# Gibson's *The Passion:* The superheroic body of Jesus


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Mel Gibson's recent movie, *The Passion of the Christ* (2003), provokes a range of interesting questions. Slammed by many reviewers and the subject of strong criticism by some religious leaders, it has nevertheless become one of the leading box office successes in Hollywood history. Secular critics have commonly criticised its excessive violence, its lack of exploration and development of key characters, its cartoonesque depiction of secondary characters, and its lack of narrative development and involvement. Craig Mathieson's *Bulletin* review (of the DVD) is entitled "Bloody Awful." (Mathieson 2004) Writing on the *Dark Horizons* website, Garth Franklin said,

> In a two hour movie a good 2/3 of the last hour could've been removed or better yet replaced with a better examination of the characters and Jesus' spiritual message whilst still leaving in violence and brutality cut in such a way that would've had seen more impact than the gratuitous gore fest currently has. By taking the far easier option of displaying excessive violence than exploring spirituality, Gibson essentially lost the message he's trying to convey. (Franklin 2004)

The film also provoked a strong reaction and even antagonism among many religious leaders, particularly around its suggested anti-Semitism, its violent reconstruction of much more understated Christian narrative texts around the death of Jesus, and its failure to reflect accurately the historical events around Jesus' death as presented in the Christian gospels. Yona Metzger, one of Israel's two chief Rabbis, "expressed deep concerns that Gibson's portrayal of the last twelve hours of Jesus' life could publicly feed stereotypes that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus." Metzger asked Pope John Paul II "to reiterate a Roman Catholic decision in the 1960s that reversed the centuries old doctrine that Jews were behind the Crucifixion." (Quoted in Beard 2004; see also Cooper 2004)

Nevertheless, *The Passion* was an overwhelming commercial success. Two months after it first appeared, Gibson's self-financed $30 million production had generated in excess of $386.6 million in box office receipts alone. In 2004, it was the eighth-highest grossing film of all time. It had the highest midweek opening gross ever and the second-highest opening weekend gross per theatre (for movies in wide release) and it was the highest-grossing R-rated film and the highest-grossing subtitled film. It was the third fastest movie in history to reach $350 million in total U.S. receipts. (Maresco 2004)That doesn't include the merchandising receipts: the additional millions in music, publications and paraphernalia that accompanied the movie.

The movie was more than a simple commercial enterprise for Mel Gibson. It arose from a reported renewal of his own Catholic faith at a time of crisis in his life. But the faith he returned to "with the zeal of a reformed backslider," was not contemporary Catholicism, but "the faith he had known as a boy, the faith of his father," Catholicism of the Latin Tridentine rite. (Boyer 2003) Practice of this rite is not easy as it is built around a clerical church with mass performed in Latin by a Traditionalist priest, of which there are few around. To follow the rite, Gibson employed, at first, a priest from Canada and then from France to perform

mass on the set wherever he was filming. He has since built a Traditionalist chapel in the hills near his home in Malibu. (Boyer 2003)

Gibson says that the concept of the film had been incubating for 12 years, germinated by the spiritual crisis he found himself in. "I was spiritually bankrupt, and when that happens it's like a spiritual cancer afflicts you. It starts to eat its way through and if you don't do something, it's going to take you. So I simply had to draw a line in the sand." (Noonan 2002) It can be argued, therefore, that the film reflects an interesting personal and cultural synthesising enterprise: an effort by Gibson to bring together his cultural world as a successful Hollywood action film actor, film producer and director with his personal faith and values as a religiously renewed person. On the one hand this synthesis serves to validate his commercial life and cultural activities, sacralising it through a commercially successful religious product. On the other, it creates a wider cultural validation of his own personal religious vision by reconstructing that vision as a successful public product in the crucial symbolic domain of Hollywood and popular culture.

