

# The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Early Cinema: A Complicated Relationship

## ABSTRACT

When, at the beginning of the 20th century, the influential German theologian Albert Schweitzer published a historiographical account of the “historical Jesus”, a number of silent films devoted to the life and death of Christ had already appeared in Europe and the United States. This article analyses the rise of early silent films about Christ against the backdrop of the debate intensified by growing interest in the “historical Jesus”, presenting some of the similarities and divergences that representations of the life of Jesus produced in different media as mass culture became increasingly relevant.

## KEYWORDS

Historical Jesus, David Friedrich Strauss, Ernest Renan, Jewish Jesus, Passion Play, Silent Films

## BIOGRAPHY

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Historical approaches aimed at understanding the historical Jesus within his religious context and the subsequent development of Christianity can be found in different periods, starting with Christian historiographers themselves. This arti-

cle focuses, however, on the debate which was enhanced by changes in political systems during and after the long 19th century and on the parallel reorganization of higher education, which produced a critical reassessment of the production of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the historical investigation of the life of Jesus found great public resonance in the long 19th century. Numerous publications addressed the historical character of Jesus, often intersecting the political turmoil and the cultural changes that contributed to the creation of a modern society.

As a reflection upon the historiography of religion, this article aims to deepen our insight into the problematic relationship between the historiography of religion and modernity, focusing on two main lines of investigation. The first approach refers to the role played by the emerging new media in the configuration and perception of religion. The second line of inquiry aims to link the more traditional field of scholarship with public history, for, as I indicated elsewhere, religious scholarship can be successfully analysed against the backdrop of its impact on society. Elsewhere I have used the notions of “performance” and “public use of scholarship” to better comprehend the overall impact of discourses focused on the religious past.<sup>2</sup> This article develops this line of inquiry, concentrating on a scholarly issue that was, and still is, at the core of Western culture – the historical representation of Jesus.

From the beginning Christians lacked immediate access to the physical image of Jesus, with neither the canonical nor the apocryphal Gospels providing detailed descriptions of Jesus. Christian traditions therefore produced a number of iconographies of Christ, some of which became highly iconic, such as the one allegedly impressed on the Veil of Veronica.<sup>3</sup> While Christianity was overwhelmed with images of Jesus, which varied across time, the historical figure was difficult to frame within his immediate religious and cultural context. Two paradoxes lie at the heart of biographies of Jesus: his human existence set against his commemoration as a divine figure, and his being Jewish. His deeds and words, his life and death, his self-understanding and ultimately his resurrection had to be historically grounded for the faith of many Christians. Interfaith conflict (with Jews, Pagans and Islam) and intra-Christian strife challenged the truth of claims about the life of Jesus in late antiquity and reappeared in subsequent centuries. The theological strife generated by the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Christ has deeply characterized the history of Christianity. As Italian scholar Baldassarre Labanca noted at the beginning of the 20th century, the search for the human and divine aspects in the life of Jesus has appeared constantly across literary genres and narratives.<sup>4</sup>

1 Purvis 2016; Kippenberg 2002.

2 Facchini 2016, 2018b.

3 Taylor 2018.

4 Labanca 1903, 9.

The search for the human Jesus was a consequence of social, cultural and political conditions found above all within the cultural context of Western Christianity.<sup>5</sup> The human Jesus appeared to many scholars and theologians to be more historically accurate, with the relationship between the human Jesus and the historical Jesus remaining troubled by the biased character of the literary sources.

In this contribution I reflect upon the interaction of media and the production of historical representations of Jesus, keeping in mind that unlike the early modern period, the long 19th century was characterized by a public disclosure of themes previously deemed dangerous. As indicated by articles in this collection, discussion of the historicity of Jesus often carried a polemical overtone, particularly as set against the backdrop of the numerous religious confrontations that characterized the cultural world of the post-Reformation period. Historicity lived in the interstices, circulated through clandestine networks of readers and buyers of printed books and manuscripts, or lay hidden in details that only the trained eye could detect.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the long 19th century took pleasure in exposing the historical Jesus, even if the topic remained dangerous, a minefield that could destroy the careers of those who dared to approach it. In some instances, however, it could bring everlasting fame, depending on the political and social configuration of the moment, as we shall see.

