JESUS IN THE MOVIES: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED FILMS FROM 1912-2004

Aaron V. Burton

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Committee:
John J. Makay, Advisor
Maureen E. Wilson
Graduate Faculty Representative
Alberto Gonzalez
Thomas A. Mascaro
ABSTRACT

John J. Makay, Advisor

The purpose of this investigation is to discuss popular film interpretations of Christ’s life and how the films’ narratives function rhetorically. These films become part of the rhetorical dialogue and add to the discussion of Christianity. Using Fisher’s (1984) Narrative Paradigm, a thematic and character analysis is conducted identifying the common themes of sacrifice and vengeance, noting the progress in the Christ character. Six films have been selected for analyses that represent both the successes and failures of the Christ Film genre. The films selected are *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). In addition, the investigation seeks to understand each film in the particular period that it was produced. Using rhetorical analysis and history data, this investigation attempts to understand the ways that films about Jesus aid in spreading the message of the Gospels.
Dedicated to Mom and Dad
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This investigation began in the fall of 2004 with a narrative criticism of *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Originally developed for a graduate seminar, it was eventually presented at the Ohio Communication Association’s annual conference in Dayton, OH in 2005. This study is concerned with how Mel Gibson uses graphic scenes of suffering and shocking imagery in the film to serve his rhetorical purpose of eliciting change in the audience. In order to answer this question, four themes were identified and analyzed: accept Christ, God vs. Satan, we killed Christ and take action against unjust practices (Burton, 2005).

Based on suggestions from conference participants and faculty members, the study was further developed to include *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). The intent of this study was to show the differences in the films. However, as the project progressed it became clear that rhetorically the films contained more similarities than differences. The study became much broader in scope; in addition to the themes, setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, casual relations, and audience were analyzed and striking similarities emerged in all categories. This study was presented at the Association of Journalism and Mass Communication’s Annual Midwinter Conference held in 2006 at Bowling Green, OH (Burton, 2006).

As the project continued to develop, the themes were narrowed to sacrifice and vengeance. Based on additional feedback, it became apparent that similarities identified in theme and the Christ character were the most compelling results in the second study. *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) are typically viewed as polar opposites in terms of filmmaker perspective and political ideology. Since similarities exist
between these two films this begs the question, are the themes common in the Christ Film genre as a whole (Burton, 2006).

Christianity’s core beliefs are closely aligned with America’s democratic government and culture. Research has consistently shown that America is far more religious than all advanced, industrial, democratic countries (Buddenbaum & Stout, 1996). According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2004, 84% of Americans identify themselves as Christian. While only 9% identify with no religion of any kind. Religion is very important in the lives of 59% of Americans, with 34% attending a church service at least once a week (Newport, 2004).

America is also a media driven culture. The use of various types of media takes up a large portion of the average American’s day, for example the television is generally turned on for six hours per day. The consumption of messages via mass media has steadily increased and this trend will likely continue. Religion is a major influence in politics, the daily life of Americans, and mass media content and consumption. Those who attend church regularly are also larger consumers of media such as television, newspapers, and magazines. Religious people also tend to be more likely to consume media that supports their ideology (Buddenbaum & Stout, 1996).

This merger between religion and media can be seen in popular culture. Religion is present and thriving in all forms of media and popular culture. In literature it can be seen in Dan Brown’s *Angles & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* and LaHaye and Jenkins’s *Left Behind* book series, on television *Joan of Arcadia* and 7th *Heaven*, and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) on the big screen (Forbes & Mahan, 2005).

Christian stories have mass appeal, whether fiction or non-fiction. Since the beginning of the motion picture industry filmmakers have attempted to put the Bible on screen. These first Biblical films were a series of short one-reel versions of the Passion plays that date back to 1897
(Campbell & Pitts, 1981). The subject matter is still of interest to audiences and these films are continuing to be made today. Christianity as a subject is one of the oldest used by the motion picture industry.

Biblical films appear in nearly every form and genre the motion picture industry has developed. The Bible is the source for films from silent, black & white, color, comedy, drama, and even pornography, as in the case of the Mitchell Brothers’ *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Whatever the form, audiences never seem to tire of the subject matter (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). Often these films are referred to as Biblical Epics. Biblical Epics can be divided into three subcategories: the Old Testament Epic, the Christ Film, and the Roman/Christian Epic (Babington & Evans, 1993).

Biblical Epics and the subcategories are genres of film. In rhetoric, genre is any group of artifacts that share similar characteristics that set them apart from other artifacts. A genre can influence or restrict a rhetor’s message and the audience’s response to an artifact. An artifact’s inclusion into a particular genre depends on three elements. First are situational elements, which invoke a unique rhetorical response. Second artifacts contain stylistic elements that are uniquely rhetorical. These rhetorical elements are selected by the rhetor or filmmaker to retort the situational elements. Third are organizational elements. These are the overarching roots that tie the other elements together placing the artifact into a genre (Foss, 2004).

Genre can be defined as order. Humans organize items or pieces of information so each can be more easily recalled or dealt with. As discussed in many basic communication courses this organization allows humans to take short cuts in responding to daily stimuli. Decisions are not made in isolation of our past experience but using past experience allows for the quick
response in a particular situation based on our experiences with past interactions or information (Kaminsky, 1985, Robinson, 2000).

In the more confined terms of the artifacts in this dissertation, genre involves organizing creative products in the form of rhetorical acts and artifacts (Robinson, 2000). Genre is used to provide some structure to the many texts available in the culture for ease of identification for the artists and audiences (Fiske, 1987). Michael Robinson (2000) describes genre as “a particularly useful shorthand in media-saturated cultures such as contemporary America” (p. 2).

Genre traditionally has been of particular interest and useful in the analysis and understanding of popular culture for both academics and critics. Genre enables the understanding of an artifact or set of artifacts without the limitations of a time period or context. In this investigation, genre study within popular culture aids in understanding of evolution or change in a genre. This can include but is not limited to themes, characters, and the historical study of a genre (Berger, 1992, Robinson, 2000).

The Biblical Epic genre has two eras of popularity. The first era began with Judith of Bethulia (1914) and Intolerance (1916) but did not gain momentum with a broad audience until the 1920s. Cecil B. DeMille's films, such as Ten Commandments (1923) and The King of Kings (1927), along with Niblo and Earle’s Ben Hur (1925) marked the peak of the era (Babington & Evans, 1993, Campbell & Pitts, 1981). These films were three of the most successful of the period and The King of Kings is possibly one of the most successful in film history because of its permanence (Babington & Evans, 1993).

The genre lost momentum in the 1930s and 1940s largely due to the Great Depression and World War II. Economic instability caused a decline in large film productions. Religious films continued to be made in this period, but on a much smaller scale, and productions of this
period lacked the longevity of the major films of the 1920s. As the Second World War ended and a prosperous economy returned, so did the Biblical Epic (Babington & Evans, 1993).

The second popular era took place in the 1950s, marked by *Samson and Delilah* (1949), the highest grossing film of 1950, earning $9 million. Historically and critically, the Christian film was most successful in the 1950s. This decade produced the most Christian films that were either nominated or won Academy Awards (Babington & Evans, 1993). *Ben Hur* (1959) won eleven Oscars, which was a record that remained in place until 1997 (Tatum, 2004). Other notable films of the 1950s included *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953). The era carried on into the early 1960s; however, its demise was marked by the tremendous box office failure of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) (Babington & Evans, 1993).

The late 1960s through the 1970s produced only a few motion pictures in the genre. One notable exception was the successful and controversial *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). However, films of the 1970s were not devoid of Christian themes. The 1970s were the greatest era for science fiction films, which are typically rife with Christian and religious undertones. The 1970s generated some of the most successful science fiction films ever produced, such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Alien* (1979) (Babington & Evans, 1993).

The 1980s saw a slight resurgence in the Biblical Epic with Martin Scorsese’s controversial but commercially marginal *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). In addition, *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) received a Genie (Canadian Academy Award) for its Christ character, a milestone because a Genie is the most significant award any actor has ever received for playing Jesus Christ. The role of Christ has been a mixed blessing for actors over the years. It is a role that often receives little praise and has the potential to make or break a career. Once again a lull
appeared to have occurred in the genre in the 1990s, but *Jesus* (2000) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) show the reappearance of Biblical Epics (Tatum, 2004).

Religious films have many characteristics that seem to have remained the same for more than 100 years, for example the basic narrative of Christ’s life. However, the genre also seems to make attempts to adapt to the period that films are produced. Biblical films and the Christ character provide unique challenges to filmmakers of every generation. Seemingly every decade produces a filmmaker who wishes to give an updated revision to an old genre of film. It provides a difficult task in the retelling of stories that most audiences already know the ending. Filmmakers seem to create new ways of telling the story, exploring new variations and interpretations of the characters, but often these films receive little box office attention.

The financial success of recent religious films is something that has eluded religious filmmakers in past decades. Christian denominations are reporting lower and lower church attendance with the success of the Evangelical mega-churches and an increasing interest in Christian film provide an important area for academic study, in particular the rhetorical study of film. The recent popularity may indicate a renewed interest in faith and Christianity; however, individuals are seeking information in modern ways (Corley & Webb, 2004).

*Research Questions and Rhetorical Artifacts*

Christianity has been prevalent in recent years in all forms of popular culture. Artists have attempted to communicate historical and biblical messages using rhetorical devices in order to appeal to both Christian and secular audiences. Christianity in secular mediums, in particular the presence of Christianity in film, warrants a rhetorical study. The hope is to understand these films in the context that they occur and possibly identify a cultural trend. This investigation seeks
to contribute to our knowledge of religious rhetoric in commercial films by answering four questions.

1. In what ways do the films about Jesus function rhetorically in spreading the message of the Gospels?
2. In what rhetorical ways has the persona of Jesus reflected a divine/human messenger?
3. What promotional strategies and what cultural restraints have influenced the level of acceptance of the messages and portrayal of Jesus in the films?
4. What conclusions can be drawn about religious rhetoric in the presentation of Jesus in the films included in this investigation?

This investigation seeks to understand the significance these Christ Films play in the Christian faith, ways they affect American Christian values and beliefs, and the persuasive effect these films have on a secular audience. In order to select a representative sample from the Christ Film genre certain guidelines are in place. Campbell and Pitts’ (1981) *The Bible on Film: A Check List (1897-1980)* is an index of Biblical films that provides basic logistical information including a brief summary of nearly ever Christian film produced until 1980. This check list limited the number of films that were actually viewed in the selection process of this investigation. The selection of films is based on the following seven categories.

*Film Selection Criteria*

1. This investigation is limited to American feature films. As stated previously the United States is a deeply religious nation and these films have had an impact on the religious identity of this nation. *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to St. Matthew)* (1964) is considered by many critics to be the best Christ Film of the 1960s; however, the film is an
Italian/French production that had a limited release in the United States. The film did generate some discussion but did not have mass appeal in America (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

2. All films selected are feature films. In order for a film to qualify as a feature it must be more than 40 minutes and publicly exhibited as a theatrical release (Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, 2007). Feature films reach the broadest audience giving them the opportunity to influence and be seen by more viewers. This excludes the earliest film narratives of Christ’s life such as La Passion (1897), which is only five minutes in length (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). It also excludes straight-to-video films, made-for-TV movies, and TV miniseries such as Jesus (2000) (Deming, 2007).

3. The films are available on the most current media, which at the start of the investigation was DVD (Digital Video Disc). DVD allows the films to be viewed in the home at the viewer’s convenience. The format is relatively inexpensive and gives the viewer control over the viewing experience with features such as scene selection, reverse, forward, pause, close caption, and special features not available on VHS. In addition, older films now available on DVD indicate longevity, market interest, and significance. For example, Civilization (1916), which garnered person attention from President Woodrow Wilson at the time of its release, is not available on DVD, while other films of the same period have been released on DVD. This provides some insight into the historical significance and market interest of particular films (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

4. The films selected are financially significant. This means the films could be successes and failures at the box office, more importantly they are significant in terms of profit or scale of production. They are generally considered to have high production values and artistic quality. In other words, the films are made with care and precision. This does not necessarily mean
that critics praised each selected film; however, the technical aspects are sound. For example, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1928) is excluded because it had a relatively low budget for its goal of showing every aspect of Christ’s life. The result was a poorly made film that failed to generate a significant profit (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

5. The films selected represent the history of the genre. The genre of the Biblical Epic and subgenre of the Christ Film have gone through peaks and valleys. However, it is an enduring genre of films. In order to show significant similarities in a genre that spans more than 100 years, films selected reflect different time periods. As stated previously the 1920s and 1950s were the greatest eras for the genre of the Biblical Epic. However, the 1950s produced no major Christ Films. Selecting several films produced in the same decade while ignoring other time periods where significant Christ Films exist would not accurately represent the genre (Babington & Evans, 1993).

6. The films depict roughly the same events in the life of Christ. Working within the genre of the Christ Film will eliminate many well-known films that fall into the broader category of Biblical Epics such as the DeMille’s Old Testament Epics *The Ten Commandments* (1923), (1956), and Roman/Christian Epics like *Ben Hur* (Niblo, 1925), (Wyler, 1959). The Christ Film genre is distinguished as a straightforward narrative of Christ’s life derived from the Gospels (Babington & Evans, 1993). Beyond this broad outline, the films selected contain scenes depicting the life, death, trial, crucifixion, and at the least allude to the resurrection of Christ. Films such as *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) do not follow the straightforward narrative, *The Robe* (1953) and *Solome* (1953) do not give the Christ character enough screen time or depict the necessary narrative elements of Christ’s life and death to be analyzed and compared (Babington & Evans, 1993, Campbell & Pitts, 1981).
7. Each film represents a milestone in the genre. A milestone can be defined as a level of significance that was not reached by prior film efforts or a turning point in the representation of the narrative or depiction of characters. A film that altars future depicts of the life of Christ would be considered a milestone in the genre. The selected films all had a documented impact on audiences and/or religious culture.

Selected Films

Based on the seven criteria the following films have been selected for analysis: From the Manger to the Cross (1912) was the first major religious feature film produced and released in the United States. The production costs for this film were high for the period; approximately $100,000 and the film grossed more than $1,000,000 making it the most profitable film produced by Kalem Company. The film was critically praised and for many years was considered the best film of its kind. The film begins with Christ’s birth in Bethlehem and proceeds through his childhood. The rise of Christ’s ministry follows, documenting the major works and miracles. From there the film proceeds to reenact the last week of Christ’s life with the Crucifixion and subsequent Resurrection. The film is a milestone not only because it was the first Christ Film meeting the guidelines but because it was also shot on location with many scenes staged in Egypt, an uncommon practice in filmmaking then. The film was directed by Sidney Olcott and starred Robert Henderson Bland (Jesus Christ) and the popular Gene Gautier (Virgin Mary) (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

The King of Kings (1927) is considered by many to be the best film of its kind, including Michael R. Pitts (Campbell & Pitts, 1981, Tatum, 1997). The film’s production costs are estimated at well over $2 million, initially grossing slightly more. However, the scale of production makes it financially significant (Birchard, 2004). The silent feature still aired
regularly on American television 50 years after its theatrical release. The film’s longevity and
critical praise as one of the best films of all time make it significant to genre and film history in
general. Cecil B. DeMille directed the film. H. B. Warner played Jesus Christ and is judged as
giving one of the finest performances in film history. This film begins with Christ as a child and
documentos his life through the Resurrection (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

*The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was a colossal failure and significantly marked the
end of the golden age of the Biblical Epic. The film cost an astonishing $20 million, grossing
only $6.9 million (Babington & Evans, 1993, Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999). Although a box
office disappointment, many aspects of the film were praised, including its version of the
Resurrection. The film is generally not mentioned when discussions of the best religious films;
however, its overall production value was high. It marked a turning point in the presentation of
the Gospels on film. The traditional presentation no longer interested audience members. If the
genre were to survive, filmmakers would have to explore new ways of packaging the story of
Christ. The film was directed by George Stevens and starred Max von Sydow as Jesus Christ.
One of the more detailed accounts of Christ life, the film closely adheres to the Gospels
(Campbell & Pitts, 1981; Babington & Evans, 1993).

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was likely the most unique portrayal of Christ based on a
highly successful musical of the same name that tapped into late ‘60s/early ‘70s American youth
culture. Richard H. Campbell claims this rock opera is the best Biblical Epic (Campbell & Pitts,
1981). The film was made for $3.5 million and earned nearly $20 million (Kinnard, 1992,
Tatum, 1997). It is a milestone in the depiction of Christ and its use of the Gospels only as
background to the spectacle of song and dance. It introduced Christ to an entire generation of
young people. Norman Jewison and Robert Stigwood directed the film. Ted Neeley played the
role of Jesus Christ in this rock opera and still does on stage. This interpretation does not start
with Christ’s childhood but much later, with Christ and his Apostles hiding from Roman
soldiers. However, much like the first three, the events leading up to the Crucifixion and the
Resurrection result in a dramatic ending for the film (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is likely the most controversial film in history
(Hunter, 1991). Paramount Pictures scheduled the film for production in 1983 but cancelled due
to pressure from the religious right. Conservative groups believed the depiction of Christ is
blasphemous, in particular a scene depicting sex between Christ and Mary Magdalene (Riley,
2003). Most films and accounts of Christ’s life are depicted from the perspective that Christ is a
purely divine being. This shows Christ struggling with and even resisting his fate as the savior of
man. This film investigates the last days of Christ’s life, showing the struggle that occurs
between the spirit and flesh (Erickson, 2005). The film was finally made in 1987 for
approximately $6 million, which was much lower than its original budget in 1983 (Lyons, 2006).
In the end, the film managed to eek out a small profit, grossing around $8 million. The film is
based on Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel and directed by Martin Scorsese with the role of Jesus
Christ being played by Willem Defoe (Erickson, 2005).

*The Passion of The Christ* (2004) generated a great deal of prerelease controversy due to
charges of anti-Semitic content and excessive violence (Medved, 2003). The film utilized a
unique social marketing campaign to promote the film’s release that ignored mass media outlets
focusing on church groups and leaders (Beal & Linafelt, 2006). The film was the most successful
religious film in history. It was made for $25 million and turned out to be the highest grossing
film of 2004 making $608 million (Beal & Linafelt, 2006, Medved, 2003). The film only deals
with the last twelve hours of Christ’s life and is in entirely in Latin and Ancient Aramaic (Beal &
Linafelt, 2006). *The Passion* was directed by action film star Mel Gibson and the role of Jesus Christ was played by little known actor James Caviezel. The film is the latest in 100 years of the Christ Film genre and based on the numbers and audience response it is the most successful.

These films span the twentieth century, and a great deal has changed during filmmaking in this time. All of the films selected for this investigation depict, in various lengths, the life of Christ and more importantly his trial and death. This investigation seeks to understand film portrayals of Jesus Christ both thematically and through the depiction of his character over time.

*The Gospels*

The films selected for this investigation are all also roughly derived from the four gospels of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John who present the story of Christ’s life. Beside the four gospels, the New Testament contains 23 other texts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke cover the same aspects of Christ’s life and are referred to as the synoptic gospels. The gospel according to John is less historical and more representative than the synoptic gospels (Borg, 2006).

The gospel according to Mark was written approximately 40 years after Christ’s death. Mark’s is the earliest and shortest gospel. It refers only to Christ’s adult life and contains no information on Christ’s birth or childhood. The gospel primarily focuses on Christ’s life with less information on teaching than the other gospels. Mark begins by discussing Christ’s public activity and follows with his passage to Jerusalem. The gospel of Mark ends with Christ’s resurrection on Easter (Borg, 2006).

The gospels according to Matthew and Luke are based largely on the gospel according Mark. However, both expand greatly on Mark and nearly double the length. Research indicates that both Matthew and Luke were written 10-20 years after Mark. Matthew and Luke are
bookends to Mark that discussing Christ’s birth and early life with more narratives of theesurrection (Borg, 2006).

The gospel according to John is likely the most recent of the four gospels. The style of
John is different; Christ’s teachings are depicted as more conceptual and metaphorical than in the
synoptic gospels. Christ’s teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection. The gospel according to
John is less factual and more interpretive (Borg, 2006).

The gospels are four accounts of life and teachings of Jesus Christ. However, the gospels
are composed of historical and metaphorical data. Most scholars discount the gospel of John as
metaphorical, containing little actual testimony. The gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are
considered to be mostly historical testimony and memory. Although, the synoptic gospels
describe largely the same subject matter, they are not independent accounts. Matthew and Luke
are based on Mark, and this indicates that much of what is known about the life of Jesus is based
on only one source of information (Borg, 2006).

The gospels are not scientific fact but a historical account of Christ’s life. They contain
holes. The gospels are often the basis of other interpretations of the life of Christ but should not
be considered a benchmark for any narrative (Borg, 2006). Films are further interpretation of
Christ’s life. Films, like the gospels add to the discussion of Christianity. This investigation is
not concerned with discerning how closely these films follow earlier interpretations of Christ’s
life, but how these films function as independent narrative interpretations and their addition to
the discussion of Christ.

Procedures and Methods

Many scholars have explored religion in literary artifacts by analyzing the components of
the story as a narrative. The nature of a narrative is in part religious, because the listener, reader,
or in this case, viewer, is taken to a place beyond typical daily life and given reasons or explanations for things that may take place in their own lives. This exposes the viewer to the realm of the sacred and in turn gives the viewer contact with the supernatural or sacred (Martin & Oswalt, 1995).

