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The Jesus Film and Tradition

A Hermeneutical Reflection

The Gospel story remains one of the most depicted subject matters in cinematic history. Since the advent of the motion picture in the late nineteenth century, filmmakers have offered viewers contrasting images of Jesus and the gospels. They have added to, re-orientated, and indeed transformed our ways of reflecting on the Christian tradition and its sources of expression. Film, then, is a central moment in theology's dialogue with the visual arts. It is not simply a peripheral accompaniment to the gospels but a mode of representation and interpretation in itself. A key task in theological reflection on film, therefore, is to emphasize its place within tradition — that it is a viable medium of representing and interpreting the Christian story.

All interpretation occurs against the backdrop of our prior involvement in tradition. When we watch any Jesus film, we are, most likely, bringing a number of preconceptions to the work regarding Jesus, the gospels, and the Christian tradition. Jesus films illustrate how the Gospel story is received in a particular context by drawing either implicit or explicit parallels between the story and the cultural, social, political, and religious contexts in which the film emerges. Nonetheless, many filmmakers dealing with the Gospel story claim to offer viewers historically accurate portraits of Jesus, thus stressing the perceived ability of film to represent or reconstruct the historical context of the Jesus story. This approach is especially evident in the famous biblical epics of the mid-twentieth century and, more recently, Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 silent masterpiece *The King of Kings*, for instance, opens with a title card stating how the events portrayed took place two millennia ago. Although the film never substantiates this audacious claim fully, DeMille nonetheless creates a feeling of authenti-

city by composing his title cards in the poetic style of the King James Bible. A later example of this method appears in Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (released in 1961 and a remake in name only), which opens with a detailed yet highly embellished summary of Pompey's invasion of Jerusalem. While Ray stresses the historical context of Jesus, his work is a response to cold war American culture. He emphasizes Jesus' role as both a teacher and the «Messiah of peace», thus mirroring the choices faced by American society on the eve of the Cold War. While claiming historical authenticity, this style betrays itself, so to speak, by inevitably revealing the historical and cultural contexts in which the work emerges and the story is received.

While an awareness of the past of any story always accompanies its interpretation, hermeneutics is never an exercise in historical reproduction. Interpretation does not ask us to situate ourselves *in* the past (which is impossible), but rather *in relation* to it. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, released in 1964, exemplifies this dynamic by situating the Jesus story not in a reconstructed first-century world but in the austere, poverty-stricken villages of southern Italy in the 1960s. An admirer of the Italian Neorealist movement, Pasolini uses on-location filming, stark black and white photography and amateur actors to retell not only Matthew's story but the two millennia of interpretation and representation that have accompanied both the Gospel text and, indeed, the wider Christian story. Pasolini constructs a narrative of analogy which highlights the intersections that occur through interpretation. The past mingles with the present and both intersect at various points. Hence, Pasolini can suggestively place his Jesus on the parapet of a temple that is clearly a medieval ruin and depict his scribes and Pharisees as aristocratic figures with mafiosi accents. An expansion of this dynamic occurs in Denys Arcand's 1988 film *Jesus of Montreal*, which tells the story of Jesus allegorically through the experiences of a group of actors staging a passion play in contemporary Montreal. While the play presents a historicized Jesus whose resurrection is a pious fraud, the multi-levelled story plays with notion of historicism and reveals its limitations and failures by focusing on the influence of the Gospel in the lives of those who encounter Daniel, the mysterious actor who plays Jesus. More recently, Mark Dornford May's 2006 film *Son of Man* transports the Jesus story into a contemporary African setting by re-contextualizing it in a fictional state called Judea¹. We shall return to these three films at a later stage in this paper.

¹ L. Baugh («The African Face of Jesus in Film: Part Two: Mark-Dornford May's *Son of Man*», *Gregorianum* 92 [2011] 317-345) describes *Son of Man* as a «radical actualization or "re-contextualization" of the Gospel narrative». Further, it situates «the Gospel narrative in the contemporary African reality». Dornford-May's film represents a significant shift in the Jesus film genre, which, by and large, has portrayed Jesus as a European/American figure.

Film is not a window through which we see an objective visualization of the gospels, but a subjective lens where we become part of the filmmaker's ongoing engagement with the story and the influence it exerts throughout centuries of aesthetic, literary, and musical interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as outlined in both his magnum opus *Truth and Method* and his later essays, form an essential theoretical ground that allows us to assert the role of film as an interpretive medium. Gadamer appreciates the hermeneutical implications of not only the written word but also the encountered image. The work of art, be it literary, visual, musical or otherwise, is «playful». The structure and style of any piece of art is a game within which we participate in the work and our perceptions are changed. When we dialogue with the work of art, that is, when we enter into a conversation, it mediates something to us. This ensures that film is a place of dialogue and communication where perceptions are potentially changed. Each instance of the subject matter, then, is an opportunity to create new meanings. Since all interpretation is historically conditioned, it is essential that we re-evaluate the relationship between the past of the story and the present of interpretation. The playful and mediatory character of film means that it speaks to us in our own present. The historical context of the subject matter is not a gap to be bridged but a supportive ground upon which we find meaning. All interpretation, therefore, is part of a wider reception history. When we interpret any particular thing, we are not retrieving a lost object, or «holy grail»; instead, we are fusing our horizon with those of previous times. The Jesus film exemplifies this dynamic by forming an inter-textual dialogue with both other films and other modes of interpretation outside the filmic medium. Within this movement of interpretation, the sources of the Christian tradition are expanded and we participate in the so-called «happening» of tradition. Filmic interpretation cannot be the search for the perfect image of Jesus. Rather, it is a place where we expand the continuity of tradition through participation, exploration, and illumination.