The long 19th century saw the rise and institutionalization of history as a professional practice, a process closely tied to nation building. Alongside the increasing relevance of historiography, European higher education bolstered a scholarly project on the scientific study of religions. Interest in the “historical Jesus” and the study of Christianity as a discipline were thus both seen as relevant and gained a shared scholarly prestige. The professionalization of history and the study of religions has parallels in technological achievements in the field of visual media, such as photography and cinema. The interaction of these realms of modern culture has yet not been fully explored. Within representations of religion and of the historical past, the trajectories taken by the “historical Jesus” and by the “cinematic Jesus” intersected at a certain point, as a product of modernity and the incipient rise of mass culture.

## INTRODUCING THE “HISTORICAL JESUS”

At the beginning of the 20th century the influential Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer published a significant contribution to the historiography of the

5 Pesce 2011.

6 The literature on these themes is growing: see, for example, the articles in this issue by Barbu and Benfatto, and Pesce 2011. Sacred historiography was also effective, as the article by von Wyss-Giacosa shows.

historical Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Schweitzer claimed that the German Deist scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) was the founder of a scholarly tradition focused on investigation of the historical background of Jesus’ life as a means to disentangle the real message of his religious mission from the theological interpretation of later generations of Christians. “Before Reimarus”, Schweitzer claimed, “no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> Schweitzer’s historiographical assessment did much to establish a field of research that he thoroughly described in his text: starting with 18th-century Reimarus and navigating through the whole of the 19th century, Schweitzer analysed in details the debate that the research on the historical Jesus had kindled among scholars and in the wider public. Among the authors who had helped shape this field of research, he listed Reimarus and rationalists and then Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Ernest Renan, and a few other liberal authors who had examined the question of the eschatological Jesus proposed by Johannes Weiss in 1892<sup>9</sup>; he added a chapter on biblical scholars singled out for their knowledge of Jewish sources. While Schweitzer paid tribute to innumerable scholars, he dealt extensively with German writings, the context in which he believed the debate about the historical Jesus was carried out. Although his interpretation did not go unchallenged,<sup>10</sup> it proved influential and established a whole genre that tackled the phases of the “quests” devoted to the historical Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Although this article adopts a different method, I too will start with Reimarus, following Schweitzer, to briefly introduce the theme.

The *Fragments* on which Samuel Reimarus’ reputation rested were published posthumously by Gottfried Ephraim Lessing between 1774 and 1777, with no mention of their author.<sup>12</sup> Lessing selected seven fragments:

- (1) The toleration of the Deists;
- (2) The decrying of reason in the pulpit;
- (3) The impossibility of a Revelation, which all men should believe;
- (4) The passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea;
- (5) Showing that the books of the Old Testament were not written to reveal a religion;

7 The first German edition of this work was published in 1906 and then reprinted, augmented, in 1913. The first English translation appeared in 1910/11; I use here the reprint of 2005. There is also an English edition (2001) of the second German edition of 1913. Schweitzer 2005; on Reimarus see Mulso 2011 and Groetsch 2015; Parente 1977.

8 Schweitzer 2005, 13.

9 Weiss 1892.

10 Similar historiographical essays appeared at the same time and subsequently as an attempt to challenge this interpretation. See Labanca 1903; Salvatorelli 1929.

11 For recent criticism of this approach see Bermejo Rubio 2009, 211–253.

12 Theissen/Merz 1998.

- (6) Concerning the story of the resurrection;
- (7) The aim of Jesus and his disciples.<sup>13</sup>

The last fragment engages most fully with Jesus' life and was initially attributed to Moses Mendelssohn, the great Jewish representative of the Enlightenment and a friend of Lessing.<sup>14</sup> "The aim of Jesus and his disciples" contains Reimarus' groundbreaking historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, where he challenged many classical theological interpretations: Jesus was a Jew and did not found a new religion; his teachings are to be separated from the teachings of his disciples; his notion of the "kingdom of heaven" has to be evaluated against Jewish theological traditions, for Jesus never explained what it meant. For Reimarus Jesus was a Jew who spoke to Jews under the yoke of the Roman Empire and his message was to be interpreted as political, suggesting that the Messiah be placed "within the limits of humanity".<sup>15</sup> Jesus did not break with Jewish law, did not cease to be a member of the chosen people; he probably did not establish baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) as new fundamental rituals. The narratives about the miracles are also deemed historically implausible – while Jesus was certainly a healer, he never performed public miracles. It was his disciples who had attempted to found a new religion, as they slowly tried to make sense of his inglorious and sudden death.<sup>16</sup>

