Critical Reflections on Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ

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The February 2004 release of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ is a major cultural event. Receiving a tremendous amount of advance publicity due to claims of its anti-Semitism and adulatory responses by conservative Christians who were the first to see it, the film achieved more buzz before its release than any recent film in our memory.[1] Gibson himself helped orchestrate the publicity with selective showings of The Passion and strategic appearances on TV shows where he came off as something of a Hollywood eccentric, albeit one who was only too happy to admit to his past sins and to claim that he had achieved "salvation" through his adherence to Christianity. His film, he insisted, would be testament to the truth of Christ and how Christ died so that sinners like Gibson could be saved and enjoy eternal life.

Our reflections will interrogate reasons for both the popularity of the film and why it has educed such intense controversy. The film emerged during a period of passionate debate and global friction over the Bush administration Iraq intervention, leading to concern over the Manichean vision that informs contemporary Islamic fundamentalism and Bush administration militarism and rightwing Christian fundamentalism.[2] We argue that Gibson's film is part of the reactionary Manicheanism that is fueling religious hatreds and violence today and that therefore the film deserves a close reading and political contextualization to discern its meanings, ideologies, and possible effects and uses.

The Gospel According to Mel Gibson

The Passion of the Christ is very much Mel Gibson's construction of Christianity, depicting Jesus of Nazareth's arrest, prosecution, and Crucifixion via depiction of the 14 stages of the cross and last 12 hours of Jesus's life, involving a set of painful and extremely violent episodes that make up much of the film. The narrative closely follows the form of the notorious Oberammergau medieval passion plays, that themselves have been accused over the centuries of promoting anti-Semitism and hatred of Jews. Yet the extent of the violence and blood gives the film the aura of a splatter film as Jesus is beaten, whipped, and nails are pierced through his hands so that he is covered with lacerations and blood by the end of the film. The languages used include Aramaic, Latin, and Hebrew, which provide both a distancing effect that creates an illusion of realism and a sense of weirdness and eeriness different from previous Hollywood Jesus films.

Gibson himself allegedly held the hammer that pounded the nail through Jesus's hand, signaling his personal involvement in the film and participation in the sinfulness for which Christ died. The use of steadcam cinematography helps provide a quasi-documentary look and feel, as do the use of languages of the region and sets that appear to capture the atmosphere of the region (though it was filmed in Italy). Yet The Passion deploys a variety of cinematic techniques to help capture the strangeness of the story and while much of the narrative follows the Gospel accounts there are significant departures that signal the specificity of Gibson's version of Christianity and view of Christ's death.

Indeed, the film should be named Mel Gibson's Version of the Passion of the Christ since, like the Gospels themselves, the film is totally a construction that represents

a specific view of Christianity and the gospels dealing with Christ's "sufferings," or "passion." Gibson's Jesus is a man's man, closely resembling a Mel Gibson action hero. He takes tremendous beatings without a whimper, refuses to be beaten down by his enemies, and presents a supremely masculine Jesus, unlike the femininized Jesus of much traditional iconography, or the Hollywoodized Christ of most Jesus films, who used traditionally good-looking and middle-class type actors to play Jesus.

Gibson's Jesus is played by an off-beat character actor, Jim Caviezel, who seems to have identified with Gibson's version of the Christ and who plays with intensity the young Galilean carpenter who rounded up a posse of followers and produced a group that became founders of one of the world's major religions. The Caviezel Jesus is virilely good-looking, buff and athletic, and very macho, representing Mel Gibson's ideal of masculinity as well as his version of Jesus.

Revealingly, most of the main characters are clearly white and Western, which is not an accurate portrayal of race and ethnicity of the biblical peoples of the period. Despite some attempts at authenticity, Gibson thus continues a long Western tradition of whitening Christian iconography and presenting images of Jesus and his followers as projections of the white, Western imagination.

The film has arty and exotic moments, such as the opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Satan tempts Christ and there are occasional Felliniesque touches in the surreal representations of Satan and exuberant representations of crowds. The music is often eerie and the soundtrack powerfully conveys the violence and horror of the brutality with jolting swish and cracking of whips. The film borrows from Sam Peckinpah's and Sergio Leone's graphic and balletic depiction of violence, with artful editing, close-ups and slow-motion flows of brutality, lavishly garnished with spurts and gushing of blood. The sadomasochistic aesthetic, however, is largely focused on cutting between close-ups of brutal torturers and torn flesh, lacerating wounds, the manly Jesus's stoic acceptance of his travails, with edits to leering and jeering Roman soldiers and crowds and his helpless followers looking on in agony. In this sense, the film becomes more of a classic splatter film, masquerading as a theological depiction of Christ's Passion which conveys the fundamental Christian message of Christ's suffering for human redemption.

