'BECAUSE HE IS DIFFERENT …' THE AMBIGUOUS HERMENEUTICS OF NICHOLAS RAY'S *KING OF KINGS*

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Rooted in the lavish style of the Hollywood biblical epic, Nicholas Ray's 1961 film *King of Kings* offers viewers a Jesus for the mid-twentieth century, where secularization, religious pluralism, and the looming threat of war saturate the world of the implied viewer. Beneath the excessive elements of the epic style lies a complex story which illustrates how the Jesus film functions as site of hermeneutical and Christological reflection. Ray constructs a complex, sometimes abstruse, image of Jesus mediated through a variety of competing lenses ranging from the political to the social and beyond. This article explores the Christological and hermeneutical dimensions of *King of Kings*, focusing in particular on how the backdrops of culture, tradition, and competing interpretations influence Ray's often unappreciated retelling of the Jesus story. Further, it proffers a hermeneutical reflection on film as an essential element in the reception of the Gospel story within contemporary culture.

I. 'I WAS A TEENAGE JESUS'

A film without honour in its own time, Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* encountered immediate criticism in the early 1960s for its lack of theological or historical accuracy.[1] Ray sought to offer viewers a more youthful, idealized, and human Jesus for an audience facing the cross-currents of secularization, moral scepticism, and the uncertainty of the emerging Cold War world. Through historical fiction, melodrama, and no small amount of sentimentality, *King of Kings* navigates a variety of competing interpretations of Christianity in the fluctuating world of the mid-twentieth century. For Moira Walsh, this pluralistic backdrop presents substantial difficulties. 'Another undoubted shortcoming of the Gospel according to Hollywood', she writes, 'is the watering down of the Bible in our pluralistic society so that it gives the least possible offense to the religious sensibilities of all shades of believers and unbelievers in the audience'.[2] While this view is understandable and indeed valid, the perspective of six decades as well as the wider span of two millennia of interpretation and representation allows for a more sympathetic view of Ray's Jesus. Popular renditions of the Jesus story, through a variety of media, have rarely demonstrated complete theological or historical accuracy. As far back as the early Renaissance period, if not long before, the Christian story has been depicted with a cavalier attitude to either the historical or theological context of the late first century world from which the New Testament emerged. Further, the religious, cultural, and social sensibilities of each era are as embedded in classical art as they are in contemporary cinema. Artistic interpretations of the Jesus story are saturated in historical and sometimes theological anachronisms.[3] Nicholas Ray's

Jesus film, then, appears more 'traditional' than one might first imagine. While claims of historical, cultural, and theological objectivity have accompanied the biblical film since its first emergence with the birth of cinema itself in the late nineteenth century, contemporary theological hermeneutics renders such claims to be both reductive and naïve. If one searches for complete historical or theological accuracy, numerous obstacles to understanding Ray's film emerge. Does its epic style distract from the content of the Christian story? More potently, how does Ray's image of Jesus resonate with audiences of differing beliefs and opinions? Further, can film, with its variety of genres, styles, and commercial concerns, ever mediate the complex and dense heritage of the Christian story in a way that does justice to its depth of meaning? The hermeneutical task of the theologian dialoguing with Ray's work, perhaps, is how to situate it as one element in an evolving dynamic where a number of competing interpretations of Jesus – both within and without the filmic medium – meet and clash. These cultural moments, one might say, are never the totality of the Jesus story but rather instances of its expansion into a wider aesthetic and cultural matrix. Understood as a cultural moment that leaves much more to be said about its subject matter and taken against the broader backdrop of two millennia of interpretation on the Jesus theme, *King of Kings* presents an altogether more complex adaptation of the Jesus story than might first appear.

Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 film *The King of Kings* dominated the 'canon' of Hollywood biblical films for the best part of three decades.[4] Henry B. Warner's virile, fatherly Jesus casts a long shadow over the evolving historical consciousness of Christianity's encounter with film culture. Appealing to scriptural fidelity, perceived Christian orthodoxy, and historical objectivity, DeMille combined elements of the New Testament with sensationalized stories of moral depravity to produce a film style that appeased Christian denominations and entertained audiences. In the wake of DeMille, American filmmakers portrayed Jesus indirectly in the Roman-Christian epics such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), and *Ben-Hur* (1959).[5] The absent Jesus structured these narratives and gave them a subtext (however muted) beyond the heroic stories of battles, conversions, and martyrdom.[6] A remake in name only, Ray's *King of Kings* re-reads the Jesus story against the backdrop of the legacy of the holocaust; religious and cultural pluralism; and the threat of the Cold War. Ray counters the casual anti-Semitism of previous epics by downplaying Jewish hostility to Jesus and emphasizing the historical context of the story, albeit with much embellishment.[7] He concentrates more on the teachings of Jesus than the miracles, thus downplaying the spectacular or kitsch elements in the epic style as well as attempting to engage the potentially sceptical viewer. Responding to Cold War America, *King of Kings* stresses Jesus' role as the 'the messiah of peace'. Conscious of the more divinized Jesus figures of previous films, Ray re-interprets his protagonist (played by Jeffrey Hunter) as a youthful, idealistic, and even broody figure.[8] An idealized 'new man', he offers an alternative mode of existence to the cycle of violence instigated by Roman oppression. Infamously, this led one reviewer to dub the film 'I was a teenage Jesus'.[9] Ray's interpretation of the Gospel story attempts to counter the excess of the religious epic by offering viewers a more human Jesus for a pluralistic world.

Keen to avoid scandal, perhaps, Ray makes little attempt to probe the personality or motivations of Jesus. Despite a renewed emphasis on his humanity, Ray idealizes Jesus to a great extent. This is illustrated by the decision to shave Hunter's body hair in the crucifixion scene after preview audiences expressed offence at the sight of a Jesus with chest hair.[10] This idealized Christ remains too distant a figure to possess the all too human characteristic of a hairy chest. Despite this, Hunter's Jesus is repeatedly photographed in patterns of ambiguous imagery which depart from the typical style of the Hollywood religious epic. In his first appearance during the baptism scene, for example, Hunter is shot from above while a close-up of his eyes

replaces the image of the dove. In another example, only Hunter's silhouette appears in two of three subdued miracle scenes. Ray's interpretation of Jesus, then, satisfies neither the quasi-Docetist tendencies of the filmic medium, with Hollywood's thirst for divinized heroes, nor the more psychological, introspective style of later Jesus films, such as Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.[11] Harmonizing the four gospels, *King of Kings* depicts key episodes indirectly through a series of elaborate subplots which explore how several characters perceive Jesus. These function as dramatic foils for the story and form the basis of Ray's interpretive style. He probes the gaps in the New Testament stories, so to speak, by focusing on the experiences of secondary characters and fictional elaborations of key episodes which, for example, attempt to explain Barabbas' motivations, Judas' betrayal, and the responsibility for Jesus' death. For Ray, the Jesus story, or motif, possesses universal significance for all people regardless of race or creed. In typical epic style, his 'children of Israel' are white Americans while the callous Romans with British accents mirror both atheistic communism and America's colonial past. Further, Hunter's more human but idealized Jesus appeals to a potentially more sceptical, secularized, and pluralistic audience. Defined by the characters who encounter him, Jesus becomes an object of interpretation within the story itself. In so doing, Ray's style emphasizes the mediated character of interpretation through his use of secondary characters as a collage of archetypal responses to and representations of Jesus.

II. FILM AS RE-INTERPRETATION

The potency of film lies in its ability to render what is absent present and, even more importantly, to make it seem immediate. Despite the burgeoning technical sophistication of film in the twenty-first century, this core point remains as true for the apocryphal crowd fleeing the first showing of the Lumière brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* as it is for contemporary cinematic audiences.[12] Film presents a radical challenge for our understanding of the Christian tradition and its sources of expression. If filmmakers can interpret and re-interpret the Jesus story, how will this change and influence an audience's perception of that same story? Indeed, does the story itself shift, expand, or change through its re-interpretation via a different idiom? Yet the very prospect of film changing a viewer's own understanding hints at its opportunity. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the Jesus story has dominated filmmaking. The enduring popularity of the Christian story in film, then, demonstrates how it is a central moment in the contemporary reception of the Gospel. As filmmakers and film viewers de-stabilize the seemingly static 'text' so opportunities arise to find new meanings, expand the Christian story, and reveal the inexhaustibility and symbolic depth of tradition.

