

J.J. Snyman & H.P.P. Lötter

The saving of appearances: Denys Arcand's Jesus of Montreal

Abstract

The film Jesus of Montreal consists of an overlaying of stories presenting in a postmodern way the story (S1) of a group of actors' attempt at an interpretation (S2) of an old story, the story of Jesus' life and death (S3). In line with a typical postmodern approach the borders between these parallel narratives are blurred, the various texts become intertexts, the contents of the 'original' text are realized in the lives of the actors apparently without their realizing it. In this contribution the dialectics of Arcand's postmodern procedure is followed up along two lines: firstly, the strategy of the overlaying of three narratives is uncovered. In a second phase, the dialectics of appearance and truth in the overlaying of narratives is discussed.

1. Introductory

One can view Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* as a postmodern version of Thomas á Kempis' *De Imitatione Christe* (The Imitation of Christ). The film, as the director explained, is a representation of what would happen if Jesus should appear in modern day Montreal. The film, however, probes further than a mere adaptation of a story of two thousand years ago to late twentieth century Western culture; it poses the question of what the following of Christ would entail today. How would the message of Jesus affect postmodern humankind? How would the Gospel appear on a talk show? How would the story about a man called Jesus go about the town?

Jesus of Montreal constitutes of an overlaying of stories presenting the story (S1) of a group of actors' attempt at an interpretation (S2) of an old story, the story of Jesus' life and death (S3). Characteristic of a postmodern text the borders between these parallel narratives are blurred, the various texts become intertexts, the contents of the 'original' text are realized in the lives of the actors apparently without them realizing it.

One could contrast Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* with Federico Fellini's *Jesus of Nazareth* to illustrate the distinction between a postmodern and a modern version of an old narrative. Fellini's film is a window on the world of the old narrative. One is conscious of the window Fellini offers, but the window is in a certain sense unobtrusive, because one gets the story more or less as one is accustomed to it. Arcand's film makes one very conscious of the window through which one is having the representation of the old narrative, and the way

the window obtrudes forces or invites the spectator to use it as a tool to reconstruct the old narrative in a new way. In Fellini's film one recognizes vague but familiar representations which the film confirms. In Arcand's film one discovers new narrative implications and the film challenges possibilities of meaning. Fellini's film is a text *denoting* a narrative and presupposing a vague consensus about the way the contents of the narrative should be presented. Arcand's film is a text *connoting* various other texts. It does not presuppose any consensus about the way the other texts should be incorporated into the final reading, because the final reading is delayed through the strategy of a multiple overlaying of narratives. There is a nearly endless interplay of references and connotations (e.g. Jesus' baptism according to the Gospels is referred to by way of the sequence of the advertisement for the perfume, which is significantly called *Esprit numero 7*, connoting the Holy Spirit, perfection and the Old Testament representation of prayers as incense before God, and the connection of all these possible references to the omnipresence of publicity and consumer goods in society).

In this contribution the dialectics of Arcand's postmodern procedure is followed up along two lines: firstly, the strategy of the overlaying of three narratives is uncovered. In a second phase, the dialectics of appearance and truth in the overlaying of narratives is discussed.

2. The strategy of the overlaying of three narratives

The film *Jesus of Montreal* intertwines three narratives about Jesus. The first narrative, which so to speak forms the backbone of the whole strategy, is the one that the viewers themselves have of Jesus – wherever or how they have learnt it (S3). This well-known narrative in Western culture is referred to in the film itself as "the famous of all" narratives, though it is qualified as being one "that we think we know". Arcand, author and director, challenges the traditional interpretations of the narrative about Jesus of Nazareth (S2.1) in his film by means of the narrative about Daniel Coulombe (S1), as well as the narrative that Daniel and his theatre company create as script for the production of a Passion play for the Roman Catholic Church (S2.2).

