

Published at the Pontifical University, Maynooth

# MAYNOOTH THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

- Paul Clogher      Re-consecrating Jesus: Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* and the Hermeneutics of Tradition
- Katie Dunne      Towards an Understanding of Narrative as a Moral Category in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas
- Donna Mae Linton      The Pastoral Practice of *Lectio Divina* with Eastern Orthodox Icons
- Pádraig Smith      The Trinity and Business: How Trinitarian Theology can Contribute to Contemporary Business Practice
- Andrew McGrath      The Development of Just War Thinking in the Irish Context
- Donal Joseph Moran      Moral Evil, Free Will, and the Existence of God: An Enquiry into the Free Will Defence of Alvin Plantinga
- Colette M. Maloney      Walking the Line: A Catholic Politician in a Modern Democracy
- Amanda Howe      The Resurrection Appearances According to Alfred Loisy and Ernest Renan
- Séan Corkery      The On-going Relevance of *Donum Veritatis*
- Bill O'Shaughnessy      Journeying Together on the Road to Emmaus: The International Eucharistic Congress 2012

---

**RE-CONSECRATING JESUS: PASOLINI'S *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MATTHEW* AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION**

Paul Clogher

INTRODUCTION

A key task in theological reflection on film is to emphasize its place within tradition – that it is a viable medium of representing and interpreting the Christian story. Since the birth of cinema, directors have given 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 Christianity's dialogue with the visual arts. It is not a commentary or peripheral accompaniment to the Gospel story but a mode of interpretation and representation in itself. This article explores the role of tradition in the Jesus film through Pier Paolo Pasolini's "re-consecration" technique in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. His interpretation of Matthew, influenced by both Marxist theory and centuries of Christian art, situated the story of Jesus in the austere, poverty stricken villages of southern Italy in the 1960s. Despite his apparent unease with Italian Catholic culture, he succeeded in crafting a film that was not only acceptable to Christian viewers, but a significant development in the Jesus film genre. Using the hermeneutics of Gadamer, this article offers a theological reflection on the role of tradition in the Jesus film through the lens of Pasolini's work.

PASOLINI'S FILM STYLE: RE-CONSECRATION AND ANALOGY

By the mid-twentieth century a conventional style had emerged within American cinema for depicting Jesus and other religious figures. With few exceptions, Jesus was an Anglo-Saxon, passive figure who was distinctly asexual, unambiguously otherworldly, and divine. Examples of this are to be found in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), where Jesus' face was hidden, and in George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), which pictured Jesus as a figure from Byzantine art whose entire movement, posture, and speech identified him as divine rather than human. An exception to this portrayal is Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), which presented a youthful Christ but retained both the distance and Anglo-Saxon appearance of previous films. The American religious film followed the stylistic conventions of formalism, where the filmmaker was seen to construct an interior universe and mould that universe into a particular shape and style.<sup>1</sup> A result of this was the biblical epic, where the divine was a clear, unambiguous, and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ambrose Eichenberger, "Approaches to Film Criticism," in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 3-16, here 4-5.

explicit presence within the narrative.<sup>2</sup> The epic, then, was spectacular and focused on heavenly visitations and divine interventions. There was a significant lack of realism in the epic. A prominent example of this is the depiction of Mary who remained as young at the foot of the cross as she was beside the manger. Pasolini, by contrast, placed his elderly mother at the foot of the cross as the aged virgin.

*The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* was released in 1964.<sup>3</sup> 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 life.<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* is visually different from the typical religious film of the 1960s. It is shot in black and white, populated by amateur actors, and filmed on location in some of the poorest regions of southern Italy. Further, it is historically anachronistic and tells us as much about the world of 1960s Italy as that of first century Palestine. While the American Jesus film attempted a grand scale reconstruction 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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 them.<sup>6</sup>

Pasolini’s style, then, 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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. His work, then, is a discussion on tradition. Through a narrative of analogy, he rejects both the historicist tendencies of the epic Jesus film and the excesses of Italian Catholic culture in the mid-twentieth century. 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

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, dir. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Tartan, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995*, trans. Francesca Chiostrì, Elizabeth Gard Bartolini-Salimbeni with Thomas Kelso (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Maurizio Sanzio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini’s Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Oswald Stack and Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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.<sup>8</sup> This sense of dislocation is tempered somewhat by his resemblance to the Jesus of El Greco's paintings, thus evoking both a contemporary European context and centuries of artistic depictions from the Renaissance to Expressionist eras. The temple is a medieval ruin; the Jewish authorities wear what appear to be mitres and speak with Mafiosi Italian 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. Noa Steimatsky sees this as a "model of Biblical contamination."<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> Analogy, contrastingly, "translates the past into the present and suggests a series of relations of resemblance and difference for the audience to recognize and judge."<sup>11</sup> Pasolini's imagining of Matthew's story evokes two millennia of tradition. As viewers, we are reminded of 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.

