JESUS AND THE MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God", Mark wrote nearly fifty years after Jesus' death, beginning the first text in a palimpsest of mythology that has expanded for nearly 2000 years. Since Mark wrote his gospel, theologians, writers, artists, and, today, film directors, have recreated and idealized the life of Christ in their texts. With each new text, the historical Jesus has been idealized and used to communicate the cultural information of a particular time and place. Each new text is an intertext composed of previous texts and new individual and cultural embellishments. Previous texts are not obscured by new ones; instead they co-exist and add to the number of meanings that the myth is capable of communicating.

RÉSUMÉ

"Le début de l'évangile de Jésus Christ, le Fils de Dieu", écriva Marc prés de cinquante ans après la mort de Jésus, commença le premier texte d'une mythologie qui devait croître et se transformer pendant presque 2000 ans. Depuis que Marc a écrit son évangile, les théologiens, les écrivains, les artistes, et, récemment, les directeurs de cinéma, ont récreé et idéalisé la vie du Christ dans leurs textes. Chaque nouveau texte idéalise la vie du Jésus historique et est utilisé afin de communiquer l'information culturelle d'une temps et d'un endroit particulier. Chaque texte nouveau consiste d'un inter-texte, composé d'anciens textes mais comportant aussi des embellissements individuels et culturels nouveaux. Les anciens textes ne sont pas obscurés par les nouveaux; ils co-existent et ajoutent aux nombres de significations que le mythe peut communiquer.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark is, itself, an intertext, and might be used as a metaphor for Christ mythology as a whole. Mark is composed of the 'real' historical event of Jesus' life, correlations between these events and the themes and prophecies of the Old Testament, the writer's additions, which include idealized speeches that he couldn't have witnessed, plus the

structure of the book itself, which follows the model of a Hellenistic tragedy. It also includes several other themes, such as the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man, the Resurrection, and the coming Apocalypse, which are themselves intertextual products of the oral and written cultural lore of the times (Harper;s 1988; Rayfield, personal communication 1990.) The Gospel of Mark also contains redactoral additions, such as the words "the Son of God" in the passage quoted above (Harper's 1988). All of these texts co-exist in the Gospel of Mark in a palimpsest-like fashion. Similarly, from the Gospels onwards, the myth of Jesus has expanded so that each time it is recreated in a new text (or intertext) it broadcasts new meanings without ever completely losing the old ones. We can never be sure exactly what Christ meant to Mark, Paul, or the producers of the first medieval Passion plays, but we can be sure that our contemporary Jesus films contain visible remnants of these texts, because they all belong to the same mythological tradition.

If we analyze the recreations of the myth of Christ in isolation from their historical and social contexts, we can construct a paradigm of the creative process for all of them. Each intertextual recreation of the myth is what Richard Schechner calls "restored behaviour" (1985). Schechner's model concentrates on the creative process from the perspective of the generator(s) of a text. The creator(s) exist in the present with their mind geared towards producing a text in the future. In order to create their text, they must refer to events in a 'real' istorical or an 'unreal' past. Few texts are ever exact restorations of previous ones. During the creative process, the generators of a text 'select behaviours' from real events in the past, which may include previous texts or performances, and from 'non-events' which are the creator's additions (ibid). The Gospel of Mark combines the historical events of Jesus' life with selected pieces of written and oral texts from the ancient Hebrew tradition, along with Mark's own additions. The final product is an intertextual restoration of a non-event. During the creative process, Mark thought about the future text in such a way as to recreate the past. Since the Gospel of Mark, each new recreation of the myth of Christ has followed this same creative process. They have all linked the future, present and past in a dynamic relationship, and they have all infused the myth with new meanings without ever wholly concealing the old ones.

