

The Power of the Passion: Exploring Mel Gibson's Heart of Darkness

Matthew Ogilvie

Abstract: *This article will not be a review of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ so much as a reflection on some reactions to the film. I would like to say something of reactions to The Passion and how this film has generated intense feeling through challenging the privileged knowledge and orthodoxies of our society. My basic thesis is that The Passion shocks people not only through intense violence but more so, by confronting the realms of meaning and horizons of its viewers.*

Key Words: Mel Gibson; *The Passion of the Christ* – reception; films – violence; 9/11 terror attacks; human suffering; horror; radical human evil

Reaction to Horror and Terror

I would first like to say something about horror and terror. It is noteworthy that two of this year's most controversial films featured actress Monica Bellucci. In *The Passion* she plays Mary Magdalene, a sympathetic witness to horror. In Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible* she plays the victim of horror. Bellucci's character suffers extreme violence at the hands of drug-affected sadist during a protracted nine-minute rape scene from which many movie-goers have fled. The same film also shows a man having his face beaten repeatedly with a fire extinguisher until this face is no longer recognizably human. It is a scene rivalled only by the protracted scourging in Gibson's film.

The Passion and *Irreversible* express horror from within similar horizons. They neither sanitize nor glorify the experience of violence, mortal terror and agony. Instead they amplify the violence to a hyper-realistic intensity. It is common to find viewers of both films comment on how they flinched or recoiled at the scenes of torture. What Gibson and Noe have achieved is a transfer of the audience members' sense of horror from something that happens "out there" to horror that is felt within oneself.

I suggest that one reason *The Passion* has created so much distress is that so-called "first world/westerners" have forgotten how to deal with horror. The privileges of twenty-first century industrialized nations have helped us aspire to a life of comfort and ease. Unlike our forebears, we no longer struggle for existence. We live in relative security, with a steady supply of food, access to medical care and the many diversions of leisure time. One of Charles Darwin's significant observations is that creatures only develop and maintain survival strategies when they are faced with mortal adversity. Through the lack of everyday threats to our lives, we residents of the first world seem to have lost the ability to work with suffering, to deal with terror or to live with horror. Perhaps no one knows this better than Osama bin Laden. While he is powerless to win a war conducted according to the rules of the Geneva Convention, his evil genius has realized that crimes of horror will have the greatest impact upon us.

By way of example, if we reflect upon the media coverage of the “9-11” attacks, one observes that the most horrifying scenes of 9-11 are now shown only rarely. The planes hitting the World Trade Center towers are shown often, perhaps because one sees no immediate death in those images – to the viewer, they are great masses of speeding metal hitting structures of steel and glass. Nowadays, the media only relatively rarely shows the people throwing themselves out of the building, or the news anchors’ desperate disbelief at the towers’ collapse. In the face of overwhelming horror, could it be possible that we would now prefer to remember the tragedy, but not the suffering, of 9-11? One may also observe the differences in reaction to horror. Americans and Australians are still traumatized by the attacks in New York, Washington and Bali. We might note the memorials we are building to the victims – bright lights, beautiful gardens, noble buildings. But how do the less privileged deal with horror? This year sees the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. It is perhaps a cruel irony that this event is being commemorated with a similar genocide in Sudan. But what memorials are the Rwandans making? One reads of survivors who are exhuming the remains of victims, putting them on display so as not to bury the memory but to remind people of the genocidal horror. The Rwandans show a sharp difference between the first and third worlds. The first world considers horror a rare event and something to be avoided. For many in the third world, horror is frequent experience and something dealt with daily.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* reveals something of the conflicting approaches to horror in the so-called civilized and savage worlds. Confronted with the failure of his civilized ways and the savagery of the jungle, Kurtz dies suffering mental torture and crying “the horror, the horror.” Yet the manager’s boy greets the death and horror with a contemptuous “Mistah Kurtz – he dead.”¹ It is almost as if the European recoils in mortal shock from the horror, horror so awful Kurtz’s widow cannot be told of it, while the native dismisses Kurtz’s death with “He’s dead, there’s horror, now get on with life.” There is a cruel parallel in Gibson’s film regarding the perceptions of Jesus’ passion and death. To his mother and his disciple, the passion is inhuman brutality and utter horror. The Roman soldiers, on the other hand, get drunk, play dice and treat the whole event as a routine banality.

