A STUDY IN CULTURAL CONFLICT: THE CONTROVERSY
SURROUNDING MARTIN SCORSESE'S
THE LAST TEMPTATION
OF CHRIST

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Lisa K. Scheffler
Denton, Texas
December 1995
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When the filmed version of *The Last Temptation of Christ* was released in the United States, it met with significant protests from conservative Christians who felt it was blasphemous. Using the controversy surrounding the film and its reception in Austin, Texas, this is a case study in censorship as a social process and in the cultural conflict it signifies. Certain societal factors must converge to create an art controversy. Through an examination of the film, the groups involved in the protest, and the social and political climate at the time, some of these factors are described. Imbedded in this controversy are the underlying tensions that permeate many modern cultural debates: shifting ideas of the sacred and the profane and definitions of moral authority.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Before it was even released in the summer of 1988, *The Last Temptation of Christ* had been condemned as blasphemous by many Christian leaders and was perceived by some Christians to be a blatant attack on their faith. Various methods of protest, from pickets to petitions to threats of boycotts, were used to keep the film from being released. An estimated 25,000 people picketed outside the gates of Universal Studios on the eve of the film’s opening.¹ When the film opened in nine major cities during the initial week of release, large numbers of protesters gathered at each theater in opposition to the film.² But the filmmakers and the film’s distributor, backed by the Hollywood establishment, stood firm.

Both sides of this debate were equally impassioned. Many Christians felt deeply offended by the depiction of Christ in the film. Many counter-protesters, both inside and outside of the entertainment industry, believed strongly in the right to free expression. Thus an cultural clash occurred over this film. Opposing sides squared off once again over the issue of censorship.

Censorship can be defined as broadly or narrowly as the user of the term decides and as such is a term that is both problematic and contested. *In Arresting Images*, his
exploration of art controversies, Steven Dubin makes the observation that in modern America, the meaning of the word censorship has been diluted because the word is bandied about so frequently.³ "At times censorship has been naively attributed to all manner of occurrences, in other instances its presence has been denied, and at still other moments, some artists have worn it as a badge of honor"(9). He also makes the assertion that the initiation of censorship "is not the exclusive domain of the political right of political right"(9). Alleged instances of censorship mirror one another, regardless of orthodoxy in Dubin's opinion. Thus a work may be found in need of censoring because it offends on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or any attribute in which people find their identity. The political orientation of the group involved is not as useful for characterizing the controversy as is "the degree of control which is proposed...by whom, why and in reaction to what type of work"(9).

Dubin finds that three basic conditions are generally present "which heighten the probability of controversy occurring over a work"(11). One is the nature of the subject and the extent to which it challenges accepted beliefs. As Dubin states, "an adverse response is more likely when art blends together what social conventions generally separate"(11). Secondly, a factor that is usually of some importance is the "degree of fit between the audience and the work"(11). He has found that frequently people are offended by a work that is presented in a form with which they little experience or familiarity. Thus what is acceptable in one context becomes unacceptable in another. And finally Dubin points to "fundamental social and demographic shifts and generally unsettled
social conditions” (11). To some extent, The Last Temptation of Christ meets all of these criteria.

It is Dubin's assertion that controversies over works of art frequently point to underlying social and political tensions that periodically explode when given a catalyst. It is not unusual for a work of art or popular culture to be found offensive by some individuals. Nevertheless not every “offensive” work creates a controversy of the magnitude seen with this film. Certain social factors must converge before efforts are launched to control the exhibition of the work.

In Culture Wars J.D. Hunter finds that censorship controversies frequently denote a cultural conflict, which he defines as “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.” The underlying principles that support these systems are “by no means trifling, but always have a character of ultimacy behind them” (42). Therefore the parties come to a debate from very different world views.

It is Hunter’s hypothesis that the average American, being a complex individual, is made up of a variety of thoughts and opinions and would rarely “embrace a particular moral vision wholly or uncritically.” He also asserts that though he believes competing moral visions to be at the center of most cultural conflicts, “these do not always take form in coherent, clearly articulated, sharply differentiated world views (43).” What is at work according to Hunter is the institutionalization of moral visions in organizations and public rhetoric that result in polarizing impulses or tendencies in cultural debate (43). Thus the most sharply polarizing speech comes from “the organizations and spokespeople who have an interest in promoting a particular position on a social issue” (43). Hunter gives these
organizations credit for "tremendous power in the realm of public discourse," taking on a life of their own (43).

This study is intended to use the controversy around The Last Temptation of Christ as a case study of censorship as a social process and of the cultural conflict it signifies. Dubin's strategy of examining the level of censure called for, the individuals and groups involved, why they chose to act and to what end is employed. Furthermore the criteria provided by Dubin for discussing the conditions usually in existence in art controversies is utilized. Under examination is the nature of the film itself, which partially accounts for its controversial reception. Other social and political factors at the time of the controversy are explored as a means of determining how the status of a particular faction of society clashed with the nature of the subject.

Hunter's framework for understanding the nature of cultural conflict is used to examine the reception of the film in one city. This provides a more in depth discussion of the controversy by looking at it on a smaller scale, where social and political climate can be examined along with the organizations and personalities involved.

Austin, Texas was chosen as this city for several reasons. First Austin was one of the first southern cities to open The Last Temptation of Christ. Universal Pictures carefully chose the cities in which the film was going to be released and chose Austin as one of the "testing grounds" for the South. The film opened in Austin to a substantial protest. Creating one of the larger pickets the film experienced, approximately five hundred protesters staged a demonstration outside the theater on the film's opening night.
But beyond its role in this particular controversy, Austin provides an interesting case study in cultural conflict. Because of certain demographics as well as certain official social and political stances, a mythology has formed around Austin. It has become known as the “liberal” city in the conservative state of Texas. Yet a closer look shows that Austin is very much alive with cultural conflict over a variety of issues. A strong conservative element exists in the city. As the state capital, Austin provides a fertile ground for political and cultural debate. Ultimately it is not surprising that the very city that has a reputation for being a bastion of liberalism produced one of the largest protests against *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

**Background: the Evolution from Novel to Film**

Before looking at the content of the film itself, it is useful to discuss the background of the work. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was based on the novel of the same name. The author is Nikos Kazantzakis, a controversial writer and poet who frequently dealt with religious themes in his works. He not only wrote about Jesus Christ, but other religious leaders such as Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, St. Theresa and St. Francis. A literary scholar notes that Kazantzakis was “not limited by or nurtured in or concentrated around one philosopher or one belief system.”\(^{10}\) He instead assimilated tenets of several.

*The Last Temptation of Christ* was not Kazantzakis’s only exploration into the figure of Christ, but it was one of his last. One reviewer believed that, “the concept of the Messiah varies with the periods of the poet’s life.”\(^{11}\) As one of his final novels *The Last Temptation of Christ* represented to some critics and scholars the pinnacle of his lifelong
obsession with “the meaning and purpose of great spiritual leaders.” In the book’s prologue Kazantzakis announces his intentions:

This book was written because I wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles; I wanted to show him that he must not fear pain, temptation or death – because all three can be conquered, all three have already been conquered.

Like many of his earlier works, the interpretation of this religious leader was controversial. The emphasis of the Christ of this novel is on his humanity. He admits his sin and his weaknesses. He is a reluctant savior who continually grapples with his nature: part divine, part human. Kazantzakis was rebuffed by the Greek Orthodox Church for these views and the novel remained a subject of controversy.

Production and Pre-release Controversy

Scorsese expressed a public desire to adapt Kazantzakis’s novel as early as 1984, when he planned to produce the film for Paramount. The studio withdrew its support within weeks of beginning primary photography. Scorsese claimed in an interview that Paramount was not “crazy about the casting,” and was concerned with the budget of the film. It is also likely that Paramount was concerned about possible controversy and responding to objections raised by the president of United Artists theater chain about possible protests of the film’s release. The film reportedly went through a number of configurations with possible distribution by New World and Hemdale. In November 1984, Variety reported that the rights were to be bought from Paramount and the picture produced as a European venture, with France as the majority contributor. Controversy erupted over the film’s proposed content in that country and the French Culture Minister
announced that the French government would not be contributing to the project.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Variety} then reports that production of the film was postponed, not for lack of financing but because of “prior commitments made by the filmmaker.”\textsuperscript{17}

By September 1987, it was reported that the production would finally get under way. The film would be produced on a relatively small budget of ten million dollars, with the cast and crew working for scale. The film was to be independently financed, shot in nine weeks in Morocco and then distributed as a negative pick up by Universal.\textsuperscript{18} Some speculation exists as to why Universal would take the risk in releasing this film, after it had been rejected by several other companies on the basis of its controversial content. And even without considering possible controversy, the film was not a promising blockbuster. It was to be a historical drama with no bankable stars.

The answer may lie partially in the film’s financing arrangement. At this time, MCA owned Universal and 49.7\% of the Cineplex Odeon theater chain.\textsuperscript{19} Cineplex Odeon had a small film division that was contributing financially to the project. With the companies being linked under MCA, it seems likely that this relationship at least partially accounts for the distribution deal. Another possible contributing factor was revealed six months after \textit{The Last Temptation of Christ} was released when \textit{Variety} announced that the deal to distribute \textit{Last Temptation} had “evolved” into a long term arrangement under which Scorsese “will produce, direct and develop projects” for Universal.\textsuperscript{20} This arrangement did ultimately prove profitable for the company when Scorsese produced the acclaimed remake \textit{Cape Fear} for Universal in 1991.
By the spring of 1988 Scorsese had finished shooting *The Last Temptation of Christ* and had begun the editing process in New York. According to a report in *Christianity Today*, protests were beginning to gain strength during the summer due to the actions of certain prominent Christian organizations. An early incarnation of the script had been circulated by the Sisterhood of Mary, a group of “ultra-conservative Protestant women.” Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family had begun alerting people of the film's existence and imminent release on his nationally syndicated Christian radio program. Organizations such as The American Family Association had begun a direct mail appeal that included the most controversial portions of an early version of the script. After trying to inform the Christian community about the film, the target of the early protests became the film's distributor. With many groups involved in the protest against the film in general and Universal specifically, a variety of tactics were employed in attempts to stop the film's release.

On July 12 a press conference was held in Los Angeles at which several religious leaders expressed their grievances with the film. Many of these individuals represented fundamentalist Christian churches and organizations who objected to the portrayal of Christ as a morally vacillating savior, who fantasizes about having sex with Mary Magdalene. The consensus among this group was that the film should not be released.

One of the speakers at the press conference was minister Tim Penland who had been employed by Universal as a consultant for the project. Because the film was known to be controversial, Universal seemed to want to convey the message to Christians that it was sympathetic to their concerns. In a March 1988 interview with *Christianity Today*,...
Penland relayed the "desire" of Scorsese and Universal "to make a faith-affirming movie" and asked that Christians not prejudge the film "until they can comment intelligently."

