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Kyle Stewart

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The Representation of Authorities in *Jésus de Montréal*

Kyle Stewart¹

The film *Jésus de Montréal*² was released in 1989 and is widely considered one of the greatest Québécois (and indeed, Canadian) films of all time. This essay will examine the film's representation of authorities in contrast to the representation of authorities in the gospels. The film contrasts the various depicted authorities (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church, the police, and, to a lesser extent, the clinic) with the Roman authorities of the gospels. For the purpose of examining these contrasts and comparisons, it is essential to place the film within its particular historical context, to which writer-director Denys Arcand only alludes. Through such a lens, it becomes evident that the portrayals of Roman soldiers and political and religious leaders are juxtaposed by Arcand with today's church, the police, and, to a lesser extent, the austere clinic.

The Roman Catholic Church (for simplicity henceforth abbreviated as “the Church”) is first portrayed during the film's opening credits, where a choir rehearsal seems to be taking place in what one assumes to be Latin. This use of Latin is despite the film taking place in the then-present-day of around 1989. Therefore, the film seems to be evoking the audience's memories of a pre-Vatican II Church—but also the Church from prior to the practically simultaneous *Révolution tranquille* (Quiet Revolution). This was a period of the 1960s during which Québécois society underwent significant modernization—including an emphasis on secularity, especially within the state. Before *la Révolution tranquille*, the Church dominated practically all aspects of Québec society; however, the “revolution” resulted in a drastic decline in both the power of the Church as an institutional authority and of the number of Church adherents and attendants, especially among younger Québécois.³

Thus *Jésus de Montréal*, within its first five minutes, is situating itself within this particular historical discourse, bringing together the Church of the past (in Latin) and the empty churches all over Québec of today (including here). Underlying the Church figures' condemnation of Daniel's passion play is anxiety over the place of the Church and its power in the post-Quiet Revolution Québec. The interpretation of the gospels is one of the few places in which the Church is still able to exercise some authority, and this is highly relevant to understanding the motives of the antagonist(s).

The plot begins while the choir continues in the background: the film's primary priest character—and chief antagonist—Frère Leclerc walks up behind our protagonist Daniel Coulombe⁴ as he looks upon the choir in awe. They seem to be familiar with each other; this man who embodies the Church beside the man who would come to embody “Jesus of

¹ Kyle Stewart is a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University researching queer liberation and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This paper was originally submitted for TH503C: Survey of the New Testament at Martin Luther University College.

² *Jésus de Montréal*, directed by Denys Arcand (Montréal: Orion Classics, 1989).

³ Reginald Bibby, M. Meunier, and Robert Mager, “Religion à la carte in Quebec,” *Globe* (2007): 1.

⁴ The surname *Leclerc* is etymologically rooted from “cleric.” *Coulombe* could perhaps be meant to evoke Christophe Colomb (Christopher Columbus), although this is evidently a speculative leap. There are clearer links to the biblical Daniel in this character, which would be valuable for further examination.

Montréal.” Leclerc shows Daniel a dated and rather boring video of the passion of Christ from the Church. Leclerc himself tells Daniel that it needs to be modernized. The video represents the Church’s approved theological interpretation of the passion: those who decide Jesus ought to die argue that he must be condemned. “Why [must he die]?” a witnessing woman asks; “because He is just and we are not.” Although there are perhaps no theologically incorrect assertions here, the historical accuracy of this interpretation of the passion is at the very least suspect. The Church is not interested in illustrating the gospels’ awesome narrative of the passion, for instance, where Jesus cries out in misery, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*”⁵ Nor does it portray how, at his death, “[t]he earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen were also raised.”⁶ The Church does not depict the disciples’ multiple failures towards Jesus during the passion either.⁷ Rather, the Church is interested in how Jesus’s passion and death affect the adherent today—through the forgiveness of sins. A more biblically accurate re-enactment of the passion is not what the Church seeks from Daniel—Leclerc seeks to “modernize” this production while keeping the focus on the implications of Jesus’s sacrifice, presumably to justify the Church’s distinct doctrine on sin.

