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CHAPTER 6

The Last Temptation of Christ

'It is accomplished.' Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

When he gave three Guardian Lectures in Britain in January 1987, Scorsese spoke with bitter passion about his failure to get *The Last Temptation of Christ* under way. He was not going to give up, but there seemed little chance of support in a Hollywood that thought in 'fish out of water' formulae and clearly preferred him to make *The Color of Money* with Newman and Cruise. But within weeks of his leaving Britain, certain that his next film would be the *Wise Guy* adaptation, a new alignment in the power elite of Hollywood itself would bring the opportunity that had so long eluded him.

Although I'd heard about Kazantzakis's book when I was a student at NYU, it was Barbara Hershey and David Carradine who gave it to me when we'd finished shooting *Boxcar Bertha* in 1972.¹ At that time there was an incredible feeling of spirituality in America, and we thought that making a film of it would help to bring about change. It took me a number of years to read it – I liked it so much I didn't want to finish it! – and I finally reached the end while visiting the set of *The Meadow*, the Taviani Brothers' film, in Florence in 1979.

I found the representation of Christ, stressing the human side of His nature without denying that He is God, the most accessible to me. His divine side doesn't fully comprehend what the human side has to do; how He has to transform Himself and eventually become the sacrifice on the cross – Christ the man only learns about this a little at a time. In the whole first section of the book, He is acting purely on human emotions and human psychology, so He becomes confused and troubled. I thought this

neurotic — even psychotic — Jesus was not very different from the shifts of mood and psychology that you find glimpses of in the Gospels. For example, Christ cursing the fig tree, throwing the money-changers out of the Temple and saying, 'I've not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword, set father against son, mother against daughter,' and so on. I had a sense of this problem in Kazantzakis. There's a wonderful confession scene — in the film it's with Jeroboam — in which Christ says, 'Lucifer's inside me, he's saying I'm not the son of Mary and Joseph, I'm the son of God, I am God.' So He thinks it's the Devil inside Him saying this, and He believes He's the worst sinner in the world. I felt this was something I could relate to: this was a Jesus you could sit down with, have dinner or a drink with. Even in the Gospels, the Pharisees and the Sadducees complain about His eating and drinking, saying He wasn't in the tradition of prophets like John the Baptist, who went out into the desert all the time and fasted, and refrained from hanging out with prostitutes and money-collectors. So for me this was a very human Jesus. Knowing that Paul Schrader and I have close affinities, I thought it would be interesting to see what a Calvinist approach to the book would be. It's a very long book and I wanted a normal-length film, not a six-hour mini-series, so I thought Paul would be able to strip away all the unnecessary elements. The whole relationship between Mary Magdalene and the Apostles and how they were fighting with each other, all that was fascinating, but couldn't be put in the film. I thought that I would be making it just as George Stevens did *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and Nicholas Ray did *King of Kings* — both at the end of their careers.² But when Paul delivered a ninety-page script after four months, I realized that I'd always wanted to make a film of the life of Christ, ever since I first saw Him portrayed on the screen in *The Robe* when I was eleven years old. I was an altar boy, and I was taken by our diocesan priest on a little field trip up to the Roxy. He hated the film for its absurdity, but I'll never forget the magic of walking down the lobby and getting a glimpse of that gigantic Cinemascope screen for the first time.³ And when I heard the music in stereophonic sound, it became confused in my mind with the Gregorian Chant for the Mass for the Dead, at which I used to serve every Saturday morning at 10.30. I remember once an old Italian man of about ninety years of age had died, and his widow, who was about ninety-three, attacked the coffin and knocked it down in her grief, and we altar boys had to help her. So, with the confusion of these experiences in my mind.

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the whole film became a holy experience, and the first image of Jesus carrying the cross in the street was very shocking to me.

The first images of Christ that I recall were the plaster statues and crucifixes in St Patrick's Old Cathedral. The strongest impression was of a human being who had been tortured and beaten, then put on the cross, and this was someone you would have loved, who had been a very good person. I remember being taken to a Mass and wondering why my parents had never taken me before. It was so impressive, with different coloured vestments for the different Masses: white and gold, or green and gold. I guess I made the association between going to the cathedral and to the movie theatre at an early age. In fact, as kids we used to joke about Mass being the same show every day.

My First Communion was very important to me, participating in confirmation and making my first confession. At this time I was fascinated by images of the crucifixion and drew endless pictures of it, which I gave to the nuns at school. Regarding ancient religions, such as in Carthage, where they sacrificed 500 five-year-old children, or the blood sacrifices of the Israelites, finally up to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and beyond that the sacrifice of the Mass — there has obviously been a 'civilizing' of religions, I feel, but this primal instinct towards bloodletting is still part of our subconscious. Travis in *Taxi Driver* is an Old Testament figure in that sense: in order to be righteous and correct the only answer was to call down the wrath of God. I remember finding the sequence in which God directs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in John Huston's film of *The Bible* very beautifully staged.

Paul wrote the first version of the script coming out of the psychological trauma of his mother's death, and it was a very heart-felt piece of work. He felt that the supernatural should exist alongside the natural, so he added Jesus taking His heart out, as well as a literal version of the Last Supper in terms of swallowing the flesh and blood of Jesus. I said, 'Paul, come now,' but he said it was just between us, a Calvinist teasing a Catholic, and in his second draft that scene was taken out and we went back to Kazantzakis.

