Casting Jesus: a century of cinematic Christ

Geoff Broughton

Australia’s first public screening of ‘moving pictures’ was the story of Christ. Soldiers of the Cross is considered Australia’s first feature-length movie, premiering at the Melbourne Town Hall on 13 September 1900 to a crowd of approximately 2,000 people. It was actually an illustrated lecture, combining photographic glass slides with short, dramatised film segments and orchestral or choir music, to relate the episodes of Christ’s life. If an illustrated lecture in a church setting sounds eerily familiar then it is another reminder that the more the world changes, the more it stays the same. In the words of ancient proverbial wisdom, ‘there is nothing new under the sun’. Or is there? When Commandant Herbert Henry Booth, son of Salvation Army founder William Booth, conceived the film in 1899, he could not have imagined the impact his venture would have on either popular storytelling through moving pictures or on the adaptations film would inspire in portrayals of Christ over the next century.

This essay explores that century of cinematic portrayals of Christ. I begin by describing the twentieth century as simultaneously the age of cinema and the ageing of the Church, both of which have made depictions of Christ on film a revealing index of the relationship between Christ and culture. I then discuss briefly elements of filmmaking that have a bearing on cinematic portrayals of Christ, particularly the crucial issue of ‘casting Jesus’. Finally, I examine the climatic crucifixion scene in seven key films, before drawing some broader conclusions about the cinematic Christ in the first century of film.

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The twentieth century: the age of cinema

Australian film director George Miller is famous for creating, producing and directing films as varied as the *Mad Max* quartet, both *Happy Feet* films and the children’s favourite, *Babe*. Miller is also responsible for this infamous quote:

> I believe Cinema is now the most powerful secular religion, and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively, as they once did in Church. Cinema storytellers have become the new priests … I don’t think we fully understand yet the need of people to gather together to listen to a story, and the power of that act.

Cinema is a significant cultural form, revealing those issues that concern or interest us, setting and pushing boundaries of morality and imagination, reinforcing dominant world views or suggesting alternatives visions of the future. Cinema attendance is a shared experience between people as they identify with or reject the world that is shown to them on the screen. The simplicity and similarity of the movie-going experience across the Western world means that cinema has facilitated globalisation, especially through the global reach and success of Hollywood. People are taken to the cinema from an early age, with many not remembering their first experience of the movies (thanks to popular ‘Mums n’ bubs’ screenings). From Saturday night at the drive-in movie theatre of the 1950s and 60s to the trip to the ‘video/DVD’ store in the 80s and 90s, movie viewing has evolved during the age of the cinema. The recent introduction and popularity of digital movie subscriptions (e.g. *Netflix*) is merely the latest evolutionary phase. Yet, in spite of these advancing technologies, going to the cinema remains popular.

As cinema’s influence grew, many people—including people of faith—felt ill-equipped to engage with movies at more than a superficial level. The insecurity and uncertainty shared by many remains unremarked upon and unexamined by those on whom cinema has had the most influence (the young). The Church, by comparison, grew old, tired and unglamorous. Cinema—not the Church—became a powerful and persuasive medium for telling and re-telling the story of Christ.
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The twentieth century: the ageing of churches

Christians have been faced with the question of how to engage with cinema since the earliest silent films appeared a century ago. During the last century an inversion has occurred, reflected in George Miller’s observation above. At the dawn of the age of cinema most people went to Church weekly and the movies rarely. Today, some people watch movies weekly and most rarely go to Church. A casual observer might be struck by the wide difference in age between those at the local cinema megaplex on a Saturday evening and those attending nearby churches the following morning. For many younger people the cinema—not the church—has become the most accessible medium for spiritual encounter. Although movies provide a rich opportunity for Christians to engage in the cultural conversations of our times, the church has been slow to engage in constructive dialogue—even when films have opened the way spiritual discussion and encounter, such as those I discuss below.

Only in the 1990s did theology begin to take film seriously. Film is primarily entertainment, yet many films explore the universal human search for meaning. A film does not need to contain clear or explicit references to theological themes in order for Christians to engage in a fruitful dialogue. Many films contain broad or implicit references to spiritual, social or moral issues such as love and commitment, friendship, war, grief, addictions and abuse, sexuality, parenting and so on. While fewer films over time have contained explicitly Christian contexts, characters and imagery, some films (such as It’s a Wonderful Life and The Apostle) draw their viewers deeply and consciously into a Christian worldview.

