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Intro (00:06):

Welcome to The Quadcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum Emily Judd interviews fellow alum Richard Lindsay, a scholar of Hollywood cinema and religion. Richard shares funny moments from the early Hollywood biblical films.

Lindsay (00:24):

When Jesus is resurrected, he actually comes up from the floor on a stage elevator.

Intro (00:30):

He discusses how the Cold War and American culture influenced biblical epics.

Lindsay (00:34):

He's kind of taken what is the charter story of the Hebrew people and turned it into the charter story of American democracy.

Intro (00:43):

And Richard reflects on how Hollywood has shaped American's perception of biblical figures.

Lindsay (00:47):

We have this white American Moses and these white American Jesuses. This is shaping our perception of what the Bible is, who's in the Bible, who the Bible is for.

Judd (01:00):

The history of religious films in Hollywood. Your book explores this subject and how Hollywood first began tackling biblical stories. What initially drew American filmmakers and audiences to having biblical stories on the big screen?

Lindsay (01:16):

Biblical films have been a part of filmmaking from the beginning of filmmaking. They started making films that, particularly things like passion plays, so just like stories of Jesus and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, pretty much going back to the beginning of filmmaking. So there's some really good reasons for that. One is that in the Bible, you have very popular stories. It's the bestselling book of all time. And also as copyright became an issue, it took a little time for that to kick in, but people started realizing you can't just take a book and adapt it into a movie without copyright permission. When you're dealing with the Bible, you don't have to deal with copyright. So it was also just a way for filmmakers to say, "Okay, we're making a serious picture now because this is going to be about Jesus Christ or it's going to be about a Bible story or something like that." And it also kind of provided them

some cover that when people were kind of unsure about this new medium of film that maybe this is not something that's good for people, maybe it's bringing down society.

(02:28):

Filmmakers could say, "Well, we're making this religious picture." So people would, they'd put that out there and then they would say, "Okay, well maybe these people are all right." But one of the very first films that we have, we're doing this poster display at YDS of historic posters going back to the very beginning of film. And one of the earliest ones we have was a film that was released in 1902. And it was from Pathe Company, which is a French company, and it was called The Life and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it was a Jesus story telling some about his life and then going into the death and resurrection of Jesus. And what was really cool was the way that they were experimenting with film and what they could do with film, doing things like having people appear and disappear by stopping the camera, things like photo effects, even color, which they were doing by hand stenciling the color frame by frame into the film.

(03:43):

And then some of the effects are a little more theatrical. When Jesus is resurrected, he actually comes up from the floor on a stage elevator, which is really cute. And it's really a very charming film. You can actually find it on YouTube.

Judd (03:59):

Jesus on an elevator. Well, clearly the effects were not as modern as they are today, but other than the technical effects, how has Hollywood's depiction of biblical stories and figures, how has that developed over time?

Lindsay (04:13):

When you watch these films, you can get a lot of idea of what society is thinking about, particularly if you're talking about Hollywood films, things that are made in America. You can get an idea of what their concerns are in society, what the concerns are in the world at that time. The very first 10 Commandments film was made silent film in 1923, and it was made by Cecil Beeda Mill, who was the one who made the 1956 version that everybody's familiar with. And so he made this silent version. And the thing was that the Exodus story was only about a third of the film. The rest of the film was a modern story that had to do with morality, which was if you break the 10 commandments, they will break you. So here you're seeing the kind of anxiety around changing morality in the 1920s, right?

(05:09):

You've got Victorian morality is kind of falling by the wayside and you've got all of this new morality. And so there's this fear about are we going to lose track of the traditional ways of doing things? So fast-forward to the 1950s and you have in 1956 when he remade the film as the 10 commandments that we know with Charlton Heston, really what he's talking about there is the Cold War and he's talking the Egyptians are the communists, the Hebrews are all freedom loving people. And he has this very American Charlton Heston playing Moses. And so he's kind of taken what is the charter story of the Hebrew people and turned it into the charter story of American democracy. Then you look today at some of the films that are coming out today and a recent one is The Chosen, which it's a streaming series, but also just a few years ago it was Passion of the Christ.

(06:16):

And this is all about the culture wars in the United States and it's all about a particular, even just going to see one of these films or stream one of these films is a way of showing that you're on one side or

another of the culture wars. And it's its own religious act to support this and to support that point of view. So really throughout history, these films have really have kind of reflected a lot of what's going on in society.

Judd (06:47):

So you mentioned the Cold War and how it influenced the second version of the 10 commandments. What influence did the Cold War have on biblical epics beyond that, beyond the 10 commandments?

Lindsay (06:58):

Pretty much all of the biblical epics or a lot of the biblical epics that came after World War II were making assumptions about. They were trying to promote a kind of broad-based civil religion that you might call Judeo-Christianity. They were just trying to promote a general religiosity in the country, which was meant to be in opposition to communism.

