

JESUS IN FILMS: A CENTURY OBSERVED

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Abstract

In 1995 the motion picture celebrates its centenary. During this century many Jesus films have been made, and still there is no end in sight. In this article the most important Jesus films of the past century are discussed, with some focus on the whence and the whither of these films. Specific problems pertaining to these films are highlighted, as well as trends and characteristics. It is argued that this type of film has undergone a process of development, but the final Jesus film appears to be an elusive dream.

1. Introduction

Exactly a century ago the world was on the threshold of a discovery that would drastically change the world and its inhabitants' use of leisure time. On 28 December 1895 the two brothers Louis and Auguste Lumi held a film show of 20 minutes in Paris with an audience of 33 people. The show consisted of short films on subjects such as a train arriving at a station, workers leaving a factory and a piece of slapstick about a gardener being drenched by his own hosepipe (cf Norman 1992:3). Thus the two brothers earned the title of the fathers of the cinema, although two German brothers, Emil and Max Sklandowsky, also held a show earlier the same year. The latter two, however, made use of more primitive equipment, which showed a series of images rather than a continuous moving picture.

The earliest films depicted everyday events, until another Frenchman, Georges Mèliés, realised that a touch of fantasy, a plot and some character development would make films more interesting. At the turn of the century narrative formed an integral part of films. Sound did not yet form part of films, initially there was only piano accompaniment. Because there was no sound, there was also no language barrier, and films could freely be screened across borders. No country dominated the film industry in these early days.

The rest is history, as the cliché goes. During the twentieth century the film has become one of the major sources of entertainment for mankind. In the search for themes, producers and directors realised very soon that films with Biblical themes would address a large part of mankind. Once the Bible was being used as a source for films, it was inevitable that the story of Jesus would also be depicted on the screen, although it was initially done with some awe and reverence.

In this article I want to pay attention to the most important Jesus films of the past century, as well as to some problems pertaining to the depiction of Jesus. From a survey it is obvious that there was a process of development in these films. Today's Jesus films are not similar to those at the beginning of the century. This raises the question whether it is possible to make the final Jesus film. This question will be addressed at the end of the article.

2. Problems Pertaining To The Depiction Of Jesus

Before I discuss the most important Jesus films, I want to point out a few problems pertaining to the depiction of Jesus.

It is well known that, apart from a few extra-Biblical references to Jesus and a few apocryphal gospels, we only have the four canonical Gospels for information on Jesus. This may sound like enough material for a film, and indeed it is, but the material in the Gospels is problematic because the Gospels differ on many occasions. Anyone who knows about the synoptic problem, is aware of these differences. This is of course due to the fact that the evangelists made use of sources when they wrote their Gospels, and also to the fact that each made his own interpretation of the material at his disposal. It has long been realised by researchers that these different interpretations cannot be harmonised with each other to get to a more complete picture of Jesus. The matter is much more complicated than this. It may sound strange to the uninitiated reader, but it is an accepted fact among researchers that very little is known about the historical Jesus, because the Gospels were rather written as interpretations of Jesus than as history books.

Now one could say that it causes no problem making a film about 'unhistorical' material - most films are anyway made of such material. This is true, but then one has to keep in mind that what we have, is only an interpretation of Jesus and not Jesus as he really was. Just as the Gospels were interpretations of Jesus, Jesus films are further interpretations of the material known about him, whether it is a filmed version of one specific Gospel or a harmonisation of material from different Gospels. Hahn (1987:142) expresses it as follows: '...a Jesus-film is nothing but a dramatized version of a faithful testimony that was written down some 1900 years ago. Even if the film-maker gets the assistance of historians, theologians, archaeologists and whosoever, there can only be drama on the screen and never camera-documented, eyewitnessed or reconstructed reality at all'.

Another problem that film makers initially had to deal with was whether it was permissible to depict Jesus on the screen at all, in other words whether it would not be blasphemous to depict Jesus as a human whose face is shown and whose voice would later be heard once sound became a part of films. Could a sinful man be used to depict the sinless Jesus? In the early days Jesus would therefore only be shown from the back. As late as 1965, however, Jesus is only shown from the back in the film *The Redeemer*. This initial hesitance, however, soon gave way to a complete depiction of Jesus.