The representation of the strong and stoic Jesus, manly enough to be beaten to a pulp with nary a whimper, is reminiscent of Clint Eastwood's "Man With No Name" in Sergio Leone's "spaghetti Westerns" and his own 1973 film High Plains Drifter. The ultramacho bearer of unimaginable violence and torture is also evocative of the Rambo figure and many of Mel Gibson's previous action adventure heros, such as the stalwart Braveheart (1995) in which Gibson's William Wallace character is virtually crucified at the end of the film, or any number of other Gibson figures in films like Ransom, Payback, or The Patriot, who are badly beaten, but ultimately redeemed.[3]

Structurally, the film opens as a horror film with Jesus's confrontation with Satan and then the frightening arrival of Jewish police who arrest and torture him. It then morphs into a biblical epic and spectacle of violence with overtones of the splatter film. The violence is so extreme that, as Frank Rich points out: "With its laborious build-up to its orgasmic spurtings of blood and other bodily fluids, Mr. Gibson's film is constructed like nothing so much as a porn movie, replete with slo-mo climaxes and pounding music for the money shots."[4]

Indeed, The Passion presents a pornography of violence with savage beatings, brutality, and torture as extreme as any in S&M porn films. The narrative also contains suppressed homoeroticism, fetishism of body parts from the reverently portrayed foot washing to obscenely violent flaying and scourging of flesh. The fact that the violence is being inflicted on a major global religious figure adds to the horror and provides iconography of violence as extreme as any in cinema history.

Hence, formally, Gibson's The Passion can be read as a postmodern pastiche of different Hollywood genres and conventions, drawing on both European art film and Hollywood biblical epic, action adventure, horror film, and other genres. Ideologically, on the whole, Gibson's The Passion is an utterly rightwing and reactionary version of Christianity and the arrest, torture and murder of Jesus. Various filmmakers have presented Jesus's life and the story of the Gospels extremely differently in diverse historical epochs. Nicholas Ray's The King of Kings (1961) presented a pacifist Jesus and Franco Zefferelli's Jesus of Nazareth (1977) focused on Jesus's teachings and good works, while Norman Jewison's Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) provided a hippie Jesus. Although one could present a revolutionary Jesus, as did the Italian filmmaker Pier Paulo Pasolini in his 1967 The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Gibson's Christ is a solitary fanatic who is betrayed by his followers and stoically accepts his isolation and harsh fate. Whereas Pasolini stressed the social gospel, with emphasis on Christian love, community, and benevolence, Gibson's gospel is more violent and bloody with no Beatitudes or sympathy for the poor, oppressed, and excluded who either look to Jesus for miraculous cure's in Gibson's film, or exult in his suffering and Crucifixion.

In contrast to Gibson's version of the Christ story, Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, highlights Jesus's ambiguous and conflicted relation with Mary Magdalene and the conflicts between the divine and human in his character. Scorsese presents a much more richly textured and challenging film than Gibson, but because of a rightwing fundamentalist Christian attack on the film was quickly pulled from circulation whereas Gibson's film has become a global success thanks to the support of the same groups who called Scorsese's film blasphemous and worse.[5]

Gibson's version of Christianity is exceptionally violent and blood-thirsty, and, as we argue in the concluding section, resonates with audiences caught up in the vicissitudes of Terror War and the violent passion plays of contemporary politics. There is, to be sure, a small pacifist moment in the film. When the Temple Guards arrive to arrest Jesus in an early scene, his disciples begin to fight back. Jesus warns that "those who live by the sword shall die by it," ordering his followers to back down. They do, and the rest of the film Jesus's disciples are shown as cowardly and supine. However, it would have been possible to stress the peace-loving and benevolent aspects of Christ's teaching, but instead there is but a brief phrase that orders his followers to renounce violence, whereas the rest of the film exhibits highly violent and brutal beating and the crucifying of Jesus.

In contrast to previous versions of the life of Jesus, Gibson's The Passion thus really has little interest in the life or teachings of the Christ, focusing instead on the Passion, with very brief flashbacks to episodes in Jesus's early life, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Last Supper. The film has been, somewhat surprisingly in view of its almost unbearable violence, a global success that is helping to make Gibson one of the hottest kingmakers in film today. Helped by all the advanced publicity, it appears that

many evangelical and fundamentalist Christian churches organized their congregations to attend together, making the showing of the film a religious event. Many audiences allegedly wept loudly during Jesus's tormenting and found it a deeply moving and disturbing experience. Many film critics tended to be negative, although there were some positive reviews and the popular press emphasized the popularity of the film making it a "must see" cultural phenomenon that helped put it on the top of the list for week after week.

The Passion became an instant box office success and has elicited heated controversy, with passionate defenders and sharp critics. Opening widely in the US on February 25, Ash Wednesday, by the Easter and Passover holidays in April, it became the 10th highest grossing domestic movie of all time, grossing $331 million. As of May 22, 2004, it has grossed $368,894,610 in the US and $581,027,248 worldwide.

Further, the film has also been a great merchandise marketing success, selling books, CDs, and various religious items, such as nails emulating those that pierced Jesus. An article on the merchandising of paraphernalia linked with the film notes that a book The Passion: Photography From the Movie 'The Passion of the Christ' rose to number 3 on the New York Times bestseller list and has sold over 650,000 copies; the CD soundtrack of the film was a best-seller; and the jewelry firm that was exclusive marketer for the film sold 150,000 crosses and 125,000 pewter Crucifixion nails as of early April 2004.[6]

Hence, Gibson's marketing strategy and the support of Christian churches and audiences may help explain in part the great commercial success of the film. Yet the intense focus on the drama and intensity of Christ's Passion (i.e. the suffering in the Crucifixion) may also clarify both the power and esteem of the film with certain audiences. Despite the criticisms of the film that we will develop in the next section, it has become popular with both film culture and religious community audiences.

