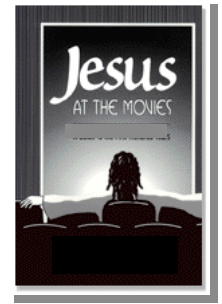


Should Jesus Win an Oscar?



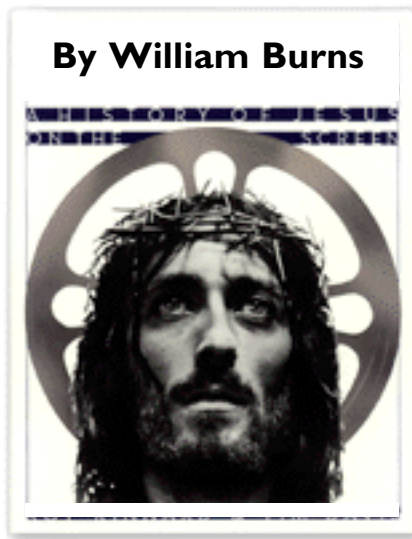
THERE HAVE BEEN well over 100 portrayals of Jesus Christ on the screen. And for many years filmmakers dealt with this controversial figure by mysteriously implying his presence - by a hand, feet, a cloak or simply reactions of amazed onlookers. The God of Christianity was considered too sacred to be filmed in the normal way.

In the first ten years of the movies there were several versions of his life. Depending on the sources, the first commercial screenings began in France in 1895 or 1898. The American inventor Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) presented his first public screenings in the same decade. By 1912 Robert Henderson played the role in Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross*, which lasted over an hour and paved the way for full-length Jesus movies. It was shot in Palestine and Egypt with an American cast and crew.

In 1916 came *Civilisation*, with George Fisher as Jesus on the battlefields. In the same year D.W. Griffith's still impressive *Intolerance* was released, including a section about Jesus in its four stories of injustice from the Babylonian era to modern times. Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) had H.B. Warner (aged 50) playing Jesus, as some critics remarked, like a Victorian patriarch. It also tells us that Mary Magdalene was in love with Judas, which, of course, has nothing in common with the Gospel accounts.

These early silent films tended to be solemn, stoic and overwhelmingly reverential. Nothing of a critical or analytical nature, even if supported by sound scholarship, was permitted, a feature that still exists today. The effort to avoid offending the godly is prominent. The stories of Jesus were made to conform rigorously to a particular theological convention. This is achieved by a misleading cut-and-paste harmonising and blind acceptance of the Gospels as authentic history. Such simplicity may work on an audience who knows no better, or indeed your average Christian, but is frustrating for those who understand the material differently.

With the coming of sound, Jesus films became more spectacular and cinematic but no less Sunday School in sophistication. Look for instance at the silly way he is depicted as recently as the 1950s. In *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953) and especially *Ben Hur* (1959), whenever he's mentioned it's usually by someone who has been struck dumb in admiration. He is seen at a distance, or his hand or feet fill the screen and we overhear a few words briefly or hear others discuss him. It is the usual metaphorical nonsense on display. We get the impression that he's some sort of superior alien far re-



moved from the rest of us.

Apart from DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), the early filmmakers left it to our imagination what the Son of God looked like. This was probably done to please certain Christians - Protestants in particular - who believe it would violate God's commandment against graven images (Exodus 20:4) to show Jesus fully on the screen or anywhere else. However, there is no copyright on the Gospel accounts. In spite of their so-called concern, the story and images of Jesus continue to make money and have been translated into every art form. Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)

has made more money than any other Jesus movie to date and largely because of fanatical Christians going to see it Jesus remained a kind of holy-bogyman on the screen until the 1960s, the decade when the taboo against showing him fully was destroyed for good.



Nothing much had really changed, though, for the new era of Jesus films still conformed to the traditional interpretation of the Gospels. Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) may be impressive to look at but are not representations of reality. Like the Gospel sources, they represent fairy tales. Stevens' *Greatest Story* is notable for being painfully slow-moving and the horrible miscasting of John Wayne supervising the crucifixion. Who can forget him utter the immortal words, "Truly, this man was the Son of Gaard"?

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According To St Matthew* (1966) is something of a departure in its documentary style and the way in which it plays down the supernatural. Although it was made by a Marxist, it is not nearly as radical and different as often suggested. In my view it is a cold, uninvolved and unimaginative film which sticks too closely to Matthew's Gospel as if it were true.

The best Jesus yet seen on celluloid for many is Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), originally shown in three parts on TV and with Robert Powell playing Jesus. Clearly a labour of love for Zeffirelli, it is an emotional and dramatic triumph whether you're a believer or not. And, importantly, his Jesus is a Jew. However, it has the