This coincides with the question of what Jesus looked like. The Gospels have no description whatsoever of Jesus' appearance. It is, however, a fact that Jesus had been

depicted in art works through the ages. These depictions differ with respect to the time and the place in which they were made. More often than not no cognisance was shown of the fact that Jesus had been first century, Jewish and Mediterranean in appearance. Often the appearance of Jesus resembled the time of the artist more than his own actual circumstances. When the first films were made before the turn of the century and decisions had to be made with regard to the appearance of Jesus, film makers turned to the art style of the late nineteenth century. This depiction would to a large extent be continued in the twentieth century, and would therefore irrevocably influence the twentieth century view of what Jesus looked like.

Another matter that may be pointed out is that one must distinguish between Jesus figures and Christ or Messiah figures in films. The former is a depiction of Jesus himself, while the latter is the depiction of a character who has something in common with Jesus (cf May 1991:79ff). There are many examples of the latter, but in this article I will only concentrate on the depiction of the Jesus figure, that is the depiction of Jesus in a Jesus story or aspects thereof. This limitation therefore excludes not only the films with Christ figures, but also a considerable number of films in which Jesus is indeed depicted, but where the film is not in the first place a story about Jesus. Even with these limitations in mind, though, it is nevertheless inevitable that I will refer to films which are not Jesus films in the strict sense of the word. This happens whenever I think that such a reference may make a contribution to the discussion.

In what follows I will give a brief survey of the Jesus films as specified in the previous paragraph. Although I incorporated all the literature that I could get hold of, literature on the topic is relatively scarce, and I often had to rely on the work of Kinnard and Davis (1992). Although they did not write from a theological point of view, they made a very important contribution which I gladly acknowledge. After the survey I will try to make a few conclusions with regard to developments and trends based on the films discussed.

3. A Survey of Jesus Films

A survey of the most important Jesus films may roughly be divided into decades. From this it is apparent that although films were continuously produced about Jesus, the first two decades were an active period, after which a quieter period followed in the twenties, thirties, forties and fifties, to be followed once again by a more active period starting with the sixties. This may apparently be ascribed to several factors, among which the two World Wars could have played an important role. It would for instance be interesting to try to establish to what extent Jesus' Jewishness played a role in the relative quiet period around the Second World War. There were, however, also other contributing factors, and to the best of my knowledge these have not yet been investigated.

3.1 The early years

Shortly after the establishment of the film medium producers started turning to the Bible for themes. Before the turn of the century two versions of the passion play were produced: *The passion play* (1897) and *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898).

The former was a filmed version of the passion play in Horwitz, Bohemia, while the latter was not, as it proposed to be, a filmed version of the passion play in Oberammergau, but a reconstruction filmed in New York. In the role of Jesus in the latter film was the first professional actor that portrayed Jesus in a film, namely Frank Russel.

Although quite a number of shorter films about Jesus were made in the first twenty years of this century, the two most memorable films were *From the Manger to the Cross* (1913) and *Intolerance* (1916). The first, by director Sidney Olcott and with Robert Henderson-Bland in the role of Jesus, was a remarkable film for its time, even though the screenplay was written by one of the actresses (Gene Gauntier in the role of Mary). It was a dramatisation of the main events in the life of Jesus, with quotations from the New Testament as title cards. A novelty was the fact that the film was shot against real backgrounds instead of sets. The film was very successful and was re-released in 1937 after a sound track had been added.

But probably the most famous film of this era in which Jesus was depicted, even though it was not a Jesus film in the first place, was *Intolerance* by D W Griffith in 1916. It treated the theme of intolerance through the ages, and this theme was covered by four episodes from different eras. One of the episodes was about the time of Jesus. The depiction was in the form of tableaux, without any narrative development. Jesus was depicted (by Howard Gaye) at the wedding in Canaan, in the company of children, with the adulterous woman, with Pontius Pilate and at the crucifixion. He is portrayed as a benefactor, while the Pharisees are portrayed as intolerant and responsible for his death.

