

The Crucifixion through a Lens Sharply

Passionate Dialogues: Critical Perspectives on Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ

Edited by Daniel Burston and Rebecca I. Denova

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Review by Alan Pope

In the Japanese short story, "Patriotism," Yukio Mishima depicts in extremely graphic and gory detail the ritual seppuku of a Samurai lieutenant and the follow-up suicide of his wife (Mishima, 1966). I find this story most fascinating and disturbing, particularly for the questions it raises about humanistic psychology. In the face of feeling duty-bound to commit acts so deliberately and gruesomely self-destructive, the protagonists approach their last act of lovemaking and their ritual self-murders with a sensuality and presence that befits the mantel "self-actualizing." If we keep our gaze centered here, we admire our protagonists for their loyalty, self-discipline, and sheer heroism. However, if we step back to situate the story within its larger context, we can easily criticize the social fabric upon which the characters' blood leaves its stain, and we can bring into view the author's own fascist tendencies and presumed mental illness (Stokes, 1974). Depending on where we, the reader, focus our attention, we read a different story and it elicits a different set of reactions.

Reading through the excellent selection of essays in *Passionate Dialogues* brought a similar question to mind with regard to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. The editors, Daniel Burston and Rebecca I. Denova, provide an excellent panorama of views of this film and its consequences. Depending on where we place our focus, however, the view can be astonishingly different. Of the fourteen essays, eleven are decidedly critical of the film and wary of its impact on the future of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Three, however, revere the film, and they do so by entering into a hermeneutic engagement with the imagery itself, absent consideration or concern for historical accuracy or socio-political impact. To me, one who naturally sides with the film's critics, the three "pro" essays contribute a great deal to the book, challenging me to see the film from another point of view. They also reflect the sincerity of the editors' desire to generate dialogue rather than "sing to the choir."

The largest possible context for the film comes with Daniel Burston's concluding essay, which eschews critical analysis of the movie itself to instead situate its occurrence as a manifestation of the "low-brow, low-intensity anti-Semitism" that continues to exist in many right-wing Christians who purportedly support the Jews. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Wilhelm Wurzer offers a detailed and appreciative analysis of the film's content and its visual style and musical elements. Conceding that the film is not faithful to the Gospels—a number of authors point out that Gibson has relied heavily on the 19th Century deathbed visions of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, alleged by some to be an anti-Semite—Wurzer praises Gibson's intuitive artistic gifts, and suggests that the film's display of Jesus's resolute commitment to love in the face of extreme torture "effectively opens up a hermeneutic reading" (p. 137) that cuts through church ideology and its meta-narratives. (This view strikes an interesting contrast with that provided later by Britton Johnston, who sees Gibson as employing a meta-narrative that makes Jesus into a super-hero who casts out Satan by his own death.) Wurtzer doesn't disagree with the film's critics that Gibson's own conscious intention is narrow and focused; rather, he "reads" the film for the meanings that extend beyond the artist's conscious intentions.

Of course, we can step outside of the director's conscious intention in other ways as well, looking to history, culture, and the artist's own personal unconscious to understand his vision and the manner in which he realizes it. In a number of fine essays that trace the historical accuracy of Gibson's movie, we come to see in detail how its storyline is constructed both in line with the lineage of Passion play productions and from Gibson's own artistic and personal choices. For example, Rebecca Denova makes a compelling case that the Gospel accounts from which these plays are traditionally drawn do not conform to historical evidence, leaving us to best consider them as inspirational rather than factual accounts. Further, it is asserted by more than one essayist that in following Sister Emmerich's visions of Jesus's final hours, Gibson specifically chose (consciously or unconsciously) those elements most likely to incite anti-Semitism, defying a number of the guidelines established by the American Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1988 for the culturally sensitive production of the Passion play. Rather than reflecting what actually happened, as Gibson claimed, his movie version is clearly a construct that carries with it a number of hidden influences and motivations.

