Rethinking Parody: *Life of Brian* as Historical Satire

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Monty Python's *Life of Brian* traces the tragic last year of Brian of Nazareth, a man who shares his exact birthday and town with Jesus Christ, the subject of countless biblical epic films. Comedy distinguishes this biopic, which features a male actor playing the analog of the Virgin Mary, a cured leper begging for alms, and spontaneous song on the crucifix. It is not sufficient, however, to relegate the film to parody, which seems the obvious criticism, simply for taking a comedic outlook. The unique style and construction of many scenes imply that comedy partially motivated the film, but other stimuli clearly contributed to its simple message. <u>Closely analyzing the film's principal utilization of non-realistic elements and scenes reveals that *The Life of Brian* approaches history artistically and satirizes religious foundations, without parodying the classic Biblical epic style</u>.

The film begins with operatic chanting accompanying the image as it fades from black to the night sky, panning with a shooting star. Three shadows in the background resemble men riding camels through the desert, bathed in moonlight. The robed men arrive at an ancient stone town and navigate the narrow street passages, which are sprinkled with worn tapestries and agrarian equipment. Harps and horns underscore their slow passage through a beam of light descending from a division between two rooftops, exposing a wandering sheep. The men arrive at a doorway, each holding an adorned case, and watch a mother caring for her newborn child, who stretches playfully in a manger. Their silent entrance, so as not to disturb the child, scares the mother violently and she falls backwards out of her chair and rolls through the dirt and straw that line her

home. The shot's end typifies surrealist style, which characteristically utilizes jolting action or language to disturb expectation. In this case, the viewer expects the Virgin Mary to accept frankincense, gold, and myrrh. The feminized male voice, the hideous face, the slapstick, and questioning if myrrh is "a dangerous animal" all interrupt anticipated conventions that are informed by Bible scholarship, history, and a host of previous artistic works. The canonical information that contributes to the viewer's expectations is restored when the mother tells the three wise men that her child is called Brian, thus relinquishing the Christ parody that could have been. The realism that permeates the first few shots allows the payoff joke to work. Production designer and group member Terry Gilliam describes the achieved realism in relation to the intended overall style: "We actually wanted to give it a very rich feel, we didn't want it to be too lit. You very often find comedy is over-lit, but we wanted it to look like an art film. I don't see any reason why a comedy shouldn't be beautiful. I wanted it to look like an epic: to look rich and have depth of color." The intricate scenes in the film reveal a balance between humor and historical reality that allows it to creatively explore ancient culture without having to rely on other canonical films for a cheap laugh.

The movie-going public naturally assumes comedy plus history equals parody, which is usually appropriate considering, for example, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (Mel Brooks, 1993), which barely looks beyond a feathered cap and tights as historical set pieces. Unfortunately, typical historical and biblical epics do nothing to offset this assumption. Frequently, it seems, filmmakers either

consider comedy as spoiling dramatic adventure or they position the religious importance so high that it disables any willingness to poke fun. Historical reverence comes at the price of humor, and the two occupy disparate universes for most filmmakers. *The Life of Brian*, which was financed fully by George Harrison after the original financiers read the film's proposed script, employs many of the same sets, props, and costumes from Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 production of *Jesus of Nazareth* (Figure 1-1), which many people still cite as the most accurate depiction of Christ's life.

Figure 1-1. Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* Source: http://users.hol.gr/%7Etgsonsoe/

Figure 1-2. Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

For the purposes of this discussion, an epic parody imitates the style of the epic genre for comedy or ridicule. According to Python group member Eric Idle, *The Life of Brian* defies this description because history, not previous biblical epics, motivated the group to create the film.

This is an interesting area for comedy because nobody's

touched it, [there are] no jokes at all or any humor about the

bible or about JC or about biblical times. So we examined it

for about two weeks and read books and bibles and the

Dead Sea scrolls, we actually seriously studied it. It became

pretty apparent very early on that you couldn't really laugh at

Christ, because what he's saying is actually very good. It's a

very strong philosophy, and so what became apparent was

that the followers, or the people that pretend to be and

formed churches, are the target for the satire in the movie.[1]

The comedy team followed the expected course of study for the historians and

writers that work on normal projects, which seems to discredit the argument that

their gags were aimed at the genre. Accordingly, there are only a few

recognizable jabs at memorable epic film moments, the most obvious being the

roundly universal cries of "I am Brian Cohen," from *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick,

1960), when the Roman centurions ask which man they should take off the

crucifix. This moment, however, does not sufficiently merit parody because the

only joke simply implies that none of the men want to die, a reversal of the

circumstances in Dalton Trumbo's tale of the famous slave revolt.

