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christ, that hurts!: rewriting the jesus narrative - violence & the language of action cinema in mel gibson's **the passion of the christ**

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3-5: 700 BCE).

He was despised and shunned by men, a man of pain who knew what sickness was (A Prayer to Horus: 2575 BCE).

Centurion: You know what the penalty for harboring a wanted criminal is? Crucifixion!
Matthias: Oh.
Centurion: Nasty, eh?
Matthias: Could be worse.
Centurion: Could be worse! Crucifixion lasts hours. It's a slow, horrible death.
Matthias: Well, at least it gets you out in the open air (Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, 1979).

While on a trip to Peru, I visited the main Catholic Cathedral in Lima. As expected, inside the cathedral was a large cross from which hung a life-sized image of the crucified Jesus near (or at) the moment of death. While I had seen many representations of Jesus on the Cross in Europe and North America (as well as explicit illustrations of the martyring of the Saints) I was unprepared for the image presented. The carved Jesus' wounds were deep and horrific. White ribs stood out underneath ripped flesh – a glistening heart and lungs were just visible within the dark hollow deep within his open chest. Blood seemed to flow fresh and warm from the many punctures and tears that had ruined what was once a perfect body. Beneath a crown of vicious thorns, Jesus' face was a bloody pulp. The image of the flayed and dead Jesus rendered in such medical realism nearly overwhelmed me, and I stared in fascination and revulsion. Why would such an image be produced? The answer, I was told by a cathedral guide, lay in the daily experience of the local Indians centuries ago. They had suffered such violent treatment and torture at the hands of their conquerors that the usual depictions of Christ's sufferings did not impress them. It was decided by the Church of the period to exaggerate the wounds and suffering so that it would seem beyond the native's own. How else would the Indians accept that He gave His life so they might live under the whip of their Masters?

Expedient exaggeration of the violence done to the body of Jesus aligns Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) with the intentions of the makers of the carved Jesus in the Lima Cathedral. How else to convince a secular audience steeped in the violent images found in films such as *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995) and *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) that Jesus' death was such a monumental act of self-sacrifice that he absorbed all the sins of Mankind? And absorb is exactly what *The Passion's* Jesus does, willingly accepting the impossible violence done to his body as necessary for the greater good.

It is into author Jean Baudrillard's domain of the hyperreal that we travel upon viewing *The Passion.* From its opening image of a full moon coursing over the Garden of Gethsemane to the final shot of the risen Christ leaving his tomb, there is not a single image that does not refer or rely upon an almost endless series of related images. The 'ultimate' image of Jesus presented by *The Passion* is potent only because of the images that have gone before it. All the representations we see in *The Passion* (Jesus and otherwise) evoke specific as well as general responses in the viewer and while these images seem particular to the story of Jesus, they also can be read across several film and art history genres – both secular and sacred. In his book Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard argues that the power of these images (overloaded as they are with social, cultural and historical meaning) has little to do with the "original" upon which the representation is based. The image, created in order to simulate (or stand-in for, or perhaps distill) the original, quickly replaces the original as the method by which cultural meaning is produced *because the layers of cultural meaning attached to the image over time become more important than the original object.* The *simulation* of the object replaces the object entirely, reproducing itself in favour over whatever the original was. The images presented in films such as *The Passion* do not represent an *original* object or event, they are simulations representing an original that can never be directly accessed or experienced. A contemporary audience understands that it can never experience the physical actuality of Jesus or his times, but they can experience an image/simulation of Jesus that agrees with the cultural meaning they have come to expect. They agree with the simulation presented, allowing it to stand-in for, or *replace,* the original. The *signs* of the real come to *replace* the real – in the case of Jesus and his times there is no alternative – and Baudrillard suggests, its simulation in effect destroys the real.

Like an icon of Jesus, the images presented are signs that have replaced whatever reality might have existed 2000 years ago in 1st Century CE Judea. The imagined reality presented has the imprint of authenticity – we are all familiar with how films represent the period in question. We are not surprised by what we see - it agrees with the images found throughout Christian art history and films such as *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewcz, 1963). Baudrillard's ideas of the hyperreal and the Successive Phases of the Image are especially resonant with the experience that is *The Passion.* If we accept that an image of Jesus (either an icon from Constantinople or an actor on

screen) is a reflection (not the original) of a profound reality, it takes little time to arrive at this conclusion that the same image has no relation to reality whatsoever - it becomes its own pure simulation. Yet despite its artificial nature, much is made of *The Passion's* authenticity. After screening the film, Pope John Paul II was quoted by The Wall Street Journal as saying "It is as it was" (Noonan). But did the Pope speak in Italian, Polish, English or perhaps Latin? Each language has its own subtleties and mistranslations are possible. To question the accuracy of the Pope's quote acts to demonstrate how far even in this circumstance we are from the 'original.' That we accept the quote as being accurate speaks as much to the social belief in the veracity of The Wall Street Journal and its reporters as to what we believe the Pope might say in this instance.

