Jesus film can support this process.

The hardest moment in the learning process is when the film has ended: then the teacher has to break through the 'godly enchantment' of the film, return to the banality of daily school life and **start the actual hermeneutical learning process** by using appropriate didactic teaching methods. Also if the students resist...



Jesus @ the movies

Theologies of the suffering and death of Jesus in movies

Critical confrontation with five different Jesus movies



Focus on the presentation of **Jesus' suffering and death**.
In each film, a dialogue with the contemporary culture can be detected:

Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)

The pop and rock culture of the 60s and 70s: Jesus as a *rock star*.

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

Struggle with the meaning of suffering in the world in the late 80s when the liberation movements seemed unable to deliver.

De intrede / The Entry (2003)

A post-Christian echo of Jesus and Christian culture.

The Passion of the Christ (2004)

Possibly an attempt to wrestle with the excessive violence of the events of 9/11.

Jésus de Montréal (1989)

Suffering as resistance against social injustice.

1. Jesus Christ Superstar

Norman Jewison, 1973



1. Jesus Christ Superstar

Norman Jewison, 1973



The last seven days of Jesus' life from the perspective of Judas.

- Beginning with Jesus' entrance in Jerusalem
- Ending with the crucifixion
- Resurrection is NOT mentioned

Many elements of Western culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

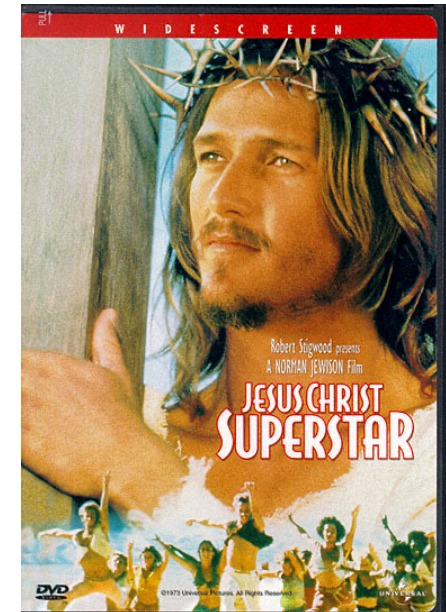
Central question sung by the choir: *"Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.
Who are you? What have you sacrificed? Jesus Christ, Superstar.
Do you think you are what they say you are?"*

= one of the most important questions in theology, namely
the meaning of the life and death of Jesus Christ (cf. Mc 8,27).

Jesus presented as a very human figure.

The objective of the movie:

- Less to present a religious or theological interpretation of Jesus' suffering and death
- Rather **to address a number of contemporary questions** in the context of the story of Jesus.



1. Jesus Christ Superstar

Norman Jewison, 1973



Fragment 1/3 (1.5 min)

