



# **Christian Films and the Gospel Truth: A Critique of Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, Roger Young's *the Bible* and Martin Scorsese's *the Last Temptation of Christ***

**Endong Floribert Patrick Calvin**

Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University Of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

**Email address:**

[floribertendong@yahoo.com](mailto:floribertendong@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract:** Being invested with Christian and evangelical themes, Christian films are likely to seriously impact the spiritual being of audiences. They are generally conceived as having a direct or indirect link with the Bible, even when they include disclaimers warning viewers on their directors' departure from the Holy Scriptures. In tandem with this, a fair critique of this category of films will inevitably consider the biblical perspective. Following such a logic/premise, this paper presents a critique of three famous Christian films (*The Last temptation of Christ*, *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Bible: Joseph*), principally from a biblical perspective. Hinging on the auteurist, structuralist and encoding/decoding theories, the paper shows to what extent these three Bible films artfully interpret and deconstruct the Holy Scriptures. It argues that the two first films present contradictory versions of the life and mission of Jesus Christ on earth and contain a high deal of ideological and doctrinal coloration. This coloration tends, at a relatively high degree, to obscure or totally distort the evangelical message of the films. The paper also argues that the third film (Roger Young's *The Bible: Joseph*) is highly sexualized, contrarily to the Bible which depicts sex in a mostly implicit way. From these observations, the paper concludes that, at varying degrees, the various directors are mainly non-scripturalist filmmakers. They seem bent on deconstructing biblical realities.

**Keywords:** Christian Movies, Deconstruction, Auteurist Theory, Structuralism, Film Experience

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## **1. Introduction: Film Interpretation as a Complex and Subjective Experience**

Reading a film – be it religious or not – in a systematic and purposeful way is a somehow tasking and complex exercise. This is due to the fact that filmic text is most often easy to understand but paradoxically difficult to either technically examine or explain [1-10]. The human brain is used to watching movies uncritically, principally to enjoy them (that is for leisure). Furthermore, films – especially those with subliminal, ideological or religious messages – are generally carefully conceived, in a way as to render the constructed nature of the medium practically “invisible”. The various manipulations of film ingredients by filmmakers – mostly for specific purposes – are therefore hardly evident, especially for the lay man. And so, a serious film review and critique automatically demands the consideration of highly technical

and methodic approaches (by the reviewer). Goldberg stresses the complex nature of film reading when he contends that “because a film is constructed of visual, aural, and linguistic components that are manipulated in numerous ways, it is a challenge to take apart the totality of the film experience and to interpret how that experience was assembled”. However, despite these interpretational elusiveness and difficulties/complexities, every viewer has his/her personal film experience, at least at a sensual dimension. As Bordwell insightfully remarks, “we watch films with our eyes and ears, but we experience films with our minds and bodies. Films do things to us, but we also do things with them. A film pulls a surprise; we jump. It sets up scenes; we follow them. It plants hints; we remember them. It prompts us to feel emotions; we feel them” [3]. In a nutshell, everybody has his own film experience.

Experience, as a concept, is principally used in reference to commonsense conceptualizations of what determines

knowledge, forms of expression or culture. Being commonly predicated on the individual person, it is regarded as the prime source of meaning. In effect, experience varies from one person to the other, due to differences in socio-cultural backgrounds, educational, religious, ideological or professional affiliations and orientations and the like. Based on this premise, O'Sullivan *et al* contend that the interpretation or reading of a (media) text – notably a film – will theoretically depend on the audience or reader's experience [11]. As they insightfully put it, "we must pay deference to experience, whether our own or that of a group we wish to study and understand. And any arguments about the 'true significance' or 'quality' of a given text (factual or fictional, analytic or 'creative') are centered on whether or not it is 'faithful' to 'authentic' experience". In tandem with this, it may be safe to argue that one's personal experience and motivations will determine his/her reading and appreciation of a particular media text (notably film). Therefore film experience will vary from one person to the other. Blumer and Hauser put it beautifully in their study of motion-picture's influences on audiences. They contend that:

The variety of influences which motion pictures may exercise arises from the wide range of themes and patterns of conduct which are shown, and the different backgrounds of experience of the observers. Because of their difference in experience, gained mainly from the groups in which they live, persons acquire attitudes which sensitize or immunize them to certain motion picture influence. [12, p. 10]