The twentieth century: adaptations of Christ

More common are the films with implicit Christian contexts, characters and imagery. Important genres of these films are allegories or parables that contain a Christ-like character (The Lord of the Rings Trilogy, The Chronicles of Narnia and The Matrix trilogy). Finally, the plots of some films explore explicit theological themes such as redemption and atonement (Gran Torino).

Theologians have developed a variety of models for engagement with films, one of which is genre criticism. The approach I have adopted in this essay is similar to that developed by Clive Marsh—called film sentiment—which is summed up by the question, "What do films do to people?" I propose three questions for watching (or discussing) a film:
1. How did watching the film affect you?
2. How do you make sense of / experience the way the story was told through the film?
3. How do you make sense of / experience the value, significance and meaning of the film?

The first question explores the ‘gut-level’ response, inviting the viewer to be attentive to their body, feelings and thoughts. The second question investigates the narrative response, asking the viewer to focus on the film’s use of plot, characters, images, sound and music. The third question identifies the worldview response, where the viewer is invited into a dialogue between their faith, theology and spiritual convictions and those offered in the film. Christians and church leaders, unfortunately, have usually responded to only the last of these in relation to films about Jesus, often asking questions such as ‘How accurate was the portrayal of Christ’s story in the film?’ But before comparing and contrasting key film portrayals of Christ, I want to examine briefly the task of making a Jesus film and some of the peculiar challenges in casting Jesus.

**Not your average Hollywood hero**

The art of good filmmaking is the power to draw an audience viscerally into an imaginary world. Films that are either boring or ‘unbelievable’ (in the more literal sense) fail this critical test and often fail at the box office. A successful film depends on at least four inter-related criteria: its methods of film production are hidden; the boundary between the theatrical and the real is blurred, the entertainment is both public and personal (a dreamlike experience); and the viewer enters an alternate reality which is experienced as un-interpreted, but which has symbolic force and significance.

When a film is based on a well-known historical figure such as Jesus Christ, these challenges become more acute. Added to these criteria is the potential for controversy and censorship when making a film about the life and death of Jesus Christ. Naturally the Church has a vested interest in the way Jesus is presented in public and has not responded kindly to more creative interpretations such as *Life of Brian* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. William Telford notes that in the United Kingdom ‘the depiction of Christ was banned in films following the founding of the British Board of Film Censors in 1912 and this ban was not lifted until after World War II.’ Since the 1960s, when censorship became less effective, certain films
about Jesus continued to attract controversy. Again Telford records that ‘Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) was seen as communist propaganda and in Spain his Christ-impersonator, Enrique Irazoqui, had to endure 15 months of hard labor in the National Service, [with] his passport confiscated and his university career suspended for a year.’

The historicity of the biblical story is not, however, the only problem faced by the creator of a film about Christ. Because Jesus is worshipped, adored and followed by billions of people, a constellation of other challenges bear upon the film’s reception at the box office. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the choice of the actor to play Jesus. The Hollywood star system requires well known actors to make a film commercially viable, yet not every Hollywood ‘star’ can play Jesus. It is difficult, for example, to imagine either Arnold Schwarzenegger or Matt Damon (two of Hollywood’s most bankable stars for the last 25 years) turning the other cheek or patiently feeding a crowd of five thousand! Such actors bring with them a body of work that identifies them with a popular role—such as Schwarzenegger’s ‘Terminator’ or Damon’s ‘Jason Bourne’—as well as a persona that defines them in the eyes of their public. When casting Jesus, the neat separation between an actor’s professional and private life is harder to sustain. The actor’s private failings—common Hollywood frailties such as infidelity, addiction and egotism—become problematic when auditioning for the part of the son of God. In the history of the films about Christ, it is therefore not surprising that the lead role has tended to be played by unfamiliar actors.

A second problem is the suitability of Jesus himself as a leading man. He is not your average Hollywood hero. Many films thrive on sex and violence, and the cult of the anti-hero makes the Jesus of the gospels—a pacifist and asexual (in the of words of Aitken, ‘he does not get into fights and he does not kiss anyone’) difficult to act well. Telford notes, as a result, that screenwriters have ‘tended to build up or develop the other Gospel characters, in particular Judas, Barabbas or Peter, allowing them to demonstrate the human passions and frailties denied to the classical Christ figure.’

A third problem concerns Christology. The actor must be convincing in a role in which that character is both divine and human. The touchstone scene for any actor cast as Jesus—as we shall see in the films below—is the pivotal and climactic crucifixion. Here the actor portraying Christ must negotiate dramatic contradictions: ‘he must be believably human, yet also believably divine, gentle yet forceful, charismatic yet humble.’
All three tensions are evident in a sample of seven prominent Jesus films spanning the last century: *The King of Kings* (1927); *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964); *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965); *Godspell* (1973); *Jesus of Montreal* (1989); *The Passion of the Christ* (2004); and *The Son of God* (2014). While the similarities in these films are more striking than their differences, it is also worth noting that Jesus scholarship is a crowded and contested field of inquiry. What, then, are the theological issues for a credible portrayal of Jesus’ life?