It is important to keep this in mind as we analyze the presentation of the myth of Jesus on film. Films about Jesus are simply the latest link in a long chain of mythology. On the exterior, they appear to be very different from the main body of religious Christ mythology. They attempt to de-mythologize the man (although, as we shall see, they are

unsuccessful), and they make substantial changes to the traditional story. They are also complex intertexts that broadcast meaning to their audience on a number of different levels. They simultaneously appeal to their audience on individual religious and collective psychological, mythological, emotional, cultural and political levels. This paper is primarily concerned with analyzing how these films contain symbols and metaphors of anti-structure (Turner 1974) and how this relates to historical periods of social liminality. I will also spend some time on a brief semiological analysis of the films, the purpose of which is to clarify their relationship with mythology and how they make use of it to communicate cultural information. It is unavoidable that this analysis will be an oversimplification of these films and, as with any simplification, it will contain an element of distortion if it is read as a complete explanation. It is not the purpose of this essay to 'explain' the Jesus films, but to gain an understanding regarding certain aspects of how and why the myth of Christ is used in film today.

NEW CON-TEXT, OLD MYTH

Films are produced and consumed as entertainment. The word 'entertain' is derived from 'entretinir', which means "to hold apart, to create a liminal or liminoid space in which performances may take place" (Turner 1982:41). Therefore 'entertainment' is the process by which events and symbols are framed off from everyday activity and performance 'space' is created. This definition allows us to see performances as diverse as tribal rites of passage and modern cinema on common grounds. We can compare tribal initiations or modern club initiations with any other performance by analyzing the ways in which performance space is framed off from everyday life. This is important for any analysis that tries to 'understand' performance symbols because symbols have social lives, and the context or space in which they are presented affects the ways in which they are received. In the case of Jesus films, it is imperative that we understand performance space. The myth of Christ has, for centuries, been performed in art, literature and Passion plays, by and for the members of religious communities, and other closed groups such as towns and local theatre groups. In this context, the symbols of the story have been encoded and decoded by members of exclusive groups who generally agree about most aspects of their significance. The performance space that such groups create is usually 'liminal'. Liminal performances "are centrally integrated into the total social process" (Turner 1982:54). They tend to be collective, "concerned with calendrical, social structural rhythms" (Turner 1982:54). Liminal

performances tend to take place at socially important times, such as Easter or Christmas, often enforced by socio-cultural necessity, and they produce symbols that have "common intellectual and emotional meaning for all the members of the group" (Turner 1982:54). Contemporary cinema is not a liminal phenomena, however: it creates performance space in an entirely different way and this affects the way in which its symbolic messages are socially decoded.

Modern industrial society has created the distinction between work and leisure. Leisure is freedom from normative social-institutional obligations, and freedom to "transcend social structural limitations ... even to generate new symbolic worlds" (Turner 1982:37). Leisure has produced a new type of performance space which Turner calls "**liminoid**" (Turner 1982:53).[1] When the myth of Christ is presented on film it has shifted from its traditionally liminal context into a new liminoid one.

Liminoid performances are generated by individuals, not societies. They are usually attended for a fee and are always optional. "The solitary artist creates liminoid phenomena, the collectivity experiences collective liminal symbols" (Turner 1982:52). According to Turner, liminoid performances are not cyclical but "continuously generated, though in times and places ... assigned to leisure settings" (ibid). Liminoid phenomena are often parts of social critiques and are not as centrally integrated into the social process as are liminal performances. The symbols of liminoid performances tend to be of an individual-psychological rather than an objective-social nature (Turner 1982).

A liminoid performance space gives the creators of Jesus films the freedom to 'play' with the traditional myth by changing its structure to add important social or individual messages. The liminoid Jesus films are viewed by people of diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds at various times. These facts make it very difficult to discuss the 'meaning' of these films on a social level. They are complex, multivocalic intertexts that broadcast meaning and excercise appeal to their audience on many levels. Furthermore, films are not ephemeral; they can be 'performed' over and over again in exactly the same way, and they have much longer and more complicated social lives than most other liminoid phenomena. As I watched *Jesus Christ Superstar*, I was viewing a film that was already almost twenty years old. Its significance today is obviously very different than it was when it was released, yet it is the same 'performance' exactly. In order to place the film in its original social context, I was forced to recreate the past, yet I was confronted with a film that is still very much alive and intact in the present. Movies create several problems for a

cultural analysis, especially films as intertextual and multi-vocalic as Jesus films.

