On Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Well before the commercial release of his film, Mel Gibson had organized private showings for important journalists and religious leaders. If he was counting on assuring the goodwill of those he invited, he badly miscalculated; or perhaps he instead manifested a superior Machiavellianism.

The commentaries quickly followed, and far from praising the film or reassuring the public, there were only terrified vituperations and anguished cries of alarm concerning the anti-Semitic violence that might erupt at the cinema exits. Even the *New Yorker*, so proud of the serene humor from which it normally never departs, completely lost its composure, and in all seriousness accused the film of being more like Nazi propaganda than any other cinematic production since World War II.

Nothing justifies these accusations. For Mel Gibson, the death of Christ is a burden born by all humanity, starting with Mel Gibson himself. When his film strays a bit from the Gospel text, which happens only rarely, it is not to demonize the Jews but to emphasize the pity that Jesus inspires in some of them: in Simon of Cyrene for example, whose role is amplified, or in Veronica, the woman who, according to an ancient tradition, offered a cloth to Jesus during the ascent to Golgotha on which the features of his face became imprinted.

The more things calm down, the more it becomes clear in retrospect that the film precipitated a veritable tantrum in the world's most influential media that more or

less contaminated the entire atmosphere in its wake. The public had nothing to do with the controversy, since it had not seen the film. It wondered with evident curiosity what was it in this Passion that could create such a panic among those who are normally so difficult to shock. What ensued was easy to predict: instead of the 2600 screens originally planned, *The Passion of the Christ* opened on more than 4000 screens on Ash Wednesday–a day evidently chosen for its penitential symbolism.

The charge of anti-Semitism has receded somewhat since the film's release. But the film's detractors have rallied around a second complaint, the excessive violence that they see in the film. There is indeed great violence, but it does not exceed, it seems to me, that of many other films that Gibson's critics would not dream of condemning. This *Passion* has shaken up (no doubt only provisionally) the chessboard of media reactions concerning violence in the movies. All those who are normally accustomed to spectacular violence, or even see in its constant evolution so many victories of freedom over tyranny, find themselves condemning it in Gibson's film with extraordinary vehemence. On the other side, all those who see it as their duty to denounce cinematic violence (without their criticisms ever having the slightest impact) not only tolerate this film, but frequently admire it.

To justify their attitude, the detractors borrow from their adversaries all of the arguments that they denounce as excessive and ridiculous when articulated by the latter. They lament that this Passion will "desensitize" the young, will make them into violence addicts incapable of appreciating the true refinements of our culture. Mel Gibson is treated as a "pornographer" of violence, when in reality he is one of the rare filmmakers to not (at least in this film) systematically mix eroticism with violence.

Certain critics push the imitation of their adversaries to the point of mixing religion with their diatribes. They accuse this film of "impiety"; they go so far as to accuse it–brace yourselves–of being "blasphemous."

This *Passion* has, in short, provoked a surprising reversal of position between adversaries who have for so long used the same arguments against one another. This double abjuration plays itself out with such perfect naturalness that it looks like a classical ballet, all the more elegant because it is not in the least conscious of itself.

What is the invisible but supreme force that manipulates all of these critics without their realizing it? I believe that it is the Passion itself. If one objects that the Passion has been filmed numerous times before without ever provoking either great indignation or great admiration (though today the admiration is more secretive than

the criticism), I would reply that never before has the Passion been filmed with Mel Gibson’s implacable realism.

It is Hollywood saccharinity that first dominated religious cinema, featuring Jesuses with hair so blond and eyes so blue that they could never be subjected to the abuses of Roman soldiers. In the last few years, there have been Passions more realistic yet even less effective, because they are embellished with phony postmodern audacity, preferably of a sexual nature, that the directors counted on to spice up the Gospels, deemed by them to be insufficiently scandalous. They did not see that in sacrificing to the stereotype of “revolt” they rendered the Passion insipid and banal.

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To restore to the Crucifixion its scandalous force, it is enough to film it as is, without adding or subtracting anything. Did Mel Gibson succeed completely in this endeavor? Not entirely, but he got close enough to strike fear into all the conformists.

The principal argument against what I have just said consists in accusing the film of being unfaithful to the spirit of the Gospels. It is true that the Gospels merely enumerate all of the cruelties suffered by Christ without ever describing them in detail, without ever making us see the Passion “as if we were there.”

This is perfectly true, but to take the sparseness and concision of the Gospel text as an argument against Mel Gibson’s realism is an evasion of history. It means not seeing that in the first century A.D., realistic description in the modern sense could not be employed, for it had not yet been invented. Most probably, the first impulse in the development of Western realism came from the Passion. The writers of the Gospels did not deliberately reject a possibility that did not exist during their era. It is clear that far from fleeing realism, they seek to create it, but the means are lacking. The narratives of the Passion contain more concrete details than all of the learned works of the time. They represent a first step in the direction of the ever-increasing realism that defines the essential dynamism of our culture in its periods of great vitality. The first impulse of realism is the desire to strengthen religious meditation, which is essentially a meditation on the Passion of Christ.