But this approach still applies to the way the miracles are done in the film. It's as if to say: what was hypnosis, what was a real miracle and what was a kind of curing? When He cures the blind man, Jesus takes herbs in His hand, adds saliva, rubs them together and puts them on his eyes. I did a lot of research and discovered that many healers at the time used saliva as a healing agent, which is why it's in there. And instead of Jesus smiling at these miracles, He's terrified. Each miracle takes Him a step closer to

something He knows is going to be difficult, and according to Kazantzakis He eventually finds out that it is the cross.

Paul's second draft was made very quickly and we gave it to Irwin Winkler and Bob Charoff. I believe it went first to United Artists, who turned it down, and then by the time *The King of Comedy* was released at the beginning of 1983, Paramount had signed up to make the film. I had one meeting with Barry Diller, then head of the company, along with Jeff Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, and when I was asked why I wanted to make this film, I replied, 'So I can get to know Jesus better.'

In a way all my life I wanted to do that: first I was going to be a priest, but it didn't work out. The idea of loving and forgiving one's enemies seemed so obvious and Gandhi had shown that it could be put into practice. I felt that maybe the process of making this film would make me feel a little more fulfilled. Their reaction was very sweet, but they didn't want that answer. They asked me how much money I wanted to spend and I explained that the idea wasn't to go the traditional route of the American or Italian epics (though I love them, despite all their flaws and silliness, for the craftsmanship and artistry of design), but to go the other way and make it an intimate character study — which meant less money. And they were ready to go with that.

We began in January to scout locations in Israel, looking at different areas, and then we found villages in Morocco that really looked 2,000 years old, including Oummas, which we later used in 1987 for filming. So we talked about doing the first two-and-a-half weeks in Morocco and finishing up in Israel, where we received terrific treatment and co-operation from the Mayor of Jerusalem and even from the President. But the fundamentalists, the Moral Majority, had got wind of it all and the letters started pouring in. They went to Gulf and Western, where the head, Charlie Bluhdorn, had recently died and whose place had been taken by Martin Davis. I'm not sure of the politics, but things were different when Barry Diller had worked with Bluhdorn.

By September the film had been cast, the budget was up from \$12 million to \$16 million, and the shooting schedule increased from ninety to a hundred days. But after a final meeting that month, Irwin Winkler (whose association with Bob Charoff was ending — this was to be their last film together) felt that he would have to leave the picture. That was a blow that made it difficult for the studio to stand by us, and on Thanksgiving morning Barry Diller told me he didn't want to go with the picture. I don't think his relationship with Gulf and Western was very good, because he soon left for Twentieth Century-Fox, while Katzenberg

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and Eisner took over Touchstone Pictures. We then tried to cut the budget in half and went round every studio, yet we were still rejected. But the beauty of that year was that none of it was wasted, because we learned how not to make the picture.

I began to think the film couldn't be made in Hollywood, by which I mean with major funding from a major company. Salah Hassanein, at that time the East Coast head of the United Artists theatre chain (the biggest in America), called up Frank Mancuso, head of distribution at Paramount, and told him he would not show our film in his theatres. Furthermore, he wouldn't show it on his cable stations — and he had the cable franchise for Home Box Office. So we met Salah, who had been executive producer on George Romero's *Creepshow*, and found that he hadn't read the script, though his family had told him he should read the book and that it was great.

But he said, 'You people only make the films, I have to show them and deal with the public when they rip up the seats and fights break out in the theatre.' Then he said, 'Don't tell me about religious films' — he's Egyptian and half-Protestant — 'in the fifties I had a picture about Martin Luther and the Catholics picketed it. Then people picketed *The Greatest Story Ever Told* too, and with *Messenger of God* there were bombs in the theatre.' So it became clear that to make a film with any guarantee of distribution, it would have to be for a cost so small that it could play in one theatre in America for a while, until people realized that it wasn't offensive.

Throughout 1983 I rewrote Paul's script, as I'd done on *Raging Bull*, with his permission and on the understanding I'd take no credit. I mentioned this to Jay Cocks and he said he'd help me, though he knew he'd get no credit either. Out of three major sessions we produced, I think, six drafts. Some of the best lines for me are those from the book that Paul originally included, such as, 'If I was a fire I'd burn, if I was a woodcutter I'd cut out my heart and lungs'; and towards the end when the angel turns to Christ and says, 'Are you satisfied?' and He replies, 'I feel ashamed when I think about it, all the mistakes I made, all the wrong ways I looked for God.'

A new possibility emerged, to make the film as a French co-production with the help of state funding, since Mitterrand's Minister of Culture Jack Lang had developed a policy of offering support (and asylum in the case of persecuted directors such as Yilmaz Guney and Andrej Wajda) to non-French film-makers of international standing. But even as Scorsese and

The Last Temptation of Christ began to be mentioned as possible candidates for this aid, so a Catholic equivalent of the American fundamentalist movement started to campaign against the project. The controversy over Godard's *Je Vous Salue, Marie*, which continued throughout 1985 and included papal denunciation, made French religious protesters even more determined to nip other 'blasphemous' films in the bud. The Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Lustiger, finally delivered a solemn warning to President Mitterrand about the misuse of public funds for a project founded on subverting scripture.