However, Penland assured the Christian community that "if the movie is blasphemous or if Christian leaders feel it would be damaging to the cause of Christ, that will be the end of my involvement with this project"(8). Penland resigned after screening a rough cut of the film stating that Universal had "violated its promises to Christian leaders and falsely represented the contents of the film"(8). Along with the other speakers at the July 12 press conference, he called for Christians to take action against the exhibition of this film.

Universal answered these charges by continuing its insistence that The Last Temptation of Christ was "deeply religious and faith affirming" and again asking people to reserve judgment until they could see the film for themselves(8).

In the same Variety article, a July 16 protest was reported in which 200 members of the Baptist Tabernacle of Los Angeles picketed Universal Studios(1). Also hoping to prevent the release of the film, some of the protesters applied a different tactic in their attempts to keep Universal from distributing the movie. The publication reports the contents of some of the picketer's signs as targeting the religion of Universal's President Lew Wasserman and other members of his management team. Some protesters were reportedly making an issue out of the men's Jewish faith by carrying signs stating "Wasserman endangers Israel"(1). Also a plane flew overhead dragging a banner with "Wasserman Fans Hatred with Temptation" printed on it(8). Dr. R.L. Hymers Jr., the pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle, is quoted as saying "Universal should be greatly concerned that some ignorant Christians will see the film as a Jewish commentary on
Jesus. It isn't good for interfaith relationships. Why throw gasoline on the fires of religious intolerance?"(8). A group of protesters, led by the same church, protested in front of Wasserman's house several days later. Holding a mock crucifixion, a man portraying Wasserman nailed a bloodied "Jesus" to a cross. Many of the other organizations associated with the protests condemned these anti-Jewish sentiments.

Another development reported by Variety was an attempt by one evangelist to buy all prints of the film from Universal in order to have them destroyed. In a letter to Wasserman, Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, offered Universal ten million dollars to reimburse the company for the cost of the film. He claimed that the money could be raised by the organization from concerned Christians around the nation. Universal categorically refused the offer.

Amidst the pickets and purchasing attempts, another technique was employed by Christian groups. Threats of boycotts were made by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the American Family Association. The threats extended beyond merely boycotting Universal Studios and included its parent corporation, MCA and all its subsidiaries. Both organizations claimed its members would boycott MCA for one year if the film was released.

It is important to note that not all conservative Christians agreed with the proposed boycott, though most oppose the film. According to Christianity Today the National Association of Evangelicals issued a statement calling the film "insensitive and offensive" and "full of flawed theology" and urged Christians not to patronize the film. But they also recognized the right of Universal Pictures to make and distribute it."
went on to state, “some have alleged that the motives for making the film are anti-Christian. We ascribe no such motive.”

Throughout the pre-release controversy, Universal studios stood firm in its decision to distribute The Last Temptation of Christ. However groups had already begun pressuring motion picture exhibitors. National theater chains were flooded with letters and petitions containing threats of boycotts and picket lines. Furthermore, the activity among protesters began to spread into local areas in anticipation of the film's release. National groups like the AFA and Moral Majority called on local chapters and individual churches to organize regional campaigns against the film.

Scorsese stood firmly behind his film and asked people to wait and judge it for themselves. He answered accusations from protesters that he was trying to undermine Christianity by stating, “It’s not the literal truth of the Bible. It’s very important to state that. It’s a taking off point. It’s a work of fiction.” His motivation, he claimed, was to make Jesus more accessible to ordinary people by showing his human side.

Screenwriter Paul Schrader was less diplomatic in his interview in the Los Angeles Times. He questioned the motives of some of the most vocal protesters, stating that “there is nothing like the ogre of Hollywood to open up the pocketbooks of Christian America.” He went on to admit, “I’m not saying that there isn’t a genuine theological issue here —because there is. But those people outside Lew Wasserman’s home --yelling and screaming insults --those people are not Christians.” Schrader also acknowledged that in the early versions of the script, as in all the ones he writes, he did tend “to push things a little harder,” and thus spurred greater objections from those in the Christian
community who read it. But "when you begin shooting, you tone down. You pull
back."  

The filmmakers and Universal received some vocal support from the Hollywood
film industry. Jack Valenti and the MPAA had issued a statement on behalf of all its
member companies in support of Universal and "its absolute right to offer to the people
whatever movie it chooses."  

Clint Eastwood, on behalf of the Director's Guild issued a
statement extolling freedom of expression as the American way.  

The Writers Guild ran an ad in Variety urging theater chains to exhibit the film.

Despite support from the industry, Universal was not unaffected by the
controversy. Although it continued to support the film, the studio seemed aware that it
must precede cautiously with its release. Because of all the censorship attempts, the
studio decided upon a "pre-emptive tactic."  

Universal announced it would release the
film on August 12, six weeks earlier than planned. The company's strategy seemed to be
twofold. First, an early release could "outstep organized opposition to the movie" by
giving protest groups less time to organize.  

Secondly, by getting the film into the public
arena at an earlier date, individual moviegoers could judge for themselves and end all the
wild speculation as to what the film portrayed.  

Many groups were still reacting to an
early draft of the script which contained several scenes not included in the finished film.

Universal selected large metropolitan areas in which to open the film during the
first week. The company thought that the film would be best received in the following
cities: New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Chicago, Washington D.C., San Francisco,
Seattle and Minneapolis.  

It avoided any southern cities for opening weekend. The only
theater chain booked to show the film was Cineplex Odeon which like Universal is also owned by MCA. To news of the films planned release, Rev. Hymers reacted by stating, "If they're going to leave the sex scene during the dream sequence in, they can expect violence." He finished these comments by adding, "We'll stop the showing of the movie."

The Last Temptation of Christ did open to a flurry of protest in its initial weekend as thousands picketed outside theaters showing the film. However the film also opened to record setting business, grossing over $400,000 on nine screens in three days. Furthermore, most picket lines had all but disappeared by Monday. Due to the success of these initial openings, Universal decided to release the film in an additional nine cities the following weekend. Austin Texas was ultimately included in the cities to receive the film during its second week of release. It was hoped that along with Houston, it could provide a testing ground for the movie’s reception in the south.

The chronology of the protest continues in the focused discussion of the film’s opening in Austin (Chapter III). Many of the key organizations and personalities have been introduced and will be further explored in the proceeding chapters. But first it is useful to discuss why this film was so controversial. As Dubin states, certain social factors must converge to create an explosive art controversy. The first step towards exposing some of these factors will be an analysis of the film itself and some of the reasons it became a contested work.
NOTES


5 Hunter 43.

6 Dubin 9.

7 Dubin 11.


16 "Lang Says Ministry Won’t Fund ‘Christ’," *Variety* 20 March 1985: 42.

17 "Lang Says Ministry," 42.

18 "Scorsese’s ‘Christ’ Underway" 4.


23 Bird 42.


29 Subsidiaries of MCA include the MCA and Motown record labels, the USA cable network and Spencer gift shops. Leaders also asked that concerned Christians not buy the E.T. video that was soon to be released by Universal (from Aljean Harmetz "Ministers Vow Boycott Over Scorsese Film on Jesus" New York Times 13 July 1988 late ed.: C15.

30 Bird 42.


32 Robbins, "War Rages" 6.


35 "Scorsese Pic" 3.

36 Dawes, "Brouhaha" 5.

37 Dawes, "Clergy Nail" 1.

38 Patrick Taggart, "'Last Temptation' to begin run at Austin Movie Theaters Friday," Austin American Statesman 17 Aug 1988 late ed.: A8.

39 Dawes, "Clergy Nail" 1.


41 Other chains such as General Cinema had announced that it would not show the
film. While pressure groups claimed this as a victory, speculation existed that this chain probably never intended to show a “Srorsese art pic” due to its long length and “lukewarm reviews.” See Dawes and Robbins “Brouhaha Hurls ‘Christ’ Pic to record Biz,” *Variety* 17 Aug. 1988: 20.

42 Dawes, “Clergy Nail” 1.

43 Dubin 11.
CHAPTER II

REASONS FOR THE CONTROVERSY

Several factors existed at the time of the production and release *The Last Temptation of Christ* which can help to account for the controversy surrounding it. The outcry against the film was led by a few select fundamentalist Christian organizations. In this instance the film was not even finished before these organizations began mobilizing opposition to it. In *Culture Wars*, Hunter emphasizes the importance of these groups and their leaders in this type of controversy. It is the elites that “create the concepts, supply the language and explicate the logic of public discussion.”

While it is true that protests against *The Last Temptation of Christ* were initiated, organized and led by these Christian elites, one cannot attribute the magnitude of the outcry solely to them. Individual Christians signed petitions, agreed to boycotts and showed up to picket. Thus before discussing the organizations and their leaders, it is important to look at possible reasons why this film in particular was so offensive.

"Why This Film?"

Hollywood had been producing Biblical epics since the early days of the medium. The life of Christ was depicted on American screens as early as 1909 with J. Stuart Blackton's *The Way of the Cross*. And in the eighty years leading up to *The Last
Temptation of Christ, numerous portrayals of Jesus were accomplished, many of these done by mainstream Hollywood studios. While a few scattered objections have been raised regarding various inaccuracies or portrayals no significant issue was taken with the overall representation of Christ in these studio products. Several reasons exist for the lack of controversy attached to these works.

In *The Epic Film*, Derek Elley examines a number of films produced in the U.S. as well as Western Europe, applying the standards of the literary epic to film. Stressing its mythic quality he believes that historical and/or source accuracy is not a factor in judging the epic. He states instead that one of the purposes of the epic is to “present a national or religious identity in times of change.” Therefore in his evaluation of film epics which focus on the life of Christ, he notes with obvious displeasure that “the cinema does not measure up to the challenge of filming this material” (42).

This is true in his opinion because, “here myth continues to touch closest on our Western lives, and an excess of reverence has fettered the imaginations of scriptwriters” (43). In staying close to Biblical account, “traditional” Church views of Christ prevail in most of these films, instead of providing a “fresh view, based on the Gospels considered as literary epics adaptable like any other” (43).