Film artifacts contain all the elements of a narrative. Fisher (1984) believes that narrative is a tool of persuasion used by humans in all discourse. Humans evaluate narratives and for that matter all communication based on narrative probability and fidelity (Stroud, 2001). Narrative probability is the structure of a story. It is how thoughts are placed together or ordered. Audiences make judgments on probability based on the way a story holds together and whether a story contains contradictions (Fisher, 1987). Narrative fidelity involves truth qualities and logical reasoning. Audiences make judgments on a narrative's fidelity based on how well the story corresponds with other stories believed to be true (Stroud, 2001).

Humans use narratives to explain why certain decisions are made and why specific actions are taken. This explanation can take any number of forms, for example song lyrics, writing, or in this case film. The narrative serves not historical accuracy but a rhetorical good (Fisher, 1984). The focus of this study then, is not historical accuracy but an analysis of how well the filmmaker accomplishes their rhetorical goals.

Fisher (1984) ties narratives to morals and ethics in human behavior. Christianity relies greatly on the narrative structure to transmit messages. The Holy Bible may be viewed as a collection of narratives that act as a guide for human behavior. The Christ Films are based largely on these Biblical narratives. It is the belief of the researcher that the films chosen for this investigation were created for entertainment but also to present a religious message with
persuasive potential. The act of telling a story or narrative can be a form of persuasion, elements of narrative criticism are appropriate to analyze these films (Burchardt, 2000).

Fisher (1984) provides five conditions that must be in place in order for a narrative to occur. First, it is accepted that people by nature are storytellers. These films are essentially telling the story about Christ's life. However, none of the filmmakers are simply quoting the Gospels. Text interpreted through film, makes an accurate depiction of events extremely difficult. A film is an artist's interpretation of events and its historical accuracy is secondary (Corley & Webb, 2004).

Second, in order for a narrative to be effective, the storyteller must have a motive for the communicative action. The motive in this particular case is to present an interpretation as a story of Christ’s life. The filmmakers assumed they had a story that needed to be told and ultimately that good would come from the telling of the story (Snee, 2004).

Third, Fisher (1984) states rhetors draw from history or what is already known when they are effective in their purpose. Although the stories are unique to each filmmaker, they are based on biblical accounts of Christ's life. Whatever someone may believe the Bible to be, it can be viewed as an historical account as well as a sacred, interpreted testament. A great number of individuals believe it to be fact or at least contain facts. These films are based on the gospels which are widely believed information. However, aspects of the filmmakers’ interpretations have been questioned for their historical accuracy (Corley & Webb, 2004).

Fourth, in order for a narrative to bring about change in the audience, it must contain features the audience can identify with (Fisher, 1984). The filmmakers of Christ Films are able to do this through a variety of methods. Some features that the audience can identify with are humanity in sacred characters, violence, fear, and the basic aesthetics of the films. All of these
elements played a role in the rhetorical effectiveness of these films. However, the subject of
Christianity and the life of Christ is likely the most compelling feature of these film narratives.

Finally, Fisher (1984) believes that people are constantly sending and receiving messages
through narratives. People choose the narratives they believe. The reason these films have
resonated with audiences is because they both attack and support fundamental beliefs. These
films challenged established notions concerning historical events in a logical way because the
filmmakers generated stories that could influence viewers to reevaluate personal relationships
with God and their beliefs about the character of Christ (Snee, 2004).

An act or artifact is judged on content, however, the culture and history that it is
experienced, affects the rhetorical function. Audiences' standards for probability and fidelity
change over time and so must the packaging of a narrative. However, there should be certain
mythic facets contained in a grouping of narratives that continue to resonate with the audience
(Stroud, 2001).

There are many aspects of narrative such as setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal
relations, casual relations, audience, and theme (Foss, 2004). Relating to this investigation, a
genre of film should contain certain common narrative themes or facets that though time have
been rhetorically effective. However, other narrative facets within a genre would have to change
to resonate with a changing audience. There should be political or societal reason for the changes
in audience members.

The Narrative Paradigm has become a widely accepted method used by rhetorical critics
for identifying underlying values in an artifact. However, the method is not without its critics.
Well-known scholars such as Michael Calvin McGee have voiced concerns regarding the
narrative approach. Fisher’s theory does take contradictory positions on narrative rationality. He
states that decisions are made based on narrative alone, contending that the narrative is the only feature used by the public to judge the value of an argument. The method ignores the rationality of the audience when evaluating the value of an argument or text (Warnick, 1987).

**Application of Narrative Criticism**

Audiences evaluate a narrative, in this case through the medium of film, based on “good reasons” for beliefs and actions (Fisher, 1987). Fisher’s theory suggests these reasons are reached using standards of narrative probability and fidelity. Narrative probability is concerned with the legitimacy of the story and its lack of contradictions. Narrative fidelity accounts for audience judgment. The narrative, to be persuasive, must be highly probable in the reasoning of the audience and connect with their values. In other words, the narrative must resonate with preexisting beliefs that an audience holds.

Solid reasons contained in a narrative are four fold. Reasons must be consistent with items an audience believes to be true (1). Solutions and situations contained within a narrative must be appropriate to the dilemma depicted in the narrative (2). The narrative must promise certain effects for the audience (3). The narrative must be consistent with audience values for conduct (4) (Fisher, 1987; Stroud, 2001; 2003).

The Christ Films selected for this investigation advocate particular actions and beliefs. They invite audience participation in faith. Based on the rhetorical devices employed by filmmakers, audiences will respond by adopting beliefs and values portrayed in these films. Filmmakers who appeal to audience wants, needs, and values will likely have the greatest success in achieving their rhetorical goals and in turn experience greater box office or critical artistic success (Stroud, 2003).
In approaching research question one--in what ways do the films about Jesus function rhetorically in spreading the message of the Gospels--the common themes that occur in these films will be identified and analyzed. Themes are a flow between texts, in this case film, that are recognized across time. Although certain narrative facets may have changed over the years, certain basic elements should have remained the same. This identification of themes allows for an understanding of the films without the constraints of time (Robinson, 2000). The themes demonstrate general meanings that exist within the narratives' fidelity. Since these films at the very least are roughly based on the Gospels, the basic themes correspond with the audience's prior knowledge of the life of Christ. An analysis of the themes should show how the Gospels are portrayed in films and the rhetorical function of this depiction (Foss, 2004; Stroud, 2001).

With research question two--in what rhetorical ways has the persona of Jesus reflected a divine/human messenger--the narratives of the Christ character will be examined to discriminate between divine and human qualities. This investigation examines changes that have occurred in depictions of the Christ character from 1912 to 2004. In addition, the unique physical and mental qualities that are common in the Christ character are analyzed in these films. This investigation pays particular attention to characteristics that have remained the same and those that have changed. Due to changes in audiences, marketing strategies, new stories and the creative retelling of old stories regarding Christ's life have caused filmmakers to constantly update the narrative and portrayal of characters in the retelling of the Gospels. As stated, there is not a universal formula for rhetorical success; therefore facets of the Christ Film genre have evolved to suit the changing expectations of probability and fidelity in an audience (Robinson, 2000). A film viewer can see rationale for personal behavior within characters that they identify with (Fisher, 1987; Stroud, 2000).
Research question three asks what promotional strategies and what cultural restraints have influenced the level of acceptance of the messages and portrayal of Jesus in the films? Here the audience is analyzed. By examining the primary and secondary audiences for each film, successful and unsuccessful promotional strategies can be revealed. This analysis also shows how the values within the narrative are similar to the values held by the core audience. The values depicted in the narrative are consistent with those of the audience, thus making the narratives more persuasive. In addition, if changes are noted in the analysis of the Christ character then the analysis of cultural and historical changes may account for rhetorical decisions made by the filmmakers.

Finally, research question four asks what conclusions can be drawn about religious rhetoric in the presentation of Jesus in the films included in this investigation. This question is answered by synthesizing the elements of the narrative investigated in the first three research questions. This investigation then focuses on the broader implications of the religious film within the popular culture context.

**Review of Pertinent Literature**

Rhetoric often involves the complex use of one or more languages. The language of film comes in several forms such as dialogue, subtitles, narration, symbols, visual elements, music, and lighting. The rhetorical effectiveness of film depends on the interplay between these languages. The filmmaker constructs this grammar in a rhetorical way to communicate thoughts and feelings to the audience. Film is a way for literature to be communicated to an audience through multi-sensory means. It is an extraordinarily specific and sensory medium. Visual and auditory elements can reduce a plot to only a couple sentences.
Film is uniquely persuasive because it offers a self-contained world that is simpler than life itself. The packaging of narrative within film adds to the persuasiveness of the medium. In film, good often overcomes evil and people are able to master their circumstances. This is not always the case in real life. Film often, offers a world where all questions are answered and dilemmas are solved in only two hours (Harrington, 1973).

The medium of film gives the audience new perspectives on past events, makes viewers aware of current issues and trends, and provides insights into possible future dilemmas. Film is able to educate audiences on social concerns and make complicated problems accessible to the general public. For more than 100 years, films have provided a visual record of fears, desires, and aspirations that affect our national psyche.

More recently, rhetorical critics have highlighted films’ various persuasive objectives (Rybecki & Rybecki, 1991). Films describe past events with a critical eye highlighting little known truths and adding new perspectives. They challenge popular opinion and make audiences view items in new ways.

Snee (2004) examines the rhetorical purpose of Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), which depicts a Christ character that is full of doubt and fear. During the film’s production and after the release many were angered by the representation of Christ. One particular scene showing Christ making love to Mary Magdalene outraged Evangelical audiences. However, Snee claims that the film challenges audience notions about the Christ character. Despite the initial controversy, audiences were drawn to this very different representation of Jesus.

This suggests that audiences, whether Christian or secular, do not passively view the film and are forced to reevaluate their notions concerning religion. This brings people closer to a real
divine Christ through a fictional human Jesus. This study is relevant, then, because it investigates
the divinity of a Christ character. It illustrates that audiences identify with a human Christ rather
than a divine representation.

Another film study of note is Medhurst’s (1993) critically analyzes Oliver Stone’s JFK (1991). The film is an account of the events surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy. The film gives the audience a new perspective and possibly new insights on past events. Medhurst believes the film is about the loss of innocence and an attempt to bring back that innocence. The film is a call to action for the audience. The audience is asked to mimic the actions of the main character by becoming active members of society. People have become fickle with the political process and Medhurst believes Stone’s intention is to persuade the audience to become active in the government process. In this film, the events and characters of the past act as metaphors for the audience of today. Medhurst’s study guides this investigation by showing the films attempt to and often do influence behavior. While film calls for civic engagement, the religious films chosen for this investigation ask audience members to engage Christianity.

Filmmakers inform audiences about current social movements and trends. Rushing (1983) illuminated a movement in the 1980s in a study examining the film Urban Cowboy (1980) and the television show Dallas. Urban Cowboy is a love story set against the backdrop of the modern Honky Tonk subculture. The study called the trend the American Western Myth. In the 1980s a Western trend was sweeping the nation, not only in fashion and popular culture but in politics as well. People were nostalgic for ideals of a time gone by and had a desire to bring back that milieu. Films such as Urban Cowboy (1983) marked this trend in popular culture and in politics it was marked by the election of Ronald Reagan. Rushing argued that popular culture and politics were embracing the values and ideals of the old West. The two facets of American
culture were playing off one another and reinforcing similar principles. This present study considers whether an increase in religious films may be a sign or the cause of a larger trend in American culture towards faith.

Steiner (2001) exhaustively reviewed the film *The Apostle* (1997) for its representation of evangelical Christian faith. He uses Kenneth Burke’s ideas regarding rhetoric and representation as a framework for his study. The argument is made that this film misrepresents the evangelical faith and practice, even though it was praised by many of that persuasion for its honest character portrayals. Steiner’s study highlights a trend in the evangelical Christian community.

The film reduces and misrepresents the evangelical Christian faith by leaving out two fundamentals of the faith. The first is the absence of transcendence or a large understanding of faith. This refers to God and all creation. Steiner claims that anti-intellectualism has merged with the evangelical Christian tradition in America. This has created contempt for critical thought.

The second absence is complexity in characterizations of the evangelical Christian faith, which affects political behavior. The spirituality of evangelical Christians is reduced to a political belief. Steiner concludes that *The Apostle* (1997) does not represent evangelical Christianity because no film can transcend and challenge culture in the way a faith can. Films are not often time accurate representations of events or persons. They are made primarily to entertain, and this is where the relevance lay in Steiner’s study.

Motion pictures attempt to warn society about looming future crises. Stroud (2001) examines the narrative structure of *The Matrix* (1999), a futuristic science fiction film where humans have lost control of technology and are enslaved by it. Stroud believes that this film reflects the fears many hold about the continued reliance on new technologies. Peoples’ uncertainties about technologies bring about worries of isolation, which are demonstrated in the
film. Those who do not fear new technologies but see the possible future problems created by technology are also able to identify with the film’s themes. Audience members are either able to identify with or appreciate the main character in the film, Neo, who has the power to subdue and control technology. Religious films similarly serve as a warning and as a guideline for behavior on earth, often foreshadowing the second coming.

Social concerns are also communicated in film. Filmmakers package social concerns and issues within the narratives of their films. Daughton (1996) examines the film *Groundhog Day* (1993) using elements of gender studies, feminist criticism, and media criticism. *Groundhog Day* is not the typical film used in rhetorical study. The film is a romantic comedy where the main character through mythical means is forced to live the same day over and over again. Daughton examines the changes in the character through gender roles. The researcher believes that the character is undergoing the feminine initiation ritual. By living the same day over and over again the character takes on the traditional and stereotypical role of the repressed housewife living a mundane life where every day is the same. This study shows differences in gender roles and highlights gender inequality and also allude to film’s power including Christ films—to cultivate social change.

Tierney (2006) examines the strategic rhetoric of Whiteness in martial arts films released in 2003. The films examined were *Kill Bill*, *The Last Samurai*, and *Bulletproof Monk*. All three of these motion pictures were in the genre of the Asian martial art film, however, each a White protagonist. The researcher believes these functions as a form of cultural colonialism and reinforces roles of superiority and inferiority. Using a strategic rhetoric framework the researcher has identified four recurrent Whiteness themes in these films: in these films Western characters are able to master Eastern martial arts with ease and surpass the skill of Asian characters, White
characters often take the role of the protagonist winning battles with Asian antagonists, the consequences of repeated visions of Whites defeating Asians have an impact beyond entertainment, and this communicates White superiority over others even in their particular cultural context. Again the study affirms the narrative power of film.

Film can show us a great deal and the rhetorical critic has the potential to illuminate underlying themes contained within film narratives. However, the complex mixture of languages in film calls for the critic to be creative in the analysis. This visual medium doesn’t fit within the rhetorical methods handed down by the Greeks and requires new methods of analysis. It is important for future scholars interested in the rhetoric of film to understand film’s potential as an artifact. In is important to know what rhetoricians have done in the past with the medium of film and to stay current with this constantly changing medium. There are possibilities with the changing packaging of the film.

Rhetorical critics may for instance, explore content contained in DVDs such as film commentary, deleted scenes, cast and crew interviews, and supplemental online material. Film criticism will never be an idle area of study with Hollywood continually producing new types of motion pictures utilizing the most current technology and reflecting changing social issues.

**Rhetoric and Religious Film**

Many interpretative works have been published on Biblical Epics. These publications have been aimed at both a scholarly and popular audience. They have analyzed many aspects of the films including the marketing strategies, the portrayal of Christ, technical cinematic quality, author opinion, and rhetorical message. This segment of literature review will focus on publications that are based on the rhetorical message of the filmmakers. Although many have
analyzed these films, as long as the films are relevant pieces of popular culture and continue to affect viewers they will continue to garner interest from those in the academic community.

Reinhartz (2004) explores the history of Jesus in film. The author believes the biblical account of Christ's last hours lends itself well to the medium of film in the Western world. The intent of Reinhartz’s study is to analyze how filmmakers throughout the history of cinema have handled the portrayal of Jews in the Bible. It is suggested that filmmakers often must avoid the Jewish role in Christ's death. Reinhartz (2004) feels that filmmakers should exhibit sensitivity to viewers when retelling the narrative of Christ's life. However, ignoring the issue all together would raise issues of historical accuracy in film.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) has been praised for its controversial take on Christ as a fully human and fully divine being. However, Reinhartz (2004) explores the notion that Scorsese avoided the issue of the Jewish role in the death of Christ. This would lead one to believe that although Scorsese created one type of controversy with his depiction of Christ, he avoided the controversy of anti-Semitism by not representing Caiaphas in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Reinhartz’s study examines the role of Jews in the Christ story, which provides a barometer for the social and political climate surrounding the Christ Films.

The second study selected for examination was conducted by Pawlikowski (2004) and explores anti-Semitism in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). The researcher found that Gibson's film could possibly be the most anti-Semitic piece of popular culture witnessed in 25 years. This is demonstrated through the character of Caiaphas who was the driving force behind Christ's crucifixion in Gibson's film. Pawlikowski (2004) is claiming that *The Passion of The Christ* is fanning the flames of centuries of hatred. The study concludes that *The Passion of The Christ*
places Christ's death squarely on the shoulders of the Jews instead of the Romans. He condemns Gibson's film for this reason.

Another analysis on Gibson's film worth noting, conducted by Flannery-Dailey (2004), not only questions the anti-Semitic messages in the film but also its biblical accuracy. This study gives more legitimacy to the charges of bigotry in The Passion of The Christ (2004) and also attacks liberties taken by the filmmaker concerning non-biblical references. The author believes the use of sources other than the Bible gives filmgoers a false knowledge about the last twelve hours of Christ's life. This is demonstrated by the disturbing use of violence and blood in the film. This study concludes that not only does this gratuitous violence gives the audience a false depiction of the historical events but also communicates negative Jewish stereotypes. Flannery-Dailey's work is relevant because of the analysis of the visual images used by Gibson to serve his rhetorical purpose.

The studies summarized in the literature review show the validity of film studies, including the rhetoric of film. It is shown that religious films, including The Passion of The Christ (2004) have been analyzed rhetorically. However, the literature demonstrates that a multi-film rhetorical analysis regarding Biblical Epics does not exist. The study of religious film is limited primarily to adherence to scripture and anti-Semitic content. Prior studies of secular films provide the basis for this investigation in terms of method and structure. The method and structure used in previous secular film studies are applied to religious film in a new and unique way in this investigation.

**Structure of Investigation**

This investigation begins in chapter two with a rhetorical narrative analysis of the themes in the selected films. Each film is viewed twice to gain a general idea of common themes. A
theme can be identified as an underlying purpose or message in a film. Themes demonstrate general meanings that exist across the different film narratives. In order to be considered a theme in this investigation the general idea should at least occur in each film.

Since this investigation seeks to identify common themes in all six films, a particular theme may occur in various ways from film to film. In addition, the same theme could be demonstrated in different scenes and through different characters. Although each film is based on the Gospel either directly or indirectly, the individual filmmakers make artistic decisions about the parts of Christ’s life to put on screen and how to portray them. In other words, the films do not cover the exact same aspects of Christ’s life.

After common themes are identified, each film is viewed again citing specific examples of the themes as they occur in each film. The analysis describes the theme as it occurs in the particular scene/s for each film. Next, each instance identified is followed by explanation describing how the scene supports and fits within a particular theme.

Chapter three analyzes the humanity-versus-divinity of the Christ character as depicted in each filmmaker’s narrative. Once again, each film is viewed with specific attention to only how the narrative portrays Christ. Humanity is defined as sinful behavior displaying weakness and temptation. A Christ that experiences doubt and has angry outbursts is displaying human characteristics. In addition, physical and emotional pain and suffering are of an earthly nature. Pain and suffering are associated with earth and hell not heaven (McKim, 1996).

Divinity is defined as similarity to God or being Godly. Godlike features would include behavior that lacks sin. A divine Christ does not suffer from pain and does not give in to temptation. Healing powers and miracles are considered traits of a divine Christ character. In terms of the films, any characteristic that sets Christ apart from the human characters, for
example, if Christ were followed by a soft hue of light, would reference the supernatural, thus adding to the character’s divinity (McKim, 1996).

Chapter four is conducted by an examination of both secondary and tertiary sources to provide an understanding of the filmmaker’s process in developing the script and to provide historical data regarding the period that each film was produced. The final chapter synthesizes the rhetorical analysis in chapters two and three with historical information gathered in chapter four to provide understanding of the rhetorical purpose of each film, coupled with promotional strategies and historical information.

Each analysis begins with *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), subsequent films being analyzed chronologically. The other five films are compared to *The Passion of The Christ*. There is debate over, which Christ Film provides the best example of Christ’s life, however, the major and subtle differences in the films make a true benchmark or quintessential Christ Film impossible to ascertain, and most claims regarding any individual film are nothing more than opinion or personal preference.