To evaluate the Jesus film on the basis of either its historical accuracy or exact faithfulness to the Gospel texts is a fruitless task. Inevitably, it leads to a reduction of both the filmic art and, indeed, the Christian tradition. Film is speculative and exploratory. It renders its subject matter as essentially open to the viewer who continues that exploration. The filmmaker and viewer, then, are mutual interpreters. Film can never replicate the Gospel story or the first-century world in their totality. Every motion picture is a product of its time, a cultural moment, and cannot be treated as an objective re-telling of the Gospel story. The Christian tradition is itself an expansive landscape that contains not only the written Gospels, but also the oral tradition that preceded them and the centuries of literary, aesthetic, and musical interpretations that

have followed. Many filmmakers have imagined Jesus in ways that appear far removed from the Christian tradition (a prime example, among others, being Martin Scorsese's 1988 adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*). But since film is rooted in a wider dynamic of interpretation, no Jesus film is ever totally detached from tradition. Through our viewing of film and, perhaps, its mirroring of us and our context, we expand tradition through interpretation and participate in its «happening».

I. FILM AS «PLAY» AND MEDIATION

Before discussing the Jesus film itself, it is important to engage with the filmic art in its own right and, in particular, its aesthetic and hermeneutical capabilities. All hermeneutics is conversational. When we encounter any particular thing through any medium, we are part of a conversation. Like exchanges between people, we inevitably discover something new or unknown about that thing through the conversation itself, through dialogue. This is equally true of the work of art and, in this context, the cinematic art. No film exists to be viewed passively because the very structure of art appeals for participation. For Gadamer, a kind of «playfulness» characterizes our involvement in any work of art. The conversation between the work and the viewer, reader, or listener has the structure of a game. As Werner Jeanrond puts it, the viewer is «a player who subjects himself to the rules of a game and who will ultimately be directed or “played” by the game»². The artwork, therefore, expresses a «play-drive»³. For Gadamer, this implies a certain limitation on freedom that pervades all of human activity:

We are used to talking about the element of play proper to all human culture. We discover forms of play in the most serious kinds of human activity: in ritual, in the administration of justice, in social behaviour in general, where we even speak of role-playing and so forth. A certain self-imposed limitation of our freedom seems to belong to the very structure of culture⁴.

Play emphasizes how art is not a form of disengaged, disinterested subjectivity. Instead of being frivolous, it has its own order and structure to which we are given over. Although Gadamer never refers explicitly to film, his

² W. JEANROND, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*, London 1994, 65.

³ W. JEANROND, *Theological Hermeneutics* (cf. nt. 2), 124.

⁴ H.G. GADAMER, «The Play of Art», in R. BERNASCONI, ed., *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Cambridge 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998¹⁰, 123-130; orig. German, «Das Spiel der Kunst», in *Kleine Schriften*, IV, Tübingen 1977.

definition of art as play is important for any hermeneutical reflection on the medium. The notion of the game highlights the seriousness of film. In order to dialogue and communicate with the filmic work, we are required to submit ourselves to the structural characteristics of the art form. Like the pictorial artist, who plays the viewer through an engagement with the painting, film plays the viewer through the directorial vision of the work.

The game, as Gadamer writes, is «subject to rules and regulations that count only within the closed realm of play»⁵. In film, the rules and regulations of the game are the aesthetic form and stylistic vision of the work. As a moment of communication, film speaks to the viewer within this structure. For the game to exist there must be «something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to this move with a counter-move»⁶. There is a two-way exchange between the viewer and the work. Film does not control in order to silence the viewer. Rather, its playfulness ensures that the work affects the viewer. The conversation, then, can change perspectives and transform the participants. For Gadamer, the fascination, or attraction, of the game lies in its ability to elicit submission from the player in the form of this move and counter-move:

The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players. Even when it is a case of games in which one seeks to accomplish tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk, the question of whether or not it will «work», «succeed», or «succeed again», which is the attraction of game [...] The real subject of the game [...] is not the player, but instead the game itself⁷.

The game entices the viewer and exerts control only after the viewer has consented to be mastered. Although the players contribute to the game and, indeed, make it possible, the real focus is the game itself. This preserves the autonomy of the work of art while, at the same time, retaining the players' involvement. Gadamer describes art as «the expression of a truth that cannot be reduced to what its creator thought in it»⁸. The play of film rests in the meeting of the players within the game. Neither the director's intention nor the viewer's subjective perception is the focus. Rather, it is the film itself, as we see it, which defines the experience.

⁵ H.G. GADAMER, «The Play of Art» (cf. nt. 4), 123-130.

⁶ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, London 1975, 95; orig. German, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1972.

⁷ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 95-96.

⁸ H.G. GADAMER, «Aesthetics and Hermeneutics», in D.E. LINGE, ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley 1976, 95-104; orig. German, «Aesthetic und Hermeneutik», in *Kleine Schriften*, II, Tübingen 1967.

All art is an event of dialogue and communication. The picture is painted to be viewed; the musical score is composed to be heard; and the drama is written to be performed. In the same way, film lives as a game only when it is projected to a viewer. To play, then, is to enter the filmic world. The advent of play is the opening of this space. As Gadamer puts it when discussing theatre:

Even the theatrical drama remains a game, i.e. it has the structure of a game, which is that of a closed world. But the religious or profane drama, however much it represents a world that is wholly closed within itself, is as if open to the side of the spectator in whom it achieves the whole of its significance [...] it [the play] is experienced properly by, and presents itself as what is «meant» to, one who is not acting in the play, but is watching. In him the game is raised, as it were, to its perfection⁹.

Once the artwork, whatever its mode of expression, speaks to the viewer, the game is raised to perfection. The act of play becomes one of freedom. Film interprets the subject matter and affects perception. This encompasses us within the world of the film and implicates us fully in its vision. This implication transforms the viewer through dialogue. As Gadamer puts it, «the play of art is a mirror that through centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar»¹⁰.

Vermittlung or, when best translated, «mediation» is the consequence, or goal, of the game¹¹. When the viewer participates in the work of art, there is a point where human play attains its perfection¹². This occurs through the «to-fro» movement of the game. Just as the picture exists to be seen, so the film exists to be viewed. With this perfection comes a «transformation into structure» where the play becomes a work and acquires an «ideality»¹³. The play has transformed the players. The filmmaker and film viewer are no longer separate but have been assimilated into the game¹⁴. This transformation is not a final act of «enchantment» or «seduction», but rather a «transformation into the true»¹⁵. This happens in and through our very engagement with the artwork, which raises what is untransformed up into its truth¹⁶. If the work of art or literature is a game through which dialogue occurs, then it is also an act

⁹ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 98.