3.2 The twenties

In the twenties, still characterised by silent films, the most important Jesus film was Cecil B deMille's *The King of Kings* in 1927, which should not be mistaken for a film by the same name in 1961 by Nicholas Ray. DeMille's film was the most complete film adaptation of the life of Jesus from the silent film era. The director was famous for his extravagant film adaptations, and this was no exception. The Biblical details are fairly closely adhered to, but there is also the suggestion of a love triangle between Mary Magdalene, Judas Iscariot and Jesus. Jesus is portrayed with a friendly smile and as the doer of mighty deeds. The grand scale and the success of this film could have been contributing factors to the fact that no big Jesus film was made in the next few decades. The film was probably seen for a while as the final portrayal of Jesus. In the sixties this view was abandoned, when a number of traditional as well as more contemporary Jesus films were being produced.

In 1928 a film titled *Jesus of Nazareth* with Philip Van Loan as Jesus was released. It was a low budget film that was apparently so much overshadowed by *The King of Kings* that little is known about it.

3.3 The thirties and forties

For some, to my knowledge, yet uninvestigated reasons, these decades saw very few Jesus films. Instead, we find that the figure of Jesus is treated with more awe and

reverence than before. His presence is either suggested or he is portrayed from a distance or his effect on people is portrayed, for instance in *Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) and *The Great Commandment* (1942), and later in *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben Hur* (1959). The only Jesus film from the thirties worth mentioning is the French film *Golgotha* with Robert Le Vignan as Jesus, because it was the first Jesus film with a sound track. From the forties *The Lawton Story* may be mentioned. It consists of two parts, namely first the preparations of the town of Lawton, Oklahoma, for the presentation of the passion play, and second the passion play itself. Millard Coody portrays Jesus. The film was rereleased in 1951 under the title *The Prince of Peace*.

3.4 The fifties

In the fifties Biblical epics were the order of the day, but again the decade was not characterised by many Jesus films. This was the decade of such memorable epics as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Salome* (1953), *The Robe* (1953) and its sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *The Silver Chalice* (1954), *The Prodigal* (1955), *The Big Fisherman* (1959) and *Ben-Hur* (1959).

The only Jesus films worth mentioning are *Day of Triumph* (1954) and *He who must Die* (1956), a French-made allegory by director Jules Dassin. The first, with an elderly Robert Wilson as Jesus, was initially produced for churches and teaching, but was released in theaters in 1954. It is historically of interest because it was the first American Jesus film since DeMille's in 1927. Consequently it was also the first American film about Jesus in which his voice was heard. *He who must die* was based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Christ crucified*. The story is about the inhabitants of a Greek village preparing for their yearly passion play. When a number of war refugees come to town, the Town Council refuses help for the refugees. Manolis, the person who portrays Jesus in the passion play, however, insists that the refugees receive help. In confrontation with the town's leaders, Manolis is murdered by the person who portrays Judas in the passion play.

3.5 The sixties

Since the sixties various films about Jesus followed. First was *King of Kings* by Nicholas Ray (1961), which was not just a remake of the earlier film by the same name, while others were *The Greatest Story ever told* (George Stevens 1961) and *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (Pier Paolo Pasolini 1964), released in English in 1966, and the lesser known *The Redeemer* (1968), an Italian film which was not really a Jesus film, but an allegory with Biblical parallels. I only mention the latter because I find it strange that there has not to my knowledge been a Jesus film to date with a black actor portraying Jesus. The decade was further characterised by films about other Biblical figures such as *Barabas* (1962), *Ponzio Pilato* (1964), *Herod the Great* (1960) and *Mary Magdalene* (1960). Up to this point virtually all the Jesus films, including those of the sixties, were all based on screenplays which took the fundamentalistic reading of the Gospels for granted, where the Gospels are read and understood literally without taking into account that they are interpretations themselves, and without really

addressing the problems concerning the historical Jesus. I will pay attention to the three most important films of the decade.

King of Kings was a big budget film with a screenplay by Philip Yordan and a youthful Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus. The screenplay was severely criticised in some circles on account of such factors as the minimalising of Jesus' miracle activities, the enlargement of the role of Barabbas and an excuse for Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The Roman Catholic *Legion of Decency* described the film as theologically, historically and biblically inaccurate. Much of this criticism is probably unjustified, because any screenplay about Jesus is an interpretation of Jesus and the figures surrounding him. In the film industry the film was referred to as *I was a teenage Jesus*, which has much to say with regard to the choice of the main actor. The story of Jesus is told in the traditional linear way from birth to an appearance after the resurrection, with material taken from all four Gospels. Jesus is portrayed as an ethical, non-violent teacher. Prior to his death Jesus does not appear before the high priest, but only before Pilate, thus implicating Roman responsibility for Jesus' death.

