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Cristiana Facchini and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa (eds.)

**Understanding Jesus in the  
Early Modern Period and Beyond  
Across Text and Other Media**

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# Understanding Jesus in the Early Modern Period and Beyond

## Editorial

The exceptional and yet very human life of Jesus has been represented in a vast breadth of forms, from the visual to the textual, forming intertextual relationships that are highly complex in encompassing chronologically and geographically varied cultures.

Since the inception of Christianity and its separation from Judaism, canonical and extracanonical sources have provided nuanced and contradictory biographical information about Jesus, his birth and childhood, his early adulthood and his religious ministry. Gospel narratives describe at length the Nazarene's acts and words before turning to his dramatic and violent end, with his arrest, torture and death on the cross.

Intensified attention, especially in the form of precise historical knowledge, appears to have been given to Jesus' biography in times of conflict. The search for sources and documents that might provide accurate information about his life has been central to intra-Christian debate since the time of the Reformation. During the period of the "radical Enlightenment" a particularly polemical historiographical tradition took shape, which, bolstered by the rise of modernity, was eventually to become influential in the political and cultural public arenas.<sup>1</sup>

A genuinely historiographical approach, aiming at a more accurate and more detailed reconstruction of the historical person and images of Jesus was a hallmark of 19th-century scholarly efforts. According to the eminent theologian Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), a rationalist genius of the Enlightenment, the Hamburg theologian Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1698–1768), had been at the forefront of this scholarly endeavor.<sup>2</sup> Schweitzer was relying on selected fragments of Reimarus' Deist work published in the 1770s by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The complete *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (An Apology for, or Some Words in Defense of, Reasoning Worshipers of God) was edited and published only in 1972.<sup>3</sup> In Schweitzer's historiographical account, which covers the entire 19th century, great relevance is attributed to

1 Schweitzer 1906.

2 Mulsow 2011, Groetsch 2015.

3 Edited by Gerhard Alexander; see Reimarus 1972.

German theological scholarship and its achievements in the field of biblical exegesis, which were also influential in other European countries. Indeed, in the 19th century some historical biographies of Jesus had achieved great success. In 1835, the liberal theologian David Strauss (1808–1874) published his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*). This pioneering study, a historical investigation of the life story of Jesus, was as controversial as it was influential. A few decades later, *Vie de Jésus* (*Life of Jesus*) by the French Orientalist Ernest Renan became a bestseller in France and was soon translated into other European languages.<sup>4</sup> These historical depictions of the life of Jesus attracted fame and criticism, glory and infamy, but they resonated with the burgeoning culture of an educated middle class and the rise of mass culture. A more humane Jesus was appropriated by a secularizing culture in its attempt to engage critically and counter traditional Christian theologies.

Recent historiography has challenged Schweitzer's genealogy along at least two lines. The first looks at historical representations of the life of Jesus before Reimarus, whereas the second aims to be more inclusive, paying attention to different confessional and national contexts in which these representations were produced. Indeed, the last decades have witnessed a wealth of academic research, characterized by new approaches to the historical Jesus "before Reimarus",<sup>5</sup> influenced by a novel interest in theories and notions of religion in the early modern period and its representations of early Christianity. The Protestant Reformation, geographical exploration and missionary policies all contributed to the deepening of religious strife. Interest in religion grew. Committed philologists and brilliant apologists from different religious communities engaged in defining the notion of Christianity and establishing the biography of Jesus. New iconographies of the Nazarene circulated on title pages and as book illustrations, albeit often in a clandestine context, pictorially marking a shift from representation of the divine to representation of the human nature of Jesus. From the second half of the 17th century and in the first decades of the 18th century an enormous amount of literature about Jesus and Christianity circulated both officially and clandestinely. As we seek to recover the Jewish context of Jesus as imagined by scholars and theologians of the early modern period, we can usefully combine different media, from texts to images, to detect various sensibilities concerning Jesus as a Jew and therefore as a man.

If we are to fully appreciate the richness of early modern scholarship on these topics, a more inclusive approach will surely be required, one capable of grasp-

4 A number of recent studies have drawn attending to this text; see Richard 2015; Priest 2015. For a more general account for the 19th century see Moxnes 2012.

5 For example, the Annual Meeting on Christian Origins held in Bertinoro, Italy, cf. <https://cissr.net>; and the *Journal of the Historical Jesus*, published by Brill. For similar approaches critical of Schweitzer's account, see Salvatorelli 1929; and before, Labanca 1900.

ing and conveying how scholars belonging to different communities of faith performed their historical quest on such charged theological themes. Jewish and Catholic writers and Protestant scholars of various confessions left interesting traces of their understandings of Jesus's lived historical context. Their work could achieve vast clandestine circulation and become part of a library shared by religious reformers and enlightened thinkers, not to mention fervid critics of Christianity.

Our interest in this specific issue, the product of an intense exchange at the European Association for the Study of Religions conference for 2016, held in Helsinki, is intended to provide insight into the representation of Jesus in the early modern age and beyond, deliberately extending the focus to overlooked media. While we welcome analysis of textual traditions embedded in prints, manuscripts and marginalia, alongside authorized and authorial perspectives, we encouraged scholars to present counter-narratives and challenging views, focusing on other forms and fields of representation such as visual material or archival sources, in order to establish a more intricate picture of both multiple representations of and contrasting theories about the figure of Jesus.

The collection of articles presented here contains various methodological lines of inquiry. At the same time, it brings together, albeit very selectively, the early modern and modern periods even up to the second half of the 20th century; we believe that this selection of case studies offers a composite view of varied, and often contrasting, practices of historiographical writing, which belong to different religious, anti-religious and neutral traditions that span across the centuries. We sought to add an additional and new perspective based on communication theory, focusing on the relationship between different media and on their communicative potential and historical imagination. The emphasis on the medium – be it a manuscript, an illustration or a film – was intended to encourage new modes of representing historical themes, which, we hope, will allow new interpretations and an innovative evaluation of the impact of scholarship on religion, shedding light on scholarship's failures as well as on its ability to resonate with a wider public.

Our perspective thus points to the role of media and also offers insight into often-neglected marginal or allegedly marginal narratives, such as, for example, Jewish voices on the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. Indeed, this themed issue opens with two articles on Jewish interpretations of Jesus before the emergence of a “scientific discourse” that were taken up in the early modern period and used by different communities with diverse cultural agendas.

Miriam Benfatto's article is devoted to an early modern text on Jesus that has received too little attention thus far and to how we can understand religious themes through polemical discourse. Her contribution seeks to uncover the figure of Jesus hidden by the polemical and apologetic strategy of a book known under the title *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*). This

powerful study, which generated an early historical consciousness in its description of the Nazarene, was written at the end of the 16th century, at a time of confessional and interreligious confrontation involving Jews and Christians. The treatise was authored by Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594) in the multi-confessional Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In her essay Benfatto discusses central issues tackled by the Lithuanian Karaite scholar, such as the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as Jesus' humanity, messiahship and Jewishness. The *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* offered a noteworthy representation of Jesus from a particular Jewish perspective, using an exegetical and historical method and basing its argument on analysis of the Gospels. As Benfatto illustrates, the text circulated widely in Europe through clandestine networks, was translated into several languages before the end of the seventeenth century and was influential for freethinkers such as Reimarus and Voltaire.

In his article, Daniel Barbu also deals with anti-Christian polemical literature, but of a very different emotionally engaging type. A parodic, subversive retelling of the Gospel tradition, *Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is a narrative of remarkable cogency and was a bestseller in its period. Against the background of early modern life and thought, the essay offers an engaging introduction to and discussion of this story and of its wide dissemination through multiple oral and written channels, not least through the first printed editions, published by professor of Oriental languages Johann Christoph Wagenseil and the Swiss theologian Johann Jacob Huldreich in 1681 and 1705 respectively. Barbu investigates the use of *Toledot Yeshu* as deliberate response and challenge to Christian dogma, situating it in the context of counter-history and identity. Narratives such as this functioned within a minority culture as a form of resistance and challenge to the dominant discourse. The impact and power of humor and mockery as effective forms of polemic are highlighted. Barbu reads and treats the many manuscript versions as historical and social artefacts and analyses early modern contexts previously underappreciated. He writes about adaptations and interpretations, about the reception and circulation of *Toledot Yeshu* among both Jews and Christians, exploring the effects of a narrative that was condemned as infamous and impious while at the same time being broadly discussed by Christians as a fascinating and thought-provoking text.

From textual and exegetical narratives aimed at ridiculing or criticizing hegemonic Christian interpretations of the life of Jesus, this issue turns in its next article to Catholic sacred antiquarianism. Paola von Wyss-Giacosa introduces the reader to a tract on the shroud of Besançon as an example of early modern discourse about relics. With its polemical overtones, the historic debate over relics of Jesus is very relevant to our present perspective on various counts. Such artefacts were a medium that played an important part in disseminating allegedly authentic (and therefore sacred) images of Jesus, considered by be-

lievers to be not representations but rather direct traces of the divine and thus invested with a unique performative power. More generally, the approach allows us to recognize the role of textiles as powerful and controversial parts and products of cultural practice. At the center of Wyss-Giacosa's essay is the book *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi servatoris crisis historica* (*About a historical decision on the burial shrouds of Christ the Savior*, Antwerp, 1624), a hitherto neglected treatise in which the Besançon physician and scholar Jean-Jacques Chifflet wrote about a competitor of the shroud of Turin, a large cloth preserved in the Franche-Comté capital that was considered to hold an "imprint" left by Christ's body on his burial linen. More specifically, the article focuses on the highly effective illustrative strategy deployed by the author in his argument for his local shroud. Discussion of the cloth's rendering in a remarkable engraving is accompanied by analysis of the high circulation, use and impact of Chifflet's selection of images, and the broad implications of their reception.

Visual imagery also has a significant role in the last two articles. They deal with the modern period, offering analyses of the Gospel narrative as conveyed through the prism of the new medium of cinema. Cristiana Facchini's article explores the relationship between select early silent films devoted to the life of Christ and the historiographical debate about the "historical Jesus" that had been so influential throughout the nineteenth century. Both were a product of the impact of modernity on religion: while the former was indicative of the historical turn and an increased interest in precisely reframing the history of Christianity through a methodologically sound analysis of the past, the latter was the outcome of technological innovation's exploitation of the possibilities for the re-presentation of the past for a wider audience. The article explores the interaction between these realms of modern culture, claiming that in terms of representations of religion and a historical past, the trajectories of the "historical Jesus" and the "cinematic Christ" had features in common as they became public knowledge for an incipient mass culture, although they deployed different methodologies and analytical devices in order to convey historical realism. While scholarship exploited the powerful tools of philology and textual analysis that were combined with increasing attention to how historical sources might be used, cinematic depictions relied upon visual imagery, music and a literal transposition of the Gospel narrative. Facchini's essay offers new insight into these two historical imaginations, observing that although the two representations might share certain features and overlap, more often they generated different results and contradicted each other.

Finally, the last article, by Nicola Martellozzo, deals with what is probably the most famous film on this topic, *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, IT/FR 1964) by Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini. Viewed against the backdrop of the highly conflictual politics of Italy's post-war period, the film is analyzed partly as the outcome of a long process of ne-

gotiation between Pasolini, an influential intellectual close to the Communist party, on one hand, and Catholic groups inspired by the renewal of the Catholic Church, on the other. The article offers a new understanding of how Pasolini created the narrative of a film that was often praised by Catholic critics as a literal transposition of the Gospel's narrative and therefore as an accurate and historically sound rendering. Martellozzo gives a semiotic analysis of musical motifs in the film, showing how the soundtrack was carefully interwoven with the textual and visual dimensions of the narrative, creating an "architecture of reality" which reinforced the message Pasolini aimed to convey. The musical syntax that Pasolini construed throughout the film creates "consonant scenes", tied together by musical motifs that convey chains of meaning, which go far beyond the literal sense of the Gospel. The film director successfully connects the text of the Gospel of Matthew with a new web of meanings that reach the viewer and offer a more complex image of the life of Jesus. In doing so, Pasolini strengthens the theological undertext while also presenting the viewer with a personal message through a complex game of intertextuality.

Overall, this thematic issue seeks to provide a more nuanced and more complicated history of how historical narratives about the life of Jesus were produced and circulated in European culture. The focus on media is one of the most innovative ways to provide such an involved history, pointing to the cultural history of scholarship and the many ways in which societies produce historical representations of theological themes.

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# The Hidden Jesus

## The Nazarene in Jewish Polemical Literature: The Case of the 16th-Century Text *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*

### ABSTRACT

This article traces the figure of Jesus that was hidden through the polemical and apologetic strategy of the text known as *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*), composed at the end of the 16th century by Lithuanian Karaite scholar Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594). Despite belonging to a Karaite group, Isaac ben Abraham often used rabbinic quotations and Jewish classical commentators. His material was therefore intelligible to the wider Jewish community and it was also accessible to non-Jews and Marranos. Indeed, this text was translated into Spanish, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Latin by the end of 17th century. *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was a privileged example of what Christians knew about Jewish anti-Christian literature and was read by significant European intellectuals and philosophers. This text circulated widely among European thinkers, becoming an important source of anti-Christian ideas among non-Jewish intellectuals. The influence of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* demonstrates how closely the Jewish and Christian worlds interacted and connected during the early modern period.

### KEYWORDS

Isaac ben Abraham Troki, *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, Jewish Polemical Literature, Quest for the Historical Jesus, Anti-Christian Work

### BIOGRAPHY

Miriam Benfatto recently received her PhD in History, Culture and Civilizations from the University of Bologna. She is currently Subject Expert and Teaching Assistant in the following teaching programs, History of Christianity and Introduction to the Study of Religions at the University of Bologna. Benfatto studied in Bologna, Paris, Tel Aviv and Oxford and has written on Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature and on the quest for the historical Jesus. Her principle research interests are the historical Jesus, anti-Christian polemical texts and Hebrew manuscript studies.

The Jewish-Christian controversy, as it is known, includes reflection on the figure of the Nazarene. The richest and most systematic contributions by Jewish tradition to this discourse in the medieval and early modern period are found in Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature.<sup>1</sup> In this article I trace the figure of Jesus that was hidden through the polemical and apologetic strategy of the text *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*), composed by Lithuanian Karaite scholar Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594) at the end of the 16th century. The article reflects on this particular portrait of Jesus, which was read by leading European intellectuals and philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the extraordinary reception history of this text indicates that *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was for a long time a privileged example of what Christians knew about Jewish anti-Christian literature.<sup>3</sup>

Although Isaac ben Abraham Troki's biography remains a *desideratum*, we know that he came from a line of great Karaite scholars and became a leader of his own Karaite community in Troki (Lithuania),<sup>4</sup> one of the most important cultural and religious centers of Karaism in the 16th century.<sup>5</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham Troki was a prolific writer. His literary production covered liturgical poems that include *piyutim* (פיוטים), composed in a Turkic language with Hebrew script known as *karaim language*,<sup>6</sup> *derushim* (דרשים), a homiletic interpretation of the Bible, biblical commentaries and a treatise against the Rabbanite.<sup>7</sup> Although he belonged to a Karaite group, Isaac ben Abraham knew Talmudic literature well and often cited rabbinic quotations and Jewish classical commentators, an approach found in his main work, the polemical treatise against Christianity *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*.<sup>8</sup> This material was therefore intelligible to a wider Jewish community.

*Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was written in response to a specific need that emerged from social and cultural circumstances: according to its author, the people of Is-

1 For a general overview of Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature and its main themes see Schoeps 1963; Trautner-Kromann 1993; Krauss/Horbury 1995; Lasker 1999; Lasker 2007.

2 Popkin 1992, 159–181; Mulsow 2015, 32–38.

3 The author's in-depth study of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* will be published shortly. See Benfatto 2018.

4 Mann 1935, 715; 583.

5 Mann 1935, 566–574. Karaite Judaism is a Jewish religious movement characterized by the recognition of the Bible alone as its only authority. The Karaites therefore reject the Talmud and the rabbinical traditions. Recent scholarship (Polliack 2003, xvii–xviii) has defined Karaite Judaism as “a Jewish religious movement of a scripturalist and messianic nature, which crystallized in the second half of the ninth century in the areas of Persia-Iraq and Palestine [...] Karaism, in its spiritual essence and in the grain of its history, should be regarded [...] as one manifestation of the multi-faceted nature of Jewish culture and identity”.

6 Kizilov 2007.

7 Akhiezer 2006. The term “Rabbanite” indicates Jews who receive the Talmudic tradition and its teaching.

8 Schreiner 2002.

rael are constantly attacked by Christians and do not know how to defend themselves.<sup>9</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was marked by unique religious diversity, and each community, including the Jewish one, could take advantage of privileges and concessions. In the period when Isaac ben Abraham was writing, the city of Troki was part of this Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which had been established in 1569 by the unification of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with the political act of the Union of Lublin.<sup>10</sup> The Commonwealth was known as an *unicum* in Europe,<sup>11</sup> with religious minorities such as Armenians, Muslims, Orthodox, Hussites and Jews as well as several Protestant groups existing together in one territory.<sup>12</sup> The last of these had taken refuge there to escape persecution in their countries of origin, for the Commonwealth was an island of tolerance in the vast ocean of religious intolerance that was the rest of Europe. These confessional minorities enjoyed both religious and civil rights thanks to the Warsaw Confederation Act of 1573, which guaranteed religious freedom in the Commonwealth.<sup>13</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham's writings drew on his conversations with a range of individuals that included Catholic bishops, high officials of the state, military officers and distinguished scholars.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* we find reports of dialogues with Christians, Lutherans and members of the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>15</sup>

This text by Isaac ben Abraham has been accurately described thus: "All the controversy, the subject of endless duels since the beginning of Christianity, is here – so to speak – put in a nutshell."<sup>16</sup> While broadly speaking it has similarities in style, methodology and argument with earlier Jewish polemical literature, it also has features that made it particularly interesting and valuable, as we will see.

*Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was intended for limited, or at least controlled, circulation and contained a targeted and well-articulated attack on Christianity. The author provided his treatise with a long preface, composed of about 80 biblical quotations and rendered in rhymed prose.<sup>17</sup> The work is divided into two main sections, with 50 and 100 chapters respectively. Isaac ben Abraham's main argument tackles the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible that seeks to demonstrate that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. The first section addresses

9 Deutsch 1873, 6–8.

10 For more details: Davies 1982, 115–155.

11 Tazbir 1986, 187–188; Tazbir 1973; Davies 1982, 160; Lukowski/Zawadzki 2009, 99–100.

12 Baron 1976; Mann 1935, 553–697; Goldberg 1985; Waysblum 1952, 62–77.

13 Madonia 2013, 17–18; Grzybowski 1979, 75–96.

14 Deutsch 1873, 9–10.

15 Deutsch 1873, 168; 41; 40.

16 Waysblum 1952, 73.

17 Deutsch 1873, 6–13.

Christian interpretations of the prophecies contained in the Hebrew Bible, providing detailed responses as well as objections to Christian doctrine formulated by the author himself. The second section deals with supposed contradictions and errors in the New Testament, especially those involving Christological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and the prophecies, in other words, a major part of the *loci classici* in Christian literature about the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isaiah 7:14; Jeremiah 31:31; Zechariah 9:9). The focus of both sections is primarily on the character of the Messiah, aiming to reject the identification of the Messiah awaited by the Jews with Jesus of Nazareth. The author uses the entire first chapter to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was not the expected Messiah, which it proposes is evident from his pedigree (he was not a descendant of David), from his acts (he did not come to make peace on earth), from the period in which he lived (he did not come on the latter day) and from the absence during his existence of the fulfillment of the promises that are to be realized on the advent of the Messiah (e.g. at the time of the Messiah there is to be only one kingdom, one creed and one religion).<sup>18</sup>

The manuscript of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was completed by a disciple of Isaac ben Abraham after his death. His pupil Yosef ben Mordechai Malinowski (c. 1569–1610) took it upon himself to complete the indexes and he also added a preface.<sup>19</sup> In this preface, he argues that one can reach the truth by following two parallel and complementary paths: the first corroborates the claim, while the second refutes assertions contrary to that claim. For this reason the book is divided into two parts.<sup>20</sup>

In 1621 the Spanish rabbi and leader of the Sephardic congregation of Hamburg Isaac Athias (? – after 1626/7) translated *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* into Spanish.<sup>21</sup> Manuscript copies of this translation of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* were held subsequently by the Sephardi community in Amsterdam, as is confirmed by their presence in the *Ets Haim* library.<sup>22</sup> This collection also contains other Spanish translations as well as translations into Dutch, French and Portuguese.<sup>23</sup>

The first printed edition of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was a product of the Christian world. In the second half of the 17th century, Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705),<sup>24</sup> a polymath Lutheran theologian from Altdorf, pub-

18 Deutsch 1873, 30–38.

19 On Yosef ben Mordechai Malinowski's biography see Muchowski/Yariv 2014.

20 Deutsch 1873, 1–6.

21 One copy of Isaac Athias' translation can be found at the Talmud Torah Library of Livorno; Perani 1997, n. 57.

22 Fuks 1975, n. 188, 192, 211, 212, 217, 222.

23 Fuks 1975, n. 188, 222 (Spanish); 211 (Dutch), 212 (French), 217 (Portuguese).

24 For further biographical details see Werner 1943, 438; Roth-Scholtz 1719; Zohn 1954, 35–40; Schoeps 1952, 67–68, 146, 153–154; Blastenbrei 2004.

lished *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* as well as other anti-Christian works. Published in 1681, the *Tela Ignea Satanae* (*The Fiery Arrows of Satan*), a title that makes reference to Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6:16: "In addition to all these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one") is a well-known anthology of anti-Christian Jewish works translated into Latin.<sup>25</sup> This two-volume work contains six Jewish texts: the *Carmen Memoriale* of R. Lipmannus, the *Old Book Nizzachon* by an unknown author, the *Acts of Debate* of R. Jechielis with a certain Nicolaus, the *Acts of Debate* of R. Moses Nachmanes with Brother Paul Christian and Brother Raymundus Martinis, the book *Chissuk Emuna* of R. Isaacus and the book *Toledot Yesu*.<sup>26</sup>

Wagenseil wrote of these texts that he "thrust them into light, having collected them and dug them out of hidden places in Europe and Africa, and bringing them to the faith of Christian theologians, that they more properly consider those things, which may help to convert that wretched Jewish race".<sup>27</sup> Wagenseil strongly believed that it was necessary to devote particular energies to the refutation of the text by Isaac ben Abraham, claiming there was no more dangerous Jewish work that confirmed the errors of the Jews. *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, which Wagenseil described as "sinister and infernal childbirth conceived at half of the last century",<sup>28</sup> was considered particularly dangerous because it was easily accessible and relatively recent.

Some of the translations, such as those into French, Spanish and Latin, provided Christians with access to the text. The *Tela Ignea Satanae* attracted the attention of a number of defenders of Christianity, who saw the work by Isaac ben Abraham Troki as a strong attack on their faith. While the manuscript form of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* continued to circulate for centuries in both Jewish and Christian worlds, the printed version arrived in the libraries of European intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> They included Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), often acknowledged to have been amongst the first scholars to have reconstructed the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth from a historical viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> Reimarus was a distinguished Enlightenment philosopher and one of the most significant bibli-

25 It is possible to read *Tela Ignea Satanae* thanks to Google Books. See <https://books.google.it/books?id=Ti5IAAAACAAJ&hl=it&pg=PP9#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 23 July 2018].

26 On *Toledot Yesu* see Daniel Barbu's contribution in this issue.

27 Wagenseil 1681, title page. The translation from Latin is mine.

28 Wagenseil 1681, page not numbered [1].

29 Some examples are Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jacques Basnage De Beauval (1653–1723), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Voltaire (1694–1778) and Paul-Henri Thiery d'Holbach (1723–1789). For further information see Benfatto 2017.

30 The starting point of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" is traditionally attributed to Reimarus, though recent scholarly inquiry has called this into question. See Pesce 2011, 2017a, 2017b; Facchini 2018; Bermejo Rubio 2009. The contribution by Reimarus to biblical philology and European intellectual thought has been scrutinized in great detail. See Mulsow 2011; Groetsch 2015.

cal critics in 18th-century Germany. He was professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages at the *Gymnasium illustre* in Hamburg from 1727 and, as pointed out by recent scholarship, also a significant antiquary, orientalist, theologian and man of letters.<sup>31</sup> Reimarus is often known via Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) as the herald of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer published his *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (From Reimarus to Wrede. A History of the Research on the Life of Jesus) in 1906; the English translation was entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. According to Schweitzer and his successors, Reimarus clearly distinguished between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian dogmatic tradition and thus established an unbridgeable gap between the historical Jesus and the divine Christ. He also recognized that Jesus was a Jew and remained a Jew until his death, admitting Jesus' original Jewishness. Reimarus' works were published posthumously and anonymously by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), in fragments, between 1774 and 1778.<sup>32</sup> Most important in launching critical research on the subject was *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (On the Goal of Jesus and His Disciples), published in 1778.

Reimarus was familiar with *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*, and we should consider the influence that this text may have exerted on his approach to the study of the New Testament and early Christianity. Reimarus had at his disposal the *Tela Ignea Satanae* composed by Wagenseil and also the bibliographic work *Bibliotheca Hebraea* by his master, the renowned Hebraist Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739),<sup>33</sup> along with various treatises attacking Isaac ben Abraham Troki's text.<sup>34</sup>

Today the most accurate edition of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* is the work of the Silesian rabbi David Deutsch (1810–1873), who published a translation into German together with a revised Hebrew text based on the study of several manuscripts. This edition was published first in 1865 at Breslau and then again in 1873 with the title *Befestigung im Glauben* (Strengthening in the Faith).<sup>35</sup> Deutsch was an exponent of that Orthodox Judaism which opposed the ideas of Reform Judaism, and he tried in various ways to fight the advance of the doctrines that were gradually spreading. On several occasions Deutsch spoke out in favor of Orthodoxy, protesting, for example, at the nomination as rabbi of Breslau of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), a principal exponent of Reform Judaism, and composing a critical response to Geiger's famous pamphlet *Ansprache an meine*

31 Mulsow 2011.

32 Alexander 1972; Parente 1977.

33 Wolf 1715–1733.

34 In his monumental library we can find works by Richard Kidder (1633–1703), *A Demonstration of the Messiah*, and Johann Müller (1598–1672), *Judaismus oder Judenthumb*. See the catalogue of Reimarus' library: Scheteling 1768, 73, 113.

35 Deutsch 1873. The Hebrew text of this edition is the base text for all quotations in this article, translated by me.

*Gemeinde* (Address to my Community), published in Breslau in 1842.<sup>36</sup> He was, however, in agreement with Geiger on the value of *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*; the latter dedicated an essay to its author in 1853 entitled *Isaak Troki. Ein Apologet des Judenthums am Ende des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Isaac Troki. An Apologist of Judaism at the End of the Sixteenth Century).<sup>37</sup> Geiger was probably the first scholar to deal extensively with Isaac ben Abraham from a scholarly point of view. In his work, the anti-Christian polemics of Isaac ben Abraham was compared with the work of the German philosopher David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874),<sup>38</sup> who in 1835 had written his most famous theological and critical book, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Edited*), on the life of Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

## THE NAZARENE ACCORDING TO JEWISH POLEMICAL DISCOURSE

What could Reimarus and others read about Jesus in *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah*? What image of Jesus does this text give and what does it hide? Understandably, Isaac ben Abraham Troki did not present Jesus through a critical approach based on historical reconstruction; rather, he tried to retrace the figure of Jesus by deconstructing the theological and Christological narratives. The historical figure of Jesus is hidden by his polemical perspective, with Isaac ben Abraham focusing his discussion on what the Nazarene was not or did not do. For example, according to his interpretation, the Nazarene was not God, nor was he the Messiah and the promoter of a new religious law. Here in following Isaac ben Abraham's arguments, we will focus on evidence related to New Testament accounts, leaving aside Hebrew Bible proofs and unfulfilled prophecies.

Isaac ben Abraham proposed that the New Testament provides several proofs against Jesus' divinity, and consequently also against the theological concept of the Trinity.<sup>40</sup> For his exploration of this point, the author carefully studied the writings of Nicholas Paruta (c. 1530–1581), Martin Chechowiz (c. 1532–1613) and Simon Budny (c. 1530–1593), the leaders of Unitarianism in Poland.<sup>41</sup> The Unitarian Church grew out of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century and had taken shape in Poland and Transylvania in the 1560s. The

36 Brocke/Carlebach 2004, 247; Norden 1902.

37 On this topic see Heschel 1998.

38 Geiger 1853; Heschel 1998, 131.

39 On Geiger's interest in Jewish polemical literature, in particular by Rabbi Leone Modena, see Facchini 2018.

40 On this point the author was influenced also by contemporary antitrinitarian intellectuals. See Dán 1988, 69–82.

41 Firpo 1977; Cantimori 2009.



members of this community recognized the unity of God, rejecting the Trinity and also the doctrine of Original Sin.<sup>42</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham cites and translates into Hebrew passages from the Gospels to show that Jesus did not consider himself equal to God, that he was aware of his human condition. This identity is evident in the epithets for Jesus and his self-appellations. Chief among these is “son of man”, a term that according to Isaac ben Abraham was intended not as a Christological title, as Christians said, but as synonymous with “man” and was used by Jesus as a circumlocution, to indirectly allude to himself (e.g. Matthew 12:32; Mark 3:28–29; Luke 12:10).<sup>43</sup>

Matthew wrote in chapter 12, verse 32: “whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, not in this world, nor in the coming world”. You can also find the same in Mark 3, verse 28 and in Luke 12, verse 19 [sic.]. Here, with this passage, these people clearly confirm that the Holy Spirit and the Son are not one, thus it follows that three are not one, and since Jesus is called the Son of Man, he then is not God, according to their false belief, which is obvious to the understanding.<sup>44</sup>

In order to support his claims, Isaac ben Abraham also cites other epithets that suggest either simply Jesus’ humanity (as a man) or a lack of coincidence with God (e.g. John 8:40; Matthew 10:40).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Jesus is characterized by features that denote his very human nature: his ignorance and limited authority are a clear indication of his distance from divine attributes (e.g. Mark 13:32).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13)<sup>47</sup> was definitive proof for Isaac ben Abraham: Jesus teaches his disciples to pray neither to the Holy Spirit nor to the Son, but only to the God of Heaven, that is the God of Israel:

42 Wilbur 1952.

43 Matthew 12:32: “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”; Mark 3, 28–29: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”; Luke 12:10: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven”. All the biblical quotations that are not in Isaac ben Abraham’s text come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989.

44 Deutsch 1873, 84–85. See also 294–295. The translations from Hebrew are all mine, including quotations from the Gospels.

45 Deutsch 1873, 85. John 8:40: “but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did”; Matthew 10:40: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”.

46 Deutsch 1873, 85. Mark 13:32: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”.

47 Matthew 6:9–13: “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one”.



A quite clear matter comes from the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, called in their language *pater*, written in Matthew, chapter six [verses 9–13], where he did not decree to pray to the Trinity, only to one God, and he is the God of heaven, as it is written there, called in their language *pater*: “our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, come your kingdom, your will be done on earth as in heaven, give us today the bread that is needful for us and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but save us from evil, amen”. From this you can see that he did not instruct them to pray to him, who according to them is the Son, and also not to the Holy Spirit, but only to his father in heaven, to whom there is no equal.<sup>48</sup>

For Isaac ben Abraham this evidence indicates that the concept of the Trinity was foreign to Jesus and, moreover, this passage highlights Jesus’ deep belief in Jewish monotheism.

The author also highlights the attitude of those who were close to Jesus. His family perceived his behavior as inappropriate and deviant (Mark 3:31–35; Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21; John 7:5):<sup>49</sup>

Mark, chapter three, verse 31 [–35]: “And his mother and brothers came and were outside, and sent for him, requesting to see him. And a great number of them were seated around him; and they said to him: See, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you. And he said in answer: Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around at those who were seated about him, he said: See, my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s pleasure, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”. You can also find the same in Matthew, at the end of chapter 12; in Luke chapter 8, verse 19. From this you can see that his own mother and brothers, seeing that he incited and tempted simple people, they did not want to enter into the house, but sent him to call from outside, to prevent him from perpetuating this behavior. He did not listen to their voice, and he did not want to go out to them, since they too did not listen to his voice. The same occurs in John, chapter 7, verse 5, where we can read that neither of his own brothers believed in Jesus.<sup>50</sup>

Most of the arguments related to Jesus’ possible Messiahship come from demonstrating that the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible were not ful-

48 Deutsch 1873, 85–86.

49 Matthew 12:46–50: “While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you’. But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’”; Luke 8:19–21: “Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you’. But he said to them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it’”; John 7:5: “For not even his brothers believed in him”.

50 Deutsch 1873, 308.

filled either during Jesus' lifetime or after his death.<sup>51</sup> The author affirms that Jesus believed he was the Messiah, evident in what he said (John 17:3),<sup>52</sup> but Isaac ben Abraham recognizes that elsewhere Jesus openly challenged his Messianic identity (Matthew 10:34).<sup>53</sup> According to Isaac ben Abraham, the Messiah is a human figure, descended from the paternal Davidic line. He will save and gather all the Jews, ruling over them.

