

**The Passion of Jesus Christ**  
*Between Gospel and Movie*

**- THESIS SUMMARY -**

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**KEYWORDS:** Passion of the Christ, Gospel, Movie, Cinematography, Mel Gibson, Film, Theology.

**SUMMARY:**

The subject of the current thesis is *The Passion of the Savior Christ - Between Gospel and Film* and it refers to the theological perspective of the passions and the complexity of Jesus's sacrifice and its meanings and the way this is reflected in film. I believe this is a relevant point of view because, nowadays, many people, Christians or not, often learn more theology and religion from cinema, as film consumers, than from the Bible, or from the Church. This aspect brings me to the importance of spirituality that comes from the theology of those movies that are exposing the life of Jesus, a spirituality that could have a good or a less beneficial influence on the spiritual lives of viewers.

The content of the paper is structured in three main parts, which are divided in turn into 6 broad chapters developed in subchapters, which gives a plus of scientific relevance to the work. Naturally, the paper is preceded by a Preliminaries section and concludes with the final Conclusions, followed by the recording of the Bibliography.

Preliminaries (pages 7-19), the introductory section of the work, is devoted to presenting the bases from which the research begins, the current state of research with an introductory account of some of the main national and international references, the aims of the study and the working techniques used.

Part I - Religion in Modernity: The Representation of Religion in Art - Film (pages 22-59) - includes two main chapters that substantially explore the modern era as a social framework in which cinematography was born and the way in which religion was influenced by the new trend brought along with modernity. At the same time, the chapter Film - a Theological Space? - (pp. 67-112) includes the author's endeavor to describe the characteristics of the transcendental style in film and a few theories according to which film can be viewed from the perspective of a space for theological reflection. These theories were followed by a brief description of how films can influence a person's thinking, state of being, the way they relate to themselves, to those around them, topics that represent a major influence in their life and in the development of their thinking and behavior.

Part II of the paper is the most extensive, (pp.118-179) and refers to the Theology of the Savior's Passions in the Gospels, being structured in three main chapters that talk about the prophecies and forewarnings of the Savior's passions, about the social, religious and political context of the passions and then in detail about the theology of the passions at each evangelist in particular.

Part III of the thesis focused on the Theology of the Savior's Passions in Film, deeply analyzing two of the most watched cinematographic productions that strictly had the Savior's Passions as a subject. These films are "Passion of the Christ" directed by Mel Gibson and "Jesus Christ Superstar" by Norman Jewison.

The Conclusions section of this doctoral thesis (pp. 179 - 184) represents a comprehensive synthesis of the scientific endeavor carried out and a few practical directives of the author regarding the theological analysis of films about the Savior's passions and their relevance from a theological and spiritual perspective.

The working method used in this research is suitable for a doctoral thesis, the information in the content of the work constantly alternating with that from the critical apparatus of the notes, which gives the work the dimension of a reference biblical research. The bibliography used includes relatively recent works and the recourse to patristic references reflects this academic aspect of the working method.

I chose the subject of Jesus's Passions because it is one of the most important in the history of salvation and Christianity. It is the subject that has shocked the most, starting with the people from the time of Christ and continuing with all the generations that followed. At the

same time, even though some writers, like Thomas Hibbs<sup>1</sup> or Graham Green, speak about a crisis of relevance of the film, cinematography is currently the most significant form of art, having a unique omnipresence strong in contemporary culture. Putting these two aspects together, the main objective of this work would be to determine how much filmmakers have managed to express the accuracy of the Theology of Christ's Passions in film - this powerful vehicle of culture, education, leisure time, and of course, propaganda.

Researching a subject originated in the Bible, my intention would be to analyze the most watched films based strictly on the theme of the Savior's Passions in relation to their scriptural sources, and to monitor the way filmmakers have used and treated these sources. I chose to start this journey from the Holy Scripture primarily because it constitutes the main source of information regarding the life of Jesus and the narrative backdrop on which such films are constituted.

At the same time, in the Bible, we find the most complete description of Jesus's so complex portrait as Savior, in which His life and teachings are recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a form that cannot be reproduced through any form of art.

The Passions of the Christ have been related for over 2000 years in various forms and variations, which form the constant basis of traditions and communities spread over the times and cultures, generally subsumed under the keyword of Christianity. The Passions are not only related in Christian communities, but in numerous other areas of society, being adapted and transmitted in a wide variety of ways<sup>2</sup>.