In Elley’s estimation a fault with depictions of Christ is more than likely a strength in the view of many Christians. Most of these films have chosen to portray Jesus in a way comparable to his traditional representation. Elley tracks this characterization to the Middle Ages, with “Christ as passive instrument of destiny, seen in pious terms” (43).
The majority of these mainstream films also conclude with Christ’s Transfiguration, acknowledging at least the myth of his deity.³

But in addition to their portrayals of the epic “hero,” this subgenre of films has stylistic similarities. Narratively these films are set in the distant past and concern events of some mythic or historical significance. But perhaps the epic’s most defining characteristic is its excessive style. For many, a mention of the cinematic epic evokes images of the highest level of visual and aural extravagance and romantic over-indulgence Hollywood can reach. This includes sweeping spectacle, a “cast of thousands” and an “assertively anachronistic punctuation of its historical representation by major Hollywood stars.”⁴ These characteristics are further enhanced by “fantastic costumes,” elaborate sets, frequent use of voice-over narration, and “pervasive symphonic music underscoring every moment by overscoring it.”⁵ In his description of the 1961 version of King of Kings Elley sums up all of these characteristics as he calls the film a “moving picture-book,” with a series of “pageant-like, celebratory episodes” accented by Orson Welles’ voiceover narration. He goes on to cite the “near continuous music, strong expressionist colours and a simplicity of texture which marries well with the film’s hygienic look (hardly anyone sweats, and when they do it is always decorously).”⁶

But Elley credits the portrayals of Christ with an even earlier influence than other epic films. He notes that presentations of Jesus in Christian painting have also had a profound effect on cinematic representations. These effects can be seen in the art direction, lighting and even the facial expressions of the actors. According to Elley, Cecil B. Demille instructed his director of photography to study Renaissance paintings in order
to formulate a lighting style for the original 1927 *King of Kings* (42). Following this artistic tradition, Christ and his surroundings take on symbolic and iconographic qualities. As Elley observes, "It seems entirely consistent that Christ should still be spotless white when brought before Helod and Pilate, and that the blood from the crown of thorns should run down his face in perfect rivulets" (47).

For the most part it seems the majority of mainstream films about Jesus stick closely to stylistic, narrative and representational traditions of first the Church, then Christian art and finally other epic films. And while all of the films which portray Jesus have individual characteristics, all preclude an attempt at "realism." Elley sees it as a fault that "to date (1984) there is no treatment of the Gospels which manages to humanise the biblical text" (42).

Therefore mainstream audiences have become used to a particular characterization of Jesus Christ and depiction of his surroundings as seen in such well known works as *King of Kings*, *The Robe* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. His environment is more symbolic and anachronistic than "realistic." Christ is pious, calm and unwaveringly faithful to his mission but rarely exhibits basic human reactions and emotions. In many of these films, "there is no individual characterisation of the disciples nor any real concern for Christ as a person: events are presented and the inevitable conclusion arrives." He is portrayed as "super-human," the son of God.

Martin Scorsese's film breaks with the traditional New Testament epic in several significant ways. Perhaps the most significant, as far as the protesters were concerned, is in the characterization of Christ. But before delving into that aspect, it is worth examining
some of the formal and stylistic ways in which the film departs from the genre. Dubin states that an important issue in the art controversies that he researched was the degree to which audiences "fit" with the work. When confronted with a form that is unfamiliar, or when asked to employ a reading strategy that a spectator does not possess, an adverse response is more likely. Working from Dubin's observations, it is possible that in addition to the unconventional representation of Christ, the narrative and stylistic forms may possibly account for some of the controversy as well.

After viewing a lifetime of Hollywood representations of Biblical times, audiences may be used to a more pristine and perhaps anachronistic setting -- crowd scenes in which the "extras all wear spotless white headshaws in the bright sunshine." Elley states that in adhering visually to the traditional portrait of Christ, filmmakers have made "little attempt to conjure up the realities of the period." Scorsese does present a mise-en-scene that is seemingly "realistic." The dwellings are modest, with dirt floors and thatched roofs. Dressed in muted tones the actors are shown without perfectly coifed hair and covered in the dust of their dry surroundings. Perspiration is not used "decorously" in this film as individuals are seen bathed in sweat and weary from the pounding heat. Much of the film was shot outdoors and on location in Morocco, which lends to the authenticity of the setting.

"Glamour" lighting is used infrequently in this film. Soft diffused light is rarely used in close-ups, even for the women. Harsh sunlight illuminates characters by day, and the night scenes are very dark with barely enough moonlight or firelight to make out the figures. The environment for these characters is primitive and hostile. Even Pilate's
quarters lack the nobility of the conventional epic palace, lacking for instance the “flimsy
curtains and richly patterned floors” depicted in King of Kings.

The musical score of Last Temptation also varies significantly from the generic
convention. Gone is the elaborate orchestration of the previous epics. Replacing the
weeping strings are pulsing percussion and whining woodwinds. Scorsese also
incorporates diegetic music throughout the film to punctuate scenes, but also to illuminate
the importance of instrumentation and voice to the culture portrayed. Musicians are seen
at many of the film’s celebrations and rituals, such as the wedding where Jesus turns water
into wine and during preparations for the Passover in Jerusalem.

These stylistic choices lend themselves to a seemingly more authentic setting, and
in doing so break with the genre conventions of the biblical epic. But in addition the
narrative itself is more challenging and less accessible than those offered by classical
Hollywood cinema. While certainly linear and straightforward in presentation, this
narrative is at times oblique. The relationships between the characters are sometimes
undefined as are their motivations. Furthermore the controversial dream sequence at the
end leaves more questions than answers. Without the classical Hollywood transition, the
audience is thrust into a hallucination: Christ’s “last temptation” when his guardian Angel
rescues him from the cross. While not incomprehensible, the narrative structure for Last
Temptation is not the classical Hollywood, three-act structure familiar to most viewers
with a psychologically defined protagonist whose motivations are always understood.

All of the ways in which The Last Temptation of Christ departs from the
conventions of its genre and mainstream filmmaking practices may have contributed to its
controversial status. In its formal and stylistic tendencies this film qualifies more as an “art-house” film and thus relatively unfamiliar a majority of moviegoers. That is not to say that these aberrations account for all of the controversy, but in straying from audience expectations of the traditional biblical epic in these areas, some viewers could find the experience that much more disturbing. It must be kept in mind however that opposition to the film arose long before the film had even been edited much less released. Therefore it is likely that most of the protesters voiced their displeasure without ever seeing the film.

The depiction of Christ, whether in the screenplay or in the final release version, was the subject of the most debate. Much of the outrage was attributed in the media to Christ’s sexual encounter with Mary Magdelene in the dream sequence. To find that as the primary cause, however, is over-simplifying the issue. The root cause is the way in which the overall representation of Christ in this film goes against some of the foundational beliefs of fundamentalist Christology.

Christians who hold fundamentalist views feel an assault not only from “secular” society, but from liberal influences within the Church itself. These influences have questioned among many things, the inerrancy of the scriptures, the virgin birth, and in some cases the deity of Christ and the validity of the resurrection. The Last Temptation of Christ was seen by many as a representation of such doctrine.

This fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity contains a very particular world view as to how the universe functions. Of course, perfect agreement is not found among various groups of fundamentalists. The term “fundamentalist” itself may be applied to a variety of people and organizations from different denominations. Thus these groups may
argue over certain ideas and biblical gray areas, but hold firm to the basic “truths” of the Bible and the Christian faith.

It is useful to discuss these core beliefs as an attempt to explain the adverse reaction so many Christians had toward *Last Temptation*. But first it should be reiterated that fundamentalist Christians accept the Bible as the inerrant word of God. It is believed that God’s Holy Spirit spoke to each of the writers, ensuring that the words written in the scriptures were God’s. Furthermore it is believed that the compilation of the Bible was overseen by God, so that the 66 books contained therein are the definitive message from God to his people. Therefore the Bible, and the interpretation thereof, is the basis for the fundamentalist’s beliefs.

In discussing the views of these Christians, it makes sense to start at the beginning, with the events of Genesis chapters one through three, as interpreted by fundamentalists. Man and woman were created by God and given the garden of Eden as a dwelling place. At this point the concept of “sin” did not even exist and God, the creator, and humankind, the creation, were in perfect communion. But both Adam and Eve had been granted free will to either to obey God or not. Enter the serpent and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The two were instructed by God not to eat of this tree “for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die.” The serpent, according to fundamentalist Christianity, appealed to Eve’s pride by claiming that if she ate of the tree, she could be like God. Eve, finding the tree “desirable to make one wise,” took and ate of the tree and then gave the fruit to Adam who ate it as well. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis states that the temptation for “our remote ancestors was the idea that they could ‘be like gods’ —could
set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside of God, apart from God.” According to this viewpoint, in actively disobeying God, Adam and Eve rejected him and introduced sin into the world.

According to Christianity, with the introduction of sin comes several consequences for humankind. God is frequently described in the Bible as “The Holy One.” Biblical scholar Arthur Pink states, “He is so because the sum of all moral excellence is found in Him. He is absolute Purity, unsullied even by the shadow of sin.” Therefore, as a pure and righteous being, God can no longer allow sinful humankind in his presence. Also, as ruler of the universe, he must punish unrighteousness, “for the wages of sin is death.” But according to Christian belief, God is also merciful and forgiving and he desires to offer grace to humankind. Pink defines divine grace as “the sovereign and saving favor of God exercised in the bestowment of blessings upon those who have no merit in them and for which no compensation is demanded from them.” This grace was to come first to Israel and then the rest of the world through a Messiah.

The Old Testament speaks of the Messiah as a king who would deliver the nation of Israel from its oppressors, but also of his being a servant who would be given “as a light to the Gentiles,” have his visage “marred more than any man” and who would be wounded for the transgressions of humankind. According to Christianity, Jesus Christ is this messiah. He was crucified and made the sacrifice for all people, at once satisfying the judgment of God and then reuniting the creator with his creation. Christ was then
resurrected, signifying his defeat of death and allowing him to return in the “Second Coming” to free the nation of Israel and rapture his church.

In the Bible Jesus claims not only to be the messiah, but the son of God and at times, God himself. In the Christian view it is only Christ whose death was sufficient as payment for sin. This is because he was both God and man. As Lewis explains, “He could surrender His will, and suffer and die because he was man; and He could do it perfectly because He was God.” And in the fundamentalist view, this is possible only because Jesus lived a sinless life. Had Christ ever sinned, he like all people would deserve death for his own transgressions. It is only because Christ was perfect that his crucifixion was sufficient payment for the sins of all. Christians point to his resurrection as proof that he is the true Messiah.

According to the fundamentalists, a person reaps the benefits of this sacrifice when he or she acknowledges his or her own sinfulness and accepts by faith Christ as savior and lord. In doing so, one surrenders to the authority of God as creator and regains the everlasting life lost in humankind’s fall.

I have taken the time to outline these core beliefs in order to suggest the ways in which The Last Temptation of Christ violates them. The most obvious way in which this film varies from traditional representations of the Christ and Christianity is in not relying on the Gospels as source material. Before distribution, Scorsese added a disclaimer to the beginning of the film, stating that the film is not meant to be viewed as fact, but instead as fiction. To many Christians, this was not enough because they believed the rest of the
film presents its material as fact. In their perspective this is fraudulent, even libelous since they hold the biblical account of Christ’s life as historically accurate and true.

Of course other mainstream representations of Christ have used the Gospels as their basis and manipulated the texts, with few cries from Christians. Chronology has been altered, portions omitted, characterizations slightly altered. But in Last Temptation an even wider latitude is used in conveying the story of Christ. The film is full of small details that differ from the biblical account: the ordering of Jesus’ miracles, the omission of both Harod and Antipus at Christ’s condemnation to name just two. But its Christ’s portrayal and the film’s subtle ambiguity as to the truth of his claims that are most at issue.