Judd (07:25):

So it was meant to be inclusive to everyone, you mean?

Lindsay (07:28):

It was very inclusive, believe it or not. When people talk about 1950s religion, it was much more inclusive than what people are, let's say, Christian nationalists and things like that are thinking today. I think Eisenhower said something like, "America is based on having a firm sense of religion and I don't care what it is." So it was these very vague statements about religion, and it kind of didn't matter whether that was Christianity, whether that was Judaism or anything like that. They were always kind of just portraying these symbols that meant America is a religious nation as opposed to the communist countries. That's why the 10 commandments was such a powerful symbol because you could bring in Jewish and Christian faith and even Islam into that circle of believers.

Judd (08:25):

That's so interesting. Well, one focus of your work has been the exploration of camp and queer style and Hollywood's biblical epics. Why do you think that perspective in particular has been overlooked?

Lindsay (08:37):

Maybe it's too obvious. I don't know. So when I first started getting into this, just the posters that we're putting on display were collected by my doctoral advisor, Father Michael Morris, who was a Dominican priest and art historian. He taught at Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, which is part of the larger consortium of Graduate Theological Union, which is where I was doing my doctoral studies. So I had a friend of mine that dragged me to one of his classes early on in my first semester, and I didn't know a Dominican from a Jesuit. I was Presbyterian, so what do I know? And this guy comes up and he starts lecturing. He's wearing a white habit because the Dominicans wear a habit. And he just had this incredible lecture on the beginnings of Jesus films in silent movies. And then he showed us this Cecil B.

(09:40):

De Mill film, which was the King of Kings, which was a silent Jesus story that came out in 1928. So this film starts out with Mary Magdalene. It says that she's a cortisone. They don't want to use any other terms for her like prostitute or anything like that. She's in a kind of a feast setting, this kind of decadent

feast setting, and there's all these men who are standing around admiring her. She's basically a flapper. She's basically kind of a liberated woman of the 1920s. She's pouting because Judas, her boyfriend, has not been around. He's run off with this carpenter from Nazareth. She's getting angrier and angrier at this. And then the men tell her, "Well, I have heard that he has healed the blind." And she kind of goes, "Ugh, well, I've blinded more men than he has ever healed." And so then she goes over and hits this gong and she says one of the greatest lines in all biblical film, "Harness my zebras, gift of the Nubian king.

(10:49):

No one shall keep a man from Mary Magdalene." And then of course the zebras come up and with the chariot, she hops on the chariot and rides off to find Jesus. And so I'm looking at this and going, "This is so incredibly over the top. It's total camp." And if you start teasing away camp and looking below the surface, there's always queer subtext somewhere because camp is this secret language that often reveals queer subtext. And I got interested in that my very first semester in this class that I took with Father Michael. He encouraged me to keep looking into that and it became my dissertation topic. And so once I finished it up and once I got it published, it became this book that looks at all of these kind of camp and queer subtexts. And the question of what does that mean when you have this film that's supposed to be biblical, that you have this kind of camp queer representation that's in these films?

Judd (11:57):

For your book, you researched the entire history of Hollywood biblical films. What do you think that history can teach us about American culture?

Lindsay (12:07):

The thing is that when we watch these biblical films, they kind of have a way of colonizing our imagination so that we think of a lot of times when we're thinking, oh, the Bible says this or the Bible looks like this, we're thinking about these films. I think these films affect the way that we view scripture and we can very easily. There can be some funny things where we mix up scripture and the films and that's fine. It's mostly harmless. But then there are things like, I was looking around at the posters that we've chosen, which are all silent era up through golden age of Hollywood. So pretty much every film that is represented here mostly has white people in the roles. And so I was looking at this one that has Adam and Eve, and they're like Nordic gods. Eve is literally, I was looking it up and she's literally Swedish.

(13:10):

So this is shaping our perception. When we have this white American Moses and these white American Jesuses, this is shaping our perception of what the Bible is, who's in the Bible, who the Bible is for.

Judd (13:26):

Well, I find that very interesting myself because I'm actually living in the Middle East right now. And of course, almost all the biblical figures are Middle Eastern. And I was watching the series, The Chosen, with my husband who's Middle Eastern, and he was like, "This is the first biblical depiction that I've seen where the majority of the actors are of Middle Eastern descent." So like you said, the majority of biblical films and depictions throughout history has Jesus with blue eyes, white skin.

Lindsay (13:55):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, for me, when I was growing up, the, let's say, miniseries that probably influenced my view of Jesus more than any was Jesus of Nazareth, which was done by Franco Zeffarelli,

and it came out as the miniseries on television in late 1970s and early 80s. And the guy who plays Jesus in that is Robert Powell, who is very much this wispy Englishman with bright blue eyes and this kind of scraggly beard. And it's very hard not to think of him when I think of Jesus or to just think of the way that film was made and who was in that film and just sort of the view of the Bible that they had in that film.