Coulombe revises the text of a traditional Passion play (S2.1), used by the church for 35 years, at the request of the local priest, Father Leclerc, to create the second narrative about Jesus contained in the film (S2.2). In his revision he uses the latest scientific evidence produced by historians, archaeologists and theologians. In his version of the Passion play the events of the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth are interspersed by interesting historical facts about children in ancient near East, the history of crucifixions in ancient Eastern cultures, styles used by early Christians for the representation of Christ, the dating of the gospels, and the role of magicians and miracles in especially Egypt. This information, as well as the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth, are presented with the following proviso: our knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth is sketchy and therefore people differ radically in their views of him. In this way the film focuses attention on the importance of varying interpretations given to texts – the biblical text included. It is thus suggested that there really is no authorized version of the story of Jesus.

2.1 Analogies: Daniel Coulombe and Jesus of Nazareth

The narrative about Daniel Coulombe (S1) is the encompassing narrative about Jesus – this time it is about Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*. Arcand creates this narrative about *Jesus of Montreal* by suggesting several analogies between the life of Daniel Coulombe and Jesus of Nazareth. Initially these analogies refer mostly to events in the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth, but later on aspects of his doctrines are included as well. Analogies do not mean that identical situations are portrayed, but that some significant resemblances are found in the midst of a host of differences. It is worthwhile to point out these analogies, as they provide at least some of the keys to the understanding of the film.

Several events in the narrative about Jesus of Nazareth find their way into the narrative of Daniel Coulombe's involvement with the Passion play. The first analogy concerns John the Baptist, forerunner of Jesus of Nazareth. In the opening scene a character commits suicide in the closing stages of a play. While preparing and eventually doing it, the character condemns all those people who commit suicide, as "they curse the God who beckons them". Afterwards people rush to congratulate him on his excellent performance, one calling him the "finest actor of your generation". On hearing this he points to Daniel Coulombe whom he thinks deserve that kind of accolade. This gesture alludes to John the Baptist, who defined his role as being the one who prepares the way for the true messenger, the Messiah. Another analogy in this scene becomes apparent when a publicity agent (a woman) states: "I want his head ..." Although she wants to use his face in an advertisement (as one sees near the end of the film in a poster subtitled *L'homme sauvage* – again alluding to John's hermetic existence in the desert), her remark evokes the request by Herod's wife for the beheading of John.

Arcand constructs an analogy between the calling of Jesus of Nazareth and the priest commissioning the play from Coulombe. He asks Coulombe to revive a play that has been written and staged at the church for the past 35 years. The reason for the request is that the Passion play "hasn't been doing well". For the purpose of staging this play, Coulombe selects four actors. His selection of these four actors are analogous to Jesus of Nazareth's calling of his disciples. For example, the actor busy with dubbing a pornographic movie leaves the studio in the middle of a working session. Asked about the people he leaves behind, he answers Coulombe simply, "They'll manage." In the same way the fishermen left their boats to become disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Daniel Coulombe chooses an equal number of men *and women*, unlike Jesus of Nazareth, but similar to Jesus of Nazareth, he chooses people from different occupations: an actress serving meals for poor people, an actor dubbing pornographic movies, an actor doing serious commentary for a documentary on the origin and destiny of the universe, and an unsuccessful, nondescript actress making a living by playing small parts in advertisements. The followers of Jesus were not the famous and mighty people of his day. In a similar vein the majority of Coulombe's troupe is gathered from the lowest walks of life.

Some of Coulombe's personal characteristics are similar to those of Jesus of Nazareth. When asked by Constance where he lives, he answers very indifferently, "Around", which reminds one of the answer Jesus of Nazareth once gave to that question, i.e. that he has no dwelling place. Coulombe also shares the love of Jesus of Nazareth for children, as he is the only one of the actors who gives special attention to Constanze's little girl.

2.2 Analogous events: original narrative and Arcand's narrative

One of the dramatic events in the original narrative of *Jesus of Nazareth* occurs when he drives out people who made the temple a market place. Arcand's rendering of this event is one of the highlights of the film. After the first successful performance of the Passion play Mireille, the advertising model auditions for a beer advertisement. Daniel accompanies her. In the foyer of the building they meet her former boyfriend who immediately says that he did not expect her to come for such auditions any more. He mockingly gives his reason: "Didn't you renounce the world?" This refers to the demand that disciples of Jesus of Nazareth should indeed renounce aspects of this world. Another analogy is his remark: "O, they always travel in pairs," which refers to Jesus of Nazareth sending out his 12 disciples in pairs early in his career.