Reviews indicate that some major film critics responded to The Passion very positively qua film, including its horror film and cinematic violence aspects. Fans of extreme cinema affirmed the cinematography, style, and excessive violence, while religious audiences responded to its Christian themes and other filmgoers resonated with the titanic struggle between Good and Evil that is a staple of popular cinema.[7] The Passion story is one of a monumental clash between Good and Evil and the monstrousness and horror of the Crucifixion has never been presented in such excruciating detail. For certain audiences the unbearable suffering imposed on the Christ and his endurance of the Passion confirms their experience of Christ's divinity and that his purpose was to redeem "Mankind's" sins. Much of the film deals in painful detail with Christ's suffering and this seems to have provided a powerful experience for some audiences.

The Scourging at the Pillar was especially excruciating. Jesus is first caned by two loutish Roman guards and despite repeated beatings heroically rises to his feet. He is then beaten with cat o'nine tails that slash his flesh to ribbons, marking his body with deep wounds and covering it with blood. Repeated facial beatings close one eye and cumulatively Gibson's spectacle of the Passion produces the bloodiest Christ iconography yet to appear.

Gibson's film crew focused serious attention on historical detail and some viewers read it as documentary proof of the authenticity of the Gospels, providing a "you

are there" experience of Christ's last hours. The use of natural lighting provided striking contrasts between night and day, and exterior and interior scenes. Some of the interior and nighttime scenes achieved a dramatic chiaroscuro quality reminiscent of religious art, while the outdoor scenes had a dusty and sun-drenched Mediterranean look. Lavish care was extended to sets, costumes, and designs making the film much more believable than many Biblical epics.

Thus, the carefully crafted cinematic aspects of the film help account for its power and popularity. The soundtrack is extremely well produced, providing both exotic sounds that disorient audiences and induce a sense of the macabre to the story. Like The Exorcist, The Passion may well utilize subliminal sounds and images to intensify its effects.[8] All of the tricks of the hi-tech horror film are produced with demonic and monster children screaming, birds screeching and poking out eyeballs, and people speaking in tongues or strange languages with few subtitle translations to help anchor meanings. The musical score sweeps up and down in crescendos of (simulated) majesty, cuts to familiar weepy and sentimental orchestrations, and then deploys chanting vocals and non-Western audio effects. And the sounds of blood spurting, whips lacerating flesh, nails being pounded into hands, and the other horrifying details of Christ's Crucifixion provide an overpowering panoply of sound.

The fast editing and crafted cinematography also contribute to the power of the film for some audiences. Never has there been so much blood and gore in a single film and the experience of such extreme pain and suffering leaves its audiences overwhelmed, susceptible to subliminal messages and ideological massage. The torture scenes often cut to Jesus's point of view with startling close-ups and quick flashbacks to episodes of his life that enable audiences to identify with the character and undergo his torment. The guttural moanings, groanings, gurglings, and gaspings of Jesus during the Passion are interspersed with Mary's agonized face and close-ups of crowds cheering and Roman centurians jeering and hysterically laughing. The film rapidly cuts to reaction shots with women, children, and others looking at Christ in wonder and adoration, thus providing a mis-en-scene that suggests Christ's divinity and uniqueness. Yet precisely the intense drama of the Passion, the almost unbearable violence, and the horrific act of the Crucifixion of the alleged Son of God provides an artful cover for some extremely reactionary messages and ideologies, as we will argue in the next section.

The Passions of Anti-Semitism and Rightwing Patriarchy

In terms of the film's politics of representation, The Passion is deeply sexist and patriarchal, homophobic, classist, and anti-Semitic, although Gibson allegedly toned the latter down in response to early criticism, cutting, for instance, the subtitle of the passage in Matthew 27:25 that states: "His blood be on us, and on our children." The phrase is kept, however, in the Aramaic, and the film's anti-Semitism goes beyond the biblical sources in both subtle and overt ways. Wasting little time in getting into the film's sadomasochism, the temple guards arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, savagely beat him, and take him to the Jewish high priest Caiaphas. On the way, they suspend Jesus from a bridge, choking him and dangling him over the water, incidents for which there are no Gospel basis.

Taken before Caiaphas and his sinister cadre of Jewish priests, Christ is mocked, insulted, hit, spit upon, and abused to the great delight of the sadistic priestly caste and much of the Temple crowd. As Katha Pollit puts it:

> the high priest Caiaphas and his faction are not just bad, they fit neatly into ancient Christian stereotypes: They are rich, arrogant and gaudily dressed; they plot and scheme and bribe; they cleverly manipulate the brutal but straightforward Romans; they are gratuitously "cruel" and "hard-hearted," to quote Anne Catherine Emmerich, the nineteenth-century German nun whose visions of the Passion Gibson relied on for some of the more disgusting tortures he inflicts on Jesus. Physically, they are anti-Semitic cartoons: The priests have big noses and gnarly faces, lumpish bodies, yellow teeth; … The "good Jews" look like Italian movie stars (Magdalene actually *is* an Italian movie star, the lovely Monica Bellucci); Mary, who would have been around 50 and appeared 70, could pass for a ripe 35. These visual characterizations follow not just the Oberammergau Passion Play that Hitler found so touching but a long tradition of Christian New Testament iconography in which the villains look Semitic and the heroes, although equally Jewish, look Northern European.[9]

To prolong the suspense and agony, Caiaphas turns Jesus over to the Romans and Pontius Pilate, who personally finds no fault with Christ, but in the face of a hostile, angry mob and the Jewish Priest's insistence upon his guilt turns him over to King Herod, the Jewish authority in collaboration with the Romans. Herod is presented as highly effeminate and his court are overtly homosexual, promiscuous and debauched. The brief Herod sequences produce images of Jewish decadence and sensuality, consistent with rightwing views of pagan preChristian culture, yet without explicit Biblical grounding, revealing again the constructiveness of Gibson's interpretation.