#### GADAMER AND TRADITION

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, tradition is a living process of finding meaning through interpretation. Our understanding and knowledge of a particular thing always occurs against the backdrop of our prior involvement (i.e. that we have a certain pre-understanding of that which we understand and are thus always implicated by it). Jesus

<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>9</sup> "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 heterogenous 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 synechdochally tied to the Holy Land and analogous to its biblical meaning" (see Noa Steimatsky, "Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*: Towards a Theology of Film," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11 [1998]: 239-58, here 242).

<sup>10</sup> Viano, *A Certain Realism*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-37. See also Figure 2.

films make us strikingly aware of our own pre-understanding. Lloyd Baugh reminds us that they are “preceded by the dense heritage of nineteen centuries of visual art on the Jesus-theme.”<sup>12</sup> Since the past is not a distant object in need of retrieval, we can describe it as “happening.” Both the filmmaker and the viewer are situated in the process of interpretation which maintains the continuity of tradition. As Gadamer puts it in his seminal work *Truth and Method*, historical research, or enquiry, “is not only research, but the transmission of tradition.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, tradition is mediated through interpretation, enquiry, and research. There is no dichotomy between history and tradition; instead, the two share the same sphere. To think of one without the other is to denigrate the meaning of both:

At the beginning of all historical hermeneutics, then, the abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and knowledge, must be discarded. 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.<sup>14</sup>

Gadamer maintains that tradition is 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.”<sup>15</sup> Tradition is a medium of identity within which all human life and culture is immersed. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, with its emphasis on the interpretation of the text in the present, is a striking example of how theological interpretation on film cannot ignore its rightful place within the Christian tradition.

#### EXTENDING THE “CLAIM” OF TRADITION THROUGH FILM

Gadamer contends that tradition exerts a “claim” over us. An example of this is a Lutheran sermon or a Catholic mass.<sup>16</sup> Both incorporate participants into the proclaimed narrative. The interpreter mediates the claim of the tradition through a process of dialogue. Gadamer explains that “I must allow the validity of the claim made by tradition, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me.”<sup>17</sup> Further, “the ‘claim’ made by tradition is never static and fixed. The different horizons that fuse in every act of historical understanding

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film* (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972). Translated by Garrett Barden and John Cumming as *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 253. All quotations are taken from this English translation.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>16</sup> “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” (*Ibid.*, 112).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

mean that the 'claim' changes according to the present act of retrieving it."<sup>18</sup> For the filmmaker, the claim is made every time one engages with the Christian tradition. In turn, film is a medium where the claim is made on the viewer. Pasolini acknowledges this in an implicit way when he describes his work as a "re-consecration." When we watch any Jesus film, we encounter a tradition of writing, reading, re-reading, imaging, and viewing which we enrich by participation.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Gadamer has put 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."<sup>20</sup>

Through the interpretive dimension of film, the claim of the tradition implicates both the 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 reminds us, "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."<sup>21</sup> 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 is an instance where a claim is made, it becomes clear that film extends the claim to us who view. Because "a claim continues, it can be affirmed at any time."<sup>22</sup> 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. Therefore, in the audio-visual form of film, the claim 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.

## CONCLUSION

Pasolini transports Matthew's story into the present of its telling. Through a narrative of analogy he re-consecrates Jesus and the tradition of telling His story. This leads to anagogy – the film's symbolic participation in the meaning of Matthew's story. His style shows us that film is a medium of interpretation and representation, a place where we find meaning. In that act of storytelling, we meet Matthew's Jesus anew, not as a figure from a distant, objectified past but in the present of Pasolini's interpretation. The text is transmitted through history and its interpretation is historically conditioned. The meaning

<sup>18</sup> Ingrid Sheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 43.

<sup>19</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, eds. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1984), 54-65, here 64.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

emerges when we submit to our own role as participants, viewers, and interpreters. Since the meaning emerges through our participation, the claim extends and we participate in the “happening” of tradition. Pasolini extends Matthew and demonstrates that the claim of tradition is operative through the medium of film. Noa Steimatsky, in her important article on Pasolini’s work, gives eloquent form to this happening. Her concluding remarks on his technique serve as a fitting end to this present reflection:

*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* claims a divine presence concretely figured in the physiognomies of its actors and locations: it transpires on film; it is not abstracted as text; it denies the arbitrariness of signs. The word is incarnated in flesh; light is animated in the “things of the world.” According to such a theology, analogy as working principle is complemented by anagogy, the work’s participation in divine meaning, where what has been told in darkness is screened in light.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Steimatsky, “Pasolini on *Terra Sancta*,” 254.

APPENDIX



Figure 1. Pasolini's Jesus (left) – portrayed by Enrique Irazoqui – in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* and Nicholas Ray's Jesus (right) – portrayed by Jeffrey Hunter – in *King of Kings*.



Figure 2. Relations of resemblance: "He has given his angels orders about you, and they will carry you in their arms in case you trip over a stone." Pasolini's Jesus and Satan stand on the parapet of the "Temple."