

Mel Gibson's lethal weapon.

The Worship of Blood

BY LEON WIESELTIER

THERE ARE STILL some miracles that movies cannot accomplish. If, in the manner of the bleeding images of the old Christian legends, it were possible for Mel Gibson's film itself to bleed, and the blood with which it soaks its wretched hero to burst through the screen and soak its wretched audience, it would have done so. For *The Passion of the Christ* is intoxicated by blood, by its beauty and its sanctity. The bloodthirstiness of Gibson's film is startling, and quickly sickening. The fluid is everywhere. It drips, it runs, it spatters, it jumps. It trickles down the post at which Jesus is flagellated and down the cross upon which he is crucified, and the camera only reluctantly tears itself away from the scarlet scenery. The flagellation scene and the crucifixion scene are frenzies of blood. When Jesus is nailed to the wood, the drops of blood that spring from his wound are filmed in slow-motion, with a twisted tenderness. (*Ecce slo-mo.*) It all concludes in the shower of blood that issues from the corpse of Jesus when it is pierced by the Roman soldier's spear.

This is the greatest story ever told as Dario Argento might have told it, in its lurid style and in its contempt for the moral sensitivities of ordinary people. Gibson's subject is torture, and he treats his subject lovingly. There are no lilies in this field. There is only the relentless destruction and dehumanization of a man, who exists here to have his body punished with an almost unimaginable fury. He falls, he rises, he falls, he rises; he bends beneath the blows, but never mentally; his flesh is ripped, his head is stabbed, his eye is beaten shut, his hair is a wig of dried blood, he is a pulp with a cause. He is what the early church fathers, writing with admiration of their martyrs, called an "athlete" of suffering. Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus, does not act, strictly speaking; he merely rolls his eyes heavenward and accepts more makeup. (He speaks little, as befits a man stupefied by suffering, though his Aramaic, like everybody else's in the film, is grammatically correct and risibly enunciated.)

The only cinematic achievement of *The Passion of the Christ* is that it breaks new ground in the verisimilitude of filmed violence. The notion that there is something spiritually exalting about the viewing of it is quite horrifying. The viewing of *The Passion of the Christ* is a profoundly brutalizing experience. Children must be protected from it. (If I were a Christian, I would not raise a Christian child on

this.) Torture has been depicted in film many times before, but almost always in a spirit of protest. This film makes no quarrel with the pain that it excitedly inflicts. It is a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film, and it leaves you with the feeling that the man who made it hates life.

GIBSON IS UNDER the impression that he has done nothing more than put God's word into film. No Hollywood insider was ever so inside. "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me and this film," he told Diane Sawyer, "they have a problem with the four Gospels." From such a statement it is impossible not to conclude that the man is staggeringly ignorant of his own patrimony. For the Gospels, like all great religious texts, have been interpreted in many different ways, to accommodate the needs and the desires of many different souls; and Gibson's account of these events is, like every other account, a particular construction of them. *The Passion of the Christ* is the expression of certain theological and artistic preferences. It is, more specifically, a noisy contemporary instance of a tradition of interpretation that came into its own in the late medieval centuries, when (in the words of a distinguished historian of Christian art) "the Passion became the chief concern of the Christian soul." In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a consequence of persecution and war and pestilence, the image of Christ hovering over the world in gilded majesty was replaced by the image of Jesus nailed in the world to the cross. Passion plays were devised for Holy Week. The lacerated Jesus became a commonplace of religious art, in which the Man of Sorrows plaintively displayed his wounds, which were venerated. This Jesus came to be drawn with a brutal realism, which climaxed in the grisly masterpieces of Grunwald.

So the kindest thing that may be said of Gibson is that he is an extremely late medieval. He contemplates the details of pain ecstatically. But this is still too kind, because the morbidity of the Man of Sorrows, even in its most popular versions, was rarely as crude as what Gibson presents. Does Christian dolorousness, a serious reflection upon the fate of Jesus, really require these special effects, this moral and aesthetic barbarity? *The Passion of the Christ* is the work of a religious sensibility of remarkable coarseness. It is by turns grossly physical and grossly magical, childishly literalist, gladly credulous, comically masculine. Gibson's faith is finally pre-theological, the kind of conviction that abhors

thought, superstitiously fascinated by Satan and “the other realm,” a manic variety of Christian folk religion.

IT WILL BE objected that I see only pious pornography in *The Passion of the Christ* because I am not a believer in the Christ. This is certainly so. I do not agree that Jesus is my savior or anybody else’s. I confess that I smiled when the credits to *The Passion of the Christ* listed “stunts.” So I am not at all the person for whom Gibson made this movie. But I do not see how a belief in Jesus strengthens the case for such a film. Quite the contrary. Belief, a theory of meaning, a philosophical convenience, is rarely far away from cruelty. Torture has always been attended by explanations that vindicate it, and justify it, and even hallow it. These explanations, which are really extenuations, have been articulated in religious and in secular terms. Their purpose is to redescribe an act of inhumanity so that it no longer offends, so that it comes to seem necessary, so that it edifies. My victim of torture is your martyr.