In 1965 George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* followed, with a dour and unknown Max von Sydow as Jesus. Although the director used many well known faces in other roles, he was adamant not to use a well known actor in the role of Jesus. Max von Sydow's reading of the part was praised as one of the best interpretations of Jesus on the screen. Once again material from all four Gospels is used to tell the story of Jesus from pre-existent Word up to the ascension. Jesus is portrayed comprehensively as a miracle worker and ethical teacher, and to a certain extent also as proclaimer of the kingdom. At the trial before Pilate the Dark Hermit, symbolising Satan, is also present. Through his cry of 'crucify him', it is implied that he is responsible for the death of Jesus.

In 1966 an interesting Jesus film by the Marxist Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini was released in English, two years after its release in Italian. He wrote the screenplay himself and based it only on the Gospel of Matthew. He worked with a much lower budget than most other Jesus films and made use of non-professional actors, with Enrique Irazoqui in the role of a rough and robust Jesus. Yet it is a remarkable presentation of Jesus that received considerable praise. Jesus is portrayed as a hurried teacher, but the eschatological aspect of Jesus' kingdom proclamation is reduced. One could speak of an alternative depiction of Jesus in this film, in contrast to the more traditional and realistic depiction in other Jesus films of the time.

In 1973 no fewer than three Jesus films were released: *The Gospel Road*, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In all three music played an important part. The first was a semi-documentary film with music on the life of Jesus, produced by singer Johnny Cash, with Robert Elfstrom as director and in the role of Jesus. The dramatisation of the life of Jesus is supplemented with inserts of Cash in Jerusalem, pointing out historical landmarks. The film is described as follows in *Christianity Today* (10 August 1973): 'But with all its limitations, *The Gospel Road* presents the real Jesus as he might have been'. This is big praise indeed, but one cannot help wondering whether the reviewer would still air the same opinion today. In light of the newer investigations of the historical Jesus these words are probably far-fetched.

Godspell and *Jesus Christ Superstar* were both controversial. They were based on an earlier musical and rock opera respectively, depicting Jesus in a contemporary way. The first had David Greene as director and Victor Garber in the role of Jesus. Jesus is depicted as a clown against the background of New York. Of course it offended some people that Jesus was portrayed as a clown, but it was an innocent attempt at portraying Jesus contemporarily. This has been done through the ages: artists through the ages have portrayed Jesus in fashions of the time. Such a depiction often addresses an audience that would not otherwise have been addressed. Only nine disciples are being shown, male and female, black and white. Some of Jesus' parables are sung and acted out in an exuberant way. Jesus does not die on a cross, but through electrocution on a steel fence. The resurrection is not depicted, but the end, where the disciples are carrying the body of Jesus through the streets of the city, singing Long live God, symbolises the resurrection according to the director (cf Forbes 1973:1143).

Jesus Christ Superstar (director Norman Jewison, Ted Neely as Jesus) was shot in Israel and was probably the most successful Jesus film in the musical genre, a fact which may probably largely be ascribed to the fact that Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber were responsible for the music. The story is about a group of actors performing an opera in the Israeli desert about Jesus' last week. There are many references to Jesus' miracles, but none to his teaching. Caiaphas is depicted as the man mainly responsible for Jesus' death. Again the comments of *Christianity Today* are interesting: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, though a theological disaster, has become an ecumenical triumph... What we need, however, is a film maker to produce the true story'. Whether this 'true story' is possible would be questioned more and more by the films of the next two decades. The 'ecumenical triumph' to which the reference above refers is a reference to the fact that many religious groups were united in their protest about the film. The biggest objection was probably that the film was anti-Semitic, but it was also described as a 'provocation of racial, ethnic and religious tension' (Forbes 1973c:47). Objections were aimed at the role of Judas (portrayed by a black actor) as a hero, the relationship of Mary Magdalene with Jesus and the omission of the resurrection.