Dubin notes that controversy over art frequently erupts when “art blends together what social conventions generally separate.” Generally when the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are breached, people become uncomfortable. Dubin states, “Sacred and secular may be distinct categories in theory, but in a complex industrialized environment there are manifold opportunities for them to converge”(79). Art is a setting where this convergence frequently occurs.

In the case of The Last Temptation of Christ, the mixing of the sacred and the profane manifests itself in the person of Jesus. In this film, Jesus is not the perfect god-like man presented in the Bible. Instead of his divinity, his humanity is emphasized. He is introduced as a tortured soul who makes crosses for the Romans in hopes that God will hate him. At first he does not want to follow God’s call. He calls himself a “hypocrite who is afraid of everything.” Admitting to his sexual lusts he confesses, “when I see a woman I blush and turn away. I want her, but I don’t take her --for God and that makes
me proud.” He goes on to say, “I don’t steal, I don’t fight, I don’t kill, not because I
don’t want to but because I’m afraid. I want to rebel against God, but I’m afraid.” He
admits he is a sinner and asks for forgiveness from Mary Magdalene because “I’ve done so
many bad things.”

His motivations are sometimes suspect in the film. The contexts of events are
changed. In one of the most famous passages of the Bible, Jesus saves a prostitute by
pointing out her accuser’s hypocrisy. He asks, “Whoever is without sin throw the first
stone.” In the Bible the identity of the prostitute is unknown and many assume Jesus to be
exhibiting compassion to a woman that everyone else was ready to condemn. In the
film, the prostitute is Mary Magdalene, who is presented as Jesus’s forbidden love. His
motivation is presented not as orchestrating God’s plan for forgiveness by saving a sinner
and illustrating the new covenant, but instead using all his persuasive powers to save the
woman he loves.

The Jesus in Last Temptation is a reluctant savior, unsure of his identity. He
seems surprised that he actually succeeded in raising Lazarus from the dead. This Jesus is
also seen wavering in his beliefs. After his first trip to the desert he returns with a message
of love. After his temptations in the wilderness he invites his disciples to war, to “pick up
an ax and slit the devil’s throat.” Yet in the end he comes to the realization, after being
visited by Isaiah in a dream, that he must die to bring forth God’s plan. Thus after
bringing his followers to the verge of revolt against Rome, he refuses to give the signal to
fight.
All of these traits -- the insecurity, the struggle for holiness, the uncertainty --
would more than likely be acceptable to most Christians in the story of Moses, Abraham
or David. For these were all mere humans struggling against their sinful nature to do the
will of God. However, in the characterization of the son of God, the savior of the world,
these qualities are unsettling to some Christians. The traditional representation of Jesus
shows him always aware of his ultimate fate, and unambiguously ready to do God's will.
He is generally meek and passive, incited to anger only at the hypocrisy of God's chosen
people. He consistently calls for love and forgiveness as the ethical foundation of all
people. But perhaps most importantly he is sinless. Unlike the Jesus in the film, the view
of Christ held by fundamentalists is that he never sinned in thought or deed.

Christian theologians have been debating the mystery of how Christ could be at the
same time man and God. If he was a man with no god-like powers, how can anyone claim
he was perfect? Yet if he was not perfect, how can he be a proper sacrifice "without spot
of blemish?" And if he was more God than man, where is the nobility in the sacrifice?
With this film the complexities and enigmas of Christology were brought to the average
Christian by a film industry many of them find decadent and sinful.

The Jesus in Last Temptation does state some important "truths" according to
Christians. He declares that "God belongs to everyone, God is not an Israelite" and that
he must "be the sacrifice to bring God and man together." But ultimately the film leaves
ambiguous the validity of some of the most important "facts" of the Christian faith. This
Jesus is not seen to be resurrected. The last scene shows Jesus dying on the cross, but the
resurrection and transfiguration are omitted. Although this is the same ending found in the
novel, this omission breaks with the generic tradition of biblical films. But more than breaking with tradition some may find significance in ending the film with Christ's death. To not show the resurrection could be perceived as denying it. According to fundamentalists, to deny it is to ultimately deny the deity of Christ and the truth of his claims. In the Bible Christ states that he would rise from the dead "on the third day." If he was not resurrected, what separates him from other great moral teachers?

Furthermore it is implied in the film that Christ's death and resurrection were not even necessary for Christianity to be born. During Jesus's "last temptation" he is rescued from the cross and allowed to live an ordinary life as a man. He marries first Mary Magdalene, who dies, then Mary and Martha the sisters of Lazarus and has several children. In the dream sequence Jesus overhears Saul, now Paul, telling the miraculous story of his conversion. Earlier in the film, Saul is shown as one of the Zealots who kills Lazarus in order to prevent people from hearing of his resurrection. Now Paul proclaims the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified and then raised from the dead. When Jesus confronts him with his lies, Paul states that it does not really matter, "I created the truth out of what people needed —what they believed. If I have to crucify you to save the world, I'll crucify you and if I have to resurrect you I'll do that too." When Jesus threatens to tell the truth, Paul claims that no one would believe him, "You don't know how much people need God. You don't know how happy he can make them. He can make them happy to do anything...happy to die, all for the sake of Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God, the Messiah."
This interaction with Paul occurs during the film’s dream sequence; it is part of Satan’s temptation of Jesus. It could be said that the devil wanted to placate Jesus into believing that God’s plan could be accomplished without his death. Nevertheless, this exchange does present a recurrent argument against the validity of Christianity, that Paul utilized the teachings of a zealous carpenter to create a new religion. This theory’s mere existence in the film could only add to the “insult” experienced by some viewers.

The Last Temptation of Christ presents an alternative to the traditional view of Christ. The basic story of Christ is told, but the underlying assumptions are different. Christ is a flawed human being who inhabits a brutal environment. This film may have caused discomfort in certain individuals because it questions ideas that some say should not be disputed. It in effect challenges the validity of one of the predominant belief systems on earth. By altering the representation of Christ, it casts doubt upon the veracity of Christianity itself and according to some erect barriers to salvation for those who watched the film.

But more than any possible deleterious effects some Christians may have felt the film could cause in the “unsaved,” it represented to many yet another “liberal” and “humanist” assault on their faith. And even though the infamous “sex scene” certainly caused many to cringe, it was the overall viewpoint of the film which more than likely caused offense. And even though it is probable that the vast majority of protesters neither saw the film nor read the script, they reacted to what certain Christian opinion makers said about the work. The reviewer of the film for Christianity Today made the following observation about the film and the climate in which it was produced.
As world views come and go, the liberals succumb to their desire for relevance, for addressing the culture's despisers of religion in their own terms, for trimming from the gospel that which offends the spirit of the age and dressing what remains in the robes of Christ. And here Scorsese follows that tradition, surrendering to an age fascinated with violence, sexuality and the paranormal.

For many fundamentalists, it is the perceived manipulation and adulteration of certain core beliefs that they already felt were under attack helped to provoke the firestorm of controversy that accompanied the film's production and release.

In looking at some of the reasons some Christians took offense at this work, it is hoped that the controversy itself can be better understood. But exploration of the text alone cannot account for the outcry against this film. Controversial films that offended the religious beliefs of fundamentalist Christians had been produced before, and had not met with this degree of opposition. Therefore it is necessary to discuss some of the other factors involved.

The Fundamentalist Elite

The term fundamentalist can be traced to a group of publications issued in 1910 called The Fundamentals. Reacting to what they considered the adulteration of Christianity in some denominations and the academic community, two wealthy conservative businessmen sponsored the twelve volume publication. They systematically discussed doctrinal issues, such as the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the historicity of Christ, the nature of the Holy Spirit, and the need for missions, and also refuted the positions of other religious systems.
A new era had begun in Christianity. There came a new distinction between the "Fundamentalist" and the "Modernist," who denied the infallibility of the Bible and possessed a concern for social reform. By 1919 popular support was beginning to side with the modernists, capitalizing on a "shift in emphasis from the spiritual to the social and practical." For the academics, this "New Christianity" allowed a synthesis with changing views in science and philosophy. Thus a more modernist view of Christianity was adopted by the majority of mainline churches throughout the following decades, with the fundamentalists occupying a small but stable subculture.

Mainstream Protestantism began suffering a decline in the late 1960's as membership in their churches began to drop. By contrast, the conservative Protestant movement began a resurgence. During this period increasing numbers of fundamentalists Christians became more politically active in reaction to what they considered the moral decline of America. The culprit in this decay was "secular humanism," which was said to be itself a religion that "the government and courts in the United States favor over all others." Under this assumption, Christians felt compelled to get involved at all levels of politics. Furthermore, mass media was faulted for exalting prurience and humanist thought. The film and television industry was being engaged in a new round of debate over the content of its material.

With the rise of social and political activism on the part of conservative Christians, many para-church organizations began to appear. A para-church organization is defined as "an independent organization often drawing support from a broader inter-denominational base on behalf of particular political, social and/or spiritual mission."
importance of mainline denominational boundaries waned as Christians were organized across denominations on the basis of their religious conservatism.

Several of these organizations were involved in the debate over The Last Temptation of Christ. The American Family Association, the Moral Majority and to a lesser extent Campus Crusade for Christ and Focus on the Family. These organizations and their leaders defined the boundaries for the discourse that surrounded the film.

The American Family Association evolved from the National Federation for decency founded by the Reverend Donald Wildmon. This group primarily conceives of itself as a media watchdog group that seeks out “offensive” material, warns its membership about it and then campaigns for its eradication by targeting advertisers. Although the group focuses primarily on “indecent” programming on television, it has also spoken out against use of tax dollars to fund “offensive” art via the National Endowment of the Arts, lobbied against gay rights legislation in various states and been active in anti-pornography crusades.

Wildmon’s public condemnation of The Last Temptation of Christ and his organization’s subsequent protest of the film brought the group into national prominence. The AFA even began its monthly newsletter, which today has a circulation of 265,000, with a special issue on the film. After the controversy over The Last Temptation of Christ waned, Wildmon was able to command media attention with his crusade against Pepsi’s employment of Madonna to advertise its products, his public outrage over Andre Serrano’s controversial art piece, “Piss Christ,” and his threatened boycott of Blockbuster Video Stores unless they agreed not to carry NC-17 rated films.
The Moral Majority is an organization founded in 1979 by tele-evangelist Jerry Falwell. He named his organization based on his assumption that the majority of Americans agreed with his views. Falwell is an independent Baptist minister who has built a Christian empire based in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, chancellor of Liberty University, and was the producer of the nationally broadcast “Old-Time Gospel Hour.”