Daniel Coulombe is interested in producing a divergent interpretation of the passion; his intention for this performance is less constrained by the institutional impediments of the Church—although these constraints will certainly catch up to him later, from Leclerc and his institutional allies. However, these institutional constraints are portrayed as inequitably enforced. Leclerc’s second scene shows him hesitating as he exits a bedroom with Constance, having had sex despite the entrenched rules regarding the celibacy of the Church’s priesthood and despite the numerous biblical condemnations of extramarital and premarital sexual acts.⁸ Furthermore, Constance notes Leclerc’s past use of sex workers in Harlem—in this scandalous scene, Daniel witnesses the failures of the Church leaders to abide by their own teachings, a recurring theme of the film. It is evident that Arcand is interested in portraying the Church and its leaders as somewhat hypocritical in their application of the Bible. Leclerc acknowledges his failures to be a “good priest,” while offering several excuses in his defense, contending that if he left the Church he would have nothing. Constance kindly offers to take him in, but he rejects her kind offer, electing to continue his hypocrisy. Leclerc fails to invoke any words of his sacred texts in justifying his actions—instead citing Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. This may be compared with Jesus’s citation of Isaiah: “‘[t]his people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God...”⁹

Thus, Leclerc seems to partake in fornication, adultery, perhaps avarice, deceit, licentiousness, and pride, exhibiting many of those actions which Jesus condemns in Mark 7:21–23; “[a]ll these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”¹⁰ Despite Leclerc’s hypocrisy, he will not refrain from later vehemently judging and condemning Daniel’s production of the passion. Leclerc represents the Church as first and foremost interested in the forgiveness of sin rather than the passion narrative as a whole.

⁵ Mk 15:34. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

⁶ Mt 27:51–52.

⁷ For example: Mk 14:10–11; Lk 22:6; Mt 26:48–50; Lk 22:34; Jn 18:17.

⁸ For example, Mt 19:4–5, Heb 13:4.

⁹ Mk 7:6–8.

¹⁰ Mk 7:23.

The documentary's narrator, René, is solicited to join Daniel's production, in which he will play several roles, including that of Pontius Pilate. New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell describes Pilate as "a prefect or procurator [of Judea] from 26 to 36 CE."¹¹ Powell notes that Pilate's rule was riddled with controversy besides that which is (perhaps ahistorically) said to have arisen from Jesus's crucifixion. For instance, at one time Pilate "sent soldiers (disguised as civilians) into the crowd of protesters and, at a prearranged signal, had them beat and kill people at random,"¹² not unlike the film's later climax where the police are sent to end the production and use force to do so. René's portrayal of Pilate takes some creative liberties (e.g., he cites a philosopher's opinion on death), but generally aligns with Mark's portrayal of a contemplative but powerful Roman authority uncertain of the crowd's motivations but ultimately willing to submit to their mob mentality.¹³

In this very first scene of the passion production, the heavily armored Roman soldiers escort Jesus (Daniel) to meet his fate in front of Pilate. The jeers of the audience can only just be heard over the clinking of the soldiers' luxurious armour, a reminder of the power of the Roman Empire in Judea, where this passion play has transported us on Montréal's historic Mont-Royal. However, a Québécois audience would know that, here on Mont-Royal, the authorities are not Roman soldiers but rather *le Service de police de la Ville de Montréal* (SPVM). The SPVM, not unlike other Canadian police forces, is regarded rather controversially for its alliances in service of "capital, colonialism, and Canadian and Québécois nationalisms," its fierce opposition to social movements (of which Montréal has known many), and the many injuries and deaths it has inflicted on Montréalais.¹⁴

It may be easy for an anglophone Canadian audience to forget that *Jésus de Montréal* takes place less than twenty years following the *Crise d'Octobre* [October Crisis], but this was an extraordinary moment of Québécois history of state power and presence unlike ever before. Montréal was overrun by the Canadian military and police as martial law was imposed by the Canadian federal government—a comparison to an occupation of sorts would be apt,¹⁵ especially considering the widespread contempt towards Canadian state power. This would help lead to a massive (re)surgence of Québécois nationalism and two separation referendums (one occurred nine years prior to the film in 1980, and another would take place only six years after the film in 1995 with an even narrower result). These political events are to be understood as part of the 1989 audience's assumed knowledge despite not being explicitly mentioned by Arcand—one might assume for political reasons.¹⁶

¹¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 23.

