

‘Animated icons’: Narrative and Liturgy in *The Passion of the Christ*

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Only slightly less surprising than Mel Gibson’s decision to make a Christian film about the Passion of Christ, using Aramaic and Latin dialogue with vernacular sub-titles, was the phenomenon of the film’s extraordinary success. *The Passion of the Christ* broke box office records, topped league tables, established itself with striking rapidity as one of the most popular religious films ever made, and even gave mainstream popular cinema a run for its money¹. Recent releases on video and DVD have sustained this popularity.

But admiration of the film is by no means universal. There has been a huge gap between the film’s hospitable acceptance by popular audiences, and the critical reception it met in newspapers and magazines (see North 2004). A UK national daily contained two league tables in one edition: the Film Critic’s ‘Top Ten Choices’, and the ‘Top Ten Box Office Hits’. In terms of contents both lists were identical, except for one variation. *The Passion of the Christ* topped the box office table, but failed to feature at all in the list of the film critic.

It is no longer uncommon for controversy to generate around films before they are seen (in the case of *The Passion*, before it was made). Cynics suspect such debates to be orchestrated as a form of pre-release publicity: ‘Gibson appears to have been doing what Hollywood producers always try to do: to get as much positive buzz as possible about his film before the public’ (Silk 2004). In the case of this film, however, passions did seem to be running genuinely high. Opinion emanating from Jewish groups alleging anti-semitism was uniformly hostile, and remained consistent whether the film had been seen or not (see Plate 2004, Klein 2004). Once the film was released, journalists and media

¹ *The Passion of the Christ* earned more than \$370 million at the U.S. box office, making it the 2nd most popular movie of the year after *Shrek 2*.

critics, affirming or adopting an atheistic or agnostic perspective, voiced comparable emotions of dislike. Subsequently evangelical Christian groups in America picked up the debate and again (to the surprise of many observers) began to distance themselves from the film.

The debate has indeed been hard to follow as a consequence of a surprising ignorance of Christian history and theology (or as Nicola Denzey politely puts it, a ‘general lack of biblical acumen’ [Denzey 2004]) on the part of many opinion leaders. Such ignorance is surprising to me as a specialist in this area: to many it will be seen, even welcomed, as a reliable index of cultural secularisation. But attempts to discuss the film have obliged people to engage with unfamiliar theological and ecclesial topics - the historicity of the gospels, biblical canon formation and gospel harmonisation, the theology of the Incarnation, Tridentine Catholicism and Vatican II – which are hardly normal chattering-class dinner-table conversation. Paula Frederickson reports encountering widely a condition of ‘genuine puzzlement over the controversy surrounding this movie’ (Frederickson 2004).

All these different groups, who would normally be at one another’s throats, agreed on one thing: they did not like *The Passion of the Christ*². Their aversion could be expressed in a number of different ways: the film was at best flawed and at worst worthless; its religious influence could only be pernicious; it would stir up ethnic and inter-faith hatred; people should not under any circumstances go to see it. Although Christ-films have often courted controversy³, never has so much attention been focused on a film by people advocating avoidance. In the words of Isaiah (53:5) they ‘hid as it were [their] faces from him’.

II

In March 2004 author Philip Pullman and the Archbishop of Canterbury staged a conversation at the National Theatre, chaired by Robert Butler, around the dramatization

² An attempt at ecumenical balance can be found in Gracia 2004.

³ Obvious cases are Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation* and *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*.

of Pullman's epic trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The subject of film and religion comes up, and it is suggested by Robert Butler that film represents religious stories in 'a very realistic way' - 'you're encouraged to think you're there' - whereas the theatre works in a more mediated manner, through metaphor. Rowan Williams argues to the contrary that film in fact is 'deeply metaphorical', a 'highly patterned and stylized visual sequence'. The film medium is inhabited by 'animated icons rather than representation' (Pullman and Williams 2004).