The reading, interpretation or appreciation of a film by a viewer or critic may therefore be regarded against the background of other social institutions. The community, religious/ideological and social group (s) to which the viewer belongs transmit (s) to him or her certain principles, traditions, customs and forms of thought he or she applies in appreciating media text and in reacting to it. Other important social agents of such a systematic transmission of values are the family, the school, the neighborhood and the church. Based on this premise, this paper aims at reporting this author's film experience, an experience which, rather than being simplistic, will systematically be informed by a number of theories and technical approaches. The paper specifically presents a critique of three Hollywood religious films namely Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Roger Young's *The Bible: Joseph* (1996), and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of The Christ* (1988). The critique will attempt to measure the gap between the selected films and scriptural evidences from which they are directly or indirectly/intrinsically inspired, that is, the paper will examine the extent to which the films are faithful to the Bible from which they are inspired. The critique will equally be based on a certain number of theories of film criticism and media text reception or reading.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two theories of film criticism (namely auteurism and structuralism) as well as on one theory of media text construction and reception namely the encoding-decoding theory. The auteurism theory is literally derived from the French word "auteur" meaning author. It is associated with the French New Wave and the film critics who contributed writings for the influential French Film Review periodical called *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Developed in the 1950s and advocated by film director and film critic François Truffaut, this theory is believed to have grown up "rather haphazardly" being never elaborated in pragmatic terms, in manifesto or collective statement. And due to such an origin it is often interpreted and applied on rather broad lines. Wollen notes that "different critics developed somewhat different methods within a loose framework of common attitudes. This looseness and diffuseness of the theory has allowed flagrant misunderstandings to take root, particularly among critics in Britain and the United States" [13, p. 531]. Wollen further explains differences in conceptualizing the auteur theory when he notes that:

In time, owing to the diffuseness of the original theory, two main schools of auteur critics grew up: those who insisted on revealing a core of meanings, of thematic motifs, and those who stressed style and *mise en scène*. There is an important distinction here [...] The work of the auteur has semantic dimension, it is not purely formal; the work of the realm of performance, of transposing into the special complex of cinematic codes and channels a pre-existing text: a scenario, a book or a play. [...] The meaning of the films of an auteur is constructed a posteriori; the meaning – semantic, rather than stylistic or expressive – of the films of a *metteur en scène* exists a priori. In concrete cases, of course, this distinction is not always clear-cut. There is controversy over whether some directors should be seen as *auteurs* or *metteur en scène*. [13, p. 532]

Though its interpretation has often been subject to controversy, the auteurist theory generally stipulates that a director's film is a reflection of the latter's creative vision as if he were the primary (original) auteur (author). The theory also holds that, in some cases, film producers are considered to have a similar "auteur" role for films they have produced. An auteurist method of film analysis is therefore based on the characteristics of a director's work that make him an auteur, a creator of a film the same as the creator of a work of art.

The structuralist film theory on the other hand emphasizes the way in which films convey meaning through the mobilization of codes and conventions, with analogy to the way in which language is used to construct meaning in communication. In effect, structuralism [in language and cultural studies) could be viewed as an enterprise characterized by the attention to the systems, relations and form (structures) that make meaning possible in any given cultural activity or artifact. It is a theoretical or analytical tool

“dedicated to the systematic elaboration of the rules and constraints that work, like rules of a language, to make the generation of meaning possible in the first place” [11, p. 224]. A structuralist method of film analysis may for instance be centered on understanding how the combination (or sequence) of shots may effectively create an additional idea in the reading and interpretation of a given film. In line with this, a sequence of shots composed of the blank expression on a person’s face followed by an appetizing meal, and then back to the person’s face may express hunger or desire for food, even though such a sequence literally does not carry such a message. Additional or hidden meaning may therefore be very complex to decode. Such a complex decoding is intensified by other variables of film making such as angle, shot duration, lighting, juxtaposition of shots, and cultural context among others.

The third theory considered for this paper is the encoding-decoding theory. This theory is postulated by Stuart Hall. It emphasizes the stages of transformation through which any media message passes on the way from its origins to its reception and interpretation. Though it was originally formulated in relation to television, it can aptly be applied to any mass medium, notably film [14, p. 145]. The theory is centered on two principal assumptions:

- a) Communicators choose to encode messages for ideological purposes and manipulate language and media for those end (media messages are given a preferred reading or what is now called ‘spin’)
- b) Receivers are not obliged to accept or decode messages as sent but can, do resist ideological influence by applying variant or oppositional readings according to their own experience and outlook.