There are also more subtle connections between Jews and the devil, a highly polymorphus and sexually ambiguous figure in Gibson's narrative. Opening images show Jesus praying in the blue-lit and fog-shrouded Garden of Gethsemane while an androgynous devil appears to tempt him (played by actress Rosalinda Celentano with shaved eyebrows and a dubbed voice). Jesus resists the devil, stomping on a snake which slithers toward him as one of Satan's apparitions, but Jewish guards soon appear to arrest him. In the scene where Judas bestows his fateful kiss, one again hears the snake hissing, and as the Temple Guards haul Jesus away there is another quick glimpse of Satan and an ominous hiss. When Jesus is brought before Caiaphas and the priests, once again Satan appears. As Jewish crowds chant to kill Christ and the Jewish priests smugly look on, again images of a smirking demonic figure appear, as they do when Judas betrays Jesus and Jesus is beaten and scourged, with Satan reveling in the brutality.

Gibson deploys horror film iconography throughout the narrative and after his betrayal of Jesus, Judas is confronted with monster children with devilish eyes, mocking him, and driving him to suicide. Satan takes different forms in the film, producing a sense that Evil is afoot in the world and is associated with Jews and the killing of Jesus. At the end of the film, after Jesus decides to die on the cross, there are a set of fragmented and mysterious spectacles that include the cracking and collapse of the Temple, which Jesus had prophesized, and the unmasking and humiliation of Satan, whose shroud falls off,

revealing a bald-headed and screaming monster, producing another subtle association between the (temporary?) defeat of Satan and the fall of the Temple.

The Passion is thus deeply and insidiously anti-Semitic, as the film systematically produces a series of associations of Jews, Satan, and Christ's arrest and Crucifixion, going well beyond Gospel accounts of the connection of Jews with Christ's death by associating the episode with Satan in a Manicheanism as pronounced as that of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. Since Satan does not appear in any of the Gospel accounts of Christ's Passion, this obvious departure from the scriptures and association of the Jews and Satan give away Gibson's biases and undermine his claims that he is just following the Gospels.

Jon Meacham writes in a cover story "Who Killed Jesus?" for Newsweek that Gibson put Satan in such a prominent role to underscore that the world is in the grip of evil and that Christ must make the ultimate sacrifice to save humanity from its sins.[10] Since throughout the film, Satan hovers in and out of scenes that prominently feature Jews and Christ's passion, the implication is that Jews are a source of the world's evil who are in the grips of Satan and thus minions of the Devil. This appalling view has been used to justify extermination of Jews over the centuries and is embedded in the iconography and mis-en-scene of Gibson's film, if not explicitly argued and presented in the text.

Gibson insists that he presents good Jews in his narrative, such as the priests who argue that the group does not have the authority to execute Jesus and individuals in crowd scenes who respond favorably to his teaching and then show sympathy for Jesus during the Passion, such as the woman who gives him water and the man who helps carry Jesus's cross after he had been beaten to a pulp. This is, however, a weak defense for, in fact, Jesus and the disciples were Jews, and Gibson's distinction between "good" and "bad" Jews exhibits both his fundamental Manicheanism and his bad faith in presenting strongly negative and anti-Semitic representations of Jews, associations of Jews with Satan, and strong responsibility for the death of Jesus in his narrative.

There are many other purely Gibsonian fictions that make evident his departure from Gospel and construction of his own version of Jesus. In a flashback scene that shows Jesus building a very modern table, taller and sleeker than standard ones, his mother Mary mentions that: "It'll never catch on." The notion that the Galilean carpenter Jesus of Nazareth is too advanced for the times and that his furniture innovations will not be accepted is an obviously constructed representation of Jesus as forward-looking and avant-garde in a passage in which there is no biblical reference, once again signaling Gibson's departure from the scriptures and production of his own idiosyncratic story. Indeed, the inventive Jesus ahead of his time is perhaps another Gibson projection of his self-image as a daring filmmaker willing to take on novel creative projects, just as his depiction of Jesus as ultra-masculine is a Gibson action-hero self-projection.

On the whole, the women in the film represent a conservative patriarch's fantasy of how women are put on earth to serve and adore men. The main women in the film, Mary Magdalene and his mother Mary, look on at Jesus in adoration during the Passion episode, hold each other and weep, and say little during the entire film. Like Jesus, they are stoical and largely silent during the unrelenting violence inflicted on Christ, exhibiting no agency or resistance, other than crying and holding each other, rather than

shouting out, protesting, or screaming, as one might well respond to seeing such brutality inflicted on a loved one.

The film follows conventional patriarchal iconography, evident in Clint Eastwood's films like High Plains Drifter (1973) and Pale Rider (1985) that highlight close-ups of adoring women looking on at the major male character. There are no strong women characters in the film and women are largely part of a faceless crowd who sadistically enthuse during Christ's systematic abuse and torture or look on helplessly. Mary and Magdalene are attired in what appear to be Nun's habits during the Passion and appear to embody Gibson's idealizing of women who are saintly, pure, quiet, and reverential toward men.