The auditioning scene is fully developed into an analogy of the temple scene when Mireille has forgotten her bikini and the publicity agent insists that she undress. When she starts undressing, Coulombe jumps up and tries to stop her. The agent tries to intervene and Daniel becomes furious for the way in which Mireille's human dignity is violated. He knocks over the tables covered with expensive filming equipment and chases the men from the building using an electric cord as a whip.

2.3 The Passion reincarnated in twentieth century cultural and social codes

The rehearsals and performances of the Passion play contain many elements from the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth, i.e. elements from the original narrative (S3) and the interpretations of those narratives (S2). Most of this 'raw material' (S2.1 and S3) is re-presented in a revised fashion (S2.2) by the group of actors. Strictly speaking these 'de-dogmatized' reinterpretations cannot be regarded as part of the narrative of Daniel Coulombe, as he only plays the *role* of Jesus of Nazareth in the Passion play. But the success of the Passion play and the attention it gets from the church hierarchy and the media are indeed part of his narrative. Daniel becomes a portrayal of the life of Christ, the story of his life a re-incarnation of the life of Christ. Why could one not say it the other way round, i.e. Daniel becomes a re-incarnation of the life of Christ, the story of his life a portrayal of the life of Christ? This interpretation could not be valid because Daniel never consciously identifies himself with Christ. For the spectator Daniel takes on the features of the narrated Christ. The spectator equates Daniel with the figure of Jesus and sees Daniel *as* Jesus, in the Passion play as well as in the whole story about the production of the Passion play. Consequently the story about the production of the Passion play is giving the old story of the Passion new flesh and bones. Arcand's film is not merely the story of a revival of a Passion play; as the story of a revival of the Passion play it goes one step further: it re-incarnates the Passion in late twentieth century cultural and social codes. For instance, the notion of resurrection and the continuity of life is re-presented in the form of a heart and cornea transplant. Evil is encoded as human denigration.

2.4 The collapsing borderline between narratives

The collapse of the borderline between the narrative of the life of Jesus (S2 and S3) and the narrative about Daniel's life (S3) is visually presented in Daniel's encounter with the

attorney. The attorney presents himself to Daniel as someone who exploits talent, defines dreams, and makes people rich. He tries to convince Coulombe to commercialize his actor's talent and fame in several ways. In a scene where Montreal – and the central business district in particular – is clearly visible, he says to Daniel: "I am trying to show you, with your talent this city is yours." The condition, however, is that Coulombe must subordinate his affairs to the attorney. The similarity with Satan trying to subordinate Christ and to let him forsake his calling by means of bribery, is obvious.

The story of Coulombe's version of the Passion play and the story of which the Passion play is about, collapse once again when it becomes clear that the contents of Coulombe's play are unacceptable to the religious hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. After the first performance the priest greets Daniel with the words: "Are you out of your mind?" His dissatisfaction stems from the theological differences between the play and orthodox theology as these differences would affront the board of trustees of the church. Daniel's remark that the church officials place a ban on the Passion play and communicate this ban by a cathedral guide and the priest. When Coulombe as well as his company is informed of the decision it is already too late to cancel the night's performance. They present the Passion play despite the stern warnings of the priest and the guard. As in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, the religious hierarchy here also relies on the power of the state to enforce their will.

2.5 The convergence of Coulombe's life and the role he plays

At this point in the play Coulombe's acting in the Passion-play becomes more than a role; he starts to identify with the contents of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Daniel Coulombe and the role he plays become one. At the next performance his selection of material from the sermons of Jesus of Nazareth is directed at the church hierarchy. Themes such as the following are utilized: "Beware of priests in positions of power", "do not call people 'father' or 'master,' only one is Lord and Master", "the greatest one among you, must be your servant." Daniel preaches these words enacting the role of Jesus of Nazareth, while he stands in front of the (present) church hierarchy, addressing them directly. The church officials place a ban on the Passion play and communicate this ban by a cathedral guide and the priest. When Coulombe as well as his company is informed of the decision it is already too late to cancel the night's performance. They present the Passion play despite the stern warnings of the priest and the guard. As in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, the religious hierarchy here also relies on the power of the state to enforce their will.