The personal interest and investment by Gibson in this film is apparent in a number of ways. Gibson's hands hold the nails in the crucifixion scene in the film. A 19th century devotional book that was influential in Gibson's religious life provided much of the narrative structure and detail in the film. The artistic vision of the film was influenced significantly by traditional religious art that informs Gibson's religious sensibilities. When commercial backers couldn't be found, Gibson invested $30 million of his own money to finance the film. Personal religious or artistic enterprises such as this often lose their market perspective and frequently become an unprofitable, idiosyncratic labour of love. In line with this, it was widely expected that Gibson's production would be a commercial flop, exacerbated by his stated intention to film using the original biblical languages of Aramaic, Greek and Latin, with minimal English subtitles. It is surprising therefore that the movie was such a commercial success.

In this essay I want to explore this seeming contradiction. What underlies the box office success of an excessively violent movie, produced by a traditionalist Catholic, spoken in biblical languages with minimal subtitles, that focuses solely on the last hours of a historical religious figure, with minimal narrative development or character exploration? Two factors in particular will be explored: the cultural positioning and marketing of the movie, and aspects within the construction of the movie itself, particularly the complex intertextuality of the production, particularly the reconstruction of Jesus in the ethos of a contemporary action hero movie.

**Cultural positioning and marketing of *The Passion***

James Wall, the noted religious film reviewer and critic, attributes a good deal of the success of the film to its position within the culture wars in the U.S. According to Wall, Gibson tapped into a Zeitgeist, first flagged by conservative newspaper columnist Pat Buchanan in a speech given to the 1992 Republican National Convention: "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a culture war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself." (Wall 2003) James Hunter describes the culture wars in the U.S. as "ultimately a struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America,* who we have been in the past, who we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium." (Hunter 1991, 50) The conflict, as Hunter sees it, is different from old sectarian antagonisms that have existed in earlier American cultural and political life. "(The divisions) no longer revolve around specific doctrinal issues or styles of religious practice and organization but around our most

fundamental and cherished assumptions about how to order our lives – our own lives and our lives together in this society." (Hunter 1991, 42)

On one side are the cultural progressives, a diverse mix of secular and religious groups and individuals who share a common tendency and desire "to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life." (Hunter 1991, 44-5) On the other side are the cultural orthodox, the right, an alliance of groups who come together around a common commitment "to an external, definable and transcendent authority… a consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity, both personal and collective. It tells us what is good, what is true, how we should live, and who we are." (Hunter 1991, 44) American evangelical Tom Sine suggests that underlying the culture wars is a deep-rooted fear and insecurity that is given expression in religious and political action.

> To understand the Christian right you need to understand not what they think or even what they believe. You need to begin by discovering what they are afraid of. Those on the religious right live in genuine terror of a liberal humanist elite who they believe are intent on laying siege to their families, undermining their faith, and collectivizing America for a one-world takeover by the Antichrist. Those deeply rooted fears motivate true believers on the right to embrace right-wing political ideology with a passion seldom found on the left. Bombarded by propaganda, many have come to believe that the only way to save their families from the "sinister elite," to protect their faith, and to save America is to mount a militant political counterattack on their liberal foes. (Sine 1995, 37)

This fear has been intensified since September 2001 and has produced a large political constituency on which George W Bush has drawn, and which he has nurtured politically, with different national and international political agendas. Rather than simply "tapping into" a Zeitgeist, as Wall suggests, Gibson in his production and marketing can be seen emerging from it, aligning himself with the orthodox side of the argument, and directly speaking and marketing to the right in the successful promotion of his film. Gibson himself has acknowledged the personal religious motive behind the movie.

The success of *The Passion* illustrates one of the characteristics of the cultural and religious movements that can be seen in the U.S. in the past decades: that cultural divisions are no longer defined as much by theological, doctrinal or ecclesiastical differences as they were in the past, but by "different and opposing bases of moral authority and the world views that derive from them." (Hunter 1991, 42-43) While many aspects of Gibson's religious practice and belief as a traditionalist Catholic would still be anathema to most evangelicals and fundamentalists, his publicly declared passionate faith, conservative social views, his success in a culture like Hollywood, and his passionate concern to present a realistic portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus, all resonate with conservative Protestants despite any doctrinal or liturgical differences. Gibson also put together a marketing team and marketing strategy that deliberately tapped the concerns of this eclectic religious market and their interests, even moving beyond mass marketing with personal appearances to local groups of religious leaders to establish common interest and activate the support of the extensive and active local church network system in the U.S.