During 1985 a number of people were trying to get the film made for me including Jack Lang, the French producer Humbert Balsan and Maroun Bagdadi, a Lebanese film-maker. They asked me to go to Cannes in 1986 with *After Hours*, so that they could announce *The Last Temptation of Christ*, saying it could be made for \$5 million in Egypt. I didn't go, among other reasons because of my fear of flying. Usually, I'm able to deal with it, but sometimes I just become completely irrational.

A number of new locations were considered for *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The original plan to film mainly in Israel had proved too expensive; sets had been built, including villages, and about \$5 million of Paramount money had to be written off. Scorsese was particularly sorry to lose such settings as Timna for the raising of Lazarus, and the Roman amphitheatre in Beit Shear for Pilate's scene. It was necessary, in Scorsese's words, to give the film 'a completely new look'. Michael Powell's associate Frixos Constantine even sought money from Moscow with the idea of making the film in Tashkent. When that fell through, meetings were held to see whether Greece was feasible. Then it became apparent that the rights to the novel might fall into other hands.

It happened by this point we'd been letting our options drop a little because nobody was interested in the book, so together with Harry Ulland, my agent, and John Avnet, the producer Paramount hired after Winkler left, we pooled our money to make sure they were secured. From the time it was stopped in 1983, up to 1986, Harry was constantly trying to have the film made. In 1986 he tried to set up the film with John Daly's Hemdale company, but that fell through by the end of the year. My next film looked as if it was going to be *Wise Guy*, based on the Nick Pileggi book. But while I was promoting *The Color of Money* in Los Angeles in October, I began talking to Mike Ovitz of CAA,⁴ who was

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Paul Newman's agent and had largely put that film together behind the scenes. I decided to change representation from Harry Uffand, who was my agent for twenty years, to Mike Ovitiz. So I met with Harry in November and we worked out that the official start of my new association with CAA would be 1 January 1987. After the shooting of the Armani commercial in Milan, and the Guardian Lectures in Britain, I returned to New York and suddenly Universal were interested in talking — the one studio in Hollywood that had never courted me before.

Mike had arranged a meeting in Los Angeles with Tom Pollock, the new head of the studio, and Sean Daniel, and it went well. Then we went out to Marlon Brando's island Tietarua to talk to him about a project, and we were there for three weeks. There was only one phone on the island and we only made a couple of calls, but Mike was saying to me, 'You know, Marty, these people may make this film, so you'd better come back here.' I didn't realize the power involved here, how he could work deals, reason with people, and give them the feeling they've pretty much come out with what they wanted. When we returned to Los Angeles, we had another meeting and it was clear they were really serious. Tom Pollock had read the script when he was representing Harry Uffand the previous year, and he'd liked the project. Mike and Tom gave the script to Garth Drabinsky of Cineplex Odeon, the biggest theatre chain now in America and Canada, who liked it enough to put up half the money. In a sense, the film had been the laughing stock of cocktail parties in Hollywood until the minute I signed with CAA — then it was made!

In April we went to scout locations in Tunisia and Morocco, and came back through Rome having decided pretty much that Morocco was the place. Then we spent the next few months in negotiations between Universal and Paramount, who had spent \$5 million on the project back in 1983. There was some animosity between them at the time over another movie, so we had to wait this out before we went off again to Morocco at the end of August to find the actual locations. Shooting began on 12 October, and as we were backed up against Christmas we had to move very fast.

During the summer of 1987, Jay Cocks and I got back together and produced another two versions of the script, in which we wound up undoing most of the suggestions the original producers and studio had given us. They asked so many questions — like why does He go to the monastery? Why does He pray to God the Father, if He's angry with Him? Nevertheless, they were not to be underestimated because they do have the pulse of the public.

Because of Cineplex Odeon providing half the budget, we knew that if the worst came to the worst we would have at least one theatre for the film to open in. In a sense it's an 'art movie' according to the American definition, in other words not a commercial mainstream movie: it runs two hours and forty-three minutes and it was not made for exploitative reasons. I know from a priest friend that the Kazantzakis book is used in seminaries, not as a substitute for the Gospel, but as a parable that is fresh and alive, which they can discuss and argue about. And this is what I hoped the film would do.

I believe that Jesus is fully divine, but the teaching at Catholic schools placed such an emphasis on the divine side that if Jesus walked into a room, you'd know He was God because He glowed in the dark, instead of being just another person. But if He was like that, we always thought, then when the temptations came to Him, surely it was easy to resist them because He was God. He could reject the temptation of power in the desert; He could reject especially the temptation of sex; and He could undergo the suffering on the cross, because He knew what was going to happen, what death is all about.

Over the years I've drifted away from the Church, I'm no longer a practising Catholic, and I've questioned these things. Kazantzakis took the two natures of Jesus, and Paul Moore, the Episcopal Bishop of New York, explained to me that this was Christologically correct: the debate goes back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, when they discussed how much of Jesus was divine, and how much human. I found this an interesting idea, that the human nature of Jesus was fighting Him all the way down the line, because it can't conceive of Him being God. I thought this would be great drama and force people to take Jesus seriously — at least to re-evaluate His teachings. Most non-Christians also misunderstand the importance many believers give to images of Jesus. For example, in his wonderful movie *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen tries to become a Christian and is confused by seeing in a store window a 3-D picture of Jesus on the cross, winking at him! So through the Kazantzakis novel I wanted to make the life of Jesus immediate and accessible to people who haven't really thought about God in a long time. I certainly didn't think the film would destroy the faith of those who believe strongly.