In 1976 a fairly controversial film was released, but it did not attract much attention and was a total failure at the box office. The film was *The Passover Plot* by director Michael Campus with Zalman King as Jesus, based on the book by Hugh Schonfield. The story is about how Jesus tried to survive the crucifixion with the help of anaesthetics, with the purpose of instigating an insurrection against the Romans after his so called resurrection. He dies, however, when a Roman soldier pierces him with a spear, and the resurrection does not materialise. Such a thesis is obviously pure speculation and just another interpretation of the Christ event. As such it is perishable, although believers will have problems with the fact that the resurrection is not accepted.

A film maker who tried to tell the 'true story' by taking the problems and investigations of researchers into account was Franco Zeffirelli, who was responsible for *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), with a little help from the author Anthony Burgess. This is the film version of a six hour television epic that had been televised the previous year in America. Robert Powell, an English actor, was in the role of Jesus. Although

there is much affiliation to the Gospel of John, incidents from all the Gospels are used and rearranged to stress certain themes. The result is a life of Jesus, created by a process similar to the creation of the Gospels. Zeffirelli also did not only use the popular nineteenth century art style as a starting point, but a wider tradition of Christian art.

Even before the film was released it was already controversial, because of an utterance by the director that the humanness of Jesus was stressed in the film. When it was televised, however, most of the objections disappeared: it was a masterpiece portraying both Jesus' divinity and humanness. Jesus' miracles are not avoided: the raising of Lazarus, the multiplication of bread and fish and the healing of a blind man are depicted. The resurrection is not depicted literally, but neither is it negated. In the thoughts of his disciples he lives on (cf Zeffirelli 1984 for a description of the problems encountered with the filming of the resurrection, which contributed to the way it was eventually depicted in the film).

However, it seems to me that Zeffirelli himself rated his film too highly. According to a report in *The Christian Century* (cf Loney 1976:872) he had the following to say before the televising of the film:

The real story is not well known. Oh, the legend about Christ is known, yes, but not the real story. No one has ever done a historically fair treatment. This will not be the Gospel of DeMille. So often plays and films about Jesus reveal him through the personal visions of the writer or director... No! This is a man everybody would recognize. Everyone can believe what happened to him in his life.

From this one may deduce that Zeffirelli was of the opinion that he was better informed than others with regard to the historicity of the events and that he could present them more objectively. In spite of the merits of the film, this is, however, not true. One example of how he deals with matters will suffice, namely the case of Mary Magdalene. She is, as more often than not in films, depicted as a prostitute, while there is no Biblical evidence for that (cf Engelbrecht 1992). In the end Zeffirelli's presentation is just another interpretation among many others, albeit that he tried to take the actual events more seriously than some other film makers.

The late seventies produced two films on the birth of Jesus: *The Nativity* (1978) and *Mary and Joseph: a Story of Faith* (1979). Also Roberto Rossellini's *The Messiah*, which was released posthumously. But it is primarily two widely divergent films from 1979 that deserve attention: Terry Jones' *Monty Python's Life of Brian* and producer John Heyman's *Jesus*. The first is not a Jesus film, but it is of interest because of its parallels with the life of Jesus and also because of the genre of the film. It was made by the well known British satirical group Monty Python, which is known for their send-ups of various matters. It tells the story of a reluctant messiah whose life runs parallel to that of Jesus. As might be expected from this group anything is worth a send-up. It will definitely not be to everybody's taste, but it is a valid attack on religious hypocrisy and fanaticism. The genre of the film should be taken into account when making a judgment of it: it is obviously a satire, and therefore should be judged according to the genre's own norms, and not according to the norms for other genres.

Producer John Heyman's *Jesus* had Peter Sykes and John Kirsh as directors and Brian Deacon in the role of Jesus. The film formed part of the so-called *Genesis*

Project, a religious production company under the leadership of John Heyman, planning to film the whole Bible. Apparently because of financial problems the plan could never be realised. This film is a literally filmed version of the Gospel of Luke, and the way in which Jesus is depicted is described in the following words of John Heyman (cf Kinnard & Davis 1992:195):

What we have made is a first century docudrama. When you see Christ in this film, you can believe that he is a man who spent eighteen years in a carpenter's shop before he started his ministry. He is a man who can smile and laugh and share his emotions with people.

