Great Lights, Seen in Darkness

The Passion of Milo Rau and Yvan Sagnet

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But my subject is hope, the theological virtue, which I would distinguish very sharply from what I have called optimism. Hope implies a felt lack, an absence, a yearning.
—Marilynne Robinson, "Considering the Theological Virtues"

"Questa è l'ora della fine / Romperemo tutte le vetrine"
[This is the final hour / We'll smash all the windows]
—"Ciao Ciao" (Italian pop song, 2022), La Rappresentante di Lista

Milo Rau's 2020 film *The New Gospel*, based on the Passion of Christ, is a triumph of twenty-first-century religious and political art, one whose release heralds new directions in the landscape of contemporary global performance. The work defies any clear genre, drawing together elements of documentary cinema and theatre, metacinema and metatheatre, neorealist film, modern agitprop art, Brechtian *Lehrstück*, Beuys's social sculpture, and the medieval *mysterium*. It debuted as part of the 2020 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam under the German title *Das Neue Evangelium* only two years into Rau's new artistic directorship of Belgium's NTGent. (The premiere streamed online due to Covid-19 restrictions.) The film is now widely available in DVD format, introducing audiences worldwide to an artist already being hailed as "the world's most controversial director," and helping extend that artist's influence to a global scale.[1]

The film sprang from an invitation Rau received to create a project in Matera, an ancient city in Southern Italy built on a network of Paleolithic caves, whose untouched surroundings have suggested to many filmmakers a vision of ancient Jerusalem. Both Pier Paolo Pasolini and Mel Gibson used the site for filming their depictions of the Passion, and a score of other films have been shot there too, including the latest James Bond release, *No Time to Die*, in 2021. Early in *The New Gospel*, Rau

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explains that he was moved (like Pasolini before him) to cast non-professionals from the nearby area as actors in the narrative of Christ's final days. Unlike Pasolini, however, he also wished to include the area's current sociopolitical problems as well.[2] A humanitarian crisis has engulfed the larger province, causing "an extreme situation," as Rau puts it, "thousands of migrants just living under the sky": entire communities of African refugees—and, in some instances, persons who have been smuggled or trafficked into Italy—living unhoused and undocumented in fields outside neighboring villages like Metaponto di Bernalda.

Some of the film's opening images show the poverty of the shantytowns where these migrants are forced to dwell, their makeshift huts and tin-roof encampments set against Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik* in C minor. As the viewer quickly learns, the inhabitants of these *ghetti* are exploited as agricultural workers in an illegal labor market dominated by agro-mafia gang-masters known as the *caporalati*. The laborers can scarcely earn subsistence wages in this system, sometimes as little as €3.50 per hour ($3.74 in 2019 U.S. dollars). They lack long-term contracts, healthcare, and any worker protections whatsoever, with some enduring sixteen-hour workdays in the blazing summer heat.[3] Many work as tomato pickers, harvesting a staple produce commodity for what is arguably the world's most celebrated gastronomic culture.

To all appearances, the system amounts to a modern form of slavery encouraged by labor deregulations, both hidden inside and integral to Italy's agro-culinary economy. The situation brings to mind George Orwell's 1937 observation that "under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation—an evil state of affairs, but you acquiesce in it every time you step into a taxi or eat a plate of strawberries and cream."[4] One need only substitute "Africans" for "Indians" in this sentence, and a similar observation could be made about Europeans and Americans, digging into slices of pizza.

The son of an Italian mother, Rau describes himself as having been "raised with Catholicism, but then also in a Marxist way."[5] Perhaps unsurprising, then, that his approach to Christ's life would be framed by the current facts of poverty and racism in the region. For his staging of the Passion, he cast as Jesus the Black Cameroonian activist Yvan Sagnet (b. 1985), a former engineering student from the Polytechnic University of Turin, now a community organizer—and incidentally, also raised Catholic. As Jesus's disciples, Rau cast some of Sagnet's closest comrades in the fight against the gang-master system, almost all of them African migrant activists as well. Together with Rau, Sagnet, and many other African and Italian compatriots, they are seen in *The New Gospel* fomenting a "revolt of dignity." The mostly Black cast of non-professional actors appears throughout the film in biblical garb against Matera's stony backdrop, both rehearsing and enacting the Passion. Biblical

reenactments amount to only a part of the finished film, however. They are juxtaposed with documentary sequences following Sagnet as he mobilizes the migrant communities to demand better protections from the local authorities.

