

MAREK LIS

PITFALLS OF THE PSEUDO-BIBLICAL FILMS

Abstract. In the first decades of the 21st century, more than 70 feature films have already been produced in various cultural and religious contexts, with Jesus of Nazareth as the central figure; among them there is the ambitious and innovative project of the series *The Chosen*, scheduled for seven seasons. The creators are inspired by the Gospels and other books of the Bible, but many of these works, uncritically adopted by some catechists, turn out to be films that depart from the content and meaning of the biblical books (e.g. *The Shack*, *Noah*). In this way, do attractive works of audiovisual popular culture, produced outside the context of the Church's faith, reinterpreting profoundly the content of the Gospels, not become new *loci theologici*, however, leading the viewer into theological pitfalls?

Keywords: apocrypha; film; Gospel; Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

Many people are not aware of the fact that the biblical cinema is such a vast field of productions: it covers hundreds of films retelling stories from the Old or New Testament, produced and proposed in complex cultural or religious contexts. Brian Godawa (2009, p.176), observes “that the history of Jesus in the movies yields an interesting mixture of both historical and mythical, human and divine, sinner and saint,” and reflects all the richness of the history of the interpretation of the Gospels and of Jesus, but not only Christians read, interpret and screen the Bible! Recent examples are the Iranian films *The Messiah* (*Masih*, dir. Nader Talebzadeh, 2007) and *Saint Mary* (*Maryam-e Moghaddas*, dir. Shahriar Bahrani, 2001). Protagonists of the Gospel are shown there from the Islamic perspective (Bakker, 2013) and instead of the gospel narrative, the

Rev. prof. dr hab. MAREK LIS – University of Opole, Faculty of Theology, Institute of Theological Sciences; correspondence address: Wojciecha Drzymały 1A, 45-342 Opole; e-mail: mlis@uni.opole.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6387-2621>.

viewer will see Jesus or Mary as he is described in the Quran and in the apocryphal gospel of Barnabas.

Although screen adaptations of literature are widespread in cinema, screen adaptations of the gospels are unique: to the screen is brought a faith-shaping text, whose interpretations over the millennia have led to powerful tensions and conflicts, not least religious ones. Films, too, can cause confusion among the faithful: this was evident when *The Last Temptation of Christ* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1988) was released amid protests from various Christian communities (Baugh, 1997, p. 51).

GOSPEL OR IMAGINATION?

It is true that many filmmakers report that their film tries to be faithful to the meaning of Scripture, e.g.: “*The Chosen* is based on the true stories of the gospels of Jesus Christ. Some locations and timelines have been combined or condensed. Backstories and some characters or dialogue have been added.”¹ Years ago, the Swiss theologian Guy Bedouelle (1985, p. 63) posed the serious question, “What image of Christ does the seventh art propose? What does it choose for visual transcriptions? Can it respect the dual nature of the Saviour?” However, the problem is broader: film adaptations of the gospels are produced in diverse contexts, and provide rich study material for theologians or biblical scholars, as well as film scholars and researchers in, for example, cultural or religious studies.

It is noteworthy how extensive the literature on the subject is, especially the English-language publications (Bakker, 2009; Baugh, 1997; Burnette-Bletsch, 2016; Malone, 2012; Reinhartz, 2007; Walsh, 2003). A much poorer interest can be seen in the Polish literature, only recently addressing the subject: one finds lexicons introducing the subject of biblical cinema, guides to religious dimension of the cinema, there are also several in-depth analyses of the films themselves and the contexts in which they are made (Dopartowa, 2004; Kawecki et al., 2013; Lis & Garbicz, 2007; Lis, 2019; Marczak, 2000).

While the commercial success of a film counts for its producer, and usually it is his aim, the novelty and originality of film adaptations to the screen matters to the artist, the quality will be important to the film scholar, and the cinematic representation of events and characters from the pages of Scripture is a challenge to the theologian: the viewer is confronted with an audiovisual version of the biblical story, which, however, undergoes major transformations, becoming

¹ Quote from the opening credits of *The Chosen* series, dir. Dallas Jenkins, 2017, 2019–2023.

a new, and at the same time competitive, text, in a sense replacing the source – the book or the Bible. When films “draw from the biblical text, they do so in a highly literal fashion, providing a representation in a scene of the biblical elements of dialogue and actions. When they insert non-biblical material, they do so in a seamless manner, without drawing attention to the distinction between what follows Scripture and what does not” (Flesher & Torry, 2004). Often, the viewer cannot immediately discern the modification: “Those who have the text memorized or who have studied it recently are less susceptible to this mode of authorization” (Flesher & Torry, 2004).