The film is also highly individualist, focusing relentlessly on Christ and showing his disciplines and followers as weak, timid, and pusillanimous. While many versions of the Gospel play up the Christian community and Jesus's close and loving relation with his disciples, in Gibson's version the disciples are uniformly cowardly and craven, raising the question of why one would want to join such an organization, and undermining notions of Christian community and solidarity which have been so important over the centuries. None of Jesus's followers stands out or speaks up and the Judas episode in Gibson's version also does not probe into why his supposed friend betrays him. Further, the contemptuous look of the Jewish priests who buy Judas and the loud clink of the money thrown to him dismiss Judas as a sell-out, rather than probing Judas's motivations. Interestingly, by contrast, Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) paints Judas as a resistance fighter who breaks with Jesus because the Nazerene sells out and gives up the revolutionary cause for celebrity status and a decadent life-style, while an ABC TV-movie shown at the time of the The Passion's opening in 2004 presents Judas as a revolutionary disappointed in Jesus's pacifism, who desires a more vigorous response to Roman oppression. Yet Gibson has no interest in Judas beyond associating him with the devil, money, jealousy, and betrayal.

Although the Jews are largely shown as corrupt, decadent, and causing Christ's death, or as ignorant masses calling for Christ's Crucifixion, the Romans, by contrast, are shown ruled by noble leaders like Pontus Pilate, who twice refuses to condemn Christ despite pressures from the Jewish priests, the crowd, and suggestions that in the light of the wide-spread calling for Jesus's punishment, Caeser will punish him if another rebellion occurs. Pilate philosophizes, posing the fabled query "What is truth?" when claims of Jesus's blasphemy are posed and loudly proclaims "Behold the Man!" when Jesus is presented to the crowd before his condemnation. Pilate lavishing washes his hands to signal his distance from Jesus's persecution and then proposes that he pardon a criminal in the traditional fashion, providing another avenue of escape for Jesus. But in the face of repeated calls by Caiphas and the Jewish mob to "crucify him!" and Caiphas and the crowd's call to spare Barbabbas instead of Jesus, Pilate reluctantly signals that the mob can have its way and take Jesus. Crucially, it is Caiphas who prompts the crowd to release Barbabbas and not Jesus when Pilate offers mercy to one of the two individuals up for Crucifixion. Moreover, Caiphas is the first to repeatedly shout out "Crucify him!", thus pinning Jesus's Crucifixion largely on the Jews. Importantly, neither of these interventions is depicted in the Gospels, revealing again Gibson's anti-Semitic biases in the narration.

Further, Pilate's wife Claudia is idealized as a noble Roman who comes to recognize Jesus's divinity. When Pilate is first confronted with what to do with the prophet Jesus who Caiphas and his clique have arrested and charged with blasphemy, Claudia recommends that Pilate not persecute the Nazarene and she provides a sympathetic gaze on Jesus throughout. She is an admirable partner to Pilate who confides his political dilemmas to her. Curiously, Pilate and Claudia are perhaps the only two characters beyond Jesus who have any character or depth in Gibson's narrative, with most figures appearing as caricatures and cartoons. While the noble Romans are shown as sensitive and caring, Pilate's underlings, who ultimately carry out the scourging and Crucifixion of Christ, are represented as sadistic thugs who revel in and abuse and torture. Earlier, the Jewish guards who arrested Christ in the Garden were shown as brutish and thuggish, a consistently negative view of lower class functionaries. But it is the Roman police who carry out the most brutal beatings in unbearably long sequences and sadistic detail, which signals a deep misogyny and sadism in Gibson's imaginary, as well as contempt for the underclass.

The view that military/police underlings explode out of control and engage in brutal torture and abuse is startlingly parallel to rightwing readings of the Iraqi abuse scandal, which unfolded in the media in May 2004, who blame it on callow youth lost in a culture of pornography and media sadism and who betray their noble leaders. This view, however, was undercut by recent exposes by Seymour Hersh and Newsweek writers who see the source of Iraqi prisoner abuse as directed from top echelons of the Pentagon and Bush administration.[11] Indeed, Gibson is obviously engaging in historical revisionism, letting the Romans off the hook for their oppression of the Jews and Jesus. Most reliable historians, starting with Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, present Pontus Pilate and his gang as brutal thugs who systematically persecuted and killed thousands of Jews, including, according to many accounts, Jesus and his followers.[12] Gibson's Pontus Pilate, by contrast, is the Noble Roman, a Brutus/Caesar hybrid who intones noble sentiments, philosophical utterances, and who tries his best to keep his hands clean of the act of condemning the Christ.

Caiphas, by contrast, and the Jewish priests are shown as dark, sinister, and corrupt, taking payoffs from the Romans and becoming angry when Jesus attacks the moneychangers in the Temple, depriving them of some of the bounty as collaborators. Jewish mobs are also shown as a frenzied collective, given to bloodlust for punishment, and calling for Christ to be crucified.

Thus, in terms of the appropriation of the structure of the medieval passion play, the sources of the iconography, the specific representation of Jews, the narrative role in ascribing Christ's death to Jews, the association of Jews with Satan, breaks with the Gospel's account of the Crucifixion, and the historical inaccuracy of white-washing Pilate and the Romans, Gibson's The Passion is deeply anti-Semitic.[13] It is also, as noted, reactionary in many other ways as well, and we can easily imagine smug Christian philistines leaving the film convinced that Jews killed Christ and are in league with Satan, gays are corrupt and decadent, working class louts are brutal, stupid, and violent, and in the light of Evil rampant in the world, the Church, State, and police need to be given more power.