I interpreted the 'last temptation' in the book very much the same way as the Devil tempting Christ in the desert, taking Him up to the top of a building for Him to throw Himself down. The last temptation is for Christ to get off the cross and live the rest of His life as a normal human being. He marries Mary Magdalene, makes love to her for the purpose of having

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children, and then dies in bed. I imagined it as a series of literal visual tableaux which the Devil shows Christ, so that thirty-six years might go by in a second.

I must say there are times in the film when I return to traditional Catholic imagery, for example, the big rock in the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ prays, which came right out of my childhood. I imagined this picture of Him sweating blood just as I'd seen it at Catholic school. But then there are other times when I enjoy just wallowing in this kind of imagery. The minute I saw Willem Dafoe, I felt very comfortable with his face. When Christ changes after returning from the desert, or at the moment when He takes His heart out — which refers to the Catholic Sacred Heart motif — He becomes the Jesus we are familiar with in the Aryan Christian tradition. Oddly enough, all the guys we considered for the part were blue-eyed!

One reason why we started shooting so late was that I was waiting for Aidan Quinn to make up his mind about playing Jesus. He was in the Seychelles, having a difficult time on *Crusoe*, and since he was about to get married, he felt it was too big an undertaking. He also still had some religious problems with the part. Eric Roberts or Chris Walken were also considered in 1983, but then Willem Dafoe came up and he was a CAA client. I'd only seen him in *To Live and Die in L.A.*, playing the villain, and I'd liked him in that, so I wanted to see if he could play on the other side. Speaking with him, in a room together, he was really very good; then I saw *Platoon* and thought, sure, let's go!

I brought back most of the original cast — Harvey Keitel, Barbara Hershey and others — except Sting, who had been going to play Pilate. He was busy on one of the Amnesty tours and he spoke to me in Morocco, but though we tried to work something out between his dates we couldn't. However, I'd always wanted to work with David Bowie, and he ended up flying to Morocco and doing his scene in one day.

All the religious movies I saw and loved as a kid, such as *The Robe* and *Quo Vadis*, were more about spectacle and epic film-making than religion. Later, I enjoyed Christopher Fry's beautiful writing for John Huston's *The Bible*; and more recently the mini-series *A.D.* which Anthony Burgess wrote. But I wanted the Jesus in my film to be more accessible, more immediate, and to engage the audience. Because I'm an American, I have to think of the American audience first. If, suddenly, the screen opens up and it's Panavision (instead of the 1:1.85 that I used) and there's Miklos Rozsa's music with heavenly choirs and clouds in the sky, like in Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, and the titles in gold lettering and the

people beautifully dressed and speaking perfect Queen's English — then the American audience is going to turn its ears off. They're going to say, 'Great, it's another epic,' and know they don't have to think because it's safe.

I was thinking about New York, Manhattan, 8th Avenue and 48th Street, the block where we shot *Taxi Driver* at night, a very dangerous area where there are drug pushers and pimps and prostitutes — it's my vision of Hell. If you were to go there, those ten blocks from 42nd to 52nd Street on 8th Avenue, and say, 'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth,' you'd get robbed, or beaten up, or killed. But if you go there and grab people and say, 'Look, I want to tell you about Jesus; I want to tell you about something He just said,' then it's a confrontation. I tried to do that with the Sermon on the Mount; we had to destroy the beautiful poetry of it, and convert it to suggest, almost, that he's getting the idea for the first time.

And there had to be American voices, New York accents and different ones too: Harry Dean Stanton, as Paul, is sort of Southern Baptist, maybe Appalachian; and Gary Basaraba, who played Andrew, is Canadian. When it came to the outside forces, the Romans, and the world of Satan, they had to have a different accent, but the same language. The only way I could think of doing this was to borrow William Wyler's idea in *Ben Hur*, to make them British.

We took so many risks that there was bound to be something that people were not going to like. The ancient Judeans and the Romans obviously didn't speak like us, although we took great pains to make the language exactly the way it is in the film. I don't think Jesus came from the House of Herod; He was a carpenter and must have spoken like a carpenter; and Judas especially must have been a street tough — that's my interpretation. I remember talking in Andrew Sarris's class at Columbia University when *The King of Comedy* came out, and he said, 'Now you're off to Jerusalem. What's that going to be like, *Mean Streets* in Jerusalem, huh?' And I felt that when the film came out, if it didn't work, one of the first criticisms would be that it's like everybody hanging round the street corner in Jerusalem, saying, 'What do you want to do tonight?' I figured I'd have to wait a few years to get past that.

Some of the humour would have to be there, but it would need to be more forceful. For example, there's a moment in the book when Christ is in a monastery and He says, 'I just saw a sign, what does it mean?' The monk tells Him to go out and preach. I felt that you couldn't say that nowadays, we would have to find another word for preach, so we'd have

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to rack our brains, talk to people about it, and find different ways of saying it in straight American. The other way of solving the problem is, of course, just to do the whole thing in Hebrew with subtitles. Then it'll probably be called a masterpiece — the irony being that it would go over much better, because you avoid the issue!

Well, New York audiences understood the humour. When Jesus exasperates Judas because every day He has another plan — first He says pick up the axe, then He says He has to die — and Judas responds, 'I don't understand, we need you alive,' he's expressing all our own exasperation with God. It's a man yelling at God, treating Him as if he were talking to another person on the same level, and it's actually very funny — and I found it worked with a paying audience.