1. Jesus Christ Superstar

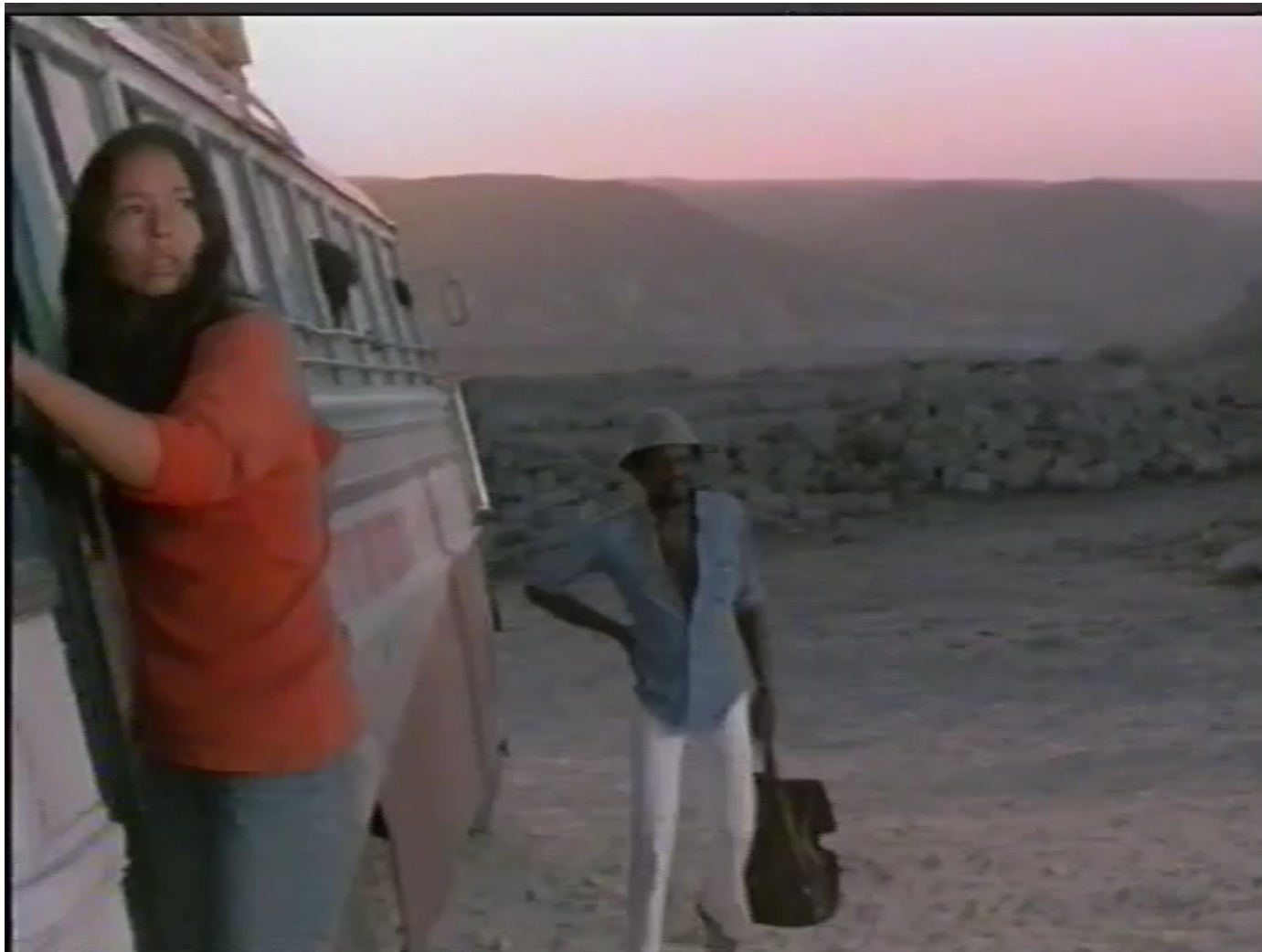
Norman Jewison, 1973



Fragment 2/3 (1.0 min)

1. Jesus Christ Superstar

Norman Jewison, 1973



Fragment 3/3 (27 sec)

1. Jesus Christ Superstar

Norman Jewison, 1973



Movie version (1973) of the rock opera by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, first performed in 1969.

'A dynamic equivalent presentation' of the Jesus event.

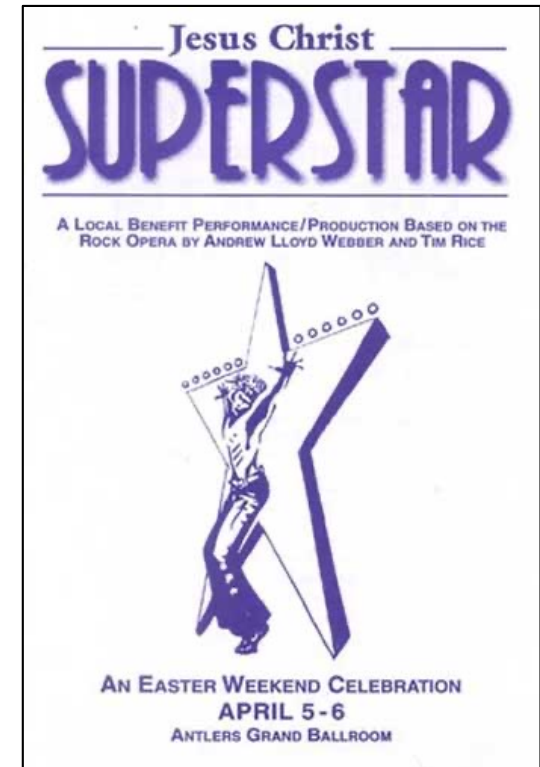
The way of the cross is reduced to a minimum:

- Interpreted by a dancing choir.
- Violence and suffering are only shown in full force at the crucifixion itself.

Why does Jesus die on the cross?

- This remains an open question (even for Jesus?)
- Possibly because Jesus challenged social conventions and the power of the powerful

At the end: sun going down, no reference to the resurrection.



2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



People are informed at the start of the movie that it does not pretend to show the historical Jesus.