In professing its disdain for realism and for the real itself, modern aesthetics has completely distorted the interpretation of Western art. It has invented a separation between aesthetics on one side and technology and science on the other, a separation that has only come into being with the advent of modernism (modernism is perhaps only a flattering term for our decadence). The will to be true to reality, to paint things as if one were there, has always triumphed in the past, and it has over

the centuries produced the masterpieces that Gibson says have inspired him. I have heard that he himself mentions Caravaggio. In the same vein one could think of certain Romanesque Christs, of the Spanish Crucifixions, of a Jerome Bosch, of all the suffering Christs…

Far from disdaining science and technology, the great art of the Renaissance and modernity used all the new inventions in the service of its will to realism. Far from rejecting perspective and *trompe l'oeil*, they welcome these things with passion. We need only think of the dead Christ of Mantegna…

To understand what Mel Gibson has tried to do, we must, it seems to me, free ourselves from all of the modernist and "post-modernist" snobbisms and think of cinema as extending and surpassing the techniques of great literary and pictorial realism. If contemporary techniques reveal themselves as incapable of communicating religious emotion, it is because great artists have yet to transfigure them. The invention of these techniques coincided with the first breakdown of Christian spirituality since the beginning of Christianity.

If the artists of the Renaissance had had cinema, do we really believe that they would have turned up their noses? It is this realist tradition that Mel Gibson is attempting to revive. The venture he has undertaken consists in utilizing to the hilt the incomparable resources of the most realistic technique that has ever existed, the cinema. The risks are proportional to the ambition that characterizes this enterprise, unusual today but frequent in the past.

If one truly wants to film the Passion and the Crucifixion, it is obvious enough that one cannot be satisfied with mentioning Christ's agonies in a few sentences. These sufferings must be represented. In Greek tragedy, direct representation of the hero's death was prohibited; a messenger told the audience what had just transpired. In the cinema it is no longer possible to avoid the essential. To cut short the flagellation or the nailing to the cross, for example, would be to shrink back from the decisive moment. These horrific things must be represented "as if we were there." Must we be indignant if the result does not resemble a pre-Raphaelite painting?

Beyond a certain number of lashings, Roman flagellation meant certain death; it was a mode of execution like any other, as lethal as crucifixion. Mel Gibson recalls this in his film. The violence of Christ's flagellation is all the more unbearable in that it is admirably filmed, as indeed is the rest of the work.

Mel Gibson is situated in a certain mystical tradition of the Passion: "what drop of blood have you shed for me?" etc. These mystics see it as their duty to imagine the sufferings of Christ as accurately as possible, not at all to cultivate a spirit of

vengeance against the Jews or the Romans but to meditate on our own guilt.

This is not the only possible attitude concerning the Passion, of course. And there would certainly be a bad as well as a good use of his film, but one cannot condemn the enterprise a priori; one cannot with eyes closed accuse Gibson of making the Passion into something that it is not. In the entire history of Christianity, no one had ever before attempted to represent the Passion as it must have truly happened.

In the theater where I saw the film, the projection was preceded by three or four "coming attractions" filled with a violence that was plainly inane, sardonic, permeated with sado-masochistic insinuations, bereft of any religious or even any narrative, aesthetic, or simply human interest. How can those who daily consume such abominations, who comment upon them, who speak to their friends about them, how can they be shocked by Mel Gibson's film? This is beyond me.

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We must start by absolving the film of the absurd reproach of "going too far," "of gratuitously exaggerating Christ's sufferings." How can one exaggerate the sufferings of a man who must suffer, one after the other, the two most excruciating tortures devised by Roman cruelty?

Once the overall legitimacy of the enterprise is recognized, one can regret that Mel Gibson went farther in his violence than the Gospel texts require. He makes the brutalization of Jesus start right after his arrest, which is not in the Gospels. If only to deprive his critics of a specious argument, the director might have been better served, I think, to stick with the essential. The overall effect would be just as powerful, and the film would not leave itself open to the hypocritical reproach of flattering the contemporary taste for violence.

What is the source of this great evocative power that all faithful representations of the Passion produce on most people? I think that there is an anthropological level to the descriptions in the Gospels which is not specifically Jewish, Roman, nor even Christian. It is the collective dimension of the event that makes it into what is essentially a crowd phenomenon.