Especially the last sentence is an indication of the interpretation of the film maker of how Jesus was, an aspect of him which was often neglected in earlier films.

In 1979 an Indian film about Jesus was also released: *Karunamayudu (Merciful One)* with Vijay Chandar, a Hindu, playing the part of Jesus. It was obviously not the first Indian film on Jesus, as is clear from the following words of Chandar: 'Previous Indian attempts on the life of Jesus by the local movie makers have depicted Jesus as a cheap magician and the images of the birth and resurrection of Jesus were good examples of Docetism' (cf Sugirtharajah 1979:19). The actor confessed that the role had a big impact on his life, and expressed the desire that the film would encourage faith in Christ, but not in Christianity as it was introduced in India by missionaries.

3.7 The eighties

The eighties are characterised by two films that were either applauded or opposed: *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese (1988) and *Jesus of Montreal* by Denys Arcand (1989). There were also a few others worth mentioning, such as *The Day Christ Died* (1980), a revisionist portrayal by director James Cellan Jones of Jesus as a helpless pawn in the hands of the Romans and the Jewish leaders, *In Search of Historic Jesus*, an insignificant pseudo-documentary by director Henning Schellerup with John Rubinstein as Jesus, *Hail Mary* (1985) by French director Jean-Luc Godard, a controversial modernising of the birth annunciation of Jesus, with Mary as a pump attendant at a service station and Joseph as a taxi driver, and *A Child called Jesus* (1989) by Italian director Franco Rossi, and lastly a film that, after many delays because of proposed sex scenes, was released in Denmark only in 1992, the Danish production by Jens Joergen Thorsen, *The Return of Jesus Christ*.

But to a great extent it was *The Last Temptation of Christ* by director Martin Scorsese and screenplay by Paul Schrader and based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis that predominated the decade and sent shock waves around the globe. The main reason for the objections against the film is that Jesus experiences a hallucination/illusion on the cross that he comes down from there and lives on as an ordinary person for a number of years, marries Mary Magdalene and after her death fathers some children with the sisters of Lazarus. The film was widely disapproved of by Christians all over the world. The fact that reviewers and theologians tried to explain that the last temptation, namely the temptation to descend from the cross and live an ordinary life, is only a dream/hallucination/illusion and not depicted as reality, did not make much difference. All over the world Christians protested against the showing of the film, and to date it is still banned in South Africa.

There is no doubt, however, that the author of the novel or the screenplay or the director did not have the objective at all of blaspheming Jesus or of depicting him as a sinful person. Rather, they struggled to depict him in his humanness. In his research for the novel, Kazantzakis did not only consult the Gospels, but also all possible sources which he could get hold of, to represent Jesus and the world he lived in. His image of Jesus is therefore not based on one of the Gospels, but is his own interpretation based on the sources that he consulted. And again it must be pointed out that this is precisely the way the Gospel writers went about writing their Gospels. Therefore the interpretations of Kazantzakis and Scorsese are not necessarily less valid and more objectionable. They may be seen as attempts to make Jesus contemporary, with which in itself there is nothing wrong. It has been done since the start of Christianity and ever since.

The other film which I mentioned above, namely *Jesus of Montreal*, is not a Jesus film in the strictest sense of the word, but it attracted considerable attention towards the end of the eighties. The story is about an actor in the Canadian city of Montreal who is requested by a priest to innovate the passion play that has been staged in the city for a long time. The actor and his co-actors become so involved with the project that it changes their lives as well as their lifestyles. The life of the main actor becomes a parallel of Jesus' life in many aspects. But although the church requested some innovations, it is nevertheless not at all satisfied with the results, because for their liking it deviates too much from the tradition. The actors had nonetheless made a genuine attempt to depict Jesus to the best of their ability with the help of current research. The film deservedly received worldwide acclaim for the way in which it attempted making Jesus contemporary and struggled with the question of what Christianity means today.