The events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection found in the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth, have several analogies in the final part of the film: soldiers captured Jesus of Nazareth before his crucifixion – similarly policemen capture Daniel Coulombe because of the priest's complaints. Simon Peter tried to protect Jesus of Nazareth by drawing his sword and attacking the subordinate of the (high) priest – likewise a member of the audience tries to protect Coulombe. His attempt to grab the cathedral guide ends when he railroads the guide into the wooden cross where Coulombe is hanging. Eventually this costs Coulombe his life, as the heavy cross fell on him. In this incident he is seriously injured and taken to hospital. After a long fruitless wait for medical attention he recovers sufficiently to be able to get up, walk, and talk. Accompanied by Mireille and Constance

he descends into an underground station – resembling Christ's descent into hell. In the underground station he starts preaching to the people waiting for a late night train – the contents of his preaching having a strong apocalyptic ring to it. He collapses again and is taken to another hospital where he dies despite efficient medical care. His organs – eyes and heart – are donated to people in urgent need thereof. The scene in the operation theatre, just before the operation starts, evokes images of a Cimabue crucifixion, and the two recipients of donated organs of Daniel intimates a resurrection.

The last analogy between the narratives of the Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus of Montreal is the founding of a theatre company in memory of Daniel Coulombe by the members of his cast. The actors commit themselves not to present mainstream commercial productions, because they want the company to exist on condition that they "could remain faithful to his ideas". In this way Coulombe's ideas will survive through the work of these actors, as the work of Jesus of Nazareth survived through his disciples and the founding of the Christian church.

3. The dialectics of truth and appearance

Any story presupposes the ability of an audience to exercise the suspension of disbelief, i.e. to take whatever is (re-)presented (or imitated) in the narrative as real while knowing it is not the real thing but only a re-presentation (or imitation) of the real thing. The not-so-real thing is usually called fiction. This suspension of disbelief hinges on the possibility of distinguishing between reality and a rendition or re-presentation of it. All kinds of distinctions, contrasts and beguiling (mostly benevolent but sometimes not so benevolent), come into play: the reality *vis-à-vis* the rendition may be called the truth, and the rendition *vis-à-vis* the reality it represents in some way or another is called appearance. Or it can be suggested through the rendition that the reality which purportedly is represented, is in itself an appearance, and that the truth is revealed in a different dimension through the appearance of the story. Once these distinctions are established, the convention generates all kinds of other possibilities, i.e. the play within the play, collapsing borders between fiction and fact, fiction becoming more real than reality, reality becoming stranger than fiction, reality fictionalized, etc.

This dialectics of story-telling and story-making is very poignantly illustrated in *Jesus of Montreal* during one of the performances of the Passion play. A woman is so taken in by the representation of the persecution of Christ that she 'mistakes' the play for the real events and as a result tries to undo the consequent history by warning Christ of what is going to come. The audience viewing the film usually reacts by smiling or even laughing sympathetically albeit somewhat condescendingly at the simple-mindedness of the woman, whereas the cathedral guide present at the Passion performance takes that woman as someone very stupid – blurring the borders between appearance and reality. His attempt to constrain her is an attempt to keep up appearances for the sake of appearances.

3.1 The quest for the real Jesus behind various institutionalized stories

This small incident in the whole film may serve as a vignette to point to an underlying and crucial issue dramatized by this layering of stories, viz. the meaning of the story of Jesus. More specifically: *Jesus of Montreal* asks what is good and what is bad appearance, and

what is good and what is bad reality in the stories since told of that story once told. The film as the story of a revived Passion play seems to start with the premise that the contents of the Passion play itself is at the bottom nothing more than a story and not a truthful account, let alone the written testimony of a divine intervention in human history. In the film the accounts of Jesus' life are represented as fictitious, combining many narrative strands of the times in the role of an actor, who in a present day representation – through the layering of stories in the Christian tradition – is taken to be Jesus. Even if there were so to speak no divine compulsion to venerate Jesus as Saviour, there is at least one fact about the stories about Jesus which cannot be denied: the storie(s) about Jesus have a profound influence on people's lives and change it for the better. Christ's resurrection can be 'de-dogmatized' and 'translated' into modern terms as meaning to give a new lease on life (the heart transplant sequence) or a renewed vision and appreciation of life (the cornea transplant sequence).