Searching for the meaning of any story involves coming to terms with how meaning itself is never objective or pre-given, but rather 'constructed by the individual reader and interpreter'.[13] This is no less true for filmmakers and film viewers as it is for readers of literature. Understood in the broadest sense of the word, 'texts' do not exist in a vacuum but are accompanied by numerous contexts. Hence, films about Jesus, either implicitly or explicitly, mirror the world of the so-called 'implied viewer'. Cinematic interpretation is a mutual enterprise between filmmaker and film viewer. Within this matrix, the filmic 'text' is not the property of one participant but rather a world of its own to which we are given over and, above all, must be taken seriously for its aesthetic and hermeneutical value. All interpretation involves 'construction, production, and re-reading'.[14] The era of the epic biblical spectacular in Hollywood cinema is not exempt from this process. Over the course of half a century, the epic established an accepted style for the depiction of the holy in film. Rooted in the sometimes kitsch and sentimental re-working of

classical religious art from the Renaissance and Baroque eras as well as reverential, if not wholly uncritical, interpretations of scripture, coupled with fictitious expansions of the biblical story itself, the epic style constructed Jesus as a static, unchanging figure exempt from narrative machinations and character development. At the heart of this supposed stasis lies an intrinsic, burgeoning instability. One need only take a cursory look at the history of devotional literature, hymns, and poetry within Christianity to see that the Gospel story, rather than being a closed or bounded category of storytelling, is itself an expansive landscape encompassing the oral traditions that the written text emerged from as well as the world 'before the text', as it were, which reminds us always of how the biblical story is received in a variety of contexts. The spectacular style, then, while claiming stability, encompasses a number of competing social, cultural, political, and religious worldviews. As cinema matured during the early to mid-twentieth century so too did filmmakers increasing self-awareness of the fluctuating dynamics of their Jesus stories and the inter-textual character of the medium. It is against this backdrop that Nicholas Ray casts Jesus as a figure from youth culture who responds to the cultural and social worlds of the mid-twentieth century.

Jesus films are cultural moments that tell us something about the meaning of the Gospel story against the backdrop of the multiple worlds at work in the telling and re-telling of that same story. Given that the Christian tradition is itself an expansive medium containing more than the written and redacted texts themselves, film never encapsulates the totality of the world(s) of the Christian story. From its first emergence the Jesus film encountered criticism for its failure to authentically represent its subject matter. This, perhaps, is one of the reasons why filmmakers consistently appeal to scriptural and historical fidelity in order to make their 'texts' either popular or acceptable with audiences. DeMille, for instance, opens his Jesus story with a title card claiming that the events portrayed took place two millennia ago, while Mel Gibson's use of Isaiah in his brief prologue to *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) appeals, in a variation on this style, to historical accuracy, as well as a literal interpretation of the prophetic text.[15] Both films, however, are very much products of their time, cultural moments that form essential parts of a wider reception history. In his acclaimed 1964 film *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* Pier Paolo Pasolini plays on this dynamic by deliberately embedding historical anachronisms into his work through his analogous film style, where no actor wears a beard; the temple of Jerusalem is clearly a medieval ruin; and most potently, the scribes and Pharisees speak with Mafiosi Italian accents.[16] Filmmakers' claims of historical and scriptural accuracy are indicators of a reception history. Both DeMille and Gibson employ contrasting methods in order to claim authenticity but do so through the contemporary cinematic styles of the late 1920s and early twenty-first century respectively. While accuracy remains a key area of debate on the significance of film for theological reflection, the method through which filmmakers' appeal to authenticity is itself an important indicator of how the Gospel story is received against the backdrop of two millennia of interpretation and representation.

In a nod to DeMille's sense of historical eventfulness, Ray opens his Jesus story with a detailed yet embellished account of Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem. Orson Welles' omniscient and authoritative narration presents viewers with the feeling of authenticity, where presumed historical and biblical authority combine with elaborate battle scenes to produce a seemingly authentic reconstruction of the New Testament world. Quickly, however, *King of Kings* deviates from this authoritative tone by introducing a raft of extra-biblical material which implicitly mirror the cultural and social worlds of the implied viewer. Further, Ray destabilizes his story through a series of interior narrators who offer privileged, almost intimate, access to aspects of the Jesus story, thus reflecting the intrinsic instability of the narrative itself. Following the prologue, for example, he casts the Herodian dynasty as a despotic Arabian family – a clear

allusion to contemporary events such as the Suez Canal crisis. Further, he casts the Roman Empire as an atheistic, totalitarian state mediated through the provincial despotism of a nar-cissistic Pontius Pilate, albeit accompanied by the sympathetic Lucius character, a fictional expansion of the Roman centurion who, depending on which account one reads, professes faith in Jesus at the foot of the cross. Secondary characters offer contrasting images of Jesus which Welles' narration never fully encapsulates. Welles' narration coupled with Ray's multiple fictional elaborations form a dialectic between the classical epic style of storytelling and a more subjective mode which emphasizes the cultural, social, political, and religious contexts in which the Jesus story is re-appropriated.