According to this theory, media messages are “encoded” according to established content genre (for instance pop music, news, soap opera, advertising and the like) with a face-value meaning and inbuilt guidelines for interpretation by audience. These messages are read by audiences depending on individual idea, experience and conception of “meaning structure”. This theory therefore recognizes the polysemic nature of media text, the existence of interpretative communities and the primacy of the receiver in determining meaning. A very peculiar aspect of the theory is that meaning, as encoded in the media message does not necessarily or often correspond with meaning as decoded by audience.

### 3. Presentation of the Three Films

#### 3.1. *The Last Temptation of Christ*

Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* is an American-Canadian drama film totally based on novelizations of the Bible and entirely shot in Morocco. It is an adaptation of the controversial novel of the same name published in 1953 by Nikos Kazantzakis. No doubt it includes a disclaimer stating that the film departs from classical portrayal of Jesus’ life and is not based on the gospels. *The Last Temptation of*

*Christ* stars William Dafoe (as Jesus), Barbara Hershey as Mary Magdalene, Harvey Keitel as Judas Iscariot, David Bowie as Pontius Pilate and Harry Dean Stanton as Paul (Saul of Tarsus).

The film depicts the life of Jesus Christ and his terrible struggle with multiple forms of temptation including doubt, fear, lust and intense depression. The film presents the Christ as being terribly tempted by the phantasms of him engaged in diverse sexual acts. The film begins with a man (William Dafoe as Jesus) whispering in despair and being not sure of the salvific mission given to him by God and ends with the second crucifixion and death of Jesus, after the latter’s previous escape from death – to frustrate God’s plan to save mankind – aided by his guarding angel (a young child, who later on will be an incarnation of Satan).

The Last Temptation of Christ has been confronted with a torrent of serious criticisms, especially from fundamental Christian quarters. From its pre-production stage to its release, the film has mostly been branded a blasphemy. Antithetic critiques of the film principally attack it on pure spiritual grounds. In line with this, Gredamus notes for instance that the film is “poisonous morally and spiritually” [15]. It is also worthless as art or entertainment, at least on any theory of art as an object of appreciation. As an artifact of technical achievement, it may be well made; but as a film, it is devoid of redeeming merit”. Similarly, in his critique of the movie, Lusiger Jean-Marie (cited by Gunn), a onetime Archbishop of Paris cracked down on the film arguing that it shocks the sensibilities of millions of people for whom Jesus is more important than their father or mother [16].

On October 1988, a French Christian fundamentalist group initiated a violent protest inside the Saint Michel movie theatre (in Paris) while the film was being screened. Similar condemnations, boycotts, and very vocal protests against were noted in numerous other places in the world. A case in point is the protest organized by a religious Californian radio station which converged 600 protesters to picket the headquarters of Universal Studios’ Parent Company (where the film was produced). The multiple protests and boycotts somehow constituted serious obstacles to the success of the film as they effectively convinced several theatre chains not to screen the film. The film has been banned or censored for many years in a good number of countries including Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, Chile, Singapore and Philippines.

However, despite the multiple protests and criticisms against it, the film has been praised by a number of critics notably Ebert Roger who included it in his list of “Great Movies” [17]. Ebert commends the film as he argues that it (the movie) pays Christ “the compliment of taking him and his message seriously”. To him, Scorsese and his screenwriter (Paul Schrader) “made a film that does not turn Jesus into “a garnish emasculated image from a religious postcard. Here [in the film] he is flesh and blood struggling, questioning, asking himself and his father which is the right way and finally, after great suffering, earning the right to say on the cross ‘it is accomplished’” [17]. Recognizing the artistic and thematic merit of the film, Scorsese received an

Academic Award nomination for best director and Barbara Hershey earned a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress for playing the role of Mary Magdalene. Harvey Keitel's performance as Judas Iscariot similarly earned him a Golden Raspberry Award for Worst Supporting Actor nomination.