**Who is Jesus Christ for us today? A conversation with Jesus films**

For nearly a decade I have taught and researched in the area of Christology. Some of the terrain of Christology can be sketched in terms of the New Testament testimony, eyewitness accounts and memory of Jesus. These are artificially separated into subcategories of the incarnation (Jesus’ person, life) and the atonement (Jesus’ work, death). A guiding question for Christology concerns the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Some focus on Jesus’ life—the incarnation, teaching, parables, Kingdom—often reflected in church traditions such as those of the Anabaptists. Others focus more centrally on Jesus’ death—the atonement, forgiveness, justification, reconciliation—often found in Protestant churches in the Reformed tradition. Unfortunately too few have been attentive to Jesus’ resurrection—acquittal and vindication, new creation, making amends—which is strongly emphasized in the Orthodox tradition. Each viewer will respond accordingly to Jesus’ films in light of his or her own Christological perspective. This is an example of film acting as a mirror to the viewer—and in this case a wider church tradition. I’ve already noted how the most abstract of Christological debates—how Christ is at once truly, fully divine and truly, fully human—is critical for casting and convincingly portraying Jesus. Some films directly engage a point of theological controversy, such as *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), where the conflict between the ‘historical Jesus’ and the ‘Christ of faith’ is an important theme. Debates surrounding the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ death on the cross (doctrines of the atonement) are often implicit in the following films, but with varying emphases.

A conversation between Christology and the seven Jesus films can be usefully facilitated by employing the rubric of three responses introduced above: gut-level, narrative and worldview. These can be used for personal reflection, but are ideally suited to a small group conversation following a
viewing. In the following I provide a brief introduction to each of the seven films, along with specific commentary on the pivotal crucifixion scene and the interpretive approach.

**The King of Kings, director: Cecil B DeMille (1927)**

Cecil B DeMille makes the story of Jesus story look and sound familiar to the audience by replicating closely the biblical story. As a silent film, images are drawn from religious art and illustrated Bibles while words, images and scriptural titles are juxtaposed. In the climactic scene on the cross, Jesus’ face is serene and calm, his movements slow and deliberate, indicating acceptance of his death as God’s will. The scene is almost devoid of violence, blood or any sense of struggle. Only the dramatic orchestral score conveys the pathos of his impending death. The serenity of Jesus contrasts sharply with the grief, struggle and chaos of those beside him and below him. The stormy scene, complete with lightning, thunder and gale force winds—introduced here by DeMille—demonstrates vividly the cosmic nature of Christ’s death and became irresistible elements of the crucifixion scene for many subsequent filmmakers. The film concludes with the portrayal of a dying hero that can be trusted because, even in death, Jesus remains the king of kings.

**The Gospel According to St Matthew, director: Pier Pasolini (1964)**

Pasolini, another award winning director, opts for a ‘documentary-style’ that employs black and white instead of colour, set in peasant villages and using Italian peasants as actors. Some see his major achievement in his refusal to ‘novelise’ Matthew’s text, thereby revealing the episodic nature of the gospel portrayals. Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* creates a dialectic between his obvious citation and visualisation of Matthew’s gospel, contrasted with the aesthetic and cultural setting for his Jesus’ story. The musical score for the crucifixion scene is set in a major key, which reinforces the dialectic: is this lynching Christ’s defeat or Christ’s victory? Pasolini trains his camera on the grieving mother and women more than Jesus. For the people, the proletarian peasants, Christ’s death on a cross is a cruel defeat. Richard Walsh deftly summarises Pasolini’s approach to the crucifixion:

> He is less interested in Jesus’ afterlife than his peasant fate, so the dominant visuals of the passion of Jesus are Jesus’ consumption ... visually, then, Pasolini’s man of the people
suffers the people’s fate … sheds light on our own institutions and ideologies. Whom do we exclude from the kingdom? What peasants and past do we willingly sacrifice? Whose innocent blood do our mythologies shed?22

Many critics have concluded that this is the greatest of all the portrayals of Christ on film. But for some critics, Pasolini interprets the gospel of Christ too suspiciously. The privileged viewer, however, hearing the soaring music as Christ is crucified, tunes into the divine possibility that more is going on in this death than meets the eye.