*The Passion of The Christ* (2004) was chosen as the basis for this investigation in the hopes that the most recent major production will provide greater insight into the rhetorical progression of the Christ narrative and The Christ Film genre through time. The film is the highest grossing religious film and R rated film in history. Beyond the genre of Biblical Epics, the film was the most commercially successful film of 2004 making it one the top 100 grossing films in history. The film has achieved commercial success and reached a mass audience like no other film of the genre. *The Passion* represents the current status of the Christ Film genre and the fact that the film is only concerned with the last 12 hours of Christ's life makes a significant statement about the evolution of the Christ narrative. It is the hope that by comparing each of the
selected films to *The Passion* (the most current) a greater understanding of the rhetoric within the genre can be achieved (Beal & Linafelt, 2006).

It has been noted that *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) was considered the highest quality and most successful Christ Film until the release of *The King of Kings* (1927). It appears that *The King of Kings* may have held this title at least until the 1970s. The release of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) tapping into youth culture caused critics and scholars to reevaluate the genre (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). This changing of opinion upon the release of each new classic provides the rationale that an attempt to identify a benchmark is subjective and ever changing. Each film seems to build and improve on films released previously. Films, like the Gospels, are simply narratives making a standard or benchmark impossible to identify. These films then become part of the dialogue of Christ’s life. *The Passion*’s raw numbers and status, as not only a media phenomenon but as a religious phenomenon, cause a reevaluation of the genre as a whole, until the next landmark Christ film (Beal & Linafelt, 2006).
CHAPTER II
MAJOR MOVIE THEMES

Chapter two analyzes how common themes in the Christ Film genre function rhetorically in spreading the message of the Gospels. Although, the films were produced in different eras, common narrative elements are present that tie the genre together. Two major themes emerged are present in all six films chosen for the investigation: sacrifice and vengeance. Although the films deal with very similar subject matter, the themes are contained in different scenes and exhibited through different characters from film to film. Each theme is first identified and analyzed in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) then the films are analyzed in chronological order compared to Gibson’s film.

*Sacrifice* is defined as suffering by one or more characters in each film. The theme is present mostly in the form of physical pain or denial. Characters are depicted depriving themselves of basic human needs such as fasting or the absence of worldly processions such as wealth or luxury goods. Sacrifice serves God or the greater good of all people. This occurs mainly though physical or emotional pain but also in avoiding an existence that includes personal happiness. The theme is also represented in scenes of intense physical torture, for example Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. God ultimately rewards this sacrifice in most situations. Salvation can only be obtained through sacrifice and is an undertone present in all six films chosen for analysis.

*Vengeance* is also present in all films but shown in different ways. The films either depict a vengeful God that takes harsh action against those who refuse to accept his message or it is shown in a passionate short-tempered Christ character. The dominate representation of vengeance is shown through revenge. Revenge is between characters or God taking revenge
against sinners. Often this revenge is much like punishment in the form of destruction of persons or structures and physical or emotional torment. The antagonists in the films are punished for the actions they take against Christ. In other cases the passionate Christ characters take physical action against sin. In addition, any scene that depicts horror supports the theme of vengeance. Horror is described as revenge at the hand of supernatural forces or mythical beasts.

Sacrifice

One theme common in all of the films is the power of sacrifice to enable good to defeat evil. This tone is present early in the Gibson film. One should live a holy life and although living by the teachings of God is not easy, ultimately the reward is great. The ways of the Satan might appear to be initially attractive but living an unholy life comes at a price. Early in The Passion of The Christ (2004) Jesus is visited by Satan who attempts to place doubt in the mind of Christ. A serpent comes from under Satan’s robe and Christ crushes the snake under foot. This metaphor enforces the good-defeats-evil theme (Gibson, 2004).

However, Christ struggles with the words of the Satan. He prays for strength and asks God to protect him from Satan’s temptation. Christ knows the physical torment that he must bear and Satan offers a different option. Although this is never actually stated, this is the message Gibson implies. The crushing of the snake’s head is Christ’s forceful refusal of Satan’s proposal. The serpent is a symbol that represents evil and temptation. Gibson’s message to the audience is that to live an unholy life may at times be easy and seem more attractive than being faithful to the laws of God (Gibson, 2004).

By killing the serpent Christ is putting his faith in God and His purpose. Faith in God allows one to defeat evil. Judas, though, erred by avoiding God and does not asking for forgiveness. Christ is both divine and human. The frail human side of Christ asks God for
strength and God provides it. Judas failed to do this and is lost to Satan, unable to overcome evil (Bartunek, 2005).

Christ encounters intense physical torture throughout most of the film. The physical torture is more graphically bloody than in previous film depictions. As Roman soldiers are flogging Jesus, Satan moves among the crowd looking on at Christ’s torture. Satan is once again giving Christ the opportunity to change his fate. However, Christ is committed to his fate for the good of mankind. Gibson uses some of the most graphic images of the film in this scene. The beating of Christ in this scene is shocking and bloody. Christ must endure pain on earth and resist Satan’s temptations in order to live in paradise (Gibson, 2004).

The theme of sacrifice is restricted to the character of Christ in Gibson's film. The Passion of The Christ (2004) does not challenge previous concepts the audience has about the life of Christ. Most Christians would agree that Christ sacrificed for the good of humankind in terms of the narrative's fidelity. However, the violent representation of Christ's torture and death is something that is more difficult to portray in a written text. Through the visual medium of film and modern special effects, the audience gets the bloodiest representation of Christ's death. Due to the success of the film, it is apparent that while shocking, the violence and humanity of Christ are represented in a way that is believable and resonated with audience members. In terms of narrative probability, events are placed together in a way that contains no contradictions and are believable in terms of violence and suffering (Fisher, 1984).

From the Manger to the Cross (1912) is a difficult film to compare to the modern films chosen for this investigation. This film is America’s first feature Christ Film and is silent, filmed in black and white. The film is 71 minutes of short-titled scenes accompanied by Biblical
passages from the New Testament that keep the viewer abreast of the story. Other than primitive visual elements the film does not stray from the Gospels.

Differing from Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) the film begins with the birth of Christ; it does not solely focus on the last hours of Christ’s life. *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) does not contain any scenes with Caiaphas and Jesus. The film blames Pilate for Christ’s death and portrays Pilate as a somewhat ambivalent character who finds himself coerced into crucifying Christ (Tatum, 2004).

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) ends with a scene of Christ hanging on the cross. No resurrection is depicted. The resurrection is a powerful scene in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Gibson (2004) made such an emotionally draining film; the audience may wish mercifully for Christ to have a quiet death. As Christ escapes pain through death, the viewer can escape the discomfort of participating in such torment. After Christ's death, *The Passion of The Christ* provides the only image of Christ that gives the audience hope for the future. The scene of resurrection provides a portrait of Christ, clean and dry with a neatly trimmed beard. There are no signs of the beating or severe treatment other than a clean hole in Christ’s right hand.

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) instead ends with the Biblical passage John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is not nearly as visually powerful as Gibson’s depictions of torture to reach a beautiful resurrection. However, it delivers a similar message of sacrifice; God, the narrative argues, sacrificed his only son for the good of humanity and humanity should in turn make sacrifices to abide by the will of God.

Olcott's Christ narrative structure closely adheres to the Gospels. The narrative's fidelity, because of a close adherence to the Gospels, will resonates with a Christian audience. The
straightforward narrative does not rely on metaphor like *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). The theme of sacrifice is overt in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) stated in the final scene in John 3:16. Olcott's narrative is the first Christ Film and seems to follow a simpler pattern than later films (Fisher, 1987).

According to Campbell & Pitts (1981) *The King of Kings* (1927) is the standard that all Christ Films are measured. The fact that this feature is silent and by and largely black and white does not take away from its powerful and moving story. Christ Films do not necessarily need dialog to have a significant impact on an audience. *The King of Kings*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) have shown to be the most influential films Christ Films chosen for this investigation. *The King of Kings*, though is a silent film with only a musical score. *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a rock opera with no traditional dialog. *The Passion of The Christ* depicts dialog spoken in Aramaic, Latin, and uses subtitles. All these have shown that powerful visual imagery without dialog is rhetorically effective. Most audience members have a general idea of the story of Christ’s life and death and this allows filmmakers to ignore dialog (Campbell & Pitts, 1981; Miles, 2006).

A feature unique to *The King of Kings* (1927) absent in other films chosen for this investigation is Christ’s connection and concern for children. This connection is depicted in several scenes and Biblical quotes. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), in contrast, contains only frightening scenes of demonic taunting children. Furthermore these scenes do not feature the Christ character. *The Passion of The Christ* chooses not to show the relationship Christ has with the young (Babington & Evans, 1993). In addition, like many films in the genre, *The King of Kings* also attempts to avoid the controversy of anti-Semitism by placing blame solely on Caiaphas instead of the broader Jewish leadership (Reinhartz, 2004).
The sacrifice demonstrated in this film is generally confined to the Christ character. It is shown in both life and death of Christ, through actions living only for the good of man and the sacrifice of his life for the sins of man. DeMille’s (1927) Christ features more divine character qualities with less resistance to his fate than other films selected for this investigation. Jesus is visited by Satan and tempted to acquire great power as an alternative to the sacrifice of dying on the cross. Yet, Jesus accepts his painful death with greater courage and less doubt than in the recent film representations of Christ’s life; clearly the emphasis is on his divinity and not his human qualities.

Sacrifice is also present in the acclaimed scene where Mary Magdalene is cleansed of the seven deadly sins. Mary is confronted with each of the seven sins and each sin formed in her likeness is an attempt to persuade her not to let go of the gratifications and pleasures of her former sinful life. Mary is presented as living a charmed existence where rich and powerful men desire her and she is depicted as a wealthy woman with fine garments and jewelry. Magdalene struggles with these temptations, and in the film, through Christ she sacrifices riches and pleasures for a difficult yet rewarding existence living for God (Babington & Evans, 1993).

The narrative structure pertaining to the Christ character in The King of Kings (1927) is similar to From the Manger to the Cross (1912). However, DeMille's film goes beyond the Gospels by creating fictional narrative in an affair between Judas and Mary Magdalene. This shows a progression in the genre and the audience. Certain story lines do not have to adhere to scripture to be rhetorically effect. A narrative does not have to be historically accurate in order to be an effective tool of persuasion. It terms of probability and fidelity of the story has a logical flow and most of the events portrayed correspond with the audiences' previous knowledge concerning the life and death of Christ. Although sacrifice is portrayed through the Christ
character it is also demonstrated in Mary Magdalene. This is also significant because Magdalene is completely human and a sinner. This makes sacrifice real to the audience (Fisher, 1984).

*The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) is similar to *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) in many of the visual elements. Both films have high production values and excellent cinematography. The films are both visually pleasing with beautiful scenery and color. Stevens’s (1965) Christ is shown as divine with fewer human qualities than Gibson’s (2004) Christ, and greater attention is given to the miracles in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. In Stevens’s film Mary Magdalene is little more than an extra. In the later productions chosen for this investigation Mary Magdalene has a major role and influence.

Gibson’s characterization of Satan, although far superior, borrowed from Stevens’s “The Dark Hermit” played by Donald Pleasence. Italian actress Rosalinda Celentano plays Gibson’s Satan character. Both renditions of Satan are understated and lack horrific images; this makes them all the more disturbing. Gibson’s character is asexual and hairless with delicate feminine features. The character has a monotone almost mechanically soothing voice. The Satan characters communicate with Christ offering him temptation. Both characters serve in the role of an observer rather than a participant in Christ's torment during the films (Powell, 2004). According to Powell (2004), Biblical scholars and film critics have attempted to explain Gibson's depiction of Satan. The consensus is that his representation was not derived from Biblical sources and is purely artistic.

“The Dark Hermit” in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) tries to persuade and tempt Christ throughout the film. Christ’s first encounter from this character comes after a difficult climb up a mountain during Christ’s period of fasting. “The Dark Hermit” is eating and offers Christ food and during this conversation he claims that an easy life is a sinful life. He further
explains that life does not have to be so difficult if a person knows the way to obtain power and glory. He then offers Christ power and glory if he will serve him instead of God.

At several points in the film Christ claims God wants people to have mercy instead of sacrifice, the theme of sacrifice is a powerful rhetorical message. Satan’s way is easy, materialistic, and hedonistic while God’s way is difficult but far more spiritually rewarding and morally right. Later, Christ tells his disciples that following in his footsteps requires them to give up all rights to themselves and bear their own personal cross everyday. This continues the theme of sacrifice. Living by Christ’s teachings requires a person to no longer live for one’s self and to love and serve God, sacrificing all personal wants and gains.

The sacrifice Christ makes during the trial and crucifixion in The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) is far less graphic and brutal than in The Passion of The Christ (2004). The theme of sacrifice is demonstrated in the words of Christ rather than in the pain and suffering that he endures. The film also avoids the role of Caiaphas in Christ’s death, placing more blame on Herod and Pontius Pilate (Reinhartz, 2004).

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) is an attempt at a comprehensive narrative about the life of Christ. The story is far more detailed than the previous two films selected for this investigation. The narrative's fidelity is not the problem with Stevens' film but narrative probability. The film does not challenge previous beliefs about the life of Christ but the structure and length of the narrative make it uninteresting. Unlike the previous films, Stevens portrays sacrifice through Christ's preaching. This reverts to the overt theme contained in From the Manger to the Cross (1912). However, similar to The King of Kings (1927), sacrifice is demonstrated through Christ's followers as moral men (Fisher, 1984).
Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) contains anachronistic props such as tanks, guns, fighter jets, and drugs to incorporate issues of the times such as the Vietnam War and drug abuse. These weapons were used by the Jews and could be viewed as anti-Semitic in nature (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

The especially unique casting of an African-American Judas addresses Civil Rights concerns of the period (Reinhartz, 2004). The multi-racial cast in a Christ Film was distinctive at the time of production but has been addressed in later films. The theme of sacrifice is best shown in the Judas character in Jesus Christ Superstar (1973). Judas reluctantly struggles with his role of a traitor claiming to Annas and Caiaphas that “I have not thought at all of my own reward I really didn’t come here of my own accord.”

At the Last Supper when Jesus identifies Judas as the traitor, Judas threatens to stay instead of turning Christ over to Caiaphas. Judas felt that his role of the trader was part of Christ’s plan and questions why it had to be him. Judas’s role was a necessary one and a sacrifice for Christ. Earlier depictions of Judas are as an antagonist where Jesus Christ Superstar presents a neutral character.

The Judas character in The Passion of The Christ (2004) elicits sympathy. However, Judas is a weak character that recognizes error when it is too late. In Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) the Judas character takes part in the betrayal of Christ not of his own will but the will of Christ. Judas fights this role but ultimately Christ’s will outweigh Judas’s need to stay with the Apostles.

The previous films mainly demonstrate sacrifice through the Christ character. However, in Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) the theme is demonstrated through the Judas character, which traditionally has been portrayed as a villain. This marks a shift not only in the portrayal of Judas
but also in the Christ Film genre overall. In terms of probability and fidelity the film was successful with its core audience. The narrative structure contained modern elements absent from previous films. This resonated with the youthful core audience that came to cinemas without the previous knowledge of the Christ story that evangelicals had. This departure from scripture was not rhetorically successful with many evangelical viewers. These changes in narrative structure and character representation did not line up with previously held beliefs (Fisher, 1984).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) also depicts sacrifice through the Christ character. Scorsese's Jesus is one completely lacking any joy or happiness. The character lives only to serve God's purpose. Although Christ attempts to resist and wants only to live a normal life, he is always sacrificing to please God. Jesus states "God is once again asking me to go where I do not want to go." Jesus never lives for himself and none of his wants and desires are met, only God's.

At the point Christ dies in both films, Satan is defeated and sacrifice is rewarded. In Gibson's (2004) version the temple is destroyed. Throughout most of the film, Satan moves gracefully and with confidence observing Christ’s most intense scenes of physical abuse. However, in Satan’s final scene he is exposed as a fierce screaming demonic being that has been defeated by Christ's sacrifice. Scorsese's (1988) Christ, in death, finally realizes his purpose and for the first time in the film achieves inner peace.

In Scorsese's film the change in the Judas character has continued. However, the change in the Christ character in this film is the most notable. Christ is depicted as an anti-hero lacking many qualities present in the early films of the genre. Christ's sacrifice is not something he accepts willingly but rather something that is thrust upon him. Christ is a weak character while Judas and Magdalene are strong. In previous films this has been reversed. The narrative structure is no longer straightforward with the Gospels as the basis for the story. *Jesus Christ Superstar*
(1973) and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) both depart greatly from scripture with more attention paid to character exploration and interpretation. The story is Christ becomes more complex with different facets of narrative being the focus. For most Christian viewers this story does not correspond with previously held beliefs about Christ and his followers, which resulted in box office disappointment (Fisher, 1987).

Sacrifice is a regular theme in the Christ Film genre. The story of Christ’s life and death is a story of sacrifice and the rewards of sacrificing for God. Living a holy life is not romanticized in these films. The characters’ that serve and obey God lead difficult and impoverished lives, often without basic human needs being met. These characters are treated harshly by fellow men, enduring physical abuse and segregation. Only after living a difficult existence are these characters rewarded.

Vengeance

The second theme present in each of the films is vengeance. Gibson (2004) graphically depicts the vengeance of God. Gibson's film appears to contradict the Christian beliefs of a forgiving and loving God. His film shows God's revenge, which is administered to sinners throughout the film. The unrepentant characters in Gibson’s film are severely punished for their unholy ways. A crow attacks a criminal dying along side Christ on a cross when he questions Christ's divinity. When Christ dies, the Jewish Temple is destroyed by an act of God (Wallis, 2004).

These two particular events depicted by Gibson demonstrate the wrath of God. Gibson's rhetorical message can be interpreted as a warning to the audience that to defy God and his teaching will result in punishment. However, the violence and gore can be avoided by accepting
Christ and his message in one's own life. The suffering and violence endured by Christ is rewarded in the final scene of his resurrection (Wallis, 2004).

Gibson (2004) uses the character of Judas to send this warning message. The character is the best example of guilt and wrath in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Once Judas betrays Christ, Judas’s torture begins. Judas kisses Christ and he immediately realizes his error. Judas is forced to witness the results of his betrayal. He is present at all proceedings until his eventual suicide.

Judas witnesses the guards beating Christ as he is brought to the house of the high priest and he attempts to flee to avoid bearing witness to the consequences of his actions. However, he is forced to witness the proceedings. While it appears that Judas cannot stand to view Christ’s wrongful arrest, he is somehow compelled to view this severe punishment. At one point during the high priest’s accusations, Judas rubs his face against the rough surface of a column until the skin is torn away from his lips. Judas rubbing at his face and lips throughout the proceedings is an expression of his guilt. In the story he is attempting to wipe away his act of betrayal. However, the physical pain he inflicts on himself does not detract from his severe punishment (Gibson, 2004).

During high priests’ accusations and Christ’s eventual confession to these charges, it is Judas’s reaction Gibson chooses to portray in the film. As the priest spits at and strikes Christ, Judas makes an attempt to right the wrong that he has committed; by approaching Caiaphas to demand the release of Christ claiming that he has "betrayed innocent blood." Caiaphas makes the statement "if you have betrayed innocent blood that is your affair take your money and go." Judas however appeals to the wrong power because redemption and relief are not achieved through Caiaphas, but through Christ (Bartunek, 2005).
So, Judas is tortured and pursued by demons and Satan. This is the point where Gibson’s use of shocking imagery is evident. First, Judas is attempting to hide from what he has done to Christ. However, Christ’s physical torture is thrown in Judas’s face. In this scene, Gibson is attempting to show that a person can only escape sin through Christ. At this point, a demonic ape-like figure with yellow glowing eyes and sharp teeth lunges at Judas, forcing him from his place of hiding. Although Judas may be able to avoid viewing the results of his betrayal, he cannot escape the tortures of his mind, which are shown through his punishment manifested into a demonic ape-like figure (Bartunek, 2005).

Vengeance is also depicted as Judas attempts to redeem himself by giving back Caiaphas’s payoff and he once again is attempting to abandon what his betrayal has caused by hiding in the street behind a building. However, this is short lived, when two children who become concerned for Judas’s bleeding lips and face notice him. After Judas attempts to get rid of the children with harsh words, they begin to taunt him and then unexpectedly the situation turns. The physical features of the children change, as one of the children ages rapidly, the other bites Judas and shows his rotten teeth as blood drips from his mouth. The children’s eyes also change, rolling to reveal only white (Gibson, 2004).

Judas fails to find peace through Caiaphas because peace can only be achieved through the Lord and his son Jesus Christ (Bartunek, 2005). The Bible states “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).” This error in judgment causes Judas's continued punishment in Gibson’s version of revenge (Wallis, 2004). Gibson's use of children as tormenting demons and a vehicle of punishment demonstrates a loss of all that is pure and good in the life of Judas. As Judas continues to seek peace in the wrong place, he creates an
increasing amount of distance between himself and Christ. This causes Judas to continually lose hope (Bartunek, 2005).

Judas is then chased by a group of children. The children are yelling and spitting at Judas as he falls to his knees and trembles. At this point, Judas is visited by Satan, which looks on at Judas being tormented by the children. As Judas covers his face, the children and Satan disappear and leave Judas with a decaying donkey. This decaying animal is being swarmed with flies and is riddled with maggots. The donkey has its teeth showing and appears to still have an expression on its face. Judas then uses the harness from the donkey to hang himself in the desert (Gibson, 2004).