The "Jesus Film" as a genre has been present since the beginnings of Western Cinema. In Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film, author Richard Walsh examines how representations of Jesus in film have evolved over time, dividing these representations into two broad categories: "Jesus as Sign (Christ) and Jesus as Character (human)." Both these representations share the inescapable fact that the story of Jesus is *known* – so deeply rooted in the Western experience that it is impossible to change (Walsh). It is in fact a story in the pre-modern Epic tradition, one in which any attempt to humanize its hero is trumped by the cultural knowledge of his fate. The cinematic Jesus as Sign can be found in many forms: he is seen at a distance (either physical or psychological) in films as diverse as *The King of Kings* (Cecile B. DeMille, 1927), *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Peir Paulo Pasolini, 1966) or *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979). In all of these films, Jesus stands at a formal remove from the audience, an icon whose formulaic reciting of lines and actions cannot deviate from the *known story*. This is the *Christ*; a Jesus transformed from the creditably human into a sign whose iconic power is so charged that it still used to evoke myriad cultural and historic imperatives.

In the case of Gibson's *Passion,* the Jesus represented is a fusion of several sources and Gibson makes a point of situating his film first and foremost with quotes from the Old Testament as found in an edition of the Holy Bible used by the Catholic Church (there are subtle differences between the Catholic and Protestant translations of the Bible, some which maybe of interest in a future examination of *The Passion).* However, the Gospels aside, the most influential source for Gibson's Jesus originate in the visions attributed to 18th century Nun Anne Catherine Emmerich as recorded in her book The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Emmerich's visions of the hideous physical violence done to Jesus are combined with Gibson's cinematic vision to resurrect a supposedly lost version of the Christ – one that belongs to the pre-modern (perhaps medieval) Church. The film's title is the first indication that its purpose is the recovery of this lost object: *The Passion of the Christ* is not *The Passion of Jesus.* The difference is important and not subtle - the word passion, whose Latin root means suffering, gives us clues as to where Gibson's lost Christ originates. He is to be found in medieval Passion Plays, such as the notorious version staged in Oberammergau, Germany before and during Hitler's rule. The Oberammergau Passion Play follows the same narrative as Gibson's *Passion* – Jesus' last twelve hours of life as illustrated by the Stations of the Cross. Although separated by 500 years, these versions share more than the physical suffering of Jesus in common - they both present a Villain responsible for Jesus' death: the "Christ-Killing Jews" (Swidler: Oberammergau Website).

It is through the violence done to Jesus' body *The Passion* reveals its purpose: to rewrite what I shall call the Jesus Narrative such that it conforms to a specific religious/political reading. This reading, which requires that the Jesus Narrative constructed by *The Passion* be accepted as the *correct* version, replacing all that came before it, is often portrayed as being rooted in religious Fundamentalism. Given its association with *The Passion,* it is important to briefly examine what the term Fundamentalism has come to mean in popular usage. In the Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions, edited by John Bowker, Fundamentalism is defined as:

> In general, a description of those who return to what they believe to be the fundamental truths and practices of a religion. It can thus be applied to this attitude in all religions (e.g. the resurgence of conservative Islam is sometimes called 'Islamic Fundamentalism'). But this use is sometimes resented by such people, because of its more usual identification with those, in Christianity, who defend the Bible against charges that it contains any kind of error. More specifically, it denotes the view of Protestant Christians opposed to historical and theological implications of critical study of the Bible. To avoid overtones of closed mindedness, Christians in the Fundamentalist tradition often prefer to be called Conservative Evangelists (Bowker 203).

Fundamentalist readings of sacred texts are often associated with an extreme form of literalism – that is to say: if it's written in the Bible that God created the universe in six days and that He rested on the seventh, then that is exactly what happened. There is no room for discussion. Those that disagree with the one true reading of the sacred text are considered Other – outside and in opposition to those with the special knowledge to interpret the sacred text correctly. By concentrating in horrific detail on the last twelve painful hours of Jesus' life, *The Passion* gives the viewer little time to consider alternative readings. To be Other in this context is to be damned.