The speakers then turn to discuss Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, though neither has seen it. The film is described as selling itself on the basis that it is supremely realistic, enabling viewers to get close, 'to see what happened'. The atheist Pullman and the Archbishop both agree that this is undesirable: the former because moral reformation is not achieved by 'seeing someone tortured to death', the latter because 'the pivotal event in the history of the universe' cannot be represented naturalistically. Pullman asks which was the pivotal event, the Crucifixion or the Resurrection, since the latter 'doesn't come into the film' at all (in fact it does, but only as a brief concluding coda). Williams then defines the 'pivotal event' as neither the one nor the other, but rather the redemptive totality of the story, 'the whole Easter complex'. From the entry into Jerusalem to the post-Resurrection appearances that conclude three of the gospels, this 'complex' is certainly a sequence of events that can be found narrated in the gospels; but more importantly it represents a series of kerygmatic ritual moments which forms the basis, in the Catholic (or here of course Anglo-Catholic) church's traditional practice, for the liturgies of Holy Week:

You walk through the experience of Holy Week in a ... ritual way ... watching through the night; participating in a very curious and distinctive liturgy for Good Friday, with the bare cross being brought in and unveiled. All that attempting to say what a mere recitation of the story, or a mere photograph, couldn't say.

Using Karen Armstrong's distinction between 'myth' and 'logos' (Armstrong 2001), Pullman then suggests that cinematic representation must inevitably be 'rational', and must thereby eliminate the 'mythical' from its horizon.

If this were true, then film and religion would be pretty much incompatible. Film would be able to show only the observable psychological and social effects of religious experience, not spirituality itself. Indeed Joseph Cuneen (1993: 93) has argued that film's 'inevitable bias towards realism' explains the lack of interaction between film criticism and religious studies - 'serious study of religion in narrative film has been extremely limited'. Martin and Ostwalt (1995: 2) draw the same conclusion:

Scholars engaged in prevailing modes of film criticism have almost nothing to say about religion. And scholars who study religion have almost nothing to say about Hollywood film.

In addition, argues Cuneen, the Hollywood system, oriented towards popularity and profit, does not allow directors 'to make personal movies that suggest the depth of religious mystery' (Cuneen 1993: 93).

Enter Mel Gibson.

III

But before addressing *The Passion of the Christ* in these terms, I want to follow up Rowan Williams' idea of the Passion as participatory ritual rather than 'realistic' gospel narrative. Most people who went to see the film could be expected to assume that Christian theology is embodied principally in the canonical gospels, which present quasi-biographical narratives of the life, teaching and death of Jesus. Despite their status as divine scripture, the Christian gospels are 'realistic' in style; they are anchored in history; they correspond to Jakob Lotter's definition of narrative as 'a chain of events which is situated in time and space' (Lotter 2000: 1).

They are also of course narratives of events that occur outside time and space, and they include miraculous and mystical materials that would be hard to integrate into any conception of ‘realism’. But compared to the scriptures of other religions, the Christian gospels are surprisingly down to earth, a difference arising from the Incarnational theology of the ‘Son of Man’. Unlike the transcendent divinities of Judaism and Islam, Christ through the Incarnation takes on human form, and thereby becomes accessible to representation. In the Gospels, when miracles occur, they are described in realistic detail; and only rarely do we see Jesus slipping momentarily out of the human frame, and as it were re-appearing to be glimpsed through the lens of divinity, as happens in the Transfiguration (Matthew, 17:1-6; Mark, 9:1-8; Luke, 9:28-36); and of course the Ascension (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51). Since the early 19th century, artists have found it a relatively straightforward matter, whether from a Christian or a non-Christian point of view, to turn the stories of the gospels into prose fiction and narrative film.

But are such narratives the natural or essential language of Christian belief? The canonical gospels were written from the 70s onwards. The earliest documents of Christian theology, written in the 50s, are the letters of St Paul. All scholars agree that the gospels were written later than Paul’s letters, that Mark is the earliest of the gospels, and that narrative and discursive elaboration increases with chronological distance from the historical events, culminating in the gospel according to John. A sequential reading of the Bible’s books (*‘biblia’*) encounters Paul’s letters *after* the gospels, out of chronological sequence, and the inexperienced reader would naturally assume that Paul is quoting or citing from already formulated narrative sources. He may have been; but Paul’s Christology does not depend on narrative. It is anachronistic, *kerygmatic*⁴ and liturgical.

