



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Gospel According to Matthew

Although Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *The Gospel According to Matthew* (*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*) is habitually praised as a key work both of the director's oeuvre and of world cinema as a whole, small myths have congregated about it nonetheless. You may hear that it's a Marxist life of Jesus, which flies in the face of the Catholic church. Or that it was an extraordinary, contrary story choice for a filmmaker who was gay, an outspoken Marxist and a staunch atheist. Others present it as the unadulterated Gospel, with nothing added or taken away in the service of plot. One hears nigh everywhere it's mentioned that it's gritty, raw and handheld; maybe that it's a quintessential neorealist text. The Matthew Gospel is indeed the main source, certainly of the film's dialogue, which is sparse – except for Jesus's sermons and parables – but material from the other Gospels is used too, and more significantly, Pasolini ushers in the visual influence of religious art from many an anachronistic historical period. He himself described the film as a sort of palimpsest, 'the life of Christ plus 2,000 years of storytelling about the life of Christ'. As for the film's neorealist credentials, certainly it owes characteristics to the school during the rise of which Pasolini began his filmmaking career.

The Gospel According to Matthew favours untrained actors and powerless, penniless characters. It argues for the underdog, its noble characters are by and large negative presences, and it isn't afraid to find elegance in the undecorated and the ugly. Pasolini's approaches to shooting landscapes and human faces, and to depicting and eliciting emotion, were unquestionably influenced by neorealism; it's in part the film's lack of awed formality and soft-focus sentiment that sets it apart from Hollywood Bible studies.

But just because it's raw by the standards of the studio epic doesn't mean that, as Roger Ebert has it, the film 'tells the life of Christ as if a documentarian on a low budget had been following him from birth'. The low-budget part might be accurate enough, but the standard contention that this is Jesus without glamour, magic or mystery seems to miss something key about Pasolini's practice. Indeed, the inclusion of unconventional music choices (Leadbelly also appears on the soundtrack, as well as the Congolese mass 'Missa Luba', Prokofiev and Bach) points to a rejection of the sort of unmediated naturalism with which critics have been oddly keen to credit the film. And to contend that Pasolini's Marxism and rejection of religious practice made this a rebellious or provocative choice is to ignore both the curious, respectful tone of the movie and its director's lifelong, unambiguous fascination with matters of faith.

Marxist he may have been – and a transgressor in the eyes of the Vatican for his 1963 short film *La ricotta*, which saw him accused of 'insulting the religion of the state' and sentenced to four months in prison (he was pardoned) – but Pasolini was compelled by religious imagery and feelings, and was no straight-up hater of the Catholic church. The dedication that opens *The Gospel According to Matthew* – 'To the beloved, happy, familiar memory

of Pope John XXIII' – was sincere; he credited that popular and progressive Pope with the film's inception. In 1962 Pasolini visited Assisi at the Pope's invitation to participate in a seminar between Vatican members and non-Catholic artists. But trapped in his hotel room by traffic jams caused by crowds awaiting the Pontiff, he instead sat and read the Gospels 'straight through' – whereupon the notion of filming one of them 'threw in the shade all the other ideas for work I had in my head'.

Though invariably categorised as a 'devout atheist', Pasolini resisted having his own stance decisively categorised. 'If you know that I am an unbeliever,' he told a journalist in 1966, 'then you know me better than I do myself. I may be an unbeliever, but I am an unbeliever who has a nostalgia for a belief.' Three years later he would tell another, 'I am religious because I have a natural identification between reality and God. Reality is divine. That is why my films are never naturalistic. The motivation that unites all of my films is to give back to reality its original sacred significance.'

From his earliest work Pasolini engaged with unreality: restaging and pretence, artifice and performances-within-performances. Little wonder that a hero whose future was mapped out, and whose possession of free will and even of ordinary human bodily functions were matters of intense theological debate, appealed. Christ's miracles are rendered not with smart special effects or coy evasions, but with crude cuts; somehow the refusal to attempt to fool us emphasises rather than reduces the sense of magic. The sheer scale of what the Gospels ask a true believer to accept is rendered unavoidable.

Then there's Enrique Irazoqui, Pasolini's Jesus. An economics student, Irazoqui reluctantly appeared in the film in exchange for Pasolini's patronage of his anti-fascist group. He subsequently became a professor of literature and a master chess player. Though a non-actor, Irazoqui is no guileless peasant savant; his is a layered, fierce and strange performance that plays on Jesus's youth, mood swings and flashing charisma. He is also one of the great beauties of all cinema, possessed of a face at once stormy and sweet, with fathomless dark eyes and an infrequent but devastating smile. Yet despite the actor's loveliness – and Pasolini's own professed erotic interest in the notion of crucifixion – this is a particularly sexless Jesus, whose Passion is notably uncarnal in its depiction.