Central theological questions:

- What is the relationship between the humanity and divinity in Jesus?
- Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?

Jesus' 'last temptation' occurs in a dream as the climax of the tension Between humanity and divinity.

Controversy concerning the scenes (in the dream) of the married life of Jesus.

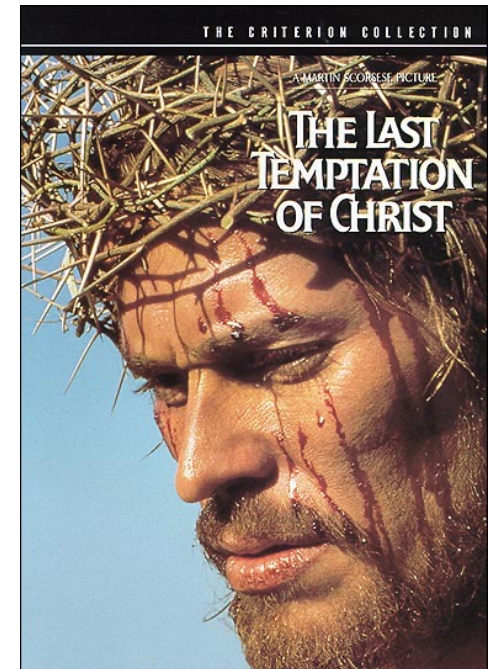
Theology of suffering:

- **Satisfaction theory**: it is God's explicit will that Jesus dies on the cross
- Only if Jesus is obedient, he is the Messiah, the saviour of the world

Demonic temptation = Jesus did not have to die on the cross in fulfilment of God's will (cf. Jesus Christ Superstar).

The death of Jesus as primarily the will of God.

The human responsibility for Jesus' death is not considered.



2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



Fragment 1/4 (38 sec)

2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



Fragment 2/4 (48 sec)

2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



Fragment 3/4 (4.01 min)

2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



Fragment 4/4 (6.23 min)

2. The Last Temptation of Christ

Martin Scorsese, 1988



People are informed at the start of the movie that it does not pretend to show the historical Jesus.

Central theological questions:

- What is the relationship between the humanity and divinity in Jesus?
- Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?

Jesus' 'last temptation' occurs in a dream as the climax of the tension Between humanity and divinity.

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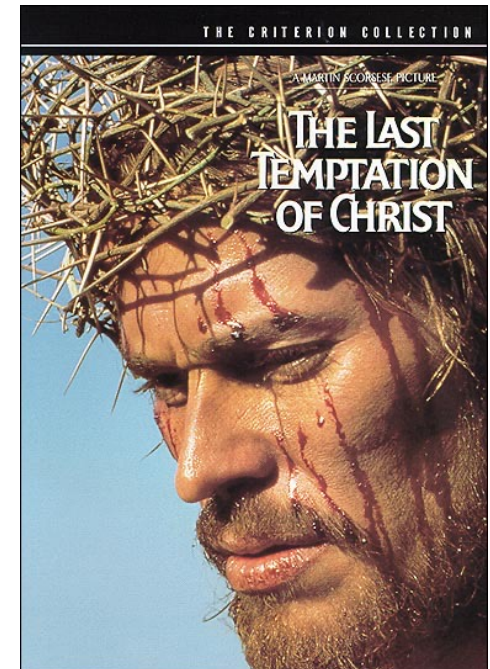
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3. De intrede / The Entry

A short film about princely behaviour, gifts and generous gestures

Pieter De Buysser, 2003



Plot of the movie: This short film shows a young man, followed by a young woman, entering the busy city Brussels while sitting on a horse. The local authorities think this is disturbing and provocative behaviour. When he gives his horse away for free to a poor man, he is beaten up by a group of bandits ordered by the capitalistic elite of the city. Bleeding, he crawls and meets a fellow sufferer who suffers from worm infections. The young man licks the wounds of this man to soften his suffering. He looks to the sky and asks: “*My God, my God, why have you not yet forsaken me?*”. The girl finally kisses him.



3. De intrede / The Entry

A short film about princely behaviour, gifts and generous gestures

Pieter De Buysser, 2003



**De intrede. Een kortfilm over prinselijk gedrag,
cadeaus en genereuze gebaren.**

**(The Entry. A short film about princely behavior,
gifts and generous gestures.)**

Short movie by Pieter De Buysser, 2002

Produced by: Lampe vzw, Transit-zone vzw en KVS/de bottelarij.