Author Slavoj Zizek examines Fundamentalism in his book On Belief, and suggests that the Other represents the forbidden – usually in the form of excessive pleasure or *jouissance* - to the Fundamentalist (Zizek 68). Further, Zizek suggests that it is only through the existence of the Other with its attendant excesses that the Fundamentalist can define himself. But there is no pleasure to be found in how we see the Jews in *The Passion*. *The Passion* presents the majority of Jews as hideous, cruel and *different from* Jesus and his followers. Excess, instead of being represented by *jouissance*, is found in appearance, gesture and primitive behavior. Certainly a few, such as the Head Temple Priest Ciaphas stand out as leaders, but they only serve to re-enforce the collective cruelty of the Jewish mob. Positive character identification is located exclusively with those who either believe in Jesus' status as Messiah – especially his mother, Mary – or those sympathetic to his situation and suffering – including Pilate and a few Romans and Jews who are included in the Jesus Narrative. *The Passion* creates an absolute definition of good and evil; it does so by deploying a cinematic vocabulary foreign to the genre of the Jesus film.

Rejecting previous approaches to the subject, *The Passion* constructs Jesus by deploying a cinematic vocabulary

which director Mel Gibson has mastered both as director and actor - that of the Action Film. This radical departure from standard representations of the Jesus Narrative produces a potent hero familiar to audiences steeped in the Action genre, thus enabling a form of character identification. The application of this well-established and specific film vocabulary to a story (some would say *the* story) central to Western Culture, results in the creation of a *muscular Jesus*: a new and potent representation of Jesus that has more in common with John Rambo (*First Blood*, Ted Kotcheff, 1982) and Maximus (*Gladiator*, Ridley Scott, 2000) than the distant and gentle fisher of souls depicted in previous motion pictures. The resonance with Rambo and Maximus is deep, illustrated by a central requirement of the action genre: the action hero needs a villain to struggle with and define himself against. The Christ of *The Passion* does not die an innocent in order to save Mankind – he dies and is resurrected in order to empower those who believe without question his status as Messiah and his teachings. All others are excluded from salvation and shall spend eternity burning in hell.

An obstacle to a wide audience being able to read *The Passion* in a more or less coherent manner is Jesus himself. Past representations of Jesus on film illustrate that he is not a character the audience can identify with easily. Attempts to differentiate the human character from the sign fail and Jesus remains a distant iconic figure – a hero of the pre-modern Epic tradition. Jesus, the Sign or Character, is doomed to live, not choose as the post-modern hero does, his fate. The films that attempt to humanize Jesus usually resort to a standard narrative device – the love triangle – to do so. In both Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), Judas and Mary Magdalene vie for his love and attention. Neither succeeds (as *we know* they cannot) and instead they act out their fated roles: Judas betrays Jesus to their mutual deaths and Mary sublimates her physical love into chastity and worship.

This difficulty of identification with Jesus as a character, whether in film or other media, has generated a series of narrative substitutes – characters who posses flaws and qualities we see in ourselves. Refined over centuries, these substitutes for Jesus the Epic Hero appear throughout cinema. They represent good, struggle against and suffer terribly at the hands of their opponents. Then they rise, stronger for their suffering, to conquer their enemies. But in most cases, unlike Jesus, they are alive at story's end. These narrative substitutes for Jesus are the "common man" as hero central to the novel and cinema. He is Benjamin Martin (*The Patriot*, Roland Emmerich, 2000) or Neo (*The Matrix*, A. & L. Wachowski, 1999), not Jesus or Gilgamesh. The common man story is 'unknown' and unlike the Epic Hero's can surprise us in how it ends. The common man hero can even meet Jesus, as in *Ben Hur* (Wyler, 1959). His life can parallel Jesus' trajectory through sacrifice and transformation, but without having to give up his desires for love and life. What Gibson attempts in *The Passion* is to combine the attributes of the Jesus of Sign with those of the "common man" substitute hero. While this combination has been attempted in the past (*The Last Temptation of Christ* is an example), as discussed, it has usually deployed the vocabulary of romantic melodrama. By using the vocabulary of the action cinema, Gibson avoids melodrama's unnecessary complications - such as (carnal) love and character development – complications that ring false in the Epic tradition.