The New Gospel continues Rau's commitment to examining harsh contemporary realities through performance, a mission that extends at least as far back as 2007, when he co-founded the company that produces much of his work, the International Institute for Political Murder.[6] The IIPM cites a range of artists and philosophers as its influences, but Rau's debts to Brecht are among the most apparent, complex, and significant. The manifesto he composed for his Ghent directorship includes a set of ten demands for what he calls the *Stadstheater* (German: *Stadttheater*, or city-theatres) of the future, modeled after the Dogme 95 movement's filmmaking manifesto, and opening with two notably Brechtian positions.

> ONE: It's not just about portraying the world anymore. It's about changing it. The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real.
>
> TWO: Theater is not a product, it is a production process. Research, castings, rehearsals, and related debates must be publicly accessible.[7]

Other demands stipulate that "at least two different languages must be spoken onstage in each production," and "at least one production per season must be rehearsed or performed in a conflict or war zone, without any cultural infrastructure." They are ambitious proposals for any arts administrator, to say the least. (For some Europeans, these provocations have already invited comparisons with the work of the late German director and provocateur Christoph Schlingensief, who died in 2010.) They put NTGent's theatre on the move, conjoining a traveling stage or *Wanderbühne* with the functions of a mutual aid society's mobile unit. The manifesto thus hurls down a gauntlet to Northern Europe's urban theatre infrastructures, demanding entirely new dramaturgies and new global methods of production. And while southern Italy may not count as a conflict zone by the standards of international law, *The New Gospel* furthers Rau's dedication to collaborating with those affected by the violence of globalization across multiple languages: in this case, Italian, French, German, and English.

As Rau himself has argued, in describing his own work: "there is, paradoxically, only a global economy, a global climate, global flow of information, and refugees; a global civil society or even global legislation does not exist. They have to be created by our generation, as a utopian, unfinished project. … It is only when one understands seemingly foreign, distant conflicts as one's conflicts, that one enters the level of global flows of capital and consciousness."[8] *The New Gospel* illuminates this political and aesthetic project with exceptional clarity. Equal parts theatre, film,

and protest action, it aims less at depicting the world than helping intervene at a point of global political crisis, pushing representation into a new reality. The project demands its viewers and participants imagine not just new futures for the arts, but new social relations, new administrations of justice, and new codes of morality. As the film follows Sagnet's uprising, it helps give visibility to a collective struggle and to some of global neoliberalism's most destructive contradictions. For today, modern forms of slave labor are both, apparently, integral to *and* illegal within the capitalist system, simultaneously the rule *and* the exception.[9] And today, while certain Italian foods and tourist sectors remain popular across the globe, it seems they may be fast becoming unsustainable without businesses having recourse to human rights violations, an especially disturbing prospect after the ascendance of the far right in Italy's 2022 elections.

The film's power stems from the simplicity of its concept, its depth of spiritual and moral seriousness, and the directness of the questions Rau poses to the viewer: "What would Jesus preach in the 21st century? Who would his disciples be? And how would today's bearers of secular and spiritual power respond to the return and provocations of the most influential prophet and social revolutionary in human history?" Rau's answers to these questions are clear and forceful, even as the film eschews any easy didacticism. In one sequence, Sagnet (as himself) speaks to a crowd of workers in front of a mural depicting the Pan-Africanist revolutionary Thomas Sankara, aiming to conscript his listeners to the broader fight: "We want access to real homes, no matter whether we're Italians or not. We want all the papers because it's impossible to live in this illegality. … We have to get started in a new direction, in the direction of change, a change that puts dignity in the center, the dignity of all of us, against the dominant powers, against the powers of capitalism. You are the apostles for that. You are the disciples." These moments shine a more radical light on the cliché still popular among American Evangelicals, "What would Jesus do?"

