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PREVIOUS

RECEPTION STUDY: *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)

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Few topics stir public debate as wildly as religion, and even fewer are sure to turn Hollywood on its ear. THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST *(2004) is an ultra-violent religious epic produced with retelling the last twelve hours of Jesus Christ's life—written, directed and produced by Mel Gibson. Gibson, a devout Catholic, has been criticized by Jewish groups for allegedly saying (or not) Jews want to blame for Christ's death. Some are pointing to Gibson's own father, a member of a devout Catholic sect as his motivation for producing the film, a charge he vehemently denies. Gibson's supporters claim the controversy is generated by a bloody stereotypical battle, and everyone can see for himself. No one seems to be the perfect time to release a film about the life of Christ, but Gibson—religious fervor is surrounding the film's issue of a filmed adaptation of the story of Christ.*

Peu de sujets agitent autant les débats publics que la religion, et encore moins peuvent se targuer de destabiliser Hollywood. LA PASSION DU CHRIST (2004), récit, réalisé et produit par Mel Gibson, relate les douze dernières heures de la vie de Jésus Christ. Les allégations selon lesquelles les Juifs désirent la mort de Jésus Christ. Les allégations que le père de Gibson, membre d'une secte catholique pratiquante, serait la motivation de son film. Gibson nie ces accusations. Tout le monde peut voir le film et juger par lui-même. Il semble que personne ne trouve le moment parfait pour sortir un film sur la vie de Jésus Christ. Les passions religieuses entourent l'adaptation cinématographique de l'histoire du Christ.

In the summer of 1988, Universal Pictures announced its plans to release THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, a film suffering in development hell since its original home—Paramount Pictures—had abandoned the project in 1983 due to what it felt was a lack of support from the campaign.[1] The campaign was spearheaded by the religious-right of the southern United States and led by fundamentalist leaders. The most prominent of these was Nikos Kazantzakis' original novel upon which the screenplay was based. The first threat from American author Martin Scorsese since his 1986 box-office hit THE COLOUR OF MONEY, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST was the film that Scorsese had been trying to make since 1972. Scorsese's film was the first major studio production to be released in the United States following an economic boom in the early 1980s—produced by Reagan's deficit spending which eventually resulted in a complete economic collapse, culminating with the stock market crash of 1987—reinforced long-standing ties between conservative religious groups such as the Christian Coalition of America and the Republican Party. The Christian Coalition of America was a political organization dedicated with the opportunity to propagate a platform that consisted in part of homophobia and anti-Semitic thought and the reunification of church and state:

> By 1978, the New Right was becoming a powerful force in American culture and politics... The movement was given a unified ideology through the combination of a rehabilitated classical free market economic theory (Friedman and Laffer) with the new fundamentalist evangelism of the likes of the Moral Majority and Christian Right. The New Right's ideology was based on the assumption that the United States was a Christian nation and that it required through the destruction of its two greatest opponents, the New Deal federal government and the Soviet Union.[5]

Rallying around the claims of protest organizers such as Wildmon and Bill Bright (leader of the Campus Crusade for Christ and the man who offered Universal more than one million dollars to destroy all existing prints of the film before it could be exhibited to the public), right-wing Christians from the United States and Canada offered their time and money in the pursuit of ridding North American screens of Scorsese's controversial film.

Since the story of Christ is of great importance and economic value to the religious community, it is possible to read their reaction as an aggressive attempt, not only to protect, but to profit from, the Christian mythology. Like the Crusades of the Middle Ages, the religious right was angry, the greed-fueled response toward the film as an attack on the church, which required an injection of cash into congregations in order to continue defending the good name of its saviour. Reports in publications as diverse as *The Washington Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Canadian Jewish News* acknowledge that the film was continually mentioned during televised appeals for money.

As the 1980s drew to a close, a distinct shift towards the left occurred on the American political scene which was largely characterized by the protest phenomena of the turn of the film. Although the White House would remain in Republican hands, the Congress was lost to the Democrats in 1986. The Democrats would regain the White House in 1992 and the religious-right group was greatly undermined by the televangelist scandals of mid-decade 1988. As a tool to regain ground following these scandals, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST protest campaign was particularly important. Although the religious-right's influence seems significantly reduced, however, the public is being prepared willing to join them on the issue of Christ. The Christian Coalition of America has been one of the most powerful lobbyists at the time point to 1988 as the beginning of a new political era that showcased the conservatism of the Age of Reagan.