In the uncomplicated worlds of Epic and Action cinema, the hero must struggle against his evil opposite. The stakes are high: should he fail, the world (or nation) will be lost. Both traditions feature characters and situations that are recognized on sight (or sound) by audiences familiar with the form. Both traditions use violence as a method of driving their narrative forward. By exploiting both traditions, *The Passion* manages not only to present Jesus as a Hard Bodied Action Hero but as the culturally known Epic Hero. The Epic, culturally 'known' story of Jesus is exploited in order to present a specific and highly coded Insider version. This Insider reading of the film exploits action cinema's vocabulary both to mask its presence and to re-enforce its central message: that the Inside reading of the film is the only correct one. And what a specific Insider experience it is - from the first image of the full moon to the last of the risen Christ's punctured hands against his nude and muscular thigh, the references seem countless – all relating to a specific reading of the cinematic text. It is the fusion of this intentionally specific (and paradoxically 'outsider' reading – for it is based upon materials and traditions not found in the so-called original text, the Bible) religious language of symbols and sound with the Action Cinema that Gibson manages engagement with a wide audience.

The Passion of the Christ presents its Jesus carefully – an innocent who doesn't deserve punishment of any sort, let alone the sustained and inhuman violence that is visited upon him. Gibson's Jesus accepts both the violence done to his body and his death as being necessary – a sacrifice required in order to fulfill ancient prophecies found in the holy texts of the Jews. And it is with a quote from a Jewish Prophet that Gibson begins his film. After the usual array of sponsoring company logos appear (including Gibson's own lightning cracked 'Icon'), music that evokes an ancient time fades up as the following passage from the Old Testament appears over black:

> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by god, smitten by him, and afflicted (Isaiah 53:3-5: 700 BCE).

The quote from Isaiah is followed immediately by the film's first image: the full moon hangs high over a dark

landscape, a thin slash of cloud – a precursor of a larger, darker mass approaching – cuts across the lunar surface like a knife. The full moon and troubled sky established the camera descends towards the earth and the Garden of Gethsemane. Moving over a misty landscape bathed in cold blue light and cut by hard black shadows, the camera pauses to hover near the shadowed figure of a man. His back to us, the man pleads to an unseen presence. The man wears robes we recognize from countless images of Jesus but he speaks (between sobs) a language we cannot understand. Jesus is shaking - seemingly weak and afraid - he reaches out, his back still to us, to a tree for support. He continues to speak and cry. Jesus turns and stumbles out of frame calling to his disciple Peter and the first subtitle of the film appears.

The effect of this opening is immediate: subtitles replace what the characters on screen actually *say* with an edited text that the audience *reads*. An unspoken agreement is established between the film and the viewer that says: what you read, that which I have translated for you, is what is being said on screen - it is the truth. Language is used in *The Passion* for the same purpose as ancient Jewish Prophecy is used in the New Testament: to ensure that its message is read as being 'authentic.' Jesus and his followers speak 'Aramaic' and the Romans 'Latin' (two types of Latin are used – refined, 'proper' Latin for Pilate, his wife and Officers and a crude gutter Latin filled with obscenities for the common soldiery) - or, rather, they speak "reconstructed" versions of Aramaic and Latin as imagined and translated for the screenplay by Father William Fulco (The Passion of the Christ Website).

Jesus (Jim Caviezel) is not alone. As shadows pass over the moon, dimming its light, we see a figure watching Jesus from the safety of the darkness. Dressed in black, cadaverously pale, gaunt almost to the point of androgyny, the figure is Satan (Rosalinda Celentano). Satan speaks gently as she watches Jesus suffer alone in the darkness. As maggots crawl in and out of her nostril, she comments on his situation in a calm and detached tone – again in a language we cannot understand. In response to Jesus' cries to his unseen Father, Satan 'gives birth' to a serpent, that drops from between her legs and slithers towards the distraught prophet.

The deployment of the action cinema's vocabulary follows almost immediately. It manifests, as one might expect, in an act of violence. What is unexpected is that the perpetrator of the first act of violence in what is arguably an extraordinarily violent film is Jesus. Jesus stands. He is tall, physically impressive and commanding – the opposite of Satan. Satan's words and the arrival of the serpent are the answer in his Father's silence, filling him with resolve and certainty. And it is resolve that Gibson wants us to read in Jesus' shadowed but stern features, not the anger that seems to be there. Staring at (or is it past?) Satan, Jesus crushes the serpent beneath his sandal with a violent stomp.

Jesus' actions in the garden are cut against Judas' meeting with the Jewish Priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Priests are portrayed as an alien and repulsive mass of conniving and bitter old men. Their fading physical power is concealed beneath excessively embroidered and bejeweled ornate black vestments. They regard Judas from a platform on one side of a torch-lit inner courtyard. On the opposite side of the courtyard, towering over Judas from behind, a large group of black armored Temple Guards watch and wait for the Priests' instructions. The Guards' physical powers are obvious, but, like the Priests, they are clothed in complex and unnecessary excess. Combining visually with the Jewish Priests and hard black shadows, the Temple Guards evoke a feeling of ancient, malevolent decadence. In soft amber torchlight, Judas succumbs to the display of temporal power represented by the black mass of priests and soldiers. Jesus and Judas both succeed in fulfilling their required narrative roles, albeit by the overt display of opposite qualities: Jesus faces and defeats his own doubts and Satan in a display of strength and certainty while Judas realizes his fate by succumbing to doubt and weakness.