¹⁰ H.G. GADAMER, «The Play of Art» (cf. nt. 4), 123-130.

¹¹ The word *Vermittlung* has a number of possible translations including mediacy, placing, agency, and relaying.

¹² H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 99.

¹³ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 99.

¹⁴ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 100-101.

¹⁵ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 100-101.

¹⁶ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 102.

of mediation. For Jean Grondin, to understand the artwork is to realize that «the meaning of the work is not to be sought anywhere except in its *Vermittlung*, in its transmission or its “mediation”: it has being only in its presentation»¹⁷. Our encounter with any film implicates us in a conversation. Moreover, this conversation has implications outside the work of art itself. Film makes a claim on us and challenges our pre-conceptions of its subject matter. This takes us beyond an understanding of art as an exercise in reproduction. Imitation cannot be a «second copy»; rather, it is a «bringing forth», which contains the «essential relation to everyone for whom the representation exists»¹⁸. Film, like all art, not only reproduces or imitates its subject matter, but transforms, illuminates, and brings it into a deeper focus. It is not a mode of imitation or reproduction, but something which makes visible and provides new meanings.

As a medium of disclosure, art, in all its expressions, is related to its subject matter. There is a unity between the interpretation and experience of the work. In this unity, our engagement is allied to the dynamics of the medium and the subject matter itself. This means that there is always, and inevitably, a plurality of interpretations:

In view of the finite nature of our historical existence there is, it would seem, something absurd about the whole idea of a uniquely correct interpretation [...] the obvious fact that every interpretation seeks to be correct, serves only to confirm that the non-differentiation of the interpretation of the work from the work itself is the actual experience of the work. This accords with the fact that the aesthetic consciousness is generally able to make the aesthetic distinction between the work and its interpretation only in a critical way, i.e. where the interpretation breaks down. The communication of the work is, in principle, a total one¹⁹.

When we separate the artwork from the interpretation contained within, we do so in a critical sense, i.e., when the interpretation breaks down and has not dialogued with its subject matter authentically. When art mediates its subject matter through dialogue, we tend not to notice the distinction between the interpretation and the work itself. Hence, the mediation is total because it does not separate the medium from the perspective of the artist. We are assimilated into the work and it becomes its own present. It is never confined by its historical origin or by the viewer’s distance, in time, from its production²⁰. History is not the medium of communication. On the contrary, the work of art

¹⁷ J. GRONDIN, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, Chesham 2003, 46; orig. French, *Introduction à Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Paris 1999.

¹⁸ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 103.

¹⁹ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 107.

²⁰ H.G. GADAMER, «Aesthetics and Hermeneutics» (cf. nt. 8), 95-104.

communicates itself. Film assimilates us through play and mediation. The medium itself brings about a unity between the viewer, the filmmaker, and the subject matter. Hence, film reveals itself to us through its presentation. Meaning is encountered neither in the interpretation of the director alone, nor in the experience of the viewer but only in the meeting of the two in the mediation of the work.

II. TEMPORAL DISTANCE AND FILMIC INTERPRETATION

Like all interpretation, film is subject to the distance of its subject matter in history. This is especially evident in the two examples of DeMille and Ray, among others. Both directors attempt to bridge this gap by framing their stories as objectively accurate portraits of both Jesus and his historical context. This presumes that the Gospel story has been wrenched from its original context and is understandable only within that context. The task of the interpreter in any medium, then, would be to reconstruct that world and thus bridge the gap between the past and the present. This, however, distorts the process of reception and appropriation. A fundamental challenge for any filmmaker (and indeed viewer), therefore, is how to interpret the events of the New Testament without confining them to a historicist interpretation which, inevitably, misunderstands the intention of those who proclaimed, wrote, and redacted the story of Jesus. History does not confine the New Testament. Rather, the Christian community interpret and re-interpret those texts, which are interpretations in their own right, as something living and active rather than static and unchanging. The Gospels are about «Jesus, the glorified Saviour of the world, who is alive in our midst, not about the actual Jesus of the first century who is no longer existent»²¹. Similarly, for the person of faith, that actual Jesus is the same glorified saviour who became human and thus existed within history. The audio-visual interpreter, be they a filmmaker or a film viewer, needs to engage with this dynamic. We are called, then, to redefine our understanding of the temporal distance which exists between the worlds before and behind the text(s).

Gadamer argues that temporal distance is the realization that the past and the present are firmly connected and, therefore, that the past is not something that has to be painfully regained in each present:

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted. Hence

²¹ S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, Collegeville 1999, 101.

temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naïve assumption of historicism, namely that we must set ourselves within the spirit of the age, and think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity²².

Temporal distance frees film from having to recover the historical Jesus. If film were a means of recovering this Jesus, it would be a distortion. Since it is an event of subjectivity, film, like all means of expression, can never represent its subject matter objectively. Gadamer holds that objectivity is not a suitable ideal because «there does not exist any one correct interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation»²³. Therefore, objective historical readings of the Jesus story through any medium are impossible. The varying depictions of Jesus in film demonstrate how the concerns of the filmmaker are rooted in the context within which the film emerges. All interpretation is dictated «by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history»²⁴. The filmmaker partakes in this process by revealing the historical situation in which the film itself emerges. This does not mean that every Jesus film is relative to its particular cultural and historical context; rather, it reminds us that the act of imaging is historically and culturally conditioned.

Film adds to the process of interpretation and, in doing so, extends meaning. For Gadamer, «all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with a still unfinished process and is itself part of this process»²⁵. Temporal distance permeates all understanding and reminds us that the pre-understandings we bring to any film are conditioned by our prior involvement in tradition. The task of finding meaning is grounded by history. Filmic interpretation is best understood as an unfinished event. The most effective manner of exploring the person of Jesus, therefore, bears in mind that the tradition of interpreting his story, through the aesthetic and the textual, is one grounded in a wider dynamic of interpretation. In this dynamic the proclaimed Jesus becomes accessible through the living process of tradition, which reminds us that the «Jesus-event, although intrinsically historical, cannot be reduced to the historical»²⁶. This enriches our viewing of film by allowing us to move beyond the search for historical accuracy. The image never captures the totality of the thing it represents. It makes what is absent present but it is not the thing itself. Temporal distance reminds us that historical reconstruction is

²² H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 264.