Paul’s ‘undisputed’ letters⁵ contain virtually no narrative representation of the life, actions, and teaching of Christ, other than a handful of references to the salient events of

⁴ *‘Kerygma’* is gospel proclamation as distinct from *‘didache’* or doctrinal instruction. Theodore Ziolkowski argues that modern fictional representations of Christ normally eschew ‘kerygmatic’ events such as the Resurrection in favour of ‘transfigurative’ events that can be portrayed naturalistically (Ziolkowski 1972: 11).

⁵ Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

Holy Week: the institution of the Eucharist, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. Paul shows hardly any interest in the story of Jesus' life, and little interest in his teachings. His focus is exclusively on Christ's death and resurrection. Even the famous passage in 1 Corinthians on the Last Supper, which adopts a linear narrative form, is much more concerned with a timeless pattern of sacrifice and redemption than with Jesus' biography, representational accuracy or historical detail:

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the *same* night in which he was betrayed took bread:

And when he had given thanks, he brake *it*, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

After the same manner also *he took* the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it*, in remembrance of me.

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come (St Paul, 1 Corinthians 11.23-26, in Carrol and Prickett 1997: NT 216).

In other words Paul's focus is not on the autobiography of Jesus the Son of Man, but on the transcendent divine actions of Jesus the Son of God, on those events that demonstrate the true meaning of Incarnation, the 'intersection of the timeless/With time' (Eliot 1941: n.p; 1944: 32). And of course discursively Paul is not here recounting a story, but offering a verbal sacrifice: for what is enacted here in the poetic prose of the epistle is nothing less than the sacrament of the Eucharist. This is not an episode in a narrative, but a transcendent liturgical moment that crosses 2000 years to link the first Holy Thursday, the rituals of the early church and the daily sacrifice of the Catholic Mass.

In a similar way when Paul cites the post-resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15, he links the unmediated experience of the apostles, who physically encountered the risen Christ, to the apparition that accompanied his own conversion on the Road to Damascus:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time (St Paul, 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8, in Carroll and Prickett, 1997: NT 219).

The ostensible continuity invoked here is misleading, since these apparitions are clearly of a different order. What sounds like a historical sequence of parallel events is actually an anachronistic conflating ('Out of due time') of literal encounters with the risen Christ, and the visionary conversion narrative that tells Paul's own story. For Paul, when God irrupted into his own life the impact of that event constituted an 'appearance' comparable to those witnessed after the Resurrection. This narrative is not a history, 'one damn thing after another', but the same kerygmatic event repeated over and over again.

Paul's Eucharistic theology corresponds to Rowan Williams' description of the Easter rite as a participatory ceremonial to be experienced, rather than an impersonal narrative to be heard, or a visual representation to be gazed at. This distinction has profound implications for a filmic account of the Passion, and for the experience of its audiences. The Gospel accounts provide the kind of linear narrative that turns itself easily into fictional prose or narrative film. All mainstream Christ-films follow, wholly or partly, the

Gospel narrative, often beginning in the beginning with the Annunciation and the Nativity. Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, despite its putative link with Anthony Burgess's modernist novel *Man of Nazareth*, nonetheless follows the gospels in strict linear sequence; Pasolini's *The Gospel of St Matthew*, which clearly has links in terms of setting and casting with the traditional communal Passion Play, follows a straight path through the gospel narrative from Annunciation to Resurrection; and Scorsese's radical treatment in *The Last Temptation of Christ* tells the same story, albeit with the interpolation of the famous might-have-been flashback⁶.

Even *The Passion of the Christ*, which spans only the last day of Jesus' mortal life, has a plot that can be traced exactly in the gospels. And Mel Gibson has repeatedly claimed, as any obedient Catholic inevitably would, that his film is based on the gospels (Gibson, 'Foreword' in Duncan and Antonello 2004). But clearly it differs strikingly from the traditional filmed gospels; and in its concentration on one final day, from Gethsemane to Golgotha, the film truncates imaginary time and space into a palpably experiential, non-narrative concentration, consisting of scenes which do not progress an action, but rather show the same action repeated over and over again. The reason for this difference is that the film's narrative and dramatic structure owes less to the gospels than to a cultural form within which time and narrative assume very specialized meanings: the ritual and liturgy of the traditional Catholic Mass.