Crusading Fundamentalism, Militarism, and Contestation Over Christianity

To properly assess the resonance and significance of The Passion in the contemporary moment, we suggest that the film be read in the context of present-day politics, marked by a war of religious fundamentalisms, militarism, and accelerating societal violence and turbulence. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a wave of religious fervor in former Communist regions and in the US with the election of George W. Bush Christian fundamentalists have received high positions in government and at least part of Bush's Terror War policy and invasion of Iraq was fuelled by a sense of crusade. In his response to Bob Woodward's question of whether Bush Junior had consulted his father, former President George H. W. Bush, before invading Iraq, Bush admonished Woodward saying that he consulted his Heavenly Father and hoped that he was worthy to be "God's Messenger."[14]

Ironically, there are many neoconservative and pro-Israel Jews in the Bush administration who are among the most aggressive militarists, revealing the complex intermixing of religious and political passions in the Bush administration.[15] In this context, there is clearly danger of a surge of irrationalist religious fervor that can take violent forms such as Al Qaeda's attack on the infidel West, Bush Junior's retaliatory militarist unilateralist response in Afghanistan and crusade in Iraq, or Israel's escalating attacks on the Palestinians. Films like The Passion of the Christ fuel this religious fervor and are thus dangerous cultural forces that should be taken seriously by those interested in political and cultural critique.

Rightwing militarist culture like the Gibson film or the Left Behind novels have their analogue in crusading Christian militarists in Iraq.[16] Last October, General William G. Boykin received brief press coverage when it was revealed that the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence had been regularly appearing at evangelical revivals preaching that the US was in a holy war as a "Christian nation" battling "Satan." General Boykin revealed the insight that his battle with the forces of evil was a crusade between his "true God" and "the false one." Boykin insisted, "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."

Moreover, Sidney Blumenthal has revealed that after these startling statements, widely circulated through the global media, General Boykin

> was not removed or transferred. At that moment, he was at the heart of a secret operation to "Gitmoize" (Guantánamo is known in the US as Gitmo) the Abu Ghraib prison. He had flown to Guantánamo, where he met Major General Geoffrey Miller, in charge of Camp X-Ray. Boykin ordered Miller to fly to Iraq and extend X-Ray methods to the prison system there, on Rumsfeld's orders.
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> Boykin was recommended to his position by his record in the elite Delta forces: he was a commander in the failed effort to rescue US hostages in Iran, had tracked drug lord Pablo Escobar in Colombia, had advised the gas attack on barricaded cultists at Waco, Texas, and had lost 18 men in Somalia trying to capture a warlord in the notorious Black Hawk Down fiasco of 1993.[17]

Blumenthal also noted that "Just before Boykin was put in charge of the hunt for Osama bin Laden and then inserted into Iraqi prison reform, he was a circuit rider for the

religious right. He allied himself with a small group called the Faith Force Multiplier that advocates applying military principles to evangelism. Its manifesto - Warrior Message - summons "warriors in this spiritual war for souls of this nation and the world ..." Mel Gibson is obviously a member of a similar Warrior Messenger cadre and the message entails a violent and bloody crusade against the forces of evil.

Indeed, there are a series of interesting similarities between George W. Bush and Mel Gibson. Bush has famously declared that Jesus is his favorite philosopher and part of Gibson's highly effective publicity for the film was stressing his deep Christian beliefs that drove him, despite the controversy, to make and market the film. Both Gibson and Bush Junior are born-again Christians who overcame struggles with drugs and alcohol to embrace a highly fundamentalist Christianity (albeit of different denominations). Both are Manichean to the core, see themselves on the side of Good and see their enemies and adversaries as Evil. Both are morally righteous and accept redemptive violence in the struggle for Good. Both often appear addled and inarticulate when confronted with difficult questions (possibly due to years of excessive drug and alcohol abuse that impaired their cognitive faculties). And both deploy their respective political and cultural power to advance the ends of their conservative version of Christianity, arguably with highly destructive effects.

Crucially, The Passion of the Christ promotes hatred through its relentless Manicheanism and caricatures of evil Jews and Roman soldiers who condemn, torture, and brutally kill Jesus. The film projects a vision that violence is prevalent in the world and Christ is the Savior who will put the world aright. It is, of course, too soon to evaluate the ultimate effects and impact of The Passion of the Christ. It has been highly popular in the Arab world where it could possibly intensify anti-Semitism and contribute to violence against Jews. It has allegedly produced conversion experiences for Christians, which may take any number of forms. Notoriously, at the time of The Passion's release the Lovingway United Pentecostal Church in Denver posted a marqee reading "Jews Killed the Lord Jesus." A Georgia couple got into a violent theological dispute after seeing the film, police were called, and the couple spent the night in jail, each charged with battery. Showing the contradictory effects a media culture artifact can have, a 21-year old Texas man admitted to killing his pregnant lover and making it look like a suicide after seeing Gibson's film.[18]

Ultimately, The Passion of the Christ may or may not significantly contribute to the spread of rightwing crusading Christian fundamentalism and militarism. There are important countervailing factors to the aggressive religious militarism in the Pentagon and White House, such as outspoken criticism of religious fundamentalism and revisionist takes on Christianity. While Gibson's version of Christianity is strongly masculine, there are attempts to stress the "feminine" side of Christianity, with a series of studies stressing the importance of Mary Magdalene in early Christianity after lost Gnostic texts were discovered containing an alleged Gospel by her.