²³ D. WEBERMAN, «A New Defence of Gadamer's Hermeneutics», *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000) 45-65.

²⁴ D. WEBERMAN, «A New Defence» (cf. nt. 23), 45-65.

²⁵ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 88.

²⁶ S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Revelatory Text* (cf. nt. 21), 101.

itself an illusory proposition. In light of this, there is a further implication; namely, that if interpretation is grounded in the process of understanding, then it is part of a reception history.

III. FILM AS AN EXPRESSION OF EFFECTIVE HISTORY (*WIRKUNGSGESCHICHTE*)

One of Gadamer's central achievements in *Truth and Method* is his concept of effective history, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Manfred Oeming describes it as a call «for the recovery of an awareness of a text's particular history of influence»²⁷. This history, he continues, is «the melting of our contemporary horizons with the horizons of previous times»²⁸. Since there is no such thing as a historical object, the way we think of the historical must change. The alternative to this would be to persist in a search for something that does not exist. Jesus films are part of an ongoing process of reception within history and tradition. The varied interpretations of Jesus throughout both cinematic history and two millennia of representation and interpretation illustrate how «the narratives in which we are involved and which we have to understand [...] not only continue even as we try to understand them, but also they continue as a confluence and even conflict of different interpretations of different narratives»²⁹. Changing cultural, religious, and political contexts dictate the need for new readings of the Jesus story. Cinema is at the vanguard of this flux and demonstrates how the Gospel is re-appropriated in light of new cultural realities. Each interpretation of Jesus, therefore, happens in light of both the influence the story exerts and the various contexts in which interpretation happens. For Gadamer, history is a process of understanding that transforms understanding itself:

The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding. A proper hermeneutics would have to demonstrate the effectivity of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as «effective history»³⁰.

Further, the history of influence is not periphery to our engagement with an image or text, but a central and essential way of verbalizing that basic hermeneutical enterprise of finding meaning:

²⁷ M. OEMING, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, Aldershot 2006, 77; orig. German, *Biblische Hermeneutik: Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt 1998.

²⁸ M. OEMING, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics* (cf. nt. 27), 77.

²⁹ G. WARNKE, «Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics», in R.J. DOSTAL, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, New York 2002, 79-101.

³⁰ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 267.

In the sphere of historical understanding, too, we speak of horizons, especially when referring to the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in its own terms, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices but within its own historical horizon [...] If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditionary text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us³¹.

The Jesus film exists in a process of reception where the filmmaker interprets, understands, and re-configures images, narratives, speculations, and explorations surrounding the subject matter. For instance, the Jesus film constantly references other forms of pictorial art, from the icon to Da Vinci and beyond. Another, more subtle, aspect is the reception of the Gospel narratives themselves. Film may either harmonize the gospels or choose a single text. The great majority of Jesus films harmonize the four gospels. They demonstrate how our historical consciousness considers the Jesus story not as four separate stories but as an integrated one. This practice is nothing new and dates back to the oral tradition and Tatian's *Diatessaron* in the second century. The filmic practice of weaving the four gospels into one narrative, albeit with plenty of fictional insertions, demonstrates the authoritative character of the gospels in all interpretation, both textual and visual. Although Pasolini, for example, chooses the single text approach, he redacts Matthew in light of his own cultural, political, and religious context. In either case, the filmic narrative not only engages with the texts themselves but also the process of interpretation that accompanies them. This is not a dialogue between two distant partners but an implication and an immersion. Film does not converse with other media of interpretation as something distant, but rather as an integral part of understanding the Jesus story as «shaped by its passage through history from its initiating occurrence to the present»³².

Gadamer describes interpretation as a fusion of horizons. The task of the interpreter is not to dilute the obvious tension between the present of reading and the past of the text; instead, the tension must be brought out³³. Through this fusion, we become aware of the influence that the object of interpretation exerts. We can never leave our horizon. In our present we expand the continuity of tradition by adding new interpretations to the process:

The projecting of the historical horizon, then, is only a phase in the process of understanding, and does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In

³¹ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 302.

³² H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 159.

³³ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 273.

the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed³⁴.

Film is a fusion of horizons. Through viewing, film fuses us with the horizon of the filmmaker who interprets. This leads to our being fused with the horizon of what is interpreted.

A striking example of this dynamic is Dornford-May's treatment of the *Pietà* in *Son of Man*. Jesus is shot after being abducted by the authorities. His mother claims the body and takes her dead son home on the back of a pick-up truck. In an evocative scene, Mary holds the dead Jesus on her lap while the truck speeds along a motorway. As Lloyd Baugh puts it, «her stasis and the dynamic movement of the truck [...] enter into a powerful dynamic with other *Pietà* images, for example, Michelangelo's classical contemplative version or Mel Gibson's bizarre, accusatory version»³⁵. The influence of the image remains intact and its subject matter is no less evocative. The tension between the past of the image and the present of a different interpretation is brought to light. Perhaps the most integrating aspect of the image is its contemplative character. The speed of the motorway and the stillness of Mary and her son draw the viewer into the image. Michelangelo's classical *Pietà* image invites contemplation and participation through stillness and tranquillity. Dornford-May furthers this by forming a «dialectic», as Baugh calls it, between the speed of the motorway and the stasis of the figures³⁶. This demonstrates the influence which the image exerts as an interpretation in itself. Dornford-May's African re-telling of the story occurs against the backdrop of previous interpretations through many media. Despite film often deviating from previous texts and images, it continues to evoke them even while attempting alternative approaches. Thus, Michelangelo's *Pietà* is one of many «initiating occurrences», which pass through aesthetic history to the present and exceed the medium of representation itself.