In these two inter-cut scenes, *The Passion* establishes the most stable of the action cinema's conventions – the hero and his opposite. As well, what the Hero needs to accomplish (while already known by the audience) is laid out in a specific manner: Jesus accepts that he must carry out his heroic act by surrendering to those who would kill him. But for whom does Jesus sacrifice himself? With the exception of his few followers (who, save for the two Marys, are barely realized characters in the film's narrative) there is no one. As Yvonne Tasker observes in Spectacular Bodies:

> The hero of the action narrative is often cast as a figure that lacks a place within the community for which he fights, a paradox familiar from the Western genre. In the recent action cinema, problems of a location and position are increasingly articulated through the body of the male hero (Tasker 77).

The Insider knows that Jesus is sacrificing himself for a community that does not yet exist - one that will be found in the ashes of the order his sacrifice will ultimately destroy. The Epic Jesus' suffering and death is *fated* – a closed loop of cause and effect: Jesus is the promised Messiah who will take on all the sins of man, ushering in a new era of peace and justice for those who believe. He *must* (will, has *always*) die(d) and (will) be resurrected through the unforgiving formulas set down by prophecy. In other words, there is no element of human choice present in this scenario; no blame can be assigned for its inevitable outcome. Those present in the drama must act as they do or the prophecies are not fulfilled and Jesus is not the Messiah. So why is it that we do not feel indebted to the vicious Jewish Temple Priests after they force the thoughtful Roman Governor to execute Jesus by crucifixion? It is their clearly drawn status as Other (unlike the Romans) that dooms the Jews to carry blame, not credit for Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection. The need to blame the Jews (or to be somewhat lenient, the Temple Priests) is central to *The Passion*'s version of the Jesus Narrative.

A central concern of the early Christian community was to prove that Jesus was in fact the Messiah foretold by the Jewish Prophets. Those who do not accept Jesus as Messiah are therefore no longer party to the covenant with God. This concept – that Christianity represents the fulfillment of Old Testament Judaism and that in so doing Christians have *replaced* the Jews as God's chosen people – is called *supersessionism*. This centuries old Christian belief cuts off the Jews, and any who do not believe in Jesus' status as Messiah, from God and the hope of salvation. Given that the Jews still claim the covenant with God and do not recognize Jesus, they are the enemy of the Messiah. Many Christian Churches have rejected supersessionism in

modern times due to its power to create and promote anti-Semitism, though it is still practiced by many conservative and fundamentalist denominations and some traditional Catholics. However, as part of his effort to bridge the historical gap between Catholics and Jews Pope John Paul II has on several occasions rejected supersessionism. To quote Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League on the occasion of the Pope's death:

> Most importantly, the Pope rejected the destructive concept of supersessionism and has recognized the special relationship between Christianity and the Jewish people, while sharing his understanding of Judaism as a living heritage, of the permanent validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. He was a man of God in every sense and a true friend whose visionary leadership will be sorely missed (Foxman: Anti-Defamation League Website).

The Passion's forceful reassertion of supersessionism is a further indication of the films attempt to recover a 'lost' Jesus from the past and its strong association with the literalist form of conservative Fundamentalism. The tragedy of the absolute belief represented by Fundamentalism is that it allows no dissent or alternatives. Thus when Jesus rises from death to the sound of triumphant martial music, he represents the end of the previous, decadent order. Jesus has successfully fulfilled Jewish prophecy: he is the Messiah and therefore appropriates the authority of the old order. There can only be one true covenant with God, and it is with the Messiah. The Jews are successfully (!) superceded by the Christians and left to damnation and eternal suffering. It is in this creation of an evil Other to define itself against that the Insider's greatest pleasure is to be found. In fact, without the Other, with its excess and decadence as a source of hatred, the supposed good guys would not exist. If Zizek is correct, there is a secret desire on behalf of Fundamentalists for the Other – and in desire there is pleasure. In the case of *The Passion*, the required sacrifice of Jesus at the hands of the Jews by Roman proxy is the true source of Insider pleasure. What is sacrifice then in the context of *The Passion*? Zizek states that, at its most elementary, sacrifice is an exchange: "I offer to the Other something that is precious to me in order to get back from the Other something that is even more vital to me" (Zizek 69). By offering his life to the Other (in this case the Jews and their ancient Law represented by the Temple Priests) Jesus accomplishes that which the Jews never anticipated: their demise as God's Chosen people.