But such marketing in itself is not sufficient to guarantee the sort of success *The Passion* achieved if there is not also some substance in the product being viewed. Examples abound of large promotion campaigns for high budget films that have not been sufficient to carry a film past its first weekend. Yet there is also much about *The Passion* that goes against normal box office success. It has little narrative development within the text of the film itself to engage an audience; its dialogue is minimal - what dialogue there is, is in archaic languages with only occasional sub-titles; its violence many found offensively graphic,

spectacular and unrelenting; with only a few exceptions its character portrayals are wooden and unengaging. What then has made it such a powerful and appealing movie?

I propose that Gibson has produced a cultural product that skilfully and (it can be argued by the box office) successfully uses complex intertextuality to evoke and rehearse multiple dimensions and experiences of one of the fundamental religious myths and stories of U.S. society – and other societies whose undergirding mythology has been dominantly Christian. Peter Steinfels, writing in the *New York Times*, notes that critics who dismiss the film fail to grasp or understand this:

> The movie reignites religious embers that may have cooled over the years. Critics who have recoiled at Mr. Gibson's grim vision are puzzling over the widespread positive response. They do not grasp that viewers are bringing to the film a whole store of religious beliefs and emotions, embracing and kindly as well as apocalyptic. These people are not simply going to a movie; they are going to church. (Steinfels 2004)

Much more extensive work from a reception perspective would need to be done to identify what the film means and how it speaks to different individuals and different religious sub-groups, but a number of apparent inter-textual connections can be identified.

**Religious Intertextualities**

The film assumes the audience's familiarity with the Christian narrative. Little context is set even at the beginning of the film to understand the history or significance of the subsequent plot that unfolds. The lack of an inherent narrative has been criticised, but its effect is to constitute its target audience as an in-group, a key strategy of the conservative right. It also gives a greater freedom to the audience to contextualise the events being portrayed in their own terms. Knut Lundby argues that any religious "megaspectacle" requires a symbolic construction strategy that maximises its rallying capabilities through shared symbols while minimizing audience resistance through avoidance of other symbols that would offend or exclude. (Lundby 1997, 154-6) To that extent, it could be argued that the minimal narrative interpretation within *The* Passion is one of the factors that enabled its success. Gibson was able to build his audience from a number of Christian groups that traditionally have had not only different theologies but also quite different religious aesthetics and sensibilities. David Goa observes that "Fifty years ago it would have been unimaginable that the Evangelical wing of the Christian community would flock to a film using the template of the Stations of the Cross." (Goa 2004, 151)

Gibson has achieved this strategy of maximizing rallying and minimizing resistance, I would argue, not by presenting a "lowest common denominator," inoffensive Jesus but by building a variety of layers in the film that allow a diversity of identifications and participation from different segments of the population. In the process, it could be argued - given the distinctiveness of his artistic creation, its popular appeal, and the significant cultural debate that has accompanied it - he has contributed to a significant cultural reinterpretation and repositioning of the events and meaning of Jesus, certainly within American and possibly other traditionally Christian cultures.

Edward Rothstein, writing in the *New York Times*, suggests that the film "reinvents the Passion in a late medieval mode, exhibiting a lusty fascination with flagellation, a fetishist's attentiveness to whips and welts, a panting anger at grotesquely caricatured villains." (Rothstein 2004) While such a version of Christianity seems archaic in some ways, it recovers a cultural version of Christianity that is suited to the violence of a lot of contemporary cultural productions and revitalises that version of Christianity as a culturally relevant religious expression today. This passion-centred spirituality, with mystical fervour and graphic visual imagery has always been residual in many contemporary cultures, in particular

