

Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate
eds., The Religious Film Reader

(NY: Routledge, 2007), 267-268

Chapter 41

Martin Scorsese

ON REAPPRECIATING
KAZANTZAKIS

IT WAS MY FRIEND Barbara Hershey who recommended that I read Nikos Kazantzakis's novel. She mentioned it for the first time in Arkansas, when we were shooting my film *Boxcar Bertha*, and then she brought it up again in Los Angeles. I'll never be able to thank her enough. I took my time reading the book. And as I always do whenever I get excited about a novel, I started to make notes. I realized, quickly, that I wanted to make a film based on *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

I had dreamed of filming the story of Christ in a contemporary setting – downtown New York, to be exact, where I grew up. When I saw Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, I felt that he had basically made that film – Gospel may have been set during the time of Jesus' life on earth, but it felt completely contemporary, from the casting to the point of view to the music.

When I read the Kazantzakis novel, with its magnificent language and its restlessly probing spirit – that tone, at once so frank and so tender – I felt that I'd found another way of approaching Christ. Not to work from the gospels, but from a novel that attempted to pinpoint the key conflict of His short life – where did His humanity end and His divinity begin? Kazantzakis understood something that few have ever understood as keenly in a work of art, be it a novel

or a film. He understood that Jesus must have felt as much of an obligation toward His own humanity – that is, an obligation to fulfill His life as a man, in the way we all feel it – as He did toward His divinity.

Jesus is often pictured as serene, somewhat like Siddhartha. In the Pasolini film, He is often angry – the sermon on the mount is delivered as a fiery call to arms in that film. But in the Kazantzakis novel, He is no longer just a figure, but a uniquely complex character as well – serene at some moments, angry at others. And, at all times, conflicted. Perhaps even confused, in the same way that any of us is confused at times about who we are, and where we're going. About our intuitions of what we want to do with our lives, which light a spark within us – we don't know where they will lead, we don't fully understand them, but we know that we must fulfill them, and see through to the end. I'm reminded of Stanley Kubrick's comment that when you're making a film, or any work of art, you have to preserve the original spark. That's what life is like, I believe. And it was that way for Jesus, as Kazantzakis so brilliantly imagined it.

I had always thought that if Jesus had returned to walk among us, He would be living with the hookers, the junkies, the bag ladies. He would be trying to set the world aright, one soul at a time. And it's certain that many among us would be laughing at Him. Scorning Him. We would be upset that someone was calling attention to the misery around us, insisting that we not look away. And He would be suffering.

I found this longing to make a connection between our present and Jesus' present, to make us one with Him and Him one with us, in Kazantzakis' novel.

It took many years and a great deal of effort to get my film of *The Last Temptation of Christ* made. It's a long story which doesn't bear repeating – most of the details were exhaustively reported at the time. But in the end, despite the difficulties, not only in getting the film made but in the uproar that followed its release, despite the fact that we were forced to go into production with a small budget and rush through the editing process, despite all those things, I think our film honored the spirit of Kazantzakis's book. Many people accused me of making a film that attacked belief, that attacked faith – just as Kazantzakis himself was accused. As if belief and faith were that flimsy. As if the image of Christ could not withstand interpretation.

If Christ were to walk the earth today, He would be nothing more or nothing less than one of us. He is one of us. Whenever you see someone helping a fellow human being who is weaker than he or she, you're seeing His example. Forgiveness and compassion – the best we can expect of ourselves, and the best we can expect of others. It was Kazantzakis who helped me to understand that Christ's teachings were eternally, radically new. That was the gift he gave me with *The Last Temptation of Christ*.