One cannot approach the analysis of biblical films without taking into account another important development of the last two decades: in the lexicon *Gesù e la macchina da presa* Dario E. Viganò (2005) gathers 168 titles of films produced between 1897 and 2004. This lexicon seems a fairly complete guide to Christological cinema, showing, among other things, the scale of production: on average, in the years 1897–2004, 1.5 films were made every year. After the publication of the lexicon in 2005, in less than 20 years nearly 70 new films were released (Lis, 2019, pp. 125–127), which could be included in an updated edition of the lexicon!

This screen popularity of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth applies to all audiovisual media. There are films produced for cinema, television, or released via online platforms, both commercial and independent. Many of these works, which refer to the Gospels and are usually uncritically accepted by catechists, among others, turn out to be films that depart from the content and meaning of the biblical books (e.g. *Noah*, dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2014; *The Shack*, dir. Stuart Hazeldine, 2017). In this way, the attractive works of audiovisual popular culture, produced outside the context of the Church’s faith, do not become new *loci theologici* – leading the audience astray?

My perspective must, of course, be interdisciplinary, but I adopt first and foremost the perspective of a theologian, who – following the thought expressed by John Paul II (1999) in his *Letter to Artists* – sees in the Bible a text that feeds the imagination of artists, including those from the world of cinema. It is, by the way, one of the few statements of the Popes in recent years that mentions cinema.

The expectation a theologian can have of a biblical film concerns the way in which the content of the Bible is communicated. Thomas Leitch (2004, pp. 197–209) writes about three ideals of faithfulness, showing how it can be expressed on screen. It is, on the one hand, fidelity to the text (Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, 1964), and, on the other hand, an effort to present the authentic biblical world in detail (*Jesus of Nazareth* by Franco Zeffirelli, or *The Passion of the Christ*, where Mel Gibson reconstructed the

“authentic” ancient languages), while the third ideal implies the question of what the teaching, passion and death of Jesus mean today, for contemporary audiences? Examples of realisations of this ideal include *Son of Man* (dir. Mark Dornford-May, 2006), whose protagonist is a contemporary African from a fictional country called the Kingdom of Judea, and *The Chosen* series.

The protagonist of the first film of this popular series (*I Have Called You by Name*, 2019) is an adult woman named Lilith, mentally disturbed and sexually abused by men. Unsuccessfully, Rabbi Nicodemus attempts to perform an exorcism on her (in this scene notice the similarities to the horror film *The Exorcist*, dir. William Friedkin, 1973), and the increasingly desperate Lilith reaches for an old doll in whose body is hidden a scroll with a quote from Isaiah already familiar to the viewer: she takes it out and tears it up. It is only in her encounter with a stranger that we hear her name – Mary Magdalene – and the words of Isaiah she had learned from her father as a girl. The cleansing tears and Jesus’ embrace, who calls her by name, are moment of release. Yet we do not find any of these cinematic scenes in the Gospels, information about Mary Magdalene is scarce in Scripture (she was freed from evil spirits, she accompanies Jesus on the road, we see her at the cross and at the tomb). The imagination of the filmmakers, however, is like a spotlight that moves and brings out of the shadows the secondary characters barely mentioned by the evangelists. The same method is used in other episodes of *The Chosen* series, built from extra-biblical elements, sometimes implicitly contained in the Bible; even if the name of Matthew is mentioned there only twice, in the calling scene and in the list of the twelve apostles, is it so difficult to imagine, on the basis of the Gospels and historical knowledge, who the despised tax collector might have been? Seriously, then, one must take the last sentence from the opening credits, “Viewers are encouraged to read the Gospel”, because this film does not simply replace it. The narrative audiovisually reconstructs it, explains the background, shows the dynamics of the relationship between Jesus and those he meets.

There are many ways of ensuring that a film is faithful to the text of Sacred Scripture. It is rarely sufficient to repeat faithfully the words of the Gospels or to reproduce meticulously the realities of the historical events depicted (i.e. to “transport” the viewer towards the original text); what may be more convincing for today’s viewers is to recreate the faith experience of the Evangelists and the first Christian communities in contemporary experience, to bring it up to date (i.e. to “transport” the living text, not closed in its original, although archaeological, form, to today’s audiences). In doing so, it should be recognized that not all films are suitable for every audience (diverse in terms of age, education, cinematic sensitivity, etc.).