Reimarus was a great ancient historian and a polymath, his writings distinguished by immense erudition and composed in a witty and agreeable style. His interpretation of the life of Jesus summarized in a cogent manner knowledge about Jesus and his disciples that was disseminated in a wide array of sources. His notion that Christianity was indebted to Deism was politically charged, as it took shape among a circle of enlightened philosophers who aimed to reform the church and to establish a more tolerant society.<sup>17</sup> His interpretation of the life of Jesus, with the idea that Jesus' main message was worldly, should be set against the backdrop of changes in perceptions of Jews and Judaism and increasing support for their civic integration. The *Fragments of an Anonymous Author of Wolfenbüttel* was a great piece of literature and historical scholarship but, as Schweitzer underlined, its authorship remained veiled until another great German scholar of the "historical Jesus" created a public resonance.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1878), a theologian influenced by Hegel, published *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*)

13 Schweitzer 2005, 16.

14 Benfatto 2018.

15 Schweitzer 2005, 18.

16 For a recent interpretation about the death of the leader see Destro/Pesce 2014.

17 Groetsch 2015; Klein 2011, 153–182.

in 1835/36.<sup>18</sup> The book stirred enormous polemical reactions, which jeopardized Strauss' career as an academic, pushing him to become a freelance intellectual. His book about Jesus was reprinted four times between 1835/36 and 1864. Translations into foreign languages appeared very soon, and criticism stemmed from both the Catholic and the Protestant folds.<sup>19</sup> By the 1870s Strauss had ultimately left religion behind, becoming a true follower of science, especially in the guise of social Darwinism.<sup>20</sup> Schweitzer praised his style and clarity and claimed, "as a literary work, Strauss' first life of Jesus is one of the most perfect things in the whole range of learned literature. In over fourteen hundred pages he has not a superfluous phrase; his analysis descends to the minutest details, but he does not lose his way among them."<sup>21</sup> Much of the scandal about Strauss' life of Jesus has to be linked to his idea of myth as applied to the Gospels. Strauss claimed, indeed, that much of what was recounted in the Gospels is mythical, as none of the authors of the Gospels were eyewitnesses. The narrative patterns of the Gospels, according to Strauss, are often modelled after Old Testament narrative stories. The notion of myth as applied to the New Testament was outrageous enough to kindle severe criticism and harassment. Nevertheless, Strauss' work became a classic, and his deconstructive reading of the Bible was applied subsequently by other scholars. In Strauss' last work on religion, Jesus had become a "religious enthusiast" whose authentic message was unsuitable for a modern society.<sup>22</sup>

Strauss had fuelled immense debate in the many European countries where his works were translated and commented upon, and another book similarly destined soon appeared. In 1863 the French Orientalist and biblical scholar Ernest Renan (1823–1892) published the acclaimed *Vie de Jésus (Life of Jesus)*, which became one of the most popular books of its time, second only to the novels of Émile Zola.<sup>23</sup> Renan, who had been raised a Catholic, left behind his religion to become a committed secular historian, an icon for freethinkers and liberals who applauded him as a modern hero devoted to the pursuit of science. His *Life of Jesus* was the result of much preparation, which included both a long journey to the Holy Land and his cooperative enterprise with his publisher, Michel Lévy.<sup>24</sup> Renan's controversial masterpiece was created under two cultural influences, one of which spread from within, related to the vast production of

18 Strauss 1835/36; third edition with modification 1838/39; fourth edition 1840 (as the first and second). In 1864 Strauss published a book on Jesus modeled after Renan's *Vie de Jésus*: Strauss 1864.

