



An Offensive and Disgusting Film

By Ron Jolliffe

In the entire theater, I felt alone in finding Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, offensive and disgusting.

I entered the theater on the film's opening day, Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, for the first matinee showing. The theater was almost full and respectfully quiet—like the inside of a cathedral. Some in the audience were wearing the sign of the cross on their foreheads, applied by priests with vertical and horizontal stokes of ashes made from the previous year's Palm Sunday fronds. When the film was over, I watched most viewers file out reverently, heads bowed as though meditating on eternity. A few sat sobbing; one held a handkerchief against both eyes.

Many aspects of the film are inviting. The camera angles, lighting, thematically connected flashbacks to earlier story elements, costuming, and sets are absorbing aspects of the film. There is a cute exchange between Jesus and his mother in a flashback to Jesus working as a carpenter about the unlikelihood of "tall tables" with chairs ever becoming popular. Although the musical score seems emotionally manipulative at times, it is beautifully done at other moments.

There are many aspects of the film that surprised me, but not happily. The film assumes that the viewer

knows the story well, for it has little by way of explanation about why the scenes filmed transpire. The film is basically four extended scenes of brutality: the arrest in Gethsemane, the trial, the Via Dolorosa, and the Crucifixion, followed by a lingering tableau of Michelangelo's *Pietà* as its crowning moment.

Covering approximately the last twelve hours of Jesus' life on the day of his crucifixion in Jerusalem, the film script is said to be based upon several sources, including "the diaries of St. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824) as collected in the book, 'The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ', 'The Mystical City of God' by St. Mary of Agreda, and the New Testament books of John, Luke, Mark and Matthew."¹

In part due to the respect of so many in the audience, I had to examine why I felt so strongly negative toward the film. Here are my reasons: It seems to me that the film (1) trivializes the transcendent, (2) vilifies non-"normal" persons, (3) thrills to its own voyeuristic sadomasochism, and (4) graphically depicts violence as redemptive.



Trivialization of the Transcendent

This, of course, is not the first time that a filmmaker has attempted to depict the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. It has been filmed hundreds of times, but other films have never approached the brutality and savagery of this depiction. In spite of all the technology for editing film, I believe it continues to be the case that the transcendent, like the alien and paranormal, is more truly affective when implied rather than depicted.

The snake crawling out from under the tempter's robes seems cartoonish—as though the audience is expected to think, “This is not a real snake but a metaphor for evil derived from the Garden of Eden, so it is not going to bite Jesus' hand, but tempt Jesus not to go through with his ordeal.” The dove fluttering above Jesus' head means one is to realize that the Spirit has not abandoned Jesus.

The demonic characters seem more like they belong to a B-grade horror film or to juvenile humor made more on the basis of unfortunate physical deformity than upon any actually frightening presence—as though the viewer is now supposed to conjure up the feeling “Now the devils are tormenting Judas.” A demon of some sort with simian visage is depicted as tormenting Judas until Jesus, having been thrown over a wall by the soldiers shortly after his arrest, comes into its presence.

These things aren't really scary fodder, but more nearly Harry Potter. Contemporary American Christians have enough difficulty confusing the category “factual” for the category “faithful” without having these and other crass literalisms stand in for the meaning of grace.

The idea that a graphic depiction of the magnitude of the suffering of Christ will cause believers to understand salvation better misunderstands a point at the core of Christian theology: Christ's story is about transcendence, not literality. This critique is aimed at all attempts to treat transcendental things as concrete facts.

For example, Christian theology would not come closer to the meaning of the incarnation if it possessed a microscopic video of the virginal conception of Mary in a close-up of the formation of the zygote in Mary's womb with her immaculate egg (which she is able to donate because of the miracle God performed at her own conception, according to Roman Catholic theology) and the (spiritual?) sperm provided by the Spirit (when the power of the Highest overshadowed her).

Spiritual things are spiritually discerned and attempts to concretize them result in genuine loss.

For example, the two thieves crucified with Jesus in the film are amazingly free of marks of torture, flogging, and abuse, in comparison to Jesus, but there is no historical reason to assume that they were not treated as Jesus was, for scourging and abuse were regular elements that preceded crucifixion.² But from the film's point of view, to show the thieves suffering the same treatment as Jesus did would apparently diminish the impact of what he suffered.