IV. FILM AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION

For Gadamer, tradition is a living process of finding meaning through interpretation. Historical research, or enquiry, «is not only research, but the transmission of tradition»³⁷. There is no dichotomy between history and tradition; instead, the two share the same sphere. To think of one without the

³⁴ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 273.

³⁵ L. BAUGH, «The African Face» (cf. nt. 1), 338.

³⁶ L. BAUGH, «The African Face» (cf. nt. 1), 338.

³⁷ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 253.

other is to denigrate the meaning of both. Gadamer approaches the relationship between what is historical and traditional by emphasizing their unity. As he puts it, «the effect of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute a unity, the analysis of which would reveal only a texture of reciprocal relationships»³⁸. Gadamer sees tradition as a positive, liberating ground where we find meaning. As understanding subjects, we «always stand within tradition, and this is no objectifying process»; instead, it is «a recognition of ourselves which our later historical judgment would hardly see as a kind of knowledge, but as the simplest preservation of tradition»³⁹. Understanding is impossible without the pre-understandings we bring to the work being interpreted. Only then can it inform, shape, and change our understanding. Indeed, to think of understanding without pre-understanding is a distortion. Tradition, then, provides the unavoidable framework within which we receive the Jesus film. We can never transcend tradition, nor can we comprehend it in its totality. Our task, instead, is to recognize that we are immersed in it before, during, and after our watching of any particular work.

Jesus films, as Baugh reminds us, are «preceded by the dense heritage of nineteen centuries of visual art on the Jesus-theme»⁴⁰. While the Gospel story and the filmic art are radically different media, they are not incapable of dialogue⁴¹. The dense heritage of the Jesus theme may be an obstacle for both the filmmaker and the audience⁴². Yet tradition, though vast in its quantity of sources and interpretations, is not necessarily a stumbling block. Most spectators «come to any film about Jesus with a whole series of preconceived notions and feelings about him, based on their religious and intellectual upbringing»⁴³. Though «it is highly unlikely that any filmic image of Jesus will be in full harmony» with the faith-based image, or pre-understanding, of the viewer, this does not negate the possibility of film being an interpretive, and indeed efficacious, medium⁴⁴. If the Jesus film is to be understood as a viable form of representation and interpretation, it is essential that we affirm the dynamics of tradition within the reception of film. Tradition tells us that

³⁸ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 251.

³⁹ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 250.

⁴⁰ L. BAUGH, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*, Kansas City 1997, 5.

⁴¹ L. Baugh («Representing Jesus in Film: Challenges, Limitations, Possibilities», *The Bible Today* 46 [2008] 5-11) writes that «The Gospel is the medium of the written word — clear, elemental, focused, the word of faith, born and transmitted through the oral tradition». In contrast, film is «the *genre* of the audio-visual word, mediated by ever-more-complex digital electronic technologies [...] a word communicated in the context of socio-cultural activities and entertainment».

⁴² L. BAUGH, *Imaging the Divine* (cf. nt. 40), 5.

⁴³ L. BAUGH, *Imaging the Divine* (cf. nt. 40), 5.

⁴⁴ L. BAUGH, *Imaging the Divine* (cf. nt. 40), 5.

pre-understanding is an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the viewer and filmmaker alike. In acknowledging the necessary dimension of subjectivity, we reject the notion that a universalized image of Jesus is possible in any medium. By taking into account the element of pre-understanding as the subjective moment (that is unavoidable), we admit to this impossibility. We view, then, in order to submit to the whole range of possibilities that we cannot foresee, transcend, or control. Images of sacred narratives necessarily interpret as well as portray and do so «all the more when [they are] consciously used to present persons or events in a context different from that of the scriptural narratives»⁴⁵. Seen in this light, Jesus films are self-encounters where our understanding of Jesus is potentially changed. All art, as Gadamer writes, is «an intimacy where we are touched, in enigmatic fashion», by a «shattering and a demolition of the familiar» which states to us who we are as subjects⁴⁶. Once our understanding changes, our world changes. As we attempt to understand the story of Jesus, we are equally working out our own presuppositions regarding the story. If film exceeds our expectations and challenges us with its plurality of interpretations, then it becomes a medium of identity, meaning, and transformation.

V. FILM AND THE REHABILITATION OF TRADITION:
PASOLINI'S *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MATTHEW*

All Jesus films, to varying extents, illustrate Gadamer's hermeneutical appreciation of aesthetics, history, and tradition. Perhaps the most important aspect of Pasolini's is that it is a discourse on tradition itself. Through a narrative of analogy, Pasolini highlights both the seriousness of film as an art and its place within a wider interpretive dynamic. As a realist director, Pasolini dispenses with much of the excessive and spectacular elements of the American Jesus film. Realist filmmakers consider cinema as a window open on the world and a mirror of life⁴⁷. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* deviates, quite strikingly, from the typical style of the American Jesus film that dominated the cinematic landscape during the mid-twentieth century. In many respects, it initiates the religious film's shift from epic historical reconstruction to a more reflective style that situates the story in a particular context. While the American Jesus film attempted a grand scale recon-

⁴⁵ R. VILADESAU, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*, New York 1999, 168.

⁴⁶ H.G. GADAMER, «Aesthetics and Hermeneutics» (cf. nt. 8), 95-104.

⁴⁷ F. CASETTI, *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995*, Austin 1999, 21; orig. Italian *Teorie del cinema, 1945-1990*, Milan 1993.

struction of history, and the objective was to situate the viewer in the time of Jesus, Pasolini sought to bring the story into the world in which it is being read and interpreted. As Viano puts it, Pasolini strives «less to evoke a specific historical moment (Christ's times) than to *provoke* the social constellation in which the text was to be consumed»⁴⁸. Pasolini affirms this when he outlines his rationale for filming a life of Jesus:

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 them⁴⁹.

Pasolini's film style is «re-consecration». He wishes not to deconstruct the story of Jesus to the point of oblivion (an outcome that many had expected of his work), but rather, in his own words, to «tell the story of Jesus plus two thousand years of telling stories about Jesus»⁵⁰. An affirmed unbeliever, Pasolini does not see the Christian tradition as a threat or a constriction upon his artistic freedom, politics, or lack of faith. Instead, he attempts to make sense of the Christian tradition for his contemporary audience. Through a narrative of analogy, he rejects the historicist tendencies of the epic Jesus film. He seeks to re-claim Jesus but does not dismiss the tradition of telling his story. It is not an attempt to divorce the person of Jesus from the Christian tradition; rather, he re-consecrates Jesus through a re-activation of the story in the context of Italian Marxism in the twentieth century.