Location: Brussels

Language: Dutch and French

Total duration: 14 min.

Compilation of fragments (6.24 min)

3. De intrede / The Entry

A short film about princely behaviour, gifts and generous gestures

Pieter De Buysser, 2003



No explicit reference to Jesus.

- Can this be seen as a movie on Jesus?
- Allegorical references to the Jesus event.

Free use of religious tradition: "My God, my God, why have you **not yet** forsaken me?"

Opportunities stemming from a confrontation between modern culture and the Jesus event.

Relationship between contemporary experience and the Christian message?

Correlation (religious elements):

- Entrance into a city on an animal
- Resistance of the dominant class
- Christmas song sung by an elderly lady
- Admiration – adoration
- Is the redeeming gift accepted?
- Excessive violence (cf. The Last Temptation of Christ)
- Option for the poor, radical self-gift?
- Etc.



DE INTREDE
een film van Pieter De Buysser

Photo: Johnny De Jaegher, ©2001

3. De intrede / The Entry

A short film about princely behaviour, gifts and generous gestures

Pieter De Buysser, 2003



Critical questions:

How far do I go with my love and action for my neighbour (danger of *domesticating the cross*)?

What is the meaning of the cry: "*My God, my God, why have you **not yet** forsaken me?*"

- Is it a reproach addressed to God?
- Does the speaker imply that, if God had abandoned him, he would not have to act so radically for his neighbour?

Does the movie suggest that Christianity is a *religion for slaves*?

In the final scene, the main character crosses a boundary in his identification with the suffering person. This results in the *loss of dignity*. However, in the gospels Jesus defends and keeps his dignity, even in his passion and death.

- *Human dignity as the limit of love of neighbour?*
- *Problem: the presentation of the content of this movie is cut off from the Biblical narrative and context.*

3. De intrede / The Entry

A short film about princely behaviour, gifts and generous gestures

Pieter De Buysser, 2003



Critical questions:

Ambiguity concerning the motivation for giving away the horse:

- Self-aggrandisement and complacency of the main character who poses for applause.
- vs. Christianity: it is the neighbour who is the starting point and endpoint of the care and concern.

Suffering does not have salvific meaning as such, but is the result of the option of Jesus to persist in his faithful commitment for the realisation of the Reign of God despite opposition.



4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



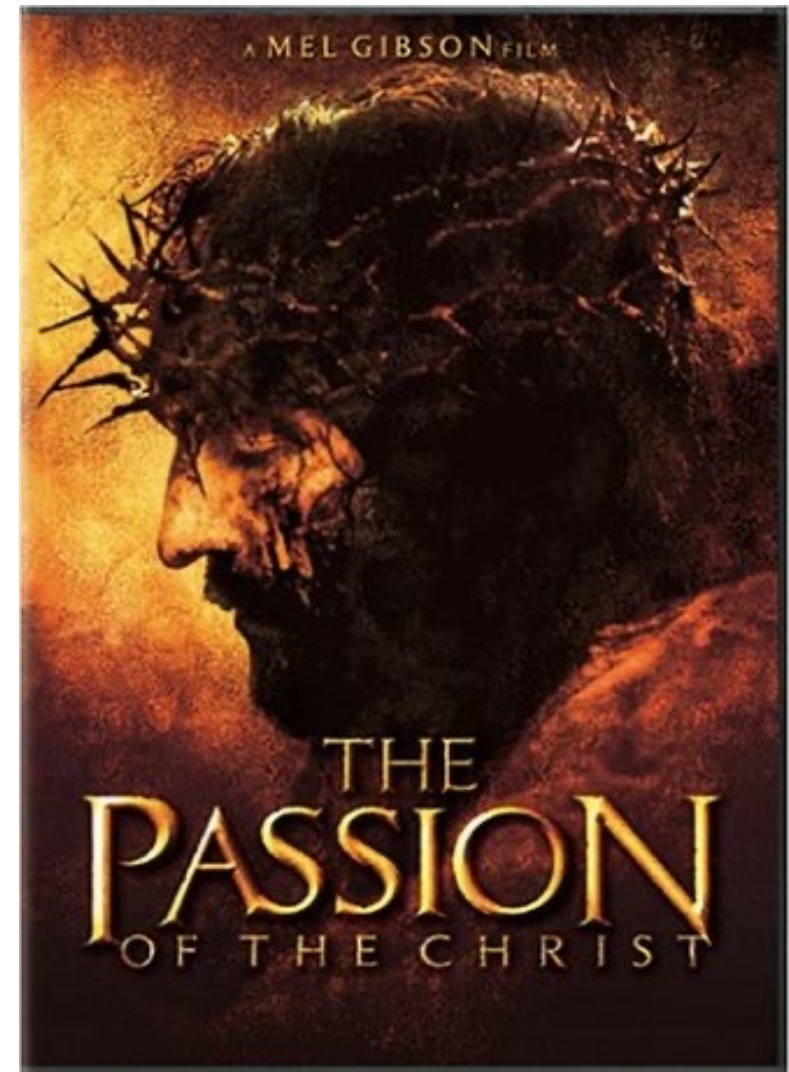
The last twelve hours of the life of Jesus
filmed in a 'realistic' fashion.