The contradiction in Jesus' self-understanding does not undermine the polemical power of the work: the author's intent seems to be focused on discrediting the Gospel accounts for their discordances. We find a similar kind of incoherence when the author deals with topics related to Mosaic Law. The Christian argument underlined that Jesus had brought about a new law, but according to Isaac ben Abraham, Jesus was largely a devoted Jew who followed Mosaic prescriptions. The argument is so central to the author that he anticipates his main conclusion in the presentation of the second part, recording:

it is renowned and popular that Christians said that the Gospel is a new law given to them by Jesus the Nazarene, but we do not find anywhere in the Gospel that Jesus gave them a new law, indeed we find the contrary: (Jesus) himself ordered the commandments written in the law of Moses be observed and said this is eternally valid and never to be invalidated.<sup>54</sup>

Isaac ben Abraham cites Jesus' own words from the Gospel accounts (e.g. Matthew 5:17–19)<sup>55</sup> to reinforce his conviction:

A Christian opinion against divine law reports that the Mosaic Law was not established to last forever, but only for a limited period of time, up until [the coming of] Jesus, who would then abrogate the Mosaic Law and give to his disciples and followers a new law, which freed them from the commandments and ordinances of Mosaic Law. [...] Response: this claim is not true and also their gospel refutes their words because we can find in Matthew, chapter 5 verse 17 and following, that Jesus said these words to his disciples: "think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfil".<sup>56</sup>

51 Deutsch 1873, 30–38, 45–66.

52 Deutsch 1873, 326. John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent".

53 Deutsch 1873, 295. See also 300. Matthew 10:34: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".

54 Deutsch 1873, 283.

55 Matthew 5:17–19: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven".

56 Deutsch 1873, 124. See also 293, 296.

Furthermore, Jesus' religious behavior demonstrates how he respected mosaic precepts on several occasions (e.g. Luke 2:21; Matthew 6:9–13),<sup>57</sup> as did his first followers after his death (e.g. Acts 15:20; 16:3; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5).<sup>58</sup>

Jesus and his disciples followed religious practices to which every Jew is committed, such as circumcision or observance of Shabbat. Jesus' Jewishness is also supported by his proclaimed monotheism: Jesus addresses the God of Israel during his prayer in times of difficulty (Matthew 26:9–46; Mark 14:35; Luke 22:41).<sup>59</sup> Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane demonstrates this point particularly well:

As it is written in Matthew, chapter 26, verse 39, and these are its words: “and when Jesus went a little farther, he threw himself upon the ground, begged and said: if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me, yet not as I will, but as you will”. Then, he was caught, he cried with a loud voice saying: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” As is written there in chapter 27, verse 46. And this passage likewise proves that the Father is not one with the Son since the will of the Father is not the will of the Son. And if the Christian should reply and say that it was not according to his will, but what they did to him was done by force, then it is said to him: if this is the case how can you call him God since he suffered torments against his will, that he should not be able to save himself from the hands of the enemies? And how will he be able to save those who trust in him?<sup>60</sup>

57 Deutsch 1873, 124; 84–85. Luke 2:21: “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb”; Matthew 6:9–13: as above, n. 47.

58 Deutsch 1873, 124–125. Acts 15:20: “but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood”; 16:3: “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek”; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord”.

59 Deutsch 1873, 301–302; 306. Matthew 26:39–46: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’. Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’. Again he went away for the second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done’. Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand’”; Mark 14:35: “And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him”; Luke 22:41: “Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed”.

60 Deutsch 1873, 276.

As we have noted, the image of Jesus is not allowed to negate the polemical discourse that guides the author in his analysis of the New Testament. Thus Isaac ben Abraham can note that Jesus acknowledged the validity of the Law of Moses but elsewhere emphasize that Jesus denied the eternal validity of the Torah. Indeed, Isaac ben Abraham also points out an episode in which Jesus declared the Law and Prophets superseded by the arrival of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:13; Luke 16:16).<sup>61</sup>

## CLOSING REMARKS

In this article I have offered a reading of the image of Jesus as it emerges from the writings of a Jewish/Karaite thinker who was primarily moved by a wish to deconstruct the Christological figure. Despite some contradictions in Jesus' self-understanding and his relation with the Law, the image of the Nazarene hidden under the polemical discourse was, Isaac ben Abraham proposed, that of a Jewish man who followed Jewish religious prescriptions and asked his followers to do the same, which they did. Jesus did not believe he was God or the Messiah described in the Hebrew Bible. For Isaac ben Abraham Jesus was a Jew, but not a good Jew.<sup>62</sup> These polemical themes and needs created a particular historical perspective and presented an opportunity for a thorough reading of the Christian texts.<sup>63</sup> In deconstructing the figure of Christ, the polemicist unearthed Jesus and his world, thereby highlighting his historical being. Precisely this image has attracted scholars of ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

Such polemical literature may have unintentionally created historical images of Jesus that would become influential among Christian scholars. In the Christian world *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was well known largely as a result of its translation into Latin by Wagenseil, but manuscript versions also contributed significantly to its diffusion. For example, Spanish manuscript translations of the text circulated among eminent European intellectuals,<sup>64</sup> including English freethinker Anthony Collins (1676–1729) and Voltaire (1669–1778).<sup>65</sup> Collins was

61 Deutsch 1873, 296. Matthew 11:13: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came”; Luke 16:16: “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force”.

62 This characterization is not unusual in Jewish polemical literature. For example, in the *Kelimat ha-Goyim* (*The Shame of the Gentiles*), the work of Jewish polemicist Profiat Duran (c. 1350–1415), we can read that Jesus, like John the Baptist, was described as “fool pious” (חסיד שוטה). See Talmage 1981, 40.

63 On the value of Jewish polemical literature on this theme, see Gutwirth 1984; Cohen 1993; Berger 1998; Del Valle Rodríguez 2010; Le Donne 2012; Wilke 2016; Facchini 2018.

64 The first Spanish translation that we know of bears the title *Fortificación de la Fè* and was prepared by Sephardic rabbi Isaac Athias (?–after 1626/7) in 1621. Copies of this translation can be found at the Talmud Torah Library in Livorno (Ms. 57) and in the Russian National Library in Moscow (Ms. Guenzburg 823).

65 Tarantino 2007, 257; Havens/Torrey 1959, 256.

influenced by this kind of literature in his literary purposes: both the skeptical tradition and anti-Christian Jewish literature flowed into Collins' works as "useful tools to undermine every rational, philological and historical justification of Christian revelation and to denounce the imposture of the churches".<sup>66</sup> He cited *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* in his famous work *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) when he gave examples of books against the Christian religion written by Jewish authors.<sup>67</sup> Collins' work is documented as present in the impressive library of his contemporary Voltaire, who did not hesitate to define the English freethinker as "one of the most terrible enemies of Christian religion".<sup>68</sup> The French philosopher referred to Isaac ben Abraham's text in his famous *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, under the entry "Prophecy". Voltaire asserted that *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* was one of the most dangerous Jewish books, one in which it was possible to find horrible profanations against Christian prophecies, and he furnished examples and demonstrated a very good knowledge of the text.<sup>69</sup>

These few selected examples demonstrate that despite censorship this type of Jewish literature, criticism and polemical content circulated widely. It may have influenced European thinkers in various ways, becoming, for example, an important source of anti-Christian ideas among non-Jewish intellectuals and contributing to undermining respect for Christian theology, the Gospel and the authority of the church.<sup>70</sup>

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66 Tarantino 2007, 78. The translation from Italian is mine.

67 Collins 1724, 82; Tarantino 2007, 110–111.

68 The quote comes from a letter by Voltaire of 1767 that read in French: "un des plus terribles ennemis de la religion chrétienne". See Tarantino 2007, 75.

69 Voltaire 1843, 367–368. See also Szechtman, 1957.

70 Popkin 1992 and 2007.

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# Some Remarks on *Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) in Early Modern Europe

## ABSTRACT

*Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is perhaps one of the most infamous retellings of the Gospel narrative of the pre-modern era. The present essay explores its reception and circulation among both Jews and Christians in the period before and after the first editions of the work, by J.C. Wagenseil in 1681 and J.J. Huldreich in 1705. The work was an object of fascination for early modern scholars of Judaism and was regularly invoked in discussions concerned with the Talmud and other Jewish books alleged to be blasphemous. For Jewish scholars, it was a source of embarrassment, although both the manuscript and the documentary evidence demonstrate that many Jews did view *Toledot Yeshu* as a culturally significant narrative, worthy of being transmitted. It is here suggested that *Toledot Yeshu*, with its direct and emotional cogency, combining history, humour and polemics, was indeed recognized by early modern Jews and crypto-Jews as a powerful story, through which they could articulate their identity.

## KEYWORDS

*Toledot Yeshu*, Jesus, Polemics, Blasphemy, Reception

## BIOGRAPHY

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## WHAT IS TOLEDOT YESHU?

*Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is perhaps one of the most infamous retellings of the Gospel narrative of the pre-modern era.<sup>1</sup> It aroused the ire of anti-

1 I warmly thank Prof. William Horbury for his most valuable comments on this essay, as well as for a

Jewish polemicists, was a delight for anti-clerical propagandists and a subject of embarrassment for Jewish scholars. There is little doubt that the work – or rather different versions of the work – circulated throughout the early modern period, be it in writing or merely as hearsay. The text certainly has a longer history, yet most of the extant manuscripts were produced between the 16th and 19th centuries. Scholars have long debated whether *Toledot Yeshe* is an ancient or medieval work, but it is as much an antique tradition as it is a medieval and early modern text.<sup>2</sup> Whatever its origins, which remain somewhat obscure, the historical contexts in which the work was read, copied, transmitted, expanded and discussed (or disparaged) need to be considered, as well as the ways in which this ill-reputed yet widely popular narrative contributed to shaping both Jewish and Christian imaginations of Christian origins. Individual versions of the work and also the rich body of sources reflective of its circulation and reception do more than witness to a history of textual transmission; they also shed light on the cultural interactions that defined Jewish–Christian relations in the early modern world.<sup>3</sup>

*Toledot Yeshe* provides a “counter-history” of the life of Jesus and the origins of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The narrative has come down to us in a great variety of forms, and even the title under which it is most commonly known is not invariable.<sup>5</sup> Building equally on Jewish and Christian traditions (both canonical and apocryphal), it offers a version of the story from an anti-Christian, polemical perspective. It thus presents Jesus as a mock prophet and a charlatan who per-

number of references he generously shared with me. All shortcomings are however mine. Further aspects of the early modern reception of *Toledot Yeshe* will be discussed in my book, forthcoming with Le Seuil.

On *Toledot Yeshe* see now Meerson/Schäfer 2014, with the reservations offered by Stökl Ben Ezra 2016. Other seminal studies include Krauss 1902; Horbury 1970; Schlichting 1982; Di Segni 1985. See also the essays gathered in Schäfer/Meerson/Deutsch 2011; Barbu/Deutsch, forthcoming.

2 See Horbury, forthcoming (b); Barbu 2018a.

3 I here use the notion of early modern Europe, as given in the title, in a somewhat flexible way, to cover a long period (c. 1400–1900) and allowing for some observations on the United States.

4 Funkenstein 1993; Biale 1999 and see below, section V.

5 Other titles include *Ma’ase Yeshe ha-Notsri* (*Story of Jesus the Nazarene*), *Gezarot Yeshe* (*Decrees of Jesus*), *Ma’ase Talui* (*Story of the Hanged One*). See the discussion in Horbury, forthcoming (b). Most of the extant texts can be divided into two main families, which for the sake of convenience I call the “Aramaic” and “Hebrew” *Toledot*-traditions – corresponding to Riccardo Di Segni’s “Pilate” and “Helena” groups respectively (Di Segni 1984, 1985, 29–42). While reflecting the presumed original languages of both traditions, my distinction is not simply linguistic, as texts from both traditions circulated in a number of other languages (e.g. Judeo-Arabic and Yiddish). The traditions doubtless co-existed for quite some time (with likely intersection and contamination) and were still recognized by one medieval commentator (Alfonso de Valladolid, previously Abner of Burgos) as two distinct “books”; see Barbu 2018b; Stökl Ben Ezra 2018. Yet the “Aramaic” tradition, widely diffused in the early Middle Ages, seems to have progressively disappeared in the following centuries. Most versions known to late medieval and early modern copyists and readers thus belong to the “Hebrew” tradition, which I therefore privilege in my summary of the work. For a different classification, see Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 28–39.

formed would-be miracles by resorting to “magic” (using either God’s ineffable name or “magical books” imported from Egypt), thus raising an army of gullible disciples. After a series of twists and turns worthy of a fantasy novel (including an aerial battle with Judas Iscariot), he is eventually captured by the rabbis, scourged in public and put to death. The story goes on to tell how his body was then summarily buried in a nearby garden until his disciples declared him resurrected, at which point it was unearthed, dragged through the streets and thrown into a cesspit – while his followers were exiled or massacred. Most versions of the narrative open with an account of Jesus’ conception, narrating how his mother committed adultery with a disreputable neighbour and, worse, while she was menstruating. The episode highlights Jesus’ double infamy: he is both an illegitimate and an impure child (*mamzer u-ben ha-niddah*) – and by extension, we may assume, so too Christianity is illegitimate and impure. The story often ends with the separation of Jews and Christians through the intervention of undercover rabbis whom the Christians know as Peter and Paul. They infiltrated the unruly crowd of Jesus’ disciples and provided them with the new laws and customs that would distinguish them from the Jews – de facto inventing a new and separate religion.<sup>6</sup>

## CHRISTIAN READERS AND JEWISH SCRIBES

For Christian readers the story was understandably hard to take.<sup>7</sup> The first editor of the work, the Altdorf professor of Oriental languages Johann Christoph Wagenseil, called it “the most impious and horrible thing ever committed to writing since the origins of man” and a “diabolical” book “defecated by the Devil”.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it also sparked a certain fascination, and as Wagenseil noted, Christian scholars had spared no effort in seeking to uncover this surreptitious book, which he himself eventually obtained “with much fatigue and at high cost”. In the previous centuries, Christian converts from Judaism had repeatedly referred to this “secret” booklet containing horrible blasphemies against Jesus and the Virgin; and medieval anti-Jewish polemicists, many of whom gained a second life in the age of print, mentioned this shameful story according to which the miracles of Christ had been performed with the ineffable name.<sup>9</sup> By the time Wagenseil published the *Tela Ignea Satanae* (*Fiery Darts of Sa-*

6 On this story, see recently Gager/Stökl Ben Ezra 2015.

7 On the Christian reception of *Toledot Yeshu*, see Deutsch 1997, 2011; Horbury 2016 and forthcoming (a).

8 Wagenseil 1681, vol. 2, “Liber Toldos Jeschu,” 2, “Confutatio Libri Toldos Jeschu,” 1 [25], 8, 9, *passim*.

9 In particular the *Pharetra fidei contra Judeos super Talmuth*, which circulated widely in the late Middle Ages, first in manuscript and eventually in print; see Horbury, forthcoming (a), referring to Wolf 1715–1746, vol. 4, 567. I thank Prof. Horbury for having shared this reference with me. On the *Pharetra*, see Schreckenberger 1995, 335–36; Patschovsky 1992, 18–19; and Dahan 1999, who identifies Thibault

tan), in 1681, *Toledot Yeshu* had very much become an open secret, cited by no less than Martin Luther and frequently discussed by Christian Hebraists – even if mainly on the basis of extracts or summaries.<sup>10</sup> Wagenseil’s edition was soon followed by another one, published in 1705 by the Swiss theologian Johann Jacob Huldreich. Both the Wagenseil and the Huldreich editions were widely cited and discussed in the 18th century. Thus the influential Protestant scholar and historian of the Jews Jacques Basnage sought to dispel the fear inspired by this and other “monstrous” works while noting that the narrative also preserved a kernel of truth “in the midst of its accumulation of fables and lies” – namely that Jesus had indeed performed miracles.<sup>11</sup> Or Voltaire, who went even further and, insisting on the work’s antiquity, claimed that *Toledot Yeshu*, however despicable, was perhaps more trustworthy than the canonical Gospels.<sup>12</sup> It comes as no surprise that in the wake of the Enlightenment, anti-Christian traditions such as *Toledot Yeshu* came to be appropriated by anti-clerical writers with a view to fostering their critique of religion and questioning the historical status of the biblical narrative.<sup>13</sup>

The subversive character of the narrative was fully recognized by those who copied and transmitted it. A number of manuscripts thus bear scribal indications that the work should be concealed lest Jews be exposed to the resentment of

of Sézanne as its author. The story was also known through Ramón Martí’s *Pugio fidei adversus Mauros et Judaeos* (1278), whose citations of the works were reproduced by Porchetus Salvaticus in the 14th century and Alfonso de Espina in the 15th century; Deutsch 2011, 289. The latter work was first printed in Strasbourg in 1471 and subsequently appeared in no fewer than seven editions between 1475 and 1525. Porchetus, whose *Victoria adversus impios Hebraeos* was printed in Paris in 1520, was the source of Martin Luther’s 1543 translation of the work. For further late medieval mentions of the work see Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 17–18. Petrus Niger, *Tractatus contra perfidos Judaeos de conditionibus veri Messiae* (1475) (quoted in Wolf 1715–1746, vol. 2, 1114, 1443, and see Deutsch 2011, 291), also provided the Hebrew name of the work (*Sefer Toldot Jehoschuah hanozeri*, i.e. *liber generationis Jesu*). Alfonso de Valladolid / Abner of Burgos and Thomas Ebendorfer cited the work in the 14th century and 15th century respectively, the latter even translating it into Latin, but their writings had only limited circulation; see the discussion in Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018. Knowledge of *Toledot Yeshu* also appears in a 1415 papal bull by Benedict XIII, *Etsi doctores gentium* (Simonsohn 1989, 593–602 [n. 538], at 595), whence it was cited by King Ferdinand I of Aragon in the wake of the disputation of Tortosa (cf. Feliu 1989, 243); and later in the ritual murder trials of Trent (1475) and Avila (1491), where Jews were accused of uttering blasphemies while staging the crucifixion and torturing a Christian child; see respectively Di Segni 1989 and Fita 1887, 88–89, with Horbury 1970, 69 and following.

10 Luther 1920, 573–648. For Luther, *Toledot Yeshu* showcased the absurdity of the rabbinic tradition as a whole, and as noted by Stephen Burnett, his attack was aimed as much at the dispersed Jewish communities of the imperial provinces as at rival theologians seeking to unearth theological riches from the Talmud and its medieval Jewish commentators, and thus flirting dangerously with “Judaism” (Burnett, forthcoming; cf. also Morgenstern 2016). See Kattermann 1938 on Luther’s use of Porchetus as well as von der Osten-Sacken 2002, sp. 184, n. 141 on his use of Anton Margaritha. I thank Prof. Burnett for his notes on this question. On Luther’s attitude towards the Jews, see now Nirenberg 2013, 246–269; Kaufmann 2018.

11 Basnage 1716, vol. 1, 14; vol. 5, 253–290, citation at 287.

12 See Barbu 2011.

13 See Wheeler and Foote 1885, with Lockshin 1993.

Christians. Thus in a manuscript copied around 1740, we read: “This booklet contains an orally transmitted tradition, from one person to another; it may be written, but not printed, due to our harsh exile. Beware of reading it before the youth, children, or lightheaded people and even more so before the uncircumcised who understand German.”<sup>14</sup> One copyist asks his reader to forgive him his many errors as he wrote “in great haste and in the utmost secrecy”.<sup>15</sup> For most of its history, especially after Jews came under increasing pressure in medieval Christendom from the 13th century on, *Toledot Yeshu* circulated somewhat undercover, as part of the Jews’ “hidden transcript” – to borrow James C. Scott’s words – that is as “a discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, (in principle) beyond direct observation by powerholders”, a discourse transmitted behind closed doors and voicing a critique of the dominant culture.<sup>16</sup> This hidden transcript, which Scott claimed was inherent to every situation of social and political subordination, is what enables minority cultures to cope with this subordination and assert their own identity and social space, all the while resisting and challenging the dominant discourse. The problem arises, however, when the hidden transcript turns public. In 1429, a dozen Jews from the small town of Trévoux, on the border between France and Savoy, were interrogated after a copy of *Toledot Yeshu* was found in a Jewish home. Understandably, they all denied having any knowledge of the work except for the individual in whose house it had been found, who claimed that it had been copied a long time ago by a relative living far away and insisted that he had never shown it to anyone.<sup>17</sup> Obviously no one wanted to be caught with this work, especially in a world in which Christian polemicists repeatedly accused Jews of conspiring against the church precisely by spreading secret “lies” and “blasphemies”.<sup>18</sup> Even in the late 19th century, a Jewish publisher from New York could be thrown into jail under blasphemy charges for printing a Yiddish version of the work.<sup>19</sup>

14 Quoted from Deutsch 2011, 283. See further Krauss 1902, 10–11. The same warning appears in a number of manuscripts, as noted in Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018, n. 24.

15 Cf. Neubauer 1886, 405 (N° 2172), quoted by Horbury 1970, 8, n5.

16 Scott 1990, here at 4–5.

17 Loeb 1883; Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018.

18 The “secret” character of *Toledot Yeshu* was thus noted already in the 15th century by the Viennese cleric Thomas Ebendorfer; cf. Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 137. In general, see Carlebach 1996.

19 The case had been brought into court by the notorious Anthony Comstock. The publisher, Meyer Chinski, was arrested on 30 June 1897, released on bail and eventually acquitted on 6 January 1898. See *Record of Persons Arrested under the Auspices of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice*, vol. III, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, MSS34587; MMC-3288; *Twenty Fourth Annual Report of the Society for the Suppression of Vice* (New York, 18 January 1898), 22–23. I thank Amy Werbel for kindly sending me a copy of these documents. See also the Special Session court docket, 6 January 1898. A Yiddish account of the trial was published that year by Chinski’s lawyer, Solomon Rosenthal, under the title *Victory [Nizzahon] in Special Session*, with a full-fledged defence of the incriminated work, aiming to preserve Jews from the influence of Christian missionaries. The case, to which I intend to return in a

## DISCLAIMING OR RECLAIMING THE TRADITION

Jewish scholars of the early *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the 19th-century “Science of Judaism”) explicitly disowned this ill-reputed work, calling it “tasteless” and “miserable”, a “spurious and mischievous” book, a “pile of dump in a dark corner of Jewish literature” or even an “invention of the anti-Semites”.<sup>20</sup> Only a few explicitly defended it as a reaction to Christian persecution or dared consider it “harmless” when compared to Christian attacks on Jews and Judaism.<sup>21</sup> In the 18th century, Moses Mendelsohn had already firmly asserted (echoing Wagenseil) that *Toledot Yeschu* was “a miscarriage from the times of legends” and recognized as such by each and every Jew.<sup>22</sup> And a little more than a century earlier, the Venetian rabbi Leone Modena had called it “a lie and a mockery”, adding that it was a disgrace for Jews to believe in such nonsense.<sup>23</sup> Obviously such dismissals also aimed to deflect accusations of blasphemy and the aura of scandal surrounding the narrative since the Middle Ages.

So, for example, Zalman Zvi of Aufhausen wrote his *Yudischer Theriak* (*Jewish Antidote*), published in 1615, as an “antidote” to the calumnies spread by a Christian convert from Judaism, Samuel Friederich Brenz, and roundly replied with regard to *Toledot Yeschu* that “in all his life [he had] never seen such a book”, accusing Brenz of having written it himself in order “to beat and slander us with it”.<sup>24</sup> And Josel of Rosheim, the Jewish delegate at the Habsburg court, in a letter of July 1543 addressed to the City Council of Strasbourg requested that Martin Luther’s book *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi* (*Of the Ineffable Name and the Generation of Christ*), which included a German translation of *Toledot Yeschu*, be prohibited on account of the violence the Reformer’s anti-Jewish slurs had already caused in a number of German cities.<sup>25</sup> Josel insisted that the Jews had little if any knowledge of the blasphemous story

future publication, was also mentioned in a number of contemporary newspapers; see e.g. the “New York Letter” in *The Jewish Chronicle* (19 November 1897). On Comstock and his campaign for public morality, see now Werbel 2018.

- 20 Graetz 1853–1870, vol. 10, 302, Steinschneider 1850, 409; Karpeles 1909, vol. 1, 325; Neubauer 1888, 81–82; Schechter 1900, 415; Porges 1902, 173; 177. Richard Gottheil (1897), commenting on the Chinski case (see above, n. 19), noted that he had “seldom read a viler production” (i.e. *Toledot Yeschu*) and hoped that the punishment meted out to its publisher would be “severe enough to deter him from ever attempting to write again in a similar strain”. For a discussion, see also Horbury, forthcoming (a), with reference also to earlier examples.
- 21 Jellinek 1877, vol. 6, x; Karpeles 1902, vol. 2, 165: “Die vielfach entstellenden Sagen, die die Grundlage dieser kleinen Schrift bilden, sind aber doch immer sehr harmlos den scharfen Angriffen gegenüber, die das Judentum schon in den Tagen der Kirchenväter erfahren hatte.”
- 22 Mendelssohn 1974, 362, and cf. Wagenseil 1681, “Confutatio Libri Toldos Jeschu,” 1 [25].
- 23 Modena 1960, 43 (III, 9). See Fishman 2003; Facchini, forthcoming.
- 24 See now Faierstein 2016, here at 48–49 (I, 7).
- 25 Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 398–417. See above, n. 10.



Luther referred to, which he himself knew only because a Christian friend, the Hebraist Wolfgang Capito, had shown him a manuscript of the work, which he had received along with other Hebrew books from Constantinople. Citing Capito's opinion that similar things were found in no other Jewish book, he argued that the work had likely been written "in ancient times" by some unknown author and hardly reflected the opinion of "the community as a whole".<sup>26</sup>

Despite these claims, there is ample evidence that *Toledot Yeshu* did circulate among Jews, and that the latter did not regard it a peripheral tradition. As a matter of fact, early modern Jewish scribes were no less eager than Christian Hebraists to copy the work when they got hold of it – even if their purpose was obviously different. In certain cases, they could even turn to the printed editions. All the extant manuscripts of the Huldreich version, for instance, depend on the printed text, witnessing to the Jews' interest in reclaiming the narrative in contexts where original Hebrew manuscripts were perhaps difficult to find.<sup>27</sup> In the Netherlands, it seems the Huldreich and the Wagenseil *Toledot* texts were combined and translated into Yiddish along with whatever material was available in manuscript in order to produce a more coherent version of the story.<sup>28</sup> It was likely also from the Netherlands that the so-called Slavic or *Tam u-Muad* versions, which expanded on the earlier tradition and turned the story of Mary's adultery into full-fledged novel, started to spread.<sup>29</sup>

Both the Netherlands and the Italian peninsula witness to an intense revival of polemical activity in the 17th and 18th centuries – presumably under the influence of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had imported the longstanding Iberian tradition of engaging in fierce scriptural polemics with Christianity.<sup>30</sup> In

26 Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 411–413. That *Toledot Yeshu* was seen as apocryphal by the Jews themselves had been argued just a few years earlier by the Humanist scholar Johannes Reuchlin (1999, 29), referring to Paul of Burgos, *Scrutinium scripturarum* II, 6 (Burgos 1591, 384).

27 Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 25, vol. 2, 238–240; see Yoffie 2011. See especially Ms. Frankfurt-am-Main, Universitätsbibliothek, Heb 249 (dated 1812), f. 2r: "I already lost hope to find a (single) word written by our people concerning the story of Yeshu ha-Notsri, since all the nation is wandering in darkness, and there is no one who knows a thing about it, little or big, and who can testify against the Christians and against their numerous books full of all the virtues and greatness of Yeshu. But when my friend Greenberg returned from Leipzig, he showed me a copy from a booklet that he had found in the local library; the name of the book is 'The Generation of Yeshu ha-Notsri' I was very happy to find some (evidence), and I asked him to make a copy for me too. Thus, here is the book, published in the year 1705, and kept in the National Library of Leipzig under the number G336" (quoted in Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 240).

28 See Michels 2017 and forthcoming. This seems to have been the case for Leib ben Oser, whose Yiddish text of *Toledot Yeshu* is followed by a biography of Sabbatai Zvi and Yosef della Reina, as if to underline the link between the three pseudo-messianic figures. For an edition and translation of that text, see Rosenzweig, forthcoming. For the legend of Yosef della Reina as preserved in this manuscript, see now Baumgarten 2018.

29 Schlichting 1982.

30 For the Netherlands, see Popkin 1992, 1994. For Italy, see Lasker 1993; Horbury 1993. On Jewish anti-Christian polemics in early modern Italy, see the research project directed by Prof. Károly Dániel Dobos at the University of Budapest, <http://www.jcrpolemicsinitaly.at>.

Italy, the work was abridged and copied alongside medieval anti-Christian polemics or appended to new polemical writings such as Judah Briel's *Hassagot al sippure ha-sheluchim* (*Criticisms of the Writings of the Apostles*), apparently in order to illuminate the historical context of the Christian Gospels.<sup>31</sup> In the German lands, *Toledot* manuscripts were perhaps more scarce, although recurring references to the narrative in the writings of Christians converts from Judaism suggest that it was widely known.<sup>32</sup> An autograph manuscript preserved at the Bodleian Library, in Oxford, does show that despite his official rebuttals, Josel of Rosheim himself copied extracts of *Toledot Yeshu* – maybe from the Constantinople manuscript Capito had shown him – for the sake of transmitting this ancient “oral tradition” to future generations.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the tradition also moved eastwards, following the movement of Jewish populations in the early modern era, as suggested by the significant number of manuscripts copied in eastern Europe, or even in the Caucasus, in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>34</sup> The best manuscript exemplar of the standard medieval version of the work, the so-called Strasbourg text of *Toledot Yeshu*, first published by Samuel Krauss in 1902, was copied in Eastern Galicia in the 17th or 18th century by a Karaite scribe, confirming that the narrative was a matter of interest for both Rabbanites and Karaite Jews.<sup>35</sup> It was via eastern Europe that the work eventually also reached the United States.<sup>36</sup>

- 31 See the discussion in Horbury 1970: 153–169; Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 192–195. A third of the extant Hebrew manuscripts were produced in Italy; see Barbu, forthcoming.
- 32 Cf. Deutsch 1997; Carlebach 2006. Christian converts from Judaism describing the customs of their former coreligionists regularly claimed that the Jews recited *Toledot Yeshu* on the eve of Christmas as a way to instill a fear of Jesus among Jewish children. See the sources quoted in Shapiro 1999; and for an analysis, see also Scharbach 2013. The accusation first appears in Ebendorfer's prologue to his Latin translation of *Toledot Yeshu*; see Callsen/Knapp/Nieser/Pryzbilski 2003, 36–37.
- 33 Ms. Oxford, Bodleian, Opp. 712, f. 157a, with the following preamble, quoted in Fraenkel-Goldschmidt 2006, 412 and Carlebach 2006, 456: “This is the book of the judgment of Yeshu ben Pandira. Although it cannot be found in German lands, I copied it as a novelty, and who can blame me for this. It concerns what happened in ancient times and great things that our predecessors received by oral tradition. It is not fitting for me to write things that were not written or did not happen: I have not refrained from writing the truth in order that it should last for many days.”
- 34 For a list of manuscripts, see Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 2, 1–48. A number of additional witnesses should, however, be added to that list. I thank Michael Krupp for sharing with me a list of the manuscripts in his possession.
- 35 Krauss 1902, 38–50. See now Meerson/Schäfer 2014, vol. 1, 167–184 (English) and vol. 2, 79–95 (Hebrew). On this manuscript, see Horbury 2011; Stöckl Ben Ezra, forthcoming. On the circulation of the Strasbourg version in the Middle Ages, see Barbu/Dahhaoui 2018. That polemical material circulated between the Karaite and Rabbanite communities in that context is further illustrated by Isaac of Troki's *Hizzuk Emunah*; see Miriam Benfatto's contribution in the present volume.
- 36 Cf. the case mentioned above, n. 19 and Schlichting 1982, 17–19. In addition to the two Brooklyn prints in Hebrew mentioned by Schlichting, I have found a copy of the Yiddish text published by Meyer Chinsky (1897?) under the title *Yeshu ha-Notzri, oder Yosef Pandre* in the library of the Centre for Jewish History, New York (YIVO Library, Main Stack Collection 000004708 a).



## A POLEMICAL NARRATIVE AND ITS FUNCTIONS

It seems *Toledot Yeshu* did have an important role among early modern Jews. I have explored elsewhere the normative dimension of the narrative.<sup>37</sup> Even if outrageous to some, it was identified by others as an ancestral tradition shedding a different but doubtless more trustworthy light on the historical events that led to the birth of Christianity. The careful datings provided at the beginning of a number of versions, contesting those found in the Gospels, certainly witness to the historical preoccupations of the scribes who copied them. As noted by David Biale, counter-history is also a way to reclaim history, to argue that we possess the true narrative.<sup>38</sup> Even if they upturn the official story, counter-histories are no less true than the narratives they subvert; and the question is not so much whether the story is true but rather to whom it is true. And also: when, where and why? Truth is a matter of perspective, if not a matter of power. Counter-histories reflect the struggle between competing social groups, entangled in asymmetrical relations of power and thus possessing unequal authority to speak the truth and decide what counts as true and what does not. The wide dissemination of *Toledot Yeshu* and the constant process of embellishment, adaptation and interpretation that accompanied the reception and transmission of the narrative in the early modern period bear witness to the Jews' enduring need to have an answer to the Christian narrative of history – and to the place and role ascribed to Jews in that narrative – and to reinstate what they perceived as historical truth.