In an article published in 1987 Falwell listed several goals for his organization in the 1980’s. Falwell began his discussion by lauding the 1980s as the decade “of destiny for America,” in which “we have the opportunity to see spiritual revival and political renewal in the United States” (111). He believed the nation must be called “back to God, back to the Bible, back to moral sanity,” and away from the “rising tide of secularism” and “liberal clergy” (111). Linking religious liberalism to political liberalism Falwell denounced the “encroachment” of government on “church and family” (112).

He then outlined the viewpoints of his Moral Majority and the ways in which it could contribute to reviving America’s “moral sanity.” The Moral Majority as explained by Falwell is a pro-life, “pro-family,” organization that opposes illegal drug trafficking and pornography and supports a strong national defense and the State of Israel (112-114). He stressed that it is not a political party, nor does it endorse political candidates (115). “Moral Majority, Inc. is not a religious organization attempting to control the government” (116). Nevertheless, Falwell did call for members of his organization to lobby Congress, mobilize “inactive” Americans and inform citizens of the voting records of their representatives. Emphasizing that he is a “separatist” who believes in the division
between church and state, Falwell still insisted that Christians have an obligation to be active in shaping society. Falwell thought that he and other fundamentalists have "been sitting back waiting for apostasy to take over at any moment, and have nearly let the country go down the drain" (120).

Campus Crusade for Christ is an interdenominational ministry which can be found on many college campuses around the nation. Its primary purposes include making converts to Christianity and "discipling" individuals through Bible study and missionary work. Although not an overtly political or social reformist group, Crusade's founder, Bill Bright, has been known to speak out on certain issues. The release of The Last Temptation of Christ is one such issue. He offered to raise at least ten million dollars from concerned Christians to reimburse Universal for its expenditures, if the studio would turn over all prints of the film to be destroyed.  

Focus on the Family is headed by Dr. James Dobson, a Christian psychologist. Dobson hosts a radio program and has written several books on Christian living. Noted for offering a personal brand of psychology, he considers his responses as simply "repackaging scriptural messages." In a 1990 interview he claimed his organization was spending much of its energy responding to letters and phone calls from listeners. These correspondences ranged from the most serious threats of suicide, which are given immediate and personal attention to questions about topics such as family finances and parenting. It is in these letters, Dobson believed that the "unraveling of society" is apparent. In years past Dobson claimed that the majority of letters dealt with "thumb
sucking and bed-wetting. Now (1990) they’re writing about child abuse, manic
depression, suicide and satanic cults.43

Dobson has been an outspoken opponent of abortion and pornography, but
claimed he had no political aspirations. In the interview he stated, “I have no
qualifications for political life...I will never be a candidate for any public office. I do not
want a political appointment.”44 Nevertheless he professed his belief in the promotion of
“traditional family values” and his Focus on the Family organization has formed coalitions
of “pro-family organizations” for public education and lobbying at the state level.

Shaping the Discourse

It is groups such as these and their spokesmen that largely define the parameters of
the public discourse surrounding their causes. Their rhetoric, as evidenced in the debate
over The Last Temptation of Christ, shaped the parameters of the debate. Certain
arguments were continually reiterated during the controversy. One as articulated by
Falwell was that “Neither fiction nor the First Amendment gives Universal the right to
libel, slander and ridicule the most central figure in world history.”45 In other words,
certain types of speech and expression should not be constitutionally protected. The other
argument utilized in this debate was that Hollywood makes concessions to other groups to
avoid causing offense, yet takes pride in insulting Christians. Donald Wildmon stated that
the issue was not just one film, but the trend in “Christian bashing by Hollywood and the
Networks.”46 These sentiments were echoed again and again, as when an Austin pastor
said, “I don’t think Hollywood would attack any other minority – Blacks, Hispanics,
homosexuals—the way they have Christians.” Hollywood was treated as the knowing adversary in this cultural conflict, with specific intentions to undermine Christianity.

In *Culture Wars*, Hunter finds the creation of an opposing force common in cultural debates. “The struggle to gain legitimation requires something besides positive moral persuasion. Inevitably it entails the existence of an enemy to stand against.” Hollywood is frequently painted as one of the evil forces in America by fundamentalist organizations.

Various forms of media are utilized to disseminate the rhetoric espoused by these organizations. During their campaign against *The Last Temptation of Christ*, radio spots and newspaper advertisements were both used. But of special significance was direct mailings.

It is acknowledged in *Culture Wars* that direct mail has become very important to all such organizations because of its ability to reach so many people efficiently (166). Focus on the Family, Moral Majority and the American Family Association all utilize direct mail to communicate with supporters and potential supporters. Focus on the Family publishes six different magazines for a variety of age groups and a “monthly political publication tells subscribers what they can do to combat gay rights, abortion and sexually suggestive advertising.” Moral Majority Report was the monthly publication for Falwell’s organization. The AFA also publishes a monthly journal in addition to “special reports” it distributes on topical issues. Common in the publication of all these groups is the tendency for these materials to be extreme in their appeal with an emphasis on sensationalism (this tends to be true of direct mail solicitation regardless of the specific
political agenda of the group involved) (166). A sampling from a recent American Family Association mailing displays some of these characteristics.

The controversial drama NYPD Blue became an immediate target for AFA protest because of its occasional use of partial nudity and adult language. In a mailing sent to members in 1994, the program is touted as “Network TV’s first pornographic series,” and a warning label placed on the cover alerting parents to keep the pamphlet out of the reach of children because of the “offensive TV content” inside. The interior of the mailing contains lists of all the “pornographic” dialogue and content for each episode that aired. The group claimed it was not including photographs of the “pornographic sexual nudity” because of the report’s “wide distribution” (it is not mentioned that it would be a copyright infringement had they done so). None of the language or scenes described are placed within the context of the story.

This mailing also uses what Hunter calls a very common tactic: employing “the devil factor.” As with The Last Temptation of Christ controversy, the entertainment industry is portrayed as demonic and credited with a deliberate attempt to undermine the family. The report claims that the President of ABC had acknowledged that the show could succeed without the more controversial elements. The AFA interprets that to mean, “They don’t need the filth...they put it in to make such behavior acceptable to our children and families.” An implied call to action appears on the back of the pamphlet. It contains a list of advertisers who air commercials during the program. The headline states, “These advertisers have joined with ABC to promote TV pornography by giving money to support NYPD BLUE.”
A similar mailing was reportedly sent out by AFA during the campaign against *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Based on the content of an early script, it contained a list of “offensive” dialogue and description of events taken out of context. An example of inflammatory dialogue included in the mailing is a line spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene. “God sleeps between your legs” is a sentence of dialogue supposedly found in the early script draft although it does not appear in the finished film. The mailing characterized the film as “blasphemous” and urged individuals to sign the enclosed petition and pledge to boycott Universal and its parent company MCA.

Hunter acknowledges that these mailings are overtly biased, “since they seemed to be aimed at an audience that is already committed.” Furthermore there is a perceived need for sensationalism and the presentation of an unambiguous argument in order to motivate the individual to action. For *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as with many mailings from these organizations, materials were sent to local pastors in hopes of getting them to extend the information to their congregations.

It was through these mass mailings, in addition to radio and newspaper ads that opposition to the film was mobilized. Because these modes of address were used, as in the debate over many societal issues, discourse remained superficial and by extension polarized. Because information disseminated through these media is expected to be given quickly and succinctly, “by their very nature, then, they must reduce sophisticated moral reasonings to simplifications....which actually institutionalizes the impulse toward polarization in public discourse.”

Other Factors
Discussion of the organizations most closely involved with *The Last Temptation of Christ* controversy and how they garner support has been offered in hopes of partially explaining the scope of the protests. Individuals already likely to be sympathetic to their causes were motivated by the polarized speech and propaganda spread by certain religious leaders. And while the content of the film does partially explain why these opinion makers called for such a outcry, other motivations may have been at work. Even other conservatives questioned the intentions of some of the protesting organizations. These people believed that some groups were exploiting the controversy for their own gain. Conservative columnist Cal Thomas stated, "I’ve seen the fundraising letters – (the film) has become another button to raise funds."

But even if one assumes that some protesters had dubious reasons for their involvement, it cannot account for all of the controversy. I believe that other more indirect factors are worth examining for their possible impact.

In his list of circumstances which heighten the probability of an art controversy Dubin includes, "fundamental social and demographic shifts and generally unsettled social conditions." Both Hunter and Dubin agree that with the number of cultural conflicts that have erupted in recent years, larger societal trends should be examined.

Hunter cites the shift after World War II from a nation focused around industry, to one centered on information. "We have seen a huge expansion in the number of people who derive their livelihoods from economics of knowledge, information, ideas, and the like". Central to this change has been the growth of higher education and the number
of individuals now actively debating in the field of ideas. Old assumptions are being challenged and alternative world views explored.

Dubin is more specific in his discussion of social and political factors contributing to societal conflict. Focusing on art controversies which occurred in the late eighties, he finds the end of the Cold War and serious crisis's on the domestic front as contributing factors. With the winding down of the cold war and a new "detente" with the crumbling Soviet Union, Americans no longer had an external enemy on which to focus and project. Dubin states that historically, "when the threat of external enemies dissipates, societies characteristically begin to search for internal demons". Compounding this phenomenon was an endless array of domestic social problems that were clamoring for attention: AIDS, crime, drugs and homelessness just to mention a few. Some politicians and social leaders, seeking to avoid these complexities conundrums associated with these issues, began looking for a diversion. As Dubin states, in times of crisis "governments try to demonstrate their own efficacy by initiating diversionary conflicts". In the case of The Last Temptation of Christ, I believe an underlying motivation for the generation of controversy was the religious right trying to enunciate its own efficacy.

The 1988 presidential campaign was in full swing by the dawn of The Last Temptation of Christ debate. Many evangelical Christians had supported Ronald Reagan throughout his tenure in office. Some in the media had attributed a large share of Reagan's 1980 election to the religious right. Reagan had managed to please many fundamentalists while in office by paying some attention to the social issues they found
important. He spoke out in favor of school prayer and against abortion. In making statements like “all the answers to all the problems that face us today, are contained in the Bible” he satisfied many in the religious right throughout his period in office.

But after two terms in office, the time had come for Reagan to step down and a race had begun in the Republican party to find his replacement. None of the new candidates seemed to be able to hold together the coalition of the “old-line” Republicans and the religious right. Those Christian organizations that were politically active, such as the Moral Majority, closely scrutinized the presidential candidates for their stances on abortion, homosexual rights and prayer in schools.

Television evangelist Pat Robertson made a high-profile bid for the Republican nomination. Running on a platform that emphasized social issues, Robertson surprised many by coming in second in the Iowa caucus, but was “unable to broaden his support beyond a committed band of evangelical Christians.” He was forced to discontinue his campaign in the late spring, but not before criticizing front runner George Bush for concentrating too much on such issues as gun control and taxes and leaving the “social agenda pretty much aside.”