IV

Gospel readings are of course part of the Mass, but only a part, and only in the shape of relatively brief passages forming the separate 'doctrinal' element ('The Mass of the Catechumens') that precedes the sacrament ('The Mass of the Faithful'). In performing the Eucharistic ritual, a 'mysterious re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice' (*Daily Missal* 1956: 507), the church is commemorating the rite established on the first Holy Thursday, but also, in Catholic belief, reenacting a sacrifice instituted before the beginning of time,

⁶ 'Flashback' is used here to denote the filmic technique that alters the natural order of a narrative, taking the story order back chronologically in time to a previous or past event, scene, or sequence that took place prior to the present time frame of the film.

which in turn anticipates an ultimate return and reconciliation to take place at time's end. The short affirmation known as *mysterium fidei* or the 'Proclamation of Faith' demonstrates how, in what appears to be a transparently linear sequence of events, time is disturbed and dissociated:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again

On the face of it this is a simple, textbook narrative sequence constituting a 'story'. But the death commemorated is an event out of time, synonymous with a Resurrection that is ever present ('Christ *is* risen'), and a sacrifice that is renewed daily, for believers, in the Catholic Mass. In turn the Eucharist represents not only a historical sacrifice that took place in the past, but the Eucharistic promise of a final eschaton that lies at the other end of time ('shew the Lord's death until he come').

Profound implications for film narrative flow therefore from Gibson's traditional, many would say reactionary, Catholic faith. As Terry Mattingley observes,

It is crucial to realize that the images and language at the heart of *The Passion of the Christ* flow directly out of Gibson's personal dedication to Catholicism in one of its most traditional and mysterious forms – the 16th century Latin Mass (quoted in Kjos 2004: 2).

And Gibson is cited in the same source as saying:

The goal of the movie is to shake modern audiences by brashly juxtaposing the sacrifice of the cross with the sacrifice of the altar – which is the same thing ... The script of *The Passion of the Christ* was specifically intended to link the crucifixion of Christ with what Roman Catholics believe is the re-sacrificing of Christ that occurs in the Mass (quoted in Kjos 2004: 2).

The structure of *The Passion of the Christ* is not therefore based in linear narrative, but in simultaneity and montage; it concentrates time and space in order to transcend them; and its style of close-up realism ultimately serves an anti-realist agenda. To locate the film within the famous Eisenstein-Bazin debate on the nature of cinema, *The Passion of the Christ* works by juxtaposing images to invoke transcendent truth, rather than by delineating space to transcribe the real. Or as Gerald Mast puts it in a useful description of film time, Gibson's film 'imprisons the attention' by using

the cumulative kinetic hypnosis of the *uninterrupted* flow of film and time. Because the art of cinema most closely parallels the operation of time, it imprisons the attention within a hypnotic grip that becomes steadily tighter and stronger (if the work is properly built) as the film progresses and it refuses to let go until it has had its way (Mast 1983: 113).

V

The film's juxtaposition of the Passion and the Mass also helps to explain Gibson's explicit indebtedness to the *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, dictated around 1820 by the Augustinian nun Anna Catherine Emmerich to the poet Klemens Brentano.

The Dolorous Passion consists of a series of dream-visions in which Sister Emmerich imagines herself anachronistically witnessing the events of the Passion. The narrative purports therefore to be that of an eyewitness, positioned in close proximity to the events. Sr. Emmerich spoke of her visions as 'shown' to her, in much the same manner as those of the 15th century mystic Julian of Norwich. She does not think of herself as traveling through time, but rather placed in a position of vantage, as a bystander or witness, from which the eternal sacrifice could be clearly seen. She 'sees' the events of the Passion as they unfold; she 'understands' some things and not others; she remembers with formidable accuracy, but forgets details, some of which are later recollected.

