# Shooting Jesus, Week 4: Controversial Christs

## Welcome to SHOOTING Jesus – Cinematic Saviours

Interest in big screen biblical epics seemed to wane in the late 1960s, not least because television was affecting how people consumed visual entertainment. One the one hand this lead to productions about Jesus moving to the small screen -- most famously *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), but it also led to more creative and, at times, controversial explorations of the subject matter, with varying degrees of success creatively and commercially.

### Precursors

*From the Manger to the Cross* (Sidney Olcott, 1912)

- Just the depiction of Jesus on-screen was seen as controversial, as was the absence of the rescurrection

*Intolerance* (D.W. Grifith, 1916)

- Jewish groups objected to how Jewish people were portrayed in the film

*Sign of the Cross* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1932)

- The levels of nudity and sex were a key factor in the emergence of the Hays Production Code

*La ricotta* (1963)

- Pasolini given a suspended jail sentence for his behind-the-scenes peak of a fictional Jesus film

The Milky Way (Luis Buñuel, 1969)

- Humorous depiction of Jesus as well as a satirical take on other points of Church History and Catholic beliefs

### *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973)

* Based on the hit West End rock opera and double album by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber
* Play within a play format features a group of young people staging a Passion play
* Shot in Israel. Visually a mix of contemporary and ancient styles.
* Controversy over lack of resurrection but also the portrayal of Jesus, Judas and Mary Magdalene

### *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979)

* Story revolves around Brian, a man whose life bears certain similarities to his contemporary, Jesus.
* Much of the controversy derived from mistaken belief that the film was mocking Jesus
* Consistently voted one of the funniest films of all time
* Surprisingly well-informed about the historical context and biblical material

### The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorsese, 1988)

* An adaptation of a work that had already been controversial in its own day despite author Nikos Kazantzakis' introduction stating "...I am certain that every free man who reads this book so filled as it is with love, will more than ever before, better than ever before, love Christ"
* The film was a project that director Martin Scorsese had cherished for a long time. "I wanted to make the life of Jesus immediate and accessible to people who haven't really thought about God in a long time".
* Film shows a reluctant and anxious Jesus trying to work out the calling on his life
* Controversy primarily revolved around an extended final sequence where Jesus is tempted to come off the cross and settle for a normal life married to (and having sex with) Mary Magdalene
* Lloyd Baugh criticises the film not primarily for its "low Christology, but its "low anthropology"

### *Jésus de Montréal* (Denys Arcand, 1989)

* Not a Jesus film as such, but the story of an actor playing Jesus whose life increasingly resembles Jesus' life as the film progresses
* Multiplicity of images of Jesus and crosses from past plays and the current ones, to historical reconstructions, icons, religious art
* The reworked Passion play questions the reliability of the Gospels in general and the resurrection in particular
* Of all these films it was the least controversial even winning the Ecumenical Jury prize at Cannes

### *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004)

* Self-funded passion project by Mel Gibson, depicting the final hours of Jesus' life with other key moments shown in flashback
* Frequently cited as one of the most violent films ever made
* Jewish groups expressed concerns over the way the film depicted Jewish people and that it would set back progress in Jewish-Christian relations
* Gibson stated his intention to make a historically accurate film, but also uses various horror film tropes and techniques.

### Other notably controversial Jesus films

*Hail Mary* (Jean Luc Godard, 1985)

*Visions of Ecstasy* (Robert Wingrove, 1989)

*The Garden* (Derek Jarman, 1990)

*Jerry Springer the Opera* (Peter Orton, 2005)

*The First Temptation of Christ* (Rodrigo Van Der Put, 2019)