

THE TALKIES



ON *THE LAST TEMPTATION*

by Bruce Bawer

Given all the furor, it seemed a sure bet that *The Last Temptation of Christ* would at least be interesting to watch. Wrong. It's sheer torture—one of those deadly boring films, like Barbra Streisand's *A Star is Born*, that drag along so numbingly that you get the feeling they want you to walk out. And believe me, I would've cleared out of *The Last Temptation* after twenty minutes or so if I hadn't already decided to write about it.

Fundamentalists who are lucky enough not to have seen this picture decry it as a willful, indeed cynical, act of sacrilege, a crass exploitation of Christianity. Not at all. Sacrilegious this film may be, but not intentionally so: on the contrary, it's the work of people who plainly thought they were doing something devout. After all, when competent movie people set out to make a few bucks off of Christianity, they don't turn out a picture like *The Last Temptation*; they give us crowd-pleasers like *The Robe*, *Quo Vadis*, *Ben Hur*—glossy platitudinous spectacles marked by stilted dialogue, excellent posture, syrupy musical scores, and a thoroughgoing (if thoroughly fake) reverence toward Holy Writ (or, more accurately, toward the crudest popular twentieth-century American conceptions thereof).

No, *The Last Temptation* seeks not to exploit Jesus but to know him, to understand him; if those old Hollywood Biblical movies held Christ at arm's length, this film—based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, and directed by Martin Scorsese from a script by Paul Schrader (his collaborator on *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*)—tries to climb into Christ's skin, to get inside his head. This is a noble motive, perhaps; but it's also an exceedingly dangerous one, for to break down the barriers that those vulgar old Hollywood epics tacitly observed is to risk a degree of vulgarity—and, yes, a degree of profanity—that even Cecil B.

DeMille never approached. So it is that *The Last Temptation*, whose advertising would lead us to believe that it manifests a dignity, intelligence, and even godliness unprecedented in Jesus movies, in fact takes the genre to new depths of bad taste, fatuity, and moral offensiveness.

Willem Dafoe, who will be remembered for his portrayal of the Christ figure Sergeant Elias in *Platoon*, plays the Nazarene as a high-strung hippie—an oversensitive Haight-Ashbury type who spends most of his time whining to his apostles about his inner conflicts, confusions, doubts, and longings, and having impromptu rap sessions with them about such things as the relative importance of the soul and the body. (You keep expecting the boys to pass around a joint.) He's Jesus as seen through the filter of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, of est and Transcendental Meditation, of Jim Morrison and John Lennon. When he's not whining he alternates between crying jags and shrill pronouncements about sin and death and the hereafter—none of which is in the least inspiring, for the script deliberately robs the Gospel of its poetry. When some men attempt to stone an adulteress to death, Christ doesn't say, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her"; no, he picks up a stone and says: "Who has never sinned? Who? Whoever that is, come here, and throw these." In the Sermon on the Mount, he doesn't say, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." No, he says, "The

meek will be blessed. And the righteous will be blessed too." With an act like this, the real Jesus would never have made it to the big time. (This Jesus doesn't even know his grammar: he says "if I was" instead of "if I were," uses *like* for *as*, and announces that "it's me the prophets preached about.")

The idea here is clearly to remove Christ from the pages of Scripture, to make him more human. (The film shows him, for example, dancing at a wedding: Jesus as regular guy.) But what results is one of the most inarticulate protagonists ever to fill a movie screen. Lack of eloquence, you see, equals sincerity. This is a Lite Jesus—a timid, sniveling, banal, seedy-looking, not particularly bright Saviour who's utterly without majesty or depth or what junior high school teachers used to call "leadership qualities." There's no sense of profound love or goodness here, no sense of a huge soul in torment. There's not even any *warmth*. We're supposed to see him struggling with temptation, struggling against the necessity of his final sacrifice ("Do I really have to die?" he whimpers. "Is there any other way?"); yet he's not only tempted but weak, surly, vacillating, and impotent: a hollow vessel who occasionally has delusions, hears "voices," and acts like a guy on acid at the Port Authority in New York. Speaking in public, he usually doesn't even know what he's saying: "When those soldiers were torturing Magdalene I wanted to kill them and then I open my mouth and out comes the word love. . . . I don't understand."