Although Robertson publicly endorsed Bush, many of his supporters may have been concerned about the future of the voice of the religious right. With Reagan, they had always had a sympathetic ear. With Bush, no one was certain. He was considered too “moderate” by many. It is my assertion that on an underlying level, the controversy that surrounded The Last Temptation of Christ was a way for fundamentalists to insist upon their relevance and their clout.
The opening weekend of The Last Temptation of Christ took place during the Republican National Convention. Furthermore organizations such as Moral Majority were simultaneously involved in the election and the film controversy. In a few instances the film protest took on overtly political tones. Donald Wildmon urged his supporters not to vote for Democratic candidates, on the basis that MCA supported that party. Whether it was consciously plotted to accomplish that end or not, the protest against this film forced part of the fundamentalist social agenda back into the limelight.

The political climate in the country during the release of the film may have contributed to the magnitude of the controversy, as did the other elements discussed. According to Dubin, it is the convergence of many factors that result in the eruption of an art controversy. Examining how the film was received in one community further illustrates this idea as it provides for the further discussion of cultural conflicts.
NOTES


3 A notable exception to this is a W. German/U.S. co-production *The Passover Plot* (1976), directed by Michael Campus. In portraying Christ as “a social and political opportunist” who faked the resurrection as a “deliberate piece of anti-Roman propaganda,” Elley (p. 44) credits him with the only true attempt at nontraditional interpretation of the Gospel text up to that point (1984).


5 Sobchack 24.

6 Elley 42.

7 Elley 47.


9 Elley 46.

10 In support of this many fundamentalist Christians quote 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is god-breathes and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (New International Version).

12 Genesis 2:17 (New King James Version).

13 It is useful to note that according to many fundamentalists, the tale of Adam and Eve is history, not allegory. See for instance the introduction to Genesis in the *Spirit Filled Bible*.


15 According to the commentator, the introduction of sin also meant the introduction of physical death for the earth. Before “the fall” the earth, like man was perfect. Jack W. Hayford “1:31 Before the Fall.”


17 Romans 6:23 (King James Version).

18 Pink 66.


20 The following verses are used to substantiate Jesus’s claim to be God: John 10:27-28 and John 11:25,26 (he claimed to be the source of eternal life), Mark 2:3-12 (he forgave sin), John 20:24-28 and Matthew 28:8,9 (he allowed himself to be worshipped as God). From *Exploring the Claims of Christ* (Austin TX: Here’s Life America, 1990).

21 Lewis 53.

22 *Exploring the Claims of Christ*

23 Dubin 11.

25 In the Old Testament, it was unacceptable to sacrifice the worst of one's flock. The only acceptable sacrifice for sin was a lamb without defect (See Leviticus 4:27-35).

26 See Matthew 16:21; 20:18,19.


29 Hunter "The Evangelical," 32.

30 Hunter "The Evangelical," 33


32 Hunter "The Evangelical," 49.

33 Hunter "The Evangelical," 49.

34 According to Reichley, several events in the late 1960's and early 1970's brought about this activism. Governmentally there was the 1961 Supreme Court Decision prohibiting organized prayer in public schools, the 1973 decision to legalize abortion. Socially there were studies announcing that the divorce rate was rising along with the number of unwed mothers and the violent crime rate. See A. James Reichley, "The Evangelical and Fundamentalist Revolt," Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World, ed. Richard Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Washington D.C.: Ethics and Policy Center, 1987) 76-77.
35 Francis Shaeffer, qtd in Reichely, 77.


37 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 88.

38 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 86-91.


42 Steinfels A22.

43 Qtd in Steinfels A22.

44 Qtd in Steinfels A22.


48 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 136.

49 Steinfels A22.

51 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 167.

52 Wyatt Roberts, director of the AFA Texas, personal interview, 6 Oct. 1995.

53 Qtd in Leo 35.

54 Recent copies of the AFA Journal include a section entitled “Christians and Society Today,” which is intended as a “a supplement for local bulletins and newsletters.”


55 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 168.


57 Dubin 11.

58 Hunter, *Culture Wars* 62.


60 Reichley 84.

61 Reichley 84.

62 Reichley 84.


65 Qtd in Rosenbaum, D23.

66 Rosenbaum, D23.
CHAPTER III

RECEPTION IN AUSTIN, TEXAS

Although The Last Temptation of Christ opened to massive protests during its initial weekend of release, it also opened to record setting business. Universal decided to continue with its gradual release schedule and selected nine additional cities. Austin, along with Houston, was more than likely chosen by Universal as a testing ground for the film’s reception in the rest of the South. Cities located in the deep South were completely avoided because “fundamentalist Protestants have been the most active and vocal opponents.” Universal may have expected overwhelming opposition to the film in the “Bible Belt” of the U.S., taking into account that the headquarters of many of the more vocal crusaders against the film, such as Donald Wildmon, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were located there. Texas, while geographically the border between the South and the West, may have been considered a cultural buffer zone as well.

It is possible that in their decision to open The Last Temptation of Christ in Austin during the film’s second week of release, the executives from Universal may have been acting upon a common perception of the city. Austin has a reputation for being the
bastion of liberalism in the state of Texas. Several social, political and demographic reasons possibly account for this assumption.

Substantiating the Myth: the Left Wing City of Austin

Austin is a moderately sized city with over 465,000 inhabitants living inside its city limits. It is the capital of Texas, and the home for many state agencies, lobbyists, and political action groups. As such it is the focal point for political conflict and demonstrations by various special interest groups.

Three universities are located in Austin, including the University of Texas, the nation's third largest. The impact of these schools of higher education is seen in a breakdown of Austin's population and educational statistics. According to the 1990 census, the city's median age is 28.9 and over 200,000 of the 465,000 inhabitants are between the ages of 18 and 24. Furthermore, Austin ranks above the state average in the percentage of citizens with high school diplomas and higher education. Eighty-two percent of Austin residents are high school graduates and thirty-four percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. That contrasts with seventy-two and twenty percent respectively for the state. The demographics of Austin can be said to contribute to its more "liberal" image. With its younger, relatively better-educated group of citizens, the assumption is that these individuals contribute to a more "open minded" and "tolerant" community.

But more than stereotypes of a certain demographic group have generated Austin's reputation. Politically and socially, certain characteristics foster this image. It is true that Travis, the county in which Austin resides, has a history of voting with the
Democratic Party. But until recently Texas as a whole has been largely Democratic with the majority of governors and legislators coming from that party for most of the state's history. Nevertheless Texas is probably best classified as a conservative state, with a heavy emphasis on "state's rights," and a "right to secession" clause that exists in the state constitution to this day.

But the political climate in Texas, as in most of the South, has been changing over the last two decades. A century old loyalty across the South to the Democratic party which began largely with the Civil War has been fading. With the common perception that the Democratic Party is more liberal, the Republicans, with their ever-more conservative message, have been gaining strength. This is especially true in federal elections. The trend is found in Texas as well where in the last four presidential elections, from 1980 to the present, the state has been carried by the Republican party.\(^6\)

Yet while many counties in Texas had been voting in the 1980s with the Republicans and their conservative agenda, Travis had remained fairly true to the Democrats. In the 1988 Presidential election, Travis County went against the majority of Texas counties in its desire to see Michael Dukakis elected. In fact from 1968-1992, in both state and federal elections, Travis county voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidate in all but four instances.\(^7\)

But beyond general trends in state and federal voting, other characteristics of Austin cause some to point to its "leftist" tendencies. Although candidates in city elections are not labeled by party, the winner of the 1988 race was considered a "liberal" by some. In the spring of that year, Lee Cooke was elected mayor of Austin. Cooke was
a vocal supporter of candidate Dukakis and was considered controversial by some for his plans to designate Austin as a sanctuary for refugees fleeing Latin America because of political turmoil.\footnote{3}

The reputation of Austin is enhanced further by its perceived stance on certain social issues. Instances include views on homosexual rights and environmental issues. For example, the Austin city council voted to provide city employee spousal benefits for all domestic partners, including homosexual and unmarried heterosexual couples.\footnote{9} Austin is thought by some to be a tolerant community for homosexuals. An annual Gay and Lesbian Pride Fiesta was initiated in June of 1990. One of the organizers the Fiesta is quoted as saying “Austin is a city that’s kind to gays. I’m not saying there’s no oppression, but for the most part Austin is an easy city to be gay in.”\footnote{10}

Protection of the environment is another issue on which Austin is perceived to be “liberal.” Two separate developments were halted in northwest Austin in 1987 when species of beetle and warbler were said to be endangered.

Only a few examples have been given here to illustrate some possible reasons Austin has gained its reputation. Nevertheless, Austin is in no way a monolithic community. Each “liberal” movement is met by strong opposition from those on the right. In two of the cases mentioned above, the conservative faction has won for the time being. The Lakeline mall, one of the environmentally contested developments, is preparing for its grand opening in October of 1995. In May 1994, the \textit{Austin American Statesman} claimed that “Austin took a step away from its liberal heritage” when voters approved by a large
margin a proposition, that cut off the insurance benefits for the unmarried partners of city employees and "perhaps giving a boost to anti-gay rights movements in other states."\textsuperscript{11}  

As in many areas of the country, social issues are hotly contested in Austin. In spite of its reputation, Austin has a very substantial "conservative" faction with a well defined agenda. The Texas chapter of the American Family Association, the Eagle Forum and the Christian Coalition are all vocal groups in Austin. Of these organizations, the Texas chapter of the American Family Association is one of the most active and debated.  

**The American Family Association and Mark Weaver**  

The Texas chapter of the AFA evolved from another Austin group called Citizens Against Pornography. Founded in 1984 and headed by a fundamentalist Christian, Mark Weaver, the organization began a crusade "to totally eliminate obscenity from Austin and the state of Texas."\textsuperscript{12} The group lobbied for ordinances requiring all sexually explicit magazines and books to be placed behind the counter of convenience stores and attempted to have adult bookstores and arcades shut down for violating obscenity laws.\textsuperscript{13} Weaver claimed his crusade against the arcades also involved concern for public health. Calling for laws against sex in these establishments to be enforced, he believes that the AIDS virus is most frequently spread during anonymous homosexual encounters in adult arcades and movie theaters.\textsuperscript{14}  

In 1986 the Citizens Against Pornography changed its name and joined the American Family Association as its Texas chapter. Weaver claims that the change was made for "clarity," because the group "started on other issues about sex that were illegal."
With the other name we were limited. The group had begun crusading against other types of sexual behavior which it found immoral.

Weaver also spoke out against the "homosexual lifestyle," which he described as "wrong as it can be." A tactic in his "war on homosexuality" were night time visits to a local park where, "armed with a Canon Sure Shot camera, he exposed homosexuals coupled in the bushes." In another effort, Weaver's group lobbied against the AIDS Services of Austin, because he believed it to be a "homosexual organization." "Sodomy is against the law," proclaims Weaver, "and I don't feel it is right for our tax dollars to support illegal activities." He thought the organization should be run by "licensed city health officials who promote safe sex, which includes abstinence."