**The Greatest Story Ever Told, director: George Stevens (1965)**23

Stevens also directed *Shane*, considered by some to be the greatest Western ever made.24 This genre—after which *The Greatest Story* is stylised—allows the audience to access Jesus’ story as an adventure story because they ‘feel at home’ with a cast of Hollywood stars and its (mythic) setting in the American West.25 Pasolini gave filmmakers permission for a mythical setting for the Jesus’ story. Stevens adds, however, something more than mere Technicolor, John Wayne and Charlton Heston to previous films about Christ. The ‘old, old story’ is cast in binary opposites, featuring good guys and bad guys. Walsh concludes:

> Not surprisingly, the result of such an ethic is often violence, and the Western [film genre] often reflects upon justified violence, violence in a righteous cause, (for example, *Shane, High Noon*), that is, a violence that reaffirms the cultural myth.26

In the crucifixion scene the affirmation of Christ by the John Wayne’s centurion and Sidney Poitier’s Simon of Cyrene makes Jesus’ violent death good, even redemptive. Max Von Sydow’s Jesus ‘engages in his own struggle to trust God semi-ascetically’. Stevens opts for a minimalist approach, using camera angles placed a considerable distance from Golgotha and long periods of silence to create awe, even reverence, for Jesus’ death. Christ is more stoic (like *Shane*) than suffering (like Isaiah’s suffering servant). Contemporary viewers often laugh awkwardly at Steven’s nostalgic film fifty years after its production. Polite giggles give way to guffaws as a swaggering, silhouetted John Wayne drawls, ‘Surely this man was the son of God’. At the halfway
point of a century of cinematic portrayal of Christ, the big budget, big star Hollywood epic inspired by DeMille’s *King of Kings* (remade by Nicholas Ray in 1961) appeared to have run its course because the greatest story ever told had now also been screened.

**Godspell, director: David Greene (1973)**

Like *Jesus Christ Superstar* from the same era of the early 1970s, *Godspell* is a musical version of a passion play that was first a theatre production and only later a movie. The vaudevillian reenactment of Jesus’ sayings intensifies the communal dimension because the disciples help Jesus tell and enact the parables. This raises the important question of how Christology and discipleship relate to each other. Is Jesus’ counter-cultural—even subversive—life and death more accurately represented when the parables of the kingdom are performed? Contemporary viewers often find themselves drawn into the imaginary world causing a visceral response to Jesus. The crucifixion scene does this surprisingly well. Jesus is crucified on cyclone fencing rather than on a wooden cross. The musical score is radically different from previous films, featuring rock music with piercing electric guitar solos for effect. Jesus’ song is echoed by his disciples’ song. For the first time in a Jesus film, those who have faithfully followed Jesus’ to the foot of the cross are given voice: “O God, you’re dying.” Walsh suggests that counter-cultural obedience lies at the heart of Greene’s depiction of Jesus as the righteous One:

> By enlarging the Gethsemane scene with the three temptations from Matthew 4:1–11. Godspell’s Jesus triumphantly ends the temptations with ‘worship him above’ … At daybreak, as the disciples sing ‘Love Live God,’ the camera focuses on a dead Jesus still affixed to the fence. Removing Jesus, the troupe carries him in cruciform form through the empty city, singing, ‘Prepare the Way of the Lord’ and ‘Day by Day’.

Does Jesus rise from the dead? Greene, following the biblical scholarship of the period, is content to portray Jesus ‘rising’ into the songs (and hearts) of his disciples. Unlike earlier Jesus films—essentially screenplays of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection—the portrayals of Christ of the 1970s and 80s were freed to re-interpret imaginatively the story of Christ (for example, *The Last Temptation of Christ*). But how far could
filmmakers experiment with such a well-known story, defended staunchly by an ageing Church?

**Jesus of Montreal, director: Denys Arcand (1989)**

*Jesus of Montreal* is probably the most radical portrayal of Jesus on film, based loosely on the results of the so-called ‘third quest’ for the historical Jesus. In *Jesus of Montreal*, an actor modernises a traditional passion play by assembling a bedraggled acting troupe. His radical interpretation of Jesus forces the church (which is appalled) to cancel the performance. Seeking to maintain artistic integrity, the actors persist with a renegade performance in which the lead actor is mortally wounded. After his death his organs are harvested and the acting troupe share in his ‘legacy’.

The reader familiar with Jesus studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s will recognise the close connection between the film’s portrayal and debates about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The crucifixion scene is radically deconstructed as Jesus is reduced to a minor role and the two female guides narrate a historical understanding of crucifixion. Many Christians and students of theology learn more about the facts of crucifixion in this brief, five-minute scene than they have discovered up until viewing the film. Yet Walsh rightly observes that ‘Arcand’s cross ... ceases to have clear theological and redemptive meaning’.