Ultimately, in relating how Christianity came into being, the narrative is saying something about what Jews are and what Christians are and what their respective places should be. Such a reading of history, providing a subversive account of Jesus' conception, miracles and resurrection, could only be viewed as polemical by its Christian readers. Yet this is only one side of the story, for *Toledot Yeshu* is as much a narrative about Jesus and the origins of Christianity as it is a story about adultery, magic, heresy, norm and anomaly. Beyond its polemical aspects, the story is also, if not primarily, a story that speaks to Jews as much as it answers Christians. And while *Toledot Yeshu* contributed to shaping Jewish perceptions of Christianity and allowed Jews to make sense of Christianity's founding narrative, it also provided Jews with a way to vent the pressure exerted by the dominant religion – inter alia through mockery and laughter.

It must be noted that however polemical, the story was also meant to entertain.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while in certain contexts the work was copied together with what

37 Barbu 2018b; see also Latteri 2015.

38 Biale 1999, 134–135.

39 So Cuffel 2015.

can properly be called anti-Christian polemics (such as, for instance, Profiat Duran's *Kelimat ha-Goyim* or the medieval *Nizzahon Yashan*), it could also be included in collections of tales (*ma'asyiot*) or alongside other popular and witty narratives such as *Alphabet of Ben Sira* or *Massekhet Purim*.<sup>40</sup> In the Netherlands, where Jews enjoyed somewhat more freedom to express their religious sentiments, Yiddish interpretations of *Toledot Yeshe* were perhaps even performed within the community. Evi Michels recently pointed to an 18th-century Yiddish manuscript dividing the narrative into a series of "acts" (*bedrijf*), while another is adorned with a frontispiece showing a stage curtain.<sup>41</sup> Sarit Kattan Gribetz similarly wonders whether the story was not indeed read aloud or performed on specific occasions such as Easter or Christmas, as anti-Jewish authors often claimed, to vent communal anxieties and celebrate the demise of the evil Jesus<sup>42</sup> – and perhaps also for the amusement (and edification) of Jewish children.

*Toledot Yeshe* is as playful as it is polemical. There is much to say about the role of humour and irony in the hidden transcript, and while humour is notoriously difficult to trace historically, many episodes in the extant *Toledot* tradition unequivocally function as gags.<sup>43</sup> Such is the case with the story of Jesus' conception, which narrates how Mary's neighbour Pandera was able to pass as her husband (or fiancé) and lie with her (in effect, rape her).<sup>44</sup> When Mary's husband returns and in his turn seeks to embrace his wife, she rebukes him, claiming they already had sex and leaving the husband perplexed. The scene and its witty dialogue are obviously closer to Boccaccio or the medieval fabliaux, full of wanton erotic jokes, than to solemn religious disputations, and as such were presumably meant to prompt the audience to laugh.<sup>45</sup>

## HUMOUR IN THE HULDREICH VERSION

The late medieval Huldreich version, which in many respects departs from the standard tradition, is punctuated by such humorous snippets.<sup>46</sup> Here Mary is described as an exceptionally beautiful woman who is locked up by her husband "lest the villains whore with her". Passing under her window, Pandera rescues her with a ladder and they run away to live in adultery. When he discovers his spurious origins, their son, Jesus, kills his father and tortures his mother before

40 See Yassif 2011; Horbury 2013. Note however that the evidence mainly comes from Oriental manuscripts.

41 Michels 2017 and forthcoming.

42 Kattan Gribetz 2011, 176–179, and see above, n. 32 for further references.

43 See the studies gathered in Classen 2010. In particular, see Sewell 2010.

44 Literary parallels are explored in Di Segni 1985; see further Barbu 2018 (b), 94, n80.

45 See however Sewell 2010 on humour in *Nizzahon Yashan*.

46 On the Huldreich text, see Yoffie 2011.

escaping to Galilee. There he starts gathering disciples, baptizing them with the mysterious “waters of Bolet”, which prevent their hair from growing, so that they can be recognized as “Jesus’ men” – an evident pun on the clerical tonsure. In the course of their adventures, Jesus and his closest disciples get lost in the desert. Starving and exhausted, they have to beg for water and bread. The people they come across mock the pretended wonder-maker who cannot “do a miracle to save [him]self and to find water”. A man asks Jesus to dance in exchange for some bread as well as his donkey – and Jesus complies. At every stage of his career, Jesus thus appears as a pitiable loser, eliciting more ridicule and scorn than admiration.

Consider the following episode, where Jesus, Peter and Judas eventually find a hostel in the middle of the desert and ask the hostess for food:

The landlady said, “I do not have anything but a roast goose.” Jesus took the goose, put it before them, and said, “This goose is not enough for three people. Let us go to sleep and the one who will dream a good dream shall eat the goose.” They lay, and at midnight Judas rose up and ate the goose. They rose up in the morning and Peter said, “I dreamed that I sat near the throne of the son of God Almighty.” And Jesus said, “I am the son of God Almighty, and I dreamed that you were sitting with me, and look, in my dream, I am better than (you in) yours, so the goose is mine to eat.” And Judas said, “I, in my dream, ate the goose.” Jesus looked for the goose and did not find it because Judas had eaten it.<sup>47</sup>

It is difficult not to read this episode as a joke. Yet it aroused the ire of the pious editor of the text (i.e. Huldreich), who in all seriousness commented: “This fable is utterly inept and worthy of its [anonymous] author”, who thus turned the New Testament account of the feeding of the many into a “tasteless story in which it is figured that Jesus was not even able to quench the hunger of three men with a whole goose”.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION: REPLACING TOLEDOT YESHU IN ITS CONTEXTS

For all its mockery and wit, *Toledot Yeshu* does offer a serious attack on the Christian myth, and on the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Mockery is indeed a powerful form of polemic. The conception narrative thus rebuffs the claim that Jesus was the son of God born from an unsullied virgin. The description of his would-be miracles as mere magical tricks denies his alleged divine

47 Meerson/Schäfer, *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. 1, 312 (English) and vol. 2, 245–246 (Hebrew), and see the references in vol. 1: 38, 36n: the episode is inspired by the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*. Huldreich translates the “goose” (here written אַוּז) by *anserculus*, “gosling,” which would indeed make more sense in the context.

48 Huldreich 1705, 53–54, 1n.

powers, while the account of his death, burial and post-mortem treatment strongly contradicts the belief in Jesus' resurrection and the very meaning of the crucifixion. *Toledot Yeshu* does not only make fun of Jesus; it also offers a calculated response to Christian dogma. Despite both Jewish and Christian commentators calling it nonsensical twaddle, it seems that the narrative did allow Jews to articulate their identity through a powerful and effective anti-Christian discourse. Inquisitorial records from either the Italian peninsula or the Spanish provinces give us a glimpse of how much that discourse remained in force also in crypto-Jewish circles, and how the Jewish story of Jesus, along with other remnants of Jewish identity, continued to be shared among converso families even decades after their conversion.<sup>49</sup>

The early modern contexts in which ancient or medieval traditions were copied and transmitted are not often given much consideration. Yet the early modern manuscripts in which they have come down to us are not merely witnesses to the textual history of a work; they are cultural artefacts that need to be replaced and understood within the context or contexts in which they were produced and consumed. The history of *Toledot Yeshu* can tell us much about these contexts, and, conversely, the historical contexts in which the narrative circulated can tell us much about its functions and uses and about its effects. *Toledot Yeshu* raises stimulating questions about the ways in which Jews, as a minority group in Western Christendom, perceived their cultural environment and actively challenged the foundational narrative of Christianity. *Toledot Yeshu* is quite different from the more sophisticated Jewish polemics circulating in late medieval and early modern Europe, such as Isaac Troki's *Hizzuk Emunah* (*Faith Strengthened*), which offered a detail and systematic critique of Christian sources and arguments.<sup>50</sup> Yet this narrative, with its direct and emotional cogency, and the role of this narrative in allowing Jews to preserve and uphold their identity in the face of Christian hegemony should not be underestimated – as its early modern readers doubtless recognized.

49 See Barbu, forthcoming. In some cases the narrative seems to have been used to try and convince Jews who had converted to Christianity to return their earlier faith; see Barbu 2018b, 83 and the references cited there. On *Toledot Yeshu* among conversos, see also Gutwirth 1996; Ben-Shalom 1999.

50 Popkin 2007; Benfatto 2018. The classical treatment of Jewish anti-Christian polemics is offered by Lasker 1977. On their influence in the early Enlightenment, see also Popkin 1992; Tarantino 2007, 95 and following, as well as the bibliography cited there.

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# Between Erudition and Faith

## Jean-Jacques Chifflet's Tract on the Shroud of Besançon (1624)

### ABSTRACT

The shroud of Besançon, a large cloth considered a precious relic as an “imprint” left by Christ’s body on his burial linen, experienced a period of intense veneration and public debate from the early 16th century to the end of the 18th century. With the publication of *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi servatoris crisis historica* (Antwerp, 1624), a treatise that was as erudite as it was intellectually and conceptually biased, the Besançon author Jean-Jacques Chifflet significantly contributed to perceptions of his local shroud and its reception. A noteworthy selection of visual material that included the very first reproduction of the shroud of Besançon in a print medium was an important part of the book’s argument. This article offers a close reading of sections of Chifflet’s treatise, with particular attention given to the author’s targeted use of engravings as *illustrationes* (images meant, quite literally, to illuminate the text, its meaning and intention), and thus explores the representation of a local relic as a part and product of a cultural practice and of shared notions.

### KEYWORDS

Jean-Jacques Chifflet, Shroud of Besançon, Book Illustration, Catholic Relic, Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*

### BIOGRAPHY

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During the early modern age, a large linen cloth considered a precious relic was the object of a remarkable popular devotion in the city of Besançon, in the eastern region of Franche-Comté. The fabric, constituted of two panels sewn together lengthwise, is said to have measured 8 feet in length and almost 4 feet in width, thus about 2.5 meters by 1.2 meters. The frontal imprint of a man's naked body, with five wounds, one to each hand and foot and one on the chest, was visible on its front and back. It was believed not to have been made by human hands, but rather to be a trace, an "imprint" left by Christ's body. During its substantiated period of veneration, from the early 16th century until the end of the 18th century, this winding sheet was first preserved in a chapel within the cathedral of Saint-Etienne and, after the church was abandoned in the later 17th century and the building subsequently demolished, in the cathedral of Saint-Jean. Famous far and wide, it received particular devotion and was the focus of religious beliefs, practices, liturgies and public ostensions celebrated on a regular basis two times a year, at Easter and on Ascension Day.<sup>1</sup> For a time it was a serious competitor for the prestigious and already well-publicized shroud of the House of Savoy, which was displayed for some time in the historical capital of the Savoy region, Chambéry, and subsequently, from the late 16th century, in Piedmont, in the ducal court's newly instituted capital, Turin.<sup>2</sup> The winding sheet of Besançon was a reason for pride in the city and also a source of considerable income, an important element in the social and political identity of a region proud to be a Habsburg island in a sea of French territory.<sup>3</sup> During the French Revolution, the cloth was sent to Paris and examined by the National Convention. It was judged to be a fraud, painted by some artist as a prop probably used in the liturgical performance of Easter Passion plays and certainly not the sacred touch relic it had been claimed to be for almost three centuries. A stencil found in the church's premises was used as additional proof of the sly farce that counted many credulous people as its victims.<sup>4</sup> The historical sources suggest the cloth was deliberately destroyed: the National Convention, after a series of consultations in the spring of 1794, ruled that it should be taken out of circulation for good by being cut into strips for wound dressing.<sup>5</sup>

1 Cf. Spinelli-Flesch 2004; Vregille 2004.

2 The Besançon cloth may most likely have been a copy of the Turin shroud. Many sources confirm and in fact describe the making of such official "facsimiles", painted copies, commissioned by members of the Savoy ducal court. Upon their completion they would briefly be put in contact with the Turin Shroud and thus "loaded". Cf. Marcelli 2004, 56–57; Cozzo 2010, 60–61; Nicolotti 2015.

3 Cozzo 2010, 63.

4 Interestingly, a discussion about a stencil and the problem of life-size copies had already occurred in the early 17th century and supposedly had led to the stencil's destruction. Cf. Marcelli 2004, 61; Spinelli-Flesch 2004, 49.

5 Cf. Baciocchi/Julia 2009, 487–488; 537–546.

Thus runs a brief account of the rise and fall of one of the many Catholic relics venerated in Europe. With the physical object gone, or at least untraceable, the end of its fame and its eventual disappearance from collective memory might have been expected (as was certainly the intention of the National Convention). Instead, as a result of a noteworthy media presence, it has remained to this day one of the textile relics regularly mentioned within many-faceted sindonology discourses.

Since the middle of the 15th century, there had been particular interest in the cult of the shroud, in the veneration of an image-relic of the martyred body of Jesus. The shroud of Besançon was one of several textile objects that experienced, as a result, a period of intense veneration and public debate, in the course of which various texts and, maybe even more influential, many images of the winding sheet were produced and circulated: life-size and large paintings, embroideries and jewels, as well as small prints and protective medals for the many pilgrims.<sup>6</sup> A hagiography of this particular cloth was developed and carried forward, elaborating on its history and authenticity as well as on its relationship with other textile touch relics. With the publication of *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi servatoris crisis historica* (About a historical decision on the burial shrouds of Christ the Savior) in the early 17th century, the Besançon physician and scholar Jean-Jacques Chifflet (1588–1660) sought to bring about a decisive moment in perceptions of the local shroud and its reception, as the last part of the title of his Latin tract boldly suggested. In it he discussed the Besançon linen extensively, presenting the reading public with a thesis that, though not undisputed, would be referred to well into the 18th century.<sup>7</sup> Chifflet's was an erudite author's work, quoting contemporary influential scholars and publications as well as older sources, both religious and secular. The author gave singular importance and a role of its own to the winding sheet, arguing that while the Turin shroud had received the body of Christ at the moment of the deposition from the cross, the shroud in Besançon was the linen that had subsequently enveloped the corpse in the tomb. Chifflet was a scholar, but at the same time he was also a citizen of Besançon and a man with an overt loyalty to the Habsburgs.<sup>8</sup> He was also a Catholic with strong family links to the church, and more particularly to the Jesuits.<sup>9</sup> Quite obviously, his treatise was intellectually and conceptually

6 The earliest reproductions were painted copies by the Besançon artist Pierre d'Argent from the second half of the 16th century. The production of prints is known from the 17th century on. For an overview and a discussion on the iconography of the shroud of Besançon, see Gauthier 1883 and Marcelli 2004.

7 Cf. for instance Latendresse 2015 for an interesting discussion of two source documents arguing for and against the authenticity of the shroud of Besançon respectively.

8 The Chifflet were a lineage of civil servants and learned men from Besançon. They were loyal protégés of the Habsburgs and the court in Brussels. At the time the region was under Spanish dominion and as a result of old dynastic relationships was ruled from Brussels. Cf. Vregille 2007.

9 One of Jean-Jacques Chifflet's brothers, Pierre-François, was a Jesuit.

biased, but this notwithstanding, in its time it contributed significantly to broadening the reputation and establishing the cult of the Besançon shroud as an authentic sacred relic. As tendentious and problematic as one may judge Chifflet's disquisition to be, it was still highly learned, well-reasoned and followed a clear argumentative structure in its efforts at legitimization. In fact, Chifflet put up a whole system of references, aided by a noteworthy selection of visual material, in his tract. His argument thus seems a very interesting, and hitherto not much studied, case within early modern discourses about Jesus – this in both a historical and a religious context, as it addresses questions of the potential and limits of scholarship, of faith and of propaganda. The illustrations, in all their intended heterogeneity in terms of their sources and figurative style, merit careful examination, for the author selected some and commissioned others to corroborate his central points.

I therefore provide here a close reading of parts of Chifflet's treatise, with particular attention given to his targeted use of engravings as *illustrationes* (images meant to, quite literally, illuminate the text, its meaning and intention), thus looking at this representation of a local relic as a part and a product of a cultural practice and of shared notions.

## AN EARLY 17TH-CENTURY TREATISE ON THE FUNERARY LINEN OF CHRIST

The editio princeps of *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi servatoris crisis historica* was published in 1624 at the renowned Plantin press in Antwerp. The print run was 800 copies,<sup>10</sup> allowing for wide distribution and circulation of the tract. A few years earlier, Chifflet had presented the public with a book on the past and present of his hometown. Titled *Vesontio, civitas imperialis libera, sequanorum metropolis* (*Vesontio [Besançon], free imperial city, metropolis of the Sequani people*) and published in Leiden in 1618, it was the first monograph dedicated to Besançon and featured rich references to and illustrations of historical evidence such as archaeological finds and coins.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, *De linteis sepulchralibus* was conceived by the author as a follow-up to the previous volume, presenting the local winding sheet in such a way that the readers would consider it to be the most important treasure of Besançon. Keeping in mind the competition between the various relic cults of the time, we should note an intriguing correspondence to another pair of books: around four decades earlier the Savoy

10 The price of a volume was 30 stuivers. Cf. Waterschoot 2005, 346. A French version (*Hiérothonie de Jesus-Christ ou Discours des Saints Suares de nostre Seigneur*, Paris: Cramoisy, 1631) as well as a second Latin edition (Antwerp: Plantin, 1688) followed.

11 Vregille 2007, 113–134.

ducal court historian Emanuele Filiberto Pingone (1525–1582) had published *Augusta Taurinorum* (Turin, 1577), a book that, with the ancient Roman name as its title, was dedicated to the city of Turin, the court’s recently instituted new capital. Pingone’s employers had also commissioned a publication on its famous shroud. *Sindon evangelica* (*The Evangelical Shroud*), the title of the small book that appeared after some delay in 1581, was the very first printed publication on this cloth, which was said to be a central holy relic of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

It can be argued that for his endeavor Chifflet decided to adopt, and improve upon, the Savoy court’s media strategy; it had indeed proven very successful in publicizing the Turin shroud. Clearly, Jean-Jacques Chifflet was for his part very much a panegyrist of his hometown and of its Habsburg rulers. A practicing physician as well as an antiquarian and author, he came from a well-known and learned family in Besançon. His father, Jean, had been the main physician of the city and had a keen interest for history and antiquities. One uncle, Claude, was a historian and numismatist. Jean-Jacques, like his father before him, studied in Padua, an important center for culture and sciences, and was well traveled. A much-appreciated scholar, he published a great deal over the course of his life on history, heraldry, numismatics and archaeology, often in opulent, illustrated editions.<sup>13</sup> His publication on the shrouds of Jesus contained a total of 36 chapters and a good number of illustrations. Pingone had included only three small engravings of rather poor execution in his encomiastic writing on the Turin linen. Visually redundant, they all illustrated “coins” showing an angel holding up high the shroud on one side and a duke of Savoy on the other.<sup>14</sup> Chifflet, by contrast, in his plea for the Besançon winding sheet, used a noteworthy visual strategy, arraying a series of ten finely executed engravings, five of which I will look at more closely.<sup>15</sup>

At the core of the tract was the linen cloth, which as a devotional object was said to have performed a variety of roles in the past and present times of the

12 Cf. Nicolotti 2015.

13 Chifflet’s volume, *Anastasis Childerici I. Francorum regis, sive thesaurus sepulchralis Tornaci Nerviorum effossus et Commentario illustrates*, commissioned by his employer, the governor of the Spanish Netherlands Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, and published in 1655 also at Plantin’s press in Antwerp, continues to be viewed as a noteworthy scholarly archaeological enquiry.

14 In Pingone’s account, the shroud would have come to the West, and more specifically to Chambéry, only in 1453, after the fall of Constantinople, during the reign of Louis, duke of Savoy. Pingone reproduced the “coin” (“nummus”) Louis supposedly had minted to commemorate and celebrate the acquisition of the shroud. If such an object was produced – no exemplar has been found – it would have served as a commemorative medal and not as a means of payment. Pingone illustrated three pieces from different times, one commemorating the visit to the shroud in Turin by Carlo Borromeo in 1578. Cf. Nicolotti 2015, 163–168. Chifflet 1624, in one of the chapters dedicated to the Turin shroud in his tract, chapter 20, 120, mentions these “coins” and reproduces the first one, following Pingone: “Placuit hic unum omnium vetustissimum reddere ex Pgingonio.”

15 The other illustrations are briefly mentioned in footnotes 14, 27, 28 and 29 respectively.

city. The well-orchestrated argument touched on multiple aspects of the relic with the aim of legitimizing the existence of a second burial shroud of Christ, proving its authenticity and its devotional importance. Ancient Jewish funerary rites were thus at the treatise's center, and specifically those performed after the death of Jesus, in an effort to adduce unequivocal historical evidence that explained the size, appearance and exact function of the textile preserved in Besançon. Chifflet started out with a general discussion of the burial customs of antiquity. Certain aspects were of particular interest to him, especially the importance and rightness of laying bodies to rest in the ground, this being the oldest kind of burial and a pagan anticipation of the Christian faith in resurrection.<sup>16</sup> The following pages dealt with the rites of conservation of dead bodies, namely the types, shapes and materials of the fabrics involved and the way the rites had spread from the Egyptians to other peoples. A detailed and thorough explanation of all the single steps was necessary, as the author wrote, because the Gospels stated that Jesus had been buried following these rites. As there had been and still were frequent debates on the subject, mainly on the number and function of the textiles used, these points were to be defined once and for all so as to allow for a dispassionate analysis and decisive and necessary clarification of the matter.<sup>17</sup> Chifflet went on to deepen the discussion of Egyptian burial, giving rich details on how the corpse was covered with a byssus shroud adhering to the body and how it was subsequently wrapped with linen cut into strips, on the way the arms were crossed over the chest and on the special bandages and straps for the head. In the context of this description, the author introduced his first illustration: the image of an *antiquitas*, an Egyptian statuette integrated into the page layout, as he explicitly stated, offered further clarification to the readers (fig. 1).

It was a valuable piece of visual evidence, deliberately reproduced against a neutral background and carefully chosen, as Chifflet pointed out, as the only example known to the author bearing no hieroglyphic marks, allowing the on-lookers to concentrate solely on the wrapping method.<sup>18</sup>

16 Chifflet 1624, 4.

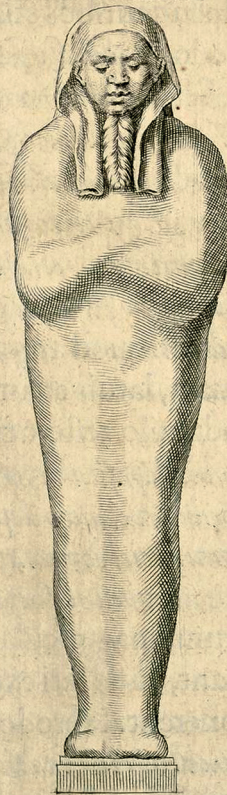
17 Chifflet 1624, 6: "Aegyptijs & Iudaeis, qui abluta & aromatis medicata cadavera linteis candidis involvere: quo ritu Christum Servatorem sepultum legimus in Evangelio, ubi dicitur: Acceperunt corpus Jesu, & ligaverunt illud linteis cum aromatibus, sicut mos est Iudaeis sepelire. Qui sane mos, licet prima fronte cuius clarus & perspicuus videatur; non pauci tamen Criticis occurrunt nodi circa eum, & in numero linteorum, & in ratione involucris; quos omnes solvere intendimus, ut linteorum Christi sepulchralium crisis expeditior sit."

18 Chifflet 1624, 13: "Unicum hic exhibemus, absque notis hieroglyphicis, ut involucris ratio melius percipiat." In his observations Chifflet repeatedly referred to Polish duke Nicolaus Christophorus Radzivilus' account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (*Hierosolymitana Peregrinatio*, Brunsbergae: Georgius Schönfels, 1601), and specifically to Radzivilus' description of such small statuettes found in Egyptian graves.



vti cenſeo, quonam condituræ ritu, cadauera ſingula fuiſſent medicata; an cum hieroglyphicis ſignis & notis, in modum ſepulti Oſiridis, cuius nomen *Ὀυερφώντιον* ob reuerentiam præterit Herodotus; an alijs duabus minoris ſumptus condituris; quòve pigmenti artificio, rubrone, ſubuiridi, an cæruleo: cuiuſmodi Gabbaras illos fictitios pleroſque vidimus, & domi habemus, in quadrangulam baſim deſinentes, cui tota effigies reſta inſiſtit. Vnicum hîc exhibemus, abſque notis hieroglyphicis, vt inuolucris ratio meliùs percipiatur.

Sindone primùm byſſinâ, ab imâ ceruice uſque ad pedes, corpus inuolutum eſt: & loris incifis circumligatum, quæ tamen ob gummi denſius illitum non apparent: cubiti decuſſatim ſe premunt ſub linteo, ita vt manus dextra in ſiniſtro pectoris latere, ſiniſtra in dextro videatur: ſupremo capiti ve-



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Fig. 1: Egyptian statuette, engraving in Jean-Jacques Chifflet, *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi Servatoris crisis historica* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1624), © Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim, <https://digi.bib.uni-mannheim.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:180-digad-3863>.

Having offered documentation on different categories of Egyptian burial, Chifflet had prepared the ground for contrasting these rather elaborate rites with the more ordinary ones most commonly used by the Jews in Palestine: chapter 4, *Ritus sepulturae Iudaicae duplex: mortui loti, uncti, involuti. Christi funerationi adhibita Sindon, Sudarium, linteamina, institae* (The twofold rite of Jewish burial: the dead washed, anointed, wrapped. The sindon used for the funerary rite of Christ, the sudarium, the linen cloths, the bandages), and the four chapters that followed represent a decisive part within the treatise. The Besançon author repeatedly referred to “Rabbi Jacob” as an important source. Surely, the highly influential medieval legal scholar Jacob Ben Asher is meant, who in *Yoreh De’ah*, the second section of his compilation of Jewish law, discussed mourning for the dead and burial rites.<sup>19</sup> Working his way through the detailed information on funerary procedure, with frequent comparisons and references to classical and biblical text passages, Chifflet recounted the individual steps: the closing of the eyes, the shaving of the hair (with the specification, quoting the ecclesiastical historian Cardinal Baronius,<sup>20</sup> that it was not performed in the case of Jesus because he was a convict), the washing, the anointing and the wrapping of the body. A careful distinction between the various fabrics used in the process was crucial for the erudite author, in particular in the case of the “sindon” and the “sudarium”, whereby the first term, according to Chifflet, referred to the linen cloths that, following the evangelist John, were folded in one part of the tomb, whereas the second described a cloth that had been on the face of Jesus and that was found put down in a different area of the tomb. Comparison with the vocabulary used in the Gospel of John to describe Jesus’ last miracle before his crucifixion, the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany four days after Lazarus’ burial, was important in Chifflet’s eyes, as was a discussion of some of the central terms on a linguistic level. *Sindon* and *sudarium*, the author remarked, were often used as synonyms, but the words had very different etymologies and meanings.<sup>21</sup> Chifflet was convinced that in matters of religion and faith it was essential to avoid mere references to miracles and one should instead draw on arguments and facts.<sup>22</sup> Well aware of the fame of the Turin shroud but also of the fierce criticism of relic cults brought forth by many, in particular the open challenges posed by Jean Calvin’s successful and widely known treatise

19 The reference given by Chifflet in the right margin of the page is to a work titled *Thurim Iora Degha*. This small distortion might be explained by his having mistaken the last part of one of the names the rabbi was known by, Ba’al ha-Turim, for part of the publication’s title.

20 Caesar Baronius, *Annales ecclesiastici a Christo nato ad annum 1198* (Romae: Typographia Torneriana, 1588–1607).

21 Chifflet 1624, chap. 5.

22 Chifflet 1624, 35.

on relics,<sup>23</sup> Chifflet time and again raised potentially problematic points in his argument for the local shroud and tried to resolve them in a convincing manner. Clarification was needed, for instance, of why the Besançon linen showed both face and body of Jesus and also why no traces were visible of bandages tying hands and feet. In Jewish burial, according to Chifflet's interpretation of his various sources and mainly of the Gospel of John, the so called "sudarium of the head" actually covered all of the anterior body and the head, and the sepulchral bandages were not tied just to the extremities but instead wrapped around the whole body up to the neck after it had been enveloped in the *sudarium*, thus leaving visible the head covered by the cloth.<sup>24</sup> To aid the readers' comprehension of the interpretation of the Gospel text he was proposing, Chifflet had an illustration of the dramatic scene of the raising of Lazarus included in the chapter. The engraving, of a painterly quality, was executed and signed by Cornelis Galle, a well-known illustrator and the son of the major Antwerp editor of prints, Philips Galle (fig. 2).

The figure of Lazarus, still tied in the bandages and with the underlying cloth covering his head, forms the intriguing center of the composition, standing near an opening in the ground that indicates the tomb he has just stepped out from. His two sisters, Mary and Magdalene, and many others surround him, all witnessing the miracle worked by the luminous figure of Jesus depicted on the right. A quotation from John (11:43–44) served as a caption for the image: "Jesus voce magna clamavit, Lazare veni foras, et statim prodijt, qui fuerat mortuus, ligatus pedes et manus institis, et facies eius sudario erat ligata." ("And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." KJV) Chifflet in this instance, too, explicitly commented on his purposeful inclusion of an illustration. In the sentence immediately preceding Galle's engraving, he declared himself convinced that the picture would, as a sensory perception, facilitate an understanding of the event.<sup>25</sup> That the body of Christ after the washing and anointing was wrapped in a linen fabric and then in bandages this very way would also explain the length of the Besançon shroud, which at 8 feet was only half the length of the Turin piece. Still following the description in

23 Chifflet specifically refers to Jean Calvin's *Traité des reliques* (Genève: Pierre de la Rovière, 1543) in chapter 7. On Calvin's tract cf. Fabre/Wilmart 2009.

24 Chifflet 1624, 35–36. Chifflet discussed the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection as described by John. At the same time he pointed to a specific use of language by erudite authors such as Hippocrates and Galen who used the words "hands" and "feet" as a *pars pro toto* for the upper and the lower body respectively.

25 Chifflet 1624, 39: "Sensum nostrum iuvabit haec pictura, Lazarum voce Christi suscitatum, et vinculis nondum solutum exprimens."



artus integri ligari potuerunt, nisi truncus quoque corporis ijsdem fascijs coërcitus est? Sensum nostrum iuuabit hæc pictura, Lazarum voce Christi suscitatum, & vinculis nondum solutum exprimens.



*IESVS voce magna clamauit, Lazare veni foras, et statim prodijt, qui fuerat mortuus; ligatus pedes et manus in tittis, & facies eius sudario erat ligata. Ioh. u.*

Ad illud igitur quod aduersus Vefontinum Sudarium affertur, nego institas in eo notari debuisse, aut

Fig. 2: The raising of Lazarus, engraving by Cornelis Galle in Chifflet, *De linteis sepulchralibus* (1624), © Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim, <https://digi.bib.uni-mannheim.de/urn:urn:nbn:de:bsz:180-digad-3863>.



posito, quâ caput velatum erat: & quia sudarium caput totum complectens à collo religabatur: Lazari facies *sudario erat ligata.* & pro illo Ioannis, *sudarium quod fuerat super caput eius,* reddit Testamentum Syriacum, *quod ligatum fuerat in capite eius,* siue, vt habent Biblia Regia, *quo comprehensum fuerat caput eius.* Sic igitur Christi corpus inuolu-



Corn. Galle fecit.

*Acceperunt corpus Iesu, & ligauerunt illud linteis cum aromatibus, sicut mos est Iudæis sepelire. Ioan. 19.*

tum

Fig. 3: The entombment of Jesus, engraving by Cornelis Galle in Chifflet, *De linteis sepulchralibus* (1624) © Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim, <https://digi.bib.uni-mannheim.de/urn/urn:nbn:de:bsz:180-digad-3863>.

John, some ten pages later the readers were presented with a second narrative image by Galle, this time showing Christ's entombment (fig. 3).