19 Labanca 1903.

20 Moxnes 2012.

21 Schweitzer 2005, 65.

22 Moxnes 2012.

23 Renan 1863; Renan 1864.

24 Richard 2015; Priest 2015.

images of Christ during and after the French Revolution, and the other one from without, namely the influential German debate in which Strauss was a participant.<sup>25</sup> “This was the first life of Jesus for the Catholic world which had hardly been touched – the Latin people least of all – by the two and a half generations of critical study which had been devoted to the subject”, writes Schweitzer, adding that “Renan’s work marked an epoch, not for the Catholic world only, but for general literature”. He continued,

He offered his readers a Jesus who was alive, whom he, with his artistic imagination, had met under the blue heaven of Galilee, and whose lineaments his inspired pencil had seized. Men’s attention was arrested, and they thought to see *Jesus*, because Renan had the skill to make them see blue skies, seas of waving corns, distant mountains, gleaming lilies, in a landscape with the lake of Gennasereth for its centre, and to *hear* with him in the whispering of the reeds the eternal melody of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>26</sup>

And yet Schweitzer’s evaluation of Renan’s work is dismissive and negative, in line with many German critical reviews of the time. However, he caught some of Renan’s powerful style, which enabled the book to be read and criticized as a work of fiction.<sup>27</sup>

Renan’s Jesus was cherished by a public prepared by his previous work and provoked a national and international debate. Many translations appeared, especially in Italy, where Renan was destined to become a national hero.<sup>28</sup> Renan deployed in his research a combination of modern disciplines and made extensive use of fieldwork notes from his journey to Syria and Palestine, where he wrote the book. The impressions and sensations he gathered while visiting the places and locations where Jesus had lived, preached and died are very relevant also for the visual imagery used by artists and filmmakers. For Renan the topography of the Gospels proved to be a powerful source of imagination and emotional experience. He called the Holy Land the “fifth Gospel”.<sup>29</sup>

Focusing on Jesus’ humanity, Renan created a representation of Jesus and his environment that was historically plausible and functioned as an evocative icon. His powerful and yet controversial image of Jesus did not stir reactions exclusively among Roman Catholics and Protestants, for it also attracted the attention of Jewish scholars and intellectuals who felt challenged and were attracted by the theme of the human and Jewish Jesus. Jews possessed a long

25 Menozzi 1979; Bowmann 1987.

26 Schweitzer 2005, 139.

27 Priest 2015.

28 Labanca 1900; Labanca 1903.

29 Priest 2015, 75. See also Richard 2015. For a more critical appraisal of Renan’s notion of religion: Moxnes 2012; Facchini 2014 with references to Said 1978 and Olender 2009.

textual tradition of polemical literature on Jesus, but in the 19th century they developed a scholarly tradition under the name of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (*Science of Judaism*) where many religious themes were discussed, in concert and conflict with Christian scholarship.<sup>30</sup> They often proposed a more nuanced representation of Jewish groups around the time of Jesus, offered insight into Hebraic sources and tried to make sense of what it meant for Judaism to possess such a strong Christian matrix.<sup>31</sup> Abraham Geiger wrote extensively on the Jewish Jesus, claiming that the historical research started with Jews, and Heinrich Graetz became involved in a polemical discussion with French authors, among whom was Renan. German Jews felt, maybe mistakenly, that Renan's depiction conveyed a racial depiction of Judaism and contributed to strengthening the opposition between Jesus and the Jews in a way that was not different from old anti-Jewish polemics.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of the 19th century, numerous publications on the life of Jesus were in circulation, some more scholarly than others, some more innovative than devotional. Members across religious groups were involved – Protestants of various confessions, Catholics, Jews and freethinkers all felt challenged to analyse or fictionalize the life of Jesus and the history of Christianity.<sup>33</sup> While it is not possible to offer a detailed discussion of how fictional literature treated these religious topics, that activity must be borne in mind, for scholarship and fiction were not autonomous spheres of intellectual activity. Indeed, themes, *topoi* and debates about fiction and poetry not infrequently have roots in scholarship. One contributing factor to this overlap in themes was the popularity of the historical novel in the 19th century, which played a major role in national myth-making. Historical novels brought to public attention controversial themes of the past, but they also treated the past as a serious realm. Fictionalized histories of early Christianity and its protagonists never disappeared, as recent literature proves.<sup>34</sup> Biblical themes were challenging, and many novelists fictionalized stories that were under the scrutiny of scholars.

## FILMING JESUS: REALISM VERSUS HISTORICITY?

It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the 19th century, when the first moving images appeared, the new medium ventured into the religious field,

30 On this subject see Schorsch 1994; Wiese 2004.

31 While Jesus opened up a discussion about the Jewish matrix of Christianity, the opposite is also true: at the beginning of the 20th century many Jewish scholars started to conceive New Testament literature as part of Jewish tradition. See Facchini 2018c.

