Walsh, Richard

Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film


Jan W. van Henten
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands 1012GC

Richard Walsh’s monograph is a most welcome addition to the quickly expanding interdisciplinary field of Bibles and films. It offers two introductory chapters to bring the reader up to date in the arena, many helpful observations and thoughts about Jesus and Christ films, as well as a razor-sharp sketch of the Americanization of Jesuses in movies (ch. 8). Yet the book’s main body concerns the four canonical Gospels and the movies selected as their silver-screen counterparts. Walsh is very much aware of the noncanonical Gospel traditions—it is, in fact, his ambition to liberate the four Gospels from their canonical confines—but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John nevertheless get most of his attention. Walsh does, however, discuss Q and the Gospel of Thomas in connection with Jesus’ teaching and the movie Godspell.

In his discussion Walsh refers to roughly a 110 relevant movies, but five Jesus or Christ-figure movies are by far the most prominent in his book as sparring partners of the Gospels. Reading the Gospels “in the dark” refers, of course, to the dark of the movie theater, foregoing interpretations by church or academy, although Walsh frequently incorporates scholarly work on the Gospels. The matches between one of the Gospels and a particular movie in chapters 3–7 are based upon correspondences, analogous ideas or motifs, typological connections, points of contacts in locations, histories, precursors, or
myths, and, in some cases, explicit references in the movie or comments on the movie. For example, Denys Arcand, the director of *Jesus of Montreal*, has stated explicitly that the Gospel of Mark has inspired him (62, n. 2).

Chapter 1 offers a brief survey of scholarship on religion in films and Jesus movies as cultural products, starting with Sydney Olcott’s *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and ending with Roger Young’s TV-film *Jesus* (1999). Chapter 2, “Films without Heroes,” makes crucial points about Jesus as the main character in these films. The failure of almost all Jesus movies from the 1960s onward is due not only to the marginality of sex and violence as usual ingredients of Hollywood blockbusters but also to the iconicity and flatness of Jesus as key figure. Jesus is quite similar to epic characters, which are monumental, static, and without understandable motivations. His feelings and motivations remain largely in the dark, but he represents well-known cultural types, such as the innocent victim, the rebel, the social critic, the teacher, or the Son of God. Several movies try to pass over this flat main character from the past by focusing on the story’s setting, secondary figures, or other elements, such as song-and-dance routines (e.g., *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*). Other ways to bypass this complication is to turn Jesus into a Christ figure, that is, a permutation of Christ in sign, myth, symbol, or allegory (with Robert Detweiler) or an imitation, fictional transfiguration or pseudonym of Christ (with Theodore Ziolkowski). Walsh argues that Christ figures cast their shadow upon most Jesus films, as illustrated by *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (31–33, 37–39).

Chapter 3, Walsh’s discussion of Mark and Denys Arcand’s *Jesus of Montreal* (1990), is, for me, the most challenging reading of a Gospel in the dark. Walsh’s reasons for linking these “texts” together are that both create similar affective and aesthetic experiences, live and create apocalyptic worlds, have unlikely heroes who die a tragic death, function imperialistically, and, finally, depend heavily on typological hermeneutics. Both suggest that the world and its institutions (including the church in *Jesus of Montreal*) are corrupt, but in the movie, contrary to the Gospel, a divine scenario is absent. There is no hope when Daniel, the film’s main character, dies—and does not resurrect!—and his followers fall for worldly corruption soon after his death. Art is suggested as a hopeful alternative for the perverted church, and Daniel can be interpreted as an absurd creator (with Albert Camus). For Walsh, reading Mark in the dark implies that Jesus’ death lacks a redemptive meaning; his death is only heroic because of his relentless commitment to his program or his integrity during suffering and despair. The movie also helps one to reconsider Jesus as an artistic creator and, finally, responds to Jesus not fulfilling his promise to precede the disciples to Galilee (Mark 14:28; 16:7).
Chapter 4 deals with several formats of Jesus’ teaching and David Greene’s *Godspell* (1973), a musical version of a passion play that later became a movie. Walsh rightly corrects the movie’s claim to be based on Matthew’s Gospel and links it also to the teaching traditions in Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*, despite the fact that in these sources there is no passion narrative. *Godspell* shares a tendency with Q to domesticate the countercultural movement, because both “texts” transform Jesus into the John the Baptist model. *Godspell*’s comic world contrasts with the solemnity of the canonical Gospels and Q’s “apocalyptic voyeurism” (80), but the *Gospel of Thomas* may come close to the clownesque by focusing upon the presence of God’s kingdom and the aim to change people’s roles within the world. *Godspell* not only translates Matthew into a romanticizing and counterculture domesticating American culture of the early 1970s but also reminds us that Jesus’ sayings in Q and *Thomas* are meaningful only in the context of a particular reader’s ideology and performance. It helps us to recognize the parabolic potential and subversive nature of the sayings and to imagine a less triumphant Jesus without death and resurrection.