Hispanic traditions of Catholicism and also in African-American religious practice. *The Passion* evokes and reproduces a number of these residual popular devotional practices and sensibilities, such as the Stations of the Cross, the five sorrowful mysteries associated with praying the rosary, Catholic mystical traditions[1] the traditions of past and present passion plays, and even the look and feel of childhood Sunday School religious pageants. David Goa suggests that

> *The Passion of the Christ* is not a film in the normal sense. Rather Mel Gibson has carefully crafted a set of *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) of the Stations of the Cross, a Roman Catholic devotion that began in the twelfth century as a way of accenting the humanity and suffering of Jesus. (Goa 2004, 152)

When these cultural reminiscences and connections are taken into account, what some critics interpret as a lack of character development in the film, and ineffective performances on the part of the actors, may in fact be deliberate or intuitively artistic staging on Gibson's part to replicate his own childhood memories in order to speak to and renew the religious sensibilities and devotional memories dormant in people's lives. Reviewer Peter Steinfels suggests, therefore, that one of the major impacts of the film will be to reignite the residual embers of spirituality and religious practice for many members of the film's audiences. (Steinfels 2004)

Gibson and his art director also drew extensively on traditions of religious art in the tones, lighting and dramatic staging of their own work of art. Of this, Gibson said,

> The idea took root very gradually. I began to look at the work of some of the great artists who had drawn inspiration from the same story. Caravaggio immediately came to mind, as well as Mantegna, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca. . . their paintings were as true to their inspiration as I wanted the film to be of mine. (Quoted in Goa 2004, 151)

The result is that at frequent points in Gibson's film the visuality is eerily familiar, evoking the visual traditions of Christianity in a way that creates an underlying feeling of authenticity and tradition to his own distinctive cultural construction and remediation of Jesus. This ascribed and resonant "visual authenticity" of the film may help explain its ability to bypass religious differences in its eclectic conservative audience, differences that previously had been divisive. Stephen Prothero suggests that the positive evangelical response to a very Catholic film needs to be seen within the context of US national and political identity and the part played by religious iconography in that identity. Jesus has always been interpreted in different national contexts to meet national needs: as a socialist, a capitalist, a pacifist, a Mister Rogers friendly neighbourly fellow, someone to know, love and imitate, a warrior, a sentimental saviour. Gibson's *Passion* refashions Jesus for the culture wars, a sign that the friendly Jesus and the self-esteem gospel is on the way out. (Prothero 2004, 30)

### ***The Passion* as an action hero film**

A key strategy in this cultural and political repositioning of Jesus is his reconstruction in the genre of filmic superhero. In reconstructing Jesus in this action-heroic genre, Gibson has drawn on his own extensive personal knowledge of a popular and successful cultural form as a means of arguing the cultural and political relevance of his own passionate religious outlook. Despite its extreme violence, the attraction of the film to religious conservatives -

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[1] Of particular note is the work *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a record of the mystical visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, an Augustine nun who lived in Westphalia around the late 18th early 19th centuries. This was a significant influence on Gibson's own spirituality and the source of much of the imagined violence in the film. (Webb 2004)

for whom cinematic and television violence has been a significant focus of social concern and agitation - lies in their perception that their religious hero had made it in Hollywood terms. This evangelical claiming of the US cultural mainstream partly explains the imperative for evangelicals to support the film against its liberal critics and in spite of its extreme violence.

There are several dimensions to the construction of *The Passion* as an action hero film. It is a very violent film, as is characteristic of most action hero films. But one difference is that *The Passion* is almost entirely about violence, and violence done solely to one body – the body of the hero of the film. This was Gibson's deliberate intent: to reconstruct his favoured religious myth in terms relevant to the culture he knew and wanted to evangelise.

> I wanted it to be shocking… And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge… so that when they see the enormity – the enormity of that sacrifice – to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule. (Quoted in Webb 2004, 162)

Susan Jeffords, in *Hard bodies: Hollywood masculinity and the Reagan era,* traces the links between portrayals of Masculine identity and US popular culture and politics, particularly images of hard masculine bodies in films of the Reagan years in the 1980s and early 90s contrasted with the soft feminised bodies of the politics of the Carter years. She explains that "The heroes of hard-body films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society, but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies." (Jeffords 1994, 19) The hard bodied heroes are those who are pushed to act on behalf of those suppressed or threatened by the system.