32 Heschel 1998; Facchini 2018a; Facchini 2018b.

33 Gatrall 2014.

34 A recent example is provided by Carrère 2014.



filming biblical stories and the life of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> Ever since then, a steady flow of versions of the life of Jesus has continued, produced by filmmakers for the general public or for religious groups. Films on Jesus continue to stir polemical reactions and public debate as well as supporting missionary work and religious propaganda. Although the new medium was perceived as associated with the profane, especially in relation to producers and companies that were in the business, this new form of communication was deemed very relevant by individual churches.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1897 and 1927, the date of Cecil B. DeMille's great masterpiece *THE KING OF KINGS* (US 1927), a number of silent films devoted to Jesus' stories appeared in Italy, France, Germany, northern Europe and the United States. The first moving images were linked to passion plays, some of which were already famous in Europe. In 1897, *La Bonne Presse*, a French Catholic organization interested in countering the rise of secularism, commissioned the filming of a passion play, shot in Paris, that is known as *LÉAR PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Albert Kirchner, FR 1897).<sup>37</sup> In the same year, the *HÖRITZ PASSION* (1897) was filmed in Bohemia. This filmed passion play involves the interaction of the documenting of a local performance and the presentation of moving images depicting biblical stories. Moreover, it offers a structure that links the New Testament with stories of the Old Testament as guided by the logic of typological hermeneutics. These examples of a first filming of passion plays can be considered a combination of performances: the passion play itself, the filming and production, the official performance in Philadelphia, with 'reading commentary'<sup>38</sup> and live music.<sup>39</sup> The producers were not responsible for the story, which is framed in medieval narrative form although it was much changed to feed and nurture religious tourism in the 19th century.

*THE MYSTERY OF THE PASSION OF OBERAMMERGAU* (Henry C. Vincent, US 1898), filmed on the roof of the Grand Central Palace Hotel in New York with professional actors, had a similar layering. Its creation was complicated, the result of a combination of texts and images vaguely associated with the passion play performed in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau since 1634, when it had been given as a ritual of thanksgiving after the community's deliverance from the plague. The play, which involved the whole community, was staged every

35 Baugh 1997; Malone 2012; Alovio 2010; Viganò 2005. For more general entries see Campbell/Pitts, 1981; Cartmell/Whelehan 2007.

36 Shepherd 2013; more problematic Baugh 1997. For a more accurate historical overview Fritz/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiati/Scolari 2018.

37 Baugh 1997; Shepherd 2016, 3 for the sequence of images and secondary literature.

38 A 'reading commentary' of biblical silent films is a proper comment meant to guide the public and avoid theological misunderstanding.

39 Shepherd 2013.

10 years and became increasingly well-known in the 19th century. The location, at the intersection of a number of ancient routes, meant that the village and its passion were visited by many travellers, whose remarks, positive or negative, heightened the fame of the play. Among those who voiced their impressions of this passion play were French theologian and philosopher Maurice Blondel and a reformed rabbi from Philadelphia, each of whom conveyed his own sensibilities about the performance: Blondel acknowledged the emotional power of this type of performance and its historical plausibility, whereas the rabbi was outraged by the demonization of the Jews who, according to elements of the Gospel narrative, were responsible for the death of Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

Also in 1898, *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE JÉSUS-CHRIST* was shot in Paris. Composed of thirteen tableaux, it was commissioned by the Lumière brothers and directed by George Hatot. The following year Georges Méliès produced a short film on the life of Christ, *LE CHRIST MARCHANT SUR LES FLOTS* (*CHRIST WALKING ON THE WATER*, 1899), with special effects to describe Jesus' miracles, an approach that raised the issue of the representation of sacred or supernatural experiences. In 1900, Luigi Topi directed *LA PASSIONE DI GESÙ* (*THE PASSION OF JESUS*, IT) with Italian actors and released it close to Easter; Giulio Antamoro's 1916 *CHRISTUS* (IT) was one of the "first religious colossal" of the Italian film industry.<sup>41</sup>

Over the first decades of the 20th century the list of works depicting Jesus' life expanded, with notable innovations. Starting from 1902, a series of biblical tableaux was created by Ferdinand Zecca and produced by the Pathé brothers with the title *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE JÉSUS-CHRIST* (*THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST*, FR 1902).<sup>42</sup> At the time it was one of the longest films on Jesus' life, constructed in 27 scenes (which were also circulated and commercialized separately), some of which were inspired by the Bible illustrations of Gustave Doré or the famous artist Mihály Munkácsy. The story is structured as a Gospel harmony, with a single merged narrative.