How then do we perform a cultural (collective) analysis of Jesus films? One approach is to assume the presence of a 'collective' unconscious that many of us share as members of society. The task here is to search for elements in the films that might be externalizations or reflections of common psychological symptoms of our society. We might compare the Jesus films to the traditional Gospels, and to Church versions of the myth to see what important changes have been made to the story. These changes might provide a clue to shifts in the psychological profile of our society. A second approach, and one that I have chosen to pursue in this paper, is to search for metaphors and symbols of anti-structure or communitas and then relate the presence or absence of these to social periods of liminality. We can also see anti-structure in these films as an externalization of the eternal human conflict between communitas and social structure. A third approach is to search for dominant cultural messages that are mythically communicated in the films. I will make use of semiotics to explain certain aspects of how and why the myth of Christ communicates cultural myths through film.[2]

ANTI-STRUCTURE IN JESUS MOVIES

Victor Turner has written that "man is both a structural and an anti-structural entity, who grows through anti-structure and conserves through structure" (Turner 1974:298). I believe that, by this, Turner means that the history of society and, as well, the history of most people's lives, has been a constant process of fluctuation between adherence to rigid, structured social roles and periods of liminality when individuals transcend social structure and confront one another on 'human' terms. Humans are social animals, and society, if it is to function, must conserve order through structure. Structure demands that each person play his/her social roles; it controls human interaction and assures predictability and stability. Yet human beings everywhere require an escape from structure, or a liminal space in which they can confront one another without concerns regarding social role playing. Thus we find, in small scale societies all over the world, rites of passage and initiations or pilgrimmages in which the iniates enter a liminal state during which time they are without social status. These kinds of liminal communities are an example of how social structure can accomodate its members' anti-structural tendencies. Yet frequently, in large scale hierarchical societies, social structure becomes oppressive to the point where, in order for humans to express their anti-structural tendencies, they must rebel against

social structure. Millenarian and revitalization movements are examples of this process (Turner 1974).

It has long been assumed by anthropologists that art and mythology are reflections and expressions of social structure (Turner 1974). However, Turner argues that much of art and mythology expresses anti-structure (Turner 1982:27). Many highly structured institutions, such as Christian churches, have in their mythic repertoires remembrances of the anti-structural movements from which they originate. Also, and most importantly, when societies enter into liminal phases during which a great deal of social change is occurring, or many traditional values are being questioned, the arts flourish with

> daring and innovation both in the modes of relating symbolic and mythic elements and in the choice of elements to be related. There might also be the introduction of new elements and their various combination with old ones ... (Turner 1974:255).

In our present case, films like *Jesus of Montreal* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are made.

Humankind's need for anti-structure is usually expressed by forming communitas. Turner has defined communitas as "an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals" (Turner 1982:45). Communitas liberates individuals from the constraints and differentiations that social structure imposes. Communitas, however, is fragile and, as Turner points out, "the spontaneous forms of communitas are converted into institutionalized structure, or become routinized often as ritual" (Turner 1974:248). The historical Jesus was probably a charismatic leader who initiated a spontaneous communitas with his ministry. This communitas suffered the same fate that all anti-structural movements do. Both the deeds of Christ and his messages have become the stylized and routinized symbols of the Church. However, as we shall see, during periods of historical liminality the anti-structural content of the myth of Christ is resurrected in the form of ideological communitas. Ideological communitas differs from spontaneous communitas in that it is reflexive. Looking back at a time when the spontaneous communitas was formed requires a distance that the members of an actual spontaneous communitas don't have. It also implies that those who create the ideological communitas have a knowledge of the fate that the original communitas suffered. Thus, we find in ideological

communitas, such as those in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Jesus of Montreal*, a depiction of the entire process by which communitas are formed and go sour. These films are unique because they reflect anti-structure and they also comment on the process by which communitas continuously becomes structure and then communitas again. They provide a visual, reflexive text in which people can 'read' about the continual tension that exists between structure and anti-structure in their own lives.