### 3.2. *The Bible: Joseph*

*The Bible: Joseph* is a 1995 American/German/Italian television movie directed by Roger Young. The movie is based on James Carrington's novel and depicts the life of Joseph (son of Jacob) in the light of the Old Testament (the book of Genesis). Joseph's story in the Bible is arguably viewed as one of the most wonderful narratives in the Holy Scriptures. It is all about the life of a young Semite shepherd sold to slavery by his jealous brothers and who, with the aid of God, rises from his retched position (of slave) to that of the revered governor of Egypt. Roger Young's movie stars Paul Mercurio, Ben Kingsley, Martin Landau and Lesley Ann Warren respectively as Joseph, Potiphar, Jacob and Potiphar's wife. The film starts with the selling of Joseph as a slave and ends with the reception of Joseph's family and people into Egypt. The film is characterized by a long flash back from the scene where Joseph is accused to have sexually assaulted the wife of Potiphar. This flash back enables the director revisit the origins of the Semite slave.

*The Bible: Joseph* may not have known an outstanding commercial success. However, it has won a number of awards including the Primetime Emmy Award (outstanding miniseries) and the Writers Guild of America among others. The film has virtually not attracted much attention from critics, except that of Endong and Obongawan [18]. These critics point the relative sexualisation of the film and the consequent departure of the director from biblical evidences. They principally note the film's deviation from the mainly purist style adopted by the Bible to depict sex.

### 3.3. *The Passion of the Christ*

*The Passion of the Christ* – otherwise referred to as *The Passion* – is a 2004 American epic biblical drama film directed by Mel Gibson. It stars Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ, Luca Lionello as Judas Iscariot, Maia Morgenstern as Mary, Hristo Shopov as Pontius Pilate, Rosalinda Celentano as Satan and Monica Bellucci as Mary Magdalene. Being principally inspired by the four Gospels of the New Testament and some non-biblical material (for instance the devotional writings attributed to Blessed Anne and other Roman Catholic mystics), the film depicts the passion of Jesus Christ – Christ's final 12 hours on earth. The film starts with Jesus' fervent prayer and agony in the garden of Gethsemane and ends with a brief depiction of His resurrection in the nude, in the sepulchre. It is characterized by successive flashbacks of Jesus as a child, the beatitudes (teaching in the mountain), the saving of Mary of Magdala (by Jesus) from the capital punishment, the last supper among others.

*The passion* is believed to be one of the major evangelical

efforts done through the instrumentality of cinema. As Rhodes insightfully puts it "whatever you may feel about the movie, one thing is certain: One man, in one year, with his own money, has done more to preach the gospel (as he understands it) than many churches dedicated to preach the gospel as their primary reason for existence (1)". *The Passion* has equally been a major commercial hit from its theatrical release. No doubt it is, today, considered as the highest grossing R-rated film in the United States history [16, 19-20]. The film has equally won numerous prestigious accolades and nominations. Despite its commercial success and acclaims, the film has received a mixed review. Most of the virulent criticisms against the film are centred on the extreme violence depicted in it. Over 52 minutes into the film, the viewer is offered an excruciatingly long experience (a horrible scene where Jesus is flogged for over twelve minutes). The scene is even exacerbated by a temporal absence of music. Critics claim that this violence seriously obscures the evangelic message of the film and indirectly breeds anti-Semitism. Other critics have likewise questioned the non-biblical sources from which the production is partially inspired. Fulco in Shepherd corroborates this fact in his assertion that "what Mel is doing is the Gospel according to Mel. People have said that sarcastically in critiques of [*The Passion of the Christ*], but in fact that's not a bad expression. He also saw a historical event which [...] suggested to him that human suffering can have a redemptive quality" [20, p. 325].

Most of the critiques made on the films seem to revolve around these three principal points (the extravagant violence depicted in the narrative, the film's potential in provoking anti-Semitism and the non-biblical inspiration of the film). It is safe to observe that critics – for the most part – virtually overlook the director's depiction of sex. Wieseltier (cited in Gunn) is perhaps one of the few critics to have associated this violence with pornography. Wieseltier describes *The Passion* as "a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film" and a kind of "pious pornography" [16]. His reading of the film has led to the (re)introduction of the concept of "violence porn" which seeks to establish a link between violence and sexuality. As used in film criticism, the concept refers to the degree of visceral impact violence –depicted in a film – has on spectator's body. A number of critics therefore argue that *The Passion* has all what it takes to organise fantasies and stimulate the bodies of spectators [18, p. 19].