Extreme violence shown in the movie:
in the USA rated 'R' (+ 17 years).

Dialogues in Aramaic, Hebrew and Latin.
English subtitles, except the potentially anti-
Jewish words: "*His blood be on us and on our
children!*" (Mt 27:25)

Some scenes are inspired by Anne Catherine
Emmerich, a 19th century mystic who had the
stigmata (some violent and anti-Jewish aspects).

Rumour that Pope John Paul II watched this movie
and spontaneously said: "This is the way it was".



4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



Fragment 1/3 (2.46 min)

4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



Fragment 2/3 (1.22 min)

4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



Fragment 3/3 (1.36 min)

4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



Main question of the film: **what is the meaning and function of Jesus' suffering for human salvation?** Jesus' public ministry and his resurrection are pushed to the background.

Christus Victor model:

- Gibson uses this ancient theological model for the interpretation of Jesus' suffering.
- Jesus' suffering and death is presented as a cosmic battle between God and the devil.
- Through Jesus' enormous suffering the power of the devil is overcome.
- The focus is less on the terrible consequences for human suffering in the world.

God is presented at the cost of his being human.

- *Jesus Christ Superstar*: Jesus being human at the cost of his being God.
- *The Last Temptation of Christ*: Jesus is torn between being human and being God.



4. The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, 2004



Problem: in a certain sense *The Passion of the Christ* is the opposite of *De Intrede*:

- While *De Intrede* plays excessively with meanings, *The Passion of the Christ* **pretends to give the one and only (true and uninterpreted) meaning of the Jesus event.**
- The camera = an extension of the director's eye, who has occupied the perspective of God himself.

The *Passion of the Christ* is **full of theological interpretative presuppositions**, though:

- These are unconsciously accepted as truth or reality by the uncritical spectators or they are simply rejected.
- From a theological perspective, the film shows a very **problematic Christology**. Therefore it is perhaps the most 'dangerous' recent Jesus movie for contemporary communication of the faith!

The film is an attempt to dismiss the spectator from the *responsibility* of understanding the movie as a specific interpretation of the Jesus event by implicitly pretending that there is only one valid interpretation.