Both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Jesus of Montreal* were produced in societies that were in liminal phases. *Superstar* was a product of the early 1970s, a period in which the counter-cultural movement was flourishing in North America. The Jesus craze that surrounded the release of first the album, then the stage production, and finally the films, was an example of the members of a counter-cultural movement reviving a long institutionalized myth and reclaiming it as their own symbol of social and cognitive rebellion. *Jesus of Montreal* was produced in present day Quebec, a society which has traditionally been the liminal 'outsider' of Canadian culture. The ultimate identity and fate of Quebec has still not been resolved, and its society has been constantly struggling to define itself. It has, for some time, been liminal -- in the process of becoming, but not yet complete. The elements of communitas in *Jesus of Montreal* might be seen as a call to unity, or simply as an expression of the state of the liminality that Quebecers find themselves immersed in.

In *Jesus of Montreal*, a communitas forms among a group of young actors who perform the Passion of Christ in a stage production for a large Catholic cathedral. Their mysterious 'leader', who plays Jesus in the production, gradually begins to acquire Christ-like qualities, and the events in his life begin to parallel those of Jesus in the Passion narrative. The troupe begins to display many communitarian values. They erase distinctions among themselves, they show disdain for the society that surrounds them, and they desperately try to prevent their communitas from deteriorating in the face of outside pressure. It does deteriorate, however, when the Church, who is not happy with what they have done to the Passion story, decides to prevent them from performing their play. The climax occurs when the actor who plays Christ is killed during a clash between their audience and the police. Eventually the remaining members of the troupe 'sell out' to big business and decide to form a corporate sponsored theatre group in their dead friend's name.

Jesus Christ Superstar makes use of rock music which was, in the 1960s, an anti-structural art form (Turner 1974; Modern Utopian 1969) that has since been hegemonized, to accentuate the counter-culture in the myth of Christ. Jesus and his followers are banners of the hippie ideal.

They deny social structure even down to the notion of family; they are poor; they live for today, and their one basic law is to love on another. At the beginning of the film, the actors drive into the desert in a bus and together they create a liminal performance. After the performance, they simply drive away. This film displays all the classic signifiers of communitas, which are movement, poverty and outsiderhood (Turner 1974). Movement is evident in the progression from station to station during the performance and the entrance and exit of the actors on their bus. The poverty of Christ and his followers within the performance, and the unconventional appearance of the actors when they are out of costume, are important signs of outsiderhood. Long hair and unisexual dress are also important signs of anti-structure. As in *Jesus of Montreal*, the performance ends with the destruction of the spontaneous communitas that follows Jesus' arrest and death. The communitas that is shared by the actors, however, continues as they pile into their bus and drive away. This is an important addition, because it signifies the hope that, while the communitas that Christ and his followers shared had faded away, perhaps the counter-cultural movement of the present will not suffer a similar fate.

The two films we have looked at so far are both instances of ideological communitas which arose out of societies that were in historic periods of liminality. Both showed the glory of communitas in full bloom, and the process by which it is destroyed. In this sense, both films might be seen as an expression of the tension that we all experience as we spend our lives fluctuating between temporary communitas and the stratified, structured society in which we all play roles. However, we must consider why one film offers a hope that anti-structure will survive undisturbed in the present while the other film does not. I believe that this is because one film, *Jesus of Montreal*, was produced in a society that is in a liminal state, yet whose members see no immediate hope for internal unification or reintegration. The other film emerged from a society in which the counter-culture movement, although it did disintegrate, was idealistic and persistent enough that it became an instigator for social and cognitive change. This explanation suggests the hypothesis that there are several different kinds of social liminality[3] and that each type will tend to produce art that represents communitas in a different light.

The Last Temptation of Christ makes use of anti-structure in a very different way than either of the two films we have so far considered. It was produced in 1988, in a society that has become, by and large, rather conservative and stable. The 1980s have not been a time of radical social

change or upheaval of traditional values for many North Americans. The majority of the hippies have become yuppies, and their concerns have shifted from contributing to cognitive and social reform to having babies and acquiring computers for their homes, and Volvos for their garages. Woodstock and Vietnam have become multi-million dollar industries, as has much of the 60s counter-culture which has been hegemonized and marketed as an image-product in film, music and fashion. In this social climate anti-structure appears in the myth of Christ as a sort of resin from the 60s, when idealism was rampant. Jesus is now a symbol that mythically universalizes the post 60s, bourgeois, humanistic spiritual conflicts. Anti-structure and communitas are no longer vital forces that must be perpetuated, but flimsy ideals that don't provide answers to the 'real' problems that modern people face. It is as though the post counter-culture society is rationalizing its ultimate acceptance of the dominant social structure by questioning the validity of the ideals it held in the past.

