The advent of Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" has brought with it a controversy that seems, at least at first glance, familiar, even ritualistic. Once again a filmmaker has brought his interpretation of Scripture to the screen and once again, before most audiences have had a chance to see the picture, there are expressions of outrage, accusations of bigotry and bad taste, and an outpouring of contentious publicity. This feeling of déjà vu could lead a perplexed observer to echo the words that Pope John Paul II may or may not have uttered upon seeing Mr. Gibson's film: "It is as it was."

Well, it is and it isn't. Hearing the charges of prejudice and persecution bouncing back and forth between Mr. Gibson's critics and his partisans, I can't help but recall the knot of quietly praying picketers I walked past 20 years ago to purchase a ticket for Jean-Luc Godard's modernized gloss on Jesus' birth, "Hail Mary," a film whose nudity was taken, sight unseen, to be blasphemous.

And I also recall the images from 1988 of demonstrators protesting Martin Scorsese's screen adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's "Last Temptation of Christ," a movie that some of the largest theater chains in the country refused to screen and that Blockbuster Video declined to stock on its shelves. There was also, more recently, the outcry in 1999 over Kevin Smith's theological gross-out comedy "Dogma," which was dropped by its original distributor, Miramax, after its parent company, Disney, drew fire from some Roman Catholic groups.

The obvious thing to say about the skirmishes over "Passion," which will either subside or intensify once the movie opens nationally on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 25, is that, since those earlier dust-ups, the sides have reversed. The conservative Christians who were so vocal in their condemnation of Mr. Godard, Mr. Smith and, especially, Mr. Scorsese, are now equally vocal in their defense of Mr. Gibson. An ugly undercurrent of anti-Semitism ran through some of the attacks on those supposedly sacrilegious movies, directed not at the filmmakers, none of whom were Jewish, but at the producers and studio heads who have periodically served as convenient targets for conspiracy-minded
demagogues. Similar insinuations bubble beneath the surface of some of the defenses of Mr. Gibson's reportedly pious picture, which is itself accused of fomenting anti-Semitism by placing the blame for Jesus' death on the Jews.

This reversal is testimony both to the endlessness of the culture wars and to the changed landscape of battle. Those Catholics and evangelical Protestants who felt alienated from much of American commercial culture and who informed the earlier protests, have not only a powerful and glamorous Hollywood ally in Mr. Gibson but also a growing sense of cultural and political confidence. More and more it seems that religious expression — in the form of best-selling thrillers, pop music, movies and television programs — is entering the mainstream.

Or, perhaps, re-entering it. There is, of course, a strain of ecumenical, therapeutic spirituality in American culture that has been around since at least the mid-19th century and that takes on more or less secular coloration as intellectual fashions change. But we take for granted these days that anything — especially any visual representation — touching on the hard scriptural and historical substance of faith will generate fierce argument. Religion is, like sex and politics, one of those subjects canonically to be avoided at dinner parties or family reunions, lest inflamed passions disrupt civility. Movies that delve into the Bible or that explicitly offer up interpretations of its teachings and stories can always expect, and can easily be accused of provoking, the most divisive and virulent kinds of controversy.

It was not always as it is. Fifty years ago, movies on biblical themes, far from being the most controversial Hollywood offerings, were among the least. In 1953, 20th Century Fox inaugurated its wide-screen CinemaScope format with "The Robe," a vast and costly biblical epic starring Richard Burton as a Roman tribune who participated in the Crucifixion. The subject and the spectacle seemed well matched. CinemaScope had been designed as a response to the menace of television, and the film's sacred story of awe and redemption served to emphasize the scale and sublimity of the movies.

The picture was also calculated to appeal to the widest possible interdenominational audience, as were the spate of Old and New Testament widescreen extravaganzas that followed, from Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" (1956) to William Wyler's 1959 remake of "Ben-Hur." In that film, which set records at the Academy Awards and later became an Easter-time television staple, Charlton Heston, DeMille's Moses, played a nice Jewish prince, some of whose best friends (and bitterest rivals) were Romans.

"Ben-Hur," based on a novel by the Civil War general Lew Wallace, was subtitled "A Tale of the Christ," but as in "The Robe," Jesus' death was presented indirectly, as it affected the lives of the human characters, and fidelity to the letter of the Gospels (or other historical sources) was less important than a broad, inclusive distillation of their message.

But by the early 1960's, when he was not yet the musical Superstar he would
eventually become, Jesus was ready to take a lead role, in films like Nicholas Ray's "King of Kings" (1961) and George Stevens's very long all-star Sunday school pageant, "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965). In that film, Jesus, played by the young Max von Sydow, wanders through a Holy Land that resembles nothing so much as an endless showbiz talk show, populated by the likes of Shelley Winters, Telly Savalas and John Wayne, temporarily exchanging his cavalry badge for centurion's armor.

"The Greatest Story" was perhaps the apex (or, if you prefer, the nadir) of Hollywood biblical kitsch, though its spirit was revived a dozen years later by Franco Zeffirelli, whose mini-series, "Jesus of Nazareth," starred Robert Powell and featured a jaw-dropping international cast including James Earl Jones, Claudia Cardinale, Ernest Borgnine and James Mason.

