



VARYING RESPONSES TO EQUIVALENT DEPICTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST AND JESUS CHRIST, SUPERSTAR

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Rewriting is often used as a tool to question established norms and ideologies. In many ways, rewritings can be seen as “cultural or identity narratives: heavily ideology-laden tales about us as individuals and members of certain communities organized around nuclear terms, discourses, and troupes of nationality, ethnicity, race, social standing, gender, sex, moral-religious beliefs and so on.”ⁱ At times however, rewritten plots generate controversies, especially due to the differing portrayals of characters.

This paper goes into the details of the response generated by two films (The Last Temptation of Christⁱⁱ and Jesus Christ, Superstarⁱⁱⁱ) that have rewritten the story of the Gospels. The films will be used as case studies to examine how works featuring Christ tend to become problematic. The focus of attention would be not on critical reviews regarding the literary merit of the texts, but instead on the controversy these gave rise to. The paper will attempt to provide a descriptive recreation of the controversies. It will look at the factors cited as being responsible for making the works disputable, the response of the directors and actors to these and the eventual outcome of the altercations.

The Last Temptation of Christ directed by Martin Scorsese was based on Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel of the same name^{iv}. Scorsese, who came from the New York University’s film school, belonged to a generation of directors who “acknowledged the classical industry conventions, but...revitalized and transformed generic conventions into something new.”^v Several movies on the life of Christ like King of Kings (1961), Jesus of Nazareth (1977), The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1965), etc presented a Jesus who was very much like the Jesus in the Bible, well aware of all that he had to say and do. Scorsese understood these films as those that “typically placed Jesus as the center of knowledge in the story.”^{vi} He felt that such films failed to present Jesus as a vulnerable being, which would then highlight his humanness. It can be argued that the emphasis on the humanness of Christ and the manner in which Scorsese explores the various facets of



vulnerability present within his Christ character was what made this film controversial.

The controversy in general, centred around the treatment of the Christ-character as being a man whose humanity overshadows his divinity. To put it more specifically, it was a scene towards the end of the film that shows Jesus getting intimate with Magdalene that led to the film being branded as an outright blasphemous movie. This scene comes towards the end of the film and it may be seen as symbolizing the natural urge of Christ to live life as someone who wants to get along in the world as an ordinary individual, but has been forced to become the Messiah. It is the conflicting polar modalities that arise within him as someone who wants to live life in his own way, but is not allowed to, that Scorsese attempts to emphasize in this film. But a section of the American society opposed this attempt and criticized its producers and director. Scorsese narrates his reasons for making *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In 1972, he was given a copy of Kazantzakis' book by Barbara Hershey, the actress who plays Magdalene in his movie. The book, especially the author's approach "that the human part of Jesus would have trouble accepting the divine", fascinated him.^{vii} So much so that he decided to adopt it to celluloid. He finds it difficult to comprehend why such a hue and cry should be made about depicting the human side of Jesus. Scorsese argues that the film is an expression of his faith. At times though, it may appear that Scorsese himself is in a dilemma so as to whether his Christ is God or man because though he says that he's interested in the humanity of Christ, he is in agreement with the majority of Christians when he proclaims that, "He's God. He's not deluded. I think Kazantzakis thought that, I think the movie says that, and I know that I believe that."^{viii} Scorsese attempts to define a Christ who's God but human enough to be recognized as one of us. He's treading a very fine line here because human beings are susceptible to sin and Christians find it difficult to accept Christ as someone who sins.

The protests against this film gathered pace even before the cameras started rolling. And even at this stage they were powerful enough to make one studio house abandon Scorsese and his project mid way through. "Paramount had planned to produce it in 1983 but backed away, fearing pressure from Fundamentalists."^{ix} The protests at this initial stage were in the form of a letter writing campaign: "The campaign was initiated by The National Federation of Decency under the leadership of the Rev. Donald Wildmon, based in Tupelo, Mississippi."^x And this campaign was successful.