The world as Judas knows it becomes twisted and distorted. All that he thought represented good has been turned evil. It appears that Judas's punishment has been calmed, as Satan and the children disappear. On the contrary, it has peaked when Judas views the dead beast. Judas wrongly believes that death is the cure. However, Judas's failure to make peace with God will result in an eternity without peace (Bartunek, 2005).

*The Passion of The Christ* (2004) uses the Gospels to provide a guide for living. The narrative explains why God punishes Judas. Gibson takes liberties with the Gospels and offers an interpretation of Judas’s behaviors following the betrayal before his suicide. The torments and mental anguish Judas faces are purely interpretation, however, they accomplish the rhetorical goal of warning the audience of actions taken against God. It is not important that the representation is not based on a Biblical account (Fisher, 1984).

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) contains the theme of vengeance demonstrated through Judas and Christ. The Judas character suffers tremendous guilt after his betrayal of Christ and God’s revenge for this act is powerful. The betrayal of Christ lacks dramatic elements
with the absence of dialog. However, Olcott’s scene depicting Judas’s suicide is one of the most powerful scenes in the Christ Film genre. The dark and grainy black and white image of Judas hanging reveals a stark and realistic picture of someone who could not escape ultimate punishment. This is one scene where the age of the film seems to make the message persuasive. In addition, the lack of sound gives the scene eerie, yet meaningful, silence.

The Christ character in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) is depicted with considerably more divinity than the recent film representations. However, the human suffering of the character is represented in the final scenes of the film. The character expresses doubts about his purpose on this earth and questions God’s plan. As the savior, Jesus ultimately sacrifices himself for the good of humanity. The film depicts Christ’s entire life of sacrifice that he lives not for himself but to serve his divine mission.

The feature that differs in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) from other selected films is the lack of an expression about the rewards one will experience by living the holy life. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) closes with the glorified resurrection to dramatically picture a reward for sacrifices. *From the Manger to the Cross* however, does not have any visual representation of Christ’s rewards for his sacrifice.

The divine representation present in this narrative is less concerned with providing a guide for living. However, the consequences for living an unholy life are still present in the Judas character. The story is tied to moral and ethical behavior for the viewers. The narrative’s simple structure more closely adheres to the Gospels and contains less filmmaker interpretation of events. The film is basically the Gospels condensed and packaged in a different medium (Fisher, 1984).
*The King of Kings* (1927) differs greatly from the other films in its depiction of vengeance because DeMille’s film has a greater emphasis on redemption. The Christ character is mild mannered and concerned with healing and helping sinners. Anger and wrath are present in the antagonists, Judas and Caiaphas. Judas, overcome with guilt, is unable to go on living and takes his own life. Caiaphas does not recognize in his pursuit for power and fortune the power of Christ’s message. The revenge taken on Caiaphas is the destruction of the temple and his role in the death of the Son of God. 

DeMille (1927) creates a scene where Judas and Mary Magdalene are lovers. Magdalene is angry that Jesus has taken Judas from her and wishes to take action against him. So, she confronts Christ and finds herself cleansed of her sins. She appears angry at the man who has taken her lover from her. But, these feelings disappear when she is in the presence of Christ whose love overtakes her. Peter is described in the film as being “quick of temper but soft of heart.” Peter takes physical action against a high priest early in the film for threatening to strike the child Mark. Peter also fights against the Roman guards who arrest Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Christ character in *The King of Kings* (1927) is not a vengeful God. The weaker characters show a need for revenge but the film shows this is not the true message of Christ. This differs from *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), which shows a God that takes action against those who do live by the life modeled by Christ.

DeMille’s narrative does take artistic license with the Gospels, however, the portrayal of vengeance closely adheres to scripture. The story depicts vengeance as a negative human behavior reserved only for God. Mainly it is shown in the antagonists in the film. For the most part the narrative is consistent with Christian teachings regarding vengeance and wrath. From
From the Manger to the Cross (1912) to The King of Kings (1927) the genre has progressed by greater departure from the Gospels demonstrated in the fictional affair between Judas and Magdalene (Fisher, 1984; Fisher, 1987).

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) shows vengeance through the characters of Christ and John the Baptist. These characters are more powerful and willing to fight against those who threaten their beliefs. Herod has John the Baptist arrested, who fights the guards like an animal when captured. The character fearlessly challenges Herod’s power, claiming he is an adulterer and will burn in hell. This challenge is close to a taunt, asking Herod if he can smell the smoke. John is a fierce and powerful character in the film, challenging and taunting Herod, claiming Christ is building an army.

Throughout most of the film Stevens’s Christ is a predominantly divine character behaving in a calm and sensitive manner preaching mercy not sacrifice. At the temple in Jerusalem when Christ finds people engaging in commerce, he violently reacts, which is a common portrayal in the Christ Film genre. However, the unique feature in The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) is that Christ curses and physically assaults bystanders with a whip. Christ is punishing or getting revenge against those who defile holy ground.

In The Passion of The Christ (2004) many of the evil characters contain certain human elements that the audience can sympathize with or forgive. Judas and Pilate struggle with their actions they have taken against Christ. Even Caiaphas sees that a mistake has been made as the temple tumbles around him. However, Stevens’s Pilate and Herod never understand or struggle with the decisions they have made. In the final scene, after Herod is told of Christ’s resurrection, he claims the entire ordeal will be forgotten in a week. These characters elicit no sympathy from
the audience and the overall tone of the film indicates that God will take revenge on these characters.

Stevens’s narrative is a more complicated and comprehensive film in the Christ Film genre. Most of the film can be found in the Gospels. Most of the characters portrayed are clearly good or evil. Many of the representations lack the complexity of future films. Because of the close Gospel representation the narrative is consistent with audience exposure to previous Biblical stories and constant with truth in a Christian audience. The film’s narrative promises God’s wrath for a lack of holiness in one’s life (Fisher, 1987).

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) demonstrates the theme of vengeance through the Christ character. Jesus is emotional and often irate in this film, much more so than the other films chosen for this investigation. At one point when surrounded by the sick and afflicted demanding his healing power he shouts in anger “heal yourselves.” This anger and emotion gives the character human characteristics. However, it does dismiss the established view of a kind and forgiving savior. Christ lashes out at Judas several times in the film, and as in other narratives ends in Judas’s betrayal. Judas resists Christ message but finally claims that “I only did what you wanted me to” betray the master.

Jewison’s (1973) Christ is far less understanding and patient than other film depictions. Gibson’s Christ does not raise his voice in anger throughout the film. Early in the film *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) Judas questions Christ’s affiliation with Mary Magdalene. Christ reacts harshly to Judas’s doubt, claiming “who are you to criticize?” Jewison’s Christ lashes out with anger and vengeance to doubters, instead of reacting with patience attempting to reason with Judas (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).
When Jesus arrives at the temple in Jerusalem and finds people engaging in commerce, he goes on a rampage and demolishes the market. Violence and rage are part of Jewison’s Christ; there are reprisals for actions against his teachings. Gibson’s Jesus is far more subdued, even in the face of Judas’s betrayal and Peter’s denial, Jesus remains calm giving only looks to show disapproval. The looks of disapproval are rhetorically far more effective than violent outbursts (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

During the Last Supper, when Jesus exposes Judas as the traitor, he once again lashes out. Judas threatens to stay with the Disciples, however, Jesus orders Judas to go to Caiaphas and Annas. Gibson’s Jesus looks at Judas with disappointment and pity while Jewison’s Jesus reacts with rage and vengeance. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) portrays a far more passionate and vengeful Christ than the other Christ Films.

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) completely redefined the boundaries of telling the story of Christ’s life. The story was not consistent with scripture and was viewed skeptically by Christians. However, it was embraced by the youth culture of the period because it was consistent with their values for conduct. The controversial imagery and passionate Christ character was appropriate for the dilemma in the narrative to the youth audience (Fisher, 1987).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) depicts God’s wrath through the tormented Christ character. Jesus is constantly in physical and emotional pain due to God’s charge. Jesus is struck down with a pain several times in the film. Scorsese's Jesus also inflicts physical pain upon himself in hopes of stopping the emotional torment. The Christ character is full of doubt and resists God's plan and for this, God punishes him. Jesus is tortured until the final scene where he accepts his fate and dies on the cross.
In Scorsese’s film the theme of revenge is present only with the Christ character. In contrast with *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), the character of Judas in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is a strong powerful character. Scorsese’s Judas attempts to give Christ strength. Scorsese’s Christ is weak and full of doubt and Judas is the solid character that wants perseverance from Christ. Satan visits Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ* taking several different forms. In one particular instance, Satan speaks to Christ in Judas’s voice and takes the form of a lion. The lion represents strength and courage just as Judas does in the life of Scorsese’s Christ.

Gibson and Scorsese characterize an Old Testament version of God in their films. Gibson’s (2004) demonic children with rotten teeth and lunging ape-like creatures are likely to stick with the audiences and are meant to haunt audience members for days after viewing the film. Doubt and rebellion are punished in Scorsese’s Christ character. Gibson and Scorsese's films reflected our fears about the religious implications of living an unholy life. If one betrays God or ignores his message there is a severe price to pay in the form of God's wrath. This theme of vengeance is demonstrated through the characters that are weak and unholy (Wallis, 2004).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was not successful in achieving its rhetorical purpose of showing the dual nature of Christ mainly because the narrative was not consistent with the audience’s beliefs if their previous knowledge came from the Bible. The weak Christ character did not seem appropriate to the dilemma of saving all of humankind. However, the vengeance depicted in the film did promise certain effects for the audience and did provide loose guidelines for living. In addition, following *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), which shattered the boundaries of the Christ Film genre *The Last Temptation of Christ*, showed that limitations in depictions still exist with sensitive subject matter (Fisher, 1987).
Vengeance is a surprising theme in a New Testament film. However, the theme is present in all the films chosen for this investigation. The theme shows the consequences for human actions on earth. Living by the teachings of Christ and the sacrifices a person makes are rewarded while refusal and indulgence are punished. God’s love is demonstrated as well as His vengeance.

Summary

These six films were produced over a span of 92 years and deal with roughly the same subject matter and comprise the two basic themes of sacrifice and vengeance. Sacrifice is typically demonstrated through the protagonists in the films. The character of Christ suffers and dies in all of the films for the good of mankind. Judas endures a great deal of pain and torment in Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) and The Passion of The Christ (2004). Ironically, the character of Judas in both of these films is not necessarily portrayed as an antagonist. Jesus Christ Superstar portrays Judas in a positive light as a necessary part of God’s plan and a reluctant traitor.

The theme of sacrifice in these films illustrates Fisher’s (1984) concepts of probability and fidelity. It shows the structure of the narratives, which are all based on the Gospels. In addition, the theme accounts for audience reaction to the film. Finally, it shows a progression in the Christ Film genre.

Vengeance is mainly portrayed at the hands God, either through the Christ character or by supernatural means indirectly attributed to God. Harsh and swift action is taken against sinners in the films. Antagonists are tormented and their temples are laid to waste as punishment. The Christ character in The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) takes physical action against sinners.
The theme of vengeance supports Fisher’s (1987) four reasons contained in a narrative. The theme is rhetorically effective when it is consistent with the audience’s beliefs about the Gospels. This theme serves as a warning to the audience and a guide for behavior. Vengeance is portrayed as a consequence for behavior against God.

The two themes are related and reinforce one another. Sacrifice for God is rewarded in the films. The struggles of the protagonists in the films are severe. The characters do not lead attractive lives; the unholy appear to live an easier life. However, sacrifice is generally reserved for the positive characters in the films. Sacrifice is a purging and a way to get closer to God. The unholy are ultimately punished for their actions and indulgences. Vengeance is visited on these characters. A life filled with sin comes at a high price.

These six films about Christ function rhetorically by combining what the film makers take from the words of the Gospels and visually interpret through filmic drama as a message, which demonstrates that a Christ-like life is simple and compassionate and a life that is not materialistic. The positive characters endure a great deal of pain and suffering on earth living only for God and the good of others. Vengeance is reserved for God’s use and is harsh and severe for sinners. The rhetorical message serves as warning to viewers that a life full of material and physical pleasures will be punished in an often horrific way.
CHAPTER THREE

The Christ Character

Chapter three explains the rhetorical ways the persona of Jesus reflects a divine/human messenger in the films under study. As different interpretations of Christ’s life have been explored in a literary and historical sense, filmmakers have used these new insights to develop different cinematic versions of the character. This in turn has changed the way both audiences and film critics evaluate films based on the life and death of Christ (Tatum, 1997).

This chapter shows the changes in the Christ character as well as the elements that appear to have remained the same over the years. Filmmakers have always struggled with Christ being both human and divine. Chapter two indicates the narrative themes in the Christ Film genre have remained largely the same. However, it has become apparent that the Christ character portrayed in this genre of film has changed. The change in this character shows that while the story of Christ has not changed, the audience and their notions about God have changed (Robinson, 2000). The filmmakers have updated the narrative, in particular the Christ character, to adapt to the changing expectations of probability and fidelity in the audience (Fisher, 1987).

The representations show both human and divine characteristics in varying degrees from film to film. Human characteristics would be represented as weakness, doubt, temptation, suffering, lack of emotional control, physical and emotional suffering. All of the elements are associated with being a typical man or woman. Divinity is defined as healing powers, miracles, and anything that defies scientific explanation. In terms of behavior, divinity can be demonstrated through the absences of human response or emotion; lack of fear in the face of physical harm for example.
The characterizations are examined, documenting examples of both the character’s humanity and divinity. Each film’s Christ character is then determined whether to be represented as more human or more divine. The Christ character in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) is analyzed then other film depictions of Christ are presented in chronological order juxtaposed with Gibson’s representation.


Gibson’s characterization of Christ in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) is one of tremendous suffering. The film shows Christ suffering internally with his fate as the savior of mankind. The first sequence shows Christ in a less than glorious fashion; Christ is shown from the back in darkness in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ is struggling with emotional turmoil because of the great physical torment he will soon face. The Christ character is depicted with more human weakness than divine strength. This conflicts with previous Hollywood images of Christ as a young strong powerful man not susceptible to human weakness (Bartunek, 2005).

The weaknesses in Gibson’s (2004) Christ character foreshadow the tremendous suffering Christ will endure later in the film. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) shows Christ’s first words asking God for strength against the persuasion of Satan. Christ questions his fate when Satan asks if Christ is capable of bearing the burden of all man’s sin. Jesus’s internal struggles come from knowing his fate. However, Christ symbolically crushes the serpent instead of responding to Satan directly.

Gibson’s film reflects an element of humanity in the Christ character as the film turns to several flashbacks. The first flashback in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) takes place while Jesus is on trial. In this flashback, Jesus is working as a carpenter making a table for a wealthy man. Jesus and his mother Mary playfully interact with one another. Mary tells Jesus to wash his
dirty hands before a meal and Jesus splashes her with water (Bartunek, 2005). This flashback provides the audience with insight into the human behavior of Christ's character. Although Christ is the Son of God and savior of man, as most boys would do, he respectfully obeys his mother (Goodacre, 2004).

The second noteworthy flashback takes place after the Roman soldiers chastise Christ. Mary Magdalene is mopping up Christ's blood as she recounts Christ saving her from stoning. This incident, which appeared in two of the films, shows Christ's compassion. He saves the life and soul of a woman that the mob had deemed so sinful that she should die. This scene functions to show Christ's courage and compassion, his willingness to stand up to a mob for the life of a woman. Christ displays qualities of a sentimentalist, which is a human characteristic (Bartunek, 2005).

Another series of flashbacks in Gibson's (2004) film depict Christ at the Last Supper with his Apostles. Christ discusses with his Apostles the importance of loving friends and advises them to love each other after his death. This also relates to the character of Christ as a loyal friend and caring for his friends despite his fate. These flashbacks give Christ human characteristics and invite viewers’ sympathy. The filmmakers employ the use of human elements in such a way to get audience members to form an attachment to the character (Bartunek, 2005).

Haas (2006) claims The Passion of The Christ (2004) demonstrates the extent to that a human body can endure pain and torture. The film has been extensively criticized for excessive violence and gore. West (2004) says that Gibson’s film is pornographic in its use of violence. However pain, suffering, and violence are experienced by humans on earth and not aspects associated with divinity. Thus, the rhetorical devices used by Gibson that scare and shock both audiences and critics make the character of Christ suffer as a human. A spiritual person who
feels pain and encounters excessive physical suffering can be far more persuasive than a divine manifestation, which has observed hardship rather than experiencing it. This is especially when a person ascends from the violence through the power of his divinity.

*The Passion of The Christ* (2004) is a film about the last twelve hours of Jesus’s life; the period prior to the crucifixion. Christ endures a considerably violent treatment during this stage of his life and this bloody suffering is the main subject of Gibson’s interest. The death of Jesus is marked by doubt in the character. The dying Christ states, "my God, my God why have you forsaken me?" This plea is similar to the prayer made by Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane early in the film. This crying out is a human plea that is met ultimately by the bright light that symbolizes victory over pain and death.

Initially Christ has doubts about his fate as the savior of man demonstrated in the beginning and end of Gibson’s film. However this quality depicts the humanity of Christ and Christ’s divinity is expressed through his perseverance and ascension despite the intense physical torment. Regardless of his doubt and physical suffering Christ is determined to complete the task. This type of self-sacrifice and ultimate faith in God and his purpose one the divine aspects of Gibson’s Christ (Haas, 2006).

A narrative is more rhetorically effective if a viewer can find characters they identify and even see reasons to change their personal behavior (Stroud, 2003). Gibson’s narrative illustrates a Christ with mostly human characteristics. As the Christ Films have progressed and audience members were exposed to more stories about Jesus than just Biblical accounts the character has changed to adapt. It appears that a more human Christ character has become consistent with audience beliefs based on the recent success of films containing a more human Christ character including Gibson’s film (Fisher, 1987).
From the Manger to the Cross (1912)

Olcott’s *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) covers Christ’s entire life while *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) only depicts his last hours. Biblical passages and additional subtitles start the film to give the viewers some context to the narrative. One of these passages is Luke I:27. “A virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” This passage reminds or introduces the viewer to the idea of the virgin birth, an event that clearly establishes the Christ character as a divine being. A virgin birth is not an occurrence that can be explained rationally by the laws of nature so the entrance of Jesus Christ to the world is unusually supernatural. In contrast, *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) does not address the issue of the virgin birth.

The Immaculate Conception is an aspect of Christ’s life that is omitted from later film versions of his life. The recent films that portray a Christ character with greater emphasis on his human characteristics tend to ignore his conception and birth. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), which arguably portray a Jesus with more human characteristics rather than divine do not mention this aspect of Christ’s existence.

Another aspect of Christ’s life that is often ignored in later film versions is the visit and bearing of gifts by three wise men. *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) includes this feature of Christ’s life to add significance to his birth. This visit foretells of Christ’s future impact on the world. Joseph and Mary react with surprise to this visit as if it were unexpected. However, these men knew of Christ’s birth and its magnitude. The inclusion of these narrative elements implies divinity in Olcott’s Christ character.
The youth of Christ is depicted as extraordinary. He is wise beyond his young age and filled with the spirit of God. It is suggested that Christ as a child was not concerned with the same mundane activities of typical children. At the age of twelve Christ, Mary, and Joseph journey to Jerusalem, and Christ is shown riding on the back of a donkey with his mother and father walking along side him. This action points toward Christ’s divine significance. Typically in the time of Christ’s life, a twelve-year-old male would be considered fairly mature. This seems odd that the woman or mother would not be given preference in this trio and the males would walk while the woman would ride the donkey on a long journey.

At this point a young Christ is shown surrounded my much older men in Jerusalem listening while he speaks. Olcott’s representation of Jesus is one possessing divine qualities even as a young child. These divine qualities are not understood and recognized by his parents but they are apparent to the masses he encounters. The child is able to converse with men with more age and knowledge. However, the child Jesus is portrayed carrying a wooden beam helping in is father’s trade of carpentry. This activity contradicts the divinity of Christ with his humanness, which dominates the character in Olcott’s representation.

As Jesus enters adulthood, he is depicted as having unusual power over people. Peter and Andrew are fishing with nets in the sea and Jesus approaches them and says “follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” The men in a trance-like state come to Jesus with their arms open leaving the net behind. Scenes portraying the calling of the Apostles are common in the Christ Film genre, however, the Apostles following so blindly is not so common. It is obvious God has touched these men.

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) devotes a great deal of time to the miracles of Christ. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) does not flashback to or mentions Christ’s miracles,
although they are common in the genre. Olcott gives Christ’s miracles a specific segment in the film. The miracles that are shown are changing water into wine and healing a leper, a man with palsy, a widow who has lost a son, and a woman who has committed many sins. The ability to heal people is a quality possessed by the divine. Olcott’s Jesus is not human but a divine being, having powers that can heal problems that plague humanity such as physical ailments.

The power of Jesus is not only shown in his ability to heal but his ability to touch humans through his words. The next scene titled “Scenes in the Ministry” shows Christ’s ability as rhetor, however, it is really a continuation of his miracles. Christ is depicted walking on water, not a task that would be defined as a human characteristic. He also raises Lazarus from the dead and gives a blind man sight. These scenes further emphasize Christ as a divine being. Olcott’s Christ is not tempted or doubtful asking God for strength at any point in the film.