> It is important to note how the same story elements – muscular physiques, violent actions, and individual determination – can serve such different social and political ends… (and) on what the hard body came to figure in a particular era, an era that saw a resurgence of both national and masculine power, both of which were embodied in the person of Ronald Reagan as president. (Jeffords 1994, 21)

Mel Gibson was part of that hard-bodied era, in his *Mad Max* (1979, 1981, 1985) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998) films, and also in a different way in *Pay Back* (1999).

For Jeffords, the early 90s and the end of the Reagan presidency saw a revaluation of this hard-bodied image, not replacing it with a return of the soft-body of the Carter era, but with "a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal and family-oriented values." These were reflected politically in, on the one hand, "a strong militaristic foreign-policy position and on the other hand a domestic regime of an economy and a set of social values dependent on the centrality of fatherhood." (Jeffords 1994, 13) This early 90s move identified by Jeffords needs to be viewed against subsequent events: the different kind of masculinity portrayed by Bill Clinton, his battles with the Christian right over masculinity issues (the influence of Hilary on his presidency, his stances on homosexuality and also his own personal sexual practices), and resurrection of the strong masculinity of George W. Bush reasserted as a muscular foreign policy abroad and a promotion of a clear masculine-feminine agenda and family-centred values at home. In this latter regard, it is interesting to note the role played by women in Gibson's film. Women are present in *The Passion* more prominently than they are in the Christian Gospels, reflecting the influence on Gibson of the visions of Anne Emmerich. But the women's roles are primarily passive supportive and sympathetic ones.

In developing *The Passion* as an action hero movie, Gibson works on the dynamic of action movies, i.e. the suffering, endurance and overcoming of the full impact of life's adversities, abrasions and threats; and the tension between restraint and excess as a visual spectacle in that endurance. As Tasker explains:

> While the hero and the various villains of the genre tend to share an excessive physical strength, the hero is also defined by his restraint in putting his strength to the test. And it is the body of the male hero which provides the space in which a tension between restraint and excess is articulated. (Tasker 1993, 19)

This spectacle of the body is both narrative and aesthetic. In *The Passion,* arguably, the spectacle is more visual and aesthetic than it is narrative. In contrast to most action hero films, there is little character development that leads an audience to identify with the hero. The story is a well known one, so little tension is generated to create within the audience the anticipation that there is a greater power here waiting to erupt Rambo-like and give 'em back what they deserve. There is no *chairos* narrative moment where the hero's restraint is pushed beyond its breaking point and he reluctantly asserts his superior power to overcome the evil. The film grinds inexorably from its beginning to its known and expected conclusion. As Goodacre describes it, the physical challenge is "a single-minded muscular commitment to following the path God has set for him." (Goodacre 2004, 34)

The lack of this dramatic anticipatory tension in *The Passion* is an interesting one. There is inherent in the Christian narrative the belief that as the Son of God Jesus had the power at any time to turn on and vanquish his tormenters, but refused to do so. This tension is not effectively developed in *The Passion.* There is no preceding narrative that establishes the portrayals of suffering within the film in a broader narrative context. In fact there is little character development at all: the twelve flashbacks throughout the movie do serve to provide some narrative context, but they are suggestive rather than constructive and assume a more detailed knowledge on the part of the audience than is presented in the film. Within the terms of the film, the primary device that is used to construct this main character as hero is an aesthetic one: the extreme suffering inflicted on the body of the primary character and the capacity of the character to endure it.

Tasker suggests that all hero films draw on "those Christian traditions of representation which offer up the suffering white male body as spectacle." (Tasker 1993, 73) Jennifer Ash suggests that those traditions are most apparent in medieval spirituality and iconography, with its concern with suffering, and is therefore the tradition that lends itself most readily to this sort of filmic aesthetic adaptation.

