The cult horror film *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, depicts the sexy second coming of Jesus. With a revamped image, a leather clad, pierced Son of Man appropriates himself into a contemporary Canadian setting with the hopes of spreading the Good News and slaying the evil vampires that prey on the homosexual community of Ottawa. Cast on the unique medium of film, it is evident that the Jesus of Driscoll and Demarbre’s artistic vision is no ordinary portrayal of Jesus. With the recent preoccupation with blood thirsty fiends as evidenced by the rise of shows such as *True Blood* and *Vampire Diaries* as well as the overarching success of the *Twilight* series, it is clear that vampires are modern day sex symbols that sell. Produced in 2001, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* complements the vampire craze and thrusts the seminal religious icon, Jesus Christ, into an ever growing cultural fascination. By becoming a part of a cultural craze, it may be argued that the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is a deeply cultural symbol. In effect, making this comparison is useful to scholars since many conclude that although not a theological landmark, the spiritual dimension of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* exposes a cultural longing for a heroic Christ-figure that has an entertaining connection to modern times. In light of recent scholarship, it may be suggested that aside from its theological merit and cultural significance, Demarbre and Driscoll’s horror film is able to bridge the divide between icons of popular culture and religion. Through this process, viewers are able to engage with the film by entering into a relationship of mutuality that creates a subject to subject relationship and allows for the experience of viewing a truly beautiful Christian work.
The idea for *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, interestingly enough, came to screen writer Ian Driscoll while listening to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* during a typical drive through his Ottawa suburb. The not so typical movie idea was then pitched to director Lee Demarbre who, recognizing its potential, excitedly exclaimed “Dammit Ian, now we have to make a movie out of this.” After spending months reading the New Testament, discussing various interpretations and auditioning actors, Driscoll carefully penned the seemingly scandalous film with no special intention to scandalize the Christian community. As the film begins, Jesus appears as he would in a traditional adaptation of the Gospels and reveals that he has returned to earth after receiving a call from Father Eustace to slay the evil vampires that are killing the lesbians of Ottawa. Maxine Schreck and Johnny Golgotha, members of Father Eustace’s parish, have turned into vampires. Through song and dance, Jesus concludes that his unique mission requires that he undergo a makeover with the help of new friend and presumed love interest Mary Magnum, clothed in an alluring red jumpsuit. However, this cool new Jesus is not enough to prevent the disappearance of Mary as she becomes yet another victim of the vampires’ scheming ways. To help Jesus accomplish his task, God sends the masked wrestler Santo Enmascarado de Plata, known as El Santos. Together, El Santos and the ‘greatest vampire hunter of all,’ Jesus Christ, slay many vampires. Jesus is captured and a stake pierces his heart. However, light shines from Jesus’ heart and the remaining vampires are reduced to dust.

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1 Lee Demarbre, Telephone interview. 1 December 2009.
According to Demarbre, it was important to be a little thoughtful when combining cherished elements of the Christian Gospel with the idea of Jesus as the ultimate action hero. Interestingly, aside from the self-professed “silly” plot, Demarbre is careful not to undermine the complexity of his creation. During a personal interview Demarbre stated,

Yes, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is absurd, but it would certainly be foolish to not consider this film art. It deserves to be viewed as art because it’s created...but when it was released into public consciousness, whatever you get out of it, whether that’s pure entertainment or something much deeper, I accept that.²

It was clear from our discussion that Demarbre considered his film to be obviously odd yet uniquely important since it requires that a Christian undergo a careful intellectual and spiritual process in order to deem this film a Christian work. In his book, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*, writer Bryan Stone argues that

Learning to live and think as Christians in our time requires learning to engage media and culture as Christians. Together we must become aware of the power of images and find both the tools to explore and critique these images as well as to [understand] the relationship between Christian theology and popular film as an interfaith dialogue.³

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² Lee Demarbre, Telephone interview. 1 December 2009.

Stone and countless other scholars argue that a thoughtful examination of this dialogue between religious images and culture, as well as the various modes of viewing film with religious content, is a necessary starting point when seeking to grasp the idea of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* as a Christian artefact.