In the background the crosses of Golgotha are visible. The body of Jesus, which is being carried into the tomb by disciples, is at the center of the composition, head and body enveloped in a linen cloth and wrapped in bandages, rendered in complete conformity with the figure of Lazarus. The caption accompanying the image, again a quote from the Gospel of John (19:40), emphasized the function of this second visualization as further confirmation of Chifflet's argument: "Acceperunt corpus Jesu & ligaverunt illud linteis cum aromatibus, sicut mos est Iudaeis sepelire." ("Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury." KJV)

Not only the proximity of these illustrations within the volume but also their obvious stylistic closeness linked them to each other visually.<sup>26</sup> The two compositions were completely different from all the other illustrations in the book; they worked on an anecdotal, emotionally engaging level, almost suggesting that the readers could witness the biblical scenes.<sup>27</sup> While the paradigmatic type of illustration of *antiquitates* within the treatise – that is of actual objects against a neutral background such as the Egyptian figure in the very beginning of the book<sup>28</sup> – may be considered an example of the erudite man's strategy of persuasion through authority, the syntagmatic tableaux pictorially conveying emotionally highly charged moments within the biblical narrative demonstrate the author's intent to persuade through sensory suggestion.

Given the way Chifflet selected sources and built his argument, the chapters briefly discussed here used what might broadly be characterized as a philologically based approach. By contrast, the next part of the treatise concentrated at length on historical aspects of the supposed provenance of the shroud of

26 It seems noteworthy that the two engravings by Galle were reproduced four decades later, with a direct reference to Chifflet's tract, in *De Pileo*, a work by Théophile Raynaud (1583–1663). The French theologian, a Jesuit like Chifflet's brother Pierre-François Chifflet, was known as a learned man and author. Under the pseudonym Anselmus Solerius he published *De Pileo* (Amsterdam: Andreae Frisii, 1671), a fascinating volume on headgear in different times and cultures, which also discussed Chifflet's argument on the funerary shrouds of Christ.

27 In chapter 28, *De sepulchralibus Christi Domini fasciis distinctius*, Chifflet returned to this point and gave it additional emphasis, also visually, by illustrating and commenting on the copy, by Peter Paul Rubens, of an antique representation of an infant wrapped in bandages and on the example of two depictions found in Rome that, though not technically refined, clearly documented how the dead body was covered first with a shroud over the head and then with bandages wrapped around it. Cf. Chifflet 1624, 171–172.

28 Chifflet 1624, 46. The author made repeated use of illustrations of *antiquitates*, such as an ancient carnelian intaglio or, in the concluding part of the treatise, a byzantine coin that will be briefly discussed below, cf. *infra*, fig. 5.

Besançon from Palestine<sup>29</sup> and, further, on several miracles worked by the relic and perceived to be, in their own right, proofs of its importance and testimonies of an individually and collectively lived faith.<sup>30</sup> Various subsequent chapters were concerned with the shroud of Turin, its travels, history and the miracles it worked. There followed a few chapters on other famous textile relics. In the last part of *De linteis sepulchralibus*, Chifflet offered the readers a detailed comparison of the shrouds of Turin and Besançon. He wrote that with regard to the shroud in Turin his discussion was based only on books, images and archival material. His description of the Besançon cloth, however, was extremely precise not only because he saw it regularly, twice a year, during its public ostensions, but also because he had been allowed, in the spring of 1623, to examine the precious textile alone, for three hours, in Saint-Etienne. A painter accompanying him for this purpose had made an image of the shroud that measured one foot.<sup>31</sup> Chifflet here highlighted the importance of autopsy, of direct observation, a characteristic tenet of antiquarian erudition. On the ground of the expertise he had acquired, the author, systematically using the first person, offered his readers rich information about the material object that was at the center of his disquisition, always comparing it with the Turin shroud: the color and the exact measurements of the linen and of the figure, the symmetry of the body, the position of the arms and of the wounds, and the loin cloth – visible on the Turin cloth, which had enveloped the body of Jesus after the deposition from the cross, but absent from the Besançon linen, which had been used after the washing and anointing of the naked body. It is in this context, in chapter 32, that probably the most remarkable illustration of Chifflet's tract is presented, an engraving showing the Turin and the Besançon shrouds together (fig. 4).

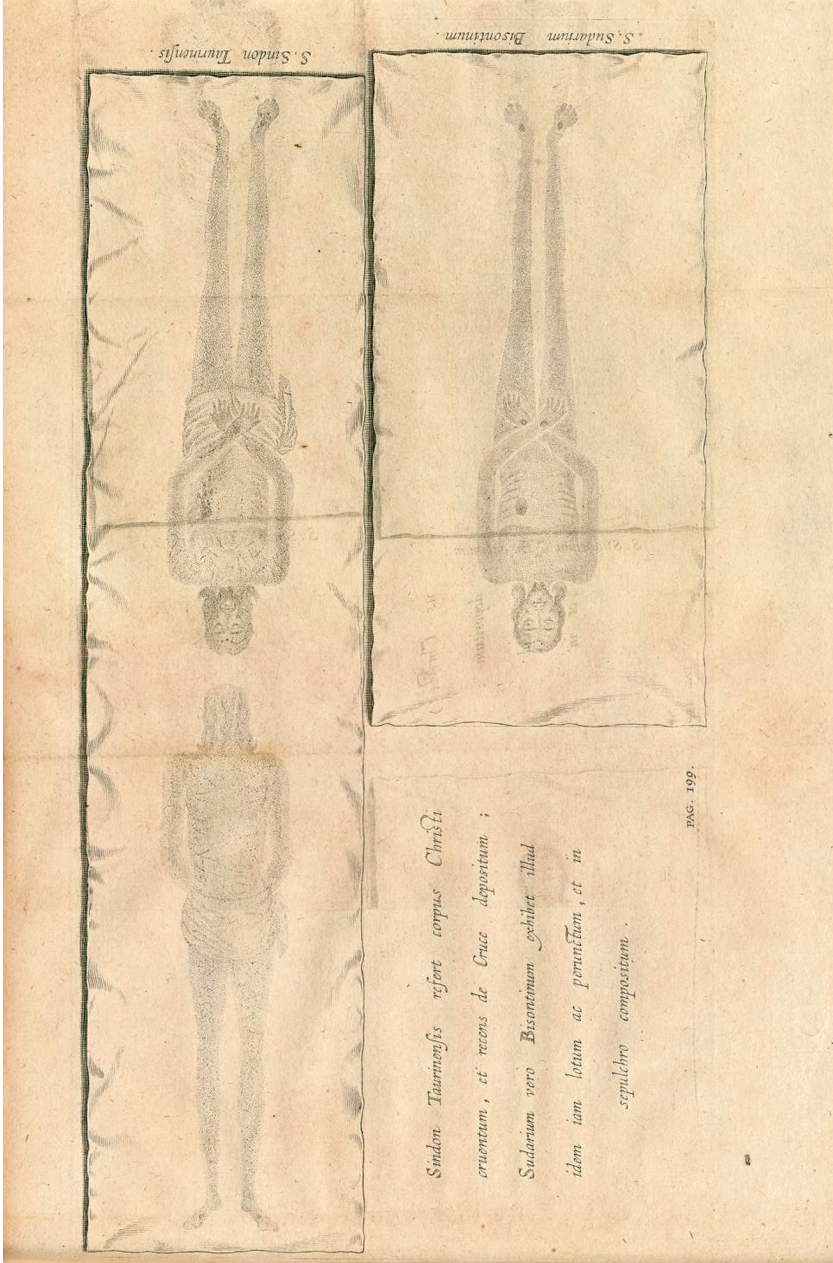
This was the first visual rendering of the linen of Besançon in a print medium. The engraving of the two cloths is the only one not integrated into the text. A folding plate of horizontal format, the size of a double page, it is significantly larger than any other illustration in the tract. The Turin shroud, front and back, takes up the upper part of the plate, the two sides of the body mirroring each

29 In this context, Chifflet referred to the cover, carved in ivory, of a very old copy of the Gospels in the local church of Saint-Jean and illustrated it (Chifflet 1624, 61–62). In chapter 6 the author had already raised the question of the historic provenance for his shroud, arguing that it might have been mentioned in early sources such as the Venerable Bede.

30 On the cult devoted to the shroud of Besançon cf. Spinelli-Flesch 2004.

31 Chifflet 1624, 185: “In Vesontina autem ut essem accuratissimus, effecit, qua frequens illus aspectus, bis in anno, cum publice explicari solet; qua spectatissimorum insignis Capituli Metropolitani Canonico-rum singularis humanitas, de quorum decreto, adorandum Sudarium, tertia lunij huius anni M. DC. XXIII. septima die quam populo exhibitum fuerat, a senis ex eorum coetu linteatis, in id muneris delectis, multa circum ardente face depositum est, ac mihi uni, arbitro dum taxat pictore, in minore Basilicae S. Stephani Sacratio propositum, tres ipsas horas, ut qualibet sacrae iconis mensuras caperem, eiusque depingi curarem expressissimam, quoad fieri posset, imaginem, pedali longitudine.”





*Sinden Taurinensis refert corpus Christi  
cruciatum, et recens de Cruce depositum ;  
Sudarium vero Bisontinum exhibet illud  
idem iam lotum ac perunctum, et in  
sepulchro compressum.*

PAG. 199.

Fig. 4: The shrouds of Turin and Besançon, engraving in Chifflet, *De linteis sepulchralibus* (1624), © Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim, <https://digi.bib.uni-mannheim.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:180-digad-3863>.



other. The Besançon shroud is placed below it on the right. Each piece is labeled, as “S. Sindon Taurinensis” and “S. Sudarium Bisontinum” respectively. Against the neutral background, a sinuous fine line with darker areas surrounds each representation, a trompe-l’oeil meant to simulate the materiality of the linen, the creases in the fabric and the shadows they cast. Both shrouds are positioned horizontally on the paper, in a pictorial correspondence to the actual presentation of the venerated textile objects. During the ostensions at Easter and on Ascension Day, the shrouds were shown to the public, the barely visible images on the linen marking the trace left by the body, which by its very absence calls attention to the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. The representations of the prone figures on the two shrouds appear, indeed, to be deliberately faint, clearly intended to convey the impression of a mere trace and seeking to avoid any association by an onlooker with paintings.

The plate, aptly positioned in the last part of the tract, is noteworthy in many respects. It was a new visual creation, evidently commissioned by Chifflet from a local craftsman, probably Jean de Loysi, who on the basis of this first engraving went on to produce, quite successfully, a rich iconographic variety of printed images of the Besançon shroud for pilgrims.<sup>32</sup> Typologically, Loysi’s representation was close to those of *antiquitates* in the treatise and, unlike the two narrative illustrations by Galle, had no particular aesthetic ambition. Its declared function was one of pure documentation. Still, the image was more than just a supposedly faithful reproduction. The concurrent presentation in a single plate of the smaller, until then less-publicized local relic with the famous shroud of Turin was conceptually bold, a targeted confrontation that was meant to reach a broader audience through the chosen medium of print, raise the status of the Besançon cloth and publicize it further. It was an invitation to the onlookers to verify the book’s contention: they were to establish the conclusiveness of the explanations offered by Chifflet for each and every congruence as well as for all the differences between the two shrouds. The simultaneous visualization of both objects in one *illustratio*, with the long caption on the lower left side carefully differentiating the “sindon” from the “sudarium” on a linguistic level and on a functional level,<sup>33</sup> synthesized the essence of Chifflet’s argument and thorough investigation, clarifying, quite literarily, the complementarity of the two textiles and their equal importance as holy touch relics of Christ.

The medium of engraving is one of mechanical reproduction; it reproduced a linen cloth, but what it really showed, as Chifflet had set out to prove, was not

32 The name was later spelled Loysi. On the attribution to Loysi and the local production of printed images cf. Marcelli 2004, 71–75.

33 The caption reads as follows: “Sindon Taurinensis refert Corpus Christi cruentum et recens de Cruce depositum; Sudarium vero Besontinum exhibit illud jam lotus ac perunctum, et in Sepulchro compositum.”

the reproduction of an original, but the reproduction of an original that had left a trace, an imprint of itself on the cloth. Christ was the original, the prototype present in each relic of his. While the Besançon author in the chapters leading up to the central plate with the two shrouds had concentrated on the description of the actual object preserved in his hometown, the overarching purpose of the treatise transcended the pure materiality and appearance of the linen textile. The cloth was said and had now been demonstrated to be a touch relic of Christ, a proof of his historical, physical presence on earth and at the same time of his divine nature and resurrection. It needed, to complete the argument advanced by the author, to be situated within a much broader context of faith and devotion, of the immense challenges posed by any attempt to represent the incommensurability of the dual nature of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. This was Chifflet's concern in the final section of his treatise and the very last illustration referred to the broader context of *acheiropoieton* images – images that were not made by the hand of man, but were instead traces of Jesus' presence on earth purposely left by him.<sup>34</sup> The object chosen by the erudite author to visualize this point was a coin. Chifflet had a great interest in numismatics and was aware of the quality and particularity of a medium that in its own right could be considered a very specific vehicle for the representation, interpretation, circulation and reception of iconographies, in this case related to Jesus.<sup>35</sup> In his opinion, various coins, among them one of Justinian II he had, as he noted, seen in person, testified to the historical presence of such an *acheiropoieton* image in Constantinople.<sup>36</sup> The small engraving in *De linteis sepulchralibus* showed a famous gold solidus of the Byzantine emperor, who during his first rule minted a series of gold and silver coins bearing on the obverse the image – believed to be the rendering of an *acheiropoieton* cloth – of a blessing Christ with long hair and a beard, shown from the chest up, with the Gospels in his left hand and his right hand raised in benediction, and on the reverse the emperor<sup>37</sup> (fig. 5).

Against the background of the theological debates of his time and particularly in light of the highly controversial nature of his topic, Chifflet, in the very last chapter of his treatise, had to take a stand and offer his readers an explicit

34 Cf. Finaldi 2000; Morello/Wolf 2000; Wolf/Dufour Bozzo/Calderoni Masetti 2004; Frommel/Wolf 2006.

35 *De linteis* was the first book with numismatic references published by the Plantin press. Cf. Watershoot 2005, 346.

36 Chifflet 1624, 212: “Nummi Tiberij & Iustiniani nomine cusi id videntur innuere, in quibus aversis effigies Christi usurpata primum conspicitur, a divina illa Imagine forsitan mutuata. [...] Iustiniani solidus, etiam ex auro, vidi alias hac forma.”

37 The numismatic imagery related to Jesus recalls the iconography of the Pantocrator. Still, it was contended time and again that it was derived from an Edessan-sindonic archetype. The Byzantine numismatic iconography has remained up to today a much-discussed topic in sindonologist debate. Cf. Nicolotti 2014, 173–182.

212 DE LINTEIS SEPVLCHR. CHRISTI  
 fti, vbi hæc leguntur: Διήγρησις αὐτῆς ἀρχιεπομέντης  
 εἰκόνος, τῆς Κυρίου ἡμεῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.  
*Narratio de non manu factâ imagine Domini &  
 Dei & Saluatoris nostri Iesu Christi.* Et verò  
 coniicere ausim, iam tunc in acie prælatam (an-  
 no Christi D.LXXXI.) cùm Tiberius Regem Per-  
 farum Chosdroëm, post obitum Iustini, Ro-  
 manum Imperium inuadentem, per strenuif-  
 simos Duces Iustinianum Iustini nepotem &  
 Mauritium variis præliis fudit; ipsamque Persi-  
 dem penitus deuastauit. Nummi Tiberij & Iu-  
 stiniani nomine cusi id videntur innuere, in qui-  
 bus auersis effigies Christi vsurpata primùm con-  
 spicitur, à diuinâ illâ Imagine forsitan mutuata:  
 aureum vnum sic describit Nummographus:

D. N. IVSTINIANVS ET TIBERIVS PP. A. *duas facies.*

D. N. IHS. CHRIST. REX REGNANTIVM. *imago Christi  
 cum cruce.* alterum Iustiniani solius, etiam ex  
 auro, vidialiàs hac formâ:

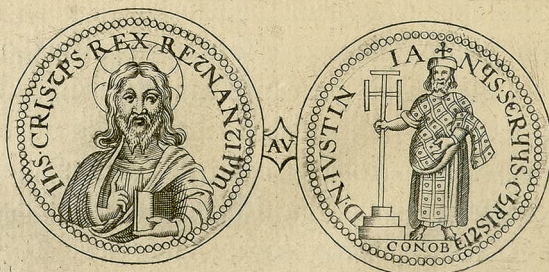


Fig. 5: Gold solidus of Justinian II, engraving in Chifflet, *De linteis sepulchralibus* (1624), ©  
 Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim, <https://digi.bib.uni-mannheim.de/urn/urn:nbn:de:bsz:180-digad-3863>.

answer to the question about the admissibility of the veneration of relics and, more broadly, of images. He did so by referring to the Council of Trent, to the twenty-fifth and last session and the decree on the veneration of images, in which the legitimacy of such forms of devotion was reaffirmed.<sup>38</sup> Relics such as the shroud of Besançon, Chifflet concluded, could be venerated by virtue of the prototype they represented; such a *latria* was legitimate because it was devoted, through the images, to Christ.

## ALMOST THE SAME IMAGE – CLOSING REMARKS

If images play an eminent role in a system of religious symbols and, more broadly, in a system of social communication and if they are carriers of meaning, conveying values and norms and at the same time forming them, and if they are, as Hans Belting has put it, the “nomads of media”,<sup>39</sup> then it is certainly worthwhile asking about the specificity of a given set of images and media and their qualities in a given social and historical context. Relic cults such as the one in Besançon were a phenomenon that was as religious as it was political, propagandistic and economic. To believers and worshippers, the veil of Veronica, the Mandylion of Edessa or the holy shroud were purposeful “self-reproductions”, mechanical traces, or rather imprints, of Christ’s face and body left by him on pieces of cloth for the benefit of humankind. They were valued and venerated as tangible records of Christ’s historical existence as well as signs of his continuing presence in the world.<sup>40</sup> In the context of possible proofs of the physical existence of Jesus in the early modern period, scholarly disquisitions about such touch relics played their own singular role, necessarily addressing theological and religious problems. Chifflet’s tract, edited by an internationally esteemed and well-connected publishing house, deserves consideration for both its production and its circulation as a contribution to and a facet of a particular narrative of religion – in this case by an erudite author who was also politically partisan and a practicing Catholic.

Narrative choices depend on circumstances and objectives, and images are an important means of conveying information, of eliciting emotion and of affecting viewers. As shown, in his selection of illustrations, Chifflet availed himself of different visual strategies. The large plate juxtaposing the two shrouds of Turin and Besançon was at the heart of the tract, intentionally prepared with its impact in mind, which was reinforced by both the written argu-

38 De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum, et de sacris imaginibus, 3 December 1563, 25th Session.

39 Belting 2005, 310: “Images resemble nomads in the sense that they take residence in one medium after another.”

40 Belting 1998.



ment and the selection and sequence of the images it contained. Since this article has focused on the illustrative practice deployed by Chifflet to position his local shroud within the broader debate on relics of Jesus, it is surely pertinent to look a bit further, in conclusion, at how material sources were treated in various media – that is at their pictorial translation into print and their contextualization – by pointing to one very particular reception of the Besançon author’s central visual argument.

Around one century after its first publication, the key illustration of *De lintheis sepulchralibus Christi* was used in an encyclopaedic enterprise of the early Enlightenment, the *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (*The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Several Nations of the Known World*), edited by Jean-Frédéric Bernard, a Huguenot man of letters, and published by him between 1723 and 1737 in Amsterdam in seven magnificently illustrated folio volumes.<sup>41</sup> The artist responsible for the iconographic program, Bernard Picart, was a French exile, well integrated into the Protestant community in Amsterdam. He was highly conscious of the function and formal possibilities of printed images as instruments of mediation and communication.<sup>42</sup> The *Cérémonies* was a rich compilation on the religious customs of the whole world that included more than 250 plates with illustrations. The work devoted much attention to the ceremonies of Roman Catholics. The selection of texts and images in that section, although essentially based on Catholic sources, clearly was meant as a targeted attack on the Roman Catholic Church. In the first volume of the *Cérémonies*, within the “Suite de la Dissertation sur les Ceremonies des Catholiques Romains” (“Continuation of the Dissertation upon the *Cérémonies* of the Roman Catholics”), a brief chapter on the shroud of Jesus followed right after one dedicated to the benediction of images and before one on the benediction of the papal vestments.<sup>43</sup> The text informed its readers of the existence of two famous shrouds in Europe that had been discussed extensively by Chifflet.<sup>44</sup> The engraving from *De lintheis sepulchralibus* was now integrated into a sequence of plates showing the pompous ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church on special occasions and a seemingly endless array of priestly ceremonies performed regularly, among them the benediction of crosses, altars, church bells and sacred images. The original composition had been modified in various ways, by cutting, turning and reassembling its elements. These made

41 Cf. von Wyss-Giacosa 2006; Hunt/Jacob/Mijnhardt 2010.

42 Cf. von Wyss-Giacosa forthcoming.

43 *Cérémonies* 1723, 113–115, “Le Saint Suaire”.

44 *Cérémonies* 1723, 113: “Il y a deux fameux Suaire en Europe, celui de Bezançon & celui de Turin, Chifflet a fait l’Histoire de l’un & de l’autre.”

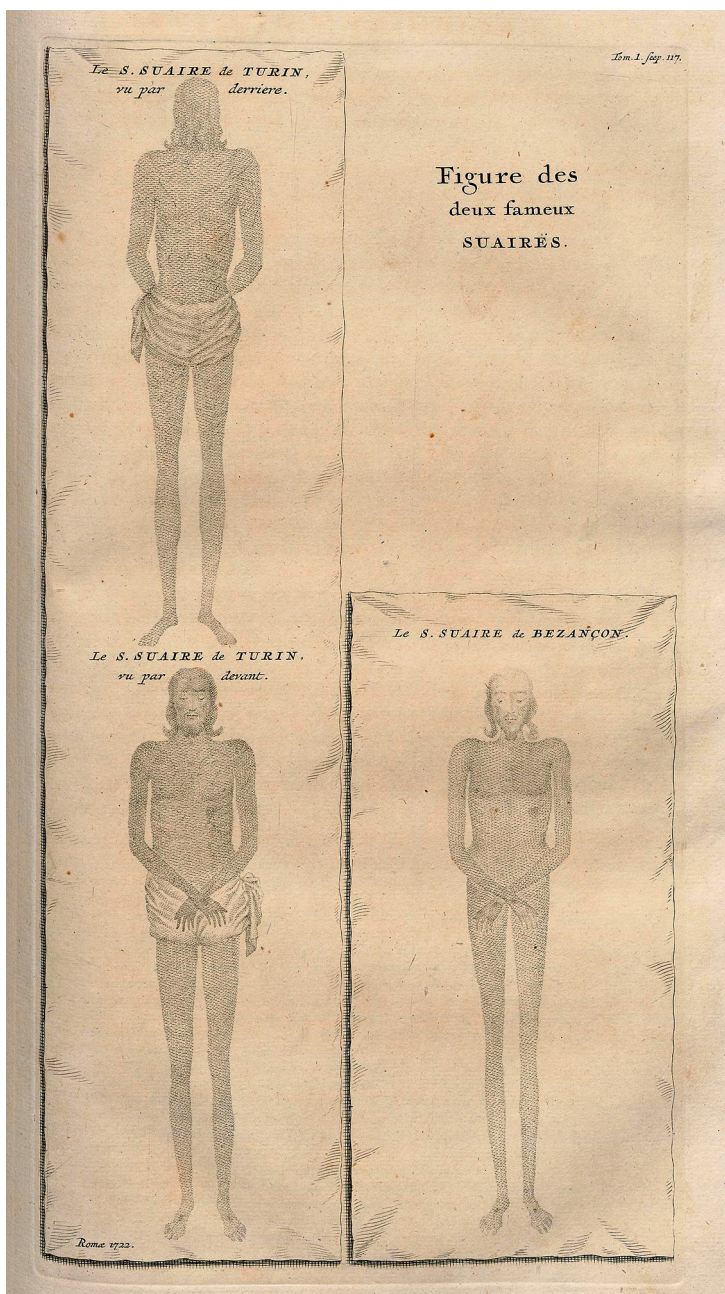


Fig. 6: The shrouds of Turin and Besançon, engraving in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, vol. 1, 1723 © private collection.

the illustration in the *Cérémonies* seem rather strange, if not outright absurd (fig. 6).

The two sides of the shroud of Turin no longer mirrored each other, as would be the case for imprints of one body on a cloth. Instead, the front and back representations were arranged on the left side, one below the other, both with the head up, the back view above, but still surrounded by a soft contour simulating the borders of the cloth, making them appear as a sort of awkward duplication. The Besançon linen was on the lower right. The whole page was oriented vertically. The three figures now seemed to be paintings on canvas rather than winding sheets, an effect increased by the individual labels for each one and the caption in the upper right quarter of the page.<sup>45</sup> Through targeted variations in its rendering, the pictorial message conceived and circulated by Chifflet was challenged polemically and, indeed, compellingly on its own terms. This new representation of the relics, close enough to the original to be recognized by the public as a visual quote and yet deftly distinct from it, made all the difference in the intended impact and effect of the illustration. It now seemed to serve as one more piece of evidence for the absurdities and manipulations concocted by priests all over the world and most particularly by the Roman Catholic Church. Such was, in fact, the goal of Bernard and Picart's editorial endeavor, as a plea against empty formulae. Their work was intended as a contribution to the ridiculing and thus unmasking of all paraphernalia and ceremonies. In the case of the shroud of Besançon, a strategy of provocative visual confrontation thus preceded the French Revolution's more drastic strategy of *abolitio memoriae*, with the former, which certainly had impact and is deserving of mention in its own right, seeking not to eliminate its object from sight but rather to make its target visible.

As this analysis of *De linteis sepulchralibus* and the reference to a small chapter in its later treatment has shown, making visible can mean different things, intend different things and, indeed, have entirely different results. Chifflet's treatise, in its genesis and changing reception, offers a many-layered testimonial of the central role of visibility in the dynamic process of a cultural practice of producing and sharing, of representing and circulating notions and meanings.

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45 Le S. SUAIRE de TURIN, vu par derrière; Le S. SUAIRE de TURIN, vu par devant; Le S. SUAIRE de BESANÇON. "Figure des deux fameux SUAIREs".

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# The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Early Cinema

## A Complicated Relationship

### ABSTRACT

When, at the beginning of the 20th century, the influential German theologian Albert Schweitzer published a historiographical account of the “historical Jesus”, a number of silent films devoted to the life and death of Christ had already appeared in Europe and the United States. This article analyses the rise of early silent films about Christ against the backdrop of the debate intensified by growing interest in the “historical Jesus”, presenting some of the similarities and divergences that representations of the life of Jesus produced in different media as mass culture became increasingly relevant.

### KEYWORDS

Historical Jesus, David Friedrich Strauss, Ernest Renan, Jewish Jesus, Passion Play, Silent Films

### BIOGRAPHY

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Historical approaches aimed at understanding the historical Jesus within his religious context and the subsequent development of Christianity can be found in different periods, starting with Christian historiographers themselves. This arti-

cle focuses, however, on the debate which was enhanced by changes in political systems during and after the long 19th century and on the parallel reorganization of higher education, which produced a critical reassessment of the production of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the historical investigation of the life of Jesus found great public resonance in the long 19th century. Numerous publications addressed the historical character of Jesus, often intersecting the political turmoil and the cultural changes that contributed to the creation of a modern society.

As a reflection upon the historiography of religion, this article aims to deepen our insight into the problematic relationship between the historiography of religion and modernity, focusing on two main lines of investigation. The first approach refers to the role played by the emerging new media in the configuration and perception of religion. The second line of inquiry aims to link the more traditional field of scholarship with public history, for, as I indicated elsewhere, religious scholarship can be successfully analysed against the backdrop of its impact on society. Elsewhere I have used the notions of “performance” and “public use of scholarship” to better comprehend the overall impact of discourses focused on the religious past.<sup>2</sup> This article develops this line of inquiry, concentrating on a scholarly issue that was, and still is, at the core of Western culture – the historical representation of Jesus.

From the beginning Christians lacked immediate access to the physical image of Jesus, with neither the canonical nor the apocryphal Gospels providing detailed descriptions of Jesus. Christian traditions therefore produced a number of iconographies of Christ, some of which became highly iconic, such as the one allegedly impressed on the Veil of Veronica.<sup>3</sup> While Christianity was overwhelmed with images of Jesus, which varied across time, the historical figure was difficult to frame within his immediate religious and cultural context. Two paradoxes lie at the heart of biographies of Jesus: his human existence set against his commemoration as a divine figure, and his being Jewish. His deeds and words, his life and death, his self-understanding and ultimately his resurrection had to be historically grounded for the faith of many Christians. Interfaith conflict (with Jews, Pagans and Islam) and intra-Christian strife challenged the truth of claims about the life of Jesus in late antiquity and reappeared in subsequent centuries. The theological strife generated by the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Christ has deeply characterized the history of Christianity. As Italian scholar Baldassarre Labanca noted at the beginning of the 20th century, the search for the human and divine aspects in the life of Jesus has appeared constantly across literary genres and narratives.<sup>4</sup>

1 Purvis 2016; Kippenberg 2002.

2 Facchini 2016, 2018b.

3 Taylor 2018.

4 Labanca 1903, 9.

The search for the human Jesus was a consequence of social, cultural and political conditions found above all within the cultural context of Western Christianity.<sup>5</sup> The human Jesus appeared to many scholars and theologians to be more historically accurate, with the relationship between the human Jesus and the historical Jesus remaining troubled by the biased character of the literary sources.

In this contribution I reflect upon the interaction of media and the production of historical representations of Jesus, keeping in mind that unlike the early modern period, the long 19th century was characterized by a public disclosure of themes previously deemed dangerous. As indicated by articles in this collection, discussion of the historicity of Jesus often carried a polemical overtone, particularly as set against the backdrop of the numerous religious confrontations that characterized the cultural world of the post-Reformation period. Historicity lived in the interstices, circulated through clandestine networks of readers and buyers of printed books and manuscripts, or lay hidden in details that only the trained eye could detect.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the long 19th century took pleasure in exposing the historical Jesus, even if the topic remained dangerous, a minefield that could destroy the careers of those who dared to approach it. In some instances, however, it could bring everlasting fame, depending on the political and social configuration of the moment, as we shall see.

The long 19th century saw the rise and institutionalization of history as a professional practice, a process closely tied to nation building. Alongside the increasing relevance of historiography, European higher education bolstered a scholarly project on the scientific study of religions. Interest in the “historical Jesus” and the study of Christianity as a discipline were thus both seen as relevant and gained a shared scholarly prestige. The professionalization of history and the study of religions has parallels in technological achievements in the field of visual media, such as photography and cinema. The interaction of these realms of modern culture has yet not been fully explored. Within representations of religion and of the historical past, the trajectories taken by the “historical Jesus” and by the “cinematic Jesus” intersected at a certain point, as a product of modernity and the incipient rise of mass culture.

## INTRODUCING THE “HISTORICAL JESUS”

At the beginning of the 20th century the influential Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer published a significant contribution to the historiography of the

5 Pesce 2011.

6 The literature on these themes is growing: see, for example, the articles in this issue by Barbu and Benfatto, and Pesce 2011. Sacred historiography was also effective, as the article by von Wyss-Giacosa shows.

historical Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Schweitzer claimed that the German Deist scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) was the founder of a scholarly tradition focused on investigation of the historical background of Jesus’ life as a means to disentangle the real message of his religious mission from the theological interpretation of later generations of Christians. “Before Reimarus”, Schweitzer claimed, “no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> Schweitzer’s historiographical assessment did much to establish a field of research that he thoroughly described in his text: starting with 18th-century Reimarus and navigating through the whole of the 19th century, Schweitzer analysed in details the debate that the research on the historical Jesus had kindled among scholars and in the wider public. Among the authors who had helped shape this field of research, he listed Reimarus and rationalists and then Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Ernest Renan, and a few other liberal authors who had examined the question of the eschatological Jesus proposed by Johannes Weiss in 1892<sup>9</sup>; he added a chapter on biblical scholars singled out for their knowledge of Jewish sources. While Schweitzer paid tribute to innumerable scholars, he dealt extensively with German writings, the context in which he believed the debate about the historical Jesus was carried out. Although his interpretation did not go unchallenged,<sup>10</sup> it proved influential and established a whole genre that tackled the phases of the “quests” devoted to the historical Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Although this article adopts a different method, I too will start with Reimarus, following Schweitzer, to briefly introduce the theme.

The *Fragments* on which Samuel Reimarus’ reputation rested were published posthumously by Gottfried Ephraim Lessing between 1774 and 1777, with no mention of their author.<sup>12</sup> Lessing selected seven fragments:

- (1) The toleration of the Deists;
- (2) The decrying of reason in the pulpit;
- (3) The impossibility of a Revelation, which all men should believe;
- (4) The passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea;
- (5) Showing that the books of the Old Testament were not written to reveal a religion;

7 The first German edition of this work was published in 1906 and then reprinted, augmented, in 1913. The first English translation appeared in 1910/11; I use here the reprint of 2005. There is also an English edition (2001) of the second German edition of 1913. Schweitzer 2005; on Reimarus see Mulsow 2011 and Groetsch 2015; Parente 1977.

8 Schweitzer 2005, 13.

9 Weiss 1892.

10 Similar historiographical essays appeared at the same time and subsequently as an attempt to challenge this interpretation. See Labanca 1903; Salvatorelli 1929.