*LA VIE DU CHRIST* (*LIFE OF CHRIST*, FR 1906), directed by Alice Guy, was produced by Gaumont. Not only was Guy the first woman to direct a film on Jesus, but she also left a distinctive authorial mark. David Shepherd claims that Guy's Catholic identity was relevant for her sensibilities, which were aesthetically inspired by another Bible illustrator, Jean Jacques Tissot, and by Anne Catherine Emmerich, a mystic who was very influential in the 19th century and for Mel Gibson's much later *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (US 2004).<sup>43</sup> The new version of Zecca's *VIE ET*

40 Blondel 1911; Krauskopf 1901. More generally see Shapiro 2001 and Favret-Saada 2004; Cohen 2007. On more specific grounds, on the charge of deicide, Facchini 2011.

41 Pucci 2016.

42 Boillat-Robert 2016.

43 Shepherd 2016, 6–7; Facchini 2004.

PASSION, which followed in 1907 and was one of the most successful films in America in its time, introduced new themes. Stories from the Old Testament also proved attractive to the cinema industry, along with narratives focused on individual characters. In 1909 Pathé produced an entire film on Judas (LE BAISER DE JUDAS, Armand Bour, FR 1908) a character that became both an icon and an archetype, at times a subversive one, in many films of the sound era.

FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS (US 1912), directed by Sidney Olcott, can be considered a breakthrough in filmic representation of Jesus' life. The film was shot in Egypt and the Middle East, specifically in Galilee and Jerusalem, clearly to provide historical authenticity. The film is divided into 10 narrative sections, with titles and biblical quotations from all four Gospels.<sup>44</sup> As also in other cinematic depictions of Jesus, women are visible and their role noteworthy. One scene depicts the dramatic suicide of Judah (which would be very relevant for the development of Judah's image), but no scenes show Jesus and the Sanhedrin, thus avoiding a theme that was likely to fuel interfaith conflict. Although some critics appreciate Olcott's film for its coherent narrative, others have argued that it lacks technical sophistication and retains the qualities of a pageant.<sup>45</sup>

Within a few years many other technically innovative films appeared, with some focusing on peripheral characters (Judas or Salome) or drawing from famous theatre and literary products. Following D.W. Griffith's THE BIRTH OF A NATION (US 1915) and INTOLERANCE (US 1916) the genre adopted an increasing polemical subtext that carried anti-Semitic overtones. There is no space to delve deeper into this phase, but these few examples of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provide enough material for discussion of the forms of historical narrative related to the life of Jesus. Just as scholars of the historical Jesus were elaborating on the results of over a century of investigation, the cinematic Jesus was presented to the public. Here we can observe how the historicity of Jesus' biographies coincided with a media revolution. Adele Reinharz has aptly noted:

Our tendency to hold the Jesus movies up to the lens of history is not mere misapprehension on our part. Indeed, our expectations of historicity are actively encouraged by these films themselves. Through their choice of subject (someone who is known to have existed), and the use of costumes (the familiar bathrobe and sandals outfit of the biblical epics), setting (the Middle East), and language (biblical sounding English or ancient languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic), these films imply not only

44 (1) The Annunciation and the infancy of Jesus, (2) The flight into Egypt, (3) The period of youth, (4) The years of preparation: heralded by John the Baptist, (5) The calling of the disciples, (6) The beginning of miracles, (7) Scenes in the ministry, (8) Last days in the life of Jesus, (9) The Last Supper, (10) The crucifixion and death. Tatum 2016.