Pasolini's work is a concoction of images, stylizations, and anachronisms. His Jesus, played by a nineteen year old Enrique Irazoqui, is a young European intellectual driven by outrage at a corrupt social order. The temple is a medieval ruin; the Jewish authorities wear what appear to be mitres and speak with Italian mafiosi accents; and none of the actors wears a beard. The musical choice is equally eclectic. Bach is mingled with Odetta's «Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child», and the Congolese *Missa Luba* heralds the resurrection. The aim of the work is not to impersonate or reconstruct an historical moment, but rather to remind viewers of the many differing ways through which the same story is received. Pasolini's initial idea was to shoot his film in Israel and Palestine. However, after spending some time there, he changed his mind and instead turned his focus to southern Italy. It was through this choice of location that he developed a narrative of analogy. As Noa Steimatsky describes it:

⁴⁸ M.S. VIANO, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice*, Berkeley 1993, 134.

⁴⁹ O. STACK – P.P. PASOLINI, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack*, London 1969, 82-83.

⁵⁰ O. STACK – P.P. PASOLINI, *Pasolini on Pasolini* (cf. nt. 49), 82-83.

This model of Biblical contamination is adopted by Pasolini, informing his work of adaptation on all levels. His film production of the Gospel will not be historically faithful, but employ instead heterogeneous stylistics — a deliberate mingling of Christian and other cultural references, of high and low voices, of everyday detail and a visionary outlook — that echoes the thematic contamination at the heart of the text. Adaptation involves, then, not re-construction but a new cinematic amalgam of materials and connotations synecdochally tied to the Holy Land and analogous to its biblical meaning⁵¹.

By mingling the present of the interpretation with the past of the subject matter, Pasolini, through visual means, discusses the manner through which Matthew is received. By reconstructing history, the filmmaker «forgets the present and aims at an absolute past»⁵². Analogy «translates the past into the present and suggests a series of relations of resemblance and difference for the audience to recognize and judge»⁵³. Pasolini's imagining of Matthew's story evokes the aesthetic, literary, and musical heritage of Christianity. Pasolini's film style is an indicator of the place of film within a wider dynamic of interpretation. The continuity of custom and tradition is an assurance of the work's living character. That is to say that the search for meaning in the film, like all interpretation, is an infinite process. Pasolini shuns historical reconstruction. We encounter his Jesus in the present of the work itself and the evocation of two millennia of tradition. His Jesus story is a rehabilitation of Matthew itself as a living text extended, though never superseded, by filmic interpretation.

VI. ILLUMINATION THROUGH ALLEGORY: *JESUS OF MONTREAL*

In contrast to Pasolini, Denys Arcand uses the motif of the Christ-figure to re-present the Gospel through an allegorical story which mirrors the viewer's own role in the process of interpretation⁵⁴. He achieves this not by concentrating on one particular gospel or even the New Testament as whole, but rather through a sustained criticism of institutional Christianity. The passion play is an intriguing narrative device which grounds the film and recalls one of

⁵¹ N. STEIMATSKY, «Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*: Towards a Theology of Film», *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11 (1998) 239-258.

⁵² M.S. VIANO, *A Certain Realism* (cf. nt. 48), 136.

⁵³ M.S. VIANO, *A Certain Realism* (cf. nt. 48), 136-137.

⁵⁴ L. Baugh (*Imaging the Divine* [cf. nt. 40], 112) describes the Christ-figure as «a foil to Jesus Christ, and between the two figures there is a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, the reference to Christ clarifies the situation of the Christ-figure and adds depth to the significance of his actions; on the other hand, the person and situation of the Christ-figure can provide new understanding of who and how Christ is: Jesus himself is revealed anew in the Christ-figure».

the earliest Christian devotional practices, the Way of the Cross. By placing the play within a wider allegorical tale, Arcand mirrors our own engagement with the Jesus story and mediates a new perspective by re-presenting the entire Gospel story through the collection of parallels and relations between Daniel and Jesus, which eventually collapse into one Christ-figure. Even more so than Pasolini, Arcand separates Jesus from the mediation of the Church. He dislocates the story from the first century world and re-activates it in 1980s Montreal through a re-configuring of both the theatrecal and the ecclesial. In *Jesus of Montreal* the theatre and aesthetic integrity are implicit mediators of the divine. This allegorical replacement works on two levels which dissolve into each other. While the interior play presents a historicized Jesus, the story outside the passion play collapses the perceived gap between history and tradition and demonstrates the symbolic depth of the Gospel story — how it speaks to people in their own situation. Arcand re-presents Jesus through a re-appropriation of the Gospel story. Re-presentation exceeds representation because it re-configures both the subject matter and the medium of representation itself. It is for this reason that we can describe it as illumination. Illumination is an act of «raising up», where the subject matter is given a new relevance that was unseen or, perhaps, hidden from view. In the work of Arcand, this process takes the form of a critical exploration.