The creativity of cinema as an art means that the potential within a character, story, or image is itself inexhaustible and open to multiple interpretations. This is a key point in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, especially his understanding of aesthetic experience as outlined in *Truth and Method*.[17] He writes that '*all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of that event*'.[18] This means that no one image, characterization, or story can ever capture totally the thing it seeks to represent. DeMille's virile, fatherly Jesus is itself only one possible interpretation of the character and is heavily influenced by the cultural world(s) within which it is consumed and re-interpreted. Contrast this with Pasolini's Jesus, shaped by the director's own Marxist sensibilities, Italian neorealist cinema, and the art of El Greco (to name but a few influences), and we see that rather than being a closed or bounded space, the filmic medium contains an 'implicit futurity' which highlights the inexhaustible potential for meaning within the subject matter. Cinema, then, is open and exploratory. Rather than being an obstacle to be overcome in the search for stability, the 'incompleteness of the work's subject-matter poses a creative challenge: to think on and uncover what has yet to be said'.[19]

As film illustrates the inexhaustible potential of interpretation, it simultaneously reveals the conversational character of all hermeneutics. Like conversations between people, the encounter between film viewer and the filmic 'text' contains the possibility of discovering something new, or unknown, about the object of interpretation. By the same token, it is a possible moment of self-discovery, of transformation. Against the backdrop of our prior involvement in history and tradition, within which all interpretation occurs, no subject matter is ever completely 'foreign' or 'alien'. As Lloyd Baugh reminds viewers and interpreters alike, Jesus films are 'preceded by the dense heritage of nineteen centuries of visual art on the Jesus-theme'.[20] In his concept of effective historical consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) Gadamer holds that the past is not an object to be retrieved; instead, each interpretation happens in light of the influence a particular story exerts and the various contexts of any interpretation.[21] As he puts it, the 'true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of one and other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding'.[22] No interpretation is the definitive word on its subject matter; rather, it is a fusion of horizons, the continual emergence of the influence a text, story, or person exerts over the course of interpretation itself.

Gadamer's reflections on aesthetics and hermeneutics touch on key areas of the dialogue between Christianity and film culture. There is an unavoidable hermeneutical dimension to all human experience. Given the key role film occupies as a mediator of meaning, the interpretive dimension of the art potentially transforms our understanding of the Christian story. While any attempt to find meaning through any medium involves an inevitable tension between the past and the present, and equally between conflicting understandings, interpretation does not dilute this obvious tension; instead, the interpreter consciously brings it out. In this fusion of past and present, of otherness and similitude, we become aware of the influence that the object of interpretation exerts. This means that rather than recreating the past we attest to the meaning of

the story in the present. In that present, we expand tradition by adding new interpretations to the process:

> Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding a real fusing of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.[23]

Filmmakers illustrate this fusion dynamic in the manner through which they both construct their Jesus story and, at times most evocatively, the patterns of imagery. Through viewing we are fused, so to speak, with the filmmaker who interprets, thus becoming mutual interpreters. Likewise we are fused with the horizon of the story. But this is no objectifying process; rather, the relationship of the past and the present, like that of the metaphorical horizons, illustrates how the meaning of the story is to be found in the encounter between the viewer and film. For instance, filmmakers continually reference key aesthetic moments such as Da Vinci's Last Supper and the passion scenes, among others, even in the most implicit sense. Indeed, *King of Kings* deliberately plays on the Da Vinci prototype by picturing the Last Supper at a Y-shaped table. The composition emphasizes the intimacy of both the meal and the matrix of relationships between the key characters – especially Jesus and Judas – while, by the same token, evoking Da Vinci even in a deviation from his celebrated image. Perhaps Ray's most effective technique, then, is his deviation from established patterns of imagery for picturing Jesus not only within the filmic 'canon' but equally throughout the visual reception of the Gospel story itself. The complex semiotic and inter-textual relationship between DeMille and Ray illustrates this well. Where DeMille pictures Jesus first, following the healing of a blind child, with a halo around his head, Ray shoots his more youthful figure in a series of close-ups with John the Baptist which focus on the eyes of Jesus as the indicator of an ambiguous identity. The deviation from objective divinity to a more humanized figure demonstrates the fluctuating historical consciousness of American attitudes to Christianity.