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, one of Jesus' central dilemmas is whether it is right to serve God through asceticism, or by pursuing a happy family life. He leads a ministry that forms a communitas which is represented very differently than in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the disciples verbalize their regrets that they deserted their homes to follow Jesus, and they express fears about his identity and his message. Jesus, in the meantime, is absorbed in internal debates regarding how to change the world and how to tell good from evil. He can't tell the difference between Satan and God for most of the movie. In fact, Satan fools him while he is on the cross. Jesus also desperately desires to consummate his love for Mary Magdalene. This desire haunts him right until his death on the cross. He is a non-committed communitarian who cannot decide whether it is right to lead political and spiritual rebellion or to just retire and enjoy a family. The communitas that develops among Christ and his disciples is plagued with problems throughout the entire picture because no one is every sure exactly what it is they are committed, to and their figurehead himself is completely confused.

The *Last Temptation of Christ* uses anti-structure differently than either *Jesus of Montreal* or *Jesus Christ Superstar* because it was produced in a society that is not in a period of liminality. Thus communitas is not glorified, nor is it shown to have any redeeming social or spiritual functions. In fact, the film might be read as a critique of the idealism that underlies communitas. Because communitas are fragile and ephemeral, their power as a force of social change is de-emphasized, and the omnipotence of social structure is stressed. This film speaks to an

audience, many of whom have shared anti-structural ideals in the past, and it tells them what they want to hear. That is: if we are to survive, everyone must desert their ideals and become engrossed in developing their personas within the social structure.

MYTH AND CULTURE

The relationship between myth and culture has been one of the most hotly debated issues in anthropology. Myths have been diversely interpreted as collective dreams, as the basis of ritual, or as explanations for ritual, as expressions or reflections of social structure, or as outlets for repressed feelings that provide a kind of emotional intellectual catharsis (Levi-Strauss 1983:207). Levi-Strauss has claimed that mythology might be studied synchronically and that the 'meaning' of myth lies in its structure, which is a dialectical relationship between binary opposites that occasionally produces mediators or resolutions (Levi-Strauss 1983:210, 211; Harris 1980:168). According to Levi-Strauss, each myth is simply a manifestation of mental structure which is universally constant. He has been widely criticized for his structural method because, among other faults, it is, in practice, a top-down model of culture that assumes the primacy of the psychological superstructure in human interaction (Harris 1980:166, 190). I would add that the structural analysis of myth, as well as the other approaches I have mentioned, falls short because it does not allow for the fact that much of mythology is an expression, not of structure, but anti-structure. Furthermore, most of the classical anthropological approaches to myth have been concerned with ancient, 'primitive', or religious myth.

This bias ignores the active role that myth plays in our own secular society. Myth is a pervasive process. It creeps into all areas of communication including science, advertising, news, T.V., and art. New myths are being created all the time, and old ones are being recreated and reborn (Barthes 1972).

Mythology is one of the most common and effective ways of using language systems to communicate cultural knowledge. Since you do not quote them, you cannot discuss them. A semiological analysis of myth finds significance in the way it encodes symbolic messages. This not only allows us to shed the 'primitive' or religious from our criteria, it also provides a framework within which we can find meaning in mythology without the need to speculate about mental structural universals or complex, empirically unverifiable psychological processes. The semiological perspective does not demand that we attribute primacy to

either the infrastructure or the superstructure, nor must we assume that all symbols reflect the social structure. A semiological analysis of the myth of Jesus in film provides an opportunity to see the mythical process in action.