Compared to historical religious artifacts such as archaeological remains, sculptures, or inscriptions of the early centuries, film is a relatively young medium. However, when we look at the history of film and religion, we observe a series of complex connections, and not just at the text, film, or representation level.

So far, over 130 movies have been made about the life of Jesus, most of them faithful to the text of the Scripture. "This is one of the most obvious cases of repetitive cinematic

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas HIBBS, *Is Cinema Art?*, <http://www.thomashibbs.org/16527/is-cinema-art>.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Lloyd BILLINGSLEY, *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film*, Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2000, p. 22.

experience, at this level of reproducing original histories, usually recorded through literary means."<sup>3</sup>

Film is an invention of the modern world. For this reason, one might think that it had the historical chance to finalize the break caused by Enlightenment and the success of Darwin's evolutionary theory between the religious culture of the past and the modern one. However, there are good reasons to believe the opposite, namely the fact that, the world of film has not only not diverted the attention of modern humanity from its religious past, but, on the contrary, due to the mythological character of its specific discourse, it has preserved and even improved the ability to experience verticality and orientation still, even from an individual, existential, and subjective perspective - in a world seemingly homogenized by the absence of absolutes in the knowledge and understanding of the universe.

In addition to its moral value and historical information, the Bible has inspired, over time, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, cinema, and, in a more general way, the way of life of these cultures. It has also influenced cinema. Just two years after its beginnings, with the first drama in film history, based on the Passions of Christ and titled *La Passion du Christ* (1897). The main films that I choose to analyze in my research are the first two most viewed films strictly based on the subject of the Passions of Christ, namely: "Passion of the Christ" (2004) by Mel Gibson and "Jesus Christ Superstar" by Norman Jewison (1973). For a comprehensive analysis in the field of religious films, I will also refer to films such as: "The Last Temptation of Christ" by Martin Scorsese (1988), "The King of Kings" (1927) by Cecil B. DeMille, "Jesus of Nazareth" (1977) or "Life of Brian" (1979) produced by Monty Python, which, although does not present the life of Jesus and contains themes of religious satire, which were controversial at the time of its release, can show an important lesson about the popular and social understanding of Jesus and the reception gaps of religion in society.

It is well known that the most important American cultural hero and religious figure is Christ. But there hasn't been a single history of Jesus in America, as there have been so many different ways to experience Him, both secularly and religiously<sup>4</sup>. Here we add the contribution of films about Christ, which have portrayed Him in so many ways, some of them more based

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<sup>3</sup> Rudolf OTTO, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1926, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Richard WIGHTMAN FOX, *Jesus in America. A History. Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession*, Harper, San Francisco, 2003, p. 27.

on the Bible, and others based on fictional narratives or personal opinions, but far too few actually on theology<sup>5</sup>.

It's hard to say what makes a film about Christ successful. Is it the percentage of how much it is based on the Bible and is faithful to the viable sources that describe the events that took place? Is it the filmmakers' ability to create symbolic images through which they end up constructing the features of the real image of Jesus? I think both are correct, but due to the situation where in a film about the Life of Jesus, the bases are almost unchangeable, it's hard not to create a cliché.

The language and preset scenario doesn't leave enough room for originality, but God wants us to be original and not be stuck into wooden formalism. We could go further and say that spirituality and religious life give humanity the chance to understand Christ's Passion beyond biblical theology, in an original way and perhaps even to present them in an original way, as the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" does, considered by some to be blasphemous, but by others revelatory, even appreciated four decades after its appearance as the best film about Jesus. And this is due to the merit of its smart approach - prudently and without moralizing intentions - to the subject of the Passions<sup>6</sup>.

The Theology of Christ's Passions lies beyond the few scriptural chapters of the New Testament in which the event is largely presented. It lies in the full understanding of God's saving work in the world, described throughout Scripture, understood through the writings of the Holy Fathers, and personally, in everyone's relationship with God.

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<sup>5</sup> **Georges SADOUL**, *Istoria cinematografului mondial. De la origini până în zilele noastre*, Editura Științifică, București, 1961, p.25

<sup>6</sup> **Bernard Brandon SCOTT**, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 10.