## 4. Our Critique of the Three Movies

### 4.1. *The Last Temptation of Christ and the Passion of the Christ*

In our critique, we find ample need to juxtapose the two above mentioned movies as they more or less have the same thematic definition or composition, and are, at varying degrees, based on novelizations of the Bible. The two films present contradictory versions of the life and mission of Jesus Christ on earth and contain a high deal of ideological and

doctrinal coloration. Our critique will therefore be based on the directors' implicit attitudes towards scriptural facts (the Bible) and the films as reflection of the directors' respective religious orientation (s).

#### 4.1.1. The Films' Contents Versus Biblical Truth/Evidences

As has earlier been observed, the two films seriously depart from biblical evidences and somehow (re)present arguable (re)interpretations and deconstructions of scriptural facts and Christian imageries. They therefore constitute kinds of food for thought and attractive subjects to (re)animate the ever-existing debate on the inspired nature of the Holy Scriptures and the seriousness of their contents. By presenting the Christ as an unstable and fallible hero (character) which is strongly subjected and made to sometimes succumb to various forms of temptation, Scorsese principally emphasizes the human nature of Christ, a fact which is often subtly "downplayed", "neglected" or slightly/scantily raised in most filmic and literary depictions of Jesus Christ. Even the Bible arguably downplays this nature of the Christ. In effect, the Holy Scriptures certainly present Jesus Christ mostly as God made human (John 1: 1-6; Philippians 2:5-8) and a being which is susceptible to be tempted (Mathew 4: 1-7) [21]. However, very little is said about His natural drives (desires). One of the very rare scriptural instances wherein the human nature of Jesus Christ is portrayed include Matthew 26: 37-42 (where Jesus "apparently" expressed fear/doubt in the face of crucifixion (death) and, being in agony, He prayed God saying "*O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done*"). A similar instance is John 11:35 where Jesus is reported to have wept because of the compassion he had for Lazarus His good friend, who died and was resurrected by the Messiah.

The lack of scriptural details has motivated most directors of Jesus films to tap from inspirational novelizations of the Bible (to apparently fill this vacuum) or highly depend on purely personal ingenuity and intuitions [19, p. 87; 18, p. 19]. Meanwhile, these novelizations are hardly authoritative. Some of these novelizations are even misleading or concurrent to the logic and analogy of the Christian faith. Against such novelizations, the Bible warns that "*As I besought thee, [...] that thou migtest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do*". The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines a fable as a story that teaches moral lesson, especially those with animals as characters. It also defines the phenomenon as a "statement or an account of something which is not true". Novelizations are similar to fables in that they are partially creative in nature and rest on "fabricated stories" and "invented claims", call it make beliefs.

The Christ presented in Scorsese's film is purely human, and a veritable incarnation of the carnal man described in 1 Corinthians 2:14 as someone who "*receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him. Neither*

*can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*". This is very much illustrated by the fact the Christ, as presented in Scorsese's film, is one who is not sure of himself and who in some instances even ignores or doubts the plans of God. In short, Scorsese's Christ is paradoxically a "non-Christ personae". From many indications, the personality of Christ and his spiritual profile are seriously deconstructed. The film equally deconstructs most Christian myths and therefore stands as a counter narrative/myth to the Bible. No doubt it attracted serious and violent protests, boycotts and bans from Christian fanatics.

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* similarly departs from biblical evidences in favor of catholic mystics. In effect, a good number of scenes in the movie constitute marginal and unbiblical ingredients visibly aimed at enriching the aesthetics of the film. Good examples include Satan tempting and perturbing Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, children morphing into little demons while taunting Judas Iscariot (in reproach and retribution to his betrayal against Jesus), an androgynous Satan stalking Jesus in the Jewish mob, Mary mother of Jesus desperately attempting to rescue and console Jesus while the latter is on the way to Calvary and a crow plucking out the bad thief's eye among others. It has been argued that most of these marginal ingredients are "traditional Catholic accretions filtered through Emmerich to Gibson" [19, p. 78]. Other similar elements are inspired by a number of familiar pious traditions, that are mostly glaringly unbiblical.