11 For recent criticism of this approach see Bermejo Rubio 2009, 211–253.

12 Theissen/Merz 1998.

- (6) Concerning the story of the resurrection;
- (7) The aim of Jesus and his disciples.<sup>13</sup>

The last fragment engages most fully with Jesus' life and was initially attributed to Moses Mendelssohn, the great Jewish representative of the Enlightenment and a friend of Lessing.<sup>14</sup> "The aim of Jesus and his disciples" contains Reimarus' groundbreaking historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, where he challenged many classical theological interpretations: Jesus was a Jew and did not found a new religion; his teachings are to be separated from the teachings of his disciples; his notion of the "kingdom of heaven" has to be evaluated against Jewish theological traditions, for Jesus never explained what it meant. For Reimarus Jesus was a Jew who spoke to Jews under the yoke of the Roman Empire and his message was to be interpreted as political, suggesting that the Messiah be placed "within the limits of humanity".<sup>15</sup> Jesus did not break with Jewish law, did not cease to be a member of the chosen people; he probably did not establish baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) as new fundamental rituals. The narratives about the miracles are also deemed historically implausible – while Jesus was certainly a healer, he never performed public miracles. It was his disciples who had attempted to found a new religion, as they slowly tried to make sense of his inglorious and sudden death.<sup>16</sup>

Reimarus was a great ancient historian and a polymath, his writings distinguished by immense erudition and composed in a witty and agreeable style. His interpretation of the life of Jesus summarized in a cogent manner knowledge about Jesus and his disciples that was disseminated in a wide array of sources. His notion that Christianity was indebted to Deism was politically charged, as it took shape among a circle of enlightened philosophers who aimed to reform the church and to establish a more tolerant society.<sup>17</sup> His interpretation of the life of Jesus, with the idea that Jesus' main message was worldly, should be set against the backdrop of changes in perceptions of Jews and Judaism and increasing support for their civic integration. The *Fragments of an Anonymous Author of Wolfenbüttel* was a great piece of literature and historical scholarship but, as Schweitzer underlined, its authorship remained veiled until another great German scholar of the "historical Jesus" created a public resonance.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1878), a theologian influenced by Hegel, published *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*)

<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer 2005, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Benfatto 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Schweitzer 2005, 18.

<sup>16</sup> For a recent interpretation about the death of the leader see Destro/Pesce 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Groetsch 2015; Klein 2011, 153–182.

in 1835/36.<sup>18</sup> The book stirred enormous polemical reactions, which jeopardized Strauss' career as an academic, pushing him to become a freelance intellectual. His book about Jesus was reprinted four times between 1835/36 and 1864. Translations into foreign languages appeared very soon, and criticism stemmed from both the Catholic and the Protestant folds.<sup>19</sup> By the 1870s Strauss had ultimately left religion behind, becoming a true follower of science, especially in the guise of social Darwinism.<sup>20</sup> Schweitzer praised his style and clarity and claimed, "as a literary work, Strauss' first life of Jesus is one of the most perfect things in the whole range of learned literature. In over fourteen hundred pages he has not a superfluous phrase; his analysis descends to the minutest details, but he does not lose his way among them."<sup>21</sup> Much of the scandal about Strauss' life of Jesus has to be linked to his idea of myth as applied to the Gospels. Strauss claimed, indeed, that much of what was recounted in the Gospels is mythical, as none of the authors of the Gospels were eyewitnesses. The narrative patterns of the Gospels, according to Strauss, are often modelled after Old Testament narrative stories. The notion of myth as applied to the New Testament was outrageous enough to kindle severe criticism and harassment. Nevertheless, Strauss' work became a classic, and his deconstructive reading of the Bible was applied subsequently by other scholars. In Strauss' last work on religion, Jesus had become a "religious enthusiast" whose authentic message was unsuitable for a modern society.<sup>22</sup>

Strauss had fuelled immense debate in the many European countries where his works were translated and commented upon, and another book similarly destined soon appeared. In 1863 the French Orientalist and biblical scholar Ernest Renan (1823–1892) published the acclaimed *Vie de Jésus (Life of Jesus)*, which became one of the most popular books of its time, second only to the novels of Émile Zola.<sup>23</sup> Renan, who had been raised a Catholic, left behind his religion to become a committed secular historian, an icon for freethinkers and liberals who applauded him as a modern hero devoted to the pursuit of science. His *Life of Jesus* was the result of much preparation, which included both a long journey to the Holy Land and his cooperative enterprise with his publisher, Michel Lévy.<sup>24</sup> Renan's controversial masterpiece was created under two cultural influences, one of which spread from within, related to the vast production of

18 Strauss 1835/36; third edition with modification 1838/39; fourth edition 1840 (as the first and second). In 1864 Strauss published a book on Jesus modeled after Renan's *Vie de Jésus*: Strauss 1864.

19 Labanca 1903.

20 Moxnes 2012.

21 Schweitzer 2005, 65.

22 Moxnes 2012.

23 Renan 1863; Renan 1864.

24 Richard 2015; Priest 2015.

images of Christ during and after the French Revolution, and the other one from without, namely the influential German debate in which Strauss was a participant.<sup>25</sup> “This was the first life of Jesus for the Catholic world which had hardly been touched – the Latin people least of all – by the two and a half generations of critical study which had been devoted to the subject”, writes Schweitzer, adding that “Renan’s work marked an epoch, not for the Catholic world only, but for general literature”. He continued,

He offered his readers a Jesus who was alive, whom he, with his artistic imagination, had met under the blue heaven of Galilee, and whose lineaments his inspired pencil had seized. Men’s attention was arrested, and they thought to see *Jesus*, because Renan had the skill to make them see blue skies, seas of waving corns, distant mountains, gleaming lilies, in a landscape with the lake of Gennasereth for its centre, and to *hear* with him in the whispering of the reeds the eternal melody of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>26</sup>

And yet Schweitzer’s evaluation of Renan’s work is dismissive and negative, in line with many German critical reviews of the time. However, he caught some of Renan’s powerful style, which enabled the book to be read and criticized as a work of fiction.<sup>27</sup>

Renan’s Jesus was cherished by a public prepared by his previous work and provoked a national and international debate. Many translations appeared, especially in Italy, where Renan was destined to become a national hero.<sup>28</sup> Renan deployed in his research a combination of modern disciplines and made extensive use of fieldwork notes from his journey to Syria and Palestine, where he wrote the book. The impressions and sensations he gathered while visiting the places and locations where Jesus had lived, preached and died are very relevant also for the visual imagery used by artists and filmmakers. For Renan the topography of the Gospels proved to be a powerful source of imagination and emotional experience. He called the Holy Land the “fifth Gospel”.<sup>29</sup>

Focusing on Jesus’ humanity, Renan created a representation of Jesus and his environment that was historically plausible and functioned as an evocative icon. His powerful and yet controversial image of Jesus did not stir reactions exclusively among Roman Catholics and Protestants, for it also attracted the attention of Jewish scholars and intellectuals who felt challenged and were attracted by the theme of the human and Jewish Jesus. Jews possessed a long

25 Menozzi 1979; Bowmann 1987.

26 Schweitzer 2005, 139.

27 Priest 2015.

28 Labanca 1900; Labanca 1903.

29 Priest 2015, 75. See also Richard 2015. For a more critical appraisal of Renan’s notion of religion: Moxnes 2012; Facchini 2014 with references to Said 1978 and Olender 2009.



textual tradition of polemical literature on Jesus, but in the 19th century they developed a scholarly tradition under the name of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism) where many religious themes were discussed, in concert and conflict with Christian scholarship.<sup>30</sup> They often proposed a more nuanced representation of Jewish groups around the time of Jesus, offered insight into Hebraic sources and tried to make sense of what it meant for Judaism to possess such a strong Christian matrix.<sup>31</sup> Abraham Geiger wrote extensively on the Jewish Jesus, claiming that the historical research started with Jews, and Heinrich Graetz became involved in a polemical discussion with French authors, among whom was Renan. German Jews felt, maybe mistakenly, that Renan's depiction conveyed a racial depiction of Judaism and contributed to strengthening the opposition between Jesus and the Jews in a way that was not different from old anti-Jewish polemics.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of the 19th century, numerous publications on the life of Jesus were in circulation, some more scholarly than others, some more innovative than devotional. Members across religious groups were involved – Protestants of various confessions, Catholics, Jews and freethinkers all felt challenged to analyse or fictionalize the life of Jesus and the history of Christianity.<sup>33</sup> While it is not possible to offer a detailed discussion of how fictional literature treated these religious topics, that activity must be bore in mind, for scholarship and fiction were not autonomous spheres of intellectual activity. Indeed, themes, *topoi* and debates about fiction and poetry not infrequently have roots in scholarship. One contributing factor to this overlap in themes was the popularity of the historical novel in the 19th century, which played a major role in national myth-making. Historical novels brought to public attention controversial themes of the past, but they also treated the past as a serious realm. Fictionalized histories of early Christianity and its protagonists never disappeared, as recent literature proves.<sup>34</sup> Biblical themes were challenging, and many novelists fictionalized stories that were under the scrutiny of scholars.

## FILMING JESUS: REALISM VERSUS HISTORICITY?

It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the 19th century, when the first moving images appeared, the new medium ventured into the religious field,

30 On this subject see Schorsch 1994; Wiese 2004.

31 While Jesus opened up a discussion about the Jewish matrix of Christianity, the opposite is also true: at the beginning of the 20th century many Jewish scholars started to conceive New Testament literature as part of Jewish tradition. See Facchini 2018c.

32 Heschel 1998; Facchini 2018a; Facchini 2018b.

33 Gatrall 2014.

34 A recent example is provided by Carrère 2014.



filming biblical stories and the life of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> Ever since then, a steady flow of versions of the life of Jesus has continued, produced by filmmakers for the general public or for religious groups. Films on Jesus continue to stir polemical reactions and public debate as well as supporting missionary work and religious propaganda. Although the new medium was perceived as associated with the profane, especially in relation to producers and companies that were in the business, this new form of communication was deemed very relevant by individual churches.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1897 and 1927, the date of Cecil B. DeMille's great masterpiece *THE KING OF KINGS* (US 1927), a number of silent films devoted to Jesus' stories appeared in Italy, France, Germany, northern Europe and the United States. The first moving images were linked to passion plays, some of which were already famous in Europe. In 1897, *La Bonne Presse*, a French Catholic organization interested in countering the rise of secularism, commissioned the filming of a passion play, shot in Paris, that is known as *L'ÉCARTE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Albert Kirchner, FR 1897).<sup>37</sup> In the same year, the *HÖRITZ PASSION* (1897) was filmed in Bohemia. This filmed passion play involves the interaction of the documenting of a local performance and the presentation of moving images depicting biblical stories. Moreover, it offers a structure that links the New Testament with stories of the Old Testament as guided by the logic of typological hermeneutics. These examples of a first filming of passion plays can be considered a combination of performances: the passion play itself, the filming and production, the official performance in Philadelphia, with 'reading commentary'<sup>38</sup> and live music.<sup>39</sup> The producers were not responsible for the story, which is framed in medieval narrative form although it was much changed to feed and nurture religious tourism in the 19th century.

*THE MYSTERY OF THE PASSION OF OBERAMMERGAU* (Henry C. Vincent, US 1898), filmed on the roof of the Grand Central Palace Hotel in New York with professional actors, had a similar layering. Its creation was complicated, the result of a combination of texts and images vaguely associated with the passion play performed in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau since 1634, when it had been given as a ritual of thanksgiving after the community's deliverance from the plague. The play, which involved the whole community, was staged every

35 Baugh 1997; Malone 2012; Alovio 2010; Viganò 2005. For more general entries see Campbell/Pitts, 1981; Cartmell/Whelehan 2007.

36 Shepherd 2013; more problematic Baugh 1997. For a more accurate historical overview Fritz/Mäder/Pezzoli-Olgiaati/Scolari 2018.

37 Baugh 1997; Shepherd 2016, 3 for the sequence of images and secondary literature.

38 A 'reading commentary' of biblical silent films is a proper comment meant to guide the public and avoid theological misunderstanding.

39 Shepherd 2013.

10 years and became increasingly well-known in the 19th century. The location, at the intersection of a number of ancient routes, meant that the village and its passion were visited by many travellers, whose remarks, positive or negative, heightened the fame of the play. Among those who voiced their impressions of this passion play were French theologian and philosopher Maurice Blondel and a reformed rabbi from Philadelphia, each of whom conveyed his own sensibilities about the performance: Blondel acknowledged the emotional power of this type of performance and its historical plausibility, whereas the rabbi was outraged by the demonization of the Jews who, according to elements of the Gospel narrative, were responsible for the death of Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

Also in 1898, *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE JÉSUS-CHRIST* was shot in Paris. Composed of thirteen tableaux, it was commissioned by the Lumière brothers and directed by George Hatot. The following year Georges Méliès produced a short film on the life of Christ, *LE CHRIST MARCHANT SUR LES FLOTS* (*CHRIST WALKING ON THE WATER*, 1899), with special effects to describe Jesus' miracles, an approach that raised the issue of the representation of sacred or supernatural experiences. In 1900, Luigi Topi directed *LA PASSIONE DI GESÙ* (*THE PASSION OF JESUS*, IT) with Italian actors and released it close to Easter; Giulio Antamoro's 1916 *CHRISTUS* (IT) was one of the "first religious colossal" of the Italian film industry.<sup>41</sup>

Over the first decades of the 20th century the list of works depicting Jesus' life expanded, with notable innovations. Starting from 1902, a series of biblical tableaux was created by Ferdinand Zecca and produced by the Pathé brothers with the title *LA VIE ET LA PASSION DE JÉSUS-CHRIST* (*THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST*, FR 1902).<sup>42</sup> At the time it was one of the longest films on Jesus' life, constructed in 27 scenes (which were also circulated and commercialized separately), some of which were inspired by the Bible illustrations of Gustave Doré or the famous artist Mihály Munkácsy. The story is structured as a Gospel harmony, with a single merged narrative.

*LA VIE DU CHRIST* (*LIFE OF CHRIST*, FR 1906), directed by Alice Guy, was produced by Gaumont. Not only was Guy the first woman to direct a film on Jesus, but she also left a distinctive authorial mark. David Shepherd claims that Guy's Catholic identity was relevant for her sensibilities, which were aesthetically inspired by another Bible illustrator, Jean Jacques Tissot, and by Anne Catherine Emmerich, a mystic who was very influential in the 19th century and for Mel Gibson's much later *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (US 2004).<sup>43</sup> The new version of Zecca's *VIE ET*

40 Blondel 1911; Krauskopf 1901. More generally see Shapiro 2001 and Favret-Saada 2004; Cohen 2007. On more specific grounds, on the charge of deicide, Facchini 2011.

41 Pucci 2016.

42 Boillat-Robert 2016.

43 Shepherd 2016, 6–7; Facchini 2004.

PASSION, which followed in 1907 and was one of the most successful films in America in its time, introduced new themes. Stories from the Old Testament also proved attractive to the cinema industry, along with narratives focused on individual characters. In 1909 Pathé produced an entire film on Judas (LE BAISER DE JUDAS, Armand Bour, FR 1908) a character that became both an icon and an archetype, at times a subversive one, in many films of the sound era.

FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS (US 1912), directed by Sidney Olcott, can be considered a breakthrough in filmic representation of Jesus' life. The film was shot in Egypt and the Middle East, specifically in Galilee and Jerusalem, clearly to provide historical authenticity. The film is divided into 10 narrative sections, with titles and biblical quotations from all four Gospels.<sup>44</sup> As also in other cinematic depictions of Jesus, women are visible and their role noteworthy. One scene depicts the dramatic suicide of Judah (which would be very relevant for the development of Judah's image), but no scenes show Jesus and the Sanhedrin, thus avoiding a theme that was likely to fuel interfaith conflict. Although some critics appreciate Olcott's film for its coherent narrative, others have argued that it lacks technical sophistication and retains the qualities of a pageant.<sup>45</sup>

Within a few years many other technically innovative films appeared, with some focusing on peripheral characters (Judas or Salome) or drawing from famous theatre and literary products. Following D.W. Griffith's THE BIRTH OF A NATION (US 1915) and INTOLERANCE (US 1916) the genre adopted an increasing polemical subtext that carried anti-Semitic overtones. There is no space to delve deeper into this phase, but these few examples of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provide enough material for discussion of the forms of historical narrative related to the life of Jesus. Just as scholars of the historical Jesus were elaborating on the results of over a century of investigation, the cinematic Jesus was presented to the public. Here we can observe how the historicity of Jesus' biographies coincided with a media revolution. Adele Reinharz has aptly noted:

Our tendency to hold the Jesus movies up to the lens of history is not mere misapprehension on our part. Indeed, our expectations of historicity are actively encouraged by these films themselves. Through their choice of subject (someone who is known to have existed), and the use of costumes (the familiar bathrobe and sandals outfit of the biblical epics), setting (the Middle East), and language (biblical sounding English or ancient languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic), these films imply not only

44 (1) The Annunciation and the infancy of Jesus, (2) The flight into Egypt, (3) The period of youth, (4) The years of preparation: heralded by John the Baptist, (5) The calling of the disciples, (6) The beginning of miracles, (7) Scenes in the ministry, (8) Last days in the life of Jesus, (9) The Last Supper, (10) The crucifixion and death. Tatum 2016.

45 Tatum 2016.

that they are telling a story about people who really existed, but also that they are telling a “true” story. More than this, the Jesus movies explicitly assert their claim to historicity, often through the use of scroll texts, titles, and/or narration. The 1912 silent movie *FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS*, for example, announces itself as a “re-view of the savior’s life according to the Gospel-narrative.”<sup>46</sup>

Early silent films are very instructive when analysed in light of the debate over the “historical Jesus”, especially as problems evident in the early 20th century are often also found in much more recent films, from Pasolini’s *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, 1964) to Gibson’s controversial *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*. For many film directors and critics, a representation of the life of Jesus is trustworthy if it is based on a literal account of the Gospel, a requirement that Lloyd Baugh also expects a film on Jesus to fulfil.<sup>47</sup>

Their approaches to textual tradition provide a striking distinction between historical and biblical scholarship and the filmic imagination. Scholarship has deconstructed biblical narratives to date the information recorded in the Gospels and the New Testament. Historical interpretation of the life of Jesus thus required skilful reading of the biblical material. The Gospels were treated as literary documents of the past and analysed philologically, searched for inconsistencies and contradictions. Modern scholarship believed it essential that the textual material be read against the backdrop of other ancient sources. Scholars also criticized and challenged theological interpretation of Old Testament passages that sustained Christological claims.

Films, by contrast, either claimed the Gospel’s narrative to be the literal truth or, more often, provided a “harmony narrative” of the life of Jesus, re-written from the manger to the cross by assembling passages from the three Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. The harmony provides a montage of elements from the four Gospels that narrates a coherent story, a biographical narration with no contradictions, countering any doubts unearthed by scholars. Screenwriters and film producers did opt, however, for certain stories to be told and others dismissed, an indication of the sensitivity of their topic in the burgeoning mass culture of the time. We can highlight here two processes that have had longstanding impact on the public discourse about Jesus, with one related to censorship and control that reflected the influence of official churches and one related to debates that seem inevitable for a “modern” society, for example about the passion narrative. Strikingly, Jews have played a significant role in framing the filmic Jesus, as actors, entrepreneurs, critics and writers. Jewish

46 Reinharz 2007.

47 Baugh 1997.

agency became increasingly visible, although with varied agendas, as for the collaboration between Renan and his publishers or the filming of passion plays by Jews; or, on the contrary, when Jews would voiced sustained criticism to anti-Jewish stereotypes.

The treatment of miracles by scholarship and by film has been very different. Scholarship of the historical Jesus has frequently charged the miracle narratives with lacking historic foundations. Yet they feature in many films, drawing on the ability of this new medium to locate the supernatural within an authentic framing. Their historical plausibility is conveyed by a literal understanding of the Gospel that is bolstered by visual devices associated with the presentation of authentic places of the Gospel narratives. Olcott's film was one of first to be shot in Egypt and the Middle East, and while the imagery still relies on biblical visual tradition, it conveys a realism through the power of setting, in the very locations where the events had happened 2,000 years earlier. Renan, as we noted, had claimed that the Holy Land was the "fifth Gospel", a text as powerful as the Bible in providing information about the historical Jesus. This approach is carried through early films, with southern Italy playing a particular role in some Italian films. "Authenticity" is the key term here: the authentic places where Jesus lived, preached, died and was resurrected are proof of the historicity of the story. That authenticity had a strong orientalizing flavor, already evident in photography and art, especially in depictions of religious groups and the human body. That orientalization supported the perception of realism and was visible in the fairs and exhibitions of modern metropolises.<sup>48</sup>

The moving image brought attractive innovations to the retelling of the biblical narrative. The story may already have been well known, but the technology's ability to create wonder brought a greater amazement to the reception of the miracles. Some biblical characters could be drawn from the Gospel texts and performed by actors, above all Jesus himself; others were slowly constructed. Judas and Mary Magdalene, for example, could carry plausible alternative storylines and bring increased drama to the devotional template. Imbued with psychological features, these characters enabled emotions such as love, friendship, betrayal and despair to become more prominent in the narrative and flow together with images. Early silent films relied on commentary, explanatory texts and choral music, generating a multisensory experience in which the artificiality of acting and the mechanical montage of the narrative ran together with a devotional and religious message. The artifice of the new medium could generate an emotional response, including a strengthening or renewing of faith.

48 On this see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998.

Filmmakers were attracted by the historicity of the biblical narrative, but their films can be better understood as engendering myth-making processes (*mythopoiesis*), with research and discussions amongst historians missing or neglected. Scholars and filmmakers share an interest in evoking the humanity of Jesus, following the paths of two European traditions, one rooted in textual and philological practices and the other in the performative character of Christianity, expressed through art and sacred theatre. These two traditions do intersect, but they often misunderstand each other. The film industry is still to embrace some of the most relevant achievements of scholars.<sup>49</sup>

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# The Soundscape of Pier Paolo Pasolini's THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW (1964)

## ABSTRACT

IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO (THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW, IT/FR 1964), by the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, is one of the most interesting and widely acclaimed film representations of the life of Jesus. Its reception in the Catholic world has reflected the alternating fortunes of Pasolini himself, but over the years critics have come to fully appreciate its merits. While the director made faithful use of the dialogue in the Gospel, he constructed a new – but plausible – imagination, or “architecture of reality”, based on an intertextual code with intersecting pictorial, architectural, biblical and sound references. This essay aims in particular to employ a semiotic approach to analyse the musical motifs in the film and the way in which they convey precise meanings and values to the viewer about the figure and life of Jesus. Songs and musical compositions are leitmotifs that punctuate the narrative, interweaving with the visual component to form a full-blown language in its own right.

## KEYWORDS

Pier Paolo Pasolini; THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW; Musical Leitmotifs; Intertextuality; Audio-visual Syntax

## BIOGRAPHY

Nicola Martellozzo graduated from the University of Bologna with a degree in cultural anthropology and ethnology. The author of an essay on the phenomenology of religious conversion (2015), he has presented papers at various specialist conferences (Italian Society of Medical Anthropology 2018; Italian Society of Cultural Anthropology 2018; Italian Society of Applied Anthropology; Italian National Professional Association of Anthropologist 2018). He is currently working with the psychoanalytic association Officina Mentis and is a member of its advisory committee. For the association he has also organized a series of seminars on Ernesto de Martino. His main research interests in the field of religion are Vedic rituality, religious forms in the ancient world and post-colonial cultural syncretisms.

## PASOLINI'S CINEMATIC APPROACH TO CHRISTIANITY

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), writer and journalist, poet and film director, was one of the most influential Italian intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. Initially quite closely aligned with the Italian Communist Party, Pasolini explored the period of the Italian economic boom in great detail, describing it as a genuine “anthropological revolution of the Italians”,<sup>1</sup> the thematic core of his incomplete work.<sup>2</sup>

A year before shooting *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, IT/FR 1964), he contributed, together with three other directors, to the *RO.GO.PA.G.* film project (Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ugo Gregoretti, IT 1963) with the short *LA RICOTTA*. The scene depicting the crucifixion of the thief, considered to be irreverent, led to his being charged with public defamation of religion. Pasolini's film career was littered with acts of censorship and charges like this, which made his decision, just a year later, to embark on a new film about Jesus even more unexpected.

The Gospel text is just the point of departure for Pasolini's film, which also has its own context, in some ways no less complex than that of the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> During the 1960s Italy was deeply riven by opposing political and social forces. Despite the victory of the Allies and the end of the civil war with the fall of Mussolini, the post-war situation was very troubled. A long process of industrial and economic transformation began in this period, reaching a peak in the 1970s.

The newly established Italian Republic had to come to terms with the new global settlement, split between the influence of the United States (NATO pact of 1949) and that of the Soviet Union. Significantly, the Italian Communist Party was the largest of its kind in Europe outside the Warsaw Pact. In opposition from 1947, it prompted the strong stance against the left-wing parties taken by Alcide De Gasperi, prime minister from 1945 to 1953. The Italian Communist Party also had to compete with the Christian Democrat Party, which enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church and was the majority party for the whole of the First Republic, despite its decline in the 1980s.

As for the Catholic Church, in the 1960s Pope John XXIII announced the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, one of the most important moments for the modern church. The *Pro Civitate Christiana*, a Catholic association based in Assisi, became a linchpin of the renewal proposed by the council, attracting the participation of Catholic and non-Catholic intellectuals alike. One of its initia-

1 Pasolini 1975, 39.

2 Pasolini 1992.

3 For a succinct overview: France 2007; Honoré 1968; Runesson 2008.

tives was an annual film festival, to which Pier Paolo Pasolini was invited in 1962, exactly when the pope was visiting Assisi.

According to testimony gathered by Tommaso Subini,<sup>4</sup> in his room in Assisi Pasolini found and read Matthew's Gospel and was greatly struck by its aesthetic and expressive beauty.<sup>5</sup> This experience marked the beginning of a journey that resulted in *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* in 1964. The final product was, however, the outcome of a long creative process. Subini charts the relations between Pasolini and Pro Civitate Christiana, providing evidence of their affinities and divergences.<sup>6</sup> The original screenplay preserved in the Fondo Caruso in Florence bears witness to a long process of negotiation, especially regarding the expressive form of certain scenes and references to events in the news at the time. These underlying dynamics need to be kept in mind at all times, distinguishing the author (Pasolini the director) from the collective construction of the screenplay.<sup>7</sup>

This distinction proved difficult for critics, as was the reception of the work. Despite criticism from more conservative quarters in the Catholic world, the film won the *Grand Prix* of the Office Catholique International du Cinéma, and the most perceptive and favourable comments came from the *Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City's daily newspaper. Pasolini's film was deemed to have captured the "spirit" of Matthew's Gospel, despite sacrificing the historic dimension. The left-wing press, for example *L'Unità*, received the work with a certain mistrust, though it did highlight the revolutionary features of Pasolini's Jesus.

Over time Catholic intellectuals and critics have given greatest attention to the movie, even at times contradicting previous positions.<sup>8</sup> Professor Andrea Oppo, who teaches aesthetics at the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica of Sardinia, has described it as "an almost philological work of *restitutio* of the gospel text, a *perfect translatability* of Matthew's Gospel into images",<sup>9</sup> a judgement in line with the last reviews of the *Osservatore Romano*.

This reception should not come as any surprise as *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* is a complex work, especially in terms of its internal architecture and directorial choices. Musical, narrative and iconic references are interwoven throughout the film.

4 Subini 2006, 159.

5 Oppo 2015, 2.

6 Subini 2006.

7 Pasolini 1991.

8 Fantuzzi 2004.

9 Oppo 2015, 1.

## INTERTEXTUAL APPROACH

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct Pasolini's cinematic representation to provide evidence of certain semiotic elements (signs) that carry specific meanings. The approach used here is that of Louis Hjelmslev's "glossematics",<sup>10</sup> with its distinction regarding processes of signification. More specifically, this analysis aims to deconstruct the form of expression, starting with the narrative units; these units are not fragmented elements in a textual magma but instead are organized into distinct hierarchical levels of sequences, scenes and so on. Examining the pattern of expressive markers at these levels permits identification of logical and content-related connections that stretch beyond individual scenes.

We are dealing here with two distinct representations of the Gospel. While Matthew's text can be considered the "original" and Pasolini's film just its representation, if we reason in semiotic terms we simply have two different types of "text".<sup>11</sup> In other words, if we assume that these collections of signs (verbal, iconic, auditory, etc.) have a multilevel narrative structure, both Matthew's Gospel and the film can be defined as "representations",<sup>12</sup> in that they re-present the same content in a narrative.<sup>13</sup>

The intersection between multiple forms of representation in Pasolini's films – which we define as *intertextuality* – is precisely what offers us the coordinates to pinpoint specific semiotic markers. Every film is conceived and realized to be seen by a viewer, with whom communication is established. Roman Jakobson has described the structure of this communicative interaction: the film constitutes the message transmitted by the addresser (the director Pasolini) to the addressee (the viewing public collectively).<sup>14</sup> Physically, the communication occurs through auditory and visual channels, which Jakobson calls *contacts*.<sup>15</sup> This article explores the semiotic value of the sound contact in Pasolini's film.

Music plays an important role in Pasolini's cinematography, at one with the images and infused within them to introduce plays of meaning into the scenes. This is what Vittorelli calls "audio-visual syntax".<sup>16</sup> *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* is no exception. Indeed, Pasolini took personal charge of the film's soundtrack, assisted by the composer and musician Luis Bacalov.

10 Hjelmslev 1961.

11 Marsciani/Zinna 1991, 133.

12 Leone 2005, 351–353.

13 Having noted this common definition, for the sake of ease during the analysis we will talk of a "Gospel narrative" and a "film representation".

14 Jakobson 1963, 185–190.

15 Jakobson 1963, 188.

16 Vittorelli 2007.

Individual musical works recur many times during the film, prompting us to talk in terms of *consonant* scenes. But this affinity on a musical plane is never casual; rather it generates logical continuity within the film, in leitmotifs which for the director are markers of significance. We will see what these are by analysing each of the motifs, considering both their role in the film and some of the characteristics of the works themselves. Here too, as in relation to the Gospel, we are dealing with narrative structures,<sup>17</sup> albeit very different from those to which we are accustomed.

## MUSICAL THEMES AS SEMIOTIC LEITMOTIFS

Pasolini chose his music with great care, requiring us in turn to consider contexts of origin attentively, comparing them with their position in the film and the series of consonant scenes thus formed. Although this approach in itself brings out many of the meanings associated with the musical motifs, we also need to conduct a broader analysis of the image (pictorial references, geographical places, props, costumes) to complete the whole. The link between image and sound that was Pasolini's constant goal must always be kept firmly in mind.

With the exception of one motif, the whole soundtrack is extradiegetic: it falls outside the plane of reality of the characters in the film, heard only by viewers. The sole exception is a piece entitled “Tre fronde, tre fiori” (“Three fronds, three flowers”), composed by Bacalov for the scene containing Salome's dance. The theme accompanies the dance of the young girl, and the music, which has a simple rhythm, is performed on flutes and tambourines by an inconspicuous group of musicians in Herod's court. The piece takes its name from the flowering fronds with which Salome partially conceals her face during her performance.

## THE GLORIA

Moving on to the more numerous extradiegetic pieces, the first musical motif is perhaps the best-known one of the whole film: the Gloria from the *Missa Luba*, a collection of songs for the Latin Mass performed in styles traditional to the Congo. The piece was first performed in 1958 by a choir from the city of Kammina, in the Katanga region. It was composed by a Belgian friar, Father Guido Haazen, who involved the Troubadours du Roi Baudoin, an adult and children's choir, in recording a number of musical compositions in various local styles. It would be an exaggeration to say that Father Haazen was the composer of the *Missa* given that none of the songs were transcribed into notation.

17 Buttitta 1979, 101.



The Gloria literally introduces the film, accompanying the title, a strategic choice that immediately highlights the importance of the piece. In the film proper, it is used as a motif in four scenes. The first comes immediately after the revelation of the Angel to Joseph in a dream, while he is returning to Mary. The Gloria is accompanied by another sound element, the citation of the prophet's words in Matthew 1:23. The second is when Jesus and his disciples approach a deformed man, referred to in Matthew 8:2 as a "leper". The Gloria marks the healing of the leper, whose face returns to its normal state when Jesus speaks in the first explicit miracle. Even though we have witnessed a miracle in the previous scene, no words are spoken. The cries of the possessed, accompanied by a musical motif especially composed by Bacalov, are gradually stilled until silence indicates that sanity has returned. The leper, by contrast, has been healed through the spoken word, with all the value known to be attributed to the *logos* in Christianity.