3.8 The nineties

And now in the nineties the world is awaiting the Jesus film of acclaimed but also somewhat notorious director of *Basic Instinct*, among others, Paul Verhoeven. As may be expected towards the end of the century it will differ considerably from other Jesus films. Verhoeven is now busy ascertaining himself of current research with regard to the historical Jesus problem. No longer will the filming of one of the Gospels or some harmonising of the materials in the different Gospels suffice. What is now being attempted more than ever before is to come to an interpretation of how Jesus really was and what he really taught, with the help of new insights which became available through archaeological discoveries and new sources that became more readily available through these discoveries, such as the Nag Hammadi library and the Qumran scrolls, as well as all possible extra-Biblical sources. Verhoeven supplied a list of what he sees as key elements in the life of Jesus to the *Jesus Seminar* in America for discussion, before he attempts finalising the screenplay.

In the meantime we have seen a local product which reminds one strongly of an earlier project that had failed. The earlier project was the *Genesis Project* mentioned earlier which planned to film the whole Bible, and produced *Jesus* according to the Gospel of Luke. As mentioned earlier this project did not survive because of financial problems. The newer project is the first product of the *Visual Bible* which is also

planning to film the whole Bible, and produced *Matthew* in 1993. The director was Regardt van den Bergh, and the American actor Bruce Marchiano played the role of Jesus. It is a literally filmed version of Matthew according to the *New International Version*. It is presently being used with great success by churches and Bible study groups in South Africa, and was recently televised in America as well as in South Africa. Jesus is depicted as a smiling and laughing person with compassion, not shying away from touching people. In a gathering in a church that I attended the main actor confessed, like others before him, of the great impact that the playing of the part had on his life (cf also *Kalender* 12 October 1993). The claim of *Visual International* that he is the first Christian and the first American to play the part of Jesus I cannot verify, in light of the many Jesus films that have already been produced.

During the last few years there have been rumours of a planned film in which Jesus would be portrayed as a homosexual. As may be expected there are already protesting voices going up and petitions against such a film have been doing the rounds. At this stage I do not have any more information on this project.

4. Conclusions

From this brief survey a few matters present themselves as worth mentioning.

First, it is obvious that there is a development process discernible in the way the life of Jesus was treated in films. In this development various external factors such as the technological development of the film medium, the two World Wars, secularisation, economical factors and the sexual and other revolutions of the sixties and beyond played an important role. The films about Jesus started with simple and straightforward depictions of incidents from the life of Jesus as reported in the Gospels, and were soon to be followed by more comprehensive depictions of his life. Later on these depictions more and more started taking on epic measurements. This whole phase is generally characterised by a fundamentalistic approach to the sources used, which usually took the form of a harmonising of all four Gospels. Up to this stage the accent in Jesus films was more on Jesus' divinity than on his humanity. From the sixties onwards film makers started experimenting more and more with alternative depictions of Jesus, making use of different genres and more comprehensive sources, and the use of sources was less fundamentalistic than in earlier films. The problems pointed out by New Testament scholars and current research of the historical Jesus problem started playing a more important role in the depictions of Jesus. Also the accent started moving towards the humanity of Jesus with the concern of making him contemporary. The days in which one of the actresses could write the screenplay for a Jesus film were over. More and more film makers started leaning on the insights gained by researchers and taking these insights into account.

Mentionable here is that in this development of the Jesus film, one may distinguish between films which one might term mainstream and which are primarily made with the object of making profit for the film makers, and those with the primary object of evangelisation. Both these types have occurred from the earliest times up to the present. Although films concerned primarily with evangelisation surely would not

mind also making a profit, this does not seem to be their primary concern, and the starting point and approach is usually different, namely more fundamentalistic, and tending towards the depiction of one specific Gospel.

In spite of the development taking place in the depiction of Jesus, the appearance of Jesus in these films has stayed remarkably the same. As was mentioned earlier, the earliest depictions of Jesus were based on the prevalent art style of the late nineteenth century. Most Jesus films carried on in this same tradition. Often the fact that Jesus was a Mediterranean Jew was not taken into account in the choice of the main actor, as is obvious from the choice of, for example, the Scandinavian Max von Sydow, Robert Elfstrom with blonde Nordic hair and blue eyes or Willem Dafoe with his Nordic features. Only in a very few cases film makers deviated from this traditional appearance, as for instance in *Godspell*. The choice of an actor for the role of Jesus in Paul Verhoeven's Jesus film will certainly not be the smallest of his problems.