This influence is amongst others also intimated by the two musical quotations from Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* which more or less 'frame' the film: the first one starts after the prologue with the rolling of the film's titles, with the words *Inflamatus et ascensus per te, Virgo, sim defensus in die judici. Fac me cruce custodiri morte Christe premuntiri confoveri gratia*, meaning: 'Be to me, o Virgin, nigh, lest in flames I burn and die on judgment day. Christ, when thou shall call me hence, be thy Mother my defence, be thy Cross my victory'. It seems as if this specific quotation from the *Stabat Mater*, apart from its very melodious line, is incorporated into the film to convey the importance of the cross as a sign of victory – victory over false appearances. The second quotation is at the end of the film, sung in the underground station: *Quando corpus morietur, fac ut animae donetur Paradisi gloriae* – 'when my earthly body perishes one day, let my soul inherit the glory of heaven'. The presentation of the film in the intimated packaging of orthodox liturgy conveys the message that in what follows something is presented which calls for renewed meditation and devotion.

What, then, is presented? Jesus of *Montreal*, literally: Jesus of the real mountain. The ordinary geographical name Montreal is transfigured to allude to the Mount of Jesus' Sermon, i.e. his teachings. This transfiguration of *Montreal* starts alluding to Jesus himself, and 'Jesus of the real Mount' subliminally becomes 'the real Jesus of the Mount'. The story of the film is therefore the quest for the real Jesus behind and in the various stories that have become institutionalized through the ages. The film is in many ways an attempt to write the story about Jesus as so many others have done before. "What's the play?" asks Constance after Daniel has gathered his troupe of players for the revived Passion play. "We'll have to write it" answers Daniel. But mere writing is not exactly the word. As the production of the play progresses, the story of Jesus – as happened so many times before – unwittingly becomes inscribed in the lives of the players cum narrators.

When Daniel has accepted the commission to revive an old Passion play, he starts his quest for the 'real' Jesus. He visits a seminary, where one of the theologians admits to Daniel that "we're beginning to understand who He really was," but that this knowledge cannot be imparted officially from the pulpit. The 'real' Jesus, so the theologian advises Daniel, can only be portrayed in the appearances of artistic representations. The shock of being confronted by the 'real' de-dogmatized Jesus through artistic representations can then be written off against the liberties artists usually take. That will save the 'fake' theological Jesus for the sake of the ecclesiastical institution; official theology has to save appearances. The scene in which this startling confession is conveyed, is immediately

counterpointed by the scene in which Daniel is doing research in a library. A very pious library assistant asks Daniel: "Looking for Jesus?" She answers her own question: "It is He who will find you." After the theologian's astonishing assessment of the so-called true state of faith the opposite of this state of affairs is illustrated: there are still lots of people who believe in the divine existence of Jesus. The order of this sequence leaves one with the impression that the naiveté of the library assistant, as well as at least the literal meaning of her utterance, is untrue. But her naive utterance is made true in the end, although in a way that she cannot foresee and does not intend. Daniel does not become a convert, but an embodiment of Jesus. Jesus is not a somebody to be pinpointed in a historical location, and therefore regarded as true. The life of Jesus is authored by people who imitate the stories told about Him. The true Jesus lives on in the lives that embody these tales.