5. Jésus de Montréal

Denys Arcand, 1989

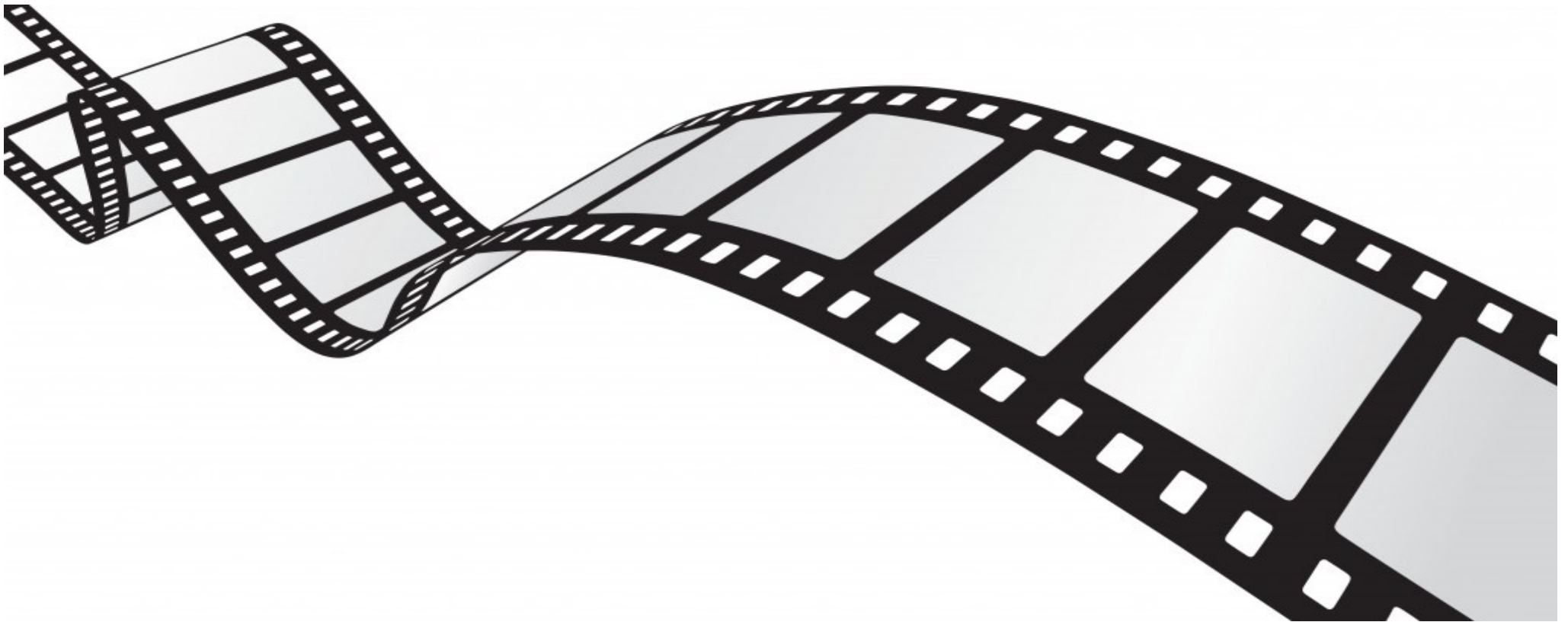


Plot of the movie: a group of actors from Montréal are hired to act out the traditional Passion in a contemporary way. The actors chose to play it against the background of modern city life. The more the actors project themselves into the roles of the Passion play, the more their lives reflect the suffering of Christ. The actors, in particular the figure of Jesus, are moved by the logic of Jesus' life, suffering and death; and this influences their daily life. Conflicts arise with the immoral logic of the world of the film industry when the local parish priest wants to prohibit the Passion play. The actors go on with it anyway. During the scene of the crucifixion, the police intervene and the cross is pushed over. The Jesus figure on the cross falls and dies. His organs are donated and give new opportunities to other people. The other actors oppose their theatre group being commercialised and do not want to betray the values of their founder.



5. Jésus de Montréal

Denys Arcand, 1989



Fragment (2.20 min)

5. Jésus de Montréal

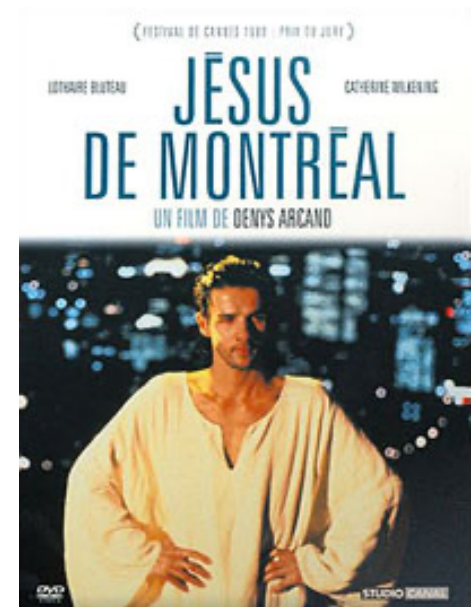
Denys Arcand, 1989



The start is not the Biblical story (cf. Jesus Christ Superstar) but **contemporary life** in which young actors live and the story of Jesus is brought to life step by step.

Unique is the **story technique**: historic interest and actualisation are brought together

- The main character learns about the historic-critical studies of the Bible
- The audience is invited to join (e.g. the multiplication of the bread)
- Actual events enter the Passion play (e.g. the arrest of the main character during the crucifixion)



Allegories: elements of the contemporary world are combined with events from the life of Jesus e.g. the gathering of the group after the death of the main character.

A very **human Jesus** (cf. Jesus Christ Superstar)

- The conception of Jesus in the Passion play is based on an old legend: the Roman soldier Pantera raped Maria
- Consequence = no divine Jesus → resistance of the parish priest

5. Jésus de Montréal

Denys Arcand, 1989



The suffering itself has no meaning.