It also happens in a few places that are not exactly intentional. The lion in the desert has a kind of wink when it says, 'Don't you recognize me, I'm your heart,' which is a little bit ironic, because Harvey did this alone with me in a room, and I used it just as it came. There's also street humour, just like in *Mean Streets*, especially in the olive grove when Judas says to Jesus, 'You said we should turn the other cheek, I don't like that.' The audience roared with laughter because — well, who does? It's a genuine question, and it was very hard for Willem to answer.

Kazantzakis wrote in demotic Greek, but the language is very specialized, so that the translation into English is very thick and verbose and too 'poetic'. We wanted a straightforward representation of speech, anti-poetic in a way. Jay Cocks and I wrote the dialogue as if we were speaking together, putting ourselves in the scenes and saying, how would we react? I thought it would be interesting to consider how the Apostles would deal with sleeping round camp fires, eating and living on mats on the ground. Or take the case of the Sermon on the Mount, which is usually presented as a man standing on a hill, surrounded by 3,000 people. There's that wonderful scene in *The Life of Brian*, when nobody can hear at the back — 'it sounds like "Blessed are the cheesemakers"' — they say, 'I guess he said, "Blessed are the cheesemakers"', how very nice of him! Well, if you hang out in North Africa long enough, you discover that in these villages where we shot the film, where there's no electricity and only a few donkeys, the number of people to gather would be, at most, twenty-five or thirty. That's why we used a small crowd, so that Jesus could really speak to each person, go inside the crowd and talk to them individually, making them understand this new philosophy and sharing His soul with them. That's the attitude we took, and it's why Willem was able to attack it that way. He had this incredible bravery about dealing with the role on

the simplest level; he'd just try anything. It was a therapeutic experience to be able to sit with Willem and look at him as Jesus, to have lunch with him and argue with him, and then create this fantasy.

I found the actual making of the film the most physical experience I've ever had, rather than a spiritual one. But later, looking at what we'd shot and constructing it in the editing room proved to be a very emotional and loving experience. I don't really look at my own pictures when they're finished, but on this one I had to look at screening after screening, and every time I see it I'm moved by the idea of trying to find out how one can live like that. How can one really live with this concept of love? I try, but I don't purport to be able to do it myself.

I never really quite believed the representation of Judas in films based on the Gospels. It was too easy either to make him totally political or to make us believe he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. In Philip Yordan's script for *King of Kings* they went the first way, and even in Kazantzakis he's strongly political, but then he gave Jesus the line, 'God gave me the easier job, to be crucified.' I think everybody who worked on the film, and everybody who's read the book over the years, feels it's the first time you can really believe in this relationship — that Judas did not want to betray him, but had to go through with being God's instrument for the sacrifice of Jesus. I always wondered, if Jesus is so forgiving and preaches love, why is Judas condemned to Hell by Him for committing suicide? While we're not saying our version is the whole truth, it makes you question and maybe understand the concept of loving a little better.

Scorese came to making The Last Temptation of Christ after many years of studying films based on the Gospels. The most important for him were those which were released in his youth — King of Kings (1961), The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), and The Gospel According to St Matthew (1964, but released in the USA two years later). Surprisingly, perhaps, the first version he saw was from a much earlier age of cinema, one which Scorese confesses he finds hard to appreciate.

I saw the silent *King of Kings*, the Cecil B. De Mille 1927 version, on release when I was fifteen or so in a small theatre in New York. I found it hard to concentrate on silent films having grown up in the sound era, and therefore some of the emotions were lost on me. Although I like De Mille's films, and particularly their design, I just found this one very boring. The first time you see Jesus in the film, when He cures the blind child and you see Him from the child's point of view, De Mille uses, quite effectively, in a

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naïve way, the special effect of a ray of light. I wondered, if Jesus was really like this, why didn't everybody listen to Him? Why wasn't His ministry more successful at the time and why was He crucified? It seemed to me to deny completely the human nature of Jesus. H. B. Warner wears such heavy make-up, he's obviously much older than he's playing, and I thought Jesus was young – Willem Dafoe was thirty-two when he played it. I remember vividly the Casting Out of Devils, with those images coming out of her body: it made quite an impact on us as kids, mainly, I think, because of the sexuality of it.

Then I saw *Ben Hur*, which again was not so interesting. But the first full story of Christ I can remember which excited me was Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, and being a strong Roman Catholic at the time I found it offensive! Jeffrey Hunter was almost like a pin-up, especially in the Garden of Gethsemane. But I liked the beginning of the film, the visual style of it – and at that time I didn't know very much about directors. I found certain scenes very shocking in 70 mm, like Pompey going into the Holy of Holies and cutting through the gauze, and the overhead shot where Herod is dying and he fights with his son. The film is full-blown Hollywood, very emphatic and vulgar: on the positive side, it's almost like doing the Jesus story in the style of story-book illustrations, with each frame a self-contained image.

And using a movie star for Jesus, they aren't able to deal completely with the human side. When Jesus is tempted in the desert, He looks up at the sky and sees, matted in, what looks like Baghdad, which has a kind of charm! Jeffrey Hunter doesn't look as though he's been forty days in the desert, he doesn't look as if he's suffering at all and you don't feel it. But the film had this remarkable staging of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus was walking around preaching, and people on the edge of the frame would say, 'How do you stand on divorce?' and He'd turn round and say, 'Well, I stand this way.' He'd answer these questions like a modern press conference, and I thought this was an interesting interpretation. What offended me most was the political aspect, having Harry Guardino as Barabbas constantly yelling about freedom while in chains. It was really pounding us over the head with that sort of thing.