The opening title sequence, one of the most elaborate of all epic films,

employs unique combinations of animated drawings, paintings, and photographs

to illustrate Brian's historical circumstances and foreshadow his religious

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[1] All block quotations from Monty Python cast members in this essay are derived from two supplementary audio commentaries on the 1999 Criterion Collection DVD release.

experiences in the film that follows. It also abridges time, taking the movie from his manger to 33 A. D., the year of his death. The sequence begins with the pyramidal typeface of the film's title that adorns theatrical release posters. The letters move upwards, revealing Brian lying in a cloud, from which the crumbling title letters knock him to earth. Positioning Brian amongst the clouds signifies his closeness to God. This metaphor appears in many epic and historical films, most notably in Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi Propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, in which Adolph Hitler descends from the clouds and is delivered to the masses awaiting his 1934 political rally in Nuremberg. Terry Gilliam, who composed animated sequences for Monty Python films and television shows, would later direct *Brazil*, which appropriates the clouds to signify an oneiric escape from an illogical fascist society in the future. The clouds' application in *The Life of Brian* could also symbolize the contrast between a moral man of god and the faults of humanity; between heaven and earth. Michael Palin admits this correlation in his observation that, "whereas the bible story is all about what happened to one man in history and it was different from what happened to anyone else in history, this is all about things that happen all the time to everyone. In that sense, Graham is every man. He's a figure who merely just wants to carry on living life in a reasonably decent, honorable way, minding his own business, and you can't do that. The world is full of loonies." Brian's fall from the clouds carries him past photographs of old Roman ruins, artifacts from Italian architecture, and stone sculptures that disintegrate with his passing. The disassembly and damage of cultural artifacts denotes the religious arguments and wars that the film alludes to

with Brian's later followers and separatists. These incidents satirize the divisiveness and extremism in religion that have caused more conflicts and bloodshed in history than anything else. Python member John Cleese clarifies their intent in this technique of paralleling Jesus and history:

> We did some research that was basically reading the
> Gospels, and we very quickly came up with the feeling that
> the humor lay not in what Christ said but in the fact that for
> 2000 years afterwards people couldn't agree on what he had
> said in the first place. So you get 2000 years of bloodshed
> and torture because you couldn't agree about what kind of
> love and peace the original prophet was talking about. Which
> is why I think people were so off-key when they said the film
> was blasphemous because it's clearly not; its actually taking
> Christ's life and the Christian story very seriously.

In fact, the animated introduction alludes to a great deal of the film's themes. One of the more important aspects considers the polarity between the religious significance that would later be attributed to that historical moment and the extreme dearth of super-importance in every day life. The song that accompanies the opening sequence tops the short list of the film's most popular and memorable moments because it exposes the aggrandization of history by detailing the ennui of life using epic vocal accompaniment. In the background, the Brian cartoon falls from heaven, encounters this great architecture and history, and re-ascends, while the song recounts the monotony of existence

(birth, growth, puberty, and identity) and the normalcy that innumerable other epic accounts get wrong. In this respect, *The Life of Brian* reveals, through its study of history, how the other epic films resemble parodies in many respects.

By trying to portray history basically and accurately, it draws attention to the exploitation in other epics. As director Terry Jones describes, by using proper historical contexts "you've got the immeasurable benefit of demystifying great moments of history which I think have been treated by movies in a very reverential way, especially in the bible stories where everyone has even teeth and blue eyes and the music surges and you know you're going to get to a great moment when John Wayne says 'Surely this was the son of God.'" The basic, humble acting in *The Life of Brian* makes it appear more human than films that incorrectly presume a lofty and stylized language to signify the ancient past. Similarly, the details of Tunisian scenery contribute to a more authentic feel than the art deco patterns in *Cleopatra* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1934) or the studio sets that many epics rely on. Coincidentally, *The Life of Brian*'s art director John Beard later went on to make *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988), another tale of Jesus filmed in the North African desert.