The visions were precisely visualized and deeply felt experiences that could be replayed again in the same form, almost like recorded films: 'I have always seen' for example 'the Pasch [Passover] and the institution of the Blessed Sacrament take place in the order related above' (Emmerich 1862: 89). Hence the visions are very detailed in their historical representation and physical embodiment, so much so that the book stands as a very early example of the novelistic fictionalization of the Passion story: 'Emmerich's narrative reads in some ways like a skillfully crafted historical novel' (Strohmeier in Emmerich 2003: 9).

Take Sr. Emmerich's account of the scourging of Jesus, which Gibson clearly used in his film:

Thus was the Holy of Holies violently stretched, without a particle of clothing, on a pillar used for the punishment of the greatest criminals; and then did two furious ruffians who were thirsting for his blood begin in the most barbarous manner to scourge his sacred body from head to foot. The whips or scourges which they first made use of appeared to me to be made of a species of flexible white wood, but perhaps they were composed of the sinews of the ox, or of strips of leather ... Then two fresh executioners commenced scourging Jesus with the greatest possible fury; they made use of a different kind of rod,- a species of thorny stick, covered with knots and splinters. The blows from these sticks tore his flesh to pieces; his blood spouted out so as to stain their arms, and he groaned, prayed, and shuddered ... Two fresh executioners took the places of the last mentioned, who were beginning to flag; their scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow. What word, alas! Could describe this terrible--this heartrending scene! (Emmerich 1862: 204-7).

Based on the very brief references in the gospels to the scourging (e.g. Matthew 27:26), Sr. Emmerich is extraordinarily precise as to the implements used, the attitudes of the scourgers, the reactions of the victim. 'The appeal of Emmerich's account of the Passion

and Resurrection’, Strohmeier observes, ‘rests in large part upon the author’s sensitivity to the inner conflicts of her subjects, and her gift for identifying the significant visual, historic or psychological detail’ (Strohmeier in Emmerich 2003: 10). In this way her narrative can be imagined as filling out detail absent from the gospels, in the form of a sensuously thick description that provides ample substance for a director’s mis-en-scene.

The *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord* can thus be read as a hyper-realistic imaginative account of the Crucifixion, fully and clearly visualized by a floating disembodied consciousness capable of observation, knowledge and compassionate feeling. Mel Gibson’s recourse to Sr. Emmerich’s visions would appear at first glance to intensify the assumed ‘realism’ of the film, to enable the director to get up close to his historical subject, to ‘see what happened’ (Pullman and Williams 2004); or in the Pope’s alleged comment, ‘It is as it was’ (*Zenit* 2003). ‘I wanted’ Gibson is quoted as saying ‘to bring you there’ (Horne 2004).

Although Sr. Emmerich was treated very supportively by the local nobility and clergy who facilitated Brentano’s capture of the visions and their publication, there was clearly some potentiality of embarrassment for the church, as is always the case, when confronted with this kind of individual visionary inspiration. Klemens Brentano protested in his preface ‘To the Reader’, that no deviation from the truth of scripture was intended:

Whoever compares the following meditations with the short history of the Last Supper given in the Gospel will discover some slight differences between them. An explanation should be given of this, although it can never be sufficiently impressed upon the reader that these writings have no pretensions whatever to add an iota to Sacred Scripture as interpreted by the Church (Emmerich 1862: 61).

‘The Preface to the French Translation’ by the Abbe de Cazales strikes a similarly defensive note, but risks a slightly more open-minded stance. He calls the visions a ‘paraphrase of the Gospel narrative’, and praises them for their accuracy and truthfulness.

But he also acknowledges that they contain material not to be found in the gospels, but which derive from post-apostolic Christological tradition:

Although [the translator] is aware that St. Bonaventure and many others, in their paraphrases of the Gospel history, have mixed up traditional details with those given in the sacred text, St. Bonaventure professed only to give a paraphrase ... these revelations appear to be something more. It is certain that the holy maiden herself gave them no higher title than that of dreams, and that the transcriber of her narratives treats as blasphemous the idea of regarding them in any degree as equivalent to a fifth Gospel; still it is evident that the confessors who exhorted Sister Emmerich to relate what she saw, the celebrated poet who passed four years near her couch, eagerly transcribing all he heard her say, and the German Bishops, who encouraged the publication of his book, considered it as something more than a paraphrase (Emmerich 1862: 1-2).