¹² Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 23.

¹³ Mk 15:10–14.

¹⁴ Adèle Clapperton-Richard, "L'histoire (vraie) de la police au Québec," *À bâbord ! Revue sociale et politique* 87 (2021): 38–39. My translation.

¹⁵ The term "occupation" has been used in Québécois scholarly histories of the October Crisis. For example, Sébastien Campeau, "L'intervention militaire en octobre 1970 et la loi sur les mesures de guerre: modalités et réactions" (master's thesis, l'Université du Québec à Montréal, 2009): 28.

¹⁶ Perhaps it is somewhat relevant to note that, according to the film's closing credits, it received funding from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and the federal crown corporation Telefilm Canada. The editorial control of these governmental organizations, especially pertaining to bilingual and francophone productions, has been an object of study according to my very brief research. Consider for example Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*, Arts Insights (McGill-Queen's Press, 2007).

This speaks to the particular Montréalais landscape situated in its unique historical context, for which there is “a collective socio-spatial attachment for people stronger than attachments to larger political units”¹⁷ such as the Canadian state and the authorities who embody its state power. This local cultural landscape is frequently emphasized in the film’s imagery, as it is associated with “individual and group identity,” as is the French language used in this landscape (and in the film).¹⁸ Therefore, the comparison between the Roman soldiers/occupiers on Mont-Royal/Judea and the film’s authorities would have been evident to the 1989 Québécois audience with their long political memories. The police comparisons are more obviously relevant to the contemporary situation in 1989.

Although Herod the Great does not have a perfect analogy in the film, perhaps we can consider the authorities, especially the police, to be like Herod in their ability to exert state power. Powell explains that Herod, despite being “half-Jewish,” was considered “by the Jewish people as a foreigner and a Roman collaborator.”¹⁹ Perhaps the same sentiments are detectable in the film, such as through the audience’s resentment of the interventions of the police and the Church regarding the passion play. The Church is portrayed as allied with state power rather than with the interests of the Christians in attendance as a number of the Judean Jews are said to be in the gospels; for example, the “chief priests” are described as accusing Jesus “of many things” to Pilate out of their jealousy.²⁰ Ultimately, like the gospels, in which there is “a fairly sustained critique of Roman imperialism,”²¹ the film critiques what the Québécois have often considered “anglophone Canadian imperialism” upon their nation. Thus, the film (covertly) juxtaposes the Canadian state with the Roman occupiers of Judea.

To carry out the will of the Church in their disallowance of Daniel’s production, the police are requested. The film’s various authorities are meant to blend gospel characters such as the chief priests, Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, and the Roman soldiers. Powell defines a prefect as “a magistrate or high official whose duties and level of authority varied in different contexts” of the Roman Empire, “in essence, a governor who served as the representative of Caesar.”²² Although this is certainly not the precise role of the police, I believe that it is appropriate to draw out the similarities in their roles as authorities who embody the material power of the state/empire. Like the Roman soldiers and leaders, the police are essential to the success of the crucifixion²³ and to the escalation which leads to Daniel’s fall on the cross. As with Jesus Christ, Daniel is (effectively) killed on the cross, and this death is brought about by the intervention of judgmental authorities including religious leaders²⁴ and the police/soldiers.²⁵ Without the intervention of these authorities, the play would have gone on as usual, and Daniel would not be subjected to death by the cross.

And Michael Dorland, Michel Saint-Laurent, and Gaëtan Tremblay, “Téléfilm Canada et la production audiovisuelle indépendante: la longue errance d’une politique gouvernementale,” *Communication: Information Médias Théories* 14, no. 2 (1993): 100–133.

¹⁷ Halvor Moxnes, “Landscape and Spatiality: Placing Jesus,” in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), 93.