Judd (14:40):

So speaking of imagery, I want to get into the new poster exhibition at YDS that's happening this semester. It's titled Silence and Spectacle: Biblical and Religious Movie Posters From the Silent Era to the Golden Age of Hollywood. How did you choose the items for this exhibition? What's your hope that viewers or visitors of the exhibition take away?

Lindsay (15:04):

So first, just a little more background on the posters. So I mentioned my doctoral advisor, Father Michael Morris. He collected these posters and lots of other film ephemera. This is a very small part of the collection that we're putting on, and he collected these really as his teaching tools. So then when he passed away in 2016, I came in along at the behest of one of his colleagues, Father Chris Rentz, who will also be there for this. Basically, we're mounting this exhibition, and one of my good friends and doctoral colleagues, Ryan Parker, and we started cataloging everything, putting everything together, putting it together as a traveling exhibition. And so then in putting together this exhibition for YDS, I wanted to have films that people might be familiar with that are things like the 10 Commandments, Ben Hur, things that were made in that postwar era that we've seen on television and Turner Classic movies and things like that, but then also show that there were precursors so that all of those films were basically remakes of things that had originally been made in the silent era.

(16:17):

And including there's a whole collection of Jesus films that goes from that first film in 1902. When I watch those films, when I watch those silent films, it just kind of blows me away that how good they already were at making films, that these are epic films and they're really arresting and they're just as exciting as the latter day films. There was so much about movies that they already understood by the 1920s. One of the things we're also offering is, so we'll do a gallery talk on September 14th up at YDS, and this is in the entrance hall there at noon. But then later in the evening at seven in the Niebuhr Lecture Hall, we're going to do a film viewing and it's this beautiful art film made in 1928, a silent film called The Passion of Joan of Arc. And it tells the accounts of Joan of Arc's trial, and it's just acted out in this incredibly.

(17:29):

It was a Danish director, it was made in France, and it's just this incredibly moving film. And the music that accompanies it is a modern day oratorio, which was composed for the film. And so if you haven't seen a silent film with incredibly good music on a big screen, you really haven't experienced the kind of multimedia transcendence that is silent film. So if anybody's in New Haven, go see that, but if not, find a silent film festival somewhere where you are and go experience that.

Judd (18:05):

Well, that sounds amazing. I wish I could be there to watch it myself. Do you have a favorite poster out of the entire collection?

Lindsay (18:11):

It's a cliche, but it is like choosing your children because I've been working with these for almost 10 years now and cataloging them and putting them all up and everything like that. The one that we have for Jesus Christ Superstar is pretty awesome because it's Japanese and it's this really wild mid-century kind of Japanese style of printmaking, the kind of thing you might see maybe in movies or something like that of sort of like Tokyo neon kind of style of poster with the leads from Jesus Christ Superstar. That one's pretty cool.

Judd (18:50):

So you'll be back at YDS this month. You received your master of divinity from YDS. How did your time at Yale Divinity School shape you both as a person and as a scholar?

Lindsay (19:01):

When you're at YDS, you're studying with the people who are the most respected researchers and teachers in their field. So you're getting to study biblical studies with people who write the books on biblical studies. You're getting to study theology with people who are internationally recognized. Yale being Yale, you have so much going on on campus with so many people who are the top of their fields coming to the campus to talk and presentations and performances. One of them was Martin Landau, who was in The Greatest Story Ever Told way back in the '60s. The other was Willem Defoe who played Jesus in The Last Temptation of Christ, which was a very controversial Jesus film that came out in the '80s. It was directed by Martin Scorsese. And I'll never forget him telling the story about the stamina that it took to film, particularly the crucifixion scenes.

(20:04):

Here he is, he's been stripped naked, he's tied to a cross in the desert, and he's had to be up there for hours to shoot these scenes. And he said, "If this acting thing doesn't work out, I'm going to start a business. I'm going to take people out in the desert. I'm going to strip them down, tie them to a cross, leave them hanging there for about 10 hours, and if they don't see God, it's their fault." So just being able to interact with people like that, I think it just expanded my horizons about what is possible in terms of whether the work I'm doing is sort of more ministry work or teaching work. I don't think that I could have had that experience of the interaction of culture along with the religious teaching and the theological education I was getting. I don't think that I could have had that anywhere else in the way that I did at Yale.

Judd (21:04):

Well, it'll be great for you to be back at YDS this month for the launch of the new poster exhibition, and everyone who's in New Haven or even who's close to campus should go check out the exhibition this fall semester. Thank you so much for joining us, Richard, on the podcast.

Lindsay (21:21):

Yeah, I look forward to being back.

Intro (21:24):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quadcast.