Mel Gibson echoes these cautious invocations when he writes that ‘Holy Scripture and accepted visions of the Passion were the only possible texts I could draw from to fashion a dramatic film’ (Gibson, ‘Foreword’ in Duncan and Antonello 2004). Elsewhere he revealed his enthusiasm for the 19th century mystic’s ‘accepted visions’:

When Gibson returned to his faith, he acquired, from a nunnery that had closed down, a library of hundreds of books, many of them quite old. He says that when he was researching the Passion one evening he reached up for a book, and Brentano’s volume tumbled out of the shelf into his hands. He sat down to read it, and was flabbergasted by the vivid imagery of Emmerich’s visions.

‘Amazing images’, he said. ‘She supplied me with stuff I would never have thought of’ (Boyer 2004).

What then are the variances between the gospels and Sr. Emmerich’s visions? What Sr. Emmerich observed in her imaginative revisiting of the events of 33 AD was a Passion retrospectively reshaped by centuries of Catholic tradition. Many of the traditional, non-

canonical details that confused lay viewers of the Gibson film – the veil of Veronica, the sequence of falls with the Cross, Jesus meeting his mother on the Via Dolorosa – are apocryphal post-apostolic details which in Sr. Emmerich’s narrative are anachronistically reinstated into the original event. This technique is rendered explicit in a self-reflexive reference to the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene performing the Good Friday rite known as ‘the Way of the Cross’ before any such ritual could possibly have existed:

The Blessed Virgin knelt down frequently and kissed the ground where her Son had fallen, while Magdalen wrung her hands in bitter grief, and John, although he could not restrain his own tears, endeavoured to console his companions, supported and led them on. Thus was the holy devotion of the 'Way of the Cross' first practiced; thus were the Mysteries of the Passion of Jesus first honoured, even before that Passion was accomplished (Emmerich 1862: 188).

The ‘Stations of the Cross’ are seen not as a later Holy Week liturgy, but as specific spots in time and space consecrated by the Virgin’s mourning:

Thus at each station, marked by the sufferings of her Son, did she lay up in her heart the inexhaustible merits of his Passion (Emmerich 1862: 188).

Thus the ‘first pilgrimage through the stations of the Way of the Cross’ is seen not as a subsequent commemorative invention, but as a sacramental event taking place during the course of the Passion itself. What Sr. Emmerich ‘saw’ in her visions was the concrete realization of a historical martyrdom retrospectively framed by the structure of the Holy Week liturgy, which is replicated microcosmically in the Eucharist. Notwithstanding the richness of detail, her account of Christ’s suffering is as firmly focused on death and resurrection as was St. Paul’s. As I will demonstrate, Sr. Emmerich’s reconstruction of the Passion via the traditional liturgy of the church provided Mel Gibson with a method for his film as well as with rich topographical detail and abundance of local colour.

VI

This is clearly visible in the structure of *The Dolorous Passion*, which divides into two parts, one dealing in four ‘meditations’ with the Last Supper, the other in 66 chapters with the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Gibson chose to conflate these separate visions by focusing on the twelve hours of the Passion, and interpolating visual allusions to the Last Supper at strategic points in the film. This device of using brief flashbacks to punctuate the Passion proper is a central narrative device in the film, and has drawn much critical attention (though often for the wrong reasons). Most, not all, the flashback episodes are from the Last Supper, which effectively constitutes the ‘backstory’ of the Passion itself.