In 1987, Scorsese managed to get Universal Pictures to fund his project, but the budget for the film was reduced from \$12 million to \$6 million and there were



changes in the cast. The film was set to hit theatres across USA in September 1988, but the protests simply grew. Universal seemed to have learnt from Paramount's experience and took a few steps, which they felt would counter the hostile campaign against the film. One of these was to hire a born-again marketing expert called Tim Penland, "a consultant who had experience promoting films to the evangelical Christian market"^{xi}, so as to use his religious tag to appease conservatives. But this move back fired when "Penland resigned in June, charging that Universal had reneged on a promise to let conservative religious leaders see the film and comment on it well in advance of its release."^{xii} Nevertheless, Universal Pictures did not take the protests lying down. They advanced the releasing date by a month and justified this move by saying that it's important for people to actually see the film, so that it would "allow them to draw their own conclusions, based on fact, not fallacy."^{xiii} The protests however only increased:

Jerry Falwell, the founder of the by-then disbanded Moral Majority called for boycotts of all theatres showing the film and all products of MCA, Universal's parent company. Bill Bright, leader of Campus Crusade for Christ reportedly offered to raise ten million dollars to reimburse Universal if the studio would render unto him for destruction all copies of the Scorsese film.^{xiv}

Advertisements were also placed in newspapers criticizing the film. The producers too retaliated in like manner: "Universal responded with lofty, full-page newspaper ads in four cities, quoting Thomas Jefferson and announcing that the constitutional rights to free expression and freedom of religion were not for sale."^{xv} At times, the protests also become anti-Jewish in tone:

The Rev. R.L. Hymers Jr., a Christian extremist in the Los Angeles area, staged a demonstration near the Beverly Hills home of MCA Chairman Wasserman, who is Jewish. An actor portraying Wasserman stepped repeatedly on the bloody back of an actor dressed as Jesus and carrying a heavy cross. An airplane meanwhile flew overhead trailing a banner that read, "Wasserman Fans Jew-Hatred W/Temptation", and a crowd chanted, "Bankrolled by Jewish money."^{xvi}

A group called Morality in Media was "particularly incensed by Jesus' anguished comment, 'I am a liar, I am a hypocrite. I am afraid of everything . . . Lucifer is inside me.'^{xvii} It's Director Joseph Reilly felt that *The Last Temptation of Christ* "is an intentional attack on Christianity."^{xviii} The protests also took different forms. For example a Methodist Minister sent out "2.5 million mailings protesting the film and scheduled anti-Temptation spots on 700 Christian radio stations and 50 to 75 TV stations."^{xix} The film was also criticized by Franco



Zefferelli, the director of *Jesus of Nazareth*, a movie based on the life of Christ released in 1977. According to Zefferelli, “Scorsese’s film is damaging to the image of Christ. He cannot be made the object of low fantasies.”^{xx}

However, there were voices that spoke in favour of *The Last Temptation of Christ* and some of these were from the religious fraternity. The U.S. Catholic of December 1988 had an article titled ‘Thank You Martin Scorsese’ by Father Henry Fehren where he appreciates Scorsese for “daring to portray Jesus as one who was tempted and for reintroducing the notions of temptation and sin for discussion in the church.”^{xxi} But then such voices were drowned by the din and fury created by those speaking against the film. Scorsese himself was quite irritated by these protests, because he felt that “Ninety-nine percent of the people who are complaining have not seen the picture.”^{xxii}

Yet, the Office for Film and Broadcasting of the United States Catholic Conference gave the film an ‘O’ rating which meant that it was a ‘morally offensive’ film.^{xxiii} Though there does not seem to have been an official ban on this film, the protesters did not completely fail in their mission. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released on August 12th, 1988 in select cities like New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, etc:

The protests and the continued calls for boycott reduced the number of theatres in which the film was screened nationwide and possibly made the film a box-office loser, at least according to leaders of the boycott. Even when the film was released in video format the next summer, there were video chains and local stores that refused to stock it.^{xxiv}

Therefore, it is evident that all the negative hype surrounding this film did have an impact, but then this was severe when *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released in other countries like Chile and Russia. According to the Religious Affairs Reporter of BBC News, “Condemned by the pope, censored in South Africa, Israel and Chile, the film by Hollywood director Martin Scorsese has been the focus of often violent protests from Christian groups across the world.”^{xxv}