The interpretative dynamics of film open us up to the possibility of finding new meanings through both the inexhaustibility of art and its subject matters and the effective historical consciousness of the Christian tradition itself, where multiple interpretations blend, clash, and most importantly dialogue with one another. Since film lives only through viewing, it can never be regarded as an art object because it appeals continuously for participation and involvement.[24] Indeed, since all interpretation happens against the backdrop of our always already immersion in history and tradition, our encounter with film is never a passive exercise. The mediation or unfolding of the work itself demands participation and mutual interpretation. Nicholas Davey puts this well when he writes that aesthetic 'experience is not an isolated monologue but an elaborate dialogical achievement involving the fusion of the respective horizons of artist, subject-matter, and viewer'.[25] The filmic text is itself an expansive, open medium which joins with the equally expansive landscape of the Christian tradition. This shatters the illusion of immediacy and opens us to the implicit futurity of the filmic work through the fusion of horizons that occurs throughout all interpretation.

Ray claims historical authenticity but simultaneously plays with the very notion. By inserting fictional interior narrators into his story, he destabilizes any claim to historical retrieval. More importantly, his story mirrors contemporary concerns, thus demonstrating how the historical dimension of the Jesus story relates to the interpretation of that same story through film. This destabilization dynamic reminds us that no interpretation of the Jesus story is definitive. Cinematic interpretation, then, by no means evokes a singular, true image of Jesus, or the New

Testament world. *King of Kings* highlights a tension between the past of the Jesus story and the present of its interpretation. Instead of diluting the cultural, social, political, and religious disparities and tensions, Ray consciously draws them out and, in so doing, demonstrates the interpretative possibilities of film. This is especially evident in two aspects: first, his juxtaposition of Jesus and Barabbas as quasi-secularized alternative messiahs of interior and exterior change and, second, his conscious mirroring of mid-twentieth century attitudes to religious faith.

III. ALTERNATIVE MESSIAHS

In the New Testament, Rome's empire casts a long shadow of opposition to Jesus. While the empire marginalizes through violence, the reign of God emerges from the margins. Just as the empire, in its broadest sense, opposes Jesus' mission in the New Testament gospels, *King of Kings* depicts an already crumbling Roman Empire which reflects more contemporary forms of violent imperialism. Beginning with Pompey's massacre of the priests in the temple, the empire perpetuates cyclical violence. Against this backdrop, two alternative messiahs emerge: Jesus and Barabbas, the criminal released by Pilate to placate the crowd in the New Testament. A tradition going back as far as Origen holds that Barabbas and Jesus share the same first names.[26] The contrast in the gospels, then, is ironic. Both share the same name but have different fathers. Barabbas means 'son of the father'. Hence, Jesus the Son of God goes to his death while the crowd choose Jesus the 'son of the father'.[27] Building on a combination of biblical scholarship and fictional speculation, Ray gives Barabbas an origin story as a Jewish zealot. Judas Iscariot, also portrayed as an erstwhile zealot, is a dramatic foil for the two. Believing Jesus to be a political leader, Judas attempts to bring these two messiahs – the messiah of peace and the messiah of war – together with tragic consequences. This dynamic expands the passion episode and casts it back into the life of Jesus. Ray's fictional messiah of war, then, is both rooted in the Christian story and reflective of contemporary concerns.

Barabbas wages war against Roman oppression. A man of action, he is the 'quintessential Old Man of American Westerns and epics' who seeks change through external actions.[28] Jesus, contrastingly, preaches peace and inner change: a modern idea, more rooted in the anxiety of Cold War American culture than the anthropology or cosmology of first-century Judaism. Ray emphasizes this inner change theme in a fictional scene involving a meeting between the imprisoned John the Baptist and Jesus, replacing the synoptic meeting of Jesus and John's disciples. When questioned about his motives, Jesus tells his herald's captors that he comes to free John 'within his cell' – inner transformation defeats even the walls of a prison. Barabbas, meanwhile, holds Jesus in contempt. For him, Jesus' words are water while his actions are fire. The two can never meet. Barabbas triggers the events of the passion story by staging a rebellion on the same day Jesus enters Jerusalem. Replacing the cleansing of the Temple, this indulgent battle scene leads to Barabbas' arrest and Jesus' betrayal. Desperate, Judas attempts to force Jesus into action. As Orson Welles' authoritative narration explains, Judas seeks to test the messiah by telling Caiaphas and the Romans that both Jesus and Barabbas are 'the left and the right hands of the same body.' Judas' test brings no political triumph as Jesus goes to his death and Barabbas walks free.