Critics often cite the film's silliness as proof that it simply parodies a genre and should have no real religious credence. Many of the scenes, however, reveal an understanding of religious and historical issues, proving a viable coexistence for humor and cultural history. The superlatively childish scene involves a lisp-afflicted Pontius Pilate questioning Brian about his claimed Roman heritage. Brian replies, as his mother once told him, that his father was Naughtius

Maximus, which the main centurion explains to Pilate as a joke name like Biggus Dickus or Sillius Soddus. Pilate professes to have a friend in Rome called Biggus Dickus, and parades around his palace attempting to elicit a laugh from the bursting guards. The scene holds great historical significance, however, for the close observer to notice any number of great references, which remain unspoken of in the narrative. For example, two artists, visible for only a few seconds, tile and paint the great hall when the scene begins, alluding to the historical fact that Pilate acquired and Romanized his Judean palace from a wealthy Jewish family upon arriving there. The artisans receive no direct reference in the film and bear no purpose other than to elucidate the temporal circumstances, which makes little sense if the filmmakers only want to parody the major epic conventions. As Terry Jones admits, they "spent as much time on detail as any serious religious film would have done even though [they] were making a comedy."

The colosseum scene similarly distills the comedic reasoning in *The Life of Brian* by providing a recognizable historical setting and exploring humorous cultural and social possibilities. The "battle" on the colosseum floor seems to parody Roman epic conventions, but it actually operates on a more sophisticated level. Roman epics require the heroism of the soldiers subjected to arena battle, whereas Python style historical satire requires only comedy that derives from resisting the required heroism in favor of trepidation. The debating members in the People's Front of Judea make the scene complex by ribbing the historical moment: two men battling to the death for spectacle and a group of fractionalized revolutionaries whose plan to subvert the Romans is contradicted by their

attendance at a Roman spectacle. When Brian requests to join their front, they elaborate on their precise hatred of Romans and a litany of other groups with every permutation of their own name. John Cleese reveals the target of this lambaste in his commentary on the film, specifying the proliferated leftist organizations in Britain at the time.

> The biggest was the Socialist Workers Party, but there were a number of others and they were all Leninist or Trotskyite or Maoist or Leninist Maoist or Maoist Trotskyite, and they all had these extraordinarily precise labels and they all fought with each other and hated each other much more than they actually hated the parties on the right, because it was so necessary for them to be doctrinally pure. What was funny was that they always talked as if they were massively important, and they were of course completely peripheral.

This modern inconsistency applies to the dilemma created in Biblical epics by calling attention to the religious discordance that plagues other epic re-creations: all of the trouble invested in telling the Bible's story leaves the resulting 2000 years of divergence untouched. Melani McAlister illustrates this inconsistency in *Epic Encounters* with an anecdote about the premiere release of *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956).

> At a luncheon for religious leaders in Manhattan just after the opening, DeMille piously explained, "I came here to ask you

to use this picture, as I hope and pray that God himself will

use it, for the good of the world" (44).

This sort of absent-mindedness, as with the equally non-secular release of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), inspires wonder in how a film could consider the retelling of religious origins to improve the world when it doesn't clarify the already-troubling religious disagreements and misinterpretations that derive from it. The genius of Monty Python's satire lies in that it can applicably confront the root of the issue without alienating the viewer or losing the all-important comedic pacing. Ironically, *The Life of Brian* conceives of a sensible, albeit heretical, analog to Christianity in a ninety minute film that only directly references Christ twice: the opening manger and the Sermon on the Mount.

The film ends with the ultimate surrealist act: the happy musical death. In a sense, it maintains the narrative conclusion from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, where the Medieval knights murder a historian and are taken in by a police cruiser in 8th century England. No longer able to suppress anachronism, the film enacts the least likely emotion and lyricizes an optimistic view of a painful life. Film scholar Jon Solomon agrees, beginning in *Ancient Comedy and Satirized Ancients* by remarking "Perhaps we sometimes take the ancient world too seriously. The clashing battles, complex politics, passionate romances, profound theologies, and majestic locales were only one side of ancient life" (283). Indeed, Monty Python proudly displays history wholly without shying away from petty quarreling, expletives, dirt, nudity, and other unfavorable social traits, all the while confident in their historical premise: that despite ideological, cultural, political,

and religious revolution, human nature remains relatively the same. Ironically, upon the film's theatrical release in 1977, the same plebeians that followed the gourd and the sandal as disciples two millennia ago showed up to protest the satirists as blasphemers.

Sources Cited

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