The events and characters established in *The Passion's* opening two scenes seem to be in agreement with the known Jesus Narrative. However, the Jesus of *The Passion* demonstrates something to the audience no other filmed Jesus has: that he is capable of physical violence that can destroy his enemies. This is a muscular Jesus whose body is capable of backing up his soft-spoken message of loving kindness with action. Once *The Passion's* Jesus has demonstrated his ability to use violence, his body as a site of potent masculine power is established. By doing so, we see him as the opposite of both Satan and the Jews. By establishing this opposition, the Jews and Satan become equivalent: they are the Action Hero's enemies and they will be defeated. The establishment of the Jewish Priests as Jesus' enemies is hardly new – the New Testament makes this assertion frequently. It is the Insider's reading of this information that is crucial to *The Passion's* narrative. In such a reading, the Jews represent the old order that has been replaced by the new, Christian order. The Jews are impotent, incapable of controlling or destroying Jesus without the assistance of the Romans.

The Passion has two kinds of Romans: the first, represented by Pilate and his wife, are intelligent and secular (though in keeping with the film's representation of "good" females Mrs. Pilate is 'sympathetic' to Jesus and his message). The others, represented by the guards and soldiers who torture and crucify Jesus, are hideous caricatures of human beings. Barely controlled by their betters, the soldiers are thoughtless brutes who enjoy causing pain. As such, their acts are not motivated by hatred, fear or jealousy (as the Jewish Priests seem to be); they are merely instruments fulfilling their purpose. These representations of Romans and Jews are central to the Insider's reading of *The Passion*. For the film to be read successfully by a wide audience (which is largely made up of non-insiders) these representations as well as the rest of the extra-biblical material that it relies upon must be accepted as being 'true' to the Jesus story.

It is through the Action Cinema that a mutual language is created that both Insider and Outsider can read, thus allowing both sides to agree on what is being said. Of course, the Insider is still in the privileged and pleasurable position of being able to read all of the layers of 'hidden' meaning. A connoisseur of Quentin Tarantino's films can read *Kill Bill Volume 1* (2003) in a more sophisticated manner than a regular spectator: myriad visual and sound references to films important to the Action genre (in the case of *Kill Bill,* the readings are *very* specialized – they refer to a sub-genre of Action cinema; the Kung Fu film) pack the screen, giving the Insider great pleasure as references hidden from those without special knowledge stream by. But the hidden information found in *Kill Bill* is itself embedded within an Action film, a genre whose conventions can be read by all, so both Insider and Outsider can read the film and obtain pleasure. However, unlike an Insider reading of a Tarantino film, which allows room for interpretation, there is only one Insider reading allowed for *The Passion.*

When the vocabulary of the Action film is established, *The Passion* propels itself into what is an escalating series of violent events. Once the Temple Guards appear in the garden, there are few moments when Jesus' body is not pummeled or cut. Moments (rather than whole scenes) when violence is not being done to Jesus on screen are usually centered on those who watch his suffering. *The Passion* neatly inverts the standard narrative structure of the Action film at the same time it relies on the audience's ability to read the conventions of the genre. Instead of building upon characters in dramatic situations that can only be released by a violent act, it is violence that carries the narrative forward until it is interrupted or released by moments of character-based drama.

The Passion exploits two well-used cinematic conventions in order to accomplish narrative release of violence: flashbacks (mainly seen from Jesus' point of view, but also from the film's main female protagonists, his mother Mary and follower Mary Magdalene) and parallel montage that focuses on those who are sympathetic to Jesus. With the exception of the extraordinarily brief resurrection, it is only in the flashback scenes that we see Jesus' face and body clearly and at its most perfect. The first blow to Jesus is to his face (which we have seen only by moonlight and in shadow up to that point), an

important gesture that begins the slow and exhaustive transformation of his hard and perfect body into the receiver of all sin.

As Jesus' body is systematically destroyed, first by the Church (in its Jewish and decadent form) then by the State (the animalistic Roman Soldiery), flashbacks are used to suspend the violent moments on screen. If violence in action films produces what Leo Charney labels as a "burst of the present" (Charney 47), then *The Passion's* narrative would stall were it not for the moments of narrative "release" afforded by the injection of these sequences. But the flashbacks or parallel montage do not stop the violence of the outgoing scene. The scenes of Jesus teaching (rendered visually, as is the rest of the film, to evoke the paintings of Caravaggio and other recognized religious paintings), the moments with his mother Mary or when Mary walks stoically from his scourging are filled with the tension generated by the violence that proceeds them. The extended sequence where Jesus is scourged by Roman Soldiers makes strategic use of both flashback and parallel montage. It is here, as the first truly horrific damage is done to Jesus' body, that the full force of action cinema's vocabulary combines with *The Passion's* version of the Jesus Narrative to generate a series of cultural messages – messages that the Insider knows to be true and the outsider unintentionally accepts.