> Late medieval Christianity turned its attention to the events of the Passion, obsessively focusing on the battered and bleeding body of Divinity dying…a Christian discourse which venerate, as its object of worship, a body – passive, suffering, bleeding, dying…a discourse constituted through a rhetoric (both visual and verbal) of violence and death, or pain and suffering: a discourse of the body and the bodily, revelling in the fleshiness of the Word. Transubstantiation was made official doctrine in 1215." (Ash 1990, 76)

In developing this religious aesthetic of the bodily suffering of the hero, it is interesting to note parallels with aesthetic aspects of Gibson's own action hero characters. The nailing of Jesus to the cross has echoes of the smashing of Gibson's character's feet in the film *Pay Back*. The beaten closed-eye of Jesus parallels Gibson's character in *Mad Max*. The raising of the cross has echoes of the raising of William Wallace's body in a cruciform position at the end of *Braveheart* (1995).

For many viewers, this sole indulgence in an aesthetic of violence verges on being pornographic and fails to do justice to the full meaning of the event. (It's interesting to note that Gibson produced a reduced violence version to correspond with Lent of 2005, arguing that the high level of violence kept many away who would otherwise have seen it). Mary Gordon, herself a conservative Catholic, argues that focussing solely on the pain and suffering is an inadequate narrative device that fails to do justice to the story or the person.

> If you take the Passion out of its context, you are left with a Jesus who is much more body than spirit, you are presented not with the author of the Beatitudes or the man who healed the sick but with a carcass to be flayed…. Jesus as a person with mind or spirit is not present in this film. (Gordon 2004)

This primary focus on the torture and execution of the hero may be explained by artistic decisions to present what Gibson saw as the horror of the event in its extensiveness required removing extraneous elements. It may also reflect, however, a reworking or an alternative vision to the modernist view of suffering and pain as being associated with victim-hood rather than human agency. Talal Asad has observed that the relationship between human agency, the avoidance and overcoming of pain, and how pain is to be admitted or administered in a civilised society, has been a significant marker of human power and progress characteristic of the modern consciousness. Modern Christianity, in accommodating a secular consciousness, therefore sees pain as "essentially and entirely negative," (Asad 2003, 106) a significant difference from early Christian martyrologies which "refuse to read the martyrs' broken bodies as defeat, but reverse the reading, insisting on interpreting them as symbols of victory over society's power." (Asad 2003, 85) In a political climate in which religiously-motivated political martyrs reflect a similar philosophy. the modernist understanding of pain and human agency may be being reworked. Gibson's production, through its violence, may reflect that sort of reworking from a Christian perspective, recovering a medieval vision as relevant to the cultural rethinking taking place around the body, pain, human agency, power and martyrdom in a post-modernist context.

This separation of the torture and execution of the character from other aspects of the character's life that the audience might identify and sympathise with, may also reflect Gibson's preferred theological understanding of the Christian doctrine of the atonement. That view, commonly understood as the substitutionary or "objective" theory, argues that in one sense humans have no role to play in salvation. Salvation or atonement is an arrangement between Jesus and God: humans have nothing to do but sit by, accept it, and worship it.

What Gibson has done in his more medieval representation, therefore, is not so much impose his own idiosyncratic version of the Passion, but injected into the cultural mainstream in a genre of the mainstream an older but enduring aesthetic and sensibility of Christianity that is more material in nature and which challenges the more rationalistic Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity that have dominated modernist religious culture. Susan Jeffords has argued strong links between portrayed masculine identity and the male body, popular culture, and national political identities (Jeffords 1994). The reconstruction of one of the founding myths of Christian culture as a powerful cultural product that achieves an outstanding commercial success by crossing the boundaries of religion and popular culture, adds a significant dimension into the political discussion. In a world in which religion has again become a significant cultural and political force, *The Passion of the Christ* needs to be seen as more than just another religious movie but as a significant cultural event which, in a globalized world, continues the cultural re-interpretation and re-appropriation of the Christian religious myth into the national and political identity of Christian nations.

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**Biography**

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