Thank God they don't make them like that anymore. But the year before Stevens's "Story" was released, Pier Paolo Pasolini made "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," a film that, in its insistence on bringing the techniques of cinematic realism to the life of Jesus, can be seen as a precursor both to Mr. Scorsese's "Temptation" and (judging from the descriptions that have been published) to Mr. Gibson's "Passion." Though Mr. Gibson, part of a Catholic traditionalist tendency that rejects much of post-Vatican II Catholicism, is a vocal enemy of modernity, the aesthetic that reportedly informs his film — the graphic brutality of the Crucifixion, the use of Latin and Aramaic instead of English — has more in common with Pasolini's confrontational realism than with Stevens's sumptuous pageantry.

Pasolini, an uncompromising sexual, political and artistic radical, was arrested in 1962, after his installment in the anthology film "Ro.Go.Pa.G." had seemed to mock not only the conventions of biblical filmmaking but the figure of Jesus himself. "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," however, cemented his paradoxical reputation as a Catholic Marxist, and was perhaps the first film to emphasize the existential contradictions inherent in being at once wholly human and utterly divine.

In trying to imagine the inner life — and therefore also the emotional and sensual life — of his hero (beautifully played by Enrique Irazoqui), Pasolini made his Jesus at once a man of his own time and a painfully, even jarringly, modern figure. His Jesus was also a partisan of the poor, and the film, like all of the director's best work (and much of his worst), is unsparing in its implicit judgment of the corruption and cruelty of contemporary bourgeois civilization.

Pasolini's modernism filters down through the later films of Mr. Godard and Mr. Scorsese. "Hail Mary" goes so far as to import the story of the Immaculate Conception into the drab modern world, making Mary a sullen Swiss adolescent living in a shabby working-class milieu, and imagining the conception itself as a moment of terrifying carnal ecstasy. It was this idea that most inflamed the protesters — or rather, the rumor of its existence that caused them to avert their eyes — just as it was the sexuality of Willem Dafoe's Jesus that enraged those
who sought to prevent "Last Temptation" from being made or distributed. It was also the Rabelasian profanity of "Dogma" that caused its spirit of earnest theological inquiry to be taken — again, by people who could not bring themselves to see it — as heresy.

In retrospect, the religious seriousness of these movies seems self-evident. Mr. Godard, recoiling from the Marxist dialectics of his earlier work, was well into his lyrical phase, and his films from the mid-1980's have a contemplative, pastoral quality that is, if not overtly religious, then certainly infused with a sense of spiritual inquiry.

Mr. Scorsese and his collaborator, Paul Schrader, in adapting Nikos Kazantzakis's earthy, revisionist rendering of the life of Jesus, were also clearly reckoning with their own religious backgrounds. Mr. Scorsese was a Catholic altar boy in Little Italy for whom movies became a second religion, and Mr. Schrader grew up in a Dutch Calvinist denomination that viewed movies as sinful. Much of their work, together and apart, is infused with a sense of moral struggle, the conflict, as Mr. Scorsese puts it in the commentary accompanying the Criterion DVD of "Temptation," between the teachings of the Gospels and the code of the streets.

None of this mattered, of course, to the film's enemies. "Can we finally look at `Last Temptation of Christ?'" the film critic David Ehrenstein wonders in his liner notes to the Criterion reissue, before revisiting some of the attempts to prevent us from doing just that. Political pressures made it difficult for Mr. Scorsese to finance his movie, and the timidity of the theatrical exhibitors meant he had a hard time showing it, problems that Mr. Gibson, for all his public protestations of victimhood, has not had to face, since he made "The Passion" entirely with his own money. And, curiously, attempts to prevent people from seeing it have come from the filmmaker himself, who has held screenings for handpicked, presumably sympathetic audiences and kept out potential critics.

All of which will be moot by Feb. 25, when we can finally look at "The Passion of the Christ" for what it is — part of a long and tangled movie tradition as well as an act of cultural provocation. The argument about the film's political implications is important and, in any case, will be hard — at least for a while — to drown out. But at a certain point, disciples of cinema, whatever their other loyalties and affiliations, must reaffirm a basic creed: for God's sake, shut up and watch the movie.

**Gospel of Cinema**

The movies and television mini-series in the Critic's Notebook article on religious films:


"**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW**" (1964), directed by Pier

"DOGMA" (1999), directed by Kevin Smith. VHS, Columbia Tristar, $9.95; DVD, Columbia Tristar, $19.95.

"HAIL MARY" (1985), directed by Jean-Luc Godard. VHS, Vestron, $3.99; not on DVD.


"THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD" (1965), directed by George Stevens. VHS, MGM/UA Video, $1.50; DVD, MGM/UA Video, $17.98.

"THE ROBE" (1953), directed by Henry Koster. VHS, 20th Century Fox, $6.98; DVD, 20th Century Fox, $14.90.

"THE TEN COMMANDMENTS" (1956), directed by Cecil B. DeMille; VHS, Paramount Studios, $14.95; DVD, Paramount Studios, $16.99.

"KING OF KINGS" (1961), directed by Nicholas Ray. VHS, Warner Studios, $14.95; DVD, Warner Home Video, $17.98.

"JESUS OF NAZARETH" (1977), television mini-series directed by Franco Zeffirelli. VHS, Family Home Entertainment, to be released Feb. 17, $24.98; DVD, Artisan, $24.98.

**Correction:** Feb. 3, 2004, Tuesday

A Critic's Notebook article in Weekend on Friday about religious films that have stirred contention included an erroneous reference to the Immaculate Conception in connection with Jean-Luc Godard's 1985 film "Hail Mary," and a correction in this space on Saturday misattributed the belief involved. It is Roman Catholic teaching — not the teaching of all Christian denominations — that Mary was conceived by her mother, Anne, without the stain of original sin. And the term does not refer to the conception of Jesus by Mary.