There is a small chapter in *The City of God* in which Augustine denounces torture—“a thing, indeed, to be bewailed, and, if that were possible, watered with fountains of tears”—and then complacently accepts the necessity of it. (He asks only that we “condemn human life as miserable.”) Augustine is speaking not of the duties of the martyr, but of the duties of the wise judge. Introduce God into the grim situation, and you will find fountains of tears shed not only over the success of some individuals in making the ultimate sacrifice, but also over the failure of other individuals to do the same. This is true of all the religious traditions. There is an ideal of holy suicide in all of them. It is important that we know how such extreme deeds were understood by the men and the women who performed them, but we have no obligation to concur in their understanding of what they did. Religious belief may actually interfere with a lucid analysis of religious life. Anyway, is the sanctification of murder really what this country needs now?

There is another problem with the insistence that a movie such as *The Passion of the Christ* can be intelligible only to a believer. When a non-Christian such as myself reads the Gospels, he is filled with a deep and genuine pity for the man who endured this savagery, and for his mother. (Jesus’ mother is infinitely more affecting than his father.) In its meticulous representation of Jesus’ excruciations, Gibson’s film is designed to inspire such pity. The spectacle of this man’s doom should be unbearable to a good heart. Yet pity is precisely what *The Passion of the Christ* cannot inspire, because the faith upon which it is based vitiates the sympathetic emotions. Why feel pity, if this suffering is a blessing? Why mourn, if his reward for his torment, and the world’s reward, is ordained? If Jesus is not exactly human, then it is not exactly dehumanization that we are watching, and that we are deploring.

Such prior reassurance, the ancient assuagement of theodicy, is found in all the religions when they come to the terrors of mortality; but the confidence in the outcome of

Jesus’ anguish is especially flamboyant. Gibson’s film un- does itself in this way most completely in the crucifixion scene. Just as the hammer is about to drive the nail into Jesus’ hand (the hammer is held by the director’s own hand, he proudly wishes you to know), the film flashes back to the Last Supper, where the camera catches Jesus’ lovely gesticulating hands as he teaches that the bread is his body; and when the cross is raised, another flashback shows him instructing his disciples that his blood is the new covenant. So this *passio* is not a tragedy; it is a gift. The film ends three days later, when a ray of golden light penetrates the tomb as the stone is rolled away, and the shroud lies empty on the slab, and Jesus is alive again. As he rises to leave, the hole in his hand passes before our eyes. And the sight of the wound is about as moving as the sound of a doctrine. For we know by now that no atrocity has really been committed. All that has taken place is the temporarily discomfiting fulfillment of a divine plan for the redemption of the world. The ending is happy, which has the effect of making the viewer, or at least this viewer, feel like he has been duped. His sympathy was based on a misunderstanding. He had assumed that what was done to this man was outrageous, but he was wrong. He should have been rooting all along, with Gibson, for the whips and the nails.

THE *PASSION OF THE CHRIST* is an unwitting incitement to secularism, because it leaves you desperate to escape its standpoint, to find another way of regarding the horror that you have just observed. This is unfair to, well, Christianity, since Christianity is not a cult of Gibsonesque gore. But there is a religion toward which Gibson’s movie is even more unfair than it is to its own. In its representation of its Jewish characters, *The Passion of the Christ* is without any doubt an anti-Semitic movie, and anybody who says otherwise knows nothing, or chooses to know nothing, about the visual history of anti-Semitism, in art and in film. What is so shocking about Gibson’s Jews is how unreconstructed they are in their stereotypical appearances and actions. These are not merely anti-Semitic images; these are classically anti-Semitic images. In this regard, Gibson is most certainly a traditionalist.

Now that Gibson has made the mistake of allowing people to see *The Passion of the Christ*—the film was much more interesting before it was released—it is plain that the controversy about its inclusion of Matthew 27:25, the infamous cry of the Jews that “his blood be on us and our children,” the imprecation that served through the centuries as the warrant for the Christian assault on the Jews, was a fake, a cynical game. When Jewish groups objected to this passage in the script, Gibson expediently deleted the English translation of it. I say expediently, because decency would have prevented him from including it, from shooting it, at all. But he may as well have kept it in, because it is entirely of a piece with the Jews whom he has invented. The figure of Caiaphas, played with disgusting relish by an actor

named Mattia Sbragia, is straight out of Oberammergau. Like his fellow priests, he has a graying rabbinical beard and speaks with a gravelly sneer and moves cunningly beneath a *tallit*-like shawl streaked with threads the color of money. He is gold and cold. All he does is demand an execution. He and his sinister colleagues manipulate the ethically delicate Pilate into acquiescing to the crucifixion. (You would think that Rome was a colony of Judea.) Meanwhile the Jewish mob is regularly braying for blood. It is the Romans who torture Jesus, but it is the Jews who conspire to make them do so. The Romans are brutish, but the Jews are evil.

