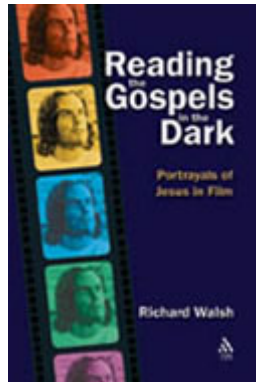


## ○ REVIEW OF RICHARD WALSH'S *READING THE GOSPELS IN THE DARK: PORTRAYALS OF JESUS IN FILM*

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Christina Petterson reviews *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film*, by Richard Walsh. (London and New York: Trinity Press International; 2003. ISBN: 156338387x.)



Reading this book was hard work. But most definitely worth the effort. The hard work was due to two facts: i) the vast amount of material gone into this relatively short book provides the reader with a large context to digest; and ii), this is certainly not helped by the layout of the book, which has an overwhelming amount of print on each page. All in all, we are talking about a very compact book in terms of content as well as appearance.

In all fairness it must be said that I did not know much about Jesus films before I started this book, nor had I seen many. This book has proved an excellent starting point, in that the reader is presented with (what feels like) every Jesus film imaginable, and is guided through specially selected ones read alongside the gospels and Q in detail. And here a warning must be issued: Walsh's passion for these films is contagious and I find my collection of Jesus films expanded by 300%. But this is not all. The reading of the films into and out of the American culture is also immensely interesting and lays bare aspects of American self-understanding through a few precise incisions.

The book consists of 8 chapters framed by a preface and an appendix. The first two chapters present the backdrop for the actual five readings in chapters 3-7 in that they discuss the Jesus films' place in the American religious and celluloid landscape: Chapter 1 deals with the pictures as *religious* films, chapter 2 their status as religious *films*. Chapter 8 expands on several points pertaining to American culture made during the readings.

The first chapter attempts to classify various Jesus films in terms of tradition (whether or not the film in question belongs to a certain era), culture (does it reinforce or counterattack) and ideology (does it construe a certain ideology or reinforce an existing one). This is a classifications

schema which will persist throughout the book, initially presented in boxes, which may *intend* to clarify the relations they exhibit, but seems like an attempt to trap the fluidity of the films into premeditated categories, which appears to be contrary to Walsh's hermeneutical reflections. This placing of the films in their ideological settings serves to define their place in American self presentation and self understanding. And what a place.

In depicting the religious characters in the films as Americans, the earlier Jesus epic films invent the image of America as the righteous empire. In other words, this modern American identity is a Hollywood construction based on Jesus films as an invention of, as well as a result of, a protestant meta-narrative. The chapter tells the story of the evolution of Jesus films and their interaction with American society, politics and especially religion, as this is multiplied, privatised and internalised. Walsh draws attention to Stevens' *The Greatest Story ever Told*, as the most American Jesus film, as it expresses this privatised and internalised faith (but surely plays a part in creating that particular faith as well?) in an American setting (the Wild West) with a Hollywood cast.

The second chapter deals with the death of the epic in a pluralist culture. Jesus is the epic hero who expresses the American worldview. How does one overcome the difficulty of adapting the epic hero to a modern culture without changing Jesus as this change would be meddling with the culture he expresses? The two films which attempted this adaptation of Jesus to modernity, Scorsese's *Last Temptation* and Young's *Jesus* were not well received, because the Jesus was too human. Christ proves to be the saviour of this particular problem, in that the Christ figure provides the possibility for interpretation, and here Walsh points to an interesting reversal in comparison with historical criticism. For whereas scholars replace Christ with an ideologically constructed Jesus, the Jesus films move in the opposite direction and replace Jesus with a divine ideologically constructed Christ figure, which naturally renders authorisation to the absent Jesus figure. Stevens for example replaces Jesus with a Christ who happens to be the ideological spokesperson for the Protestant American metanarrative. This means that the already-ideologically-interpreted Christ is presented directly to the film's recipients giving the illusion of a non-mediated, non-interpreted access to the divine will and testimony.

This is where I miss the disciples. With few exceptions (Judas) the disciples are barely mentioned. Is this due to their insignificance in the films? If so, then surely that absence is important for the reception of the message. Does this not reinforce the above mentioned illusion of a direct unimpeded access to the divine will as constructed by Stevens for example? If the audience does not need the disciples to show how *not* to understand, the interpretative activity required to understand Jesus/Christ has been done for them. Is this because of the difference in mode of presentation? In the final chapter (8) Walsh points out that American Christianity is apocalyptic in nature, which would support the idea of the American audience as the direct recipients of the message, and the community in which the will of God unfolds itself.

The co-readings of the five gospels with five chosen films seen in the light of American self understanding constitute the main part of the book. The connections between the given text, the chosen film and America are not equally apparent but once explained, never appear forced or arbitrary. *The Greatest Story ever Told* is mated with the gospel of John because of their revelation of fantastic otherworldly realities, access to which is only gained through the gospel and the film. Both use familiar cultural myths to convey this other reality to the audience: Stevens the western and John the descending revealer myth. The other reality is a mythical place which is used to

comment on the present reality of the audience and offers a place where the audience/reader may be rejuvenated by tapping into this alternate reality, which is the 'from whence' and 'to wither'. So Stevens's film attempts to call the audience back to a mythical past and a mythic American identity from modernity and industrialised capitalist society. In this mythical past Stevens creates and depicts the religiously internalised, individualised and immortal American. Stevens' Jesus is the epic hero presenting a semi-ascetic ideal that is out of sync with the American audience it attempts to approach. This is resolved by way of Lazarus (ah, here is a disciple/mediator) who is accepted by Jesus as a follower although he is unable to give up his wealth. So Lazarus is the one to be imitated as a follower of the ideal Jesus and legitimises the idea of the wealthy comfortable Christian. According to Stevens, the attitude is what is important, which reinforces the individualised and internalised aspect of Stevens's construction of American religion as some kind of gnostic deification. Walsh sees *The Greatest Story ever Told* as bringing the audience to the hero's world, while John brings the hero to 'our' world, thus making him the stranger. In this respect John may be paralleled with another of Stevens' films, namely the Western *Shane*, in which the lone stranger shows up out of nowhere, restores order and disappears again. In one film, the salvation comes from the outside (*Shane*) in the other from the inside (*The Greatest Story ever Told*). Walsh characterises these films as two versions of the American myth (which somehow suddenly has taken on an autonomous existence bordering on essentialism): the apocalyptic and the gnostic version.

The book's final chapter, Coming to America, develops and discusses these strands of American religion in relation to the Jesus films and films in general, thus providing a coherent ending to the multilayered contents of the book as well as an opening for further reflection on American culture and the role of Hollywood in the construction of American self understanding.