In *The Dark Interval*, John Dominic Crossan, building on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues that myth is the attempt to reconcile two polar, or binary, opposites.[29] Ray's two messiah narrative is mythic in style and structure. In this mythic world, binary oppositions dominate. All must choose between what Jesus and Barabbas represent. Judas attempts to reconcile the two

but ultimately fails as the narrative absorbs both figures as absent presences. The crucifixion shatters not only Judas but Barabbas also. It furthers the dynamic of misunderstanding which begins once Judas presumes that Jesus will bring political change. In the passion sequence this interplay of messiahs reaches a crescendo. As Barabbas is released, Lucius the centurion tells him to look at the one who dies in his place. While watching the crucifixion, Barabbas asks an inconsolable Judas why this Jesus wants to die for him. Later, Barabbas, now shorn of the potency and power that characterize him in the early scenes, holds the dead Judas in a disconcerting *Pietà*. The passion scenes offer political and social explanations for Jesus' death. While downplaying the supernatural element of the story, however, Ray hints at the transcendent both in his mythic polarization of Jesus and Barabbas and the latter's questioning of why Jesus dies. Inevitably, Barabbas and Judas misunderstand Jesus and remain locked in the empire's perpetual cycle of violence. The implication is clear: only the way of the messiah of peace brings inner transformation and an end to past violence.

IV. SCEPTICISM AND OPENNESS

A deeply American film, *King of Kings* is rooted in 'a panoply of interwoven issues in American civil discourse at the end of the 1950s'.[30] Scepticism and unbelief are major subtexts. This is evident in the lack of miracle scenes and when depicted, their ambiguity. Nonetheless, the film maintains a subdued openness to the transcendent. Ray addresses this dynamic through the wholly fictitious Lucius character. A Roman centurion, Lucius follows the 'ministries' of both messiahs and mediates Jesus to the viewer. For the implied audience, both Jesus and Barabbas remain inaccessible figures. Jesus, the 'new man,' is too distant and idealistic while Barabbas, the 'old man', represents an alienating past. Lucius plays the role of interior narrator and both complements and contradicts Welles' omniscient style. Aging only minimally throughout, we first encounter Lucius objecting to Herod the Great's massacre of the innocents. Nonetheless, he executes his orders. Later, however, he protects the holy family when he discovers them living in Nazareth. He re-appears twenty years later in the service of Pontius Pilate. Wearied by warfare and fearful of change, Lucius remains in Palestine long after his term of service ends and has no love for Roman culture or society. Further, he accepts neither the totalitarian atheism of the Roman Empire nor the Messianic, Christianized Judaism of Ray's filmic Palestine. He is a sceptical, almost modern, figure who doubts the existence of any god thus mirroring the potentially disenchanted viewer. In a destabilizing feature, Lucius, rather than Welles, describes the nature miracles of the New Testament. Playing on ideas of biblical inspiration, Lucius reads a set of verbatim notes on the miracles of Jesus to an increasingly irate Pilate who believes that there are no such things as miracles 'only fools who believe in them'. Pilate eventually tosses the scroll into a pool. Now without 'script', Lucius continues and concludes with the words 'so it is reported'. As Pilate leaves, his fictionalized wife, a daughter of Cesar and another retrojection from the passion story, stoops in a sign of supplication, perhaps ambiguous belief, and lifts the scroll out of the water. Despite his lack of belief, Lucius remains open to Jesus even to the point of being protective. The Romans charge Jesus purely on political grounds, seemingly disregarding any religious disputes. As Pilate derides the silent Jesus, Lucius acts as his defence but inevitably fails to convince Jesus to defend himself. In a striking departure from the New Testament, Pilate sees Jesus as a threat and wastes little time condemning him. Unsettled by the injustice of Jesus' sentence, Lucius tells the released Barabbas to look upon the one that dies in his place. During the crucifixion, he confesses Jesus to be the Christ but his absence afterward suggests that unlike his cinematic

precursor, Richard Burton's Marcellus in *The Robe*, Lucius does not convert to Christianity. He remains, then, a voice of paradoxical doubt and openness in a narrative where Jesus is a contested figure subject to multiple interpretations.