While Mary, Satan (depicted as an 'anti-Mary' several times in the scene) and the Temple Priests observe, Jesus' hands are chained to a low stone post as Roman soldiers test their canes and make jokes among themselves. The laughing and joking stop as the soldiers pause to consider Jesus' exposed back. Jesus squares his shoulders, drawing a breath in preparation for what follows. The damage sustained by Jesus is extreme – and *The Passion* deploys the same vocabulary used in *Braveheart* and *The Patriot* – a cinematic vocabulary that displays and celebrates the male body at the same time as that body is destroyed. We as spectators respond to the torture of Jesus of Nazareth as we might to the flaying of Rambo or the suffering/death (passion?) of Maximus and William Wallace.

The cane blows are counted off in Latin, building in intensity and effect as Jesus' body is written upon and transformed. Patterns are carved into his flesh; a starburst of fine red lines explodes between his shoulders; welts raised on the backs of his legs form overlapping 'x's.' It is hard work and the guards are spent when the ritual count of twenty-nine blows is reached. But Jesus is not finished. The pause in the action seems post-coital as the guards regain their breath and smile weakly at their work. Jesus has collapsed, only his chained hands visible as they keep him from falling to the stone floor. This should be the end of the punishment ordered by Pilate.

Jesus gathers his strength. In an act that provokes the wrath of the animal-like guards, he pulls himself up and back into position – offering up his ruined back for more punishment. Jesus' face strains with the effort, but there is no anger to be seen. The crowd of Priests and onlookers draw their collected breath as the Guards reach for even crueler whips – ones with metal hooks and pieces of glass embedded in their strands. The scene is presented from multiple points of view: the Jewish Mob (made up of nameless Temple Priests and rabble), mother Mary and Mary Magdalene, the Roman Soldiers, Satan and Jesus himself. Each point of view acts to reinforce the others, adding to the reading of what is being seen such that the

message transmitted is clear: *this must happen*. The monstrous female that is Satan observes and mocks Jesus as he suffers. Her calm face is a parody of Mary's noble acceptance and suffering. Satan walks through the crowd creating a terrible version of the Virgin and infant Jesus realized as hag and hideous dwarf. But in doing so, Satan not only strengthens Mary and Jesus' resolve, but – by their connection to the films action through the use of point of view - the spectator's as well.

From the first blow of a cane on Jesus' perfect back to the last piece of flesh ripped from his chest (after he has been flipped face up for more punishment), the violence is so extreme, so exaggerated, that it cannot be real. Yet the audience accepts this hyperreal depiction of violence and suffering because it occurs to the male hero's body. The hero in the action film suffers at the hands of his enemies and is reborn: he rises stronger than before, capable of beating his foes. The difference between how this transformation manifests in *The Passion* as opposed to *Rambo* is the moment of rebirth is deferred and the punishment suffered by the hero extended. Rambo's triumph over his foes is mirrored in *The Passion*: but it can only be accomplished by the hero's death and resurrection. *The Passion's* Jesus acceptance of punishment is not the masochistic suffering of a willing victim. This image of Jesus – not Christ – is phallic, hard and accepting of his punishment in order to destroy his opponents. With each stroke of the whip that rips his flesh, Gibson's Jesus strikes out at his enemies. With each blow his body is transformed – taken further from the human and towards its final, perfect manifestation.

Through his acceptance of superhuman suffering and death *The Passion's* Jesus creates a new system of communication that neither the secular Romans nor the primitive Jews can understand. It is a system that can be read by both the Insider and the Outsider because both parties know the epic Jesus Narrative: Jesus, the story goes, wins. *The Passion's* Jesus represents a revolution already won – a revolution that this film makes clear is not founded on the supposedly Christian messages of tolerance and understanding, but of triumph through righteous suffering, torment and death. The Jews are supplanted as God's Chosen People and the Romans are absorbed.