In the scene titled “The Last Days in the Life of Jesus,” Olcott’s Christ reveals some human characteristics. Christ takes his belt and violently whips a crowd of people engaging in commerce outside of God’s Temple. This scene is omitted from The King of Kings (1927) but does appear in later Christ Films. Anger is an emotion more closely associated with humanity rather than divinity. This is another scene popular in the Christ Film genre and generally functions to portray Christ as a human being overtaken with emotion. However, The Passion of The Christ (2004), which depicts a far more human version of the Christ, does not contain or make reference to this Biblical narrative.

The humanity of Christ is further depicted at the Mount of Olives as he looks down at Jerusalem with thoughtful concern. Christ knowing his fate, knowing he will be betrayed by Judas and endure a painful death, sits in quiet reflection. Christ’s concern and worry are human qualities; however, knowing one’s fate with certainty is a luxury of the divine. Olcott’s film
captures the duplicity of Christ in this scene. The character has both human and divine characteristics playing off one another simultaneously. This early film version has, if only briefly, identified Jesus in a way that filmmakers nearly 100 years later are still attempting to do.

The scene titled “The Last Supper” begins with Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. The act of washing another’s feet is unique to From the Manger to the Cross (1912) and does not occur in any of the films chosen for this investigation. The act is symbolically humble and indicates the love Christ has for his disciples and the sacrifices he is willing to make for humanity. The act of washing the feet of those who follow and serve Christ adds to the holiness of Olcott’s character (Tatum, 1997).

The final scene, “The Crucifixion and Death of Christ,” shows Christ instructing his disciples regarding his upcoming arrest. Christ prays to God and holds his heart as if he is in pain. Then Christ faces his captors with courage. As Christ is brought to Pilate and Herod his behavior changes and appears as if he has lost hope. The character does not speak or react to the questions of Pilate or taunts of Herod’s men.

Throughout the film Christ’s nonverbal behavior is slightly different from the purely human characters. Jesus moves at a slower pace and has an overall presence lacking in other characters. He always stands straight and moves with purpose. The character is stoic and looks through the people to whom he is speaking. It appears that Christ is looking at God instead of the individual he is speaking with. Christ’s demeanor is different from other characters in the film. This is true of The Passion of The Christ (2004) as well; filmmakers often make the Christ character stand out from others in his demeanor. However, it is the most obvious in From the Manger to the Cross (1912).
The torture and death of Christ does display some human characteristics in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912). Christ claims that he thirsts. The need for nourishment and hydration are human characteristics. However, the suffering and death of Christ are handled in a dignified way. Olcott’s Christ is noble and celestial, absent are the pleas for mercy. While dying on the cross, Gibson’s Christ asks why has God forsaken me. Olcott omits this Biblical passage from his film, giving his Christ far more divine qualities.

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) as the first entry in the Christ Film genre opts for a narrative more closely aligned with the Gospels portraying a divine Christ. In the period of the film’s release, fewer interpretations of the man Christ existed and may account for the Biblical interpretation being dominant in this film. Both the audience and the filmmakers using the Gospels as a main reference point creates a situation where the film is consistent with beliefs (Fisher, 1987).

*The King of Kings* (1927)

DeMille’s *The King of Kings* (1927) offers one of the most compelling and moving portrayals of Christ put on screen. The character presented displays both human and divine qualities. However, like many earlier representations the character is mostly divine in nature.

The second scene of the film and first scene featuring Christ set the tone for the film’s portrayal of Christ. The scene depicts Christ’s healings. First, Christ heals the child Mark, who is crippled. Second, Christ heals a young girl stricken with blindness. Jesus enters the scene surrounded by a soft light that is not present with any of the other characters. This clearly shows the difference between Christ and the human characters in the film. The mysticism of Christ in this film has begun. Christ’s holiness is depicted early; this sets the manner that Christ will be
portrayed throughout this film by the first scene that contains Jesus. He is healing the afflicted with supernatural powers.

DeMille’s film illustrates Magdalene as a beautiful temptress with a spirited and aggressive demeanor. In addition, the filmmaker goes outside of scripture depicting Magdalene and Judas as former lovers. Magdalene views Christ as a competitor for Judas’s affection. She rushes to confront Christ and win back Judas’s love. With one gaze from Christ, Magdalene is awestruck and suffers great internal conflict. She covers her face as if she is unworthy to look upon Christ. Ghostly versions of Magdalene surround her representing the seven deadly sins and attempting to remind her of her worldly desires. Through only a look Christ is doing battle with the evil within Magdalene. Christ commands these evils to leave Magdalene. The scantily clad Magdalene covers herself and kneels at Christ’s feet with a pure heart.

Further displaying Christ’s healing powers, Judas and Peter are approached by a man who claims his son is a lunatic. As Peter goes to get Christ, Judas claims that he can heal the child. Judas’s attempt to heal the child fails. Christ passes his hand over the child and the child becomes peaceful. Judas asks Christ why he could not heal the child. Christ answers that he does not believe. This shows the divinity in the Christ character. Mere men are unable to complete the tasks of Christ, not even his closest followers. Christ’s Apostles, although holy men, display human weakness and therefore are unable to obtain the status of a divine being.

A tax collector approaches Christ asking if he and his followers have paid tribute to Caesar. At this point, Christ performs another miracle. Christ and his men have no money and Peter becomes concerned that they will be in violation of the law. Christ tells Peter to go fishing and God will provide for them. Peter goes fishing and prays to God. Peter catches a fish with
coin in its mouth and pays Caesar’s tax collector. With this miracle Jesus proves that if you follow him, God will provide.

One of the more significant miracles depicted in *The King of Kings* (1927) is raising Lazarus from the dead. As Christ resurrects Lazarus, he has a halo of light around his head. This furthers the argument that this is a portrayal of a divine being. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) contains no special effects that emphasize the divinity of Christ. Gibson’s interpretation is one of a man. He suffers and feels pain like that of a human and no depictions in Gibson’s film indicate Christ’s divine features.

Christ also displays the ability to forgive, a quality difficult for humans. A woman accused of adultery is brought before Caiaphas and he orders her to be stoned to death. Christ intervenes and asks the person without sin to cast the first stone. This scene is also depicted in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) and in both cases the crowd disperses with Christ’s reasoning. This scene in *The King of Kings* (1927), along with his fondness for children, paints Christ as a sentimentalist capable of forgiveness, which is a reflection of divine compassion.

Similar to *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), DeMille depicts the scene of Christ’s anger when he witnesses people doing business in front of the temple. However, DeMille’s Christ only frees the captive animals and tells the people of their wrong doing. Christ does not attack anyone in the crowd or lash out in an angered manner as depicted in most cinematic retellings of this Biblical narrative. DeMille’s Christ does react in a way that displays more human characteristics than any other point in the film. However, this depiction is subdued in comparison to other films chosen for this investigation.

Similar to *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), in *The King of Kings* (1927) Jesus is visited by a dark figure representing Satan who offers Christ power. In a similar fashion, Christ refuses
Satan but becomes pensive and is weakened by the encounter. In this scene, Satan appeals to the humanity of Christ, who is bothered by this offer. The humanity of Christ is featured in this scene with weakness in human nature that is susceptible to evil.

During the Last Supper, Christ reveals to the Disciples that one of them will betray him. Simply knowing this without witnessing Judas’s action reveals the divine nature of Christ. The ability to see the future and know of actions that he does not actually bear witness to is a divine characteristic. This depiction, which is one of the more obvious divine qualities of Christ, appears, in all film versions of Christ’s life. However, it does add to the divine nature of Christ, and is worthy of inclusion in this analysis.

While awaiting his eventual arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ prays to God asking that he not die in such a painful way. Once again asking God for strength depicts the humanity of Christ. This indicates that Christ questions his fate and wishes for an easier way. Looking for an easier way is a human characteristic and a characteristic not depicted in Christ through most of this film. However, Christ, with the help of God, faces his captors bravely.

As the captors approach, a struggle ensues between the guards and the disciples. In this scene, Peter cuts a guard with his sword. Christ tells the disciples to stop the resistance and heals the injured Peter. Even in the face of death and those who attempt to persecute him, Christ is forgiving and shows mercy.

During the beating and torture, Christ somberly accepts his unjust punishment. Christ heals and helps both onlookers and guards along the way. Even in his greatest moments of physical agony he is looking out for humanity. The physical suffering of Christ is glossed over in DeMille’s version of Christ’s death. The focus of this film is on the life of Christ while The Passion of The Christ (2004) focuses on his death. This may provide reasoning for the divine
portrayal of Christ in The King of Kings (1927) because the life of Christ displays the divinity while death and physical suffering are worldly.

Christ’s resurrection is the final miracle in The King of Kings (1927) film. Christ rises from the dead in color, while the majority of the film is in black and white with exception to the opening sequence, which depicts Magdalene in color as an attention getting device. DeMille’s resurrection is depicted in greater detail than in Gibson’s film, furthering the argument that DeMille’s Christ displays far more divine characteristics than Gibson’s human version of the character.

Christ is not only able to cure physical ailments demonstrated with children in the earlier scene but also able to cleanse and purify the souls of sinners. This furthers the argument that DeMille’s Christ is divine in nature. In the first two scenes featuring Christ, his healing powers are shown. Christ has the ability to cure all ailments both of the body and the soul. The healings are a large part of The King of Kings (1927) while not mentioned in Gibson’s film.

The King of Kings (1927) differs from From the Manger to the Cross (1912) in its departure from scripture. However, The King of Kings does not greatly depart from the Gospels in the representation of the Christ character. This is significant in the progression of the Christ Film genre by successfully achieving its rhetorical message while the narrative is not completely consistent with the previously held beliefs of the audience. The fictional love affair between Judas and Mary Magdalene was appropriate to the narrative and while not factual it was consistent to previously held beliefs about the two characters. Christ is still portrayed as mainly a divine being also steady with previously held beliefs of the period (Fisher, 1987).
The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965)

Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) begins with a view of Christ's image in a fresco with welcoming arms. A narrator quotes the gospel of John--"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God"—followed by a short pause and then the phrase "I am He." The narrator mentions Christ as the life and the light. This is followed by a view of the starry night sky and one particular star transforms into a flame. This opening quote in the film indicates the divinity of Christ. All things are possible with God and he is the true way. The starry night sky indicates something beyond the earth (Tatum, 1997).

The light illuminates the scene of Christ's birth. Christ's birth is depicted only briefly. Christ comes from humble beginnings, born in a stable. Scenes depicting Christ's birth display the humanity of Christ. His birth is not one of a King or a God. Stevens glosses over this portion of Christ's life. Dwelling greatly on these humble beginnings would stress the humanity of the character. Stevens shows greater interest in the concern of Herrod with the news of Christ's birth. This shows the threat posed by the birth of Christ to the powers that be. This takes the attention away from the humanity of Christ and focuses on his divinity.

Christ's childhood is passed over in this film. Instead Stevens chooses to give the political and leadership background of the region depicted in the film. Christ is not shown again until adulthood. The next scene containing Christ is during his baptism by John the Baptist. John the Baptist is preaching and baptizing great masses of people when Christ approaches. The mere sight of Christ, whom John the Baptist has never seen before causes John to stand in awe. John claims that he knows Christ but has never seen him before. Once he determines who Christ is, John says, should not you baptize me? This further depicts the divinity of Christ in his ability to
awe people without saying a word. John the Baptist knew instinctively that Christ is different from all of those in the crowd awaiting baptism.

The Satan character credited as "the dark hermit" is similar to the depiction of Satan in *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Both characters are subtlety illustrated with no outwardly horrific physical characteristics. However, both are frightening because of understated characteristics. Stevens's Satan is a small elderly man while Gibson's is a woman that displays asexual characteristics. One feature that makes both characters so scary is the power they have. Christ, who is depicted as more divine than human in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), is leery and fearful of Satan just as Gibson's Christ. Satan tempts Christ throughout Stevens's film.

The first scene depicting Satan shows him crouched in a cave eating by a fire. Christ has come upon this cave after a long climb up a mountain. Christ is physically tired and hungry due to his fasting. Satan offers Christ food and Christ refuses. Satan claims that an easy life is not necessarily a difficult life and claims life can be as easy as Christ wants it to be. Satan then offers Christ power over the world if he will serve Satan. Christ refuses but Satan continues to tempt and challenge Jesus. Satan tells Christ he is the son of God and to jump off this mountain and turn a stone into bread. Christ is obviously fearful of Satan and extremely uncomfortable in his presence. This scene illustrates the humanity of Christ. Even with his power and divinity, the humanity of Christ shows fear and weakness towards Satan and his offers. Still, Christ is able to resist Satan taunts and temptations much better than the human characters in the film. Peter denies Christ later in the film because of Satan's accusations.

The scene of Christ gathering his flock is understated in comparison to *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and *The King of Kings* (1927). In the earlier film versions of this scene Judas, Andrew, Peter, and John are drawn to Christ in a trance-like state. Stevens's representation adds
to the argument of Christ's divinity in this film because Christ calls John by name before he is able to introduce himself. However, Stevens opts to refrain from representing the Disciples coming to Christ with open arms and mouths, as if they were drawn by a mysterious power. The Disciples come to Christ because of his message and spoken word. In the previous silent versions, overstated nonverbal expressions are necessary to demonstrate Christ's powerful message.

In *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) Christ's first scene demonstrating his healing power comes during a visit to a temple. He and his followers are listening to a sermon when Christ challenges the man delivering the sermon and a second man claims he is crippled and cannot walk. Christ heals the crippled man, claiming that he did not heal the man but the man's faith in God healed him. Healing and other miracles strengthen the claim of a divine Christ. Christ's healing powers are absent from human depictions of Christ. Gibson's film does not even mention Christ's healing powers.

As the story moves on, Christ saves Magdalene from certain death by stoning. His words after this event cause the crowd to ask for Christ to heal them of their individual ailments. As Christ moves through the crowd he heals people by touching them. Jesus and his followers make their way to Nazareth. In Christ's home he is met with mixed feelings from the people of Nazareth. He is accused of blasphemy and an old blind man is brought to him. The crowd along with Satan asks Christ to give him sight. Christ refuses and claims he will not give into temptation. Satan then calls for the crowd to stone Christ for blasphemy. One person hits Christ with a stone but he continues to walk away. However, later the old man can be seen talking to Christ but no one is present. The old man is given sight. Christ is able to resist the temptation of Satan and refuses to heal the old man to please the crowd. However, later the old man is given
sight. The divinity of Christ is represented by His ability to appear only to the old man. No one else can see Christ.

Stevens has also chosen to include the scene of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. Raising a man from the dead is one of Christ's greater miracles with the exception of his own resurrection and causes great distress to Caiaphas when he is made aware of the matter. Giving life to a dead man is obviously something beyond the power of any human. Stevens's choice to include this Biblical narrative creates a divine Christ character rather than a human character made popular in later film versions of the narrative of Christ's life.

The humanity of Christ is depicted in his emotions. When Christ comes to the temple he finds the people engaging in trade on the Sabbath. Christ is filled with rage and begins turning over tables and releasing animals. Christ is overtaken with anger and reacts harshly against the common people engaging in commerce. Anger is a human emotion and humans have difficulty controlling their anger. Christ has this same problem in this scene. This is a popular scene in the Christ Film genre and works well to display the human characteristics of Christ.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ further displays human characteristics. He asks God to save him from his painful death. Christ pleads for a different fate. In this scene, Christ displays some weakness. However, Jesus comes to terms with his fate and says may God's will be done. In later film representations of this scene, Christ does not come to terms with his eventual crucifixion; he struggles and pleads with God.

The depiction of Christ carrying the cross and being nailed to it is rather brief in this long film. Stevens, like many directors before him, glosses over this portion of Christ's life probably due to the film code of the period. Gibson on the other hand decided to focus on this portion of Christ's life in his film. The crucifixion represents human suffering, something a divine being
does not experience. Unlike later versions, graphic blood and violence are left out of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and the focus is on the message of God and Christ's power as the Son of God.

Although still mostly a divine representation of Christ, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) provides a more human portrayal than *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and *The King of Kings* (1927). Stevens while remaining true to the Gospels with his narrative pays more attention to facets that illustrate humanity than past films of the genre. However, by this point audiences need more in a Christ narrative and character that they can identify. American values of the mid-60s were not consistent with values and characters portrayed in this film (Fisher, 1987).

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973)

Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) marks a notable shift in the portrayal of Christ. It begins with the cast and crew arriving on site in a bus in modern clothing. This ends in a dramatic fashion as the Christ character is dressed in a white robe, the costume of Jesus. This is a throwback to the earlier Christ Films and represents the divinity of Christ. In the opening scene of the cast in character, Judas is sitting on a rock singing followed by a group of young people hailing Christ. Although an unorthodox beginning for a Christ Film, the first shots of Jesus in character he is being hailed by a group of people. This supports the portrayal of Christ as a divine being.

The next scene depicting Christ finds him surrounded by people asking, “What’s the buzz. Tell me what’s happening.” Jewison’s Christ responds harshly to his followers asking why they want to know. This interpretation of Christ is one that is quite intense, often angry and
forceful with people. In the same scene Judas questions Christ’s association with Magdalene and Jesus reacts in a similar fashion.

Magdalene then sings to and rubs oil on Christ’s forehead. Magdalene sings the following tune.

Try not to get worried
Try not to turn on to
Problems that upset you
   oh Don't you know
Everything's alright
Yes everything's fine
And we want you to sleep well tonight
Let the world turn without you tonight
   If we try
We'll get by
So forget all about us tonight

This indicates that Christ gets worried or upset at the thought of the consequences that could be brought upon him by other men. This is a definite human quality of Jewison’s Christ character. Worry indicates a lack of control or knowledge of future events.

The next scene depicts a large group of Christ’s followers singing and dancing his praises. The group comprises young, physically fit, and scantily clad people as Christ looks on with happiness. Christ responds in song with a challenge claiming the crowd does not understand his fate. Jewison’s Christ frequently disputes his followers’ praises by claiming the followers do not understand his purpose. This conflicts with earlier divine representations of Christ as a sympathetic supporter of his followers and their humanity. This interpretation of Christ seems condescending and somewhat abrasive at times. Although a more human depiction than earlier film representations, this Christ is quick to point out the differences between himself and his followers.
Christ then charges with purpose into the city of Jerusalem to find those doing business. The crowd sings of the decadence available for the asking and the right price. Provocatively dressed women dance as others buy and sell guns and drugs. Christ angrily destroys tables adorned with goods for sale and tells the crowd to disperse claiming this is a place of worship, not a place of business. After this striking display of anger he quietly sings and reflects on his years on earth and appears to be pleased that his time on earth is nearly at an end. This depiction is human in nature due to Christ’s inability to control his emotions. In addition, Christ displays exhaustion with his purpose. These are characteristics of a human not of a divine being that would not be affected by earthy weaknesses.

Christ’s quiet moments are soon interrupted by a mob of the weak and ill asking Christ to heal their various ailments. Christ desperately attempts to help as many of the crowd as possible, but the crowd is too large. Christ screams at the mob not to crowd him and asks them to leave him alone. This further strengthens the case of Christ as more human than divine in Jewison’s depiction. Christ is unable to deal with vast numbers of people asking for his healing powers. This challenges the notion that in God all things are possible. It seems peculiar that if Christ desires to help these people, why he cannot simply and with ease heal the crowd of diseased and weak people.

The next scene containing Christ is at the Last Supper. Christ tells his disciples, for all they care the bread is his body and the wine is his blood. Then with contempt he tells his disciples that because of them no one will remember him ten minutes after he is dead. He claims that Peter will deny him within hours and Judas will betray him. The knowledge of these events demonstrates divinity. However, Christ’s incorrect assessment of the events following his death sends conflicting messages. Christ frequently displays contempt for his followers for their lack of
understanding of the importance of the times and events taking places. Christ’s poor judgments and misinterpretations are human characteristics.

Christ’s questioning of his fate and wanting explanations for his death follow. Jesus screams at God wanting to know why he must die and demands to know the reasons for his inevitable suffering. This is followed by images of paintings of Christ’s death on the cross. This inspires Jesus to continue with his purpose. However, this questioning of his fate displays Christ’s humanity. Christ’s lack of understanding of the purpose of these events puts him on the level of his human followers.

Christ followers struggle with his nature in this film. This is shown in the song I Don’t Know How to Love Him. Both Magdalene and Judas sing this song in the film as both characters struggle with the question, is Christ human or divine? Magdalene claims he is just a man but does not know how to express her love for Christ. Judas struggles with this same question after he betrays Christ. Judas then reaches the decision that Christ is divine and his betrayal of the divine Christ leads to Judas’s suicide. This causes confusion about the true nature of Christ when his closest followers cannot determine his character.

Jewison decided to show the death of Christ in a relatively positive context, flashing to a musical and dance sequence. In this montage Judas reappears dressed in all white with a group of dancers also dressed in white. Then the film flashes back to Christ’s crucifixion, although it is briefly depicted in comparison to the earlier film versions of this story. As Christ is dying on the cross, he asks why God has forgotten him. The film then ends with the cast and crew dressed in modern clothing getting back on the bus leaving the film’s location.