When he's with Mary Magdalene (who is played by the lovely and gifted, but ever-spacey, Barbara Hershey), the two of them look and behave like one of those aging flower-child couples who live in Topanga Canyon, drive around in pick-up trucks, and analyze each other in pop-psych fashion ("You were hanging onto your mother," Mary Magdalene tells Christ, "then you were hanging onto me, now you're hanging onto God").

You get the feeling that Dafoe and Hershey's way of getting into the characters was to decide that Christ and Mary Magdalene must have been pretty much like George Harrison and Mia Farrow after a visit to their Indian guru. Lennon-style homilies abound: preaching his New Order, Jesus says, "All I'm saying is the change will happen with love, not with killing." And sex figures importantly; to Scorsese and company, the interesting thing about Jesus is that he was *human*, and to be human, in their view, is to be preoccupied with sex and self-gratification. Thus, in the course of his fantasy marriage to Mary, sister of Lazarus, Jesus tells her: "Don't ever leave me. I'm happy." And having reached (in that fantasy) a ripe old age, he tells a cantankerous St. Paul: "I enjoy my life—for the first time I'm enjoying it." (Jesus as "Tonight Show" guest!)

The Last Temptation is overacted throughout; Dafoe and Hershey in particular seem incapable of saying hello without putting on an intense Actors Studio expression. The portrayal of Christ's followers is strictly revisionistic: where the old Biblical movies presented them as gentle and soft-spoken, possessed of an inner peace, all the adherents of Christ in this film—John the Baptist, the disciples, St. Paul—are loud and pushy and obnoxious, selling salvation as if it were a cheap suit. The film is freighted with obtrusive dissolves, excessive atmosphere (camels, turbans, sand), and a musical score that relies too heavily on ditsy recorder music and a hard-rock African drumbeat; it contains too much talk and too little narrative drive;



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and, like all of Scorsese's movies, it offers violence and gore aplenty, an abundance of yukky things that force you to look away from the screen.

But the most troubling thing about the film is that its theology is a mess. Yes, Christ was both human and divine; but a Christ horny for Mary Magdalene and tempted by the dream of a wife and some cute kids is simply

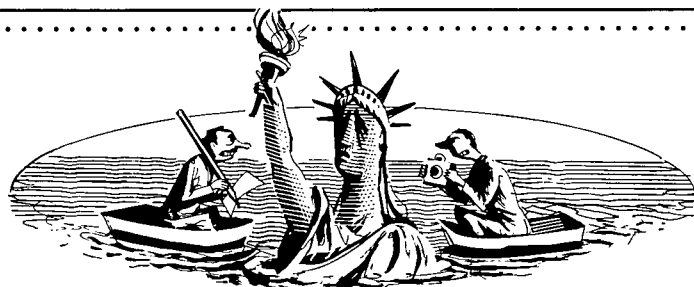
not consistent with Biblical teachings. Nor is a St. Paul who, when Jesus (in his fantasy) identifies himself and demands that he stop preaching, declares, "I don't care whether you're Jesus or not. . . . If I have to crucify you to save the world, I'll do it." To ascribe such a pragmatic view of Christ to St. Paul is indefensible. But then there isn't much intellectual rigor here to speak of—or, for that matter, any real sense of engagement with the idea

of God. When Jesus abandons his fantasy of a married life and accepts his fate on the Cross, you get the impression that he's doing so because it's a good career move.

Silly and offensive though this film is, to be sure, the filmmakers' intentions were patently not frivolous, nor their motives basely pecuniary. Martin Scorsese is a serious artist; he has done extraordinary work (*After Hours* remains one of my favorite films of the eighties);

he is a master when it comes to making movies about whacked-out all-American anti-heroes. His mistake in *The Last Temptation of Christ* was to have taken on a subject extremely ill-suited to his grim, grubby, visceral, violence-obsessed, and utterly contemporary intellect. He has robbed Jesus of historicality, of divinity, of all but the most superficial sort of humanity, and—yes—of a heroic dimension. And what remains, I'm afraid, is not very much at all. □

PRESSWATCH



A SHRINKING WORLD

by Michael Ledeen

It's been a great summer for the media, and we must choose among a cornucopia of goodies. The award for the most fascinating story comes from the Ivory Coast, courtesy of Agence France Press (as will become evident, every country's news agencies reflect the motherland's political and cultural predilections).