Where Pasolini does allow a teasing ambiguity is in this Christ's changeable ethical positions, and his testy interaction with his disciples. It's the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel who blesses the meek but also declares that he comes 'not to bring peace, but to bring a sword'; Pasolini manages to cut through centuries of scholarly conjecture by making this a simple case of a fiery temperament occasionally pushed to extremes. And Irazoqui's Sphinx-like aspect – the loneliness and sad containment he projects – addresses other contentious issues around Jesus the man: when and in what depth he knew his fate ahead of time; how far he could or did blame his betrayers or his Father for what he knew to be an inevitability. Pasolini's Jesus seems to know what's coming, but to be working out the meaning of it, coming to terms with it, as he goes.

Like the teenager Irazoqui still was when he played the part, he's prone to fits of resentment too. When Jesus goads the disciples with hints about their future treachery and castigates them for falling asleep while he prayed at Gethsemane, Irazoqui's air is of pettishness offset by mild, even satisfied

resignation. But this Jesus can also seem capricious, attention-seeking – a popular kid prone to switching the rules of membership of his clique. In Pasolini's version, Jesus's manipulation of his disciples' feelings for him directly spurs Judas's betrayal. A woman approaches Jesus to apply expensive ointment to his head; Judas, obediently imitating Jesus's oft-stated stance on the relinquishment of material possessions, tells her off for undue profligacy. But Jesus abruptly changes his tune, and admonishes Judas: 'Let her alone; why trouble ye her?... Ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.' Injured and vengeful, Judas scampers off to deliver Jesus and claim his blood money.

Pasolini blends Gospels here: although both Matthew and Mark have Judas's betrayal directly follow the incident with the ointment, it's only John who has Judas be the one to confront the woman; Matthew just states that 'the disciples were indignant'. That simple stung feelings are given such a key role in Pasolini's proceedings risks a certain triviality, but also lends poignant humanity to the tale – as when, in his novel, published in 1966, Mikhail Bulgakov has Pontius Pilate condemn Jesus to the cross partly because he's distracted by an agonising migraine.

If many of his films, from the lusty *Mamma Roma* (1962) through to the still shocking *Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), highlight corporeal excess – violent, carnal, excretory, gastronomic – *The Gospel According to Matthew* adopts the soft asceticism of Irazoqui's persona as its defining mode. Even Salome's dance is strangely gentle and naive, a spell woven by a child rather than an erotic display. It's human moods, rather than appetites, that seem to preoccupy Pasolini here; and it's the interaction between the inexplicable divine and the basely, tenderly, stropfully human that makes his Passion play so moving – whether viewed by the believer, the unbeliever or the nostalgist for belief.

Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, March 2013

**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW
(IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO)**

Director: Pier Paolo Pasolini

Production Companies: Arco Film,

Lux Compagnie Cinématographique de France

Producer: Alfredo Bini

General Organiser: Manolo Bolognini

Production Secretary: Bruno Frascà

Production Manager: Eliseo Boschi

Administration: Vincenzo Taito

Assistant Directors: Maurizio Lucidi, Paul A.M. Schneider

Script Supervisor: Lina D'Amico

Adaptation: Pier Paolo Pasolini

Director of Photography: Tonino Delli Colli

Camera Operators: Giuseppe Ruzzolini, Vittor Ugo Contino

Assistant Camera Operators: Alessandro Ruzzolini, Giovanni Canfarelli

Editor: Nino Baragli

Assistant Editor: Andreina Casini

Art Director: Luigi Scaccianoce

Assistant to Art Director: Dante Ferretti *

Costumes: Danilo Donati

Make-up: Marcello Ceccarelli

Make-up Assistant: Lamberto Marini

Hair: Mimma Pomilia

Music: Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,

Sergei Prokofiev, Anton Webern

Musical Coordination: Luis Enriquez Bacalov

Sound: Mario Del Pezzo

Cast

Enrique Irazoqui (*Christ*)

Margherita Caruso (*Mary as a girl*)

Susanna Pasolini (*Mary as a woman*)

Marcello Morante (*Joseph*)

Mario Socrate (*John the Baptist*)

Settimio Di Porto (*Peter*)

Otello Sestili (*Judas Iscariot*)

Ferruccio Nuzzo (*Matthew*)

Giacomo Morante (*John*)

Alfonso Gatto (*Andrew*)

Enzo Siciliano (*Simon*)

Giorgio Agamben (*Philip*)

Guido Cerretani (*Bartholomew*)

Luigi Barbini (*James, son of Alpheus*)

Marcello Galdini (*James, son of Zebedee*)

Elio Spaziani (*Thaddeus*)

Rosario Migale (*Thomas*)

Rodolfo Wilcock (*Caiaphas*)

Alessandro Tasca (*Pontius Pilate*)

Amerigo Bevilacqua (*Herod the Great*)

Francesco Leonetti (*Herod Antipas*)

Franca Cupane (*Herodias*)

Paola Tedesco (*Salome*)

Rossana Di Rocco (*The Angel of the Lord*)

Eliseo Boschi (*Joseph of Arimathea*)

Natalia Ginzburg (*Mary of Bethany*)

Renato Terra (*Pharisee*)

Ninetto Davoli (*shepherd*)

Italy/France 1964

137 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseglet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker

and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by

BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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