PITFALLS

Let us try to identify these inextricable constraints on biblical films, which create pitfalls that are not always readily apparent, even for a theologically-minded viewer.

1. The first pitfall is related to the specific identification of the Gospel film with the source text, and yet, quite unlike Shakespeare's dramas, which are created with the intention of being staged, none of the biblical texts were created as a film script. This difficulty is evident in the film *The Gospel of John* (dir. Philippe Saville, 2003), which is an attempt by the narrator to read the Gospel in an off-screen voice and an actor's interpretation of virtually the entire Gospel: the director of this film, like Mel Gibson, "fell into the trap of an ill-conceived (from a theological perspective) fidelity to the message of the original" (Kempna-Pieniążek, 2013, p. 62). The reconstruction of the biblical world carried out in this film and the use of an integral text ultimately lead to an artificial result. No film is equivalent to the Gospel.

2. A shortcoming leading to the rejection of a film is its poor artistic quality – take for example *Jesus: The Desire of Ages* (dir. Nancy Hamilton, 2014), a film about the childhood of Jesus using a naïve script, or *The Penitent Thief* (dir. Lucas Miles, Jon Blaze, 2020), a film burdened, moreover, by poor dramatic construction and acting. We must be aware that even the best protagonist – Jesus of Nazareth – does not guarantee cinematic quality, but the role of a film – and of the media in a larger sense – is to communicate the Gospel message properly (Schmidt-Rost, 2018, p. 87).

3. Updates of a character known from the Gospels, creating figures independent of the original, can be problematic: the very concept of Christ figures, analysed by Peter Malone (1990) or Lloyd Baugh (1997, pp. 109–112), may serve to emphasise the relevance of the Gospels' message in different times and places, but it runs the risk of depriving the viewer (and the filmmaker) of both the historicity and universality of the Jesus figure. "What would Jesus be like in a land like Narnia?" asked Clive Staples Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (and Andrew Adamson in its film adaptations) and showed that Christ could be met as the Lion Aslan. Similarly, the introduction of the theme of racial identity, with all its weight of suffering, abjection, racism, segregation, becomes crucial to understand two Afro-American films directed by Jean-Claude LaMarre (*Color of the Cross*, 2006 and *Color of the Cross 2: The Resurrection*, 2008).

4. Jesus is identified with Christianity: most adaptations of the Gospels have been made in Christian (or post-Christian) contexts, by both believing

and non-believing directors. It should be noted, however, that an interest in the person of Jesus can be found, for example, in Islam: an example is the Iranian film *Massih/Messiah* (dir. Nader Talebzadeh, 2007), which is aimed at an Islamic audience. The script of the film, which shows Jesus' teaching, his miracles and his passage to the glory of heaven, is based on non-evangelical sources (the Quran, the apocryphal Gospel of Barnabas). The story of Jesus resolutely denying the deity of Jesus thus becomes, for the viewer of this film, a parallel story to the Gospels, presenting an image falsified from the Christian perspective.

5. Another trap is the provocation of an ideological appropriation of the Gospel and its falsification: after all, the central figure of Dan Brown's novel and its film adaptation (*The Da Vinci Code*, dir. Ron Howard, 2006) is Jesus, presented as the last descendant of the royal line of David and husband of Mary Magdalene in the key of conspiracy theories, according to which the nurturing of his memory (and that of his offspring) would be the task of a secret society Priory of Sion. According to Brown, the belief in divinity of Jesus, as known in the history of Christianity, would have been the result of political decisions by the Emperor Constantine the Great...

6. While this narratively attractive falsification of the history of Jesus, of the Gospels and the Church appears there from commercial and anti-Christian motives, the story of Jesus (and the other persons of the Trinity sympathetically comforting a grieving father after the tragic death of a child) in the novel and film *The Shack* (dir. Stuart Hazeldine, 2017) leads to a different trap. Here, God as a therapist or a water running coach becomes hostage to human emotion and grief, while the comforting humanisation of all the persons of the Trinity becomes a radical rejection not only of the commandment warning against the veneration of images, but also of the Christian creed. The ancient heresy of patripassianism, which claimed that God the Father also suffered on the cross, returns here after centuries.