V. IN THE SHADOW OF THE GALILEAN

The conventional style of the biblical epic combines fiction, melodrama, and historicism in an attempt to lend an air of authenticity to tales of conversion and degradation. For the implied viewer, then, the goal is clear: the filmic image stirs the emotions with dramatic recreations of historical events, seen through the prism of characters to whom we can relate. While indulging in this style at certain points, *King of Kings* deviates from it at key junctures, thus producing an unsatisfactory outcome. Jesus remains an elusive figure throughout and Jeffrey Hunter's portrayal emphasizes ambiguity over clarity. In his 1987 novel *The Shadow of the Galilean*, Gerd Thiessen explores the Gospel story through the eyes of a fictional character coerced by Pilate into spying on Jesus. His quest, however, seems fruitless. As one line goes, 'I never met Jesus on my travels through Galilee. I just found traces of him everywhere … he remained himself everywhere intangible'.[31] The characters in *King of Kings* attempt to define Jesus but ultimately fail. This Jesus, like Thiessen's, is intangible. Ray's film style plays with the notions of biblical inspiration and inerrancy by paralleling the historical world of the story with contemporary American experience and emphasizing the subjectivity of the characters who encounter Jesus. Barabbas, the mythic opposite, despises the pacifism of Jesus. The passion, however, leaves him confused, even offended, by someone dying in his place. Barabbas misunderstands Jesus and sees his death as a failure. Unable to see beyond his own goals and tendencies toward violence, the 'old man' remains outside the boundaries of the new way of life offered by Jesus. Lucius' scepticism offers tacit hope to those who doubt but fails to resolve the conversion dynamic. Epic characters usually travel from doubt to conversion thus attaining a heroic destiny. Lucius, unsatisfactorily, remains at the foot of the cross.

As *King of Kings* closes music soars and disciples gather. If the ambiance suggests a triumphant resurrection, the imagery offers no such definitive assurances. The shadow of the risen Jesus intersects with a fishing net to form a cruciform shape and extends over the departing disciples. The messiah of peace triumphs through absence. Further, the shadow represents victory over the forces of empire which, either in the form of Barabbas' utopian kingdom; Rome's oppression; or perhaps the contemporary forces of the Cold War, claims victims through violence. 'It is Jesus' shadow that remains', writes Richard Walsh, 'and that shadow haunts, rather than justifies, empire'.[32] The shadow motif emphasizes the physical absence of the risen Jesus and the presence of interpretation and mediation. Introduced in the miracle scenes, its recurrence in the resurrection connects the ministry of Jesus with his final, albeit ambiguous, triumph over evil. As Pamela Grace summarizes, 'Jesus, the messiah of peace … lives on in a non-bodily form that intersects with the tangible world'.[33] Mediated by intra-diegetic 'interpreters', such as Barabbas or Lucius, Ray's Jesus remains an intangible figure. We are never sure who this Jesus is but we do know what he is not. This is perhaps best encapsulated in Pilate's retort to his wife in the passion sequence. As she questions why her husband demands a confession from Jesus, he replies 'because he is different and refuses to behave like the others'. *King of Kings* presents a hermeneutic of ambiguity mediated through a complex interplay between scepticism and openness; the past and the present; what we see on screen and what lies beyond the image. Ray offers no definitive vision of Jesus and leaves his viewer, like the disciples, in the shadows where interpretation takes hold.

Notes

1 Nicholas Ray, dir. *King of Kings* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1961).

2 Moira Walsh, 'Christ or Credit Card?: A Review of *King of Kings*,' *America*, 21 October 1961, p. 71.

3 Film plays a similar role to forms of 'popular' religion, or piety, in shaping the religious and cultural imagination of viewers. The history of Christianity reveals how popular expressions of the Christian story are nothing new and, rather than being divorced from the Christian tradition, are prime shapers of Christian thought and practice. As Salvador Ryan writes (when dealing with the broader relationship between theology and popular piety): 'Popular cults such as the Five Wounds of Christ eventually had their impact on the liturgy itself for which a Votive Mass of the Five Wounds was approved in the fourteenth century. The liturgy, then, was constantly in dynamic relationship with the surrounding culture and developed accordingly, incorporating into its rites forms drawn from individual, domestic and community piety'. Salvador Ryan, 'Some Reflections on Popular Piety: A Fruitful or Fraught Relationship?' *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012), pp. 961–971 (here p. 964).

4 Cecil B. DeMille, dir. *The King of Kings* (DeMille Pictures, 1927).

5 See Mervyn LeRyoy, dir. *Quo Vadis* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1951)*;* Henry Koster, dir. *The Robe* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1953); William Wyler, dir. *Ben-Hur* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959).