One of the things that Mel Gibson's Pilate says to the crowd is not contained in the Gospels, but it seems to me to be faithful to its spirit: "Five days ago you wanted to make this man your king and now you want to kill him." This is an allusion to the triumphal welcome Jesus received the preceding Sunday, known as Palm Sunday in the liturgical calendar. The crowd that receives Jesus triumphantly is the same crowd that shouts for his death five days later. Mel Gibson is right, I think, to emphasize the crowd's sudden about-face, its cruel inconsistency and surprising

volatility. All crowds in the world shift easily from one extreme to the other, from passionate adulation to hatred and the frenetic destruction of the same, single individual. Moreover, there is a great Biblical text that resembles the Passion in more ways than is generally thought: the book of Job. After having been the leader of his people for many years, Job is brutally rejected by this same people, who threaten him with death through the intermediary of three representatives, always called (rather grotesquely) “friends of Job.”

The essence of an excited, terrified crowd is to not calm itself before satisfying its appetite for violence on a victim whose identity most often scarcely matters to it. Pilate is well aware of this, for as an administrator he has experience in crowd control. At first, he proposes to the crowd the crucifixion of Barabbas in place of Jesus. After the failure of this first, well-tried method, to which he obviously resorts too late, Pilate has Jesus whipped in the hope that this will satisfy at a lesser cost, if you will, the appetite for violence that is the essential characteristic of this type of crowd.

If Pilate proceeds in this way, it is not because he is more humane than the Jews, nor is it necessarily on account of his wife. The most likely explanation is that in order to be well considered in Rome, which took pride in bringing the *pax romana* to every region, a Roman civil servant would always prefer a trouble-free, legal execution to an execution imposed by the multitude.

From an anthropological point of view, the Passion has nothing specifically Jewish about it. It is a crowd phenomenon that obeys the same laws as all crowd phenomena. Careful observation will detect equivalent phenomena in the numerous foundational myths that recount the birth of archaic and ancient religions.

Almost all religions are, I believe, rooted in collective violence analogous to that which is described or suggested not only in the Gospels and the book of Job, but also in the songs of the Suffering Servant in second Isaiah, as well as in many Psalms. Pious Christians and Jews have wrongly refused to reflect on these resemblances between their sacred books and myths. An attentive comparison reveals that beyond these resemblances, but also because of them, we can observe a difference, at once subtle and gigantic, between the mythical on one side, and the Judaic and the Christian on the other, which makes the Judaeo-Christian incomparable with respect to the most objective truth. Unlike the myths that systematically adopt the point of view of the crowd against the victim, because they are conceived and told by the lynchers, and thus they always see the victim as guilty (as in the incredible combination of parricide and incest that Oedipus is accused of, for example), our Scriptures, the great biblical and Christian texts, acquit the victims of the crowd, and this is exactly what the Gospels do in the case

of Jesus. This is what Mel Gibson shows.

Whereas myths incessantly repeat the murderous delusions of crowds of persecution (which are always analogous to those of the Passion), because this illusion satisfies the community and furnishes an idol around which it can come together, the greatest biblical texts, culminating in the Gospels, reveal the essentially deceptive and criminal character of crowd phenomena, on which the mythologies of the world are based.

In my view, there are two principal attitudes in human history: there is the mythological, which tries to dissimulate violence, because in the final analysis, it is on unjust violence that human communities are founded. This is what we all do when we give in to our instincts. We try to cover the nudity of human violence with Noah's cloak. And we turn away if necessary, in order not to expose ourselves to the contagious force of violence by looking at it too closely.

This attitude is too universal to be condemned. This is in fact the attitude of the greatest Greek philosophers, in particular Plato, who condemns Homer and all the poets because they take the liberty of describing in their works the violence that the myths attribute to the gods of the city. The great philosopher sees in this brazen revelation a source of disorder, a great danger for the entire society.

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This is certainly the religious attitude that is the most widely shared, the most normal, the most natural to man. And today it is more universal than ever, for modernized believers, Christians as well as Jews, have at least partially adopted it.

The other attitude is much rarer; it is even unique. It is found only in the great moments of biblical and Christian inspiration. It consists not in chaste dissimulation but, on the contrary, in the revelation of violence in all its injustice and all its delusion, everywhere where it is possible to observe it. This is the attitude of the book of Job, and it is the attitude of the Gospels. It is the bolder of the two attitudes, and in my view, the greater. It is the attitude that has allowed us to discover the innocence of most of the victims that even the most religious people over the course of history have never ceased to persecute and kill. This is the common inspiration of Judaism and Christianity, and it is the key, one must hope, to their future reconciliation. It is about the heroic inclination to put the truth above even the social order. It is to this enterprise, it seems to me, that Mel Gibson's film makes every effort to be faithful.

Translated by Robert Doran