

He Stood in Their Midst¹ (#24)

Fiction

By Ron Banuk

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Giulio sat transfixed on the balcony of the condominium he often used to stimulate the well spring of his creative thought. Below him the people of Rome came and went about their daily business. The people on the Viale del Parioli were better off, but not unlike people in the rest of Italy and, for that matter, in Europe and the world in general, in that they were disproportionally influenced by the constant flicker of pictures that change slightly from one to the next and when fanned give the illusion of motion. Giulio was the most provocative auteur² in the cinema industry—a genius with a near off-scale IQ who could portray the transcendental as surprisingly immanent and appear superficially blunt under a veil of ellipticity. What he could cast one way, he could just as easily cast another and receive acclaim for both versions and from the same people. He had a gift for taking the skeleton of an idea, dressing it up in flesh, accouterment, and mannerisms and presenting it as his own. Although the seminal idea or skeleton was not his, the living and breathing creation really was. He knew this and so did his producers.

These thoughts guided his demeanor as he looked down to his laptop and gazed at the caption to Clip 1 of the storyboard for the opening scene to a new Jesus film. Unlike Mel Gibson who received a personal request from an aging Pontiff, John Paul II, to do *Gesu*, Giulio had a consortium of backers with the money to do it right. So, he refocused again on the caption: “He Stood in Their Midst”. The opening scene was chronologically at the end of the storyline for the nearly three-hour movie and concerned Jesus’ appearance to the Apostles after his resurrection when they were huddled in fear in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36 and John 20:19). So, the bulk of the movie would be in flashbacks, but the tone would be set right here. And Giulio had the imagination to explore any facet of the protagonist’s character he desired. As an example, while in the *liceo* (high school) a history teacher once asked him how a roman soldier like the legendary Horatius³ was able to secretly have swum the Tiber alone in a suit of armor to deliver a message to the army under siege by invaders. Almost without hesitation, the young man shot back: “There are many possibilities. He could have held himself up hidden between two medium sized logs, or held to the branch of a single large log, or used a special suit lined with cork for buoyancy, or used a 3-meter staff to vault within the water over the bottom in a bobbing fashion, or deploy a pair of water wings fashioned from two pig’s bladders, or even shoot an arrow carrying a fishing line to the opposite bank so he could pull himself across.” The possibility blitz jarred the teacher’s train of thought and harnessed the class’ distracted thoughts. All eyes were on the oracle.

And so do audiences react to him today for Giulio has retained and refined his God-given panache. Searing the caption into his mind (He stood in their midst.), he began typing the following options as though he were witnessing the action:

A1) Door entry—bold. Latch and lock are torn from the door. Door swings wide hitting the adjoining wall, just missing Peter. Apostles are awed.

A2) Door entry—spooky. Mysteriously the latch turns and bolt retracts. Door slowly creaks open. Apostles are disengaged.

A3) Door entry—knocks. Apostles are surprised. Peter inquires. A booming voice responds.

A4) Door entry—bold. Door swings wide striking Thomas rendering him unconscious and trapping him behind the door in the corner of the wall. Apostles are stunned, but do not notice Thomas.

A5) False door entry—diversion. The rumble of many horses outside the door comes to an abrupt halt. Apostles gather by the door but out of fear they do not address the disturbance. At the height of their wonderment, Jesus shockingly appears behind them.

A6) Window entry—light. Slowly the window begins to glow. A shaft of light beams into the room. When their eyes have recovered from overexposure, Jesus is seen in their midst.

A7) Self entry—environmental. In the background, the sound of many waters begins to rumble followed by a raucous rush of wind. The ceiling with its beams fades away to be replaced by a night star-pocked sky and the luminous glow of the descending Messiah.

B1) The Apostles and some women are dressed in contemporaneous outfits. Jesus too is dressed so much like his disciples that He is barely distinguishable. His wounds are not noticeable, and He is only recognized because He is separated from the group. For an awkwardly long period He says nothing and then attempts to brush off His indecisiveness by commenting boldly that their prayers have been heard.

B2) Same as B1, except the one woman in the crowd is obviously Mary Magdalene. He casts a gaze over her pregnant with suggestion and then chastises the Apostles for not believing her testimony of his resurrection.

B3) Only Apostles contemporaneously dressed are present. Jesus approaches the group dressed in flowing pastel-colored garments with mincing steps. He comments on the importance of their being together and abiding in Him while looking at John.

B4) The Apostles are standing around Jesus who unlike them is in his glorified body with white clothing and vestiges of his major wounds. The Apostles are transfixed. Jesus' arm raised to speak is redundant to his commanding position. His animation invigorates the Apostles who at the same time are chastised for their indecisiveness. The scene is from an Easter postcard.

Now Giulio lay back in his chair. He has only to pick one scenario from A and one from B and the intradiegetics⁴ of the 201st Jesus Film will have precipitated from a soup of ideas. Whichever elements he chooses to combine from his musings be they psychological, Scriptural, romantic, historic, didactic, demythologizing, or homosexual, he has the flair to make it work especially with his control of extradiegetic film technology. When the Cardinals are given a special preview, he knows they will in partial confusion dance in step to his drum beat however elliptical it may appear. The faithful may not understand the director's intentions, but few will withhold acclaim. As for the Fundamentalists, they are few and will never give unreserved approbation to an artisan even one jot or tittle removed from Scripture, so his mesmerizing vibrato will be directed elsewhere. Finally, when the dust has settled and Giulio has received his acclaim, the movie its rewards, the faithful their DVDs in memoriam, and the

202nd Jesus Film its achievement award; one must ask if this, first paper, then celluloid, then camera tube (Immy), and now electronic medium has really illuminated⁵ Scripture or has just perpetuated the Greeley Cycle⁶.

¹ This fictional story was written in answer to *Imaging the Divine* by Lloyd Baugh, S.J., published by Sheed and Ward, 1997. The vocabulary used here is typically found in this book.

² Auteur: A film writer-director with the distinctive style alluded to

³ Horatius Cocles rather than surrender to the Etruscans jumped from Pons Sublicius into the Tiber in 506 BC and swam back to the city under a hail of missiles.

⁴ Intradiegetic: matter within the plot line as opposed to that imposed on the plot externally as in film techniques and called extradiegetics

⁵ Illuminate: With regard to Scripture, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to Reveal, Inspire, and Illuminate. Illumination concerns the explanation of the meaning of Scripture to the faithful, not unlike the efforts found in commentaries and the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

⁶ Greeley Cycle: Rev. Andrew M. Greeley (b 1928) posits that the historicity of a certain subject is not as important as the resulting action. The cycle proceeds without beginning and without end like the *uroboros* (snake biting its tail) from Symbol to Action to Language to Meaning/Theology to Thing to Experience and again to Symbol beginning the process anew.