MYTHIC REALITY AND FILMIC REALITY

Myth is a semiological system that may be defined by its form rather than its content (Barthes 1972:109, 131). Semiological systems are composed of signifiers and signifieds, which unite to form signs. The signifier and the signified are perceived separately only for the purpose of analysis. In reality, it is the totality of the sign that is perceived. According to Barthes, myth is a staggered system of communication in which one semiological system is imbricated with another (Lowe 1982:122) In mythical communication, the signs of one semiological system become the signifiers for another. Thus myth is a "second order of language" in which "the meaning embedded in the sign of one system becomes the form of mythic communication in the next" (Lowe 1982:123). If, for instance, an icon or symbol is the sum total or sign of a signifier and a signified, then myth uses this sign as a signifier for a new signified. The signified of the myth is always a ready-made cultural concept that essentially imposes itself on the system of language. Myth is "stolen language" that uses "the signs of other languages for its own purpose" (ibid). The purpose of myth is to communicate cultural concepts. It does this in a very unique fashion; by combining the texts of language and culture in a complex intertext.

Language 'creates' the world by using symbols and icons to represent what is 'out there'. Myth freezes the world by using language to impose concepts into it. Language represents reality but myth transforms reality into cultural concepts. Through language, events and things are labelled; through myth, events become ideas (Barthes 1972:151). For example, cross and Jesus are signs of language that have complete meaning in themselves: they represent things. The myth of the Passion uses these signs as signifiers for concepts such as the fulfillment of prophecy, God incarnate and divine sacrifice. These concepts are cultural creations yet, in the myth, they are perceived along with the signs of language, as a whole. By using language to communicate cultural concepts, myth equates the signifier with the signified. Those who 'read' the myth do not decompose the system as we have done. The audience simply perceives the mythological signification as a whole. To the audience, the association between the signifier and the signified of the myth not only seems natural, but the two are equated. Thus, cultural concepts are 'naturalized' and

mythic reality is equated with historical reality. It is the function of mythology to transform history into nature (Barthes 1972:12). Myth presents its concepts so that they appear natural, static and timeless. To the members of a given culture, mythology does not seem to have been created as the product of a particular historical environment. Rather, it appears to be communicating timeless, natural 'truths' (Barthes 1972).

"Image and sound are the basic ingredients of film. The filmic image is ... a visual trace of the world" (Lowe 1982:124). The image is an iconic sign, or the photographic representation of a real event. Yet, through careful editing and multi-perspectivity, film transcends reality (Lowe 1982). Film refers to the real world, and it makes use of image to create its own reality. Film is actually an iconic symbol because it possesses both the qualities of iconcicity and symbolic signification. This means that film is an extremely rich form of symbolic communication that transforms reality for its own purpose. "The filmic image, though an extrapolation of sight and sound, is more vivid than everyday life, and the filmic reality is at the expense of everyday reality" (Lowe 1982:136). As a semiological system, film greatly resembles myth because it has the power to impose its own concepts onto reality. Thus, film is an exceptionally expedient medium for mythical communication. It makes use of image and language to give mythical reality an extra dimension. The films that are produced in our society are filled with mythologies that de-historicize cultural concepts. Jesus films are a perfect example of how myth operates in contemporary cinema. In these films, an old myth is recreated, given new dimensions of signification, and infused with contemporary meaning. The Jesus films are meta-communicative; they talk about myth and about the world, yet they use mythology to freeze the world by equating it with their own mythic-filmic reality.

MYTH IN JESUS MOVIES

Jesus films have a paradoxical relationship with mythology. While, on one level, they seem to de-mythologize the traditional Jesus story, they also make use of myth to communicate new cultural information that, before now, had not been a part of the Jesus story. In this sense, they are a second order of myth because they use a mythical system as the signifier for new cultural signifieds. They have, in effect, stolen myth and used it for their own purpose, which is to add to the significations of the myth. Jesus films, as we shall see, do not in fact de-mythologize the man, nor do they completely obscure the traditional meanings from the story. They do,

however, add another link in the chain of Christ mythology and, in so doing, they increase the number of meanings that the myth communicates.

Most people agree that someone named Jesus did live, but there is little agreement about who he was or what he did. The three films I have studied reflect our widespread scepticism of the Gospels and Church dogma. Much of the manifest content of these films is an attempt to comment on the nature of religious truth, the development of myth, the dangers of group thinking, and the mystery of the historical Christ. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the crowds of followers are portrayed as fickle and desperate. They create a God out of Jesus, and then desert him when things get dangerous. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus meets with Paul during his dream sequence. Paul tells him that he is not concerned with the 'real' historical Jesus, but the mythical Christ who gives people hope and purpose. He asserts that his Jesus is more important than the 'real' one. In *Jesus of Montreal*, a corrupt priest tells the young actor who plays Christ that people want comfort, not truth. People don't care about the latest Bible criticism or archaeological findings; they want to know that Jesus loves them.