Contrary to the film's implied message, it is not the magnitude or intensity of suffering that redeems human beings—many crucified persons not only received treatment like Jesus received, but also endured up to a week or more on their crosses before dying. Those who argue that we are saved because of the violence Jesus suffered misunderstand the act of redemption. Violence is not redemptive—it is destructive.

For me, the film certainly created more grisly, bloody images to go along with the words of that old “gospel song.” I'll never hear it the same again, and I don't like the new way I hear it—“Would you be free from your burden of sin? There's power in the *blood*, power in the *blood*.”

Vilification of the Non-“normal”

In my opinion, the film also draws upon subliminal Christian bigotry, though probably not anti-Semitic in the specific usage that means anti-Jewish. I fear that the film may prove to make some of its viewers more anti-Semitic in the larger sense of anti-Arab/Jew/Middle-Easterner and anyone else who doesn't accept Jesus as what Christians say he is.

The undercurrent is that such persons are rejecting the amazing love and forgiveness exhibited in Jesus' words, spoken while he was nailed to the cross after hours of the grossest brutality: “Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.”

I fear that the message the film will instill in too many of its Christian viewers is that humans are insufferable, irredeemable wretches that only God can forgive, so we Christians, also being insufferable, irredeemable wretches that only God can forgive, don't have to be forgiving toward non-Christians—after all, they killed Christ, so they deserve whatever we give them.

I say this on the basis of what seem unfortunate portrayals of evil in the film: Herod and his entourage are depicted as debauched gay men, the boys who torment Judas take on bizarre characteristics of deformity supposedly representing demonic intensities. But the visuals

unavoidably imply that deformed features are the result of some kind of demonic possession, a subtle bigotry exercised against persons whose facial features are different.

Invitation to Voyeuristic Sadomasochism

I did not like the morbid curiosity the film created in me about the interior of the body of Jesus, wondering if those wounds depicted on the screen looked like real ones. What makes me wonder which stroke of the Roman soldier's cat-o'-nine-tails laid open Jesus' ribs? As revolting as I found much of the movie, there was still this morbid curiosity that I desperately wanted to shake off, but it would not leave.

I found myself curious about things to which I didn't want to have answers, yet I wondered—perhaps like crowds at public hangings—what death looks like. What sort of sick curiosity is this? Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "To behold suffering gives pleasure, but to cause another to suffer affords an even greater pleasure."³

Does the puzzling attraction of this movie for so many people add credence to Nietzsche's claim? When one has the right to behold this suffering because it is a sacred story—coupled with a belief that one caused that suffering—does that explain this movie's compelling attraction to so many viewers?

Portrayal of Violence as Redemptive

When Janet Jackson suffered her "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl, one conversation about the impropriety of that half-time show for family television elicited this question from Jason Alexander (George Costanza on *Seinfeld*): "What makes us think that thirty-six guys beating the crap out of each other in the Super Bowl is family programming?"

The general American inurement to violence seems to be related to a primitive premise of many Christians that pain is required in order to atone for transgression—consider everything from penance and spankings and fasting to prison and the death penalty. As a nation, Americans have an obsession with violence as the way to make atonement for transgression. This film, I fear, will embolden depictions of violence on the screen and lower further the bar for ratings that restrict the young from movies that contain graphic depictions of violence.

If any good can come from the film, I believe it will come from a serious conversation about the popu-

lar idea of propitiation, that violent pain was required of God for the redemption of humans. There are other, better, approaches to theology.

When I think about my experience with this film, the first term that comes to mind is *gratuitous violence*. But even if the word *gratuitous* derives from the word *grace*, this film is heavy on violence and lacking in grace. There is nothing graceful about violence.

No wonder I hated the film.

Notes and References

1. See <<http://www.hallett.com/times/movies.html#anchor332544>>, accessed on February 24, 2004.
2. Philo, *Against Flaccus* 72, 84; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.256; *Jewish War* 2.306, 308; 5.446–51.
3. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1956).

For Further Reading

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