The film places great demands on its viewers. One mode of viewing the film is to attempt to ‘Christianize’ the film or approach it with preconceived notions as to its significance and content. In the essay *Contexts and Obstacles*, Alan Jacobs outlines the theology of viewing images and how to discern their meaning. Jacobs’ theory is arguably the best way of interpreting *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* since it warns viewers against the very thing that inhibits one from appreciating the film as a thing of beauty - the hermeneutics of suspicion. By seeking to ‘baptize’ *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, the viewer neglects to permit the film its own integrity which in turn allows for the danger of art censorship. By attempting to apply a meaning and interpretation that is unwaveringly faithful to the Christian tradition, it is difficult to do the very thing required of a *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* viewer - to see the film with eyes of love. Despite the non-traditional interpretation of the Gospels, Jesus’ interaction with the homosexual community, the addition of a transgendered woman in the Good Samaritan story, or the sexual tension between Jesus and Mary Magnum, are all a part of the film’s beauty, and is what makes watching the film such a challenge. In fact, scholars like Jacobs would argue for the necessity of even greater love when viewing a film such as Demarbre’s. Jacobs writes that love must be the primary attitude when approaching images whether they are secular or sacred. Engaging in a subject to subject relationship with *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*
allows the viewer to grant the film its own agency as a Christian image and regard it as something more than a kung-fu fighting Jesus film with a 'liberal dose of humour.' Jacobs is careful to point out that this process involves great risk and demands that the viewer determine what kind of spiritual insight the film reveals. Demarbre claims that those who view *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* and are solely scandalized by it have missed the point. Jacobs responds to this notion by writing that not

> all gifts have such a dubious and coercive character. Some works of art are presented to us as opportunities for refreshment, recreation, and pleasure. Discernment is required to know what type of gift one is being presented with, and in what spirit to accept it...but a universal suspicion of gifts and givers, like an indiscriminate acceptance of all gifts, constitutes an abdication of discernment in favor of a simplistic *a priorism* that smothers the spirit.⁴

In other words, Jacobs asserts that when viewing *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* using *a priori* reasoning one is at risk of smothering the gifts it offers. For Jacobs, it is worth the effort one must put into the film in order to appreciate that its outwardly "dubious or coercive character" enhances the imagination by insisting upon a loving ‘baptism’ and a deep awareness of various modes of viewing. *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* does not neatly conform to the rules of art and so granting a viewer a suitable means of viewing the film allows for Demarbre and Driscoll’s unlikely Christian image to not only become a secular

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form of entertainment but an artistic work that narrows the divide between what is meant to be evoked by sacred and secular imaginings of a heroic Jesus-figure. This in turn awards Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter agency as an unconventional yet important addition and articulation of the Christian imagination that is being forever transformed and influenced by contemporary culture.

Catholic writer Jacques Maritain’s theory of art and beauty is an important component of the general theory of the Christian imagination and adds a key element to a discussion of Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter. Maritain’s theory states that systematic rules for the creation of art are in place in order to nurture the formation of the ‘habitus,’ or virtue, of the artist. The ‘habitus’ is a spiritual quality of the soul that strives to be good. By striving towards the good, art is able to participate in the divine. It may be said that each generation presents a different ideal of beauty and consequently each generation creates a Jesus in its own image. The purpose of an examination of Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter must not be to discern the intent of the artist, but rather to look at it as a product of its time and only then judge its suitability as a Christian image. Maritain claims that Christian art is that which bears within it the sense of Christianity and that it encompasses both the sacred as well as the profane.\(^5\) He goes on to assert that one must not say that Christian art is impossible. Say rather that it is difficult...for it is a question of harmonizing two absolutes. Say that the difficulty becomes

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\(^5\) Jacques Maritain, “Art and Scholasticism” In Art and Scholasticism (New York: Charles Scribners’s Sons, 1962), 64.
tremendous when the entire age lives far from Christ, for the artist is greatly dependent upon the spirit of his time.⁶

If this is true, it would help to explain why many are scandalized by *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*. It is widely accepted that religion and secular film remain separate and distinct. Demarbre’s revamped Jesus, however, seeks to collapse this barrier. For Maritain, this is what makes the film a Christian image. The pierced kung-fu fighting Jesus is the Jesus of our time and is good because He reveals a different side of Jesus, a side that is more appealing to a contemporary audience.