3.2 The tension between truth and appearance

The tension between truth and appearance as far as stories about the life of Jesus is concerned, is dramatically played out in the life of the priest, Father Leclerc. Leclerc is bound by conventions and church bureaucracy – hence his name. Daniel meets the 'real' Leclerc at Constance's home, and it is revealed that the supposedly celibate Leclerc is Constance's lover. He immediately confesses: "I'm not a very good priest" and relates his own history in defense of his inappropriate behaviour: his whole life consists of keeping up appearances. He actually wanted to become an actor, but coming from a poor family, opted for the priesthood instead. "It seemed a way out," he says in the first encounter with Daniel. In his final confrontation with Daniel he admits the administering of a pseudo-consolation to his flock: "It's a gathering of universal misery. They don't care about the latest archaeological findings. They want to hear that Jesus loves them and awaits them. ... Not everyone can afford psychoanalysis ...". The reason for keeping up appearances for so long is that "institutions live longer than individuals" and if he resigns or does anything that displeases his superiors, he is in danger of losing some comforts in life. The church bureaucracy is an easy accessible shelter against personal responsibility and the burden of truth. Leclerc is afraid to become the priest of a retirement home, and he dreads the cold winters. He summarizes his whole life in the words: "I don't know how to live." He realizes his own life is a bad imitation of Christ, but he vindicates himself by saying: "Even a bad priest is still a priest."

Keeping up appearances ends in betrayal. Arcand's very critical portrayal of the church's betrayal of the legacy of Jesus is visually prepared by a few other incidents. Two actors of Daniel's troupe come from industries catering for the pseudo-gratification of needs, viz. pornography and advertising. Mireille, the model for the perfume advertisement (*Esprit no. 7*), must be liberated by Daniel from hiding behind make-up and costumes. In order to save her human dignity, Daniel, in the scene reminiscent of the driving out of the merchants out of the temple, attacks the apparatus that creates pseudo-images of the good life, i.e. film cameras recording images of sex and liquor. His question to the director at the audition for the beer advertisement contains a bitter irony: "You want to see a scene?" He causes a real scene of destroying false scenes. In the long run Daniel has to withstand the temptation of the modern day Satan in the person of a suave attorney, who promises him that he will have the city at his feet if he, Daniel, signs a contract with the attorney. "Most of my friends are in the media ... We try to define dreams ...", the attorney admonishes Daniel. But Daniel's quest is not to pander to the prevalent taste, neither to that envisaged by the attorney, nor to that demanded by the priest. The priest's desperate

efforts to revive his Passion play by allowing the actors in the end, without Daniel, to experiment with so-called contemporary and popular styles, are ridiculed by the inappropriateness of the various styles for the Passion. They create untrue images of Christ, and Leclerc desperately realizes this. But he cannot fall back on Daniel's portrayal – that will jeopardize Leclerc's position. In the end the church has to betray the Passion: the cathedral guide, acting under the orders of the priest, becomes the parallel to Judas when he phones the police to rid the cathedral premises of the figure of Jesus and his entourage.

4. Conclusion

In Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* the church (or more correctly: an orthodoxy) is heavily indicted, but the outcome is not strictly against all faith as that would have been a typical Enlightenment way out. The scientific evidence gained through archaeology, text studies, etc. does not undermine the claims of the teachings of Jesus: it only serves to expose the naiveté of an orthodox institutionalization of faith for its own interests. Instead of making the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth part and parcel of a meaningful existence for the sake of others, the church tries to maintain the truthfulness of a doctrine by getting people to believe an interpretation of the narratives surrounding Jesus to be an exact representation of the events concerning Jesus. The teachings of Jesus, so the film seems to suggest, are not meant to prepare one for a better life in the hereafter. The teachings of Jesus are to be consumed and consummated in the one and only life each person has. A meaningful life, however short, is to be valued more than a supposedly blissful state after death. To imitate Jesus is no insurance policy against death.

In this article it has been attempted to illustrate

- how Denys Arcand weaves different narratives about Jesus into the film *Jesus of Montreal* and
- how this story constantly blurs distinctions between truth (reality) and appearance.

In conclusion it could be asked what underlying idea is communicated by Arcand's film. As Arcand does not sermonize his topic, the film does not convey a specific message – but the film activates a specific aspect of viewer involvement. The film rather seems to involve the viewers in critically questioning the personal and institutionalized interpretations of the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth and the way in which these interpretations influence the meaningfulness of their lives in a postmodern world.

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Rand Afrikaans University