The third time the Gloria occurs within the film is when Jesus enters Jerusalem amidst the festive crowd, and the last occasion, which extends over three scenes, is when the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb falls away and the empty shroud is revealed, an episode that covers all the final part of the last sequence, through to the foreground shot of the risen Jesus. The motif continues during the credits, mirroring the introduction. The Gloria theme thus accompanies those moments that confirm Jesus's divine identity, his extraordinariness and the highpoints of his time on earth. Everything might be summed up by Matthew 28:18, with which the final dialogue of the risen Jesus begins: "All power is given unto me in heaven and earth. Go, ye and teach all nations, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching all things I have commanded. I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."<sup>18</sup>

## "SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD"

The second musical theme is "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child", in the version by the African American singer Odetta Holmes. The roots of this spiritual song date to the time of slavery in the United States, when black families deported from Africa were often split up and sold in different areas as a strategy of social control. The song has long been part of the traditional repertoire of spiritual and blues music, and the version chosen by Pasolini is just one of many. Odetta Holmes was a leading figure on the folk-music scene in the 1950s and 1960s. She was also an important supporter and representative of

18 The passage is quoted here as it appears in the English subtitles of the film, reflecting that the author originally quoted the dialogue as in the movie. See also note 21, where the same is true.

the American civil rights movement whose political and social commitment was not lost on Pasolini.<sup>19</sup>

In the film the song is the motif of two scenes: the visit and adoration of the Magi, and the preaching of John the Baptist. They have in common a search for and attempt to achieve saintliness and to receive a sign of grace. The Magi embarked on a long journey from the East to find the Son of God, and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” renders the intensity of the distance that is finally closed. For the scene involving John the Baptist, we know from Matthew 3:5 that people came to the River Jordan from Galilee and Judaea, making a long pilgrimage to be baptized by the prophet. The spiritual motif again expresses the quest for a sign of grace, the yearning to no longer feel like orphans of a far-off God.

## “THE 13TH CENTURY”

The motif “The 13th Century” derives from a totally different context, just as it bears a very different role in the film. It comes from Sergei Prokofiev’s soundtrack for the film *АЛЕКСАНДР НЕВСКИЙ* (ALEXANDER NEVSKY, Sergei M. Eisenstein, USSR 1938), a masterpiece of Russian cinema. The subject of the film is the Battle on the Ice (Lake Peipus) in 1242, between the Teutonic Order and the Russian army. The piece has powerful resonances that represent the dramatic situation at the dawn of the 13th century. During this historical period, following the death of Genghis Khan, many peoples migrated and settled in Asia. The new geopolitical situation put pressure on the Russian kingdom of Kiev, which was also threatened by the expansion of the Teutonic Order in Estonia. The hagiography of Alexander casts him as an ideal defender of Russia against the Teutonic invaders, who during the Second World War were increasingly associated with the Nazis.

Prokofiev’s piece marks two scenes in Pasolini’s film: the Massacre of the Innocents and the beheading of John the Baptist. Violence undoubtedly unites the two moments, but this feature alone does not explain the repeated musical motif – the seizing of Jesus and the driving out of the merchants from the temple are also marked by violence, for example. But two further aspects enter into play here, one linked to those who ordered the violent act, the other to the victims. In each case the killing is ordered by a member of the Herod family, first the father and then the son, Antipas. The violence is perpetrated at the wishes of the tetrarch of Palestine and legitimated by his authority. It is the violence of rulers, of those with a monopoly on power, which, recalling Max Weber’s definition, is the State itself. The victims are characterized by their blamelessness

19 In 1963, a year before Pasolini’s film was released, the singer took part in the great civil rights march on Washington organized by Martin Luther King, who was an admirer of Odetta Holmes.

and are “innocents” by definition. Or rather, the innocence of the children is attributed to John the Baptist precisely through this musical theme, creating a narrative continuity.

## BACH’S COMPOSITIONS: FROM THE CONCERTO IN C MINOR BWV 1060 TO THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION

The Adagio from the Concerto in C minor BWV 1060 by Johann Sebastian Bach is another musical motif. Pasolini had a great liking for Bach, whose compositions appear in various of his films, including his very first one, *ACCATTONE* (IT 1961). Here we might cite, for example, Andante in D minor from the second Brandenburg Concerto or the aria “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder”, to which we shall return.

Once again we have a pair of consonant scenes, this time the second announcement to Joseph in a dream and the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. Both are characterized by this tranquil, almost playful theme and in both an obstacle is overcome thanks to a miraculous sign. In the first case the announcement of the Angel enables the family to return to Galilee; in the second people are fed as a result of the miracle of the multiplication. And in both one can note gestures of affection – Joseph embracing his son, Jesus feeding the hungry crowd.

There is also a further piece by Bach, from a Mass that is stylistically far removed from the *Missa Luba*. It is taken from the Mass in B minor BWV 232, specifically the final piece of the fourth movement (“Dona nobis pacem”). The internal structure of this sung Mass deserves separate analysis for its compositional richness and geometry, together with the influences of Catholic and Lutheran theology. We will instead limit ourselves here to indicating the scenes in which it appears, namely the healing of the paralysed man and the arrival of the children in the Temple courtyard. In both there is a run-in between Jesus and a group of Pharisees over orthopraxis. The theme crops up in relation to the miraculous healing of the paralysed man, which was performed on the Sabbath, and the arrival of children and the sick in the Temple after the traders had been driven out. In both cases the rules of the priests are broken and replaced with new teachings, and both represent gestures of challenge which on the one hand demonstrate Jesus’s superior power and on the other pose a threat to the Pharisees.

A stepping up of this challenge occurs in concomitance with the Adagio from Bach’s Concerto in D major for violin BWV 1042. The second of three movements, it is distinguished by a ground bass which expressively marks a progressive darkening of mood. The theme is present in three scenes of *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO*: the sermon at Capernaum (Matthew 12:30–31), the view of Jerusalem (Matthew 21) and the condemnation of the Pharisees in the Temple (Matthew 22:14). All three are quite close to the middle of the film, and in them the characters take up positions in two quite distinct and opposing camps: that

of Jesus and that of the priests. What emerges from the dialogues is an awareness of a clear separation, expressed in reciprocal condemnations and verbal criticisms and in a very polarized division. This musical theme signals the increasingly tense confrontation between the two sides.

The next two musical motifs can be dealt with together, as they are from the same work by Bach, the St. Matthew Passion BWV 244, which sets the final part of Matthew's Gospel to music. The pieces in question are the arias "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" (Have mercy, my God!) and "Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder" (We sit down in tears). The theme of intertextuality is particularly prominent here: we have a film representation which, in order to transpose Matthew's Gospel narrative, draws on a musical transposition of the same text. Given what we know about Pasolini's passion for Bach, it was inevitable that this work would find its way into the film, and indeed the second aria had already been used in ACCATONE.

Though Bach's work was certainly not the only Baroque transposition of the Passion, it is particularly interesting for its compositional care and choral accompaniment. The text on which Bach based his work was Luther's translation of the Gospel, while the vocal parts were written by Picander, one of the most important librettists of Bach's works.<sup>20</sup>

The first aria, "Erbarme dich, mein Gott", is, as the title says, a plea for mercy. It is one of the most moving pieces in the film, marking five scenes according to different meanings of "mercy". The first is found in the 10 scenes characterized by Jesus addressing the disciples. With respect to all the others, it is the only one of the ten with a musical theme, and the textual reference is Matthew 6:25–34 (when Jesus talks about the lilies). Jesus invites reflection on the mercy of God, which is dispensed freely to those who believe in him. But if here it is a gift, in the second scene it becomes a request. The rigid and implacable behaviour of the Pharisees places the Law of Moses before what is good, as in Matthew 12:7. In the encounter with the rich young man, Jesus is moved to mercy by the man's inability to forego material goods, by how shackled he is to his own wealth. The fourth scene takes place on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus predicts that Peter will forsake him and then goes to pray. Mercy returns here as a request and in the behaviour of Jesus towards the physical and spiritual weakness of his disciples. Finally, linking back to the previous scene, the last person to ask for mercy is Peter, when he runs away having denied his master.

In the opening credits, the Gloria is followed by another theme, "Wir setzen uns mit Tränen". For those who know Pasolini's work well, this is nothing

20 A pseudonym of Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–1764), who after studying law began to write poetry and compositions. He worked together with Bach at least from 1725, after the latter moved to Leipzig, becoming his trusted librettist.

new given that it is a full-blown leitmotif in ACCATTONE. In IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO it links two moments almost at opposite ends of the film. The first is in the scene with Herod and the Wise Men, when the king learns of Jesus' birth. The second coincides with the capture of Jesus and the kiss of Judas. It is not easy to find an underlying meaning linking these two episodes, but perhaps it is precisely their relative distance, as two end moments, that offers a common theme. In both a prophecy is fulfilled, in the first case Isaiah's regarding the birth of the Messiah, in the second case the three prophecies Jesus himself made about his capture and death (Matthew 16:21; 17:22; 20:17). As with the citations of the Old Testament, the musical theme is a marker of fulfilment.

Also from Bach, in this instance the *Musikalisches Opfer* BWV 1079, but in an arrangement for orchestra by Anton Webern, is "Ricercar a sei". Webern was one of the leading pupils of Arnold Schoenberg, the theorist of the twelve-tone system. He put his master's teachings into practice by creating the school of integral serialism. The expressive form of the passage, the fugue, is particularly well suited to the scene of the temptations in the desert. The exchanges between Jesus and Satan almost follow the rhythm of the music, just as the desert view of Etna is well suited to the delicacy of "Ricercar". This comparison returns in the second scene, where Jesus curses the barren fig tree. The tree becomes the symbol of Judas, the only interlocutor of his master for the whole scene, in whom the teaching of Jesus does not bear fruit, just like the fig tree.

## MOZART'S MAURERISCHE TRAUERMUSIK

Moving on finally to another composer, let us look now at W.A. Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik* in C minor K 477. The composer, who made no secret of being a member of the Viennese Freemasons, wrote the piece in 1785 to commemorate two brothers of the order. It is a work that stands out from among Mozart's other output as in a single movement it combines the tempo of a march with a Gregorian melody.

The *Maurerische Trauermusik* is associated with the most important scenes in the whole film. The first is the baptism in the River Jordan, where Jesus appears as an adult and begins his mission on earth. This first manifestation is rendered even more solemn by the voice – this time diegetic – that speaks from the sky, and it marks the spiritual consecration of Jesus, a transformative and transitional moment. The Mozart piece returns as the theme after the presentation of the apostles, when Jesus talks about his mission, although a different passage of the work is used. The teachings concern the dangers of death and of the persecution of believers and suffering and death as temporary moments on the path to true life. A radical change of perspective is proposed, which we also find in the crucifixion and death scene. These scenes are linked by a continual

theme, which seems to halt at the invocation of the Father, but then resumes with greater force in the final cry (Matthew 27:50).

With these elements we are in a position to give a more precise meaning to the “dark” sequence of the crucifixion, with this very particular citation: “Hearing you shall hear and not understand, seeing, shall see and not perceive, for the people’s heart is waxed gross and their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears” (Matthew 13:14–15).<sup>21</sup> From a Christian perspective, only those who have faith and do not reason with the body can grasp the sense of the crucifixion: not a definitive death, but passage to a new life, and indeed the highest moment of this transformation, which leaves the dead and now useless body behind it. The scene with the collapsing houses, earth tremors and fires is nothing other than the visual transposition of the bodily “collapse”, just as on various occasions Jesus spoke of himself as a building (the true Temple). From this point of view, Mozart’s composition marks this change of perspective in accordance with the Christological doctrine.

## “DARK WAS THE NIGHT, COLD WAS THE GROUND”

The next musical theme is a blues song by Blind Willie Johnson, “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground”, which evokes the same melancholy as “Motherless Child”. Johnson’s songs often have religious themes associated with American Baptist culture. “Dark Was the Night” is the theme for two scenes: first, when the paralytic man clumsily approaches Jesus, and second, for the belated contrition of Judas. The notes of the song draw the two situations closer, with both featuring a “sick” man. But while the physical defect of the paralytic can be resolved with a miracle, it almost seems as if even Jesus is powerless to treat Judas’ spiritual illness – a bitter association that fits well with the text and rhythm of the blues song.

## TWO RUSSIAN FOLK COMPOSITIONS: “OH YOU, WIDE STEPPE” AND “YOU FELL VICTIM”

The next two musical motifs have a great deal in common, starting with their context of origin. Both are Russian compositions with a popular origin. The first is “Oh You, Wide Steppe” (Ах ты, степь широкая), a folk song sung by the Red Army choir, and it accompanies Jesus at the beginning of his journey through Galilee and during the calling of the first disciples. It has powerful sonorities,

21 Once again, I have cited the passage as it appears in the film. The citation is present in Matthew’s Gospel, but it comes from a prophecy attributed to Isaiah and Pasolini does not complete it with verse 16.

accentuated by the choral voices and the pressing rhythm of the scenes. It is therefore at odds with the scenes of the conspiracy of the Sanhedrin, in which the subdued tone of the song almost seems to add a parenthesis to the words of Caiaphas. Finally, the piece recurs in the deposition of Jesus' dead body, with the same charge as the first one, drawing a parallel between the beginning and end of Jesus' mission on earth.

This piece, like the following one, also undoubtedly refers to the failure of the revolutionary design. The major point bearing this out lies in the long speech to the crowd against the priests and Pharisees, under the threatening gaze of the soldiers. In these scenes the background to the words of Jesus is "You Fell Victim" (Вы жертвою пали), a funeral march of the Russian revolutionaries which was subsequently adopted by the Soviet Union and was incorporated into Shostakovich's Symphony no. 11 in G minor. The Russian composer's work concerns events that took place in 1905, including Bloody Sunday, when the army fired on defenceless demonstrators outside the Winter Palace. The soldiers' violence also returns in the scenes of *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* when arrests are made and people captured to disperse the crowd around Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

## THE KOL NIDRE

The final motif is *Kol Nidre*, a very elusive theme that has only rarely been recognized. It is a piece in Aramaic performed in the Jewish context before the liturgical service of Yom Kippur. Its name comes from its opening words, as many Jewish texts do. *Kol Nidre* means "all vows", and its origin is more that of a legal declaration than of a prayer as such. It is an introduction to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in the Jewish religious calendar and the last in a series of 10 days of fasting that begins with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. With the recitation of the *Kol Nidre* all the vows and promises made during the previous year are annulled. Even more interestingly, up until the final destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, part of the ritual of Yom Kippur involved the offering up of two goats (Leviticus 16:7–10), one of which was sacrificed to God, while the second was left alive as atonement – the so-called scapegoat. All this takes on a particular meaning when related to Pasolini's film, where the *Kol Nidre* is the musical theme of just one scene: Jesus' last supper and the establishment of the Eucharist. The connection here is fairly clear, given the Christian symbolism of the lamb offered in sacrifice for the remission of sins. Just as the Jewish prayer provides release from the weight of vows and oaths in anticipation of

22 In the Gospel of Matthew no mention is made of the presence of soldiers or of arrests. The only passage speaking about the crowd is in Matthew 23:1, when Jesus begins to list the wrongs of the Pharisees. In the film all this is rendered visually as a people's assembly with disorder and riots.



the atonement of Yom Kippur, so with the first Eucharist Jesus announced the deliverance of humanity from the burden of their sins, shouldering them himself and sacrificing himself for definitive atonement. The *Kol Nidre* is a historic act that must be repeated each year; the Passion of Christ is an unrepeatable meta-historical event which breaks the cyclical nature of Jewish time.

These musical motifs clearly do not make up the entire soundtrack of Pasolini's film. They are, however, the most important semiotic elements on this level (together with the dialogues), and the ones most closely woven into intertextual relations as the result of precise aesthetic and expressive choices on the part of the director.

## AN EXAMPLE OF AUDIO-VISUAL SYNTAX

By way of conclusion, it is worth looking at the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents as an example of audio-visual syntax. Here we find a general association between the musical theme, the film *ALEXANDER NEVSKY*, Piero della Francesca's fresco *Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* and the representation of the bodies. The soldiers on horseback, lined up in a row on the ridge of the hill in their armour recall the Roman knights of Heraclius in Piero's fresco in Arezzo. Some of the hats, especially the hemispherical ones, echo that model. But the great variety of helmets framed one by one is not an aesthetic whim on Pasolini's part, but a visual element in line with Prokofiev's musical motif. The same kind of shots and the same variety of helmets can be found in the opening scenes of Eisenstein's film about the Battle on the Ice. Furthermore, there are similarities between the spatial arrangement of the knights in Piero's fresco and the initial charge of the Teutonic knights, a static visual relationship that extends here onto the sound plane and that of the bodies, creating a multiple contacts marker.

Continuing with the scene, the acceleration of the foot soldiers, as they chase and slaughter the children, is another type of visual indicator. This new semiotic element is introduced by a modification of state, not by a change of form (e.g. the aging of Mary). The speeded-up film and the shots of a broad, fixed field with scenes of violence are reminiscent of Fascist newsreels from the war, an impression that becomes even more powerful when we look at the soldiers' clothing. It is as obvious as it is necessary to say here that all the bodies in the film are dressed: they are covered bodies, but this expressive masking is a revelation of content, significant insofar as it is a *sign-of*. The costumes, the clothes, are the communicative code with which viewers gain access to the characters, another semiotic cluster linked to the visual and audio elements. Unlike the knights, the foot soldiers are a visually coherent group, with the same uniform

consisting of a fez and a large black band across the chest. Given the parallels drawn in ALEXANDER NEVSKY between the Teutonic knights and the Nazis, it is not so very unlikely that Herod's soldiers represent a Fascist squad.<sup>23</sup>

This kind of syntax, used by Pasolini throughout the film, renders the scenes consonant with each other; in other words, it creates chains of meanings that obey internal compositional rules. This is not a question of a simple, absolute and functional arrangement of the elements, as in the work of some Russian Formalists (Alexander Veselovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Alexander Afanasyev), but of their reciprocal relationship within wider schemes, which relates to the lessons of structural linguistics.

Ties to external and to some extent objective references are not necessary because the director composes his own code to communicate with the viewer: the narrative structures within the film provide an architecture of reality, making the representation self-sufficient by relying on audio-visual leitmotifs. This architecture is developed not in a casual or indifferent manner, but along valorizing semantic axes, which distribute a whole series of significances and values (including moral ones) to characters and situations. In other words, the director's message, encoded around recurrent and organized combinations of sounds and images, permits the implicit attribution of "positive" and "negative" values (for example) to a given character. So, for instance, Herod and his retinue are perceived as antagonists of Jesus by associating the theme "The 13th Century" with them.

In this way, in an almost spontaneous and implicit manner, the spectator absorbs and learns the director's code and is able to interpret the film and receive the communicative content. Only through a process of deconstruction *a posteriori* can we break down the audio-visual continuum into individual semiotic markers, going beyond the "reality effect" of the film. Obviously this analysis of IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO is incomplete and does not consider, for example, all the references to the extra-cinematographic context, such as the historical context in which the director lived. In this article I have favoured an internal perspective focusing on audio semiotic markers, elements able to generate structures of sense through auditory contact and agreement with other markers of a visual kind.

The director's objective – and ultimately the purpose of any film – is not just to tell a story, but to communicate with the viewer through an architecture of reality, which has two aspects, one morphological and the other teleological. The former involves the generation of semantic axes, logical sequences correlated principally with an audio-visual syntax; the latter is the presence of one or more metanarrative levels, introduced by the director to transmit precise ideo-

23 Subini 2006, 163.

logical, moral and aesthetic messages. The intertextual richness and complexity of this film, the result of carefully crafted direction, have made *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* one of the most important and widely acclaimed Christological representations of the 20th century.

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**Open Section**



# Constructing Space, Changing Reality of Israel through Film

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways in which filmmakers frame reality through cinematic space, mediating issues of conflict and reconciliation and of religion and identity(ies) within Israel. Cinematic space depicts and expresses borders through elements of film language. Through such (re)framing the film can question existing socio-political realities and their impact on the individual or whole communities. The microcosmic realities which constitute different communities within Israel's wider socio-political reality are built and confronted through the cinematic space. Thus, cinema enables existing realities to be reflected and new realities to be constructed. The article focuses on two films: *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017) and *GEULA (REDEMPTION)* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018). By contrasting these two films we are able to understand how cinematic space functions as a means of negotiation: identities, religious belonging and communities correlate with the geographical space of Israel.

## KEYWORDS

Cinematic Space, (Re)Framing, Reality, Israel, Religion, Identities

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## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates ways in which filmmakers frame reality through cinematic space, mediating issues of conflict and reconciliation and of religion and identity(ies) within Israel. I use the term “space” to refer to cinematic space that integrates geographical space, physical space and embodied space. The



issue of cinema as a space that integrates and represents many spaces has been at the core of film theory (and equally phenomenology) since the time of André Bazin. More contemporary scholarly research that is helpful in particular in showing how cinema functions as a space which integrates geographical and physical spaces (an idea I develop in this text) includes the more theoretical work of Jeff Hopkins on the “geography of film” and the more empirical approach of Brian Jacobson on how architecture and cities are represented by and in relation to cinema.<sup>1</sup> Kathrin Fahlenbrach has developed a theory of cinematic space or “film space” as an embodied space which is related to pre-metaphorical structures in the human cognitive system, enabling that space to concretize and comprehend complex meanings and particularly the representations of bodily and emotional experiences. While Fahlenbrach’s discussion is useful in elucidating the ways in which viewers relate off-screen to the space represented on-screen, I employ the term “embodied space” solely to refer to the on-screen psychospiritual space of the characters and the ways in which they inhabit that inner space. The uniqueness of my approach comes from my connecting and questioning the ways in which three types of space are constituted within the cinematic to frame meaning.<sup>2</sup> For my examination of cinematic representations of the secular and sacred spheres in Israel and for questions of religion and film more widely, I take inspiration from the theoretical work of S. Brent Plate which considers the function of cinematic space as a “sacred space”.<sup>3</sup>

“Geographical space” in the context of this work refers solely to *the site of Israel as a land of many communities*, in which the individual’s struggle is the centre of the drama and the storyline. “Physical space” refers to *the interior and exterior environments which the characters inhabit in the films*. “Embodied space” refers to *the locale inhabited by the psychospiritual “inner life” of the characters*. This inner life is often manifested externally through physical space, breaking the borders of conventional temporality.<sup>4</sup> All spaces have borders, which are often invisible. Cinematic space depicts and expresses those borders through elements of film language, in the case of this article through mise-en-scène, montage and the disruption of temporal reality. By (re)framing meanings cinema questions existing socio-political realities and their impact on the individual or on whole communities. The microcosmic realities which

1 See Jacobson 2005; Hopkins 1994, 47–65. For further reading on the “geography of film” see Aitken/Zonn 1994. On the wider relationship between cinema and space see Jameson 1995.

2 See Fahlenbrach 2009, 105–121. For the conceptualization of embodied space in cinema see also Sobchack 2004, and on questions of aesthetic experience more widely see Marković 2012, 1–17.

3 See Plate 2017.

4 Cinema can disrupt conventional conceptions of temporal reality as linear by seamlessly integrating realities existing on two temporal planes: the border between life and death, for instance, is broken in GEULA (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), as I will discuss later in this article.

constitute communities within Israel's wider socio-political reality are built and confronted through the cinematic space. The cinema thus becomes a site in which existing realities are reflected and new realities are constructed, opening up possibilities for transformation.<sup>5</sup> In other words, how film frames alternate reality(ies) is related to the construction of space, as will be addressed in this article specifically in terms of how filmmakers interrogate and transform the reality of Israel on-screen and thus propose an alternative way of being and coexisting. This reality can continue off-screen, inspiring or producing change in society, but this continuation is only an aftereffect of the rupture produced on-screen.

This article focuses on two Israeli films: *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017) and *GEULA (REDEMPTION)* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018). I juxtapose these two diametrically different films in order to assess the ways in which the cinematic space functions as a direct site for negotiating identities, religious belonging and communities' relation to the geographical space of Israel.<sup>6</sup> The political borders of the geographical space of Israel are not clearly defined, the problem upon which Amos Gitai's film focuses. While Gitai questions the conflict, reconciliation and identities of Israeli-Palestinian space, Madmony and Yacov focus on the inner struggle of a character caught in between two spaces: that of the Orthodox community and the surrounding world. The selection of these films is based on their wholly different approaches to the socio-political reality of Israel (Gitai looks largely at the implications of the secular and Madmony/Yacov at the sacred) and their differing but equally rigorous construction of space. The analysis of these two films aims to sharpen our focus on cinematic space as a continuum in which such complex realities are expressed, renegotiated and transformed.

## AMOS GITAI AND JOSEPH MADMONY: RELIGION AND THE TROUBLE OF IDENTITY(IES)

Religion has been explored in Israeli cinema as related to a national-ethnic identity and a sense of belonging on both a micro-level (to a certain community) and a macro-level (to the political community that is the state, or, indeed, in rejecting belonging to the state). Religion in Israel has been a matter of extensive ongoing

5 Furthermore, as I argue elsewhere, cinematic space bears the potential for transforming reality. See Radovic 2017.

6 I referred earlier in the text to Israel as "a land" because I am considering the physicality of the geographical space as depicted in the films. However, as we shall see, filmmakers further define and renegotiate the physicality of the land as the state and the cultural and political space. The changing borders and the new settlements in the West Bank indicate that geography as political space is not precisely defined.

ing debate – academic, religious, political, cultural, and public<sup>7</sup> – and covering all the elements of that debate lies beyond the scope of this study. Israeli cinema can be considered, however, an arena for political and cultural transformation, where Jewishness and Jewish identity have been reconstructed and renegotiated.<sup>8</sup> Yaron Peleg argues, particularly in relation to Israeli films such as *HA-MASHGIHIM* (*GOD’S NEIGHBOURS*, Meny Yaesh, IL 2012), that a “holistic Jewish identity” has been proposed as a means to resolve the conflictual identities of Israeli society. For Peleg this identity, a correction to historical Zionism, reconciles the opposed secular and sacred spheres<sup>9</sup> and has been incorporated into and reflected in cinematic space. Peleg further argues that in this process “contemporary Israeli society [is] trying to negotiate its tortured relationship with Jewishness (and not necessarily Judaism)”. While also considering the discussion of cinema as a medium that reflects societal tendencies towards creating a more holistic Jewish identity, this article looks principally at the ways in which films attempt to grasp the essence of the more complex reality of Israel, which consists of multiple microcosmic realities and identities. The films I discuss do not level those realities, denying one side or resorting to a simplistic reconciliation. Madmony and Yacov’s *GEULA* engages with a personal, embodied conflict (of a religious man stuck between his Orthodox community and the outside world), whereas Gitai builds a mosaic of conflictual points of view (from across the society) by exploring geographical space in order to address the diverse realities constituting the socio-political life of Israel. The intertwined questions of religion and identity(ies) are considered to the extent they serve the cinematic narratives.

In their previous films both Gitai and Madmony were critically engaged with issues of religion and identity: Gitai through his *KADOSH* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 1999) and Madmony through his *MAKOM BE-GAN EDEN* (*A PLACE IN HEAVEN*, Joseph Madmony, IL 2013). In Madmony’s work, religion served as a point of reference for complex narratives on identities, divisions and communities. In *A PLACE IN HEAVEN* Madmony creates an anti-narrative to explore the complex

7 Religion plays an increasingly important role, and whether viewed as a tool used by the far right or as an important part of the “reconciliation process” between the “secular and sacred spheres”, religion remains one of the pertinent issues of Israel.

8 For the historical context of Israeli cinema and representations of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship see Shohat 2010 and Shohat 2017. For further examination of the ways in which Jewishness and Jewish identity have been reconstructed and renegotiated through media beyond film, particularly television, see Talmon 2013.

9 As Peleg argues, “this is a historical corrective to the national engineering of Zionism earlier on [...] and a fundamental paradox at the base of Zionism: the tension between religion and state. This tension has been unravelling since the 1980s and Jewish religious elements, which were excluded under labor Zionism, are being gradually incorporated into the national mix”, Yaron Peleg, interview with the author, 01.08.2018. Also see Peleg 2016, and for further information Yadgar 2017.

relationship between fathers and sons and between the secular and the sacred: parallels with the Bible are turned upside down to revise the relationship between war and peace, Zionism and religion, and understandings of meta-narratives for the land and its people. While it could be viewed as an attempt to make Zionism “more Jewish” through its engagement of a religious narrative, Madmony’s film rather reflects the confusion in separating the religious and secular.

A PLACE IN HEAVEN reinforces at first the biblical narrative of the land: cinematic space frames the land as site on which the main character works, to gain the woman of his life, to win her father’s trust, to enable new growth from the soil. However, the biblical narrative is inverted when he gains his wife, for the land they inhabit (the flat they buy) is Palestinian. They become occupiers of geographical space: the edges of the filmic frame are constantly filled – deserts and woodland landscapes are there “to be conquered”, as the main character puts it. The film reinforces geographical space as a problematic site on which personal and political relationships are (re)negotiated.

Enclosed physical spaces enveloped with dark foggy lights make up the *mise-en-scène* of A PLACE IN HEAVEN, where father and son interrogate one another, where the notion of sharing a place (a life, a relationship, a physical boundary such as a flat) becomes essentially impossible (for the son). Space is marked by the sins of the fathers and the rebellious relationship of the sons. Through the union of temporal and extra-temporal via physical space, A PLACE IN HEAVEN indicates that heaven and earth, and likewise good and evil, are intertwined and cannot easily be separated.<sup>10</sup> Finally, by connecting the temporal and extra-temporal Madmony explores the possibility of forgiveness: the son holds a Kaddish for his deceased father and the father can be seen at the end wandering through an open field with the rabbi who bought his place in heaven. The uncertainty of the film lies in the uncertainty of salvation for both fathers and sons. Madmony does not reconcile the secular and sacred spheres. The cinematic space is used to confront them, leaving the resolution to the audience.

Gitai takes a more critical view of religion in his KADOSH, where he explores the life and troubled position of women within the Orthodox community Mea Shearim. Gitai is aware of the complexity of the question of what defines a Jew, a product of “the coherence, in Judaism, between an ethnic, even national, identity and a religious conception”<sup>11</sup> and of the variety of standpoints even within the religious (Orthodox) communities, from those who “oppose the

10 Madmony refers to the belief that sometimes something good can come even out of evil circumstances. Joseph Madmony, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018.

11 Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: KADOSH (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002.

state of Israel” to those who are “nationalists, and even pacifists”, as well as those tied to the notion of land.<sup>12</sup> Gitai’s exploration of life in Mea Shearim is an exploration of the community’s relation to space. Gitai creates an “eclectic visual environment”<sup>13</sup> to show that such a community has no interest in the physical space they inhabit, with the scriptures instead determining the lives of everyone involved in Mea Shearim. To describe the inner struggle and exile of the female leads within the community “he [Gitai] moves objects as well as the camera, and two geometries are created, where one is used to describe the other”.<sup>14</sup> The inner exile thus is reflected in a physical space that becomes both austere and eclectic. The notion of exile remains dominant in Gitai’s later work. In *ANA ARABIA* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2013) the “exile” of the mixed community of Arabs and Jews is expressed through the cinematic space. Gitai shot this film in a single take to reflect the “unbroken links” between the two peoples.<sup>15</sup> He juxtaposes the political reality with the reality of the community, and through the “unbroken space – time”<sup>16</sup> he offers an alternative reality as the solution to the exclusion that surrounds it. Religion in *ANA ARABIA* seems to be related only to ethnic/national identity, a divisive point. However, religion is present through the space – that is the space of a garden tended by one of the characters that serves as a metaphor for God’s garden, for the land that belongs to no one, only to God, and that is to be shared between Israelis and Palestinians. In that respect *ANA ARABIA* serves as a reference for a different kind of identity: it confronts the identitarian politics of power with the identity of a community that thrives in togetherness in the heart of Israel. Gitai erases borders by not making cuts, by not using montage.<sup>17</sup>

Both Amos Gitai and Joseph Madmony approach religious communities as complex microcosms within contemporary Israel. Both directors see religion as a burning issue for Israel. Madmony identifies two prevailing problems when it comes to religion: first, that it can be extreme (in the service of ultra-nationalism), and second, that it is bound to the institution, which complicates it.<sup>18</sup> For Gitai, the problem seems to be institutional and ideological (which often overlap) and although he “casts no judgement on religious communities ... he does

12 Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: *KADOSH* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002.

13 Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: *KADOSH* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002.

14 Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: *KADOSH* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002.

15 Radovic 2017, 70–84.

16 Radovic 2017, 70–84.

17 For my consideration of montage and the implications of the absence of cutting in Gitai’s *ANA ARABIA* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 2013), see Radovic 2017, 70–83.

18 Joseph Madmony, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018.

not accept their authoritarian solution”.<sup>19</sup> Religion is intertwined with conflictual identities, and in neither KADOSH nor A PLACE IN HEAVEN is it a solution. Rather, troubled and multiple identities are diffracted in the religious. In ANA ARABIA, however, Gitai constructs the space of “God’s garden”, in which the mixed community thrives despite poverty and exclusion; the conflictual identities that surround the community (political divisions in society) do not penetrate their shared space. By contrast WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER represents a shared space into which political divisions inevitably enter.

## WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER

The documentary film WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER is divided into 19 sections. The film opens with Gitai interviewing Yitzhak Rabin. Before we are introduced into the story, we see a shot of paintings and photographs being replaced on a wall, indicating the change of scenery that is to take place. The children in the gallery, which serves as a space of historical memory for the turbulent history of Israel, observe the images that will be replaced. The title of the film appears and around it rotate the titles of the 19 sections of the film. Their circling around the main title indicates the issues that surround the physical space west of the river Jordan. The director speaks of this film as created in “capsules” that break and connect space and time.<sup>20</sup> Images of Yasser Arafat and people killed in attacks are followed by Rabin’s commentary on extremism and right-wing demonstrations against the peace negotiations.

## CAPSULATED STORY – OCCUPIED SPACE

The first section focuses on the “1994 Erez Checkpoint Israel/Gaza and closed check-points”, and from here Gitai takes us on a cinematic journey. The following sections include interviews with Yitzhak Rabin, members of the Knesset, Tzipi Hotovely (the deputy minister of foreign affairs), NGOs and other organizations (Breaking the Silence; Parents Circle; B’tselem), journalists, activists and individuals (Ari Shavit, Ben-Dror Yemini, Aluf Benn, Gideon Levy and Tamar Zandberg), members of communities (a Palestinian boy, Ali from Hebron, wants to be a martyr), individuals gathered for the preservation of the Bedouin school

19 Gitai understands personal faith and the complexities associated with it, but he finds institutionalized religion or religion as a cultural-national ideology problematic as a solution. In his own words, “one needs to define their point of view on the world and take a specific position, especially in the world today with the rise of nationalism and religious extremism”; see Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: KADOSH (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002. Both Gitai and Madmony hold the perspective that the land should be shared between Jews and Palestinians. Amos Gitai, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018; Joseph Madmony, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018.

20 Amos Gitai, Interview by Marie-Jose Sanselme: KADOSH (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 1999) British DVD Release, Planet, 2002.





Fig. 1: Bedouin School. Film still, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 01:07:54.

(fig. 1), and a settler, a woman from an Israeli settlement in the West Bank who has been the victim of an attack.

The stories, experiences and parallel realities of each section are connected to one another and they often contradict or subvert one another.<sup>21</sup> Gitai's capsulated narrative reveals the space of different and parallel realities. Here his style is different from that of *ANA ARABIA*, filmed in one continuous shot to create the space of togetherness. All the conversations with communities and people are filmed in open space or move through space. Furthermore, Gitai's shot of the land makes space central also as a geographical and cultural-political space (fig. 2).

Gitai takes the film back to where he started it – he brings us back to Yitzhak Rabin and the year 1994 (Part 18: “Yitzhak Rabin 1994”). The interview continues: “I would like to see a reality less violent”, states Rabin, warning that two obstacles must be removed – hatred of Israel and economic and social distress. For Rabin the main idea is “to strive for peace” and “avoid creating a reality which serves as fertile ground for the extremists to flourish”. For Rabin peaceful coexistence is possible, and the main principle of Rabin's political programme is “to create a new environment – a new reality”. This part finishes with a fade out and the sound of gun shots – the assassination of Rabin. In the very last part of the film (Part 19: “Backgammon Tournament”) Gitai brings us

21 “Judaism's greatness is shown in justice and law. But here, as Isaiah said, a great injustice has been committed”, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 2017), 01:09:56–01:10:07.





Fig. 2: Landscape. Film still, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 00:20:25.

to a festive celebration in Jerusalem and a backgammon tournament between Israelis and Palestinians. The sequence starts with an image of a revolving carousel and then moves on to the mixed peoples, who are enjoying the evening with its festive music. The event as described by one of the participants is about “Middle Eastern culture that serves as a gateway between ‘us’ and Arabs ... we can live in peace by sharing our culture and music”. The last shot (like the opening) stays on the carousel. The fade-out in this scene is not complete, and a dim image of the carousel remains as the credits roll.

Each capsulated narrative becomes part of an encapsulated story about the unresolved socio-political space that includes the many different realities and spaces (geographical and socio-political) of Israel. By encapsulating all these diverse spaces and realities, Gitai continues Rabin’s work in the cinematic sense: he acknowledges differences, social stratification, absence of trust, misuse of religion and even contradictions that divide the sides deeply. However, he frames all these realities within an ultimate dialogue, as a “programme of striving for peace” and “transforming the circumstances” of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

## FRAMING PEACE: CONTEMPORARY PROPHETS?

“The thing I can adhere to most in the Jewish heritage is that it’s a great critical school of thought. Even the Old Testament is a very critical text.”<sup>23</sup> Amos Gitai

<sup>22</sup> See Yitzhak Rabin interview in *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Amos Gitai, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018. Also see Romney 2000.



Fig. 3: Checkpoint. Film still, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 00:08:01.

returns with his critical voice on the Israeli-Palestinian space with his *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER*. In searching for how the conflict might be resolved, Gitai deconstructs hierarchical authoritarianism and extremism by framing the film within the idea of peace, as embodied by the political figure of Yitzhak Rabin, with whom the film starts and finishes. In framing *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* with the “peace narrative”, Gitai raises a variety of political issues within the cinematic space.

Gitai’s critical approach is by no means limited to Israelis’ views on the state and politics of identity. He also investigates the living experience of war, peace and religious extremism in all strands of society, including amongst Palestinians. *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* contains both a balance and a contradiction between characters and environment. The balance stems from the director’s equal division between segments that navigate across Israel’s geography and segments that contain interviews with people of different ethnic, religious and socio-political backgrounds. The contradictions are captured by the camera when people and images emerge in physical spaces where they are not expected or where the personal story interrupts the peaceful geographical scenery where it is told: the first such example is the “1994 Erez Checkpoint” section, which shows closed checkpoints, armed soldiers and diverted traffic and a boy wandering with a bowl of strawberries (fig. 3); the second is “A Boy on a Terrace” (fig. 4), where the peaceful imagery of a sunny terrace in Hebron is distorted by the story of a boy who wants to become a martyr (in both cases, innocence is interrupted by socio-political reality and conflictual circumstances).



Fig. 4: Hebron. Film still, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 01:00:26.

Gitai's critical view of religion is socially based: the narratives on the "chosen people" and the "promised land" have less to do with faith and more to do with the transfer of historical trauma and a political agenda of territorial expansion. The desire of a Palestinian boy to be a martyr is depicted more as a consequence of isolation, violence and poverty than as a matter of faith. Gitai questions identitarian struggles, religion and tribalism and the politics of exclusivity as a (contemporary) socially engaged "prophet": social stratification is strongly connected with the hierarchical structures of oppression, and religious concepts are used for the justification of violence, both inside and outside specific communities. Gitai's voice speaks of social criticism that strives for a peaceful resolution. His understanding of criticism connected with geographical and cinematic space stems from the notion of equality. *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* shows that the end of space (as land shared among the people, Israelis and Palestinians) means the end of democracy in Israel. Gitai's whole cinematic opus is wrought through with criticism developed around space and equality.<sup>24</sup> Gitai re-examines authoritarianism, oppression, war and extremism only to finally reject them in the space that he inhabits – the cinematic space. Through this space Gitai creates and offers an alternative reality, a "citizenship to come".<sup>25</sup> In his

24 In his discussion of the creation of cinematic space in which criticism of socio-political practices emerges, Gitai notes the importance of a synagogue as a non-hierarchical structure. From this perspective Gitai further considers issues of oppression and second-class citizens and non-citizens. See Amos Gitai Interview, Personal Interview, 30.07.2018.

25 See Isin/Nielsen 2008, 23.

approach to equality, justice, war and peace, Gitai resembles a contemporary prophet who speaks from the “deserted space of cinema”, which he inhabits and in which he reconstructs humanity.

## GEULA (REDEMPTION)

GEULA is a film about a widowed father, Menachem, who lives within an Orthodox community with his daughter Geula. Menachem is isolated from both his religious community and the outside world; he is a loner. He was the leader of a well-known rock band before he became “religious”. His conversion to religion led him to take up an ordinary job in the local shop, bringing him anonymity, far from night clubs, concerts and his friends. His realization that he cannot become “a scholar” coincides with his daughter’s grave illness. When she needs additional chemotherapy that is too expensive for her father, he decides to approach his friends and reassemble the band to raise the money for his daughter’s treatment. His friends accept his suggestion, play at weddings and are willing to help him, but they have an ambition to go further and recalibrate their lost fame. Menachem’s world starts slowly to crumble. As his friends question his decisions, his inner strength, his relationship with his late wife, and his state, Menachem realizes that he cannot reconcile his old self with the new religious person he has become, that he does not belong to either of the two worlds and that he cannot express joy. The struggle for the life of his daughter opens old wounds and questions, reflecting another struggle – the inner struggle of a father who is wrestling with both God and the world. Going through redemption and reconciliation, Menachem eventually finds hope by the end of the film and the first clear signs of his daughter’s healing. Although GEULA focuses on the figure of the father, the character through whom healing is made possible is his daughter Geula, whose name means redemption.

## RETHINKING RELIGION

In collaboration with Yacov, Madmony revisits questions of religion and faith with GEULA. The Madmony/Yacov team tells the story of an isolated man who belongs in neither of two worlds completely: he abandons “this world” for the sake of religion, yet he is a second-class person within his religious community because he is newly converted, having been religious for only 15 years, unlike members who “were born in religious communities”.<sup>26</sup> The father, who is unable to find himself, pulls his daughter into the world of isolation, but his daughter becomes his guide through the space confined to repetition and rituals.

26 Joseph Madmony, interview by the author, 30.07.2018.

GEULA reframes religion: rules alone are inadequate, and faith is observed as a personal struggle and experience. Similarly, no warmth of a community comforts Menachem. There is no comfort from the outside world to which he belonged in the past. In that respect GEULA is not a counter-narrative to films such as KADOSH, as it portrays not the struggle of an individual with or within a comforting community, but a person who must find within himself the means to re-establish broken links with others.

Madmony and Yacov depict the progress of the struggle through the pace of the film. That pacing is achieved through the movement of the camera, the framing, music, montage and the creation of a specific space-time relationship. The space is used to communicate several aspects of the narrative. First, the space is a physical space where the characters live and move (limited to few streets, shops, flats, a hospital and a concert hall), with each of these physical spaces reflecting a different reality and mood. Second, through space the film expresses the burden and the struggle of the main character (narrowed space, characters continuously framed by the doors, closed windows and blinds). Finally, the space connects memory with the present, two realities, the physical and the transcendent.

Oppressive space is created primarily by narrow framing. However, it is not religion that is oppressive here, but the character's inability to reconcile himself with his past. In rethinking and re-experiencing his faith, he is faced with many outside boundaries (such as the rules that are important to his neighbours or to the rabbi matchmaker). His rethinking religion is rethinking isolation, narrow-mindedness, self-righteousness and the inability to face his mistakes and wrong-doings; blindly following the rules turns out not to be enough.<sup>27</sup> However, the effect of the image is not solely of oppression, as a flickering warm light follows Menachem throughout the film, emanating both from him and from Geula, suggesting a light that comes from within and acting as a sign of hope. Moreover, while the door frames can indicate constriction, they also can offer a sense of release, for in many scenes the doors they contain are open, suggesting a way out (from isolation) is possible.

## RE-CREATING SPACE

The changing movement of the camera through the immediate physical spaces that Menachem inhabits simulates his embodied psychospiritual space, from which his inner struggle is manifested externally. The camera is withdrawn, hand-held and fragmented, and the light is dark in the initial scenes inside Menachem's home. Although the home is traditionally associated with stability and

27 Menachem remains "rebellious" in both worlds, as one of his friends observes. See GEULA (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 00:37:50.



solitude, the movement of the camera and light suggest that for Menachem home is a space of instability and isolation. By comparison, two of the wedding scenes feature lively, unpredictable camerawork, with the camera dizzyingly encircling the stage upon which Menachem and his band perform, alternating direction and constantly changing in frame focus and size. The light is also brighter, warmer and inconstant. Camerawork and light coupled with the joy Menachem expresses in the shots indicate that the wedding acts as a space of emotional release. However, the relationship between the interior and exterior physical spaces is not so simple, and it is precisely in breaking down that relationship between the home and the outside world that Madmony and Yacov convey the cinematic space as a manifestation of the inner struggle. One such moment of breakdown occurs in the third wedding scene, preceded by and intercut with Geula lying in the hospital with her health at its most critical. In the scene Menachem is on-stage singing about joy, but his eyes convey deep sorrow.<sup>28</sup> The camera is situated frontally and low down, engulfed in the crowd of wedding guests, characterized by an unstable drifting and intensified by clinical lighting. Together these features create a sense of uncertainty and drowning and thereby enable us to resonate with Menachem's pain but also to continue to understand the external physical space of the wedding as a site at which his inner space is renegotiated just as his pain is put into music, into art. The editing of the film serves to reconcile that inner space with time, creating a fabric in which his consciousness and personal relationships are blended into the present moment. Memory is no flashback but instead integrated into the inner reality of the character. It functions on one plane, as a united space in which Menachem can understand his past self and thereby renegotiate his relationship to the present and the future, for his daughter. A scene where Menachem's deceased wife appears to him in the kitchen, as he sits alone, is crucial: there is no obvious aesthetic break between the two figures; it appears they share a single space (figs. 5 and 6).

In preserving the unity of the two realities that the characters share – life and death – through one physical space, the film externalizes Menachem's inner reflection and reconciliation. This seamless outside-the-box perspective on space and time (as a united entity, contrary to logic) brings Madmony and Yacov's work closer to that of Andrei Tarkovsky, for example, on a humble aesthetic level.

In *GEULA* the filmmakers shift the conflict to the personal experience of faith, rather than represent a more general(izing) and rather conventional narrative

28 The music in the film is the part of the narrative. In this particular scene Menachem's song is a call for the "joy that does not depend on anything". See *GEULA* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 00:47:39–00:48:00.



Fig. 5: Gaze into a Different Reality. Film still, *GEULA* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 00:56:23.



Fig. 6: Broken Boarders. Film still, *GEULA* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 00:56:28.

on the conflict between the religious and the secular or between the individual and the religious community. *GEULA* shows the diverse realities that surround an isolated person (isolated both from his religious community and the secular world). However, by portraying Menachem's struggle as burdened by the narrow-mindedness of both worlds, his religiousness as starting as "consumption" (with grandiose signs expected from God), and his self-righteousness as creating only a temporary escape (with which Menachem's journey starts), Madmony and Yacov give a certain universal appeal to the story.<sup>29</sup> By coming to terms

29 At the 2018 Jerusalem Film Festival *GEULA* won the audience choice award and was recognized as the Jewish Experience of the festival. See Tobias 2018. *GEULA* won the main prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (2018), while the lead actor, Moshe Folkenflik, received the





Fig. 7: The Absent God? Waiting for a Sign. Film still, *Geula* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 01:23:25.



Fig. 8: God in a Lollipop. Film still, *Geula* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 00:45:21.



Fig. 9: Light Infiltrates Space. Film still, *Geula* (Joseph Madmony / Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, IL 2018), 01:36:03.

with his own mistakes and by overcoming pride, the character of Menachem is able to find himself and his relationship with others and consequently with God, who was hidden, as the film narrates, in the lost-and-found lollipop of his daughter Geula (figs. 7 and 8).

Small details containing innocence in an otherwise oppressed physical space change the scenery: the character can smile again as the light filters into the space through half-closed windows towards which both father and daughter are turned for the first time (fig. 9).

## CONCLUSION: SPACE AND SPACES, REFRAMING REALITY

The cinematic space of Israeli films, discussed here through the works of Amos Gitai, Joseph Madmony and Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, includes a number of diverse spaces and communities. By creating the cinematic space with narratives stripped of clichés, the filmmakers create a new sense of the real and of realism, rupturing the cultural and socio-political contexts in which they were made. The films employ geographical, physical and embodied spaces to communicate the complexity of the multiple microcosmic realities within the wider socio-political reality of Israel. In Gitai's case, these micro-cosmic realities are represented as a mosaic via capsulated narrative segments that bring out the voices of diverse individuals and communities that exist within the land. In the case of Madmony and Yacov, the focus lies on one specific microcosm, that of a man within an Orthodox community, and on his struggle with faith that gradually enables him to mend his bonds with his daughter, friends and the outside world. *GEULA* was shot in a small number of places, and alternative spaces emerge to create layers of realities: that of the outside world, the reality of the religious community, and the inner reality of the character (past and present). In *GEULA* the characters dominate the space, and the physical space correlates with the characters. Unlike in *KADOSH* and *A PLACE IN HEAVEN*, this space is neither highly austere nor visually eclectic, but serves to communicate layers of reality with attention to small details that give further meaning to the space and the narrative. The film creates a composition of space and time through which religion and faith, isolation and community, are confronted and re-examined.

By contrast, Gitai's film is bound to the geography of the land, which frames the stories of Israeli-Palestinian realities. In capturing fragments of the geographical space that exists beyond the frame (the land), the camera depicts specific physical spaces, and the inner embodied realities of characters tied to those spaces are made manifest. As Gitai reminds us, just as different commu-

Best Actor Award. See News Section on Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 2018, <http://www.kviff.com/en/news/> [accessed 07.08.2018].



Fig. 10: Jerusalem's Carousel. Film still, *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 01:24:47.

nities have different relationships with space, they also have conflicting points of view on issues that surround them in wider society, and thus there can be no simplistic reconciliation for the land and the various peoples that inhabit that land. He reframes each piece of the (fragmented) story by contrasting one narrative with another, one geo-political understanding of the land with another one, creating a never-ending circle, as the image of the carousel in his final sequence suggests (fig. 10).

Gitai highlights the significance of specificity and inclusivism within Israel if the political tendency towards exclusivism, an ideologically-coercive mechanism that favours one group over the other, is to be avoided. The filmmakers reframe the changing socio-political reality of Israel by creating a cinematic space from which specific individuals and communities can be heard and in which they themselves can renegotiate their relationship to one another and with their wider cultural and socio-political communities. Thus the cinematic space ultimately reveals itself as a space of reconciliation (through personal redemption – *GEULA*; and through dialogue – *WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER*) and as a heterogenous space, for it involves the many spaces of different communities and their respective realities.

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- WEST OF THE JORDAN RIVER (Amos Gitai, IL/FR, 2017).





## **Media Reviews**





## Book Review

### Joshua Louis Moss, *Why Harry Met Sally* Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017, 360 pages,  
ISBN 978-1-4773-1283-4

Joshua Louis Moss's new book *Why Harry Met Sally* analyzes representations of romantic couplings between Jews and non-Jews in popular culture. In terms of scope, Moss is less interested in how Jews have depicted Anglo-Christian-Jewish coupling on their own terms, as in Yiddish or Hebrew literature. Rather, examining broader trends in European and American popular culture, Moss shows how Jewish/non-Jewish couplings offer "a visceral, easily graspable template for understanding the rapid transformations of an increasingly globalized, modern world" (4). That is to say, in European and American popular culture, Jewish/non-Jewish couples were commonly marshaled to play out the paradoxes and struggles of the modern mass media age.

Moss situates his discussion around three periods, or waves, of Anglo-Christian-Jewish couplings – 1905–1934, 1967–1980 and 1993–2007 – all of which push back against conservative cultural and political trends. His central methodological contribution is "coupling theory", whereby a couple should be read "as a single, entangled construction oscillating between holistic and fragmentary perspectives" (7). Further, he basically establishes the reasons for his "waves" in his coupling theory: "The coupling binary was flexible and adaptable. The couplings emerged at key historical moments to navigate the legacy of the Victorian era and champion the pluralism of an increasingly visible, libertine, modern world" (10). Jewish/non-Jewish coupling allows for subversive and taboo discussions to be negotiated, though not necessarily resolved, in various historical moments.

Interestingly, in Part One, "The First Wave: The Mouse-Mountains of Modernity (1905–1934)", Moss begins his analysis with the baptized Jewish politician and romance novelist Benjamin Disraeli, who married Mary Anne Lewis (non-Jewish and British elite). According to Moss, Disraeli's marriage to Lewis

and performance of “Anglo-Christian-Jewish entanglement” spoke to the conditions and tensions of the modern age and provided Disraeli with access to political power (33). Moss then examines Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army famously convicted of treason in 1894 on false charges. French newspapers and the French cinema used Dreyfus’s Jewish wife, Lucie, as the face of the Dreyfus Affair, and images of her proliferated. Though both Dreyfus and his wife were Jewish, the mass media, French intellectuals, and Lucie herself drew heavily on Christian imagery of martyrdom and crucifixion to publically frame the Affair. This was a kind of baptizing, as Moss calls it, of Alfred and Lucie in response to antisemitic, Christianized rhetoric. Still, akin to Alfred’s public image, Lucie’s Jewishness as *threat* came back into the conversation, exemplifying the failure of this mass media baptism: “she found herself tarred by the same suspicions of dual loyalty that stuck to her husband” (39). According to Moss, the Dreyfus Affair raises a key question in relation to coupling, à la Disraeli, one that has no clear answer in light of different European contexts: would the Affair and its mediation have been different if Alfred married a Christian? While there is no simple answer, Moss uses Dreyfus and Disraeli as examples of “the link among marriage, coupling, Jewishness, and modern identity at the beginning of the screen media age” (40). Connected to press and screen, the trial and its fallout influenced a number of European intellectuals as they wrestled with the potential limits and paradoxes of Jewishness, coupling and social acceptance in a rapidly changing modern Europe. Novelists noticed “the potency of Christian-Jewish intersubjectivity” (50) for transgressive experimentation; Moss effectively connects writers such as Kafka, Proust and Joyce to Disraeli and Dreyfus.

American cinema had a more utopian vision of Jewish/non-Jewish couplings than that which emerged in Europe. Moss’s best analysis of this vision centers on prominent films in the late 1920s, such as *THE JAZZ SINGER* (Alan Crosland, US 1927) and *ABIE’S IRISH ROSE* (Victor Fleming, US 1928), which “featured a variation of either intermarriage or a thematic Anglo-Christian-Jewish coupling” as “the marker of final ascension into American life” (71). On screen cross-couplings like these could be a fairly safe form of transgression and experimentation. Regardless of their usefulness and popularity, first-wave films had their critics and decline. Moss robustly accounts for the dwindling representations of the first wave as anti-Semitism and discrimination grew in the United States.

The primary dates associated with Part Two, “The Second Wave: Erotic Schlemiels of the Counterculture”, are 1967–1980, but Moss starts with interesting background for this second wave. Key writers, most notably Philip Roth, and boundary-pushing comedians like Lenny Bruce critiqued 1950s’ conservatism and the de-ethnicization of the immediate post-war period. They ultimately had an impact on the sexualized coupling themes of American New Hollywood

cinema in the late 1960s. Generally speaking, two rhetorical trends emerged from the second wave. The first trend took on the absence of Jews during the 1930s and 1950s and tackled the association of Jews with Communism. *THE FRONT* (Martin Ritt, US 1976), starring Woody Allen, is an excellent example of a second-wave film on 1950s blacklisting and is an example Moss wields well. The second trend of this New Hollywood was a “new Jewish visibility [that] signified the rhetorical entrance of explicit sexuality” (151). Moss marshals a litany of filmic Jewish/non-Jewish couplings to show the sexual experimentations of the youthful counterculture. Also in Part Two, he tracks the rare television cross-couplings of the second wave and the pornographic cinema of the 1970s.

Despite some holdovers, the second wave of clear cinematic cross-couplings largely declined in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Reagan-style conservatism took hold in American culture and politics. (The Holocaust in popular culture was an exception.) If the second wave was defined by cinema, the third wave, discussed in Part Three, “The Third Wave: Global Fockers at the Millennium (1993–2007)”, began heavily invested in television. To highlight just a few examples of his sweeping survey in Part Three, we can note that the radical female Jew returned in popular culture in the form of Roseanne Connor (Roseanne Barr) in *ROSEANNE* (ABC, US 1988–1997) and Moss’s most potent analysis is centered on *THE NANNY* (CBS, US 1993–1999). This period is particularly defined by the adaptation of Christian-Jewish couplings for global, transnational audiences. American television companies were expanding their markets overseas and thus required the “familiar, translatable material” that they found in the “nostalgic tone of the couplings of the third wave” (234). Moss moves beyond TV sitcoms to highlight Broadway musicals and the gross-out comedies of the 1990s and 2000s, such as *AMERICAN PIE* (Paul Weitz / Chris Weitz, US 1999). Part Three includes a variety of examples of which full account cannot be given here. By the late 2000s, the third wave was coming to a close as “scripted entertainment began to look elsewhere for visualizing societal fracture” (260).

Moss’s book is particularly intriguing when he connects media formats in popular culture, especially when he joins newspaper accounts, stand-up comedians and novels to experimental Jewish/non-Jewish couplings in cinema and television. His command of media formats, major theorists and secondary literature is impressive and expansive. However, the book seeks to account for too much, and as a result Moss sometimes misses the opportunity to make his analysis all the more persuasive. For example, Moss’s analysis of the comedy revolution – stand-up comedians in the 1950s and 1960s – is fascinating, but a more detailed engagement with this revolution might have offered other convincing examples beyond Jerry Stiller and Lenny Bruce. Similarly, aspects of the theoretical material on the comedy revolution needed to be worked out more to be persuasive. It is unclear to this reviewer, for instance, that “the anti-hu-

mor origins of European Christendom”, translated to the middle of the twentieth century, was a factor in making it “no surprise that Christian audiences turned so often to Jews to make them laugh” (141). A book exclusively on the post-war era or with less wide ranging examples could have expanded this discussion and focused further on the comedians’ own voices. More detail would have been helpful at other points as well. A good example is Moss’s account of Woody Allen’s ANNIE HALL (US 1977) and MANHATTAN (US 1979), which for Moss are “the peak of Anglo-Christian-Jewish coupling visibility in second-wave cinema” (168–169). Yet, ANNIE HALL and MANHATTAN occupy only a little over a page of discussion. Despite these issues, Moss has accomplished a tour de force, and his coupling theory is worth the extended consideration he hopes it will receive (e.g. 264). His work will be of interest to media studies, Jewish studies and American studies, to name just a few relevant areas.

## FILMOGRAPHY

ABIE’S IRISH ROSE (Victor Fleming, US 1928).  
AMERICAN PIE (Paul Weitz and Chris Weitz, US 1999).  
ANNIE HALL (Woody Allen, US 1977).  
MANHATTAN (Woody Allen, US 1979).  
ROSEANNE (ABC, US 1988–1997).  
THE FRONT (Martin Ritt, US 1976).  
THE JAZZ SINGER (Alan Crosland, US 1927).  
THE NANNY (CBS, US 1993–1999).

## Book Review

**Peter Klimczak / Christer Petersen (eds.),**

### **Popestar**

#### **Der Papst und die Medien**

Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos 2017, 312 pages,

ISBN: 978-3-86599-254-3

This soft-cover book with its eye-catching, colorful cover photo of the pope's famous red shoes points immediately to a highly symbolic accessory that represents a recurrent element in the analyses brought together in the text. The German-language anthology is structured in five sections, organized by subject area, reaching from history/art history and theology/philosophy to sociology/psychology, literary/film studies, and journalism, with five contributions in each section. The volume opens with a short but interesting introduction by the two editors in which they report with humor the complicated, even dramatic origins of the volume: Originally, Leo Fischer, the editor of the satirical magazine *Titanic*, was to be one of the contributors.<sup>1</sup> This led a number of ecclesial representatives to withdraw their contributions to the anthology and one of the editors even resigned. Unfortunately, in the end Fischer was not able to deliver his contribution on the adequacy of the satirical critique of pope and church. Nevertheless, the list of contributors is impressive, with a number of renowned names in church, theology and society, such as the former Polish president Lech Wałęsa, the theologian Hans Küng and Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, long-term secretary of Pope John Paul II. The book addresses the figure of the pope as media object and media subject and aims to bring together various interdisciplinary reflections on the relations of these two poles (10). This goal is clearly achieved in the volume. The authors with their different professional, disciplinary and national (Austria, Germany and Poland) backgrounds provide a multifaceted view on the topic. Furthermore, they offer their thoughts, experiences and analyses in different genres – some contributions are written in a scholarly style, others in a narrative or even personal style – which makes the book readable for a non-specialist audience as well.

1 During his tenure as chief editor, in 2012, the magazine had attracted broad attention with a harsh critique of Pope Benedict XVI.



One of the topics which appears several times throughout the contributions is authenticity. At a time marked by the significant “presence” of a second, *virtual reality* (or, even better, virtual realities), people long for institutions and leaders with “authenticity”, understood as unambiguous coherence and continuity in speech and action.

Peter Szyszka addresses this issue directly in his article. He frames “authenticity” in opposition to “identity”, locating identity on the side of the subject (or, as he would say with a systemic approach, a system) and authenticity on the side of the surroundings, meaning the *images* which others have of the system. These images always contain suppositions concerning the expected behavior of the particular system. Whereas identity remains the same, expectations bound to a conception of authenticity vary according to the concrete circumstances of the particular group or person. In Szyszka’s conception, authenticity is less about coherence in speech and action (as proposed above) than about the coherence of speech and action with the ideas of a particular group. In conclusion he therefore proposes that “authenticity” as such, as an evident quality, does not exist. Such differing expectations of the pope’s office and its representative have always been a fact. What has changed is the role of mass media in producing formative images of authenticity. Szyszka considers whether the Vatican consciously controls this production of images to be a secondary question, since “it is not facts but opinion about facts which influences our thoughts and deeds” (288).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, at the end he illustrates the images associated with the programmatic name chosen by Pope Francis as strategically directed by Radio Vatican. Through it related Pope Francis’s first public acts to the historical features of Saint Francis of Assisi, Radio Vatican consciously shaped “reality” (in the sense of “opinion about facts”) and concentrated the audience’s attention and expectations about the pope’s authenticity on the problem of poverty. However, in line with his concept of authenticity, Szyszka concludes that “no pope can be Francis” (293), since not only the images associated with “Francis” but also the question of how to deal with poverty (as well as what is meant by “poverty”) evokes a considerable number of different expectations.

Insight into how our images and expectations concerning authenticity are generated is deepened by the contribution by Petia Genkova. Picking up Hans Mummenedey’s theory of impression management, she provides analytical tools by differentiating between assertive and defensive techniques used by public persons (such as the pope) to convey or nurture an intended impression via mass media. Whereas with assertive techniques the subject tries to produce or effect a particular impression in the public’s mind, defensive techniques are

2 All translations from German are mine.

applied to restore an already damaged image. These techniques can further be characterized as either *strategies*, meaning institutionalized actions aimed at the production of long-term impressions, or *tactics*, which designates spontaneous actions and gestures. In any case, a prototypical figure of representation like the pope bundles the impressions we have of a complex institution like the Roman Catholic Church, fostering recognition, but also supports the temptation to simplify reality and ignore divergent information. Nevertheless, despite all efforts at impression *management*, our concrete opinions are shaped by many other conditions as well, such as individual personality or even our current mood. Such analysis confirms Szyszka's thesis that "the pope" does not exist, echoing the statement from the introduction of the book that "only the pope knows the pope" (9). This might also be the reason for the wide range of images of different popes, above all of the three most recent popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis), which the contributions in this anthology provide. One might not immediately recognize that Hans Küng and Stanisław Dziwisz are both writing about Pope John Paul II. While Dziwisz presents him as a man deeply devoted to prayer, with a high esteem for women and especially well able to attract youth, Hans Küng draws parallels between John Paul II and his contemporary President Ronald Reagan and points out the conservative and politically problematic sides to the religious leader.

While we will do well to bear these thoughts on perspectivity in writing in mind, we can still enjoy the other contributions, such as those concerning the popes' contrasting styles of relating to mass media. Hubert Knoblauch, for instance, analyzes how the broadcasting of religious mass events has changed by comparing the video record of the visit of John Paul II to Vienna in 1998 with that of the visit of Benedict XVI to Berlin in 2011. His thesis that the religious performances of these two events diverge significantly does not concern only their liturgical styles, with the integration or exclusion of popular elements such as clapping or popular chants, for he also notes a fundamental transformation of religious acting itself through the phenomenon of mediatization. With mediatization he means not simply "the substitution of corporeal action through a process of [digital] media" but rather the "transformation of the structure of actions through the integration of technical media" (190) – more an intensification of communication than its dissolution. He illustrates this thesis with an analysis of the roles of the audiences who appear in the broadcasts. In 1998, the camera focuses on the liturgical celebration in order to deliver it a TV audience and there is very little space for shots of the audience. By contrast, in 2011, the audience and individuals receive much more attention, and members of the audience also record themselves and the event. These phenomena change behavior and, as Knoblauch states, lead to new forms of spirituality. One can recognize behaviors similar to those observed at non-religious mass entertainment

events or in response to meeting a celebrity. Knoblauch argues that mass media support the development of forms of “popular religion” (184).