Roland Barthes writes that myth "continuously transforms the products of history into essential types" (1972:155). Myth presents historical events in terms of present cultural ideologies, "it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (ibid:143). The Jesus films are filled with images that reduce real historical characters into essential types. Through these types, we define the historical 'other' so that he/she conforms to our own cultural codes. The image presented in the film takes on its own reality. The historical characters become equated with their image value. The images make history far easier to approach by causing it to be easily defined and much 'simpler' than our present world. By reducing things to types and reifying these on film, the members of our society are able to insulate themselves from reality. We create the historical other so that he/she reifies our own cultural construction of the world.

In all the films I have studied, Pilate is portrayed in terms of our modern perception of the Roman elite. The signifiers have become cliché; the full head of wavy hair, the English accent, the worldly cynical wisdom, and the hint of feminity in mannerism. These signifiers are equated with what they signify, Romanness or, rather, our ideological conception of what this represents; decadence, imperialism, ruthlessness, disdain. The real Pilate, the historical Roman, has been lost or reduced to a type that is devoid of historical reality. Similarly, the figure of Christ himself is transformed into a typified image. His emaciated frame, long

hair and bearded face signify holiness. To the members of our culture, signifiers such as distant eyes, Aryan appearance and refined speech are equated with holiness. It is no accident that Christ is never played by a Black man or a dark Semite. Jesus films are filled with countless other mythological images; for instance, the beauty of Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. These images reduce history into essential types which are the ideological products of our culture.

Modern bourgeois humanistic ideology loves to stress the 'oneness' of humanity. The bourgeois humanist finds him/herself in everything. S/he is incapable of perceiving the 'other' on their own terms (Barthes 1972). Bourgeois humanist artists love to search for transcultural art and symbols that reflect the 'universals of human experience'. Films like *Powaquaatsi* display images of people all over the world doing the same things. The myth tells us that human experience is the same everywhere. People laugh, they cry, they grow food and make friends. The contingencies of culture and social context are ignored or naturalized. The bourgeois humanist creates the other on terms that he/she can accept. The 'feel good' transcultural aspiration of bourgeois art ignores the very real problems that cross cultural communications entail. It glosses over the unjust disparity that exists in the way humans experience their lives, and it denies the exploitative and antagonistic relationship that Western cultures have historically shared with their 'primitive' or 'exotic' brothers.

Jesus films are products of bourgeois humanistic culture, and they communicate bourgeois humanistic myths. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus is a symbol of the spiritual dilemmas of 'modern' man. He is unsure of what God wants him to do; he is never sure if he is doing the right thing; he is scared and confused by life; and he incessantly indulges in internal existential dialogues. The traditional myth has been altered to accomodate modern dilemmas, and Jesus' spirituality has been equated with our own. It seems perfectly natural to the humanist audience that, if Jesus was human, we should be able to relate to him on human terms. Thus, the frustration and doubt he 'must have felt' is dramatized, and scenes like the one at the Garden of Gethsemane become externalizations of our own doubts regarding the motives of God. The historical context of Jesus as a person is lost, and his life becomes an essential type, symbolic of spiritual struggle. At the same time, modern bourgeois spirituality is naturalized as timeless and 'human'. In fact, the précis to the film tells us that we are about to experience an "exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict". The words of Yvonne Ellman, who played Mary Magdalene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, are typical of the kind of

reaction this myth produces: "Well, I certainly know a lot more about the man ... He makes me have a very good feeling" (Braun 1970).