Yet over the years the film has a resonance – I think because of the intelligence of Philip Yordan's script, in particular the discussions with Pilate before Jesus is put on trial. And I always thought Nicholas Ray's use of the wide screen was so fascinating. In the last image of the movie, when Jesus goes to the Apostles by the shore and you see His shadow, he went for simple iconography, and it works. Michael Powell did a similar thing

with the nuns at table in *Black Narcissus*, and he didn't worry about whether it's naive or not, either, it's just beautiful.

I saw *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in 70 mm in 1965, and I found a lot of the imagery fascinating; Max Von Sydow was a beautiful Christ, especially the way he held his hands. I remember being very excited about Von Sydow because I'd previously seen him in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, which was a very religious film for me. But Stevens's film had an antiseptic quality about it, a hermetically sealed holiness that didn't reach us anything new about Jesus. Of course, there's a whole school of thought which argues that Jesus isn't to be identified with, that He is above sin. But in 1965, with Vietnam, the United States went into a whole different consciousness and the message needed to be made alive and accessible.

Jesus talks about forgiving everyone, but, I thought, what about guys on Death Row, rapists and killers who face the death penalty? If they look at this movie, there's no hope of any spirituality, because they'd feel again He's just someone who glows in the dark. He doesn't understand my suffering. Stevens did have the brilliant idea of using the American southwest, with the Grand Canyon area standing in for Israel, but here is Jesus speaking to thousands, and they all manage to hear Him! What we did in *The Last Temptation of Christ* was to stage these scenes with small groups so that He was heard by all. In Stevens's film there's a self-conscious emphasis on design, dressing the disciples in white, and there's no sense of real people living. I think the pictorial aspect — the pageantry — took over. But although it follows many classic paintings, of all the films about Christ I retained it least in my mind. We didn't even look at it when researching

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One film that I did find a revelation, and I only saw it in 1981, was Richard Fleischer's *Barabbas*, which was based on a book by a Danish author who won a Nobel Prize.⁶ I found it very moving because of Barabbas's struggle to understand why he was spared and what God wanted from him, until he ends up being crucified himself. In the struggle of his character to transcend through spirituality, I found that it's probably one of the best performances Anthony Quinn has ever given. He's hooked up with another slave, played by Vittorio Gassman, who unfortunately is directed like a saint. He tries to get Barabbas to wear a medallion and believe in Jesus, to understand why he was the one who was spared. Then there's a crack-down on Christians in the slave area and the Romans question him, asking if he believes because of the medallion, and he says, 'No, I try to believe, but I can't.' It's a remarkable film about a man trying to find himself.

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The Last Temptation of Christ

The biblical film that made the biggest impact on me, when I was at film school, was Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, which in Italy was just called *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Up to that point, I had had an idea to do a film on Jesus, in *cinéma-vérité* style, in the Lower East Side of New York with everyone wearing suits, a modern-day interpretation of the story we know. So I was moved and crushed at the same time by the Pasolini film because in a sense it was what I wanted to do. Jesus was played by a Spanish law student, and it was shot in the south of Italy. In fact, we wanted to go and shoot *The Last Temptation of Christ* there, pretty much in the same areas as Pasolini. But Morocco was better for us; it had the whole Middle Eastern look.

Pasolini's use of faces was marvelous. It reminds me of Renaissance art even though it's in black and white, and I love the music – the Missa Lubba and Bach. Just compare his Christ with Jeffrey Hunter. He doesn't act walking, he is walking; it's not self-conscious and yet it's very determined. The simplicity of the film reminds me very much of the early Rossellini pictures, *Rome Open City* and *Paisa*. This European style, in its simplicity, gave me the key to be able to make *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The images have to resonate and be very, very strong.

One problem I have with Pasolini is the editing. It seems like a patchwork at times, because of the seemingly off-the-cuff shooting style. But I like his Christ as a kind of conspirator. It was a revolutionary Jesus. In fact, at the time, people referred to him as a Marxist Christ. The strength of Matthew's language comes out very clearly, and it's purer because it doesn't try to make it a straight story from beginning to end. There are no transitions between scenes, characters come and disappear, then reappear in no dramatic way.

Yet the key to the whole picture is Jesus – how forceful He is and how He carries through. 'Do not think I have come to bring peace on this earth, I have come to bring a sword . . . He who loves his father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me.' This is not the stuff you usually hear on Sunday morning in church! He's a very strong Christ, you're either for Him or against Him, and some of the sermons do give you the sense of being yelled at and beaten down. Also, I love the way Pasolini did the miracles; for example, when Jesus cures the leper, with the Leadbelly steel guitar on the soundtrack. Just a simple cut, and it's so shocking and beautiful: he's looking into the eyes of Christ, who says, 'Go show yourself to the high priest.'

The costumes for Pasolini's film were by Danilo Donati, who I tried to get for my film back in 1983, but he was too busy. He did tell me to go and

study the Sistine Chapel, though. John Beard, my designer, looked at this film with me a lot. Pasolini had many more extras than me—we had a total in the Temple scene of 135, including five Roman soldiers who kept appearing in different parts of the Temple to make it seem like twenty-five or more! I remember reading how Pasolini had gone to Israel first, thinking to make his film there, but then he realized it was no longer the Israel of antiquity, so he created it in the south of Italy. And it really worked beautifully, the film is so joyous: he was a great poet.