Arcand expresses a serious, though highly critical, attachment to his own cultural and religious traditions. Quebec and its French Catholic identity form his historical horizon. Arcand's Jesus story is one of how tradition operates within and through culture. His Jesus is a prophetic figure. In the passion play, he inhabits a non-traditional and radically historicized dramatic sphere⁵⁵. The supposedly non-traditional aspect (Gadamer reminds us that such a thing is only ever a matter of perception) is known through its being juxtaposed with the traditional context of Québécois culture and, indeed, that culture's departure from one of its traditional sources of authority — the Catholic Church. Since Arcand sees artistic integrity as a prime mediator of meaning, his interior passion play is the central moment of encounter between the divine and the human. The Church and the theatre are seen as corrupt or, at best, forgetful of their values. Fr. Leclerc, the priest at the shrine who hires Daniel and the actors to write a new play, fears the reaction of his superiors to the radically historicized drama and orders its postponement. Early in the film Daniel meets with a theologian from the local faculty who speaks of new discoveries in Palestine and Israel, stating that they are now beginning to know «who he [Jesus] really was». He leaves the meeting telling Daniel that actors can do as they wish without consequence. The theatrical scene in Montreal is heavily commercialized and filled with passing phenomena. An actor at the

⁵⁵ R. WALSH, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film*, Harrisburg 2003, 46.

beginning of the film gives a moving performance in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Immediately, producers seek him out to become part of an advertising campaign for a new aftershave product. Daniel is as a life-giving critic of tradition in a culture where tradition has become corrupted and devoid of life⁵⁶. While the Church is seemingly lost, Jesus, now separated from the Church, is present through Daniel. Arcand's hope of life-giving power lies in the purity of art⁵⁷. In the fictional «post-Christian» world of Montreal, the artistic pursuit of truth re-habilitates and re-establishes tradition. Otherwise, an apocalyptic future waits, as Montreal's institutions remain corrupt and lifeless.

The intradiegetic passion play holds up a mirror to us, as viewers, through the varied reactions to Jesus. These range from the ambivalence of the security guard, irritated by people wanting to see the ending, to the deep faith of the Haitian domestic who intervenes in the play to profess her love for Jesus, and perhaps Daniel, and to warn him of his impending death within the play, and perhaps outside it also. Eventually, the boundary between Daniel and Jesus becomes impossible to define. By the film's conclusion, it is clear that the play has failed to contain Jesus and the two levels of the story have dissolved into each other⁵⁸. Daniel/Jesus «redeems» Montreal through his death and metaphorical resurrection. However, Jesus does not become a triumphant saviour. He subsides and life in Montreal continues without him. Despite this, Daniel lives on, along with the allegory, through the donation of his organs. In of the final scenes, the actors who have followed Daniel set up a theatre company in his memory — a clear allusion to the Church. Like the first Christians, some members of the community experience failure. Arcand illustrates this through the presence of the cynical lawyer, Richard Cardinale, who first «tempts» Daniel with fame and later becomes an odious presence at the foundation of the theatre company. The location of the story intensifies the effect. The «ordinary» world of Montreal, which lacks the exotic «otherness» of the biblical epic and Pasolini's analogized world, is a locale where the divine and creation meet. Arcand shows that all art, like all theology, is located within a particular cultural setting⁵⁹. Through his fictional exploration of 1980s Montreal, Arcand examines this process of reception and appropriation. While Pasolini analogizes the past, Arcand brings it into the present explicitly. The Gospel is universally significant only «when related to our particular

⁵⁶ R. WALSH, *Reading the Gospels* (cf. nt. 55), 48.

⁵⁷ R. WALSH, *Reading the Gospels* (cf. nt. 55), 49.

⁵⁸ R. Zwick («Entmythologisierung versus *Imitatio Jesu*: Thematisierungen des Evangeliums in Denys Arcands Film *Jesus von Montreal*», *Communicatio Socialis* 23 [1990] 17-42) alludes to this when he describes Daniel as being in an almost meditative state as he hangs on the cross alone after his fellow actors and the audience have moved to the next station.

⁵⁹ J.W. DE GRUCHY, «Theology and the Visual Arts», in D.F. FORD – R. MUERS, ed., *The Modern Theologians: Christian Theology Since 1918*, Oxford 1989, 1997, 2005³, 706-718.

context and culture»⁶⁰. Arcand's method attempts to relate his own cultural context to the Jesus of Christian tradition. Further, he re-configures the story within his particular setting. Despite the somewhat hopeless outcome of his story (Daniel's metaphorical resurrection and the lawyer's presence at the end leave many questions unanswered), Arcand vindicates Jesus through a focus on his transformation of the lives of those who encounter him through their participation in the play.

VII. EXTENDING THE «CLAIM» OF TRADITION THROUGH FILM

Even in cases where a dualistic opposition is assumed between film and tradition, the visual and dramatic understanding that emerges is always, and essentially, related to the tradition of interpretation. For instance, while Dornford-May radically situates the Gospel story in a contemporary African context, he integrates the past and the present, thus highlighting the tension between the two. This reminds us that the Jesus story incorporates us through its retelling in and through a variety of contexts and, indeed, media. Gadamer contends that tradition exerts a «claim» over us. An example of this is a «Lutheran sermon, or Catholic mass»⁶¹. Both incorporate participants into the narrative that they proclaim. The context of the interpreter is different in every situation. This means that «the “claim” made by tradition is never static and fixed. The different horizons that fuse in every act of historical understanding mean that the “claim” changes according to the present act of retrieving it»⁶². For the filmmaker, the claim is made every time one engages with the Christian tradition. In turn, film is a place where the claim is made on the viewer. When we watch any Jesus film, we encounter a tradition of writing, reading, re-reading, imaging, and viewing which we enrich by participation⁶³. Thus, as Gadamer puts it, the «whole life of tradition consists exactly in this enrichment so that life is our culture and our past: the whole inner store of our lives is always extending by participating»⁶⁴.

The scriptures of the Christian tradition make a claim on the interpreter. In a similar manner to how the work of art (and film) exists through viewing, the scriptures unfold their meaning through reading⁶⁵. Further, scripture is a form

⁶⁰ J.W. DE GRUCHY, «Theology and the» (cf. nt. 59), 706-718.

⁶¹ H.G. GADAMER (*Truth and Method* [cf. nt. 6], 112.) explains that «the application to Lutheran theology is that the claim of the call to faith persists since the proclamation of the Gospel and is made afresh in preaching. The words of the sermon perform this total mediation which otherwise is the work of the religious rite, say, of the mass».

⁶² I. SHEIBLER, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas*, Maryland 2000, 43.

⁶³ H.G. GADAMER, «The Hermeneutics of Suspicion», in G. SHAPIRO – A. SICA, ed., *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, Amherst 1984, 54-65.

⁶⁴ H.G. GADAMER, «The Hermeneutics of Suspicion» (cf. nt. 63), 54-65.