Further, there are popular strands of Christian revisionist history that find articulation in the best-selling novel by Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code.[19] While Gibson's version reinforces and upholds an unquestioning patriarchal and violent interpretation of Judeo-Christian politics and beliefs, The Da Vinci Code (2003) provides a damning critique of the conservatism of both the Catholic Church and the kinds of misanthropic, misogynist and fundamentalist Christianity reified in Gibson's film.

Drawing on a number of controversial theological arguments and scholarly sources, (which include the Gnostic Gospels, discovered in Egypt in 1945), Brown's story articulates alternative and resistant accounts of a far more egalitarian Christianity, which celebrates a feminine/masculine dialectic and attributes status to Mary Magdalene as the thirteenth -- and most important -- apostle of Christ's teachings. Part of the plot centers on the Catholic Church and the Opus Dei's attempts to suppress documentation which not only attests to Mary Magdalene's, and women's active contributions to and importance in early Christianity, but also the nature of Mary Magdalene's (spiritual and physical) relationship with Jesus.

Brown's novel is important for its documentation of the constructed nature of the Gospels, with the Church choosing some texts of the period and rejecting others. Moreover, Brown's accurate identification of the Opus Dei, as a wealthy, elitist, fundamentalist and right-wing international sect of the Catholic Church, provokes a recontextualization of current dilemmas in contemporary institutionalized Christianity, especially concerning the corruption, secrecy and revelations of widespread abuse, related to the Catholic Church. Given Gibson's fundamentalist beliefs, it is hardly surprising that the reactionary politics of Catholicism, like the Opus Dei's extreme patriarchy, are reflected, in his film.

Hence, Gibson's version The Passion deflects us from alternative kinds of religions and spirituality, which embrace social justice and egalitarian praxis, as well as serious problems of institutionalized religion. Moreover, that an extremely unpleasant and widely upsetting film could become such a major cultural phenomenon calls attention both to the power of the culture industry and religion in the contemporary world. Despite centuries of Enlightenment, many people still adhere to fundamentalist religion, even in the Mecca of consumer capitalism and materialism, the United States. There are obviously unmastered social problems and conflicts that drive individuals and entire societies to find religious solutions to their deepest problems. Critical social theory and cultural studies thus has a challenge to decode major cultural phenomena like the worldwide success of The Passion of the Christ to unravel what it tells us about contemporary culture and society and what problems need to be confronted and dealt with to create a freer and happier world.

Notes

[1] For a detailed account of the prerelease controversy and Gibson's deeply committed marketing of the film, see Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War: Mel Gibson & "The Passion." The New Yorker, September 15, 2003, at www.wcnet.org/~bgcc/Gibson.htm. To some extent, Gibson himself promoted the issue of whether the film was anti-Semitic through his passionate disclaimers, and attempted to present the film as faithfully following Gospel teaching. This promotion strategy helped bring in both flocks of Christians and others curious as to what the controversy was about. As we will show, the obvious departures from Gospel representations and narrative provide clues to Gibson's biases and politics.

[2] On the "clash of fundamentalisms" between Al Qaeda Jihadism and Bush administration militarism, see Tariq Ali, The Clash of Fundamentalisms. London and New York: Verso, 2002. For detailed critique of Bush administration ideology and

policies, see Douglas Kellner, Douglas Kellner, From 9/11 to Terror War: Dangers of the Bush Legacy (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

[3] On how previous Mel Gibson characters and films anticipate The Passion, see Jessica Winter, "Mel Gibson's Jesus Christ Pose," Village Voice, November 5-11, 2003.

[4] Frank Rich, "Mel Gibson Forgives Us For His Sins," The New York Times, March 7, 2004. Rich wrote a series of articles before release of the film discussing dangers of anti-Semitism in Gibson's highly publicized films and concerned Jewish reactions. Gibson was allegedly enraged by the accusations and told a New Yorker writer producing a story on the phenomenon: "I want to kill him [i.e Frank Rich]. I want his intestines on a stick… I want to kill his dog" (see the Peter J. Boyer article cited in Note 1). Gibson later used his psychotically intemperate remarks to affirm his Christian forgiveness of his tormentor. Rich remains worried and concerned: "the fracas over 'The Passion' has made me feel less secure as a Jew in America than ever before." Cited in "Gibson Forgives Us for His Sins," ibid.

[5] Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979) was also attacked as blasphemous by rightwing Christian audiences for its satire of Hollywood versions of the life of Christ. Ironically, the popularity of The Passion led to Life of Brian's re-release in some markets as an antidote to Gibson's toxins.

[6] See Anne Thompson, "Holy Week Pilgrims Flock to 'Passion.' Film is Selling Books, CD's And Jewelry, Too," New York Times April 12, 2004. The article also notes that part of the marketing strategy was to open the film on Ash Wednesday and keep up marketing momentum through Easter, to bring in big crowds during the Christian holy season.