The final scene is relatively somber and the humanity of Christ largely emphasized with Christ asking why God has forgotten him. In addition, Jewison’s artistic choice to leave out
Christ’s final miracle of the resurrection enforces Christ’s humanity. Elements contained in this production indicate that Christ differs from his followers, for example he is the only character wearing all white throughout the film. Jewison’s film still does provide a human representation of Christ.

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) portrays the most human Christ by far compared to the previously discussed films. However, the narratives presented in this film still are largely from the Gospels. The genre still has not produced completely fictional narratives about the Christ character. The narrative’s content is true to what is known and valued in the Bible. The interpretation and depiction is entirely new and unique. The character goes further than past representations to reach out to a non-Christian audience. It is successful in achieving its rhetorical message to its core youthful audience (Fisher, 1987).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) opens with a quote from the novel of the same title that summarizes the film as a fictional take on the dual nature of Christ being both human and supernatural. Scorsese’s Christ is first depicted asleep and his divinity described as a sharp pain. Judas then describes Christ as coward when he finds Jesus constructing crosses for the Romans. Judas then physically assaults the weak Christ character who claims he is struggling. Judas is depicted as the strong character that pushes Christ and gives him strength. This opening scene sets the tone for this film and the depiction of Christ as weak and doubtful.

Instead of being adorned by followers, Christ is hated early in this film. As he carries a cross that will be used to kill a Jew, the crowd throws stones at him and Magdalene spits in his face. Christ aids in the crucifixion of this man. He does this so God will stop loving him because he describes God’s love as painful. Christ is struggling with his divinity and humanity. Although
Christ attempts to cast out God’s love as if it were an evil spirit, he also punishes himself for his disdain of God and the actions he takes against him. Christ chastises himself and while he carries crosses for the Roman’s he wears a studded belt to inflict pain upon himself.

Instead of Christ forgiving sinners, Christ asks for forgiveness from Magdalene. Magdalene claims Christ is pitiful and says she hates Christ and hates God because of him. This depiction is not of a misunderstood or feared Christ but of a man whose conflicted nature causes a lack of understanding concerning how do deal with this dual nature. This causes those around him to have negative feelings toward him. Christ is depicted merely as a tool of God with no real understanding of his purpose or powers.

Christ claims it is not a blessing to know what God wants. Christ claims he is a liar, hypocrite, afraid, and wants to rebel against God. Christ says his only real God is fear. This is not the brave stoic figure portrayed in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), or even *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). The humanity portrayed in Gibson’s film is not in what is shown but what is left out. Gibson’s depiction of Christ shows the humanity in the suffering of the last twelve hours of his life. He chooses to leave out the miracles and the powerful sermons. The depiction of torment and physical suffering endow the character with more human characteristics.

Scorsese on the other hand depicts the humanity of the character by what is strategically depicted or created. Scorsese’s Christ appears weak and elicits pity during his struggles. Although miracles are shown in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), they are done through Christ or surrounding him but not actually perpetrated by Christ. Even the miracles and knowledge of future events seem to come from God and not the Christ character.
The sermons of Christ do not contain the same powers of persuasion depicted in earlier film versions of his life. Scorsese’s depiction of the Sermon on the Mount is filled with doubt and questions from those listening. A couple of men in the crowd laugh at Christ and a misunderstanding in Christ’s speech cause the crowd to disperse and run away. Even Gibson’s depiction of Christ’s sermon through a flashback displays a kind gentle man who has his audience captivated.

Scorsese’s Christ does build a following; however, the depiction is glossed over. People are not drawn to Christ with mouths agape as depicted in From the Manger to the Cross (1912) and The King of Kings (1927). Jesus does display glimmers of leadership ability in the film; he manages to save Magdalene from the angry mob. However, Christ states later in the film that he was filled with anger at the mob and wanted to kill them but when he opened his mouth, out came love. When Christ does display the strong powerful qualities shown in earlier films, it is as if God is speaking through him. Christ as a man is not in control over his thoughts and feelings.

Scorsese’s film does depict the supernatural but it is typically set into motion by either God or Satan. Satan appears to Jesus in the form of animals with familiar voices, for example he appears as a lion with Judas’s voice and as a snake with Magdalene’s voice. God produces supernatural events as well. Christ has conversations with Lazarus and John the Baptist later to find out they were dead at the time of their interactions. Christ does not produce the supernatural forces at work in the film but they surround him. Christ is depicted as a man that is used by God.

Christ does perform miracles in the film. He performs what looks like psychic surgery on himself removing his own heart, heals the sick, turns water into wine, and raises Lazarus from the dead. These are the miracles most often depicted in the Christ Film genre, with the exception
of the psychic surgery. This appears to be Scorsese’s attempt to show the divinity of Christ. Jesus seems to gain confidence after performing miracles. With this confidence comes a following.

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead he approaches the situation with confidence. However, when Lazarus raises his hand Christ is startled. This indicates surprise on the part of Christ. As Lazarus embraces Christ, Jesus appears relieved and looks skyward as if he is thanking God. In this scene, it appears that Christ did not believe that he was actually going to be able to perform the miracle. A lack of knowledge concerning the outcome of this miracle reveals the humanity in Christ. Jesus did not have faith that God would aid him in raising Lazarus from the dead.

Scorsese, like the filmmakers before him, prefers to depict Christ’s anger in front of the temple. Christ goes on a rampage turning over tables and smashing goods. Jesus then screams at people who ask him to heal them, claiming that they are filled with hate and God will not help them. Scorsese’s interpretation is different but equally as dramatic as earlier versions. In addition, it functions in a similar way depicting the humanity of Christ through his expression of anger and lack of control over his emotions.

Christ pleads with God for a quick death while he still has strength. All of the Christ characters in the films chosen for this investigation plead with God in some way for an alternative to crucifixion. However, Scorsese’s Christ not only pleads with God but asks Judas to stand with him and not to leave him. At this point, Christ is weakened to the point that he can barely stand. Judas takes Jesus away from the crowd and Christ realizes that he must die on the cross. Christ needs the support of men for strength to carry out his task. A divine Christ would not need the support of men to give him strength.
In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ displays divine characteristics after his final plea for God’s assistance. Judas leads the Romans to Christ and betrays Christ with a kiss. Peter cuts off a Roman soldier’s ear and Christ encourages Peter to put down his weapon and heals the guard. Christ is taken to Pilate and beaten. Scorsese decides to avoid the Jewish role in Christ’s death by leaving Caiaphas out of Christ’s arrest and persecution.

The scenes following depict Christ carrying his cross and subsequent crucifixion are far less dramatic and bloody than depicted in Gibson’s film. These scenes merely set up the controversial hallucination. Christ is visited by Satan in the form of a young girl who claims that Christ is not the Messiah for man and she takes him from the cross. The young girl shows Christ his marriage to Mary Magdalene. Magdalene then cleans his wounds, which leads to a very brief scene where the two are making love.

Christ’s fantasy continues with Magdalene’s death. Beyond this Christ goes on to lead a normal life. He marries, has children, and grows old. The young girl follows wherever Christ goes, watching over him. However, chaos develops in Christ’s world. On his death bed Christ is visited by his disciples. Judas enters the room last and calls Christ a coward, telling him his place was on the cross. The scene cuts back to Christ on the cross smiling realizing his purpose is to die on the cross. The film does not depict a resurrection.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is by far the most human depiction of Christ of the films chosen. Christ lives out God’s purpose but as a man. As a man, Christ has doubts and questions God’s plan even with contempt. Eventually he sees the rationality of God’s plan and understands what and why it must be done only after seeing the consequences of the Son of Man leading a normal life. Christ leading a normal life prevents many others from enjoying a normal life.
Scorsese’s film completely departs from scripture in the character of Christ. Most of the discussion of Christ’s personality is completely fictional and portrays the opposite of values consistent with the Christian viewer’s image of the Son of God. This may be a character audiences can identify with but is not a character appropriate to the situation presented in the film. In addition, Scorsese’s Christ is not idyllic as a basis for behavior. However, the film is significant in the evolution of the Christ Film genre being the most significantly different portrayal of the character. It shows all of the past boundaries of the character are flexible (Fisher, 1987).

Summary

The earlier film versions of Christ show a divine character. *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) depicts a supernatural being with great powers over the earth and humans. *The King of Kings* (1927) offers another divine interpretation of Christ. This film depicts a kind and gentle Christ with compassion for men. Both of the silent films put a great emphasis on Christ’s miracles and *From the Manger to the Cross* stresses Christ’s supernatural birth and childhood. These are consistent with the audience’s previous Christian knowledge and the values of the period. *The King of Kings* does mark a significant progression in the genre but also includes completely fictional portrayals of characters and events.

*The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) depicts a slightly more modern and human depiction of the Christ character. The physical suffering and needs of Christ are more prevalent in this film than the earlier silent versions of his life. This Christ character also displays some human weakness and emotion such as anger and fear. However, there is still a focus on the miracles. The character is a stoic version that faces his fate with little resistance. The filmmaker decides to give greater attention to the man Christ than early film depictions. However, the film’s narrative
based on Fisher’s (1984) model is not rhetorically effective because audiences still wanted qualities to identify with in the character.

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) in the form of a rock opera offers a very different interpretation of the Christ character. This Christ full of human emotion and passion often reacts harshly to his disciples. Jewison’s Christ is frustrated at the lack of understanding displayed by his followers. The Gospel narrative still remains intact in Jewison’s film but it shows the first significant changes in the character of Christ. The film’s narrative reaches out to the youth audiences, which this new character of Christ displayed consistent values. However, a Christian audience found the film was not true with previous stories about the Christ.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) breaks the mold of the Christ Film by using fictional portrayal of Christ. Christ is portrayed as an unwilling instrument of God. This representation is the opposite of the audience’s previously held beliefs. Scorsese’s Christ struggles and resists God throughout most of the film. The character is weak and full of doubt and relies greatly on his disciples for strength. This film marks the boundaries of the Christ Film genre. Although a human Jesus appears to be more rhetorically effective in recent years, the boundary is clearly drawn at sexuality. A sexualized Christ does not correspond with the audience’s previously held beliefs.

Finally, *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) does provide a human depiction of Christ. Gibson’s choice of only depicting the last twelve hours of Christ’s life gives a limited view of the character. However, the film pulls back from fictional depiction of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and returns to the Gospels as the basis for the narrative. Once again, Christian audiences found a Christ character that was consistent with previous narratives but they could also relate with on a human level. In addition, the character was appropriate to the situation and
possesses qualities needed as the savior of man. Gibson gives the character texture with use of flashbacks but the majority of the film depicts physical suffering, which is definitely a human characteristic. This version of Christ’s life is the second most human portrayal chosen for this investigation and is not a throwback to the 1920s Biblical Epics.

Rhetorically Christ’s persona as an equally human and divine messenger has changed over time. The earlier films show Christ as a supernatural miracle worker that is impervious to human weakness and temptation. The Christ character in the silent films is set apart from the human characters; while in later representations they depict a Christ that is similar to the fully human characters. Rhetorically, filmmakers have attempted to depict a Christ that, while divines, features also noticeable human characteristics. I would argue that it is easier for modern audiences to identify with a Christ figure character who displays characteristics of human beings. This sort of identification can link the viewer’s humanness with the love of God. As time has moved on, people know the divine Christ through Biblical narratives as filmmakers have presented to audiences the human qualities combined in the divine nature of Jesus Christ.
CHAPTER IV
PROMOTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The films selected for this investigation span nearly 100 years and have varied in interpretation and financial success. This chapter will examine and summarize secondary and tertiary sources to explain target audiences and promotional strategies used to understand box office successes and failures of the Christ Film genre. In addition, the chapter will give historical context to the films. Certain values are common across the long history of the Christ Film genre. However, others have changed as the genre has progressed. This will provide an explanation for these changes. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) will be explored first; the remaining films will be examined in chronological order.


The rhetorical potential of Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) extends beyond the content. The strategic release date of Ash Wednesday and the unique grass roots social marketing campaign, which ignored typical mass media outlets, led to the film’s success (Beal & Linafelt, 2006). Gibson’s film garnered no interest from major Hollywood studios and Gibson funded the $25 million dollar production from his own firm Icon Productions (Medved, 2003). The film turned out to be the most successful religious film in history and the highest grossing film in 2004 (Beal & Linafelt, 2006).

As early as a year before its scheduled release, *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) came under attack by film critics and organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). These charges stated that the film had an anti-Semitic message and portrayed Jews as sadistic. These charges were based on an early draft of the screenplay, which was leaked. Critics believed that Gibson’s portrayal depicted Jews as blood thirsty and responsible for Christ’s death. The fear of
the ADL was that Gibson’s film would cause violence against Jews and create a setback in Christian and Jewish relations (Medved, 2003).

Gibson only had an advertising budget of $10 million, low by 2007 standards, and his strategy drew even more attention to the project (The Numbers, 2004). Typical film promotional techniques were not used in the case of *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Gibson relied greatly on churches and religious leaders to help promote the film. Christian Churches were sent promo packets that included film trailers, door hangers, posters, and post cards/flyers (The Passion of The Christ, 2004).

Church groups and leaders widely promoted the film to their congregations and communities. These groups and individuals made the film an event among the congregations by renting theaters conducting private screenings. This promotion and support from Evangelicals is rare for a Hollywood production. Billy Graham even claimed the film brought him to tears (Cooper, 2005).

Gibson specifically targeted Evangelical Christians with *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). Evangelicals are frequently mocked and misrepresented in popular film. This film generally speaks to Christians and represents their values and beliefs. Unlike some modern Christian cinema, Gibson’s film contains high production values and appeals to an adult audience (Caldwell, 2006).

America’s culture wars have left Evangelicals with a sense of exclusion (Caldwell, 2006). The United States is one of the most religious nations in the world based on church attendance and self-reported data. Approximately 94% of United States citizens claim they believe in God and almost 50% attend church services at least once a week, this compared to Europe where less than 20% attend church weekly (Singer, 2004). Christianity is by far the most popular religion in
the United States with 77% of the population claiming a Christian affiliation (Kosmin, Mayer & Keysar, 2001). However, in Hollywood movies, Christian values are often ignored (Caldwell, 2006).

A lack of representation of Christian values in film and popular culture in general may have changed in recent years. The election of President George W. Bush in 2000 is significant. Those who attend Church more often than once a week supported Bush two-to-one over Gore and third party candidates. Gibson’s film largely appealed to Evangelicals that tend to vote Republican. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) has become a political issue. When discussing the film, more often than not, those who claim to like the film are Republicans and those who dislike the film or adamantly state an unwillingness to watch *The Passion* are Democrats (Caldwell, 2006).

Based on Gibson’s marketing strategy, the film specifically targeted a Christian audience. Although, the film’s narrative may not have been a throw back to the films of the 1910s and 1920s with its modern mostly human representation of Christ, it was in terms of marketing. Judging by the secular and Christian response, the film represented the values of a Christian audience. With few exceptions a Christ Film must have the support of Christian leaders in order to successful financially (Fisher, 1987).

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912)

Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) is significant not only in the genre of the Christ Film but for filmmaking in general. Film depictions of Jesus's life were common even at the turn of the century. However, *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) was the first significant religious film made by an American production company (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). The film was made by the Kalem Company, which was a leading production company in the United States
in that era. One unique feature the Kalem Company used was to shoot on location and this film began that tradition for this company (Tatum, 1997).

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) was one of the only films of this period to be shot without using the home studio and one of the earliest movies filmed entirely on location. Experts on the region were consulted in an attempt to pinpoint exact locations for authenticity. The Egyptian sequences were completed in 1911 while the remainder of the film was shot one year later in the Holy Land. Even the interiors were built and filmed in a studio in Jerusalem (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). Well-known landmarks such as the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids make up the backgrounds in this motion picture (Kinnard & Davis, 1992).

The shooting location of the film added to the expense of this large production for the time. The film cost $100,000 to produce; this was one of the most costly movies ever made in 1912. In addition, the film had forty-two actors and actresses for the principal roles along with hundreds of extras and animals. The amount of time spent creating the picture was also extensive, taking three months to complete. The film made nearly $1,000,000 making it the most successful film in the Kalem Company's history (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

Gene Gautier, who played the Virgin Mary and also developed the script, was a popular actress in the era. Her script was drawn directly from the four Gospels and Biblical quotes were used in the film to keep the audience abreast of the story. The film's visual elements were drawn from Tissot's illustrated Bible, which was extremely popular in the early twentieth century (Tatum, 1997). Christ was played by British actor Robert Henderson Bland with a subdued dignity. Bland would later write two books about his experience with the film. His portrayal of Christ is generally considered one of the best in film history (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).
Films pertaining to the life of Christ at the turn of the century garnered little controversy. Much like Gibson, producers would often receive the approval and support of Christian church leaders. Religious films were used as teaching tools by evangelists and well known religious leaders of the day hailed film as the new medium to spread the word of God. Gibson's unique social marketing strategy was not completely original and was a technique employed nearly 100 years previously.

As film began to gain steam as an affordable and common form of entertainment, the religious community began to see film as a threat to children's morals. The subject matter of film broadened with an increase in sex and violence and this generated controversy from many in religious circles. Many of the same criticisms voiced regarding film today were present in the early twentieth century. Before the release of *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) local censorship boards were present in major cities throughout the United States.

Much like *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) experienced a great deal of pre-release controversy. At the time, many believed that no film made previously had received such negative attention. However, after the film's inaugural showing on October 3, 1912 in London's Queen's Hall, many religious leaders who were in attendance supported the film. The reviews eleven days later after the New York screening also praised the film. The reviews touted everything from the locations to gospel adherence (Tatum, 1997).

The early criticism of *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) bears a striking resemblance to *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). However, *From the Manger to the Cross* slowly gained acceptance from the critics and the religious community. For many years after the initial release the film was successful (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). The film was periodically re-released for many
years and the 1938 release featured narration and a musical score (Tatum, 1997). The film was generally considered the best religious film made until the 1927 release of *The King of Kings* (1927) (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). It is yet to be seen, whether history will paint *The Passion of The Christ* in a similar light.

Due to *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) close adherence to the Gospels the film’s narrative was eventually supported and praised by the Christian audience. The secular audience also supported the film due to the novelty of the new medium. The values portrayed in the narrative did correspond with those of the audience and likely accounts for the film’s success. Olcott’s film provides the basis for the Christ Film genre and future films evolve from its starting point (Fisher, 1987).

*The King of Kings* (1927)

DeMille’s *The King of Kings* (1927) is considered by many to be the best Christ Film ever made. The film still aired well into the 1980s and was used in primitive regions of the world to promote Christianity. DeMille’s historic career in motion pictures produced no finer film. The film is the standard that all motion pictures of the genre are judged (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). In DeMille’s autobiography he claimed that second to the Bible more individuals had been exposed to the story of Christ through his film than any other medium, more than 800 million viewers (Tatum, 1997).

Many have criticized Gibson for not using religious advisors while developing *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). DeMille consulted people of faith during the making of *The King of Kings* (1927) and encouraged prayer during shooting. Day one of shooting began with a nondenominational prayer. This behavior was common throughout the production. The actors and actresses were required by contract to behave in a commendable way off the set. Similar to
Gibson, DeMille did draw on his religious background during the creative process. DeMille’s filmography included several religious narratives and this was based on the Biblical stories from his youth (Tatum, 1997)

The cost and profits generated by *The King of Kings* (1927) are difficult to accurately estimate. It is estimated that direct costs were $1,265,283.95. However, final costs are $2,265,283.95. A million dollars of the final cost was buried to cover the building and stock company used for other films. The film was released by Producers Distributing Company and premiered in New York on April 19, 1927 and grossed $2,641,687.21 (Birchard, 2004).

The outdoor scenes were shot on location on Catalina Island of the coast of California and drew on all four gospels (Tatum, 1997). Similar to *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) the script for *The King of Kings* (1927) was written by a woman. Jeannie MacPherson was a frequent collaborator with DeMille (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). H.B. Warner was cast as Jesus Christ. Although a veteran actor, by the time of production he was largely forgotten by the film industry. Casting relatively unknown actors in the role of Christ is generally positive. The actor does not have to overcome a screen image held by audience members (Birchard, 2004). In *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), for instance the little known but capable actor James Caviezel played the difficult role of Jesus Christ.

*The King of Kings* (1927), like many other films in this genre generated controversy. DeMille decided to make changes to the final version of his film based on pressure from Jewish groups. It seems that charges of anti-Semitism are sure to surround any film that depicts the trial and crucifixion of Christ; *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) was no different. However, the Gospels are clear regarding the role of Jerusalem’s Jews in the death of Christ and Pilate’s
Filmmakers have taken two approaches to this problem either adhering to Gospels and enduring the controversy or omitting certain events to avoid debate (Reinhartz, 2006).

Pre-release charges of anti-Semitism in Christ Films are not enough to keep people away from movie theaters. Although, DeMille did make certain changes, the majority of the blame was placed on the Jewish high priest Caiaphas and not Pilate. Gibson’s film portrays Pilate as a weak character that gives in to Jewish pressure. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) solidly places blame not only on Caiaphas but on the Jewish crowd as well. DeMille did not portray a blood hungry mob of Jewish people. Regardless, both films were commercial successes (Reinhartz, 2006).