⁶⁵ S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Revelatory Text* (cf. nt. 21), 42.

of symbolic expression that «participates directly in the presence and power of that which it symbolizes»⁶⁶. The revealing power of scripture exists only through the encounter between the reader and the text⁶⁷. Through the interpretive dimension of film, the claim of the tradition implicates both filmmaker and viewer. There are different and contrasting interpretations of Jesus in film. This demonstrates that the claim is different for each interpreter. As Gadamer states, «the concept of a claim also contains the idea that it is not itself a fixed demand, the fulfilment of which is agreed by both sides, but is, rather, the ground for such»⁶⁸. There is no fixed demand for a certain interpretation of Jesus; rather, the demand emerges in the interpretation itself. The claim, then, is grounding for the interpretation.

Since film is an interpretive medium and interpretation as an instance where a claim is made, then it becomes clear that film extends the claim to us who view. Because «a claim continues, it can be affirmed at any time»⁶⁹. Not only can the claim be affirmed at any time, it can be affirmed through any medium. The claim changes in every act of interpretation. In the audio-visual form of film, it operates through a variety of methods, each dependent on the filmmaker's own interpretation of the sources and the viewer's reception of that interpretation. Despite this, the claim remains because tradition is never standing-still but always expanding. As we acknowledge film's claim on us, so we acknowledge our relation to the whole of tradition through its extension.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The hermeneutics of Gadamer offer a framework and a vocabulary which demonstrate how film operates within history and tradition. Perhaps the most important contribution of Gadamer's hermeneutics to a reflection on film is his focus on the mediation of the work. We cannot impose a prescribed method on interpretation; instead, our way of understanding any work emerges from our experience of the work itself. The examples of Pasolini and Arcand represent important milestones in the Jesus film genre. Moreover, both directors illustrate explicitly how film is part of an ongoing process of interpretation within tradition. The filmic text, through its playfulness, forms a supportive ground on which we realize our relation to the past of the Jesus the story and the present of its interpretation. The Jesus story is an «initiating

⁶⁶ S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Revelatory Text* (cf. nt. 21), 35-36.

⁶⁷ As S. Schneiders (*The Revelatory Text* [cf. nt. 21], 42) puts it, «It [scripture] must "come into being" as meaning by actualization that occurs through reading, that is, through interpretation».

⁶⁸ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 112.

⁶⁹ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 112.

occurrence», to use Gadamer's term, which passes through both textual and aesthetic history. Jesus films re-interpret the process of interpretation itself. They allow us to discover new affinities between our world and the world of the story and illustrate definitively how film is a central moment in the dialogue between Christianity and the visual arts. This is especially evident in the numerous ways in which Dornford-May, for example, re-interprets famous scenes from Christian art in a distinctly African manner. Film is a dialogue, or conversation, that reminds us of our constant involvement in tradition. In this continuity, our horizon becomes fused with both the world of the Gospel texts (i.e., the New Testament and the tradition of interpretation that emerges from it) and the world of the film. In the fusion of horizons, we are implicated by what we see and recognize. Filmmakers interpret the sources of tradition and offer their perspectives to viewers who, through dialogue, participate in the process of finding meaning. Film may alter the viewer's understanding of the subject matter and become a medium of transformation. In a metaphorical sense, it is an act of visual translation. Visual translation is not confined to something that exists beforehand, as an object, but rather as something living which allows us to re-discover what is represented and, in turn, ourselves. Filmic interpretation affirms how interpretation is a process of extension rather than closure. Each instance of the subject matter is an opportunity of find new meaning. Film does not re-create the gospels; or the world that the text first emerged in; or the earliest traditions of imaging Jesus. Instead, it is joined to them in a process of finding meaning. Gadamer expresses it best when he writes:

What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships. Normative concepts such as the author's meaning or the original reader's understanding represent in fact only an empty space that is filled from time to time in understanding⁷⁰.

In film, then, the New Testament enters into a new relationship which expands the wider mediation of tradition.

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⁷⁰ H.G. GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (cf. nt. 6), 357.

ABSTRACT

Through a dialogue between the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and selected Jesus films this article explores the place of film within tradition as a mode of representation and interpretation. After discussing how film illustrates Gadamer's concepts of «play» and mediation (*Vermittlung*), the issue of filmic interpretation and temporal distance is explored in light of how filmmakers often seek to construct historically accurate portraits of Jesus. The author then deals with film as an expression of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). Gadamer invites us to see tradition as a liberating process of finding meaning through interpretation. This article reflects, in particular, on how Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* form critical, inter-textual discourses on tradition. It concludes by discussing how film mediates the «claim» of tradition, thus emphasizing its role as a possible medium of transformation and meaning.

Keywords: Theology and Film, Jesus in Film, Biblical Interpretation, Theological Hermeneutics, Philosophical Hermeneutics, Theological Aesthetics, Tradition.

RIASSUNTO

Attraverso il dialogo tra l'ermeneutica filosofica di Gadamer e alcuni selezionati films su Gesù, questo articolo esplora quale sia la posizione del «film» in riferimento alla tradizione, quale modalità di rappresentazione e interpretazione. Dopo aver discusso come il film illustri i concetti di «gioco» e mediazione (*Vermittlung*) di Gadamer, sono studiate le questioni dell'interpretazione filmica e della distanza temporale alla luce di come i registi spesso cerchino di costruire ritratti di Gesù storicamente accurati. L'autore si occupa poi di come la pellicola sia espressione della storia reale (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). Gadamer ci invita a leggere la tradizione come un processo liberatorio mediante il quale trovare il significato attraverso l'interpretazione. In questo articolo si riflette, in particolare, su come il film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* di Pier Paolo Pasolini e il film *Gesù di Montreal* di Denys Arcand realizzino un discorso critico e inter-testuale sulla tradizione. Nella conclusione dell'articolo si esamina come il film sia in grado di mediare la «pretesa» della tradizione, sottolineandone il ruolo come possibile mezzo di trasformazione e significato.

Keywords: Teologia e cinema, Gesù nei film, interpretazione biblica, ermeneutica teologica, ermeneutica filosofica, tradizione.