After the flayed Jesus is dragged away – his torture halted by the arrival of a Roman Officer who is horrified by how far the guards have gone (far beyond their orders) – and the crowd dispersed, the two Marys enter the

courtyard. Blood, in impossible amounts, covers the stone floor in pools. Using white towels given them by a silent Mrs. Pilate, the two women carefully mop and soak up Jesus blood. This is part of the ritual necessary for a Jewish burial – all of the body must be gathered for internment. However, it is also a statement as to the sacred quality assigned to Jesus' blood in Christian teaching.

Mary Magdalene experiences a flash of memory as she mops the blood: an out-of-focus crowd of angry Temple Priests are in the distance, made small and impotent by the sudden entrance into frame of Jesus' foot and leg – made giant-size by its foreground position and sharp focus. Jesus reaches down to the ground and draws a line in the sand – the earth seems to explode as he etches the line and then writes words in Aramaic we cannot understand. The tiny Temple Priests hesitate as they watch Jesus. After a moment they toss aside the heavy stones they carry, turn and walk away. Jesus' foot and leg stay firm in the foreground as a woman's hand, covered in hennaed designs the Insider reads to be the signs of a prostitute, enters frame. The hand shakes as it reaches for Jesus' foot, pausing just before it would touch. We see the woman whose hand it is – face painted in makeup that labels her a whore, Mary Magdalene cries softly in thanks for Jesus' mercy.

Jesus' torture and death are presented as ritual: The Temple Priests condemn Jesus using an outmoded Religious Law they themselves cannot enforce. The Romans, guardians of the ultimate secular power of state sanctioned death, carry out this Law for the Jews in order to preserve the peace and themselves. The cinema presents what is forbidden – an execution, preceded by terrible torture – as acceptable. In the West, bloody public ritual executions were formerly performed by the State and sanctioned by the Church. The practice declined, with few exceptions from the mid 19th century on. The shift of torture and execution from public and accepted to private and forbidden is discussed in the opening chapters of Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish:

> The disappearance of the public executions marks therefore the decline of the spectacle; but it also marks a slackening of the hold on the body. In 1787… Benjamin Rush remarked: 'I can only hope that the time is not far away when gallows, pillory, scaffold flogging and the wheel will, in the history of punishment, be regarded as marks of the barbarity of centuries and of countries and as proofs of the feeble influence of reason and religion over the human mind' (Foucault 8-11).

What was formerly an integral part of and a ritual display of the State's power and authority (almost always linked with the Church), the public destruction of the criminal body, had become its opposite: a display of criminality that actually exceeded the acts committed by the accused. Punishment in the West was made secret and impersonal. The pre-modern forces of the Enlightenment created prisons that spoke to the new cultural imperatives and machines that would deal out death painlessly and efficiently. Whatever horrors follow in the 20th century and its modern conclusion in the Holocaust have their seeds in this transformation. The deaths of millions become hidden, unknown. The denial of the events is made possible-indeed necessary – by this new equation.

The spectacle of the public execution was transferred to the cinema early in its history. Leo Charney refers to "the cinema of attractions" in "The Violence of a Perfect Moment" as the display of the most outlandish acts of violence. "Executions" of criminals by hanging or electrocution (even an elephant was filmed being electrocuted) and trains crashing into each other were common fare. Accepted by their viewers as being "real," these "attractions" were shown in isolation with no narrative other than the violent act itself (Charney 47-62). The hyperreal that we enter when watching violence in contemporary film has its roots in these early cinematic "attractions." Agonies far exceeding those of Damien's (Foucault 3-6) are manufactured and presented – bloody yet bloodless substitute spectacles for the good old days of the pre-modern era. *The Passion* takes simultaneous advantage of the Insider's knowledge that what they are watching is not real with their conflicting belief that the epic Jesus Narrative is true. There is no possibility that anything we are seeing in *The Passion* is rooted in an actual object or experience. What does exist in our experience of the film is *time* - time to be pulled through one hyper-violent moment after another. Time to be given brief respite from the ripping of flesh and the manly acceptance of punishment.

Before *The Passion,* Jesus in cinema could be defined by what he is not: he is not violent. He is not sexual – Jesus is an innocent. Before sending him to be nailed to the cross, Pontius Pilate asks Jesus "What is truth?" If *The Passion of the Christ* is to be accepted as "the" true Jesus Narrative, we must accept a Jesus defined by what he is: he is righteous. He is powerful. He is capable of violence. This new reading, made possible by *The Passion's* use of a filmic language and hyper-violence previously associated with the Action Cinema, also generates by default the following, troubling possible readings:

- The Jews are responsible for the death of the innocent Jesus.
- Jesus is the Messiah; not to believe so makes you his enemy.
- There is only one truth and only those who can read and believe in *The Passion of the Christ* know it.
- If you don't believe it, look out. ☹

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