The Texas AFA also lobbied against certain provisions in a 1989 Texas Bill which would have prohibited discrimination against AIDS victims or carriers of the disease. Instead the group supported another version of the bill which would have required educational materials to "state that homosexuality and prostitution are illegal" and teachers to "encourage sexual abstinence before marriage." This version also contained language demanding that no state funds be given to groups that approve of homosexual activity. The legislature adjourned before a compromise between the two bills could be reached.

In the fall of 1989 Weaver launched an attack on the Austin Chronicle, the city's free alternative newspaper. He attempted to have the publication removed from one of the local grocery stores because it featured personal advertisements with categories such as "Men Seek Men" and "Women Seek Women." The store did remove the publication
for a time, but after counter-protests and public debate, it ultimately relented and allowed distribution of the newspaper.  

These are just a few examples of issues with which Weaver and the AFA/Texas became involved. These years, from 1986 to 1989, were perhaps the most active for Weaver, or at least the ones during which he received the most media attention. In an interview with the Statesman Weaver insisted that his activities were not self-serving nor was his aim fame. claiming that he was not trying to build a Christian empire around himself the way others had done, Weaver stated that he earnestly believed in his causes. He cited Martin Luther King as an early influence, because he used reason instead of emotion to fight his battles. “All I want to do is win the war,” he claimed.  

Mark Weaver became an Austin celebrity and was the subject of adulation by some and criticism and malice by others. Frequent letters to the editor in the Austin newspaper provide a sampling of opinions on the man and his work. After the Statesman published its profile of Weaver several Austinites wrote to the newspaper to express their feelings. One reader was offended by Weaver’s self perceived emulation of Martin Luther King and his use of “reason over emotion.” This man believed that “Weaver uses inflammatory appeals to those basest emotions, fear and hatred.” Another individual criticized the paper for not challenging Weaver’s assumptions. “What appalls me most is that no one sought to inform the readers of the inaccuracies in Mr. Weaver’s statements... AIDS is not, nor ever was a “problem” only in the gay community.” He goes on to state, “As the only daily paper in this city, I think you have an obligation to report the truth.”
Mark Weaver left the American Family Association in 1992 but remained active in the public sphere as the acting director of the U.S. Taxpayers Party. The Texas AFA is still functioning in Austin and has been involved in the debate over issues such as sex education and health textbooks for Texas schools, a controversial state appointed advisory committee on teen pregnancy and the Texas sodomy law. It has also followed suit with its national parent organization in becoming a watchdog over television and film content.

Because both sides of the ideological spectrum are strong and well organized, Austin provides an interesting case study in cultural conflict. Each position comes to the various cultural debates from an opposing worldview with perceived truth on its side. It is for this reason that examining the controversy over The Last Temptation of Christ in Austin can exemplify some of the ways in which such a conflict is played out.

The Chronology of the Protest

The first story reporting on the controversy surrounding the film did not appear in the major Austin newspaper until August 10, but it can be assumed that individuals in Austin were already being mobilized. When it was later announced that the film would play in Austin, the associate director of the American Family Association stated, “there was a good possibility of a massive picket.” Austin theater managers have acknowledged that they were receiving complaints about the film weeks before it opened. One manager insisted that he had been deluged with protest calls saying, “We’ve gotten petitions and threats and everything else.” Another stated, “People are calling and saying, ‘I’ve been coming to your theater for years but if you show this film I’ll never come back.”
Opponents of the film held a press conference to voice their opinions and announce their intentions. Holding the conference on August 12, the film’s opening day in nine other cities, signed petitions were produced opposing the release of the film in Austin. The American Family Association of Texas claimed that it had collected 8,500 signatures during a two week period. Mark Weaver also stated that if the film came to Austin, the AFA and other groups of “concerned citizens” would be prepared to picket the theaters involved.

Addressing some of the counter-protests that had been launched he stated, “You know the code word right now is ‘fundamentalist.’ Everyone’s saying that the fundamentalists are against this movie, but there are a whole range of Christians upset about this movie.” He also mentioned some of the “moderate clergymen” who supported the film. “They’re people with a liberal point of view who may not even believe the word of God is inspired of God. They take it as a historical document.” With these statements Weaver is acknowledging that the debate over this film is not only between Christians and those of different faiths, but between the two groups of Christians that he believes exist. He indicated that there is in fact a significant difference between the fundamentalist who believes in the inerrancy of the Bible and would therefore be offended by this film, and the liberal who will tolerate and even support its perspective.

Mark Weaver’s was perhaps one of the more adamant opinions on the subject of this film, but his was not the only conservative Christian’s voice being heard regarding this controversy. Four local pastors were interviewed by the Statesman about their reactions. The most offended of the group was Dr. Ralph Smith. At that time he was
the pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church and a strong advocate for fundamentalism in the Southern Baptist denomination. He had not seen the film, but had received copies of the petition from the American Family Association which included quotes from early drafts of the script.

Smith denied that one must see the film before discussing it. "If you carry that to its ultimate conclusion, then you have to say the I have to have a divorce before I can talk about it." He also felt that Hollywood had attacked Christians by attacking "the one we worship," but would be far more cautious before offending other minorities. He encouraged his congregation to write to Universal in protest if they so desired, but ultimately no plans were made by the pastor for leading demonstrations or urging boycotts. "When you're out there helping folks who are dying, getting married and divorced, you don't have a lot of time for movies."

David S. Harris, pastor of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, admitted that the premise of The Last Temptation of Christ was not particularly offensive to him. "We accept the fact that Christ was tempted. Sin is not being tempted but yielding to temptation." Harris encouraged his congregation to see the film for themselves and make a decision. "It is an unacceptable position for me to belittle the intelligence of the American public and their maturity, by telling them not to go see it." He also stated that the protests could actually help the film "and the promoters will whistle all the way to the bank."

The Associate pastor at Westlake Bible Church said he would support a boycott. Bill Laughlin stated his belief that Christians "have a right not to patronize theaters
showing the movie or Universal products.” He likened the boycott to those of multi-
national corporations operating in South Africa.

Another Baptist pastor, Dr. Gerald Mann was also interviewed. He believed that a
minister “should not talk about a piece of art that he had not seen,” but admitted that he
was disturbed by reports of the film's content. Like Smith, Mann exhibited a distrust of
Hollywood, but perceived the film less as an attack than the usual quest for profit. “I’m
not surprised by any of this. ...Hollywood has to find new ways to get us away from the
television and into the theaters. Whatever anxiety or titillation they can find, they’re going
to try eventually.”

Taking a moderate tone in discussing the content of the film, Mann echoed
Harris's sentiments that depicting Christ being tempted in itself was not offensive. “We
understand Christ to be fully human and fully divine, but the human side of Jesus continues
to be a mystery to the church. We don’t want to let Jesus be very human.” And as for his
response to the film in front of his congregation, Mann intended to see it but had no plans
to lead protests.

Mann did see the film with several other pastors and was given an opportunity to
comment on it. It seemed that Weaver’s petitions had failed and the film would premiere
in Austin on August 19. A special screening was provided for religious leaders the day
before. After the movie, Mann was again interviewed. He stated that though the film
was not Biblically accurate, he enjoyed it. “I can see where Christians who want an
accurate portrayal will be offended. But is you want to portray Christ’s humanity, it’s
graphically portrayed.” Not believing it would hurt anyone investigating Christianity,
Mann still did not endorse the film. "I would have them read the New Testament as well."

Ultimately Mann stayed with his moderate viewpoint stating, "I think everyone should have an opportunity to go or not go to the movie, or to protest it if they want to."

Mark Weaver was one of the Christians who must have desired an accurate portrayal. He stated that he did not like anything about the film and that it was "anti-Christ." The portrayal is anything but Christ. The accuracy is just not there. Events are told out of sequence and the people are out of character." Weaver stated that his main complaint was that the film "shows Jesus becoming God, and in the gospels it says he was born God."

On August 19, The Last Temptation of Christ opened in Austin at the Village Cinema Four. The Village is the local Austin "art-house" cinema and is part of the ActIII/Presidio chain owned in part by Norman Lear. Lear's organization, People for the American Way, had begun to engage in counter-protests for the film. The Village was to be the first theater not connected to Universal and its parent company that agreed to play the film. Lear's involvement may have been a factor in this.

The Statesman reported that police estimates put the crowd outside the theater at five hundred. This included protesters and counter-protesters. All showings of the film were sold out as crowds wrapped around the theater wanting to get in. Extra security had been provided at Universal's expense and people were asked to open large bags or purses as they entered. Picketers carried signs and crosses and sang as the film played inside.

When individual protesters were interviewed, they acknowledged that their actions may have been helping the film by garnering free publicity. But many said that point was
irrelevant. "I'm here because I believe in Jesus and what he stands for, and he is not a sinner," stated one protester. Another stated, "I love my Lord, I don't think this movie represents him truly or justly, and I'm here for him." Mark Weaver was quoted as saying, "For a ten piece of silver they're degrading the one who created them...All I can say is the Lord have mercy on their souls." The film grossed over $12,000 its first weekend in Austin.

Public Discourse

The leaders of the Christian community were given a significant amount of press coverage in which to voice their beliefs and concerns. As is the practice when controversial events surface, the media requested the opinions of the experts and leaders in the community. But beyond what was said by the elites directly involved in the controversy, letters to the editor and commentaries written in the press can provide another perspective on public discourse. A small sampling of Austin public reaction to the controversy surrounding The Last Temptation of Christ can be found in the editorial pages of both the Austin American-Statesman and the University of Texas campus newspaper, The Daily Texan. Both opponents and proponents of the movie are represented in editorials and letters to the editor.