GIBSON PLEADS THAT these are nothing but the elements of the Gospel narratives, but the Gospels are not clear and reliable historical documents. His notion of authenticity has no time for history. Historiographically speaking, after all, there is no such thing as gospel truth; and so his portrayal of the Jews is based on nothing more than his own imagination of what they looked like and sounded like. And Gibson's imagination has offered no resistance to the iconographical inheritance of Western anti-Semitism. Again, these things are not passively received. They are willingly accepted. Gibson created this movie; it was not revealed to him. Like his picture of Jesus, his picture of the Jews is the consequence of certain religious and cinematic decisions for which he must be held accountable. He has chosen to give millions of people the impression that Jews are culpable for the death of Jesus. In making this choice, which defies not only the scruples of scholars but also the teaching of the Catholic Church, Gibson has provided a fine illustration of the cafeteria Catholicism of the right. And the American media, which flourish by confusing gullibility with curiosity, go merrily along. A few weeks ago the cover of *Newsweek* asked, over a closeup of Caviezel crowned with thorns, "WHO REALLY KILLED JESUS?" The article inside the magazine exonerated us, so we are safe. But is this really the question facing America? Up next: Should his blood be upon us and our children or shouldn't it? We'll be back right after this message. Don't go away.

No, go away. And take this low moment with you—but not until a little attention is paid to some of the praise that has been offered for this pernicious film. The apologetics for *The Passion of the Christ* must represent an intellectual nadir in contemporary American conservatism. Thoughtful people have been uttering thoughtless words. "Heartbreaking," declared Michael Novak after a screening, as if he had just walked out of *Waterloo Bridge*. "A meditation," he lazily called it in *The Weekly Standard*. It is hard to think of anything more unlike a meditation than *The Passion of the Christ*. But the discussion of the film was immediately and ferociously politicized, as conservatives conflated the defense of Gibson's religion with the defense of religion. If you turned away from Gibson's Jesus, you turned away from Jesus. The Via Dolorosa became the slippery slope. To

criticize the film was to be godless. To suggest that it is not an accurate record of Jerusalem in the first century was to be anti-Christian. To worry that it is anti-Semitic was to be liberal. (The vigilance about anti-Semitism upon which conservatives like to congratulate themselves suddenly vanished.) Come to think of it, Pilate is the liberal in Gibson's film. And Gibson shrewdly encouraged this view of his slasher movie as the bulwark of a civilization: He made cultural warfare into a marketing strategy. Is the film violent? Of course it is, but this is God's violence. This violence is good for America.

GIBSON'S JEWISH DEFENDERS have been especially disgraceful. "Jewish organizations must not attempt to take responsibility for deciding what Christians can and cannot believe," wrote Michael Medved in *The Christian Science Monitor*, as if the Jewish criticism of Gibson's film is anything other than the behavior of American citizens freely expressing an opinion. "If we are empowered to edit their doctrine," David Klinghoffer asked ominously in the *Forward*, "then why are they not empowered to edit ours?" reminding his readers that once upon a time the Christians censored the Talmud. Is Gibson now doctrine? Is criticism now censorship? And where is the Sanhedrin on the Upper West Side that is poring over Christian texts with a black marker? Then there was the argument for timidity. "Jewish denunciations of the movie only increase the likelihood that those who hate us will seize on the movie as an excuse for more hatred," Medved declared. I wonder if he feels the same way about Jewish denunciations of Islamic anti-Semitism. In a journal of the American Enterprise Institute, he warned that "sadly, the battle over the *The Passion* may indeed provoke more hatred of the Jews." Yet the hatred of the Jews is not simply a response to the Jewish response to the hatred of the Jews. Anti-Semitism is not anti-anti-anti-Semitism. It is an old and independent and vital tradition of fear and hallucination, a non-Jewish disorder that has nothing to do with the Jews, as *The Passion of the Christ* demonstrates.

But the loathing of Jews in Mel Gibson's film is really not its worst degradation. *Kim le bi-deraba mine*, as Yeshua might have said: Its loathing of Jews is subsumed in its loathing of spirituality, in its loathing of existence. If there is a kingdom of heaven, *The Passion of the Christ* is shutting it in men's faces. ■

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