45 Tatum 2016.

that they are telling a story about people who really existed, but also that they are telling a “true” story. More than this, the Jesus movies explicitly assert their claim to historicity, often through the use of scroll texts, titles, and/or narration. The 1912 silent movie *FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS*, for example, announces itself as a “re-view of the savior’s life according to the Gospel-narrative.”<sup>46</sup>

Early silent films are very instructive when analysed in light of the debate over the “historical Jesus”, especially as problems evident in the early 20th century are often also found in much more recent films, from Pasolini’s *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, 1964) to Gibson’s controversial *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*. For many film directors and critics, a representation of the life of Jesus is trustworthy if it is based on a literal account of the Gospel, a requirement that Lloyd Baugh also expects a film on Jesus to fulfil.<sup>47</sup>

Their approaches to textual tradition provide a striking distinction between historical and biblical scholarship and the filmic imagination. Scholarship has deconstructed biblical narratives to date the information recorded in the Gospels and the New Testament. Historical interpretation of the life of Jesus thus required skilful reading of the biblical material. The Gospels were treated as literary documents of the past and analysed philologically, searched for inconsistencies and contradictions. Modern scholarship believed it essential that the textual material be read against the backdrop of other ancient sources. Scholars also criticized and challenged theological interpretation of Old Testament passages that sustained Christological claims.

Films, by contrast, either claimed the Gospel’s narrative to be the literal truth or, more often, provided a “harmony narrative” of the life of Jesus, re-written from the manger to the cross by assembling passages from the three Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. The harmony provides a montage of elements from the four Gospels that narrates a coherent story, a biographical narration with no contradictions, countering any doubts unearthed by scholars. Screenwriters and film producers did opt, however, for certain stories to be told and others dismissed, an indication of the sensitivity of their topic in the burgeoning mass culture of the time. We can highlight here two processes that have had longstanding impact on the public discourse about Jesus, with one related to censorship and control that reflected the influence of official churches and one related to debates that seem inevitable for a “modern” society, for example about the passion narrative. Strikingly, Jews have played a significant role in framing the filmic Jesus, as actors, entrepreneurs, critics and writers. Jewish

46 Reinharz 2007.

47 Baugh 1997.

agency became increasingly visible, although with varied agendas, as for the collaboration between Renan and his publishers or the filming of passion plays by Jews; or, on the contrary, when Jews would voiced sustained criticism to anti-Jewish stereotypes.

The treatment of miracles by scholarship and by film has been very different. Scholarship of the historical Jesus has frequently charged the miracle narratives with lacking historic foundations. Yet they feature in many films, drawing on the ability of this new medium to locate the supernatural within an authentic framing. Their historical plausibility is conveyed by a literal understanding of the Gospel that is bolstered by visual devices associated with the presentation of authentic places of the Gospel narratives. Olcott's film was one of first to be shot in Egypt and the Middle East, and while the imagery still relies on biblical visual tradition, it conveys a realism through the power of setting, in the very locations where the events had happened 2,000 years earlier. Renan, as we noted, had claimed that the Holy Land was the "fifth Gospel", a text as powerful as the Bible in providing information about the historical Jesus. This approach is carried through early films, with southern Italy playing a particular role in some Italian films. "Authenticity" is the key term here: the authentic places where Jesus lived, preached, died and was resurrected are proof of the historicity of the story. That authenticity had a strong orientalizing flavor, already evident in photography and art, especially in depictions of religious groups and the human body. That orientalization supported the perception of realism and was visible in the fairs and exhibitions of modern metropolises.<sup>48</sup>

The moving image brought attractive innovations to the retelling of the biblical narrative. The story may already have been well known, but the technology's ability to create wonder brought a greater amazement to the reception of the miracles. Some biblical characters could be drawn from the Gospel texts and performed by actors, above all Jesus himself; others were slowly constructed. Judas and Mary Magdalene, for example, could carry plausible alternative storylines and bring increased drama to the devotional template. Imbued with psychological features, these characters enabled emotions such as love, friendship, betrayal and despair to become more prominent in the narrative and flow together with images. Early silent films relied on commentary, explanatory texts and choral music, generating a multisensory experience in which the artificiality of acting and the mechanical montage of the narrative ran together with a devotional and religious message. The artifice of the new medium could generate an emotional response, including a strengthening or renewing of faith.

48 On this see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998.

Filmmakers were attracted by the historicity of the biblical narrative, but their films can be better understood as engendering myth-making processes (*mythopoiesis*), with research and discussions amongst historians missing or neglected. Scholars and filmmakers share an interest in evoking the humanity of Jesus, following the paths of two European traditions, one rooted in textual and philological practices and the other in the performative character of Christianity, expressed through art and sacred theatre. These two traditions do intersect, but they often misunderstand each other. The film industry is still to embrace some of the most relevant achievements of scholars.<sup>49</sup>

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49 For the relevance of the cinematic Jesus in public culture of the early 20th century see Clogher 2018.

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