The pope as popstar is a notion which appears in several contributions. Peter Fuchs writes explicitly on the phenomenon of pop, which has become a frequently deployed frame for contemporary thinking and perceptions. He characterizes this “execution and symbol of modernity” (145) as impressive in producing novelties and trends in all cultural spheres while at the same time functioning as “machinery” (144) to deal with the world’s transiency by pointing hedonistically at the body and its ability for emotional and aesthetical experience and enjoyment. In its mere immanence, pop works with techniques of exaltation to create glamour and singularity. However, its most significant feature is its fundamental homogenization in the sense of exchangeability: the popstar is not an absolute celebrity – he or she can be uninteresting tomorrow. The exaltation of a person is random and certainly not eternal. Such homogenization and the recurrence of total immanence are problematic for the church’s mediation of the absolute truth, yet Fuchs discovers a perhaps surprising number of connections between pop and church. Without going into great detail, he states that the church is already adapting features of pop culture that seem beneficial to it. I would say that one can see this happening in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, for instance, in which emotion and popular aesthetics play a significant role while their members continue to cling to strong identificatory references (e.g. the concrete community). Fuchs proposes that in the institution of the pope, the Catholic Church already has “preadaptive advances” (145)<sup>3</sup> at its disposal that could probably be elaborated through their convergence with the phenomenon of pop.

It is helpful to consider how the pope has already gained the status of a star – even if only fictitiously. Marcus Stiglegger examines the role of the papacy in entertainment media and analyzes the iconic presence of the pope in film. In addition to legends concerning the female Pope Joan and discussion of Pius XII’s relationship with Nazi Germany, the most prominent motif in this medium is of the Holy Father as a tragic figure who can only fail in his task of representing Christ on earth. The discrepancy between the personal worldly existence and the task of holding a highly symbolic, not to say mythological, office predisposes the pope to serve as a perfect central figure for tragicomical narrative material. Which brings us back to the question of authenticity.

This volume can shed only limited light on this wide-ranging complex of themes. The contributions make evident the many different perspectives from which one can approach the combination of the terms “pope” and “media”. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to hear – in addition to personal expe-

3 English original.

riences with the papacy of John Paul II by authors from Poland – voices from other continents, especially from Latin America, to better understand how the papacy of Pope Francis is perceived and mediated on his home continent. Additionally, one has to wonder why there are only two women among the 25 authors. Moreover, the contributions focus largely on TV broadcasts, films and newspaper articles. For the pope to be adequately addressed as the *subject* of media, examination of his online presence would have been enriching. For instance, what is the effect of the video messages from Pope Francis shared on Facebook or of the other channels of communication that the Vatican uses for reaching young people nowadays? Nevertheless, the book provides a diverse view of a topical subject and is of interest not just to theologians, for it intertwines media theory, psychology, theories of power, linguistics, aesthetics and many more approaches. The personal and essayist articles of renowned authors and public figures make the anthology a very pleasant read. I can therefore recommend this book to a broad readership beyond the scholarly community.

## Book Review

### Mathew P. John, *Film as Cultural Artifact* Religious Criticism of World Cinema

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017, 148 pages,  
ISBN: 978-1-5064-2169-8

An interdisciplinary endeavor, Mathew P. John's study *Film as Cultural Artifact* attempts to draw on methods and theories of cultural anthropology and theology in order to analyze film's role in intercultural dialogue and deepen the theological understanding of religion in film. The use of an integrated methodological framework including theological critique, ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological analysis, he argues, will allow for "a more holistic reading of religion from world cinema" (1). The author applies his theoretical and methodological insights to analysis of the Elements trilogy by Deepa Mehta, in particular the last film of the trilogy, *WATER* (CA/IN 2005).

The author begins with a discussion of the parallels between film and religion as "narrative[s] of culture" (9) that are world- and meaning-making. Religious criticism of film will pay attention to the role of religion in the meaning-making processes in which the film engages, with a specifically theological approach being explicit about the normative elements of such critical analysis and about the transcendental horizon in which the analysis takes place. Film thus becomes a potential space of God's revelation in and to culture, whose movements the analyst follows in an open, dialogical attitude which begins with analysis of the film qua film, presupposing a mutual critique and enrichment throughout the dialogical encounter.

While these first two chapters are firmly grounded in previous research in the field of film and theology, in chapter three John offers an innovative contribution in the combination of this theological approach with anthropological and ethnographic methodologies that push further the understanding of how film and religion interact as cultural meaning-making narratives. John describes films as cultural documents available to ethnographic studies: "a *fictional story* is being *performed* to create *visual representations* of culture" (35). Cultural exegesis, the methodology developed by John, then looks at film in order to understand and interpret culture. Specifically, the author works with a combination

of methods that allow analysis of the work itself, its context of production and its reception, focusing on how culture, and especially the religious dimension of a culture, are represented and understood. This includes virtual participant observation, in which the viewer enters the world of the film to participate in its culture, combined with auteur criticism, which helps uncover the meaning of the film intended by the filmmaker and understand choices and biases in the filmic representations, and context criticism, the author's term for analysis of the reception of the film studied through focus groups and expert interviews.

The particular field of application of this methodology is world cinema as a space for intercultural and interreligious encounter when viewers enter into another culture through the story told and performed in a film. Chapter four offers a brief introduction to world cinema as the cinema(s) of all cultural contexts, which, while valuable and necessary, is too brief and lacks analytical and theoretical depth. The description of Bollywood as a production context and a genre offers some interesting insights in view of the case study of the Elements trilogy, but a problematization of the term as well as a critical analysis of its potential are necessary.

The second half of the volume, chapters five to eight, is dedicated to analysis of the Elements trilogy, and specifically the film *WATER*. The author applies the methodology developed in the first part, starting with detailed analysis of the conditions of production and authorial intentions as derived from an interview with Mehta. Here, a discussion of the "diasporic gaze" of Mehta as an Indian woman living in Canada is especially interesting as this situation combines both emic and etic perspectives in a complex relationship which often leads to a controversial reception in the country whose culture is represented. In fact, Mehta's work has been criticized in India for exoticizing and denigrating Indian culture and, especially, victimizing Indian women. Feminist and decolonial criticisms of Mehta's films discussed by the author provide a glimpse of the multiple layers that the country's colonial past and continued relationships with former colonial powers as well as neo-colonial dynamics have created. A more detailed theoretical reflection, taking into account post- or decolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (whose thoughts on *suttee*, the sacrificial burning of a widow alongside her husband's body, would have been especially important for the analysis of *WATER*), would have provided more depth to the author's account.

In chapter six, the author combines an analysis of the film's representation of the stigmatization and deprivation of widows in 1930s colonial India based on ethnographic studies with the outcomes of focus groups and interviews about the reception of the film in 21st century India. The combination of two different methodological steps is not helpful because it leads to the underlying implication that while Mehta represents the cultural situation adequately (or maybe even authentically), given the ethnographic studies the author consults, view-



ers today are critical, maybe unjustly so, of the implications of the film regarding the situation of women and the role of religion in India then and now. While the author acknowledges a multifaceted reception that distinguishes between the film and what it says about “India then” and “India now” and affirms the possibility of different readings, there seems to be an implied “correct” reading that acknowledges that the representation is “authentic” (an expectation that the author had problematized in earlier chapters about ethnographic research) and has a critical relevance for the social context of India today. The author points out, rightly so, that both the filmmaker’s intent and audiences’ responses are tinted by ideological presuppositions; perhaps it would also have been fair to add that the scholar’s analysis, too, is not perfectly objective.

In the concluding chapter, the author focuses on a religious analysis of the film, its treatment of the multireligious context of India (and Pakistan) with all its tensions, its references to different schools of Hinduism and its universal message about the relationship of “faith” (or institutionalized religion with specific traditions, practices and regulations) and conscience, with the individual conscience as the place where the value of traditions will be decided.

The volume concludes with three appendices (ethnographic films; Christ figures; film analysis of narrative, image and sound) whose relevance for the previous study is not entirely clear.

The author’s combined ethnographic and theological approach does justice to film and religion as narratives of meaning- and world-making, and thus as cultural processes. The understanding of entering a film’s world as an activity of virtual participant observation (and the anthropological analysis of the data derived from this observation) and ethnographic methods in the analysis of reception provide particularly interesting contributions to the field of film and theology. Overall, however, the study only scratches the surface and would benefit from more in-depth reflections on issues like, in no particular order, the scholar’s own presuppositions and potential biases in the work of analysis; the presence of divergent views in the reception of the film; the post- and decolonial theoretical underpinnings of the project; the comparative theological project of the encounter of Hinduism and Christianity in the theological analysis; and the broader potential of world cinema for theological analysis from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, the volume provides interesting reading both for those interested in the methodological and theoretical development of research in film and theology and for those interested more specifically in Mehta’s Elements trilogy.

## FILMOGRAPHY

WATER (Deepa Mehta, CA/IN 2005).

## Film Review

### FIRST REFORMED (Paul Schrader, US 2017)

Most of the initial critical response to Paul Schrader's latest film has largely ignored the elephant in the room: the extensive influence of *JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (*DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*, Robert Bresson, FR 1951) and *NATT-VARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963) on the film. This review seeks to remedy this failing by analysing *FIRST REFORMED* through an emphasis on its relationship with these two films. This approach functions on three levels, which this review will explore sequentially: narrative, thematic concern and form.

The plot of *FIRST REFORMED* is best summarised by considering these two major influences. Indeed, Schrader's pastiche of these two films is to transpose Bresson's protagonist from *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* into the scenario that challenges Bergman's protagonist at the beginning of *WINTER LIGHT*: Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) is Schrader's conflicted minister and, like Bresson's priest, he suffers simultaneously from a crisis of faith and from stomach pain caused by cancer. The events of the film are set in motion when – just as in *WINTER LIGHT* – a young wife brings her reluctant husband to Toller for counselling. Whereas Bergman's troubled husband despairs at the threat of nuclear war, Schrader's husband, Michael (Philip Ettinger), is an eco-activist tormented by the threat of climate change. With prophetic urgency, he argues that it is immoral to bring a child into the world because an environmental cataclysm is imminent. Bent on this apocalyptic vision, he reveals he wants his pregnant wife, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), to abort their unborn child.

From this point in the narrative, Schrader documents the events of the next few weeks, leading up to the climactic dedication service for his church. Central to this narrative is Toller's own struggle with faith and his theological beliefs, as well as the instability of various personal issues, such as his relationship with a colleague with whom he once shared a romantic past. The catalyst for all of this is Toller's encounter with environmental activism, his theological interpretation of the ecological crisis and his conflict with the worldly forces that are simultaneously responsible for this crisis and for the financing of his church. Over these weeks, two more events occur that trigger Toller's unravelling. First, Mary discovers a suicide vest that it appears her husband intends to use in an act of

eco-terrorism. Second, upon realising the vest has been discovered, Mary's husband ends his life brutally with a shotgun. From here, as he grapples with the environmental issues that led to this suicide, Toller descends into radicalism, apparently conceiving a plot to use the suicide vest himself and commit a similar act of eco-terrorism. His rationale is at the same time starkly understandable and completely unsanctionable, and the viewer is left to wait as the film moves inexorably towards the dedication service, which seems to be Toller's target.

At face value *FIRST REFORMED* is a film about the place of religion in a modern age when worldly forces like politics, money and industry dominate our existence. However, the film's deepest thematic concern is with the struggle for faith, characterised through the problem of spiritual self-neglect. Schrader demonstrates this simply and powerfully: the protagonist's malnourishment is used to represent spiritual malnourishment. Toller subsists on a meagre diet of bread and alcohol, which Schrader presents in such a way as to pervert the eucharistic allusion inherent in this aesthetic. This is clear from one particular image in the film, where, in an early scene, Toller sits alone in his stark kitchen, dipping bread into a bowl of whisky. Schrader's wide angle and long take serve to isolate Toller in this shot; there is no sense of communion in the act, only a profound sense of aloneness. This is compounded by the austere editing and use of sound, especially the heightened sound effects of the mundane elements of the scene, like the scratching of the threads as the bottle cap is unscrewed. Furthermore, by substituting whisky for wine, Schrader retains the façade of the eucharistic allusion while stripping it of its substance and its interiority. The effect of this is to evacuate the act of its spirituality, and so to pervert the eucharistic image of spiritual nourishment.

The consequence of this diet adds another level to Schrader's symbolic connection of Toller's spiritual and bodily health. As the film progresses, his physical health deteriorates as a sign of his unravelling spiritual health and, incubated in his isolated and conflicted psyche, sin surfaces. Toller's spiralling descent into radicalism coincides with the rapid failing of his body; his racking cough and bloody stools become outward signs of an inward spiritual sickness. Yet the film climaxes with a moment of astounding self-realisation, where this sickness is acknowledged as sinfulness. Just as Toller is about to go through with his act of mass murder, Mary arrives unexpectedly to attend the dedication service. Her arrival opens his eyes to what he is about to do, and the psychological horror causes Toller to spiritually disintegrate. Raving, he wraps barbed wire around his torso so tightly that it draws blood. It is a moment of terrible self-flagellation, which emerges from the impulse for penance but fails drastically. However, the ending is not void of redemptive hope. This redemption is never explicit, and the film's ending is deliberately ambiguous: Toller, wrapped in barbed wire and – for the first time in the film – clothed all in white, prepares to end his life;

suddenly, Mary appears in the room. It is unclear how she passed the locked door; in fact it is uncertain whether she is even there and if this is not all an illusion created by Toller in his delirium. Vision or not, her appearance causes Toller to desist from suicide. The two embrace and the camera whirls around them as they kiss. Unexpectedly, Schrader departs from the reserved and austere style of camerawork and music he had employed up until this moment. The spinning shot continuously circles the two of them and the music from the church swells until the most abrupt of cuts, with which the film incongruously ends, and the viewer is left in stasis with silence and unanswered questions. Was Mary's appearance an act of grace? Is redemption even possible at this point? In the end, the questions that matter are not narrative questions; "what really happened" seems inconsequential, and the ambiguity of the ending leads to more interesting questions about the state of Toller and the possibility of salvation, if indeed there is any such hope.

Thematically, then, the influence of *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* and *WINTER LIGHT* is evident in the questions the film raises about faith and doubt, as well as in the explicitly theological themes of redemption and Christological passion. Yet Schrader expands a multivalent dialogue between these two films even in the smaller details of *FIRST REFORMED*. There is Toller's profound inability to pray, which Schrader draws out of Bresson's film and throws into relief against an atmosphere of doubt akin to *WINTER LIGHT*. There is also the agonising relationship Toller has with a former lover, where a loathing is articulated in nearly the exact manner it is by Bergman's priest. There is even a perfect symmetry between the suicide event in *WINTER LIGHT* and its counterpart in *FIRST REFORMED*: the same location and even the same tool of self-destruction.

Schrader's most significant departure from Bresson and Bergman is his engagement with contemporary socio-political and theological issues. A theology of the environment is prominent, instantiated by Toller's question "Can God forgive us for what we have done?" Schrader frequently employs real footage of environmental abuse: plastic waste, oil spills and other icons of our failed stewardship. Ecclesiology is also examined, especially through the contrast of Toller's small church and the megachurch that funds it. The former is jokingly referred to as "the gift shop" in the film, while one character says that the latter "feels more like a business". Most challenging of all, perhaps, is the film's analysis of religion's dependence on money (in this case industrial money made by exploiting the environment). However, the film only presents these issues superficially, raising them in rudimentary form rather than exploring them with any significant insight. While Schrader's raising of these questions is interesting, it is frustrating that the film does not explore their true depth. For example, in one scene Toller is challenged by a youthful evangelical in such a way that the shadow of prosperity theology looms just out of shot. Yet, rather than flesh

out this particular theological debate, Schrader leaves the viewer with only a superfluous caricature of it, so that the episode becomes entirely about Toller's character and not about the theological context to this conflict. This scene, and many like it, renders the film slightly vacuous: at face value, it appears to offer genuine engagement with some urgent theological and political problems; in reality, such issues are merely paid lip service and serve only to contextualise the protagonist's motivations.

Yet beyond such thematic inspiration and narrative impetus, the influence of Bresson extends to the film's structure and form: like Bresson, Schrader positions his protagonist's journal at the heart of his storytelling. Interestingly, unlike Bresson, Schrader introduces his protagonist's journal in a highly affected manner. Whereas the journal in *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST* seems an organic narrative device (and a central inheritance from Georges Bernanos's novel), the journal in *FIRST REFORMED* is introduced as a spiritual exercise, the writing of which will last for one year, after which it will be destroyed: Toller will write in unbroken prose, forbidding himself from crossing out words and sentences so that, without any space for the oblation of thoughts he regrets or else would suppress, he is forced to confront himself psychologically, without self-indulgence. The effect is prayerful and contemplative; it is spiritual in the truest sense of a bared soul, insofar as it is bared not outwardly but inwardly and becomes the crucible for the central struggle with faith in the film.

Perhaps Bresson's most significant influence on the film, though, is stylistic. In the early 1970s, Schrader devoted a third of his book *Transcendental Style in Film*<sup>1</sup> specifically to the work of Robert Bresson, whom Schrader identified as a filmmaker who embodied transcendental style. As with other forms of transcendental art, transcendental style in film is an attempt to contemplate the transcendent and express the concept of the "holy other" through its art. The key elements of this style permeate Bresson's films and are readily perceptible in *FIRST REFORMED*: the long take, where action is spurned in favour of inertia; minimalist editing, where the director delays the cut and holds on to shots longer than the subject dictates; austere camerawork, which eschews conventional coverage in order to pursue a stillness in the frame that reflects the stillness and contemplative atmosphere of the film. These techniques are the bare bones of transcendental style as Schrader articulated it in his critical theory and it is not surprising that he seems to have made *FIRST REFORMED* with aspirations of emulating this style, particularly given the subject matter. I would argue, too, that Schrader is largely successful in this aim. The film is contemplative; it withholds action in order to distance the viewer, while at the same time its focus on the mundane and the everyday details of life draws the viewer into the film in

1 Schrader 2018, first published 1972.

such a way that it engenders introspection and reflection on the film's spiritual themes. The transcendent is never an explicit subject of the film but is alluded to and suspended just out of the picture, anticipated in the long silences of Schrader's slow, meditative shots and intimated in his wide, distanced frames.

In this sense, there is a consonance of style and form with the film's thematic concerns of faith and doubt. *FIRST REFORMED* is a valuable reinterpretation of the narratives and themes that intrigued both Bergman and Bresson some fifty years ago. Moreover, in striving to replicate transcendental style, the film is fascinating insofar as it constitutes the rare occurrence of a theorist's attempt to substantiate their critical theory in a text of their own creation. Whether Schrader achieves this style is open for debate. I would argue that he certainly creates the contemplative and distanced atmosphere typical of the style, but his somewhat rudimentary approaches to complex theological and socio-political issues often undermine his transcendental aims.

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## Festival Review

### 75th International Film Festival Venice

#### Variations on the Theme of Violence

#### Multifaceted Representations of a Ubiquitous Phenomenon in New Films

At age 75, the *Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica* in Venice is the oldest film festival worldwide. It usually shows not only art-house films that can be seen only in repertory cinemas but also bigger productions and blockbusters that will be released in European cinemas over the coming year. Held from 29 August to 9 September in 2018, this anniversary event presented a collection that was rich and demanding for scholars of media and religion. In this review, I focus on the two programmes I watched as a member of the Interfilm Jury: the main session *Venezia 75 Competition* and *Orizzonti Competition*, a programme of art-house productions from all over the world.

The film selections in both categories covered a broad range of topics, styles and genres, but one issue could be found in almost every work – violence. Many of the films in the main competition and *Orizzonti* offered detailed analysis of the many facets of violent human relationships: violence on an individual and collective scale, violence within families or nations, violence in conflict zones or everyday life. Seen from this perspective, Venice Film Festival 2018 offered a great opportunity to reflect on ideas and concepts related to representing violence as a ubiquitous phenomenon in human relationships. This review is conceived as an overview highlighting selected works and their particular contribution to articulating violence.

#### VIOLENCE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

A number of films focused on violence within families. In these works, the family represents the focal point of broader social relationships. *OZEN (THE RIVER)*, Emir Baigazin, KZ/PL/NO (2018) provides a portrait of a family composed of a violent father, a weak, indifferent mother and five brothers, who all live in an isolated house in a desert landscape. The father keeps the family in complete social isolation through a system of self-sufficiency that demands huge physical and psychological exertion. One day, a peculiar young figure brings the family into contact with technology and the contemporary world,



Fig. 1: Film Still OZEN (THE RIVER, Emir Baigazin, KZ/PL/NO 2018), <https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/ozen-il-fiume> [accessed 30.12.2018].

which plunges its members into a vortex of feelings, fears and menaces. The film highlights the strength of the violent familial bonds with an almost immobile camera that impressively but disturbingly reproduces the father's absurd attempt to keep time still (fig. 1).

In the Estonian drama TCHELOVEK KOTORIJ UDIVIL VSEH (THE MAN WHO SURPRISED EVERYONE, Natasha Merkulova / Aleksey Chupov, RU/EE/FR 2018) the family becomes the stage for a violent transformation of the protagonist, a courageous state forest guard. A loving father, cheerful partner and caring son, Egor discovers he has a terminal cancer. The fight against illness and death is represented in parallel with his gender transition. More than his illness, his transition exposes the protagonist to the crude violence of a whole social network. The film combines careful social analysis with surreal moments of a healing ritual. The body is exposed to all kinds of violent and destructive external and inner forces.

Two further films investigate the relationship between domestic and social violence, although they have less in common on the narrative and stylistic level. FRÈRES ENNEMIES (CLOSE ENEMIES, David Oelhoffen, FR/BE 2018) follows the development of two men who as children, growing up in a suburban neighbourhood, had been as close as brothers. As adults, one works as a police officer and



Fig. 2: ROMA (Alfonso Cuarón, MX 2018), <https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/venezia-75-concorso/roma> [accessed 30.12.2018].

the other becomes a delinquent. The thriller explores violence and friendship as two sides of the same coin. Extreme violence characterises everyday life in an area where hope does not seem to be possible; the balance between love and destruction marks the existence of both men, the promoter of justice and the promoter of crime. WERK OHNE AUTOR (NEVER LOOK AWAY, Florian Henckel von Donnersmark, DE 2018) explores the relationship between systematic violence in familial and societal relationships in Germany during the Nazi era over three generations. The body of female family members is the place where systematic and personal violence is perpetuated. The film, which is not very convincing in its narrative or stylistic strategies, articulates the struggle between the destructive power of violence and the liberating energy of love and artistic creativity. Even when using stereotypes and naive assumptions, the film looks for ways to resist and break the chain of endemic violence that can be manifest in a political system or hidden within the intimacy of personal relationships.

The articulation of the devastating effects of social and familial violence and the subversive, strong and effective power of love is the main topic of ROMA (Alfonso Cuarón, MX 2018), the festival's masterpiece. The film, which has an autobiographical dimension, mirrors the atmosphere in Roma, the district in Mexico City where the director grew up. Winner of the Golden Lion and the Signis award (and numerous awards at other festivals worldwide), Roma is a

detailed and powerful portrait of female relationships in a broader family where traditional hierarchies and male power fail to provide order and stability and generate physical, psychological and systemic violence in all aspects of life. Breaking social conventions, the female members of a middle-class family, who include two young indigenous women who work as maids and nannies, have to face crude relationships of violence on many levels of their lives. With unbreakable solidarity and thanks to their capacity to overcome prejudice, they succeed in facing suffering and death and opening up a space of hope. The narrative is strong, without any sentimental concession but very transparent in transmitting a feeling of commitment and profound love. Furthermore, the film is impressive on the aesthetic level. The black-and-white images, which may suggest recollections of the past, use a broad range of visual metaphors. The gaze into the microcosm of the family mirrors the observation of macrocosmic connections (fig. 2).

## VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The role of violence in shaping social relationships is the leitmotif in three outstanding productions from different cultures. The Tibetan film *JINPA* (Pema Tsenden, PRC 2018) is situated in a dreamlike vision. The protagonist Jinpa, a lorry driver, meets a wayfarer with the same name on a vast plain. The film explores the reflections of these two figures, who are trapped in chains of vengeance and violence. Finally, they succeed in liberating themselves from this heavy heritage. The film demands an active interpreter who is ready to engage this poetic but still hermetic work where cultural stereotypes and habits are broken on the narrative and aesthetic levels. *SONI* (Ivan Ayr, IN 2018) is the name of the female protagonist of an Indian drama that focuses on violence between genders in institutions and families. As a diligent policewoman, Soni tries to be guided by justice, equality and solidarity. Her chief, Kalpana, supports her. The two women fight together against violence, indifference and the arbitrariness of habit. The challenges that Soni deals with in her professional life are reproduced in her private and intimate domain. A fresh and in no way banalising analysis of social violence is presented in a comedy set in the middle of the most paradigmatic and complex conflict of the present time. *TEL AVIV ON FIRE* (Sameh Zoabi, LU/FR/BE 2018) traces the production of a soap opera in Ramallah. The protagonist has a job as an apprentice on the set of the successful TV series *Tel Aviv on Fire*, in which a charming Palestinian spy flirts with a Jewish officer. The protagonist, who crosses a checkpoint every day, becomes involved in an intricate network of constraints on his real life and his position as a screenwriter on the set. In this brilliant piece, which won the award of the Interfilm jury, playful jokes and the serious dimensions of social violence are intertwined in a captivating way;



Fig. 3: Film still *TEL AVIV ON FIRE* (Sameh Zoabi, LU/FR/BE 2018), <https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/tel-aviv-fire> [accessed 30.12.2018].

humour aims here at opening up an alternative perspective on the conflict between Muslims and Jews, who in this film consume the same entertainment on television (fig. 3).

## STATE VIOLENCE

A closer look at violence perpetrated by state institutions characterises a wide range of works shows at Venice, such as *SULLA MIA PELLE* (*ON MY SKIN*, Alessio Cremonini, IT 2018) or *LA NOCHE DE 12 AÑOS* (*A TWELVE YEARS' NIGHT*, Álvaro Brechner, ES/AR/UY/FR 2018). The former recounts the real case of Stefano Cucchi, who died a week after his arrest in 2009. The young man, who was involved in the use and sale of drugs, had been brutally beaten by the Italian police when he was arrested. Nobody officially noticed the prisoner's serious condition until he was found dead. The drama reintroduces the case as representative of abusive state violence and contextualises it in a social situation where it is barely possible to maintain trust in institutions and the state. *LA NOCHE DE 12 AÑOS* reconstructs the imprisonment of three Tupamaro fighters in Uruguay in 1973. During the military dictatorship, the prisoners were isolated, tortured and heavily mistreated for 12 years. The film follows the profound and traumatic transformations of the protagonists, who are dehumanised by this long-lasting,



extreme experience. One of the three, Pepe Mujica, later became president of Uruguay. Both films depict with great precision – in different times as well as against diverse cultural and political backgrounds – the destructive impact of arbitrary state violence upon citizens. On the aesthetic level, the body of the victims is presented as the field where the brutal annihilation of the prisoner is performed on both the physical and symbolic levels, with the camera often very close to the naked, wounded bodies of the protagonists. The bare body, therefore, becomes a strong filmic metaphor for the fragility of the human being facing uncontrolled state violence.

The drama PEETERLOO (Mike Leigh, GB/US 2018) represents a different way of dealing with the issue of state violence. The focus lies on the massacre of people who were demonstrating for democracy and women rights in Manchester in 1819. Hopes for change and equality were drowned in blood as the conservative forces retained power. Although the film is presented as a historic drama, it is striking because of its relevance today (as if intended for contemporary readers of the newspaper the *Guardian*, which was founded following this massacre) and its implicit reflection on the fragility of democracy. As in LA NOCHE DE 12 AÑOS, it shows that institutional violence will be overcome and democracy established.

While these films approach the destructive impact of state violence from the perspective of the victims, THE FAVOURITE (Yorgos Lanthimos, GB/IE/US 2018) scrutinises the subtle rules of power and the use of violence for establishing hierarchies in an all-female historic drama set in early 18th-century England at the court of Queen Anne. The film is impressive for the acting, its costumes and camera. It makes a clear statement about the capacity of mastering [sic] and controlling cruelty as a powerful means of (female) power.

## VIOLENCE IN WAR, TERRORISM AND GENOCIDE

The annihilating power of violence in war is analysed in the Syrian production YOM ADAATOU ZOULI (THE DAY I LOST MY SHADOW, Soudade Kaadan, SY/LB/FR/QA 2018). Alone with her child, Sana tries to give him the impression of a normal everyday life within a chaotic city where nothing seems possible anymore. The search for a gas cylinder is transformed into a never-ending journey between the different parts of the conflict. In this nightmare, people cannot escape annihilation. The film emphasises these destructive aspects by showing how the characters slowly lose their shadows, a poetic but incisive image for blurring the boundary between existence and annihilation, between reality and afterlife (fig. 4).

KRABEN RAHU (MANTA RAY, Puttiphong Aroonpheng, TH 2018) is a hermetic Thai narrative at the edge between everyday survival and otherworldly lights shining in the impenetrable forest where the bodies of victims of genocide are





Fig. 4: Film still ADAATOU ZOULI (*THE DAY I LOST MY SHADOW*, Soudade Kaadan, SY/LB/FR/QA 2018), <https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/orizzonti/yom-adaatou-zouli-il-giorno-che-ho-perso-la-mia-ombra> [accessed 30.12.2018].

lying on the ground. The lives of the protagonists, who are not situated in a social context, are represented as interchangeable. The film expects the audience to scrutinise the surreal and coarse portraits of the protagonists by focusing on the images and it refuses to provide narrative explanations. The existence of the characters depends on the fragile balance between (casual) empathy and submission to an invisible violence whose pervasive reach can be fragmentarily perceived.

In this series of filmic productions dealing with war, genocide and terrorism, *22 JULY* (Paul Greengrass, NO/IS 2018) deserves to be highlighted as a positive and hopeful contribution which resists resignation and makes a clear statement in favour of democracy and solidarity as means to overcome blind and arbitrary violence. The work reconstructs, by means of fiction, the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik in Oslo and on the island of Utøya. The systematic killing of the young people on the island and the efforts to elaborate the trauma in a public, democratic process are told from the perspective of an adolescent who survives the attack with severe injuries. The film offers a precise portrait of the physical and emotional impact of terrorism at the individual, familial and social levels. Furthermore, it can be read as a plea for the liberating power of public discourse and democratic procedures in overcoming violent annihilation.

## THE WESTERN AS A COMPENDIUM OF VIOLENCE IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

I conclude this overview on the topic of violence in selected films presented at the Venice Festival by mentioning two Westerns I count among the most convincing movies at the festival, *THE SISTERS BROTHERS* (Jacques Audiard, FR/BE/RO/ES 2018) and *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS* (Joel Coen / Ethan Coen, US 2018). In these films, violence is the language of communication in all dimensions of life. The law of the strongest is the only way to establish order and provide orientation in these dystopian worlds that push the boundaries of the genre into new territories. *THE SISTERS BROTHERS* explores the challenge and precarious tension created by the power of hegemony based on violence, on one side, and individual emotions and scientific innovation, on the other. Charles and Eli Sisters are the most cruel and most skilled killers of the whole West, but they are tired of their job and are looking for rest after a long life of crime. The encounter with a scientist who has a new chemical formula to find gold in rivers radically changes their views on existence and relationships. Inserting elements of comedy, the film wonderfully depicts the challenges of understanding and feeling at ease in a world that is transformed by innovation and scientific progress. The collection of short episodes in *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS*



Fig. 5: Film still *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS* (Joel and Ethan Coen, US 2018), <https://www.labiennale.org/it/cinema/2018/selezione-ufficiale/venezia-75-concorso/ballad-buster-scruggs> [accessed 30.12.2018].

also investigates the fine line between violence and irony in the Western. This film represents variations on the motif of violence as a fundamental dimension of the human condition. Against the background of the conquest of the West, the human search for wealth and domination regulates everything; greed and hunger for power are represented in ironical ways, in landscapes where humans are more likely to be destitute than successful (fig. 5). The film re-enacts six short stories from an old book, and this premise confers a fictional and nostalgic character on the whole work that in fact represents a sharp and very realistic criticism of human society. Although there is an eternal struggle for violent domination and hierarchies of power, at the very end humanity is composed of equals: the film concludes with a carriage transporting a very diverse group of people beyond the door that leads to death.

## AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION?

The cinema production of 2018 presented in Venice offers a rich cinematographic encyclopaedia of many facets of violence in diverse narratives, styles and genres. Violence is scrutinised in various ways – as social criticism, in the form of detached descriptions, irony and satire or through alienation. Religion is not always directly linked to the motif of violence; it can appear in the background or foreground and be associated with isolated religious symbols, with aspects of the narrative or with stylistic features. When it plays a central role, religion appears as an identity marker more than a whole symbol system. In the portraits of the scattered existence of protagonists in a violent scene, religion appears in a fragmented way. It is not an obligatory cause of violence nor is it an antidote to it. If we consider all those films as a contemporary artistic discourse on violence and power relations, the link to religion can be reconstructed by considering the human condition in a world where humans are represented as the perpetrators and victims of violence. In this sense, the festival can be seen as a laboratory in which viewers can engage with representations of violence as an inevitable dimension of societal coexistence. The audience becomes a fundamental part of this filmic experiment: it has to assume responsibility as an active interpreter of filmic fictions who seeks to cross the boundaries between invention, creativity and a sharp, critical audio-visual insight into the contemporary world.

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