7. Can Jesus be an American, and a waiter from a roadside bar (*Encounter*, dir. David A.R. White, 2010)? Or can he fall in love with a German university student on the eve of the announcement of the last judgement and the end of the world (*Jesus liebt mich/Jesus Loves Me*, dir. Florian David Fitz, 2012)? The pitfalls of many films are the ambiguities that result from constructing characters out of many elements, as in the case of the Netflix-produced series *Messiah* (2020): its Syrian protagonist Al-Masih carries many messianic, Christ-like qualities, performs miracles (he controls the weather, resurrects a shot boy, walks on water), gathers crowds around him, but it remains unclear who he really is.

8. It is also necessary to notice films in which the trivialisation of the figure of Jesus borders on blasphemy, as in the Brazilian satirical film *A primeira*

tentação de Cristo (*The First Temptation of Christ*, dir. Rodrigo Van Der Put, 2019), whose protagonist turns out to be a homosexual who succumbs to the tempter in the desert. Eventually it is the devil who becomes the son of God in this trivial comedy, which was removed from the Netflix distribution amid protests!

CONCLUSIONS

The variety of images of Jesus in culture, their inconsistency and the appropriation of this figure by different groups and circles is nothing new: Jaroslav Pelikan (1999) in his book *Jesus through the Centuries* shows the impact of Jesus not only on religious, but also on cultural, social, political, and economic history of humanity and how the figure of Jesus has been transformed, used or appropriated for various purposes, both cultural and political.

The young Church, in deciding to establish a New Testament canon and selecting the four canonical Gospels, considered that the other texts did not belong to this canon, did not constitute material on which the teaching of the Gospel should be based. Apocryphal texts, albeit attractive, use elaborate fantasies nonetheless. Today the function of apocrypha, widespread in the audiovisual world, is performed by films, which, especially for viewers unfamiliar with the source text of the Gospel, become an alternative (or perhaps unique) version of the Gospel. Here we see another trap: the one who looks like Jesus on the screen is not Jesus, and what resembles the Gospel is often a fake.

Film adaptations of the Scriptures will always be marked by the personal approach of their authors and perhaps films express more their personality and beliefs than the actual protagonist of the Gospel. Fortunately, filmmakers are looking for new ways to express the content of the Gospels: an interesting proposal is the independent series *The Chosen*, which recalls the events of the Gospels not from the perspective of the evangelist or Jesus, but from that of its protagonists: Mary Magdalene, Matthew, Nicodemus, Peter. Protagonists of the animated film *The Star* (dir. Timothy Reckart, 2017) heading with Mary and Joseph out of Nazareth and into Bethlehem, are animals: Bo the donkey, Dave the dove, Ruth the lamb, and the camels of the Magi, who, like in ancient Greek fables, are able to speak.

The history of film adaptations of the Gospels is not yet closed as new films are being made: *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection* (sequel to *The Passion of the Christ*), directed and produced by Mel Gibson (scheduled for 2024), and *The Way of the Wind* by Terrence Malick, one of the most profound Christian

filmmakers, who has been working on his adaptation of the Gospel for many years. Perhaps these films will surprise us with further original interpretations of the Good News?

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PUŁAPKI PSEUDOBIBLIJNYCH FILMÓW

Streszczenie

Pierwsze dwudziestolecie XXI wieku przyniosło już ponad 70 filmów fabularnych realizowanych w różnych kontekstach kulturowych i religijnych, których pierwszoplanową postacią jest Jezus z Nazaretu; wśród nich znajduje się ambitny i nowatorski projekt realizowanego od 2019 roku serialu *The Chosen*, zaplanowanego na 7 sezonów. Twórców inspirowały zarówno Ewangelia, jak i pozostałe księgi Pisma Świętego jednak wiele z tych utworów, bezkrytycznie przyjmowanych m.in. przez katechetów, okazuje się filmami odchodzącymi od treści i znaczenia ksiąg biblijnych (np. *Chata*, *Noe*). Czy w ten sposób atrakcyjne utwory audiowizualnej kultury popularnej, powstające poza kontekstem wiary Kościoła, reinterpretujące nieraz głęboko treści Ewangelii, nie stają się nowymi *loci theologici*, wiodącymi jednak widza na manowce?

Słowa kluczowe: apokryfy; Ewangelia; film; Jezus Chrystus.