¹⁸ Moxnes, “Placing Jesus,” 93.

¹⁹ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 21.

²⁰ Mk 15:3.

²¹ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 36.

²² Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 23.

²³ Jn 18:12.

²⁴ Mk 15:17; Jn 18:12–14.

²⁵ Mk 15:16–20; Jn 18:3.

Arcand concludes with a brief—though pertinent—critique of another authority: the (underfunded) clinic.²⁶ Arcand is directing in the context of the beginning of a neoliberal turn towards unprecedented austerity measures, introduced by the likes of Brian Mulroney, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan, and which would continue through to 2020 with deadly consequences. The fictional *l'Hôpital St.-Marc* [St. Mark's Hospital] is swamped with far too many patients, so Daniel is unable to receive the care he needs. Although the pericope of “no room in the inn” for baby Jesus is in fact in the Gospel of Luke rather than Mark (Lk 2:7), it seems clear that Arcand is drawing parallels to Jesus (Daniel) being failed by the overwhelmed institutions of the day. Rather than being born in a manger after being turned away from the inn, Daniel descends into the depths of the *Place St.-Henri* metro station towards his death after being turned away from St. Mark's Hospital.²⁷ Here he vomits after seeing a billboard of himself modeling in an advertisement for “l'homme sauvage: eau de cologne” [savage man: cologne]; he is no longer the man he sees on this billboard—he is the “Jesus of Montréal” now. Following this, he offers several parables to nearby strangers, including a plea to “flee to the mountains”; the strangers are confused and some laugh at these passionate teachings of a dying man (compare with the mocking of Jesus in Mk 10:34, Mk 15:17–20, Mt 27:28–31). Again, the parallels to Christ are evident as Daniel promptly collapses, the metro comes, and the station empties as if nothing had happened. Daniel is taken to the (real) Jewish General Hospital, where his death is confirmed and his organs are donated to several people in need, constituting a brilliant form of resurrection for this “Jesus of Montreal” enabled by modern science.

It would be remiss not to mention that *Jésus de Montréal* is a rather provocative title (perhaps one could argue it even to be blasphemous?), in its comparison of the experience of a modern Montréalais to the incomprehensibly complex experiences of Jesus. From the film's title to the inclusion of models, science, and pornography voice actors, through to the film's final scene of the choristers in front of Daniel/Jesus's cologne advertisement, *Jésus de Montréal* is meant to incite controversy and contemplation. Denys Arcand produced a subtly political film within the constraints of Canadian polite society, and as such, it ought to be recognized as a product of its unique Québécois historical context. As such, the film delicately contrasts the authorities of the Greco-Roman era in which Jesus of Nazareth was born with the authorities of 1989 in which Jesus of Montréal (Daniel Coulombe) is found. This essay has argued that the New Testament's portrayals of Roman soldiers and political and religious leaders are juxtaposed by Arcand with today's Church, the police, and, to a lesser extent, the austere clinic. This juxtaposition offers a covertly political argument in line with those often articulated by Québec nationalists: that Québec is an occupied nation, to which comparisons with Greco-Roman era Judea may be drawn. While these comparisons may not exactly fit, nor be entirely appropriate, the religious (especially Roman Catholic) influences on Québec nationalisms are not to be understated despite being ‘only’ covertly represented in the film.

²⁶ For more information on the clinic as a site of power and authority, consider: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). (The book was originally published in French in 1963, when Foucault was an increasingly popular French intellectual.)

²⁷ The phenomenally massive underground metro stations of Montréal are commonly described as “cathedral”-like (See Matt McLauchlin, “Cathedral Metro Station,” *Métro de Montréal*, 2003, metrodemontreal.com/ideas/cathedral.html). *Place St.-Henri* is an excellent example of these architectural feats in one of the (historically) poorest parts of the city. It is not near any hospitals, so was selected pointedly—presumably for its name, location, and colourful splendor.

The film must be understood within its historical context of popular Québec nationalism, even amongst those who did not support separatism; otherwise, its polemical elements for the Québécois audience will be missed, and the topical comparisons to the gospels may risk being left unexamined.