This scene cuts to the image of a grove at night where the assembled workers are seen at a screening of Pasolini's *Gospel*, watching the scene of Christ's baptism, underscored by the second movement of Bach's Concerto for Oboe and Violin in C Minor. In an inspired move, Rau has included Pasolini's Jesus—the Spanish actor, leftist, and professor Enrique Irazoqui, a septuagenarian in the last year of his life in 2019—as John the Baptist for *The New Gospel*. Members of the assembled migrant community watch as images of the younger Irazoqui from Pasolini's 1964 film play in black and white on a small outdoor movie screen. Suddenly, Rau's film changes locations to an image of the sun-drenched Mediterranean. Yvan Sagnet is shown in a distant long shot against an azure sky. He seems to have taken up a torch that Irazoqui has passed him, embodying a new generation of leftist activism. In costume and character as "Jesus," he walks on water toward a boatful of his

comrades, also in biblical dress. They meet in the middle of the ocean for a wordless confrontation whose silence dims Bach's solemn measures. Then this image cuts to a conversation between two of Sagnet's comrades in the struggle, sitting in their modern clothing on a beach jetty, talking about the terror of their recent flight from Africa to Italy. One of the two men reports:

> When I remember how we were at sea when darkness came, nothing but darkness. … I longed for our salvation in this darkness. I'm looking for land, but I only see the sea around me. Nothing else. … That was something I cannot explain. I can't find words for that. Where's the land?… Where are we? I don't know what to believe any more. In the sea, in total darkness. The only ones who see me are the stars above me. There's no land for me anymore. I don't want to remember all the drowned people here in the sea either. I don't want to be reminded of the sea at all. Because people live on in my memory, forever. I can't let go of them.

Against this agonized description of a twenty-first-century middle passage, whose only witnesses are constellations in a darkened heaven, Rau then juxtaposes a placid image of the Mediterranean horizon under steely clouds. A narrator intones in voice-over: "Blessed are you when they insult and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." Then the scene shifts back to the nearby shantytowns and to depictions of organizers stirring up a protest under eviction threats from the Italian police. The threat of winter homelessness looms.

Through sequences of this kind, the film produces an interrupted spectacle in which the ancient past, the political present, and a messianic future converge repeatedly—collisions of historical and theological time that are equally majestic and unsettling. The effect is of a Brechtian distancing of narrative registers: the tensions of Jesus's confrontation with Satan in the desert, for instance, are broken by Rau's voice calling "cut" from off-screen, giving Sagnet a moment to relax, and reminding viewers that they are watching a film-in-the-making. Shortly thereafter, Rau depicts the scene of Sagnet (as Christ) saving a woman accused of adultery from being stoned to death. The performer playing the accused woman then takes the camera crew on a nighttime drive to a nearby train station: a former sex worker, she points out spots on and under the train platforms where local migrant women wait as prostitutes for their johns. Rau's collaborators bring blankets and other provisions to the girls. After helping them to a nighttime coffee, the actress playing the accused adulteress tells the documentarians: "It was not a nice thing to be on the street. Believe me. … I experienced a lot of things at my tender age. Sometimes it still reflects in my memory. … I've been hoping. I want to be something, something really interesting. I want to be somebody that people use as an example, to say: wow, a prostitute can be saved." In a breathtaking moment, the biblical past and the neoliberal present overlay each other in the "now." The scene

The disciples meet Jesus on the open sea in Milo Rau's *The New Gospel* (2020). Photo: Thomas Eirich-Schneider. © Fruitmarket/Langfilm/IIPM/Thomas Eirich-Schneider.

Cast members on the *Via Dolorosa* in Milo Rau's *The New Gospel* (2020). Photo: Armin Smailovic. © Fruitmarket/Langfilm/IIPM/Armin Smailovic.

makes clear that, if "Christian" names an ethical ideal even more than a demographic, as authors like Marilynne Robinson have proposed, then in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Europe is still not yet Christian. Ours is still the age of Empire.

Sometimes Rau's epic interruptions occur through sequential juxtapositions of incongruous imagery, while at other times the counterpoise of timeframes is more simultaneous. In an instance of the former, he shows Sagnet's comrade Samuel Jacobs speaking at a street protest in Matera, appealing to European principles of universal human rights for a redress to the suffering of his fellow workers. ("By the law of dignity and equality of human persons, they deserve a better life than this," Jacobs tells the assembled European listeners.) Then later in the film, Jacobs takes on the role of Judas Iscariot. In a more simultaneous directorial juxtaposition, when Judas offers to betray Jesus to the chief Jewish priests in exchange for thirty silver pieces, the scene is shot—in full biblical costume—in the dimmed chancel of a Catholic church. No further comment is needed for Rau's critique of the institutional church to be fully clear. Indeed, Sagnet is seen several times throughout the film, advocating for the importance of bringing church leadership more actively into the fight on the side of the migrants' rights.