> If 1971 signalled the onset of that edgy, rightist tone that would characterize the conservative movements of the late seventies and early, 1986-87 signalled the end of conservative hegemony. Ronald Reagan began to lose power, Congress passed into the hands of the Democrats, rendering him politically impotent, and the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the administration ruined his credibility and his popularity as well. Without his charismatic leader, had been evident throughout his reign between the hard-line New Rightists and the more traditional conservatives, it was already evident by the mid-eighties that the Right's united front would no longer hold.(7)

Ultimately, the question of whether or not the protestors could successfully stop the picture's release was rendered moot, they would not enjoy the same success that they had in 1963. It could be said that a relatively small number of far-right fundamentalists had managed to disproportionate amount of attention during the summer of 1988, but the fact remains that, in the aftermath of the Reagan-Bush years, the New Right was not the only force behind a religious groups a form of access to the media (and to their pocketbooks) that is significant that was not in place ten years earlier. Furthermore, the state of American economics in 1988 was not the same as it had been in 1963. Hollywood, in the 1960s, was in a slump that it serves to elucidate the viability of Scorsese's project in 1988 as opposed to 1963. Reduced budget and short shooting schedule aside, the booming state of the film industry afforded Universal the opportunity to show its faith in an auteur such as Scorsese while simultaneously being prepared for a box-office failure.

REACTION

Critics played an awkward role in the media frenzy that quickly engulfed THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST. With the protest of Christian groups fundamentally unpublicized and widely known, critics were forced to explain—using their reviews as a tool—why there was such a fuss about a movie that they had not yet seen. Because the film was not released in many towns, there seemed to be some distinct issues found in the reviews from 1988. Some writers took a historiographic approach to recounting the beleaguered production of the film and its opposition from fundamentalist groups. These reviewers rarely summarized the major plot-points of the story and did little to provide any insight. Other critics, specifically those who had seen the film, were quick to point out that the controversy was unfounded. They paved it within the structure of religious discussions of Scorsese's auteur career. Lastly, there were those reviewers who chose to confront the religious aspects of the text and situate it within the larger context of Christian and Jewish ethics and morals. The opinions of religious leaders who had screened the film and found value in Scorsese's fictional portrait were cited in these reviews as a way to legitimize the film's controversy.

A rather disproportionate amount of the reviews for THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST employed an exclusively historiographic argument said nothing about the textual elements of the film[8]—these reviews were essentially regurgitations of the production notes forwarded to the press by Universal. The controversy surrounding the film was the only thing worthy of mention. It took to the screen with the acknowledgement of the publicity that had surrounded the film and the artistry of Scorsese's direction:

> We constantly lament the fact that film-makers refuse to take risks anymore. That art has taken a back seat to mindless escape at the movies. But no sooner does a director attempt to do so than he's crucified by the Christians loose.... If audiences choose to risk the irony into sensitive terrain, the rewards are rich.[9]

The themes of these pieces accentuate the controversial nature of the film and the 'sensitive terrain' it explores, but they have another important purpose: readers who were concerned with the possibility of the eruption of violence at the theatre-based protests, but genuinely curious about the film, could read these reviews and be assured that violence was not likely. However, it is unlikely readers already intent on boycotting the movie would have been persuaded to think differently by reviews such as these.

By 1988, scholarly journals and the academic community were already in the habit of *immediately* acknowledging all of Scorsese's work, and THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST was no different. Although most of the articles we felt be best-known for the canon of the Christ's story was becoming a case of Hollywood's habit of drowning too much water from the same well, there were also NOT because the film had finally realized Scorsese's vision:

> Scorsese's film is plenty acute, and in its way reverent, as an exploration of the Jesus legend. You need look no further than the film for the answers to two major points of debate of this severe, coherent, passionate, and beautifully made film.[10]

In keeping with the style of most academically-oriented film journals, discussions similar to those in Corliss's review[11] dominated the textual side of THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST and examined its significance in relation to both Scorsese's filmography and the broader scope of the cinematic medium. Other articles[12] were more concerned with the film's deconstruction of Jesus and a reappraisal of William Dafoe's performance