Over the years I've always been fascinated by Christ in art. I remember buying many prints around 1970–2 in Rome, and having them framed and put on the wall in my house in California. One of them was by Da Messina, showing Jesus on a perfectly constructed cross in the centre, and the two thieves crucified on trees. In my research, I realized that if Golgotha was such a killing ground, there would be maybe 2,000 or 3,000 skulls of zealots up on that hill, as Pilate says in the movie. I thought it must have been a real charnel house, and that there would be some trees like a no man's land from the First World War.

When I was about eleven years old, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art with some friends, and in one of the rooms I saw in a glass case a fourteenth-century German wooden carving of the three crosses, and the figures on them were naked. And at the time we all said, of course, that must have been how it was. After the film was first cancelled around 1983, I subscribed to the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and a lot of our art direction came from that magazine, and clippings I've kept over the years. One whole issue dealt with the only archaeological evidence of a crucifixion, a young Jew in his twenties in about AD 100. Sure enough, he was crucified naked, sitting sideways with his legs bent, and we followed this exactly in the film, even down to the blocks of wood on the wrists. The shot of Christ carrying the cross in slow motion came from Boris Leven, who showed me a painting by Bosch in which the surrounding faces gave no sense of three dimensions. It took all morning to do that shot, at 120 frames per second. To keep the people around him, some of them laughing or pointing at him, we had to tie them together with ropes, so they could only move one step at a time. We took Christ's wounds from the Shroud of Turin, where the crown of thorns was not a crown but a skull-cap, and the scourging completely covered his back. If we didn't show the blood, it seemed to me to weaken the extent of his sacrifice, and diminish what it meant for him to die on the cross.

In the *De Mille King of Kings*, the high priests in the Temple wore round their necks the twelve stones of Israel, only they looked almost machine-

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made, something that you could take apart in sections like a child's toy. Each stone represents one of the Tribes of Israel. So I went through the Atlas Mountains with John Beard, Laura Fattori, the production manager, and Barbara, my wife and producer, and we bought these differently coloured rocks from young boys, and broke them up. Then I designed something for the high priest to wear with the rocks tied together with leather, so that it had a much more primitive, hand-made quality.

The visual style of the film came out of the way I normally work, planning most of it beforehand in New York. There are some overhead shots and I used a lot of moving camera: sometimes it swirls round Christ's head and moves up, though on this film I couldn't afford a crane, much as I was tempted to use one. I wanted to express the energy that Jesus had, that I wanted Willem to have, so we adopted a very fluid and almost nervous way of moving the camera. Because He was unsure of Himself, the camera would be hiding and creeping around Him, caught between following Him and, at the same time, trying to pull back far enough so that you could see the landscape. We had a jib arm which only goes up twelve or eighteen feet, but it was enough for the scale of our story; for example, when Jesus and Judas are sleeping in the olive grove and we start in high, the camera moves in and we cut to His face.

For the music, I came up with a lot of ideas from listening to a great deal of Moroccan music by a group called Nass El Ghiwane, who I saw in a film called *Trances* (advertised as *Moroccan Rock'n'Roll*), shown on cable television back in 1982.⁷ It's not really rock'n'roll at all, but a famous group in Morocco, their equivalent of Bob Dylan, in a way. The lyrics are beautiful poetry and they could apply to any religion any time. It was just the same as when I was living in California and driving everywhere listening to rock'n'roll on the radio, I'd find myself fantasizing about scenes in movies, and scenes in movies I was going to make, how I would cover them with the camera. People would hate to drive with me because I'd always miss the turning off the freeway!

In *The Last Temptation of Christ* the rhythms of this Moroccan music gave me the feeling for designing the shots, and that's why I'm so glad that Peter Gabriel was able to do the soundtrack. Peter took many of the rhythms from Turkey, Greece, Armenia, North Africa and Senegal, mixing them together to make the music as primal as possible. I began listening to Peter's music back in 1982-3, and I especially liked 'Rhythm of the Heart' with its drums, and then 'I Go Swimming', where the lyrics start quite ordinarily before taking off to reach a spiritual level, especially in the live version. I first met him the week before the picture was cancelled

In 1983, in a café one morning, Robbie Robertson got us together. I said I'd be interested in having him do the music because, for me, the rhythms he uses reflect the primitive, and his vocals reflect the sublime — it's as if the spirit and the flesh are together right there.

We stayed in touch over the years: he sent me a tape from Senegal, and I told him that was the direction we wanted to go. He visited the set on the last day of shooting in Morocco, and we talked more closely. Of course, he had to do it as a labour of love because there was hardly any money in it. Normally, he says, it takes two years to do forty minutes of music, and this was two hours and forty minutes, which he did in three months! He used drummers from Egypt and vocals from Pakistan, and an Indian viola player, Shankar, who fused the violin with the viola in imitation of the human voice, so that you would swear it was someone singing. It was really a great job, and I hope Peter is recognized for it.

In the search for locations, an uncharted village near Marrakesh called Oummast was discovered that served for Nazareth and Magdala. Ancient Jerusalem was originally conceived as a set, but at Mekenes the Moulay-Ismael Stables came to be used as the interior of the Temple, the Passover baths and the palace of Pontius Pilate. The final scenes of the film, in the 35-minute 'last temptation' sequence, were shot in the Atlas Mountains and around the Roman ruins of Volubilis. In the end, only one third of the shots planned for locations in Israel had to be altered for filming in Morocco.