One scene in *The New Gospel*, two thirds of the way through the film, is especially effective in both political and aesthetic terms, and deserves some extra commentary. Just moments after depicting Christ's betrayal in Gethsemane, Rau includes a sequence of local community members auditioning for the Passion reenactment. Several young, mostly white Italians are shown trying out in a local church. A handsome, bespectacled young man expresses interest in being cast as one of the Roman soldiers tasked with beating and abusing the imprisoned Jesus, drawn to the contradiction of being a Catholic actor charged with "killing, massacring God Himself." Rau gives the young thespian a stage whip and invites him to improvise flogging and harassing a Black Jesus. A black plastic chair stands in the place of the victim for the purposes of the audition.

The young performer removes his shirt and glasses, revealing an athletic torso. He does some push-ups at the foot of the altar, then, for four, nearly unbearable minutes, brutally whips the black object and showers it with racist jokes and invective, having been permitted to theatricalize any taboo instinct—whether internalized or imagined—by the special circumstance of the audition scenario. At the end of the scene, the actor treats the black chair as having been beaten into unconsciousness, perhaps beaten to death, and spits on it. A cross-shaped necklace dangles from his neck. This almost pornographic moment of theatrical sadism plays out accompanied by Pergolesi's haunting *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, with a soprano and countertenor locked in a chilling duet. For an American viewer watching the film after George Floyd, after Breonna Taylor, after Tyre Nichols, the scene is especially hideous and

revealing. Suddenly, the film shifts to images of the same young actor later, having been cast and costumed as the Roman soldier role of his desire, receiving a friendly embrace from Sagnet on filming day, the two men exchanging air kisses on both cheeks, as Italian men do. The actor seems proud to be part of the project and the larger anti-racist, anti-*caporalato* movement.

It is a sequence that might have amazed Pasolini, I believe, one that flashes up in the film as crystallization of the project's overall political insights. Rau needs no elaborate means to make his point, he need only expose something already present, if implicit. His Brechtian *Gestus* in *The New Gospel* is that he doesn't force things; he allows and shows them. For him, the theatre becomes that mask which does not hide but reveals a latent set of realities, forces, conditions. His decision to include this excruciating moment both makes viewable *and* defamiliarizes an image, one that is almost unwatchable, but which simultaneously *must* be witnessed, the horror of racist brutality at the hands of the law. This unmitigated human cruelty, while it may seem astonishing, remains the governing rule that structures everyday white supremacy, the same force that consigns migrant workers to a lack of public consciousness, exploitation, violence, and death. An anti-racist student of Arendt, Rau reminds his viewer that evil is not something aberrant and extraordinary, but something banal, known deep in the souls of white people, awaiting a moment to be granted its entrance. Here, the filmmaker acts something like the bad conscience of his age, reminding us that violence and barbarism still lurk unexpunged near the heart of European "civilization," behind such seemingly innocent objects as jars of tomato sauce.

The final fifteen minutes of the film are given over to showing the scenes of Christ's execution, from Pilate's judgment to the descent from the cross. After the film's first eighty minutes, the familiar images (Peter's denials, Judas's suicide, Veronica's veil) reacquire something of the ancient gravity they have lost after so many kitsch renditions and blockbuster retellings. Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik* once again plays, giving an operatic richness to the reenactment of the *via dolorosa*, as the spectator enters into this live-action staging. Never having attended the Oberammergau Passion Play in Germany, I imagine this sequence captures something of its splendor, but *in italiano*. Smartly, Rau's depiction of Christ's death denies the sort of cinematic realism one sees in Mel Gibson's treatment: blood-soaked rags and thorns are clearly fake, clearly stage blood, another visual defamiliarization, reminding the viewer not to watch "too romantically" (as Brecht might say). Once again, one feels times past and times present interfolding one another, as in a royal robe richly bedecked with emblems. The mayor of Matera appears briefly as Simon of Cyrene, Sagnet helping carry the cross toward Golgotha. As the crucifix rises, modern camera crews and spectators wielding iPhones record the murder of an innocent Black man. The sounds of the hammer driving the nails, Christ wailing in pain, and Mary's cries of grief are left to reverberate over silence. As the sun goes dark, Sagnet

is taken down from the cross and given a warm blanket, ushered away from the cameras. Once again, a narrator's voice: "il popolo che camminava nelle tenebre ha visto una gran luce." The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