In line with the development within Jesus films one may also mention the treatment of certain elements from the life of Jesus. Here I primarily think of the depiction of the miracles and the resurrection of Jesus. While earlier film makers generally did not experience problems with the literal depiction of these elements, it later on became more of a problem for film makers. Even though they would not always shy away from miracles of healing, the so-called nature miracles were more and more avoided. Also the resurrection became more and more of a problem, with the result that in some cases it was completely ignored and in other cases only suggested in one of many different ways.

The treatment of Jesus' preaching in these films is also worth mentioning. In most of the films his preaching is minimalised to a great extent, probably because viewers prefer more action than dialogue in a film. Still there were a few film makers who tried to depict Jesus as a preacher or teacher. In general, however, the topic of the kingdom of God as the most important theme in Jesus' preaching has been neglected.

So far for the development that I can detect in these films. Next I would like to point out a few characteristics. Firstly the divergent depictions of characters surrounding Jesus. Here one can think especially of Mary Magdalene and his disciples, but also of the Roman and Jewish authorities. In my view a terrible injustice is being done to Mary Magdalene in virtually all of these films, because she is portrayed as a prostitute throughout, while there is really no Biblical grounds for assuming this. This assumption rests on an inaccurate linking of different texts from the Gospels. I have treated this issue elsewhere (cf Engelbrecht 1992). As far as the disciples are concerned, their portrayal is very problematic, because of the fact that they are presented as virtually different people in the different Gospels. Consequently their role in the life of Jesus is sometimes negated, sometimes minimalised and sometimes only the role of Peter or Judas is stressed. So we have had a black Judas, a very special relationship between Jesus and Judas, and a love triangle between Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Judas. Also the interpretations of the role of the Roman and Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus have been very divergent. The depiction of the Jewish authorities has often been seen as anti-Semitic. The death of Jesus in these films is often inexplicable, and the responsibility for his death is sometimes ascribed

to the Romans, sometimes to the Jews, and sometimes to a single person or even Satan.

A further characteristic of the Jesus films is that they became more and more interested in depicting Jesus in a contemporary way. This has been done with the help of different genres, such as the musical, the rock opera, satire and allegory. This means that film makers deviate from the norm that is seen by some believers as true to Scripture. In this process of making Jesus contemporary film makers inevitably focus among other things on Jesus' humanness. This in turn brings sexuality or at least suggestions of sexuality into the picture. It seems that this is for many believers the greatest obstacle to come to terms with in the depiction of Jesus. As soon as it is suggested that Jesus also could have had sexual feelings or relationships, immediately voices are raised against this.

To my mind it is unnecessary that exception should be taken so easily when Jesus is depicted contemporarily. As I have pointed out this is exactly what the Gospel writers did when they wrote the Gospels thirty, forty or fifty years after the death of Jesus: they made him contemporary for the people and their problems of their own day. Why then should artists and film makers be restricted to do the same for people and their problems now? Of course Jesus' life, teaching and example have much to say for people of today, and from recent examples of Jesus films it is obvious that these are accessible to many more people when told in a modern idiom. One should also keep in mind that filming the story of Jesus in a true-to-Scriptural way is a difficult if not impossible task, because even if one of the Gospels is filmed literally, it still remains an interpretation of the specific Gospel by the screenwriter as well as the director.

From this survey of Jesus films it becomes clear that the story of Jesus in films has not been told finally. The final film saying everything about Jesus has not been made yet. The question is whether it will ever come to that. Is it not simply a fact that Jesus was so complex and our sources about him so insufficient that no final film about him can be made? As I have mentioned, the past few decades have brought new discoveries and new insights into the character and circumstances of Jesus. The historical Jesus problem is once again in the centre of many researchers' focus. It remains to be seen whether and how all these developments will be adapted filmically. In this context Paul Verhoeven's film is something to look forward to. At the end of the day I feel inclined, however, to agree with the following words of Martin Scorsese:

...nor can you ever fully recreate Christ, really. I mean Christ is just so many things. There are just so many aspects to him that no one movie or book is going to be able to encompass it all (cf Depietro 1988:342).

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