In Francis Ford Coppola’s version of Conrad’s novel, *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz declares that “It’s impossible for words to describe what is necessary to those who do not know what horror means. Horror. Horror has a face, and you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared.”² Gibson certainly does not say that we should befriend horror, but his film suggests that we have lost our familiarity with horror. I propose that Gibson has caused strong reactions not by avoiding horror, but in making us come face-to-face with horror. Gibson’s Jesus is not the television evangelists’ Christ who saves by helping us avoid life’s horrors. Rather, he presents a Jesus who embraces horror, symbolised by his cross, one who works through it for the saving of his people.

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1995): Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.net/etext95/hdark11.txt>

² Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (Paramount, 1979).

Human Horizons and Suffering

In the context of discussing horror I have observed that most of the vitriolic attacks upon Gibson's film have come from the developed world. Middle-class journalists, high society actors and armchair critics who can afford the admission to *The Passion*, can go home to a secure house, a warm bed, good food and the leisure time to be able to write a review. On this point, of course, I wish not to throw first stones, but to include myself in a broad *mea culpa*. Gibson's *Passion* simply falls outside the horizon of middle-class westerners.

Gibson's film confronts the first world myth that life is destined to be easy, that pain and suffering are an aberration and that goodness is achieved by avoiding suffering. The conventional wisdom of our society is that life is meant to be comfortable. That approach to life is proclaimed most loudly by Hollywood and many a television evangelist. While Hollywood preaches easy sex, commitment-free love and self-indulgent wealth, many television evangelists preach easy salvation, wealth without work and self-indulgent spirituality. Gibson's film, though, shows a messiah who works through suffering and death, a messiah who declares that salvation comes not in avoiding horror, but in daily taking up one's own cross.

I suggest that the common sense hermeneutic through which lay folk interpret *The Passion* can be of the form, "does this film reflect my experience?" Residents of the third world, those for whom suffering is a daily reality, find it easier to experience solidarity with the crucified Christ. For them, the scourging, mocking and execution are not things from which to recoil, but a source of consolation in that the suffering Jesus has "become one of us." Middle class westerners, however, may find scandalous that their image of Jesus, the tolerant, sophisticated, antinomian is shattered by Gibson's presentation of an alien, suffering, committed and self-sacrificing individual who is "not one of us."

The discordance between modern western values and Gibson's *Passion* parallel the clash Hannah Arendt observes between the theory of liberal scholarship and the reality of totalitarianism. She notes that, "The conviction that everything on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces."³ This means that our intuitions lead us to interpret events of incomprehensible and radical evil by rationalising them down to common sense categories. As an example, she states that "We attempt to understand the inmates and SS men psychologically when the fact is that psyche can be destroyed even without destroying the physical man."⁴ Arendt also accuses the western tradition of being impotent to conceive "radical evil."⁵ Whether it is the holocaust or the passion of Jesus, there are things so terrible (and terrifying) that they defy common sense. They shock the human spirit with the reality that complete evil and utter terror are possible. Moreover *The Passion* and the Holocaust defy our common sense because those causing such radical evil are human beings. Our first world common sense recoils from the reality that, not only is this evil possible, but that within us is the capacity to ourselves be an SS guard, a Roman soldier or an agent of one or another radical evil.

From another perspective, Gibson offends by contradicting our first world belief that joy and hope are the norm, and that these are only interrupted by periodic brief moments of horror. Again, it is sobering to note that for much of humanity, life is experienced as extended suffering and horror, with these being punctuated by only brief moments of joy and hope.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1973), ix.

⁴ Ibid, 440-441.

⁵ Ibid, 459.

Realism and Meaning

We can also interpret reactions to *The Passion* through considering realms of meaning. Bernard Lonergan writes that “Different exigences give rise to different modes of conscious and intentional operation, and different modes of such operation give rise to different realms of meaning.”⁶ He clarifies that, for example, “There are then a realm of common sense and a realm of theory. We use different languages to speak of them. The difference in the languages involves social differences: specialists can speak to their wives about many things but not about their specialties.”

I would suggest that reactions to Gibson’s film are aggravated by clashing realms of meaning. For people in the underdeveloped world, horror, suffering and terror have a “constitutive meaning.” These things are part of the history, life and meaning of people. Horror is simply a constitutive part of their lives, be it the horror of a starving child, the prospect of unjust arrest, torture, rape and execution, the agony of suffering diseases that should be cured with basic medicines. For privileged westerners however, horror normally bears a theoretical meaning. It is something we can speak about but not something that constitutes our daily lives. Thus, when horror does become constitutive, as it did through the 9-11 terrorist attacks, our conscious world of meaning is subject to deep intentional shock.