In the desert, you often get a sense of being in a trance, of time standing still; it's a special kind of existence which I tried to convey with camera movement and music — for instance when the men are waiting in the antechamber for Mary Magdalene; in the olive grove when Jesus wakes up and performs, the apple tree appears before Him; or when the camera goes through the trees in the Garden of Gethsemane and He asks God to take the cup from His lips. When the camels appear almost as an apparition in the market-place, I wanted a sense of what it was like to be there at midday. I'll never forget André Gregory getting off the plane from New York to play John the Baptist, being taken while jet-lagged to the set in the desert at night, and he saw faraway a little flame and a bunch of tiny figures trying to make sense of God and man. And he said, looking at these ants and this flame representing the Archangel, it seemed so ridiculous — with him suddenly having to be John the Baptist too — it was one of the most surrealist experiences of his life!

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I liked the flame that came up in slow motion; that way the angel at the end could just turn into it. For the temptations in the desert, I thought of a man awake and fasting for ten days and ten nights. Then a snake goes by. How would He perceive it? No doubt the snake would speak to Him. But we wouldn't see the mouth move, it's really an inner voice. And a lion walks by and doesn't kill Him because He's so static. All this could have been done without anything, just voices and sound-effects, but I wanted to take the risk and keep the supernatural on the same level as the natural. I wrote the scene of the raising of Lazarus myself even before Jay Cocks began working on the script. The minute Christ raises Lazarus, He knows that He is God. And with Lazarus's hand clasping His, pulling Him into the tomb, it gave a sense of death pulling Him in, an image of the struggle between life and death. Death which He will – despite being God – have to suffer as man.

In the book and Paul Schrader's original script, the angel at the end was a little Arab boy, but I felt that brought connotations and we'd have difficulties. People would get upset and it would get in the way of what the film's really about. So then we decided it should be an old man – we had Lew Ayres cast in 1983 – but that concept didn't seem right. So we went with a little girl, even though we couldn't get away from Pasolini's use of a young girl as an angel, whose face is so extraordinary, like Botticelli. When Christ looks up on the cross, He sees the sun breaking through the clouds, and that's the last shot I took in Morocco. Granted it's clichéd, shot with the angel appearing, but after all, it's a scam, it's the Devil. Of course a little girl has appeared as the Devil before, in Mario Bava's *Kill, Baby, Kill*, and again in Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, where she plays with the ball, but our young girl is older, she's thirteen. When the Devil became a male voice, I used Leo Marks, the man who wrote *Peeping Tom*, with my voice behind him.

One problem I have with the book is the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. If there had to be sexual temptation, it could be another woman; for it to be Mary seemed kind of obvious. And the fact that she became a whore specifically because He rejected her is almost as bad as the Hitchcock movie *I Confess*, where Montgomery Clift becomes a priest basically because he was jilted by Anne Baxter. As the young priest whom I adored when I was young said, that doesn't happen, because you have to have a vocation otherwise you'd only last a week in the seminary! *I Confess* is an interesting movie nevertheless, but I found a similar difficulty with Kazantzakis.

Many people have said that the book is more Kazantzakis than Jesus.

I've only been able to read a little of his other work; I'm not a very well-read person, because I grew up in a house without books, and basically everything I learned was visual. But I've read about many aspects of Kazantzakis's life; I met his widow Helen and talked about him, and I find it fascinating how he followed different routes to find God or his spirituality, going up to Mount Athos and staying in a monastery, and finally writing these books in the last ten years of his life. But he lived in Greece, went through the Second World War, then went to Russia, while I'm just in Manhattan, New York — they're very different worlds. I go more towards *Mean Streets* where you try to find yourself, because I'm dealing with this urban existence. I'm not like Thoreau, I don't go to Walden. When I think about it, I say, 'Well, maybe that's the thing to do, that's the way you should be.' But maybe prayer is really dealing with what you have in the home, dealing with your family, and how you raise your children, how you relate to your wife. Maybe that's what prayer really is in the modern world. However, I still find and these remarkable men who go on spiritual quests very romantic.

Notes

- 1 Two other novels by the controversial Greek author, Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957), were previously adapted for the screen: *Christ Recrucified* (filmed by Jules Dassin as *He Who Must Die* in 1957) and *Zorba the Greek* (Michael Cacoyannis in 1964).
- 2 Stevens took five years to make *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, released in 1965. It was his penultimate film. Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) had earlier proved to be his penultimate commercial production.
- 3 *The Robe* premiered in September 1953 at the Roxy as the first demonstration of Twentieth Century-Fox's new widescreen Cinemascope process and was a great box-office success.
- 4 The Creative Artists Agency is now one of the most influential agents in Hollywood. It has become common practice for agents to 'package' movies for the studios with their own clients.
- 5 A matte shot involves blocking out part of an image and combining it with another, typically when a 'magic' effect is required.
- 6 The novel *Barabbas* was written by Pär Lagerkvist; the English screenplay was credited to Christopher Fry and Nigel Balchin. The film was released in 1961.
- 7 Ahmed El Maanouni's *Trances* is a fascinating documentary about this Moroccan band, who combine stadium appeal (they are seen playing in Carthage) with an awareness of the ritual roots of North African music.