[7] The Internet Movie Data Base contains a variety of reviews, listing the most accessed and popular reviews at the beginning of its "external review" list (see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/externalreviews). Reviews by Roger Ebert and James Berardinelli affirm the film positively qua cinema, while Guardian reviewer Mark Kermode unabashedly affirms it qua horror film and example of extreme cinema. Almost 2,000 user comments are posted on the Internet Movie Data Base user comments board (see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/usercomments). These often insightful commentaries provide testimony to the tremendous interest in the film globally and the passionate controversies it has created. It was disheartening, however, to find so few cogent critiques of the film's theology from the Christian religious community in the mainstream media, though we found some good critiques on Internet sources, including a Christian minister who noted the film's departure from scriptures; see The Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Montgomery's review "The Gospel Truth" at www.explorefaithlorg. See also the critique by Fr. John T. Pawlikowski and Rabbi David Sandmel, "What Christians Must Watch for in 'The Passion'" at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14030.html. A webpage of material is found at the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/PASSION_resources.htm#passion%20.

[8] The Exorcist (1973), like The Passion, evoked extremely strong responses from its audiences who exhibited symptoms of hysteria and later attested to nightmares and anxiety attacks. The film used frightening sounds like bees buzzing, birds screeching, and

children shrieking, as well as incantations of Satanic texts, spoken backwards or translated into ancient languages. On The Exorcist controversy and how it provided ideologies of rightwing Christianity and attacks on feminism and liberalism, see Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988;

[9] Katha Pollit, "The Protocols of Mel Gibson," The Nation (March 29, 2004) at http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml%3Fi=20040329&s=pollitt. Another reading of the priests is to see them as allegorical representatives of the Roman Catholic church whose bureaucracy and concessions to liberalism Gibson and his father scorn for a more conservative and traditionalist view of Catholicism. Gibson and his father Hutton Gibson are widely reported to be "sedevacantists" who reject the reforms of Vatican II, which include legislation of performing Mass in vernacular languages rather than Latin, liberalizing of Church doctrine, including not having to give up eating meat on Friday, and, crucially in this context, absolving Jews from responsibility for killing Christ; on Gibson's specific version of Catholicism, see the Boyer article cited in Note 1.

[10] Jon Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?" Newsweek, February 16, 2004.

[11] See Seymour Hersh, "The Grey Zone," The New Yorker, posted May 15, 2004 at http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040524fa_fact and John Barry, Michael Hirsh and Michael Isikoff, "The Roots of Torture," Newsweek, May 24, 2004.

[12] Professor John Pawlikowski, director of the Catholic-Jewish studies program at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union noted: "The main storyline of The Passion puts the responsibility for Jesus Christ's death squarely on a Jewish cabal led by Caiaphas [the Jewish high priest], who, at one point, is described in the script as 'bloodthirsty' and who succeeds in blackmailing Pilate into putting Jesus to death… We know from recent Catholic documents and from modern biblical scholarship that this was not the case, that Pilate was the bloodthirsty one and that he, rather than the Jews, played the central role in putting Jesus to death." See Lawrence Donegan, "Christ in the Crossfire," The Observer, September 28, 2003. On Gibson's distortion of history, see also David Remnick's interview with Elaine Pagels, "Passions, Past and Present. The New Yorker, March 8, 2004.

[13] Noting the anti-Semitic sources of Gibson's representation of the Passion, Stephen Montgomery, op. cit., remarks that there are "over 30 scenes and lines in the movie" that are directly from 19th century nun and rabid anti-Semitic Anne Catherine Emmerich, "virtually all of them depicting Jews as malevolent and blood-thirsty, and picturing a God short of forgiveness and long on sadism. There is one scene towards the end where the thief on the cross ridicules Jesus, and a raven settles on the cross and starts pecking the theif's eye out in gory detail. That wasn't from scripture. That was from Emmerich."

[14] See Bob Woodward, Plan of Attack. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

[15] On the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration, see Douglas Kellner, From 9/11 to Terror War, op. cit., and other articles in this issue of Logos.

[16] Interestingly, the latest in the series of Christian apocalyptic "Left Behind" series has Jesus returning to earth. See David D. Kirkpatrick, "In 12th Book of Best-Selling Series, Jesus Returns," New York Times, March 29, 2004.

[17] Sidney Blumenthal, "The religious warrior of Abu Ghraib." The Guardan (May 20, 2004).

[18] See Michelle Goldberg, "Mel Gibson: Arab World Messiah," Salon, April 6, 2004; "Mel's Passion too much for Georgia Couple," The Guardian, March 19, 2004; Scott Gold and Lianne Hart, ''Passion' Prompts Man to Confess." Los Angeles Times, March 26, 2004: A17; and "Uproar Over Mel's Pride and Passion," Globe, March 15, 2004. The latter claims that an opening day viewer suffered a fatal heart attack; that psychiatrists reported that the film had induced nightmares and warned that viewers might suffer severe, long-lasting emotional problems; and that an Israeli leader called for Israel to put Mel Gibson on trial for slandering the Jewish people.

[19] See Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code. New York: Doubleday, 2003. The novel has been a publishing phenomenon, selling over five million copies and heading the New York Times bestseller list for almost a year. A search through amazon.com reveals that there is already a small library of at least fifteen books commenting positively or negatively on The Da Vinci Code, attesting to the contestation of Christianity currently underway. Interestingly, critics of the book are the same rightwing Christians who are embracing The Passion, so that Gibson's film and Brown's novel represent two sides of the popular in the battle over contemporary Christianity.