Chapter 5, the obvious combined reading of Matthew and Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1966), shows that both are “late texts,” that is, texts that depend on other texts, the Gospel as screenplay in the film or the Hebrew Bible created as “Old Testament” in Matthew—by way of the fulfillment citations. Pasolini demythologizes and politicizes Matthew by locating it in an Italian peasant society; Matthew mythologizes the Hebrew Bible and disqualifies other interpreters of that Bible. By zooming in on Jesus’ speech against the Jewish leaders in Matt 23 and suggesting that this speech was the reason for his death rather than the statement about the temple, Pasolini successfully presents Jesus, in Walsh’s opinion, as a violent social critic. The movie deconstructs the legitimation of the disciples as Jesus’ successors (cf. Matt 28:16–20) and its preparation for institutions and communities in the continuing world and also highlights Matthew’s anti-Jewish passages.

In chapter 6 Walsh combines the Gospel of Luke with Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings* (1961). Both “texts” contextualize the Jesus story in a Roman imperial setting, but *King of Kings* turns the Gospel into a modern liberal and ethical type of Christianity. Narrators and witnesses, especially the movie’s Roman officer Lucius, show that the secularization of Jesus’ message begins with Luke, leading up to an irresolvable tension between a universal salvation myth on the one hand and the relativization of history on the other hand. Reading Luke “in the dark” reminds Walsh of the elder brother in the Prodigal Son parable (Luke 15:11–32), despite the fact that this parable is left out of the movie. Jesus becomes this elder brother, a shadow from the past, one among many Jewish victims. *King of Kings*’ dissatisfaction with empire helps one to remember those excluded by the Gospel.
Chapter 7 links John to George Stevens’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), as invited by the quotation of John 1:1–5 in the movie’s opening scene. Both reveal to the audience fantastical alternative worlds. They imagine Jesus as an ethereal stranger and unveil characters, especially of those who reject Jesus (the movie’s Dark Hermit and Judas). While John reveals a mystical connection to Jesus, the movie focuses upon psychological maturity and a semiascetic lifestyle, suggesting that others—not only Jesus—can become a child of God as well. The movie re-creates the Jesus story as the American frontier, a mythic alternative world, but very familiar as the setting of the Western. Walsh argues that there are important parallels between the Stranger in Westerns, caught between frontier and civilization, and Jesus as stranger in John. The movie, therefore, shows us that the Gospel can be read gnostically, by attempting an individual romantic quest for deification.

The analogies Walsh makes between Gospels and movies are usually well argued and fascinating, although readers’ opinion may differ about individual cases, such as the comical in *Godspell* and in Jesus’ teachings (79–84, building on John Dominic Crossan’s views). The attempt to deal with movies and Jesus traditions in an intertextual manner, going beyond analyzing the use of a biblical text in a movie and also exploring what films “may do to biblical texts” or “reversing the hermeneutical flow” (with Larry J. Kreitzer), often opens up exciting new avenues of interpretation. Walsh summarizes the results of his combined readings of Gospel traditions and movies “in the dark” in the last sections of his main chapters (chs. 3–7).

Readers may wonder whether this monograph could function as a textbook for courses on Bibles (or more narrowly Gospels) and films. I am sure it can fruitfully be used as such but do not consider it ideal for such a purpose. The book is indeed well structured and well written. It offers many helpful explanations of details, especially about biblical materials and results of biblical scholarship. However, it is overloaded with information on biblical passages, relevant movies, famous works of fiction, and philosophical issues. Like Adele Reinhartz’s *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), it matches (with one exception) a biblical passage with a movie per chapter, which is a very attractive formula, but it offers a much more complicated reading than Reinhartz’s monograph. Walsh’s always-worthwhile discussion is very sophisticated, incorporating many insights not only from biblical and film studies, but also from aesthetics, cultural and literary studies, and, last but not least, philosophy. For example, in order to make the reader aware of the problem of a Gospel contextualization, Walsh touches upon Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, Foucault’s concept of *episteme* as well the historical-critical approach in biblical studies—and this is just for starters. And in order to be able to locate Pasolini’s *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* in a “Gramscian” worldview, a reader has to be aware of distinctions within Marxist theory. The headings
within the chapters are helpful as eye-openers but complicate the reading further because of their playfulness. It took me some time to figure out that the headers with strikethrough characters on pages 154 and 180 (“Worlds Apart: Material Dualisms”; “Loosing Jesus: Or a Non-American Jesus”) were no misprints but pointers to ambivalences. Walsh’s discussions of biblical passages are rather concise and rich with references. They frequently suggest interesting and fresh interpretations but may be hard to digest for undergraduates who are not too familiar with early Christian literature. Finally, what would be more exciting for students than to try and explore intertextual readings of a Gospel and a movie themselves? In this respect Walsh does not offer students many readily applicable guidelines. Walsh’s book, therefore, seems to be foremost a scholarly work, and a highly recommended one at that because of its masterful and highly stimulating discussions of the manifold interconnections between Gospels and Jesus films.