Along with shock to our realms of meaning, the impact of Gibson’s film can be understood according to levels of realism: First, there can be a non-realistic idealism, in which one reduces objective reality to that which fits our own ideal categories. Schweitzer criticised this sort of idealism in those theologians who reduced the historical Jesus to a reflection of their own personalities. Second, there is sub-realism, in which only part of reality is presented. Hollywood violence is one example of sub-realism. In it, many die but few suffer. Heroes can suffer gunshot wounds and continue fighting villains. Violent death can be inflicted without the bodily damage that is unknown to Hollywood, but familiar to medical emergency room personnel. Third, there is realism in which reality is presented accurately. Realism in film will portray death and suffering accurately as they would appear to a live observer. Lastly, there is hyper-realism, which is the tool used by Gibson in *The Passion*. On this level, reality is exaggerated and projected into the observer. That is, a viewer becomes not just a witness to the on-screen spectacle, but one experiences empathic involvement. One feels as if one is really there and feeling something of the sensations of the victim.

In utilizing hyper-realism Gibson raises his film from entertainment or spectacle to the level of affective participation. In some ways, this affective hyper-realism transcends the achievements of “virtual reality,” for the viewer feels not only “there” witnessing the events, but the events are “inside” the person, evoking an affective response and demanding commitment either for or against the values being portrayed. In plain terms, it is hard to have a mild response to Gibson’s film. Hyper-realism can provoke only a high-level and deeply felt reaction. Thus, for those who have criticisms, whether they are valid or not, it is understandable why Gibson’s film has raised not only detached critique, but deeply felt passions.

Noting that Gibson’s film is hyper-real, I am concerned about the way some people use the film for evangelism. On the one hand, the drawing of viewers into affective participation means they are vulnerable to accusations of guilt and the need to repent radically. There are, sadly, those who would use *The Passion* to change the message of the

⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994), 81-83

Christ's suffering from a loving "I did it for you," to a condemning "this is your fault!" Without denying the need for repentance and ongoing *metanoia*, it is not evangelisation but exploitation to preach with anything but a message expressing the reality [not hyper-reality] of Jesus. I would also have reservations about taking young children to see *The Passion*. Cinema may be a useful tool with which to teach the reality of Jesus. But the hyper-reality of *The Passion* and an affective participation that evokes adult-level emotions would make this film unsuitable for all but the very mature.

I note that Gibson's hyper-realism ironically challenges some conventions of popular Christianity. Hyper-realism was used not only in the torture and crucifixion, but also in the resurrection scene. The nakedness of the risen Jesus is not what one expects from many Christian pieties. The scene once more shocks the viewer out of a comfortable horizon. Rather than the popularist Lord of Glory clothed in dazzling white, one is confronted by a naked messiah, one who is not only Lord, but also the servant of all, one who is humble in his kenotic nakedness.

Conclusion

It is true that Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* contains a number of scientific and historical inaccuracies. Yet these would be no greater than the changes in adaptations to film of works such as *Schindler's Ark* [List] and *Lord of the Rings*. It is also true that *The Passion* confronts the viewer with extreme violence. Yet there are myriad films that seek to outdo each other in violence of graphic intensity.

Why is it that Gibson's film has offended many? (I am referring not only to those who commented on the film before seeing it.) *The Passion* employs hyper-realism to confront first world viewers with a horizon and realm of meaning that is not our own. The film's hyper-realism also makes Jesus' actions not an abstract spectacle, but a communication to the inner person that demands serious decision either for or against what is presented.

In the first place, I argue that *The Passion* shocks first world viewers by confronting them with the horizon of horror and terror. These may be staples of third world life, but they are alien to those of us leading more comfortable lives. For those of us who prefer to see salvation as liberation from suffering, *The Passion* confronts us with the scandal of Jesus, who invites us to live in solidarity with him by taking up our own crosses.

In the second place, the film's hyper-realism confronts us personally and somewhat internally. Gibson's filmmaking craft leaves no room for detached observation. Rather than dispassionate critique, *The Passion* provokes a decision either for or against. Gibson no doubt wishes this to be a deeply felt decision for Jesus Christ. Collaterally, though, this means that one's decisions for or against the film itself will be amplified and intense. From one perspective, we can understand strong reactions to *The Passion* from those who decide against it or find fault with the film. From another perspective, some tolerance is called for towards those whose reactions have seemed exaggerated, for these reactions have been prompted, not only by *The Passion's* content but by the horizon-confronting and hyper-real nature of the film.

Author: Dr Matthew C. Ogilvie is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at the Institute for Religious and Pastoral Studies, University of Dallas. A native of Sydney, Australia, he attended for six years the Catholic high school from which Mel Gibson graduated.