In the letters and editorials condemning the film, a few common concerns were enunciated. One was that the release of this film further manifested the perceived anti-Christian sentiment in America. "It could be argued that this movie is a bigoted attempt to take advantage of anti-Christian public opinion." Another writer asserted that just because the filmmaker had the right to make the movie, doesn't mean he should have --
especially when the content is so offensive to a group of people. He reasoned that the
“social climate” in America permitted a film that “maligns” Jesus when it would not allow
one that celebrates Hitler or denounces Martin Luther King.42

Other opponents of the film expressed concern that if it was shown without
protest, the representation of Christ in the movie would be taken as “truth” and “the public
will view our lord and savior as a weak, sinful and ineffective man.”43 One woman feared
that the film would prevent younger individuals from “identifying with the Christ of the
Bible,” because “young minds are open to filth or truth, whichever they encounter first.”44

Proponents of the film approached the protesters with a mixture of outrage and
condescension. Many focused on the fact that most of the protesters had not seen the film
and therefore should not criticize it. A student at the University of Texas stated, “they
(religious leaders) are trying to destroy a movie that they have never seen, basing their
decision on pure conjecture and gut reaction.”45 And while acknowledging that those
opposing the film had a right to protest it, some resented the attempt to censor it. “It may
or may not be a good movie – but I’d like to make up my own mind about it,” stated one
woman.46 One man emphasized that while he believed in God, he also believed in “the
right of an individual to form opinions without being told how or what to think.”47

Finally, some proponents of the film accused fundamentalist Christians of
insecurity and a lack of true faith in their belief system. In answering her rhetorical
question, “why are so many religious leaders willing to condemn the movie without seeing
it?” one editorialist responds, “the answer lies with personal insecurity...People whose
religious convictions are based on fear have a difficult time with objectivity.”48 Echoing
these sentiments, another student attributed the protests to a refusal to be faced with a representation of Jesus that might challenge the validity of certain Christian beliefs. After outlining some of the “impossibilities” and “illogical assumptions” behind Christianity, he hoped that the film would cause Christians to grapple with some of the “inner contradictions” of their faith.⁴⁹

On some levels the public reaction that made its way into the local media emulated the rhetoric used by the elites and was similarly polarized and dogmatic. But some of the editorials and letters provided a more complex and less extreme discussion of the issues. For instance a conservative Christian acknowledged in an editorial that he experienced difficulty in reconciling his respect for the First Amendment and his belief that the film was blasphemous.⁵⁰ Admitting that he understood why some Christians might take offense at the film, a supporter questioned their reasoning but affirmed their right to protest.⁵¹ As seen in these responses, and in the comments of some local pastors, many individuals were able to see and empathize with both sides of the issue.

What is evidenced in these letters and the rest of the public discourse that surrounded the film is that Austin is a complex community that is home to a variety of viewpoints. The viewpoints of its citizens occupy a wide spectrum of belief and are articulated across a range from the extreme to the center ground. Nevertheless, in the reporting done on this controversy the majority of published rhetoric landed on the opposite ends. The most vocal individuals and the ones who demanded media attention, were frequently the more extreme in their views.

The Rest of the Country
After the film's opening in Austin, it continued to be a source of controversy around the nation for the next several weeks. Universal continued the slow platform release schedule throughout September, topping out with 120 screens. It met with a large protest in its debut in the deep South when an estimated thousand demonstrators picketed in front of an Atlanta theater. The film never played in certain southern states such as Mississippi and Alabama.

The rest of the country saw a variance in reception. More protests occurred in L.A. and vandals slashed a Hollywood theater screen. A print was stolen from a Salt Lake City theater and was later found destroyed. Kansas City, Scranton, PA and St. Louis saw a substantial amount of protests while only 50 demonstrators were seen when the film opened in Denver and three when it arrived in Boston. By mid September, attention to the film had waned in both protesters and movie-goers. Protests of the film subsided as did its box office draw.
NOTES


3 1990 Census 3A

4 1990 Census 3A

5 1990 Census 3A

6 The Texas Almanac. (Dallas: Dallas Morning News, 1995).

7 The exceptions to this were the 1984 presidential election (Reagan), the 1972 governor’s race (Grover), the 1972 presidential election (Nixon) and the 1970 Senate race.


11 Chuck Lindell, “Proposition 22 Passes,” Austin American Statesman 8 May

12 Jeanne Acton, "Porn in Austin," *Images*, 5 July 1988, 4

13 Acton 4.

14 Acton 5.

15 Acton 14.


17 Ward A1.

18 Acton 14.

19 Acton 14.


22 Haily B13.


26 This is the profile that is cited earlier, Pamela Ward’s “Weaver: ‘All I Want to Do is Win the War.’”
In the Ward interview, Weaver is quoted as saying, “It (AIDS) is a gay disease. Had it not broken out in homosexuals, it wouldn’t be a problem in America.”


The American Family Association of Texas (Austin: AFA, 1995).

Aljean Harmetz, “‘Last Temptation’ to Play” C22.

Patrick Taggart, “Movie Chain Refuses to Show Film on Jesus,” Austin American Statesman 11 Aug. final ed.: A3.


Taggart, “...Gets Mixed Reviews.” B4.


Delgado A1.
41 Rick Rutledge, "'Last Temptation' protesters turn their belief into action," The Daily Texan 1 Sept. 1988: 4.


48 Crawley, 4.


50 Anthony, 4.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

At issue in this case study has been the nature of the controversy and the underlying cultural conflict signified by the debate over The Last Temptation of Christ. From the evidence presented, certain conclusions can be drawn.

In examining the controversy as part of a social process, various factors were discussed as possible contributors to the magnitude of the protest. The representation of Christ in the film went against the established beliefs of a large group of individuals. With regard to the content of the work, its form varied significantly from other Biblical epics and narratively presented more of a challenge to viewers.

Also at issue were the organizational structures and mobilizing capabilities of the Christian organizations which led the protest. None of the organizations involved in the protest came into being because of The Last Temptation of Christ. Most were established groups, with a pre-set agenda and a group of supporters who were predisposed to a certain point of view. These groups had recognizable leaders who could command an audience with the media, and an organizational structure that could handle the task of
mass mailings and could afford advertising. Had this not been the case, the controversy would not have ascended to such rhetorical heights.

The origins of the film are also significant to the controversy. The Last Temptation of Christ was a high profile film in that it was created by a well known and critically acclaimed director and distributed by an established Hollywood studio. In addition, the political and social climate in the country was such that scapegoats were being sought to bare the social problems of the nation. Hollywood provided a convenient and familiar enemy on which to blame the “moral decline” of the country. Furthermore in launching an attack against the entertainment industry, the relevance of the religious right and its ability to mobilize could again be asserted in time for the November elections.

All of these factors had to converge to create the sizable controversy that arose over the film. Had this been a small independent production by an unknown filmmaker, Last Temptation might have passed relatively unnoticed by the fundamentalist organizations and the public at large. Likewise, in an alternative scenario in which the film is released in a non-election year and when conservatives already control the significant branches of government, the film might have met with far less opposition. But because the film was released in the context it was, the controversy took on the magnitude it did.

But beyond providing an exploration of an art controversy as a social process, the discussion of this film exposed some areas of common cultural conflict. Austin represents in microcosm the expression of two polarizing tendencies in American society: what Hunter calls the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism. Hunter acknowledges that these terms are imperfect but aspire to “describe in shorthand a
particular locus and source of moral truth, the fundamental moral allegiances
and...cultural and political dispositions” of the actors involved in most cultural
debates(43).

Using these terms to describe the “formal properties of a belief system,”

orthodoxy “is the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and
transcendent authority,” where progressivism views moral authority as “defined by the
modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism”(44). These two impulses can be seen
in much of the cultural debate outlined in Austin. Mark Weaver views pornography and
homosexuality as an abomination to God. He is attempting to define national morality
based on his interpretation of the wishes of an absolute supreme being. Weaver’s
opponents take the position that moral authority is more subjective and that rationality
should dictate behavior. If the actions of individuals in society are not harmful to
themselves or others, their individual rights are preeminent. Homosexuals have the right
to practice their lifestyle without discrimination and adults have the right to view sexually
explicit material if they so choose.

Similar world views are at the base of the debate over The Last Temptation of
Christ. Conservative Christians viewed the film as blasphemous because it strayed from
their assumption that the true depiction of Jesus is found in the Bible. The film was
offensive because it defied their moral authority. Proponents of the film found this almost
inconceivable because they do not hold the Bible as the absolute source of authority.
Therefore the film was merely an interpretation of a historical figure. Furthermore, the
rights of the artist to express himself were paramount in their eyes. The moral authority of
the Bill of Rights was at issue. Arguments such as these exhibit the significance of such
cultural debate in that they show these conflicts are more than differences of opinion, they
are differences in moral visions and guiding theoretical assumptions.

Also exhibited in the controversy over this film are the ways in which the
differences between the orthodox and progressive world views become more sharply
polarized when the debate is brought into the public arena. The technology of public
discourse requires that arguments be presented quickly and unambiguously. The political
and social organizations that have formed over recent years have acted to institutionalize
and politicize two different cultural systems. The elites and opinion makers on both sides
of major issues are battling for the power to define the predominant vision for the nation
and ultimately its reality.

In both sides of the debate over The Last Temptation of Christ, the elites drew
upon the mythologies of America’s past to buttress their arguments. The proponents
uttered beliefs such as “freedom of expression has always been the American way,” while
opponents warned that the film further evidenced the nation’s turn from the “Christian
ideals on which it was founded.” Each side of the debate was attempting to define
America’s past in accordance with their position. And by defining the past, they could
define what the moral vision of the future should be.

In the same way that opposing sides use different myths of America’s past to
strengthen their respective positions, logic, science and theology can “only serve to
enhance and legitimate particular ideological interests” because each side interprets them
so differently. Hunter expresses concern over the shape cultural debate has taken in
America. With each conflict that arises, little is resolved. "Common moral ground from which to build and resolve differences appears to be equally elusive in every case."

As seen in many of the major issues discussed in Austin, the conservatives and the progressives merely swap power. A city ordinance is passed to provide benefits to the unmarried partners of city employees. A year later, the ordinance is repealed. No compromise was possible because to negotiate would for each party mean the adulteration of their moral vision.

In the controversy surrounding The Last Temptation of Christ, the film was released and ultimately faded from public consciousness before anything could be resolved. This is true of many cultural conflicts. An event arouses public interest, a debate ensues but then public interest in an issue eventually wanes. All the participants move on to the next controversial topic or wait for the next incidence of controversy to occur without having reached any sort of understanding.

Such was the case in The Last Temptation of Christ. A few months after the film's release, both sides claimed a victory. The organizations that were active in the protests asserted that they had succeeded in their boycott after the final box office receipts were tallied. Universal spent approximately $6.5 million on the production of the film with an estimated $8-10 million on prints and advertising. The film grossed $8.5 domestically and another $4 million abroad. Donald Wildmon claimed that Universal lost 10-12 million dollars and only played the film in 130 domestic theaters because of the protests. But his claims were considered inflated by most in the film industry. They asserted that the film was never conceived of as a blockbuster by Universal and would have only played in
selected "art houses" regardless of the controversy. Proponents of the film believed that it performed better than expected at theaters because of the publicity generated by the protests.

Eventually the organizers of the protests moved on to other issues. The American Family Association began a boycott of Pepsi over their employment of Madonna as a spokesperson and then became active in the debate over the National Endowment of the Arts. The Moral Majority suffered from scandal surrounding Jerry Falwell and a tax audit of his ministries. But even though Moral Majority is no longer the strong organization it once was, others, such as Morality in the Media and Christian Coalition have sprung up. Ultimately *The Last Temptation of Christ* was just another issue in the ongoing cultural debate, a debate with no resolution in sight.
NOTES


2 Hunter 128.

3 Hunter 52.

4 Hunter 130.

5 Amy Dawes, "Family group chief says battle dented 'Temptation' take," *Variety* 9 Nov. 1988: 5.

6 Dawes 5.

7 Dawes 5.
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