*The Passion* indirectly legitimizes the Marian devotion (a catholic doctrinal practice) as it makes the viewers not only to see Christ's crucifixion from the eyes of Mary (His mother), but projects Mary as a sacred icon in Christendom. With subtle juxtaposition and sequences of shots, the director attempts to establish a strong, spiritual and unbreakable relationship between Jesus Christ and Mary. After the arrest of Jesus by His detractors, Mel Gibson uses a sequence of shots which clearly illustrates this sacred son-mother relationship between Jesus and Mary: Jesus in an underground prison, followed by Mary in at top of the prison, exactly at the same trajectory with Jesus, then back to Jesus. This sequence somehow compels the viewer to consider and over-price or over praise Mary's spirituality and piety as well as distinctness among other Jesus' friends, since none of His disciples does same. Similarly, towards the end of the film – just before the resurrection scene – Gibson offers the viewer another captivating sequence of shots where Jesus' body is removed from the cross and handed to Mary. Mary holding the corpse (as in traditional icons and posters of holy Mary carrying baby Jesus), stares profoundly the camera – visibly to attract attention and lay emphasis on the scene. This particular shot containing only Mary and Jesus is made to have a moderately longer duration. This shot of course captures catholic imageries and symbols which accord Mary a central position in the life of Jesus. The technique systematically "sacralizes" the relationship between The Christ and Mary mother of Jesus.

#### 4.1.2. The Films as Reflections of the Director's Doctrinal Orientations

The films are definitely products of the respective visions of the two directors who visibly sought to artfully and fruitfully depart from traditional religious narratives and Christian myths/traditions. Like most of his previous films, *The Last Temptation of Christ* translates Scorsese's catholic inclination and more especially his philosophy of life which very much is affected by his experience. Scorsese is known to have being an ex-seminarian who specialized in religious filmmaking after his failure to gain admission into Fordham School of theology. His life and personal struggles are overwhelming reflected in his films, principally through themes (notably guilt, search for redemption, struggle to dominate sin). His principal characters (notably in his films *Who is knocking at my door?* (1968), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and even in *The Last temptation of Christ* have a connection with him and seem to be replicating his personal life and religious experience. Blake has somehow endorsed this fact in his observation that: Scorsese's movies "are really a Catholic medium [...] Catholics have been [...] over-represented in the creative side" [22]. Blake further associates Scorsese's style to a tradition common among Catholic filmmakers.

From an early age, Catholics learn to tame the mysteries of life and death with the hardware of the material universe. By dealing with the here-and-now rather than fleeing it, Catholic filmmakers allow their characters to seek a form of redemption in their day-to-day struggles... Coppola and Scorsese have their heroes wrestle with the conflict between tribal loyalties to the family or the mob and their own personal integrity, but they too find redemption... All their characters seek personal integrity and redemption in the midst of a community. Their struggles are rarely couched in spiritual terms, but they are invariably religious quests with milestones along the way marked by Catholic images. The Catholic imagination is more than catholic, more than sacramental - it is profligate. It sees the workings of grace everywhere. [22, p. 45]

In *The Last temptation of Christ*, one easily perceives Scorsese's desire to make a relatively religious (spiritual) film out of a controversial and visibly blasphemous source, just to remain faithful to his personal tradition (that of producing religious films). Though containing a disdainer which warns viewers of the film not being historically and theoretically accurate, *The Last Temptation of Christ* remains an overwhelmingly biblical movie, centered on an arguable depiction of Jesus Christ – which, certainly, may not be shared by all Catholics – but which fervently calls/invites viewers to seriously probe theories stipulating that the Bible is inspired. It may somehow be inferred that *The Last temptation of Christ* is a kind of self fabricated consolation for Scorsese who, having failed to achieve his ambition of becoming "minister of God" (a pastoral figure), created a filmic failure of Jesus, a fallible hero who succumbs to temptation and lives a rather carnal live. The Character of

Jesus portrayed in *The Last temptation of Christ* is that of Scorsese: a man who struggles to reach difficult and complex goals and is circumstantially deviated by earthly forces. Roark is therefore somehow right in his observation that "Scorsese's movies have been a lucid autobiography of his convictions and his struggles" [23].

Mel Gibson's films similarly departs from traditional Jesus films which appear more accommodating as they often include the birth, life, crucifixion (death) and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His film concentrates exclusively on the passion of Christ, a phase of the life of Christ which, though crucial, is often downplayed and subtly avoided (in most Jesus films), seemingly because of its brutal and gloomy nature. Though being redemptive for mankind, the passion of Christ is partially viewed as cruel, sad, "unbearable" (to viewers) and inherently complex to depict. However, Gibson's film is graphically centered on this sad event and it depicts crude violence. The brutal violence depicted in the film is susceptible to obscure the evangelic message carried by the narrative. Such an obscuring may affect non-Christian viewers' reception of the message.