- Jesus does not die on the cross, but through the cross (literally and metaphorically)
- The cross is not a device of salvation, but an instrument of his message.
- Vs. *Jesus Christ Superstar*: a danger of suppressing the pain of the crucifixion

Jésus de Montréal connects more with the horrific scenes from *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of The Christ*, with the difference that we do not see the horror in *Jésus de Montréal* but it is told. The crucifixion is in the dark and we cannot see the details.

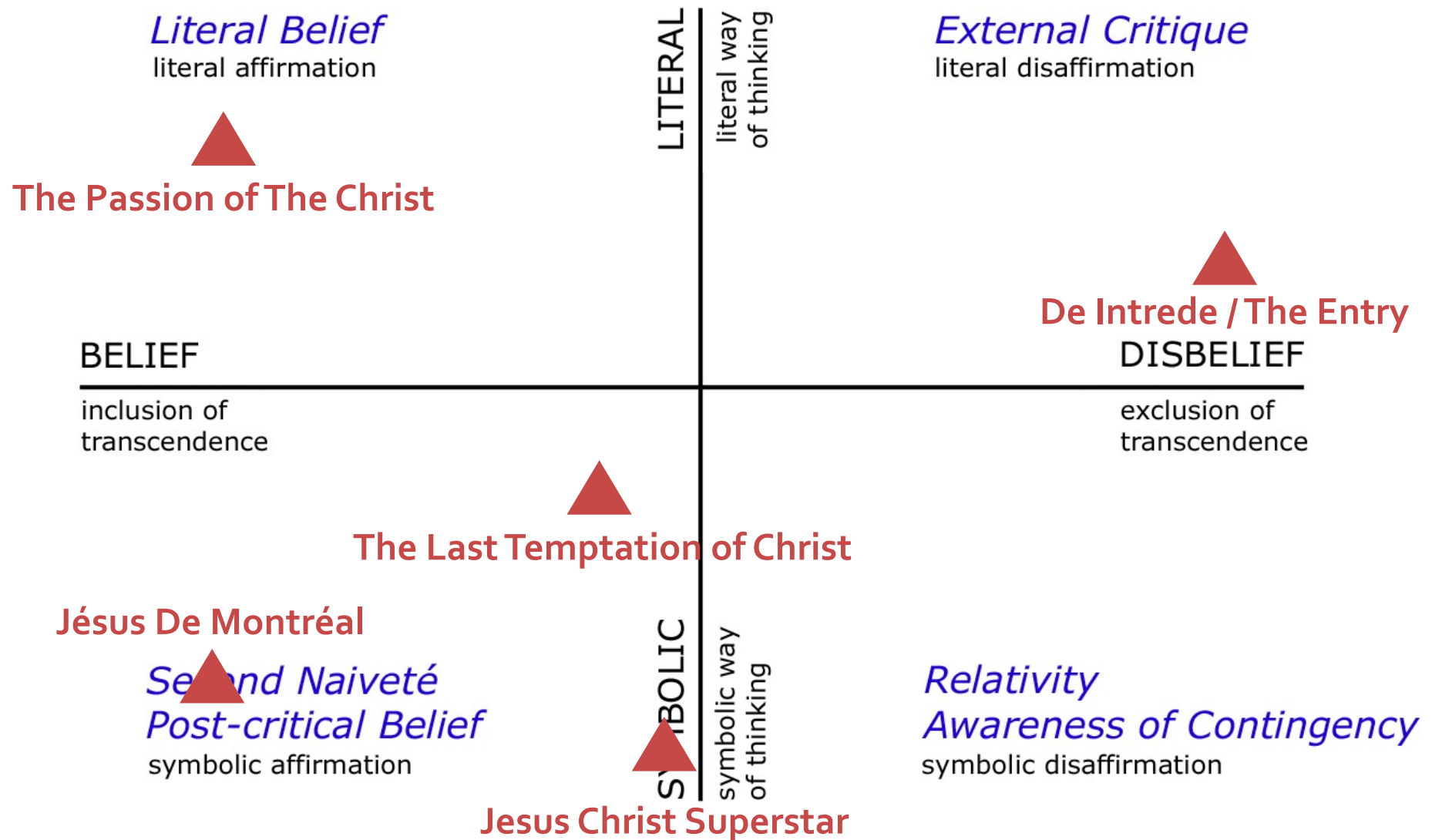
This shows us what is not the meaning of the death of Jesus. Suffering has no redeeming power. The theology of suffering in this movie is showed when the actors ask permission for **organ donation**.