Viewers trying to make sense of *The Passion* as another conventional Christ-film have naturally been attracted to flashback details that seem to complete some aspect of the relatively familiar gospel narrative that normally informs and dominates filmic treatment. The unrelenting continuum of punishment that many viewers find unbearable in Gibson’s film is, in a sense, relieved by allusions to the longer perspective of Jesus’ life and ministry: childhood and adolescence, scenes of teaching such as the Sermon on the Mount, pivotal episodes such as that of ‘the woman taken in adultery’. Newspaper and magazine reviews universally homed in on these details, clutching at the reassuring lineaments of biblical narrative elaboration. Some viewers cried for more: ‘Nor do the numerous flashback interludes depicting scenes from Jesus’ life, ranging from the trivial (his trade as a carpenter) to the portentous (the Last Supper), offer significant respite from the single-minded onslaught of his physical suffering’ (Kermode 2004). In the film it is true that all these references are carefully considered and strategically placed: but they vary enormously in their impact and signifying power, and it is questionable whether some should have been included at all.

For example during the long and painful scourging sequence, the camera alternates viewpoints and reaction shots between the suffering Jesus and the observers Mary Magdalene and the Blessed Virgin. At one point the camera shows a close-up of Magdalene, followed by a subjective camera shot from her viewpoint, which in turn triggers a flashback to the episode of ‘the woman taken in adultery’. The two Marys are

painstakingly mopping up Jesus' blood with towels given to them by Pilate's wife in an episode provided by Sr. Emmerich rather than the gospels (Emmerich 1862: 209-10). Mary's ground-level gaze recalls the scene of her rescue from execution by Jesus. From her viewpoint we see a foot (several shots of feet, as seen by Jesus himself, have already appeared, so Mary is sharing the same vantage-point of abasement and humility), and then, still at ground level, we see Jesus writing in the sand, drawing a line between Magdalene and the crowd who were about to stone her. We then see her hand stretched out to touch his foot, followed by his hand stretched down to take her up. A clear parallel is established between the bruised and beaten body of the woman, and the scourged and battered body of the Saviour. In the 'woman taken in adultery' episode Jesus saves Mary from the inexorable punishment of the Mosaic Law; now through the suffering of the Passion he offers the same forgiveness to all humanity. The complete parable of forgiveness, reconciliation and transcendence of the old Law illustrates Isaiah's great words of prophecy, which appear as an epigraph to the film:

Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows ... he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53: 4-5, in Carroll and Prickett 1997: OT 815)⁷.

In a later example of flashback, the reactive face of the Blessed Virgin Mary witnessing Jesus falling under the cross is used to cascade a recollected scene of the infant Jesus falling and hurting himself, a scene which virtually all viewers found affecting. The mother's care for her martyred son, which has of course generated some of the most sublime devotional art of all time (the poetry and music of the *Stabat Mater*, Michelangelo's *Pieta*) is part of the essential experience of the Cross; but equally, Catholic art has produced innumerable representations of the infant Jesus which prefigure the ultimate agony of the Passion, from Byzantine icons such as *Our Lady of Perpetual Succour* to Murillo's *Christ Child Resting on the Cross* (Finaldi 2000, 65) and Millais'

⁷ The whole of this great passage, spoken by Nicodemus, is interpolated into the Crucifixion in Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (Barclay 1977: 115).

Christ in the House of His Parents (The Carpenter's Shop) (Grubb 1996, 55). The scene is reprised when Jesus meets his mother on the road to Calvary.

Both these episodes are integrated into the concentrated Passion narrative: they enrich its meaning rather than draw the viewer's attention elsewhere. Even these relatively successful examples seem to me however to be distractions from the Passion. In the 'infancy' insert just discussed, and in the sound-bites from the Sermon on the Mount, which though relevant are by no means free from what Philip Horne has called 'the pearly light of TV-evangelist sincerity' (Horne 2004), it is apparent that Gibson has been seduced by the temptations of narrative into momentary lapses of concentration. Evidence for this analysis is abundant in the reactions of commentators who clearly hated their attention being 'taken prisoner' by the film, yet found interpolations such as the childhood tumble emotionally affecting. Nothing could demonstrate more conclusively that here attention is being distracted, often willingly, from absorption in the central mystery, towards sentimental narrative and relatively innocuous teaching. In the worst lapse of all, the scene where we see a young Jesus at work in his father's shop, engaged in some lame comedy around the construction of a table, the loss of focus is complete. Gibson would have been better advised to follow many other artists who have worked in this medium, and explored parallels between carpentry and execution, between the wood of the carpenter's shop and the wood of the cross. Or better still, to have left this scene among the shavings on the craftsman's floor.