So we see that the film became controversial in a lot of other places too: “Scorsese’s movie generated a record 1,554 complaints to the UK regulator, the Independent Television Commission, when it was shown on Channel 4 in June 1995.”^{xxvi} The film was banned in Chile during the dictatorial rule of General Augusto Pinochet. In fact, lawyers argued at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica to lift the ban on this film. According to one of the lawyers,



Alex Munoz, “The film has been transformed into an emblem for the fight for freedom of expression, particularly artistic freedom to create...”^{xxvii}

In Russia, the popular television channel NTV “twice cancelled scheduled broadcasts of the film under pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church and some parliamentary deputies.”^{xxviii} But on the third occasion the channel decided to go ahead with the screening and this move received condemnation from the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarch Aleksiy II and the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church appealed to managers of the NTV independent television company to cancel the showing of Martin Scorsese’s notorious *The Last Temptation of Christ*, scheduled for 9th November, (as they felt that) this heretical film profoundly insults the religious feeling of Orthodox Christians.^{xxix}

It’s important to mention that NTV’s decision to screen the film was criticized not just by the Russian Orthodox Church, but also by the Roman Catholics, the communists and Muslim groups.^{xxx} All these make obvious that Martin Scorsese’s movie raised up a storm not just in the United States of America, but also in other countries.

Martin Scorsese felt that he does not really stray much from the Bible as far as his Christ character is concerned. According to him, “Kazantzakis’ Jesus is both human and divine, in accordance with Christian teaching. What interested Scorsese in the author’s approach was that the human part of Jesus would have trouble accepting the divine.”^{xxxi} But a section of the Christian society did not want a Christ-character who would have problems with his divine calling. The intimate scene between the Christ character and Magdalene, employed by Kazantzakis and in effect by Scorsese to further emphasize his humanness was however used by the protesters as an amplification of their remonstrations.

However, it is interesting to note that works of art featuring Christ have become controversial, even if Christ’s sexuality was not directly addressed. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* is an example in this regard. In fact this work had become controversial for a variety of reasons.

It was condemned for being a “blasphemous hippie version” of Christ’s life and also for the “flesh flashed by Christ’s dancing followers.”^{xxxii} The probability that Magdalene could have harboured thoughts of a non-platonic relationship with Christ was also not appreciated by Christian activists, who picketed the Broadway show for giving the Gospel a ‘rock-pop music’ treatment.^{xxxiii} Jewish groups also joined in the protests claiming that the “nasty portrayal of Jerusalem’s high priests (in the film) would encourage anti-Semitism, while



(Christian leaders like) Rev. Billy Graham decried the show's conception of Jesus as a mortal with delusions of divinity.^{xxxiv} The unbiblical lyrics in the film like, "One thing I'll say for him, this Jesus is cool" sung by Caiaphas and Herod telling Jesus, "Prove to me that you're no fool/Walk across my swimming pool," were also criticized.^{xxxv} Ted Neeley, the actor who plays Jesus recalls the controversy:

Jesus Christ, Superstar triggered outrage, attempted bans and picketing both in New York and on the road. Part of that emanated from the rock-music treatment, part of it because the premise of this show is taking Jesus down off the stained-glass window and putting him in the streets where he was, adding the humanity element to Jesus that is not in the Bible... Everybody thought it was the ultimate blasphemy... We had to fight our way through picket lines every night just to get into the theater to go to work. We didn't think we could have opening night. They said we were going to destroy the religious fiber of the community, and demanded that we not perform. It was as if every religious group in the community was afraid we were going to destroy their religion. And the community was New York.^{xxxvi}

In short, the controversy seems to have risen mainly because of the depiction of a very human Christ. But the director of the film, Norman Jewison meant no disrespect to anyone. He felt that the musical was, "reverent and cynical at the same time."^{xxxvii} Neeley offers more explanations, "The stress is on the humanity of Jesus, not his sanctity... In that way, it's different from the stage version. To me, Jesus was a great, charismatic leader, theologian and thinker, but not God. He was a man who got beyond himself and went too far."^{xxxviii} But if it was for the depiction of a human Christ that the creators of Jesus Christ, Superstar got brickbats, then more than 20 years later, it was for the same reason that they began to receive accolades. All the controversy generated earlier seemed to have worn off. According to Neeley, their musical has become highly popular:

It's considered wholesome family entertainment now, a rock-spectacle-with-a-message that enraptures audiences wherever it plays. We started out last year doing what was supposed to be a three-month tour...But everywhere we go, we're so successful we're invited back... Now I feel I'm the most fortunate person alive to be given this opportunity again.^{xxxix}

The humanity of Christ seems to have been better received in the 1990s with Neeley even being invited to churches to speak about his role and about the show:

In retrospect, we see that 90 percent of the groups that protested that opening back in 1971 are using the CD and the film as a teaching tool



because they found this concept helps children learn about Jesus much easier because of the kinetics of the music... It's been an amazing turn of events... It's very satisfying to be so appreciated for something we were damned for 25 years ago... Now we're canonized every night on stage. That's why I've been with it so long, because it's been so rewarding.^{x1}

In essence, Jesus Christ, Superstar, a film that was welcomed by protests due to its unbiblical portrayal of Christ, became popular and sought after second time around, and this time not as a film but as a musical show performed all over America; so much so, that it has influenced viewers in a religious manner too. The words of Ted Neeley are quite noteworthy in this regard:

There are thousands and thousands of people in America and Canada who have become Christians because they went and saw this movie or this stage show... Yes, it's a musical, and yet there are people all over the world who think of it as a ministry.^{xli}

Ted Neeley seems to have been elevated almost to the status that the biblical Christ enjoys. He feels that a lot of people link him with the Christ of their perception:

Everybody who sees this show comes into the theater with their own interpretation of Jesus... They project that up on the stage and onto me. Because of that, I do everything I can physically, spiritually, bodily, mentally, emotionally, to project what I feel is the true biblical essence of the character. They are in essence using me as a palette, upon which they're painting their opinion of who Jesus might be.^{xlii}

Several sincerely feel that Jesus Christ, Superstar is not just a film or a stage show, but a divine plan for Neeley to spread the Gospel. Neeley reckons he's one of the most hugged men in North America. But he's worried about fans' adoration when they say that they see his face when they pray. But he tries to see the practical side of these responses:

When people come up to me and say 'You are in fact the true embodiment of Jesus Christ in this lifetime,' then that's endorsing our work as a group of performers. Most of the people in the audience have seen the film or heard the music or seen the show on tour before... They bring such positive energy into the building, and they sit there and focus that energy onto the stage. I walk out on that stage every night surrounded by the most positive energy I've ever felt in my life. Quite frankly, I just float around the stage every single night.^{xliii}



All these responses seem to show how much Ted Neeley influenced viewers in a spiritual sort of way, as the Jesus in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. So much so that he has a group of fans who call themselves 'Tedheads.'^{xliv}

Jesus Christ, Superstar has had so many incarnations. It was composed as an album by the British musician Andrew Lloyd Webber, and written by Tim Rice. It premiered in Broadway in October, 1971 and became an instant hit. It was made into a film in 1973 by Norman Jewison. But it was not the film but the road show based on it, staged almost twenty years later that really saw adulations pouring in. The stage show in 1992 was in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the film. The first show in December was in Baltimore and subsequently there were to be performances in other places for the next three months. But the show was so successful that it was staged continually for almost five years across the length and breadth of America. Such was the success of the show. But then *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was controversial when it was initially released.

When we look at *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, we find that an over emphasis on the humanness of Jesus Christ seems to be the cause that ignites controversy as far as the reception towards these works is concerned. There were protests against these works and also calls to ban these, which were successful at times. It may be observed here that visual forms of fictional characterizations of Christ have become more controversial than purely textual ones. The protests against these have also become thunderous on occasions. This is because visual forms of art like cinema, drama, stage performances, musicals, etc appeal and cater to a larger audience, than a novel or a story would. Perhaps this is novels and short stories like that focus on similar kind of interpretations escape negative backlash and censure. But it's difficult to generalize controversies as following a set pattern. There are deviants here too. For example, it's interesting to note that a work like *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, which was decried for its so-called blasphemous content, became extremely popular more than twenty years later. Another novel called *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* by the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago became controversial and attracted negative attention when it was initially entered for a European Literature contest and later when Saramago won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998. All these urges one to be inclined to wonder whether protests and remonstrations against works that stray from the biblical illustration of Christ's life are knee-jerk reactions or whether there are larger political issues at play here.



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