6 As Richard Walsh describes it, 'to understand Jesus films, we have to look away from Jesus to the stories of conversion and degradation swirling around his structuring absence'. Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Trinity: Harrisburg, 2003), p. 33.

7 For a more detailed treatment of anti-Semitism in the Jesus film genre, especially in the depiction of those hostile to Jesus, see Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University, 2007), pp. 180–227.

8 Director of the *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), a defining film in the formation of American youth culture, some argue that Nicholas Ray continues a wider discourse, beginning with the James Dean character in *Rebel*, on male identity in the figure of Jesus. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans point out that 'Jeffrey Hunter seems as young a man as James Dean, equally idealistic, but less confused and delinquent'. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narratives in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1993), p. 133. See also Nicholas Ray, dir. *Rebel Without a Cause* (Warner Bros, 1955).

9 Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, p. 138.

10 Ibid., p. 135.

11 Despite Kazantzakis' and Scorsese's appeal to a more human image of Jesus, both embed dualistic elements into their work. The eponymous last temptation, for example, paints domesticity and the mission of Jesus as irreconcilable opposites. For an alternative approach to this dynamic see Christine Hoff Kraemer, 'Wrestling with Flesh, Wrestling with Spirit: The Painful Consequences of Dualism in *The Last Temptation of Christ*' *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (2004), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-lasttemptation.html (accessed 9 September 2009). See also Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation*, trans. Peter A. Bien (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) and Martin Scorsese, dir. *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Universal, 1988).

12 According to the well-known urban legend, viewers were so taken by the moving image of a life-sized train coming directly at them that people ran to the back of the room. Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière, dirs. *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Société Lumière, 1896).

13 Manfred Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction,* trans. Joachim F. Vette (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 75.

14 Ibid.

15 Mel Gibson, dir. *The Passion of the Christ* (Icon, 2004).

16 Pasolini's film style proffers a form of re-consecration as well as analogy. Shunning both reconstruction and deconstruction as approaches to the Jesus story he describes his style as an attempt to recover the sacred character of a story. 'So when I told the story of Christ I didn't reconstruct Christ as he really was. If I had reconstructed the history of Christ as he really was I would not have produced a religious film because I am not a believer … But … I am not interested in deconsecrating things: this is a fashion I hate, it is petit bourgeois. I want to re-consecrate things as much as possible, I want to re-mythicize them'. Oswald Stack and Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 82–83. See also Pasolini, dir. *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (Arco, 1964).

17 His magnum opus, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* was first published as *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960 (revised edition, 1972). All quotations in this paper are drawn from the second revised edtion of the English translation published in 2004. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. John Cumming and Garret Barden (London: Continuum, 2004).

18 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 85 (emphasis original).

19 Nicholas Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing' in Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (eds.), *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3–30 (here p. 16).

20 Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*, (Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), p. 5.

21 See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 299–305.

22 Ibid., p. 299.

23 Ibid., pp. 305–306.

24 As Gadamer writes: 'From this perspective we can judge just how inappropriate the understanding and practice of art in the age of the culture industry have become. It is an industry that reduces participants to the level of exploited consumers. But a false self-understanding is thereby demanded of us. The mere onlooker who indulges in aesthetic or cultural enjoyment from a safe distance, whether in the theatre, the concert hall, or the seclusion of solitary reading simply does not exist. Such a person misunderstands himself'. Gadamer, 'The Play of Art,' in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Robert Bernasconi (ed.), trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), pp. 123–130 (here pp. 129–130).

25 Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing,' p. 23.

26 Scandalized by this comparison, Origen held that the only reason one so wicked could share the Holy Name was through a heretical corruption of the text itself.

27 George Aichele highlights the verbal irony of this scene in the Gospel of Mark: 'the statement in some manuscripts of Matthew 27:16–17 that Barabbas was also named "Jesus" generates an element of irony or even slapstick in the story: Jesus the son of the father ("abba") is condemned while Jesus the son of the father ("barabbas") is released'. George Aichele, *Jesus Framed* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.

28 Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (London: Praeger, 2006), p. 36.

29 John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Illinois: Argus, 1975), pp. 48–51. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth,' reprint, in John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 131–135.

30 Adele Reinhartz, *The Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p. 166.

31 Gerd Thiessen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987), p. 129.

32 Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark*, p. 138.

33 Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 77.