Filmmakers that take the alternative approach and ignore the Gospels to avoid controversy seem to lack the financial success of the films that adhere to scripture. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) curiously leave Caiaphas out of Christ’s trial or the entire film, failed to make a significant impact at the box office. Playing it safe, regarding the Jewish role in the death of Christ may not be a safe play when trying to turn a profit (Reinhartz, 2006).

Anti-Semitism was not the only controversial issue surrounding *The King of Kings* (1927). The film opens in color with a scantily clad Mary Magdalene living a lavish life. There is a discussion of a love affair between Magdalene and Judas. This affair has no foundation anywhere in scripture and is purely the artistic creation of the filmmakers. Many believed that DeMille had strayed too far from scriptures with this invented love affair (Tatum, 1997). However, this is relatively minor compared to the criticism Gibson has encountered. Many Biblical scholars believe Gibson’s film is largely based on the work of Anne Catherine Emmerich instead of the Gospels. She has a controversial view of Christ’s death placing the blame on Jerusalem’s Jews (Fredriksen, 2006).
The consensus among critics and the religious community was positive regarding *The King of Kings* (1927), not only at the time of its release but now as well (Tatum, 1997). Film critics and Biblical scholars have expressed very strong feelings regarding *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). The vast majority from those, supposedly in the know, was negative. The film was bashed for anti-Semitism, excessive violence, and loose adherence to the Gospels. However, these critiques did not deter the public and the film proved to be a success financially (Goodacre, 2004).

The 1920s was a complex decade in United States history. The nation was recovering from the devastation of WWI and the country wanted to return to normalcy. This post war period was marked by the conservative administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. America had finally come into its own. These were prosperous times with unprecedented growth in the middle class and consumerism. Hollywood culture was establishing itself as an important part of American democracy (Stern, Jefford, & DeBona, 1999).

Due to early 1920s Hollywood scandals, many called for federal regulations on the motion picture industry. In order to avoid government control of films and their content, film industry leaders formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in 1921 lead by Will Hays. Hays, a Presbyterian Church elder and Republican politician, created the Public Relations Committee. This committee comprised representatives from civic, benevolent and church organizations. Hays’s intent was to promise the American public that film would serve the greater good. Through the 1920s the MPPDA assured that studios would approve materials and scripts before production (Tatum, 1997).

In the same year *The King of Kings* (1927) was released, Hays distributed a list detailing material that should not be included in film as well as items filmmakers should use with caution.
In total 11 subjects were off limits and 35 others were to be handled with extreme caution. There were specific items that should be avoided in religious film or religious content. Hays successfully prevented Congress from regulating the film industry. However, he found it difficult to enforce his rules on the motion picture business (Tatum, 1997).

By the late 1920s most mainstream Catholic and Protestant churches were trending toward the belief that films and the film industry were a positive influence on Christianity (Tatum, 1997). This may be largely due to Hays using his Protestant background to persuade many religious groups. *The King of Kings* (1927) did push the limits of Hays’s list of what could and couldn’t be shown. DeMille expected a certain amount of backlash over the material in his film. However, with the exception of Jewish groups like B’Nai B’rith, Rabbinical Assembly of America, and the Anti-Defamation League--also an outspoken critic of Gibson’s film--the overall outcry was fairly tame (Lyons, 1997).

In addition, DeMille’s willingness to make certain concessions to appease the Jewish groups may have quelled the controversy. The release of *The Callahans and the Murphys* (1927) may have diverted attention from *The King of Kings* (1927). *The Callahans and the Murphys* generated a great deal of controversy from many Catholic groups. Catholics forced MGM to make 23 changes to the film and still mass protests were held (Lyons, 1997).

Although critics universally supported DeMille’s *The King of Kings* (1927), the film, like many others, owes its success to the support of religious leaders. He used both Catholic and Protestant leaders as consultants on the film aided in broadening the target audience. The film garnered very little, if any protest or disdain from Christians and was largely supported. With one notable exception the film closely adhered to the Gospels but told the story in a way that had never been done before (Tatum, 1997).
DeMille’s film like many others in the genre relied greatly on the narrative’s consistency with Christian beliefs of the period. DeMille relied greatly on the support from the Christian community for the film’s rhetorical success much like *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). The film’s departure from scripture regarding Judas and Magdalene was believable based on previous Biblical knowledge held by most audience members. The sheer spectacle of the film made the narrative interesting to a secular audience as well (Fisher, 1987).

*The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965)*

Stevens’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) is probably most remembered because of its failure at the box office. The film was made for United Artists from October 1962 to July 1963. The first cut of the film ran an extremely long 260 minutes. The film was continually cut with each release and was eventually whittled down to 190 minutes (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). Stevens attempted to make the biggest and best Biblical Epic in film history. At a cost of $20 million, the film took nearly five years to reach the screen (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999). The film holds the title of one of the biggest losing films of all time, taking in only $6.9 million at the box office (Babington & Evans, 1993). The film was the most costly motion picture ever made in the United States and it would be more than three decades before that much money would be invested in a religious film again (Moss, 2004; Tatum, 1997).

The screenplay was based on the best selling book by Fulton Oursler published in 1949. The film rights were originally sold for $100,000 to 20th Century-Fox but eventually given to Stevens and United Artists. Stevens was paid $1 million to co-write, direct and produce the project (Kinnard, 1992). Instead of shooting in North Africa or the Middle East, Stevens choose
to stay in the United States, mainly in the Glen Canyon region of southern Utah. The Colorado River substituted for The River Jordan (Tatum, 1997).

Stevens was a successful filmmaker with an impressive filmography at the time (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999). Stevens aimed to make the best religious film in the history of the motion picture industry. After the production of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* there would not be a need for another film about Christ to ever be made (Moss, 2004). The film may have fallen short of that goal, however, the film worked more often than it did not cinematically (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). Regardless of the lack of financial success many aspects of the film were praised. The film received five Academy Award nominations (Tatum, 2004).

Max von Sydow did a fine job playing the difficult role of Jesus Christ (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). He was a Swedish actor who was not well known in the United States at the time (Tatum, 1997). Over time it has been proven that casting relatively unknown actors and actresses in the roles of historical religious roles works best with the film-going audience (Birchard, 2004).

The supporting cast was a virtual who’s who of Hollywood. The cast included Pat Boone, Charlton Heston, Martin Landau, Roddy McDowall, Telly Savalas, John Wayne, Shelly Winters, Ed Wynn, and Donald Pleasance, just to name a few. This caused problems for the little known Christ character competing for audience attention with Hollywood stars (Tatum, 1997). These cameo appearances dominated the view and distracted from the narrative of Christ’s life. However, many of these performances individually were excellent and added somewhat to the overall quality of the film (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

One difference between *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and successful films in the Christ Film genre is a lack of controversy. In fact, the Legion of Decency classified the film A-I, meaning unobjectionable morally for all audiences regardless of age. Several film critics stated
the film had an aesthetic similar to greeting cards. Critics from major publications such as *The New Yorker, Newsweek, Saturday Review,* and *The New York Times* were all thoroughly unimpressed with the film. However, the religious press responded in a more positive fashion than the mainstream press (Tatum, 1997).

Stevens avoids certain elements of Christ’s trial and crucifixion. Caiaphas and the Jewish crowd calling for Christ’s death are omitted from the trial scene (Reinhartz, 2006). A careful and conscious decision regarding this matter is likely due to civil rights issues of the period (Stern, Jefford, & DeBona, 1999). Omitting this element may have kept the Anti-Defamation League at bay but was a clear departure from the Gospels (Reinhartz, 2006). Stevens was fond of Oursler’s novel because it was benign. He felt the novel would not offend any faith because it contains basic truths that are present across faiths (Moss, 2004).

The film was so innocuous that it generated no real pre-release buzz other than the great cost. It appears that in order for a Christ Film to be a success some aspect of the narrative or the presentation has to be original to get people to the movie theater. Controversy, regardless of the type and severity, can be interpreted as positive in most situations. The Biblical Epic’s golden age began with *Samson and Delilah* (1949) was #1 at the box office in 1950. The era peaked with *Ben-Hur* (1959), which was the most profitable film of the 1950s. The genre began to show signs of decline in the early 1960s, however, the failure of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) marked the end of the last great era of the Biblical Epic to date (Babington & Evans, 1993).

At the time *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) premiered in 1965 the United States was in a period of transition. The country was at the pinnacle of the civil rights movement and Americans were beginning to question the nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War (Tatum, 1997). America was beginning to lose its post-WWII unity as a country and in terms of religion.
The 1960s were marked by an erosion of religious tradition and people were viewing faith in new ways (Stern, Jefford, & DeBona, 1999).

In addition, large scale religious epics were not what interested audiences. Filmmakers were trending toward naturalistic and improvisational styles of movie production (Stern, Jefford, & DeBona, 1999). *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was a traditional representation of the Jesus narrative, which formally would have worked with audiences (Riley, 2003). However, the cultural changes in America, more sophistication in the audience, and postmodernism contribute to this film’s lack of appeal (Stern, Jefford, & DeBona, 1999). It was not a lack of interest in religious subject matter but a need to see the story told in a new way. This is shown in the success of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). By 1965, audiences were ready for an original re-telling of the Christ narrative that addressed current social and political problems (Nassour & Broderick, 1973).

The narrative’s rhetorical failure has less to do with logic and good reasons than the period it was released. The film did not depart from the Gospels but the audience’s values had changed by the mid-1960s. The promotional strategies used did not give people a reason to view (Fisher, 1987).

*Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)*

Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was made by Universal and was a huge success with American youth in the 1970s. The idea for the film began in 1968 based on a double album created by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, a lyricist. This progressed from concerts to a stage show and finally into a major motion picture. Universal made the film project known to the public in 1971 and Norman Jewison was named as the director (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).
The film was the most successful film of the briefly present subgenre of religious musicals (Kinnard, 1992). *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), like *Godspell* (1973) was a rock opera that contained no real dialog. The dialog is almost entirely in the form of song. However, like many other films of the larger genre of Christ Films, it is a harmonization of the Gospels. The lack of dialog assumes the audience has some knowledge of the story of Christ’s life (Goodacre, 1999).

Shooting took place in the summer and fall of 1972 on location in Israel. In comparison to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) the costs were a bargain at $3.5 million (Tatum, 1997). By all financial standards the film was a success, earning nearly $20 million and an Oscar nomination for musical director Andre Previn (Kinnard, 1992). Screenwriters Jewison, Bragg, and Stigwood by most accounts did an excellent job bringing the story to the screen. However, his script is more emotionally driven than Biblically accurate (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

Norman Jewison was an accomplished producer and director with an impressive filmography that garnered attention from film critics both in his career before and after the production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). He had been nominated for Academy Awards for films made both before and after *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Erickson, 2007). Jewison’s methods of filmmaking combined elements of traditional Biblical Epics with anachronistic modern elements and messages (Campbell & Pitts, 1981).

The cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) is made up of relatively unknown young actors and performers (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999). Ted Neeley was cast as Jesus Christ while several better known vocalists/actors were rejected for the role. By most accounts Neeley’s performance was solid as a young virile Christ. His performance was unique in the humanity portrayed, often angry and passionate (Campbell & Pitts, 1981). However, Carl Anderson as
Judas delivers likely the most memorable performance in the film. Anderson, an African American, plays the part as a victim not a villain (Goodacre, 1999).

*Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was approved for all audiences gaining a G-rating. However, the film was condemned by many religious groups including Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (Tatum, 1997). Unlike *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) the film took risks in character portrayals and material. The passionate and sometimes weak Christ character was offensive to some conservative Christians (Goodacre, 1999). The traditional roles of Christ and Judas were challenged, depicting Christ as inept and petulant while Judas is the wise hero (Nassour & Broderick, 1973).

In early depictions of Judas, he is clearly the villain in the narrative. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) provides a unique and new representation of the most infamous character in the New Testament. Not only a strong character but also he only betrays Christ because it was what he was told to do. In some ways, his betrayal is portrayed as a necessary part of the process. At the end of the film, Judas is resurrected dressed in a white robe (Goodacre, 1999). There was also some criticism of the casting choice of an African American in the Judas role (Kinnard, 1992). The combination of new interpretations of the Jesus and Judas characters were considered blasphemous by many Protestant critics and scholars (Nassour & Broderick, 1973).

The Reverend Billy Graham voiced concerns about the message of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). He felt the film ignored the teachings of Christ and focused too greatly on the human aspects. Graham also believed the film was borderline blasphemy and joined many others questioning the lack of a Resurrection scene. Even the appearance of the Christ character was challenged by Reverend Graham. Graham was not alone many prominent Protestant leaders and scholars voiced similar concerns upon the release of the film (Nassour & Broderick, 1973).
The Catholic response was slightly milder than prominent Protestants, however they expressed similar concerns to *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and were not willing to support the film or its message. Catholics and Protestants were similarly concerned with the possible damage the film could do to Christian-Jewish relations. Similar to *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) and many other films that had portrayed the trial of Christ, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was scrutinized for its depiction of Caiaphas’s role in Jesus’s death. Many from all faiths including the American Jewish Committee felt the film may be a step backwards for progress towards tolerance between faiths due to historical inaccuracies in the script (Nassour & Broderick, 1973).

The response from film critics to *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) can only be described as mixed. One thing that can be said is that reviewers had strong opinions; seldom did the reviewers appear unmoved. Religious content aside, the new medium of presenting God’s message in musical format caused strong opinions from both supporters and opponents. New methods of filmmaking are generally met with some resistance by the establishment and this is compounded with dealing with sensitive subject matter such as religion (Tatum, 1997). However, regardless of the controversy that *Jesus Christ Superstar* endured, it paled in comparison with the opposition faced by *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) (Lyons, 1997).

*The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) failed in tapping into the culture of the time, this is where *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was able to succeed. Jewison’s film turns the story of Christ upside down, displaying few of the traits common in Biblical Epics. By the late 1960s it had become evident that film goers did not want cultural, political, and commercial elements of American life ignored in film regardless of subject matter. The influence of the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, feminism, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and
Robert Kennedy had affected popular culture. The lyrics and music of Jesus Christ Superstar were recognizable as part of post-1968 America (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999).

The late 1960s was undoubtedly altered by the previously mentioned events. The Jesus portrayed in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) seemed to fit with the youth culture’s need for peaceful solutions to modern conflicts. Christ was also a person who challenged the establishment, which corresponded with the views of the rising counterculture. Due to *Godspell* (1973), *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and their spin-offs, the tones of religious discussion change. No longer could the religious establishment ignore the social consciousness of American youth culture (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999).

The values contained in this narrative may not have matched those held by Evangelical Christians but did match the youth culture of the early 1970s. The film portrayed Jesus as a revolutionary instead of a divine messenger. This film did not target Christians as a primary audience and was a success outside of the typical core audience for the Christ Film genre (Fisher, 1987).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)

Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was a project originally backed by Paramount. However, due to prerelease protests and a letter-writing campaign started by The National Federation for Decency, Paramount backed out of the project in 1984. Universal Pictures decided to back the film in 1987 with a reduced budget of approximately $6 million. This financial blow caused Scorsese to move shooting from Israel to Morocco and reduce the number of stunt players (Tatum, 1997). The film was released on August 12, 1988 in a limited fashion in major cities in the United States and Canada. Gradually the film was released
throughout the United States over the next month (Lyons, 2006). The film barely broke even, grossing slightly more than $8 million in the United States (Erickson, 2005).

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) was based on a novel with same name written by Nikos Kazantzakis first published in 1956 (Riley, 2003). The story is a fictional report of Christ’s life that represented Kanzantzakis’s own internal battle between the spirit and the flesh (Tatum, 1997). The purpose of the novel is to change the impression of Jesus Christ as the Savior of Mankind. Kanzantzakis felt the only way to reveal the true Jesus Christ was to subvert the image of Christ portrayed by the Orthodox Church. This novel attempted to reinvent Christ (Riley, 2003).

Scorsese became interested in turning Kanzantzakis novel into a film in 1972 when actress Barbara Hershey gave him a copy of the book (Riley, 2003). Martin Scorsese is one of America’s great filmmakers. As a youth, he considered a career as a Catholic priest (Tatum, 1997). Scorsese became obsessed with this project as a way to express his own religious convictions (Riley, 2003).

The film was originally cast in 1983 but the production was canceled and picked up again in 1987 (Riley, 2003). However, Scorsese was able to retain many of the original cast members for the delayed production (Cocks, Dafoe, Schrader, & Scorsese, 1997). The film had a stellar cast by any standard; this is especially true considering its limited budget. The cast included Willem Dafoe (Jesus), Havey Keitel (Judas), Barbara Hershey (Mary Magdaline), Harry Dean Stanton (Saul/Paul), and David Bowie (Pilate) (Kinnard, 1992).

Dafoe’s performance as Jesus Christ was generally well received by film critics. However, the critics were skeptical of the casting choice. Defoe’s unusual appearance was subject to cutesy remarks by reviewers feeling that he was not attractive enough to play the role.
(Tatum, 1997). The role of Christ did not adversely affect Defoe’s career, he continues to work in starring roles with accomplished filmmakers (Marx, 2007).

The overall response of the critics would be considered mixed leaning toward the negative. Secular reviewers criticized many aspects of the film including the dialogue, especially the inflection used by the actors (Tatum, 1997). Others criticized the talking lions and snakes that represented Satan, feeling these scenes were ridiculous. However, the film was generally praised for its originality (Kinnard, 1992). The film received one Academy Award nomination (Tatum, 2004).

The religious press, whether conservative or liberal was overwhelmingly negative in their assessment of the film. These critics felt the film failed the objective of demonstrating the dual nature of Christ. The presentation of Jesus as a sexual being was problematic for many Christian reviewers. Overall the response was that the film was theologically and artistically weak (Tatum, 1997).

_The Last Temptation of Christ_ (1988) was a project marked by the controversy it generated. The film was accused of blasphemy, depicting the sex scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and portraying a weak and doubtful Christ. Initially The National Federation for Decency was able to force Paramount to stop production through a letter writing campaign with the leadership Reverend Donald Wildmon founder of the American Family Association (Tatum, 1997). Letters were arriving at the rate of 500 per day asking that the studio nix the project. Scorsese would agree to no concessions on the project and one month before scheduled shooting began the production was canceled (Riley, 2003).

After cancellation, the film project was stagnant for three years. Scorsese pitched the film to Tom Pollock of Universal. The studio was not particularly interested in the film’s message or
Scorsese’s personal religious views; however, knowing Scorsese’s talent as a filmmaker the studio hoped if they funded *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Scorsese would consider working for them on future projects. The Christian community became aware of renewed interest in the film and they began again to take action against the production (Riley, 2003).

Once again letters began to pour in this time to MCA, the parent corporation of Universal. Universal in an attempt to stay ahead of the curve hired Tim Penland of Christian Marketing to mediate between the Christian community and the studio. However, Penland soon resigned after reading the screenplay. Similar to controversy surround the pre-release of *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), both were based on early drafts of the script. Conservative Catholics and Protestants organized protests through not only letters but also phone calls and boycotts in response to the script of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) (Riley, 2003).

Christian organizations came together and launched an extensive attack against the film (Riley, 2003). This film in all likelihood was the most controversial film produced by Universal and possibly in history (Hunter, 1991). This campaign by conservative Christians took all forms of modern media and was joined by prominent religious leaders like Jerry Falwell using his *Old Time Gospel Hour* and Family Radio Corporation and Pat Robertson’s *700 Club*. Universal offered to give Christians a chance to see the film before its release and offer feedback. However, the studio delayed this screening and this postponement was viewed as a ploy by religious parties involved (Riley, 2003).

Donald Wildman and the American Family Association developed a strategy to picket theaters and boycott MCA. As the release date approached the religious organizations strengthened their rhetoric continuing to make formal statements condemning the film. Meanwhile, numerous free speech advocates and the Hollywood community rallied behind
Universal. Finally, Universal gave in to pressure and agreed to finally screen the film, however, only for selected religious leaders, mostly liberals that were critical of Christian conservatives. The responses voiced from this group were also mixed, many voiced concerns but were overall not threatened by the film’s content (Riley, 2003).

The growing resistance caused reluctance by theater chains to show the film. General Cinema, America’s fourth largest chain with their 1,338 screens refused to book the film. General Cinema was joined by many other small chains in their decision to avoid offending customers. However, Universal issued a statement that the film would open on 1,200 screens all over America. This culminated with the Religious Right’s last effort to stop the film with a protest in Los Angeles attracting 25,000 people. Conservative Christians were joined by Jewish and Muslim leaders who voiced similar concerns over Hollywood film content. However, the next day the film was successfully released (Riley, 2003).

The 1980s was a period marked by a rejuvenation of national pride. Republican ideals dominated and the religious right found new freedom and acceptance. Once again America was no longer a defeated nation, rebounding from a decade overshadowed by the Vietnam War and Watergate. American was rebuilding its reputation with a sense of power and superiority. Nostalgia and a longing for the stability of a time gone by dominated the rhetoric. There was a call for traditional morals and values (Stern, Jefford, & Debona, 1999).