Critical questions:

- The Pantera-story is a legend, not a historic fact.
- Will contemporary viewers see the subtle references to the Bible?

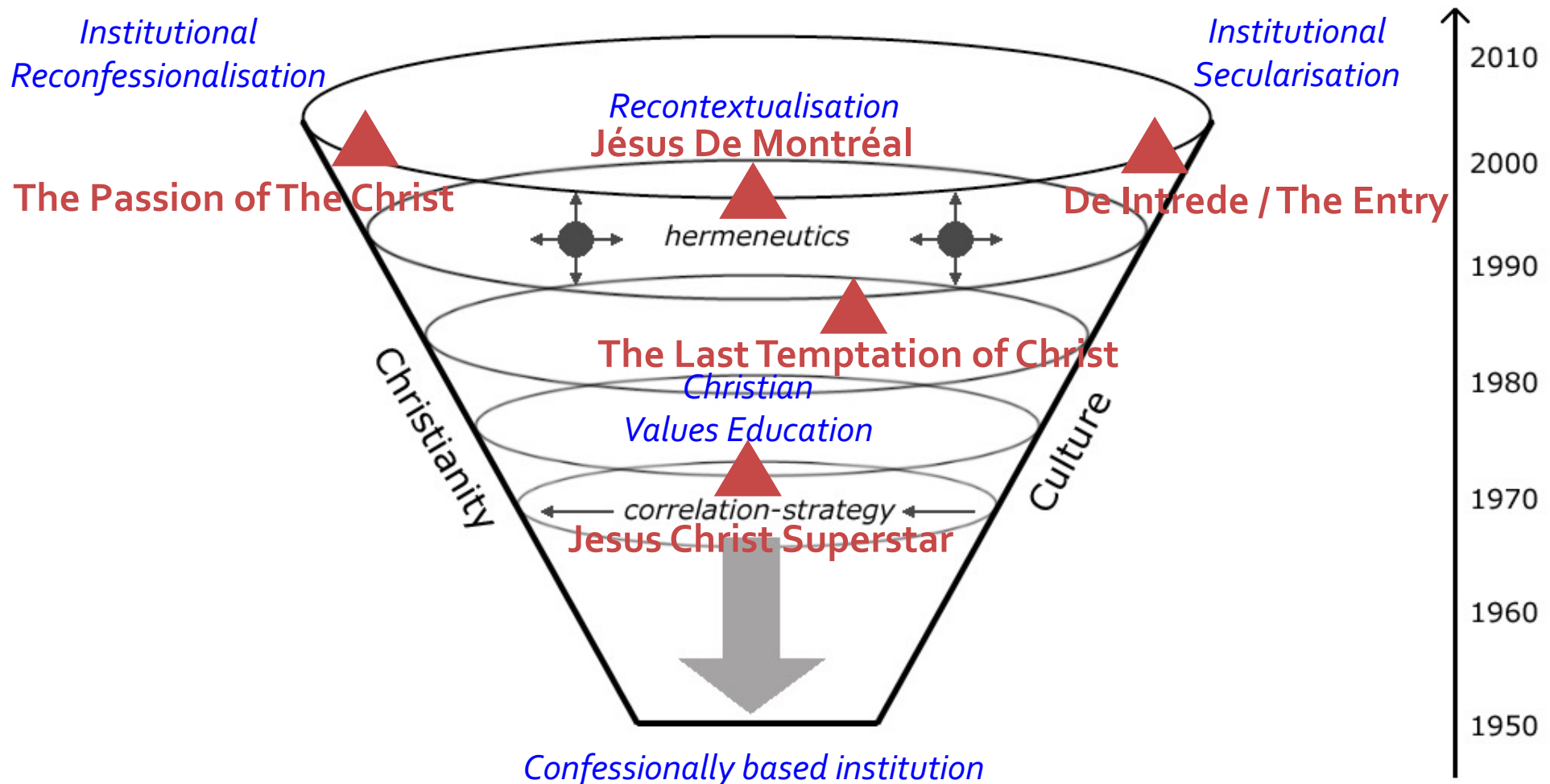
Post-Critical Belief Scale

Diagram



Melbourne Scale

Diagram



Jesus @ the movies

The opportunities and the risks of using Jesus films in RE.
How to (not) *Recontextualise* the Catholic faith
and promote *Post-Critical Belief* through Jesus films.

Prof. Dr. Didier Pollefeyt – Drs. Jan Bouwens

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