One conspicuous artistic liberty taken by the director is his frequent use of Satan and Mary throughout the movie. Whereas this innovation draws

praise from G. Christopher Williams, who views the use of Satan as a reminder of Christ's own inner struggle and doubt, Philip Gunderson chooses a Lacanian reading in which Gibson's androgynous Satan is positioned as the phallic mother against Mary as the castrated mother. Alternatively, Britton Johnston argues convincingly that Satan is made the scapegoat in Gibson's version, which relieves the viewer of culpability, thereby undercutting the true meaning of atonement. Similarly, Anne Brannen observes that Gibson's film keeps the viewers' focus on Jesus, unlike the medieval York cycle of Passion plays which frequently offered the audience the executioner's perspective, ensuring that the viewer not forget his or her place in the drama. It is fascinating to see how these different scholars adumbrate the various dimensions of the same basic elements of this one film.

Naturally, many of the authors also speak to the unremittingly brutal, graphic violence that marks the heart of the film. Does this violence depict a realism that permits a devotional immersion into the suffering of Christ and, through metonymy, the suffering of all humanity? Or does it fabricate a sense of reality that renders Jesus's teachings marginalized and, like the cinematography itself, dreamlike? Both views are represented here, with a distinct weight given to the sentiment that these scenes are pornographic, in the sense of reducing the person to flesh. I especially liked Sarah Hagelin's argument that the preponderance of screen time devoted to Jesus's scourging relative to His crucifixion and glancing resurrection signals the basic fundamentalism at the heart of the film: whereas death is a mystery, pain is not. Don Carvath sees the violent emphasis as another turning of the historical exchange of the crucifier and the crucified in a sado-masochistic repetition compulsion. Whereas Gibson's movie could have transcended this dynamic, it unconsciously recapitulates it.

As might be predicted, there is much here about the manner in which the Passion play has been used historically to generate anti-Semitism and has generated backlash against Jews. Of particular interest is Ziva Piltch's suggestion that these sentiments in the medieval period grew out of the development of rational empiricism. When this movement raised doubts about religious mysteries such as the miracle of transubstantiation, the Jews became representatives of these doubts, providing the unconscious motivation for them to be marginalized and expelled. Interestingly, in another entry Williams takes us deeply into his view that transubstantiation is both literal and physical, and he uses the writings of Flannery O'Connor to support his claim. He also suggests that Gibson's reliance upon imagery

instead of dialogue moves us into the physicality of the experience, beyond the metaphor of language. Again, it is all in how one looks.

The book is filled with many similar, fascinating observations and contrasting views. In addition to historical perspectives, the book examines *The Passion* from the view of literary perspectives, film studies, psychoanalysis, and interfaith dialogue. While most of the writers do seem generally simpatico, they tease open the phenomenon so as to provide an extremely rich and nuanced portrait that exceeds the vision that any one author alone could put forth. I found myself engaging a dialogue between the various writers, using the tension provided by the three “renegades” in particular to push my own understanding further and deeper. What I’ve come to, at this point, is that one no doubt can enter into the depictions of suffering in a manner that breeds deep compassion for Christ’s suffering and the suffering of all humanity. At the same time, I want to heed the warning in Brannen’s article that while such “affective piety” may enable a connection to universal suffering, as it did for St. Francis, it can also lead one down another path marked by self-aggrandizement. This idea makes tremendous sense to me, for the most powerful spiritual tools can provide the most damage when the hand that wields them slips. And, of course, many of the writers suggest that the film is presented in such a way as to encourage such accidents.

Although this book may seem specialized, the fruits born of reading it are decidedly not. Using Gibson’s film as a point of common focus, *Passionate Dialogues* acts like a prism to reveal the diverse range of elements converging on its production and issuing from its interpretation. Given that the crucifixion of Christ is arguably the central iconic image of Western civilization, the considerations gathered in this exploration will touch the concerns of a wide variety of scholars, thinkers, and religious practitioners. Those for whom this work will be of most obvious interest include students of religious studies, film studies, art history, and psychology.

References

Mishima, Y. (1966). Patriotism. In Yukio Mishima, *Death in midsummer and other stories* (pp. 93–118). New York: New Directions.

Stokes, H. S. (1974). *The life and death of Yukio Mishima*. New York: The Noonday Press.