Films of the 1980s were dominated by a clear distinction between the us and the them. The good and evil were clearly represented. Scorsese’s Christ does not contain a clear distinction between the human and divine. The character contains both the good and evil. The film contradicts the ideals and norms of the 1980s. This may explain the failure at the box office and the controversy generated (Stern, Jefford, & Debonna, 1999).
The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) could not find an audience that had similar values to those portrayed. This weak doubtful Christ may have been a character a human could identify with but not one a person would choose for a savior. The lack of success cannot be attributed to a marketing error but an error in the rhetorical message (Fisher, 1987).

Summary

In closing there appears to be elements that are necessary for making and selling a successful Christ Film. Christ Films seem to be more successful during conservative administrations where traditional values and faith are embraced. A certain amount of controversy is necessary to garner attention to a film project. Typically criticisms such as anti-Semitic content can be overcome. However, charges of blaspheme or sexualizing the Christ character turn off would-be film-goers and diminishes the support of the primary audience. Promotional strategies focusing on the primary audience and sell the film to Christians through their media outlets appear to be most effective. Conservative Christians are somewhat skeptical of the mainstream media and would be more likely to trust media outlets that appeal to their interest and do not mock their beliefs. There do appear to be patterns for success in the Christ Film genre and Gibson was able to be successful where other recent films have failed by taking the message directly to the core audience.
CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

This investigation presents analysis, interpretation and assessment of six Christ films. The final chapter synthesizes and expresses facts with the interpretations to offer conclusions about the rhetorical implications and the presentations of the images and characterizations of Jesus Christ in the movies. The conclusions show common themes present in nearly 100 years of filmmaking, and suggest that the interpretations are colored in part by the political climate of the period the individual films were produced.

This chapter will be organized by film beginning with *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) then the films will be summarized chronologically. The films will first be given context about the period, which they were produced and background information on each production, followed by historical data for each film’s themes and the representation of Jesus Christ. The chapter will end with the conclusions based on the analysis given in previous chapters.

Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) can be described best as a media event or even a religious event. In a media savvy and driven culture, Gibson’s marketing strategy borrowed from the promotion of silent religious films. He marketed the film to Christian churches, campus ministries, and religious leaders that would likely agree with his interpretation of Christ. These folks spread the word of the film to their congregations (Beal & Linafelt, 2006).

Gibson learned from the mistakes of Stevens’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) that religious films attempting to avoid controversy and that appeal to a broad audience are typically uninteresting. Gibson’s film addressed controversial issues such as the trial of Christ and the Jewish role in his death. Films like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Last Temptation of
Christ (1988) that attempted to avoid the issue of the Jewish role in Christ’s death and the subsequent controversy failed to generate the financial profits sought by investors. The Last Temptation of Christ did, however, generate controversy due to sexual content. Past productions, such as Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) were able to overcome pre-release charges of anti-Semitism and go on be successful at the box office.

The controversy generated by portraying the trial of Christ even appears to help a film at the box office. Anti-Semitic and violent content created a prerelease buzz for The Passion of The Christ (2004) that ultimately aided in the success of the film. Regardless of one’s feeling on the project, the controversy gave people a reason to watch. With the exception of The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), which was a box office failure, all of the films chosen for this investigation generated prerelease controversy.

The Passion of The Christ (2004) billed no major stars. A Hollywood star in the roles of predominate religious figures tends to work against the film. Using relatively unknown or forgotten actors in Christ Films tends to be the best formula for success. The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) and The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) relied on star power to fill movie seats. However, the casting decisions largely distracted audiences from the films’ messages, resulting in box office failure.

Gibson’s film was released at the perfect time. The film was released in a post 9/11 George W. Bush America when millions in the nation were turning to their faith while a self-professed devout Christian president occupied the White House. It had also been nearly forty years since a major Hollywood Christ Film had been made. Americans seemed ready for a big budget traditional Christ Film in this conservative climate.
Gibson stays with the traditional themes of sacrifice and vengeance in his modern Christ Film. The formula has worked for nearly 100 years and Gibson decides that the overarching themes should not be changed. The film depicts violent suffering of the Christ character, which is ultimately rewarded in the after life. Gibson depicts an Old Testament God that takes revenge against the characters who persecute and kill Christ. The message is that evil action has consequences.

Fisher’s (1984) concepts of fidelity and probability illustrate sacrifice in Gibson’s movie. The film’s narrative fidelity is seen through Christ sacrificing himself for the good of humankind. This violent representation of Christ’s death was rhetorically effective and corresponds with audience beliefs about the death of Christ. This supports the film’s narrative probability, which holds the story together in a way that lacks contradictions. Vengeance is shown through the torments of Judas as a guide for living. The rhetorical purpose is a warning for the audience to live a holy life or else God will take action against those who betray him.

While Gibson’s film may reflect to contemporary audiences rhetorical expressions suited to the traditional Christ Films of the 1920s, the character of Jesus is a modern depiction often revealing his humanity. There are clear differences between Gibson’s reading of Christ and the characters portrayed in From the Manger to the Cross (1912) and The King of Kings (1927). For example, Gibson’s Christ displays weakness and doubt while enduring tremendous pain and suffering.

The later films have shown that Christ characters that contain more human characteristics are rhetorically effective. Gibson’s Christ is clearly a more human representation. No attention is given to Christ’s miracles and the character experiences pain and suffering throughout the film. Currently a human Christ is more consistent with audience beliefs. A viewer finds a character
more compelling if there are characteristics that can be identified with and in turn can be seen as a reason for a change in personal behavior.

*The Passion of The Christ* (2004) was the right film at the right time. Due largely to Gibson’s unique promotion of the film and the political and social climate of the time made the film a huge success. Gibson may have studied the Christ Film genre and learned from the successes and failures of the filmmakers that came before him to apply this knowledge not only to the content but also the marketing of his film.

Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) when viewed today may appear to be antiquated, lacking many of the qualities present in the most inexpensive films and television programs made today. However, the film is the first feature length film to address Christ’s life. The film is significant to filmmaking beyond the Christ Film genre. The film was a great success making approximately 10 times the cost of the project. However, the film was not without controversy. Many questions raised by skeptics of Gibson’s project were similarly voiced nearly 100 years earlier regarding *From the Manger to the Cross*.

The film encountered a great deal of controversy in the period it was produced. Even as early as 1912, debates raged over acceptable film content. In the early 1910s content standards were being established and *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) pushed the boundaries of filmmaking not only in content but in the scale of production and cost. However, after its initial screenings, religious leaders got behind the project and slowly the film became the standard that all religious films were judged. This remained true until the release of *The King of Kings* (1927).

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) sets the stage for themes in Christ Films. The film is not as visually powerful as later films and the absence of sound prevents the film from containing powerful dialog. However, the messages of sacrifice and vengeance are clearly
present in a grainy black and white imagery and through Biblical passages presented in the form of subtitles. The themes are clearly present and the film visibly sets the tone for the genre.

Olcott’s narrative fidelity is derived from a close adherence to the Gospels. The straightforward narrative does not rely greatly on metaphor to achieve its rhetorical purpose of illustrating sacrifice, instead it takes direct quotes from the Bible that support this message. Vengeance is packaged in the narrative surrounding the Judas character. This ties moral and ethical behavior to the story.

The Christ character in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) is portrayed as a divine figure. The film focuses on the supernatural aspects of the life of Christ, and it gives greater emphasis on the Immaculate Conception than any other film chosen for this investigation. The film goes on to depict the miracles in great detail. The difference in Christ and the remaining human characters is clear. Christ shows little emotion and even in the face of a terrible death remains stoic. The Christ portrayed in Olcott’s film support the previously held beliefs of the audience as a divine messenger.

The film is the basis for many aspects of the film story of Christ’s life. Each film that follows is either directly or indirectly based on *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912). Critically investigating the films over time, a clear progression has occurred. Other than the quality in filmmaking, the most striking feature of *From the Manger to the Cross*, that separates it from the later films, is the divinity of the Christ character. The film, barely if at all, acknowledges the humanity of Jesus.

*From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) may be the first major Christ Film and therefore sets the standard in terms of formula. However, *The King of Kings* (1927) is the standard for quality, and to this day a film has not been produced that many film critics or scholars would
argue has eclipsed it in quality or production value. Regardless of the primitive filmmaking techniques employed in the late 1920s, the film is still powerful, moving, and entertaining when watched today. It continued to air on television well into the 1980s.

The film, like nearly all in the genre, was marked by pre-release controversy regarding anti-Semitism, sexual content, and departure from scripture. However, DeMille was able to overcome this controversy with the support of religious leaders and critics. The overall quality of the film is really the key factor in DeMille overcoming early skepticism. The film was so moving that after viewing, it was difficult to remain against the project.

The theme of sacrifice is limited to the Christ character. Jesus selflessly sacrifices for man. *The King of Kings* (1927) scarcely depicts vengeances, opting for the more positive message of redemption. Anger and Wrath are reserved for the villains in the film while Christ remains mild mannered and kind. The character is more focused on love and helping man instead of punishing him.

DeMille’s narrative took the genre a step further by creating some fictional elements to the story of Christ. However, the story still remains logical to the audience, which is important to be rhetorically effective. In addition, DeMille demonstrates sacrifice in Magdalene along with Christ. This marks a significant step in the genre by illustrating sacrifice in a human character. Jesus is still portrayed as a mostly divine character in this film. DeMille adheres to the Gospels in the theme of vengeance by reserving it for God and the villains in the film.

The character, while remaining more divine than in modern representations is clearly more human than the depiction in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912). DeMille like Olcott gave a great deal of attention to Christ’s miracles, which are completely absent from *The Passion of The Christ* (2004). However, the depiction is much softer and gentler than portrayals both
before and after. DeMille’s Christ represents everything we want our God to be. *The King of Kings* (1927) remained true to *From the Manger to the Cross*; however, it softened the Christ character and left out Old Testament elements such as vengeance and punishment.

Unfortunately, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) provided future filmmakers interested in tackling the story of Christ’s life a guide for things not to do. The film overall is a solid piece of filmmaking, however, it was the wrong film at the wrong time. Stevens’s film came after the public had been bombarded with Biblical Epics and the political and social climate was changing. The major mistakes that were learned by filmmakers such as Gibson are no major stars, keep the length reasonable, and address controversial issues. Stevens’s mistake was attempting to top *The King of Kings* (1927) by making a religious film that would appeal to everyone.

Jewison and Gibson learned that generating some controversy will ultimately help a motion picture about the story of Jesus at the box office. Stevens wanted his film to be the ultimate Christ picture ever made, but, the film was made several years too late. Audiences in the 1960s were not going to be satisfied with 1950s style big budget Biblical Epic. Movie goers were bombarded with Biblical Epics from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The message and the messenger needed to be packaged in a new format and linked somehow to the issues of the day.

Rhetorical appeal for the characterization of Jesus is strengthened by not using movie stars in the role Jesus. For example, subsequent successful religious films such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) did not employ well known actors in roles of predominate religious figures based on the scrutiny Stevens’s film received. Hollywood movie stars carry with them a preconceived image and familiarity in terms of past characters.
This often distracts from a story and makes it difficult for audience members to find them believable in Biblical roles.

In addition, subsequent successes chosen for this investigation were significantly shorter than *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). Audiences did not have patience for a religious drama over three hours in length. In addition, when retelling a narrative that the vast majority of audience members are familiar with, filmmakers are free to skip certain elements and still keep audience members in the story. *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) is the perfect example; Gibson focused on the last twelve hours of Christ life with minimal background for his version of the story. Stevens’s film was simply too long.

Although certain elements may be absent in terms of marketing and timing, the film fits well into the genre of the Christ Film and is an important part of the genre’s evolution. Sacrifice is a major and easily identifiable theme in this film. Christ preaches the importance of sacrifice. The scene with Jesus explaining to Lazarus that, “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of needle than it is for a rich man to enter heaven,” is described in more detail in this film than any other chosen for the investigation. Christ’s refusal of Satan’s offer for an easier life is also represented at length. Stevens portrays sacrifice through Christ’s teaching but the structure of the narrative makes the film uninteresting. However, Stevens’s narrative is consistent with the beliefs of a Christian audience.

Vengeance, although ignored in *The King of Kings* (1927), makes a return in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are powerful characters who are not beyond losing their tempers and reacting harshly against those who are not on the side of God. The clear message is that ignoring the word of God will result in severe consequences. The
theme of vengeance as it is portrayed in the film is also consistent with the beliefs of the audience.

The Christ character that Stevens created still appears more divine than human, which may account for the failure of the film. With all the Biblical Epics of the 1950s filmgoers may have already knew the story of Christ’s life and wanted to know the man on a personal level. The later release of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) displays a Christ character that is nearly the opposite of Stevens’s Christ. Once again *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) portrays a Christ with healing powers and behaves in a manner with little regard for his own safety and well being. The Christ portrayed by Stevens is similar to those of the past and are mostly divine. However, Stevens’s Christ is more emotionally driven than past representations, showing some signs of humanity, because Christ does question his fate and asks God for strength, albeit briefly. A more human portray of Christ may have resonated with the changing audience in the mid-1960s.

*The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) proves that when dealing with familiar subject matter and simply making a quality film is not enough to get people to pay to see it. The film is important to the genre in marking a turning point in the representation of Christ and the story. Later films prove that it is not enough to tell the same story again and again. Audiences are still interested in the story, but want to see it packaged in a new way and creative license with the Gospels gives people a reason to view.

Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) completely redefined the Christ Film. The film used the Gospels only as background for the spectacle of song and dance. The film had taken the unique and short-lived form of a rock opera. The filmmakers applied lessons learned from the failure of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) in a grand fashion and made likely the most unique film about the life of Christ. The film along with the preceding album and stage show was
hugely successful in American youth culture. The film was also able to tap into political and social problems of the time. The film contained references to civil rights issues and the Vietnam War.

In contrast to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), the film was much shorter, contained no recognizable faces, and generated a mass of controversy. The film was criticized for its departure from scripture and character depiction. However, the main criticism was for Anti-Semitic content. The film challenged every notion the audience had about Christ and his followers. The film was the first that did not portray Judas as a villain. Many religious figures of the period, such as Billy Graham voiced concerns about the film and its message.

Regardless of the differences the film contains the major themes typical of a Christ Film. Sacrifice is demonstrated oddly enough through the Judas character. Judas has a very different role in this film than in previous films. He is not a traitor or villain, but a necessary part of Christ dying for the sins of man. He is a reluctant participant in the betrayal of Christ, therefore sacrificing himself for the good of man. This narrative shift in portraying sacrifice did not work with Christian audiences but was rhetorically effective with the youth culture, which was the films primary audience.

Vengeance is demonstrated in the young passionate Christ character. Jesus is depicted as often angry and agitated in the film. The character at times becomes angry and rebellious, as an effort to tap into the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The character is controlled by his emotion and his behavior borderlines on violent in several scenes in the film. This depiction of vengeance through the Christ character was appropriate for the dilemma in the film. This resonated with a revolutionary minded youthful audience that could see correlations between their own time and the time of Christ.
The passionate portrayal of Christ also makes the character more human than divine. This film is the first film where the humanity of Christ is really shown in great detail. Beyond vengeance, Christ also worries and frets about his fate as the savior of man requiring comfort from his followers. Christ is controlled by his emotions in this film, losing control of his emotions on several occasions lashing out at his followers and others. Jewison’s Christ still loosely adheres to the Gospels, liberties taken with the Gospels in this film do not include events surrounding Christ. However, Christ is portrayed as an angry revolutionary that resonated with a young audience wanting change.

While *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was the wrong film at the wrong time *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) apparently was the right film at the right time. The film was able to retell the story in a way that generated excitement in youth culture. Jesus was portrayed as a rebel or anti-establishment figure. Although a new way to portray Christ, the assessment was accurate. The real Christ was anti-establishment and a protestor. This correlation was brought to the attention of American youth and the story resounded with audiences.

Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is the pinnacle of film controversy. It has been the most controversial religious film ever made and possibly the most controversial film about Jesus in history. Typically a little outrage or skepticism helps generate buzz on a film. However, this film sexualized the character of Christ and offended the evangelical Christian audience who viewed it as blasphemy. The images of Jesus Christ sharing sexual intimacy and passion is a considerable rhetorical constraint in the eyes of Christians who have always been presented with a son of God above the human driven by sexual desires. The boycotting efforts of this audience played a large role in keeping this film from being profitable at the box office. If a film gets the support of Evangelicals it is likely to be a success. Evangelicals not only did not
support this film, but delayed the production by five years and nearly kept the film from being made.

Although it is a stretch to say this film was a success by any measure. The controversy or buzz generated probably lead to its notoriety. The response to the film was nearly universally negative. It is no surprise that Christian reviewers disliked the film; however, secular film critics’ responses were also negative. Most believed that the film failed to meet its objective to depict the dual nature of Christ.

In the United States after the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s was marked by conservatism and traditional family values. The decade was likely not the best era for a film that sexualized Jesus Christ. This film would have presented problems for many audience members regardless of the time of production. Certain controversies can be overcome, for example adherence to Scriptures, anti-Semitism, and violence. However, the most sacred figure in history being married and placed in a sexual situation with one of his closest followers would likely agitate more than attract viewers. The film was never meant to appeal to a large audience, and probably by no one’s greatest expectation would the film have been a large blockbuster.

This film depicts sacrifice in the character of Jesus Christ. His life lacks any joy or happiness. The character lives only to serve God against his will as a human being. The humanity fights and has distain for the divinity. Christ desperately wants nothing more than to live a normal life as a normal man. The characters that live to serve God are the most impoverished in the film. A Godly life is a life of physical and emotional suffering. However, sacrifice is rewarded in death. The narrative structure changes with Scorsese’s film by depicting a death as a reward and sacrifice for God as punishment. Vengeance is portrayed similarly in this film as earlier versions by providing a guide for living. The story of Christ is more complex in
this film than earlier version; however, it does not correspond with previously held beliefs of the audience.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) provides the most human portrayal of Christ to date. The character is represented as an unwilling participant in God’s plan. He is not strong and stoic like the Christ characters in earlier film. The character is weak and guilty of the sins he preaches against. He is also not loved by his followers; in fact his followers are frustrated with his behavior. Judas and Mary Magdalene are the strong characters in the film, and Jesus relies on them for strength. Scorsese’s Christ is the most human portrayal to date and audiences can find some commonalities in their own life. However, the character is not appropriate to the situation of the savior of man. The portrayal was rejected by most viewers and shows that boundaries in representations are present.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) serves the genre by providing guidelines for a formula of success. Much like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) the film gives future filmmakers boundaries for addressing the Christ story. These films show that in recent years, audiences like a more human character, however there are limits to this humanity. Certain elements are still off limits such as sexuality.

*Conclusions*

This investigation contributes to the discussion of the Christ Film genre by combining the historical research with rhetorical analysis. This is done in the hopes of giving context and texture to the rhetorical analysis. It is clear rhetorically that over time the basic themes of Christ Films have remained largely the same. It also broadens the scope of narrative criticism by examining the changes of a narrative within a particular genre. The themes of sacrifice and vengeance were evident in all of the films from *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) to *The
Passion of The Christ (2004). Sacrifice is demonstrated through the positive characters in the films such as Christ and his followers. This is significant rhetorically because it provides the indication that a good Christian life is often a difficult life. The protagonists in these films not only endure physical and emotional suffering but often are deprived of the most basic human needs.

Vengeance is taken against the antagonists in the films who refuse to sacrifice in their lives on earth for God. These characters at times live lavish lifestyles and are portrayed as decedent sinners. This is rhetorically significant because it provides a guide for Christian living. One must live for God, which is a difficult life, meager and full of suffering. If a person chooses not to live this Christian life the consequences will be felt not only after death but in this life as well.

Although the themes have not changed, the depiction of the Christ character has shifted from divine to human. The story of Christ’s life has been retold many times with the rise of each new medium, film is no exception. People have become aware of the narrative of Christ’s life and the primary audience for Christian film even more so. Audience familiarity with the story has lead to a need to know Christ on a human level. Early depictions of Christ basically retold Biblical narratives through a visual medium. This was enough to a film going audience that was still fascinated by the medium alone. However, as time went on and more and more visual depictions of the life of Christ had been produced and audience wanted the character explored in different ways showing different facets of Christ.

Some individuals may view a depiction of Christ with human weakness and doubt as questionable or even blasphemous. However, a more human depiction has proven to be more rhetorically effective in recent years. A human Christ can be known on a personal level and more
effective in spreading the message of the Gospels to the modern film going audience. Although the personal aspects of Christ’s character may not be historically accurate or represented in Scripture, they have proven to be more profitable and generate discussion among audiences, critics, and scholars.

The analysis shows that along with audience familiarity with the Christ narrative, social and political changes in America have lead filmmakers to address more than the standard religious subject matter in films about Christ. Filmmakers have used the Christ story through the medium of film to address current issues of national concern. However, in order to do this a divine character without human qualities cannot answer contemporary human questions. The film character of Christ underwent a makeover in order to be rhetorically effective and believable.

Beyond contributing to the discussion of religion in film and broadening the scope of narrative criticism, this investigation analyzes the rhetorical nature of the Christ narrative. The Gospels have not changed but the manner and medium that they are told has in certain ways. The basic themes of the Christ Film genre are stable but the messenger of Christ has a revamped personality to resonate with people and address issues of a different time. The Gospels are still bringing people to Christ but through new mediums and with artistic license of artists/filmmakers.
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