Despite all of the new meanings that are encoded in the myth of Christ, when it appears on film it still operates on many of its more 'traditional' levels. For most people, Christ is still a powerful symbol of hope, sacrifice and love. To these people, Jesus films may be sources of inspiration or guides for behaviour. Thus, the didactic and instructional aspects of the myth that originated in the gospels are still visibly intertwined with the new significations that the films encode. Jesus still performs miracles in the filmic version of the myth. We must ask what effect these staged miracles have on the individuals who see them. Some might be unaffected, others may find it a form of fantasy and still others might relate to them on an 'irrational' level, becoming filled with faith. In fact, several of the actors from the cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar* were approached by inspired fans who wished to touch their garments, or hoped to be healed simply by being in their presence (Braun 1970). To these people, the film version of the myth still contains religious meaning, and it serves religious functions.

CONCLUSION

Jesus films are intertextual recreations of the myth of Christ. They are like palimpsests, combining several discourses in an intricate weave, leaving us the task of examining the structural relations between the old and the new. Yet Jesus films also transport the myth into a new, liminoid performance space, altering the social context within which the myth is coded and de-coded. Within this context the myth acquires a new system of signification. From a semiological perspective, Jesus films are a second order of mythology; they use myth to create myth. From an anthroplogical perspective, Jesus films communicate cultural constructs in a liminoid performance space.

Films about Jesus are the latest link in a long chain of mythology. The story of Christ is a mythic repertoire, a cultural resource that grows continuously. In each re-creation its symbols and metaphors are recombined and recontextualized. There is no ultimate Jesus myth; new meanings emerge while old ones remain. The very fact that the story of one man's life has been a source of meaning to diverse Western cultures for almost 2000 years is what gives the myth both its continuity and its plasticity.

NOTES

1. Turner has described this process in relation to Christian
    pilgrimmages (Turner 1978:36). According to Turner, the
    voluntary, leisure context of modern pilgrimmages makes them
    "quasi-liminal" (or liminoid) as opposed to liminal (Turner 1978:35).
    Medieval pilgrimmages, in contrast, contained "liminal, initiatory
    aspects" and were "deeply tinctured with obligatoriness" (Turner
    1978:39). The shifting notions of play vs. leisure are at the heart of
    this transformation from the liminal into the liminoid. In liminal
    rites, play occurs, although it is not culturally distinguished from
    ritual work. Part of liminal play is the inversion (not subversion)
    of social-structural relations and symbols. Liminal rites are
    ultimately conservative, they reify the status quo. Leisure is sharply
    divided from work. Leisure frames performance as 'entertainment'.
    Entertainment is never obligatory, and is not (necessarily) centrally
    integrated into the dominant social process. Thus pilgrimmage, as
    a liminoid rite, is framed in a leisure context. One result of this
    shift in context is that modern pilgrimmages may be much more
    'subversive' than they were in the past. That is, they are implicit
    critiques of social structure, much like what Geertz calls "meta-
    social commentary" (Turner 1978:38). My argument is that Jesus
    films recontextualize the Passion narrative in a liminoid space. Just
    as pilgrimmages were traditionally more liminal, so the Passion
    narrative has traditionally been performed in a liminal context.
    Because Jesus films are a leisure activity, and therefore consumed
    voluntarily as 'entertainment' the myth of Christ has shifted into a
    liminoid context. This shift expands the potential for signification
    in the myth itself. Now the myth of Christ can be subversive,
    satirical, or filled with critical meta-social commentary.

2   These perspectives are generalizations; of course there are people for
    whom these films serve none of the cultural or psychological
    functions I have mentioned. I believe, however, that the two
    perspectives I have chosen to use in my analysis cause a minimum
    amount of distortion, and allow us to perform a social level of
    analysis that is, by and large, quite accurate.

3. With respect to the societies in question, two distinguishing factors
    are ethnicity and relativity. The 60s and early 70s in America was
    a time of self-definition for many members of an autonomous

society. The counter-culture movement arose from a period of social liminality within a society; Quebec's liminality has resulted from tension with another, exterior, society (the rest of Canada). *Superstar* is the product of a social liminality that involved a renegotiation of self relative to self, whereas *Jesus of Montreal* was produced in a society whose liminality involves the negotiation of self relative to the 'other'. This issue of autonomy is related to question of ethnicity. The counter-culture movement tried to transcend ethnicity. Quebec's liminality is largely the product of the struggle for ethnic identification relative to the 'other'.

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