In keeping with the notion that *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is a Christian image since it reveals a contemporary culture’s religious consciousness, author Margaret Miles presents a theory of imitation that further emphasizes the blending of the spiritual ideal, as present in the figure of Jesus within a consumer culture. It has been established that the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is a deeply cultural image. Miles would claim that because this religious figure became a cultural product and that the transformation occurred on the modern medium of film is significant. She outlines the theory of imitation by asserting that, “cinema can be seen as continuous with a long tradition in which images have been used to produce emotion, to strengthen attachment, and to encourage imitation.”⁷ Her words elaborate Maritain’s argument that good art delights the intellect and provokes emotion without striving to do so. While acknowledging that religious

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images on film, especially when they are unconventional as in the case of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, are often deemed to be misguided and dangerous, Miles allows her scholarship to create yet another way of perceiving *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter’s* cultural Jesus as good art. Her theory of imitation states that visual imagery is an incentive to imitate Christ. Images on film inspire imitation and influence spiritual awareness because the power of vision enables a Christian to insert him or herself emotionally, and possibly even physically, into a film with religious content. Miles’ mode of viewing, however, insists upon a profound education of the Christian imagination. Miles suggests that twentieth-century filmgoers are typically unaware as to the extent to which visual practice is trained since film spectatorship requires a visual training that is as complex as the training developed through religious devotion. *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* challenges the definition of Christian art since it was drawn from a culture unaccustomed to thinking of images as communicative of spiritual insight. Furthermore, it challenges Miles’ theory by portraying a Jesus-figure that rejects imitation and raises important questions regarding the art of spectatorship. By inviting viewers to rethink the typical representation of a Jesus-figure in film, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* conveys a Christian imagination that achieves what author William Dyrness would call the hopefulness present when “two opposing realities [are brought] together [to form] a single image...” In other words, the

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9 Ibid., 27.

amalgamation of the secular entertainment value of the film combined with its spiritual merit encourage a new way of engaging in the spectatorship of Christian art.

The interaction between secular culture and images of the divine is uniquely expressed in the film *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*. It is this creative amalgamation of images that allows for the film to be understood as a work that bears the mark of Christianity. The ability to lovingly 'baptize' a film such as *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* proves that it is a suitable example of Christian life and belief being transformed by contemporary culture. According to Nina Auerbach, even the vampires in the film express a cultural longing to engage in some element of the divine. She writes that vampires are a part of the times, defined by a generation, and just like religion, “promise escape from our dull lives and the pressure of our times... [vampires] matter because when properly understood, they make us see that our lives are implicated in theirs and our times are inescapable.”  

A study of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is not flighty or unnecessary, for it reveals what Thomas Martin regards as the “intellectual arm” of the religious imagination. Herein lies its importance as a Christian image. Grasping the meaning of *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* as a Christian image requires a profound re-education of the imagination that insists upon Dyrness’ particular brand of hope for the immense challenge of viewing the film with eyes of love. Furthermore, mastering the art of spectatorship, Miles believes, is crucial to an understanding of images that pervades the silver screen and

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permeates into Christian culture. Understanding the beauty of how to approach *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* and Christianize it in a way that permits it its own integrity as something good will allow for it to be characterized as a truly beautiful Christian artefact.

The fact that *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is not recognized solely as a Christian film, and that it demands rather complex modes of viewing, is puzzling to many. It is not an exaggeration to claim that *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* is a Christian image. An examination of how to go about investigating its significance as a work with Christian connotations is important and yields meaningful results. Stone argues that to engage with the film as Christians we must first determine how *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* ought to be viewed. If we accept Miles’ theory of imitation when viewing the film we will gradually become accustomed to thinking of images on film as communicative of spiritual meaning. This is so, according to Maritain, because the artist is “dependent upon the spirit of his time” and that it is entirely possible to recognize a leather and denim clad Son of Man as a legitimate portrayal of Jesus since it is a by-product of contemporary cultures’ spiritual consciousness and means of understanding religious icons. Demarbre and Driscoll’s anachronistic film portrays a twenty-first century Jesus that serves as the focal point of mass appeal and reveals a spiritual quality of a culture that glorifies heroic figures with a clear religious affiliation. Interestingly, it is this cultural ability to grasp the nature of a hero and attach it to elements of religion that represents an essential component of a re-educated and nurtured imagination. *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*, therefore, is not a danger to the Christian imagination, but a tool that helps to strengthen its resolve to remain a uniquely Christian image despite its existence in a secular world.
Works Cited