ABIDJAN—Police had to rescue a traditional medicine man from a mob of angry fishermen who claimed he had used magic powers to reduce the size of their penises by two-thirds, press reports said yesterday. After the police prevented the two dozen fishermen from lynching him, the irate victims showed incredulous law-enforcement officers their appendages and accused the medicine man of being responsible for the shrinkage. The latter admitted to being responsible and confessed he had approached his victims with offers to restore their members to their former size—for a fee.

In the *Jerusalem Post*, where I ran across this tantalizing item, the headline featured the reaction of the crowd: "Penis shrinker attacked." But this is hardly the most interesting aspect of the story, as the French news agency's reporter must have realized. First is the question of evidence. Did the policemen check the claims of shrinkage? Aside from the fishermen themselves, could anyone verify their claims? And then there is the question of the "traditional medicine man." If he really did the awful deed, what were his methods?

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Had the AFP reporter done a thorough job, the political implications of this story might well be enormous, particularly in the upcoming American elections. For two candidates who suffer from wimpish images, the capacity to enlarge penises magically might make the difference in a close campaign.

How to Apologize to Your Readers
On September 15, the *New York Times* published what might be termed the correction to end all corrections. Entitled "Editors' Note," it told readers that, way back in February, an article on El Salvador had been misleading. First of all, it had given an impression that the information (claiming that two citizens had been murdered by left-wing guerrillas) was based on firsthand knowledge, when in reality the story relied on a local newspaper report plus verbal confirmation from "a representative of a leading human rights organization." According to the note,

The article fell short of The Times's reporting and editing standards. It should not have left the impression that it was based on firsthand interviewing, and it should have explained why firsthand confirmation was not available.

Moreover, at a later date, the human rights representative changed her mind, and "The Times then erred in not making its own determination of the facts." Still later, other journalists determined that much of the *Times*'s account was false, and "again The Times erred in not looking into the matter."

I have been praising the policy of the *Times* in these matters for several

months, and once again I am impressed. The note is a model for the media, for not only does it correct the record, but it clearly states what is being corrected, and why. The reader is told that the *Times* made a mistake, what the mistake was, how the mistake was made, and what the truth seems to be.

There are some at the *Times* who feel that this sort of thing makes the paper look bad, and is somehow demeaning to the *Times*, but I strongly disagree. The role of the media is not to develop an image of infallibility, but rather to help create an informed public. Corrections of this sort are invaluable and, to me at least, add immeasurably to the credibility of the newspaper. I am far more likely to believe the *Times* than newspapers that refuse to issue such statements.

On the other hand, I think that we can do without such masochistic excesses as "the article fell short of The Times's . . . standards." Never mind the agonizing self-reappraisals, please, just give us the facts. But this is a minor quibble. Send another medal to Max Frankel for Honesty in Media.

Jack Anderson and the Ayatollah

I have ignored Jack Anderson for a couple of years, largely because I felt that anyone who wants his articles on the comics page (where the *Washington Post* runs them) should probably be reviewed in the classifieds. Indeed, Anderson has chosen well, for his constant use of allegedly secret information to "prove" commonplaces is one of the more comic aspects of his generally entertaining writing. In mid-

September, however, he tried to be Deep and Thoughtful about the attempts by the Reagan Administration to establish contact with Iranian "moderates" in 1985 and 1986. Rather surprisingly, he concluded that the efforts of North and the others to deal with Rafsanjani and his ilk were wise and laudable, and only failed because of the devious activities of the sinister Manucher Ghorbanifar.

One cannot help but suspect that Anderson was fed this line by those persons (largely officials of the CIA) who drove the unfortunate Ghorbanifar out of the operation in the summer of 1986, thereby guaranteeing that the Iran initiative would fail. Anyone who thought about human nature should have realized that taking the one person in the Iran initiative who knew *everything* (and Ghorbanifar was the only person who had been involved from the very beginning—indeed, he was the man who originally claimed that it was possible to improve relations between the United States and Iran) and throwing him to the wolves would cause Ghorbanifar to take his revenge.

It may be churlish of me to complain about Anderson—after all, it's nice that people are finally coming around to realize not only that we had a serious objective in mind from the very beginning of the Iran initiative, but that it might well have been achieved with better management—but the use of Ghorbanifar as the excuse for the initiative's failure is a bit much. If Anderson is so well plugged in to the secrets of that part of the world, he ought to know
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