By concentrating principally on the concluding part of the life of Jesus, Mel Gibson seems to primordially target informed Christian viewers (pockets of viewers who are already somehow versed with the whole story of Jesus). Or Gibson's film assumes that the average viewer is versed with scriptural evidences. In effect, only an informed viewer will adequately make sense of the narrative, since preliminary information is theoretically needed to understand a good number of actions constituting the plots for instance, the circumstances under which Judas betrays Jesus, the rage of the Jewish priests (the Sanhedrin) who are bent on selling Jesus "to 'save' the multitude", and Jesus' act of surrendering his life as a sacrificial lamb among other elements of the plot. The successive flashbacks systematically mobilized by the director do not actually provide this illumination but rather constitute some of the film's aesthetic features. Based on this, *The Passion* could be viewed as the bearer of an evangelic message essentially targeted at converted Christian and not for those that are really non-converted. It may hardly serve a missionary purpose, contrary to Rhode's argument [24, p. 1-2].

*The Passion* equally translates the doctrinal orientation of Mel Gibson, which is traditional Catholicism, a spiritual current often "relegated" to an old fashioned version of the Catholic faith [16, 19]. As has been argued earlier, Gibson is far from being a "scripturalist". He steps out from scriptures just to find inspiration in Catholic myths, pious traditions and Catholic devotional sources (for instance Emmerich's visions), therefore presenting a mostly devout modern Catholic film. *The Passion* could therefore be viewed as a medium of the Catholic doctrine. Given such a predominantly Catholic nature of his message, one inevitably wonders how Gibson could successfully secure the support of fundamentalist Protestants in the production of the film.

#### 4.2. The Bible: Joseph

Roger Young's *The Bible: Joseph* attempts to combine both creativity and relative adherence to the Holy Scriptures. Being based on another novelization of the Holy Scriptures, the film actually does not escape from traditional criticisms often formulated against non-scriptural Christian narratives. One way in which the film departs from biblical scriptures is its relatively explicit depiction of sex – especially in the director's interpretation of the amorous relation between Joseph and his master's wife. Such an interpretation is visibly contrary to the Bible's implicit depiction of sex.

In effect, most versions of the Bible generally use a purist rather than a prurient approach/language in depicting sex. A good example of version of the Bible with a purist inclination is the "King James Version". The purist language observed in these versions is most often metonymic or euphemistic. Metonym is a figure of speech in which the thing really meant is represented by something synonymous or closely associated with it [25, p. 44]. Euphemism on the other hand is a rhetorical technique consisting in using "soft language" to depict what is relatively awful and repugnant. Wehmeir and Ashby define it as an indirect word or phrase that is used often to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant, sometimes to make it seem more acceptable than it really is. The use of such metonymic and euphemistic language aims visibly at avoiding the expressions to sound obscene and thus represent examples of "linguistic decency" [26, p. 395]. It has amply been argued that sex and sexuality is an embarrassing subject to most Christians. Talking about it in a metonymic language makes it less obscene.

The linguistic purism characterizing biblical scriptures is viewed in its referring to sex as the act of "lying (with someone)", or "knowing someone" (Genesis 4:1, Deteronomy 22:22-25) [21]. Other euphemistic expressions often used in the Bible to respectively refer to sex and sexual violence include "to go into (a woman) and "to defile a woman" (for instance, in Genesis 38:2). Despite the fact certain books or extracts of the Bible (notably Salomon 7:1-12, and Proverbs 7:10-22) somewhat emphasize romance and sex, mostly the Bible depicts sex and sexuality in a sensible and implicit way. We also recognise that some versions of the Bible notably the Watchtower's New Word Translation tend to depict sex in a rather explicit way (White 2005:102). However, the majority of the versions of the *Holy Bible* are relatively sex sensible. The relatively purist approach the Bible uses aims unarguably at developing a peculiar style and avoiding using a language that could be perceived as obscene.