And then, a coda. Clips running during *The New Gospel*'s closing credits show Sagnet—apparently months after the Passion play's filming, now wearing a Covid-era facemask—visiting a local Italian supermarket and proudly holding up a jar of *passata*, tomato purée. This jar, however, was produced under the brand name *IAMME-No Cap*, a new line of tomato products manufactured in ethical compliance with the goals of Sagnet's movement. His efforts, combined with the publicity brought to the region by Rau's *New Gospel* project, generated sufficient pressure on local authorities to begin enforcing the area's labor laws against the mafia, helping secure better contracts and housing for migrant Africans. This sequence mirrors a scene shot earlier in the film, in which several Black activists appeared in biblical dress inside an Italian supermarket, overturning pallets of tomato sauce that were produced under the gang-master system. A cynical critic of this protest tactic might call it a "riot" or "looting," but in Rau's film, this gesture appears almost a reenactment of Christ expelling the moneylenders from the temple, overthrowing their tables of ill-gotten goods.

This hopeful note closes out Rau's film: *some* progress has been made in the "No Cap" struggle. Given the continued political catastrophes of our world, it is far from a fully redemptive ending, but it is a step in a good direction toward what some might call a more "ethical capitalism." Above all, however, the film's finale serves as an example for other artists and activists—a call to the future, for how spiritually engaged artworks may effect political change in the world. Beyond the film's powerful cinematography, beyond its nods to Pasolini, its incorporation of the histories of Christian art, music, and scripture, its true grandeur lies in the urgency of this call, which enacts a prefigurative politics and aesthetics.

It bears emphasizing here that the successes of both the Dignity movement and Rau's *New Gospel* project were not secured separately, but as part of a conjoined effort of solidarity. The gains made in the fight against the agro-mafia were not the result of any single savior personality, Black or white, but of an entire network of collaborators acting in concert, across national, linguistic, racial, and even religious lines. (Many of Sagnet's "apostles" are revealed in the film's closing to be faithful Muslims.) In coming together to compose this larger social sculpture called a more just society, each participant in *The New Gospel* had to summon up that capacity which Walter Benjamin famously named "a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim."[10] And for even the most committed secularists in Rau's audience, the film offers an image for how one might imagine what

I have elsewhere called "liberation theologies … without theism." Of course, this anti-*caporalato* fight is just one local arena in a larger ongoing struggle, a global struggle that will require a total renovation of political and spiritual consciousness. The theatre of Milo Rau reminds us that there are many paths forward, even when it has long seemed like the time for contestation was a thing of the past.

NOTES

1. For Robinson's epigraph, see Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 225. For the description of Rau's controversial status, see Briony Cartmell, "The World's Most Controversial Director," *Huck Magazine*, June 26, 2018, https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/theatre-art-and-culture/milo-rau-interview/.

2. Another of Pasolini's films undertakes a similar project, offering precedent for Rau's work in *The New Gospel*. In *La Ricotta* (1963), released one year before his *Gospel According to Matthew*, Pasolini depicted from behind the scenes a fictional production crew making a film based on the Passion, making a meta-filmic political commentary on the plight of the Italian working classes.

3. At *The New Gospel*'s outset, Sagnet describes to an interviewer the defining moment that led him to an activist's life: In 2011, while working as a tomato picker in Puglia after leaving his university studies, he witnessed a fellow laborer succumb in the fields to extreme summer heat, with temperatures soaring well above 100°F. In response, Sagnet organized a two-week farmworkers' strike, eventually leading to new labor protections in the area, and catapulting him to a wider public's awareness.

4. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1958), 159.

5. Eleanor Stanford, "A Director Turns an Immigrant into a Modern-Day Jesus," *New York Times*, September 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/movies/milo-rau-the-new-gospel.html.

6. A comprehensive introduction to the IIPM's past projects and aesthetic theories can be found in the special issue of Yale's *Theater* magazine dedicated to Rau, published in May 2021 and guest edited by Lily Climenhaga and Piet Defraeye.

7. Milo Rau, "Ghent Manifesto," *Theater* 51, no. 2 (2021): 21–23.

8. Milo Rau, "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better.," *The Theatre Times*, April 30, 2020, https://www.thetheatretimes.com/try-again-fail-again-fail-better.

9. These contradictions have their corollaries in U.S. politics, as well. See, for example, Aaron Morrison, "Slavery, Involuntary Servitude Rejected by 4 States' Voters," *AP News*, November 9, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-slavery-on-ballot-561268e344f17d8562939cde301d2cbf.

10. This translation is Harry Zohn's, with emphasis in the original. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, vol. 4, *1938–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 390.

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