Should this film be considered alongside others as a portrayal of Jesus on film? Walsh provides a brutal summary of the plot, stripped bare:

- The movie begins with a play climaxing in a suicide. Thereafter, the movie’s content is a modernist revision of a passion play, and the movie climaxes with the hero’s unfortunate death. The meaning of this death is ambiguous.

The 75th year of cinema marks another departure point in a century of cinematic Christ portrayals. As *The Greatest Story* marked the end of the Hollywood epic in 1965, so *Jesus of Montreal* in 1989 marks the end of filmmakers’ radical demythologising of the Jesus’ story. The next film to be considered, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, is a clear and compelling example of a conservative turn in Jesus’ filmology.
**The Passion of the Christ, director: Mel Gibson (2004)**

*The Passion of the Christ* is really an extended crucifixion scene with torture, interspersed by the trial scene and various stations of the cross. The primary focus is on the final hours of Jesus’ life, filmed with the intention of detailing each scene with graphic realism. *The Passion of the Christ* was hugely successful as a biblical epic recoded in Latin and Aramaic (for an extended discussion of the film’s creative contexts and theological vision, see the next article by Bernard Doherty). As a visceral experience, Gibson repeatedly took viewers to the edge of tolerance. Some cried at the violence, many cringed, but a stunned silence accompanied most of the early screenings, which reflected another distinctive of film, namely its collective experience. The film forced a visceral response to the story of Jesus with its excessive violence, blood and anguish. Theologically and liturgically rich, the film offered a new perspective on the crucifixion scene: God’s eye view. God’s teardrop from heaven at the moment of Christ’s death is, in my view, one of the most profound scenes in all the Jesus films I have watched. It never fails to move me or those with whom I watch this otherwise excruciating film. The understated resurrection scene is also excellent, portraying the certainty of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection, but only glimpsing its deeper meaning.34 The box office success of *The Passion of the Christ* suggests that a de-churched and un-churched generation of young people were eager to engage the story of Christ once again—at the cinema, however, not at church.

**The Son of God, director: Christopher Spencer (2014)**

*The Son of God*, the final and most recent portrayal of Christ on film to be discussed here, is narrated from the perspective of John, the last surviving disciple of Christ, who is living in exile as he tells his story. The movie concludes with an elderly John saying that all of the disciples were eventually killed for their beliefs, except for him. He was exiled to live alone on a deserted island until his death. John then sees Jesus, who tells him that he will not die, but have everlasting life, and that He will return one day. Originally developed for the History Channel in the USA, the film aired as a mini-series called ‘The Bible’, which enjoyed surprisingly high audience ratings. *The Son of God* was the Jesus portion of that television mini-series. The crucifixion scene is strikingly similar to that in Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, although with the violence toned down to comply with prime-time viewing restrictions. The film, including the climactic crucifixion scene,
invites the viewer to consider the important of eyewitness testimony. The Son of God is a portrayal of Jesus on film for a skeptical, agnostic and biblically illiterate generation.

Conclusions

A century ago the first Jesus films portrayed a Jesus already known to a majority of viewers. Booth’s evangelistic desire to inspire ‘holy life and fearless service’ was probably not unreasonable in that milieu. By mid-century, however, Jesus’ films revealed more about the viewers: their thirst for adventure or revolution; their need to divide the world into good guys and bad guys (or rich and poor); and their quest for the American dream or its Marxist antithesis. Both the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith were eclipsed in these films. The Jesus portrayed was distant and stoic. In the films of this period, Jesus was an object of admiration, but never one of adoration. At the end of a century of cinematic portrayals of Christ, Jesus is largely unknown to the audiences that come to witness his story, often for the first time. Recent portrayals suggest that if filmmakers can narrate a Jesus story that is credible (such as The Son of God) and visceral (such as The Passion of the Christ), then there are likely to be many more cinematic Christs in the next century of film.

Endnotes

4. Michael Bird, “Film as Hierophany” in Religion in Film, John May and Michael Bird (eds.), University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1982, pp. 3–22, was the first scholar to make this observation.


15. Telford, p. 128.


28. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels*, p. 82.
34. One cynical viewer has likened the resurrection scene with a naked Jesus rising from a sprinter’s ‘mark’ to that in the opening sequence of *The Terminator* (directed by James Cameron, Hemdale Film, 1984)—a most unfortunate cinematic parallel.