In *The Bible: Joseph*, Young seems – like most filmmakers specialised in religious movies – to be confronted with the difficulty of vividly interpreting sections of the biblical text that particularly suggest sex, without using sex explicit depiction. This is evidenced by his interpretation of Potiphar's wife's desire for a sexual encounter with Joseph and her sexual harassment of the slave. The Bible verse (Genesis 39: 7-12) been interpreted states the following:

And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph said unto him, lie with me but he refused and said unto his master's wife behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house and he hath committed all that he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife [...] and it came to pass, as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her. And it came to pass about this time, that Joseph went into the house to do his business and there was none of the men of the house there within and she caught him by his garment saying lie with me: and she caught him by his garment saying lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand and fled, and got him out. [21]

To show the master's wife's sustained desire for sexual adventure with Joseph, the producer uses sex scenes where in Lesley Ann Warren – starring as Potiphar's wife – visibly masturbates on seeing Joseph or makes serious advances to Joseph or sexually assaults him on countless occasions. The seemingly most audacious of these sex scenes is when the master's wife (Potiphar's wife) pays a surprise visit to the slave (Joseph) in the latter's private abode. The visitor makes advances, sexually harasses the slave and threatens him. The victim resists on the first instance and at a point, seems to yield, being terribly pressurized and harassed. The female sexual predator caresses his body (his shoulders, his chest) manifesting orgasm. She attempts reaching out for the victim's genitals (off camera) but he firmly resists her. This scene is the major depiction of sex in the film and certainly the most audacious.

Another sex scene is offered the viewer in the interpretation of Judah's sexual encounter with Timmah (her daughter in law, here disguised as a prostitute). The instance is described in Genesis 38:15-18 thus:

When Juda saw, he thought her to be an harlot because she had covered her face. And he turned unto her by the way, and said go to I pray thee, let me come in unto thee [...] An she said what will thou give me, that thou mayest come in into me? And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. An she said, wilt thou give a pledge, till thou send it? [...] He gave it to her and came in unto her and she conceives by him. [21]

Sex depiction in this scene is not as "daring" as in the former, but prurience is to an extent dished out to the audience. Timmah undresses her "customer" and pulls her robe to expose her bosom as to suggest the sexual act. These three scenes indisputably represent relative deviation from the purist style adopted in the original text from which the film is inspired, though the idea (concept) presented in the original seems untouched. It goes without saying that such a depiction has potentials of provoking sexual arousal. Contrarily to such films as Sorcees' *The Last Temptation of Christ* which enjoys a vast literature pointing to serious criticisms against the sexualisation of the religious narrative, literature available does not say much about how the public

has reacted to the sex scenes in Young's *The Bible: Joseph*. It is however safe to observe that the depiction of sex in this film – the same as in Gibson's *The Passion* – is a consequence of the lack of details given by the Bible. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, there is no other vivid approach to interpreting the intense sexual desire Potiphar's wife has. To borrow Coates's words, the sexualisation of Christian films and the reliance of religious filmmakers on meta-textual facts can be viewed as a question of film aesthetics rather than theology. Coates argues that "Whether religious films should ever be so hyperbolically literal or, if they are, whether they are still religious—and not just visceral gross-outs—are questions of the cinema's interaction with religious imagery" [19, p. 80].

## 5. Conclusion

Christian movies – notably Bible films – are not just art for art sake, but art for evangelization. As the other forms of Christian communication, they are, in principle, construed as a category of artistry which is divinely inspired and produced (exclusively) by practicing Christians, invested with Christian themes/messages and seriously impacting the spiritual being of audiences. Christian films therefore have a direct or indirect link to the Bible, even when they include disdainers clearly warning viewers on their director's departure from the Holy Scriptures. In tandem with this, a fair critique of this category of films will inevitably consider the biblical perspective.

This paper has critiqued three famous Christian films (*The Last temptation of Christ*, *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Bible: Joseph*) principally from a biblical perspective. It showed to what extent these three Bible films artfully interpret and deconstruct the Holy Scriptures. The paper argues that the two first films present contradictory versions of the life and mission of Jesus Christ on earth and contain a high deal of ideological and doctrinal coloration. This coloration obscures to a high degree the evangelical side of the films. The paper also argue that the third film is highly sexualized, contrarily to the bible which depict sex in a mostly implicit way. From these observations, the paper concludes that, at varying degrees, the various directors are mainly non-scripturalist filmmakers.

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