VII

The dramatic references back to the Last Supper, which are dispersed across the film but concentrated around the Crucifixion itself, are of an entirely different order. Here instead of a momentary allusion we have a sustained parallel, with the Last Supper and the Crucifixion running together, interweaving and literally bleeding into one another.

The events of the Last Supper, which is commemorated in Catholic tradition on Holy Thursday, are narrated in all four gospels, and consist of the Institution of the Eucharist,

the 'Lord's Supper'; the washing by Jesus of the disciples' feet; and the 'Mandatum' (hence the name 'Maundy Thursday') 'These things I command you: that ye love one another' (John, 15:17). In the church these elements are all commemorated, and the altar is then stripped, with the focus shifting to a symbolic garden of Gethsemane for a ritual of watching and prayer.

In *The Passion of the Christ* 'The Washing of the Feet' is interpolated into the scourging scene, and focuses on the apostle John. Jesus sees the foot of one of the soldiers who is punishing him, which triggers a recollection of his washing of John's feet, accompanied by words taken from John's gospel:

If the world hates you remember that it has hated me first. Remember that no servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. You must not be afraid. The helper will come who reveals the truth about God and who comes from the Father (adapted from John 15: 18-26).

The physical detail of the close-up foot serves to anchor this meditation on humility and sacrifice, and the flashback ends with a return to the foot of the soldier. An officer appears and reprimands the men for excessive cruelty: they were not 'ordered' to kill him. '*mandatum erat hominem punire: non eum castigare usque ad mortuum*'. The Latin word 'mandatum' in his speech connects responsibility for Christ's martyrdom with his own commandment to the disciples to practice and preach a gospel of love ('*Haec mando vobis ...*', John, 15:17).

Later another flashback is triggered by Pilate's ritual cleansing of his hands to clear himself of responsibility for Jesus's death. A bowl is brought for Pilate to wash, which precipitates another flashback to the Last Supper, showing John washing Jesus' hands prior to his taking the bread. In the Mass the priest's hands are washed by a Deacon before touching the consecrated Host, in a rite known as the '*Lavabo*': '*Lavabo inter innocentes manus meas*' (*Daily Missal* 1956: 528). In the film we then see Pilate drying

his hands on a white towel and saying, in Aramaic: 'I am innocent of this man's blood'. Again a verbal echo, together with the liturgical cross-reference, ironically parallels sacerdotal ablution with Pilate's desperate efforts to evade guilt.

With the Crucifixion itself we encounter the most detailed and systematic cross-referencing with the ritual that lies at the heart of the Last Supper, the Eucharist. As Jesus rises to his feet on Mount Golgotha, we see him in an inverted overhead shot, looking upwards, then from his viewpoint we see the sky dissolving into light. In a cut to the Upper Room at the Passover we see bread brought to the table, and Jesus unwrapping it from its enclosing napkin. A cut back to Golgotha shows Jesus' body being stripped of its garments. Body and bread are juxtaposed in a montage of images, as they are united in a single sacrifice. Subsequently Jesus looks at John, and again we are back in the Upper Room on Holy Thursday, with Jesus saying:

There is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life for his friends (adapted from John 15: 13).

Jesus is laid on the cross, and a nail placed in the palm of his hand. We see the nail from his viewpoint, then revert again to the Last Supper:

I cannot be with you much longer my friends. You cannot go where I am going. My commandment to you after I am gone is this: love one another. As I have loved you, love one another (adapted from John 13: 34).

The nail is hammered in, and we see the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene feeling the blows in their own bodies (as Sr. Emmerich puts it, 'the Blessed Virgin, Magdalene and all those who had been present at the Crucifixion, felt each blow transfix their hearts' [Emmerich 1862: 294]). Then it is back to the last Supper again:

You believe in me. You know that I am the way, the Truth and the Life. And no-one comes to the father but by me (adapted from John 14: 6).

In the scene showing Jesus being nailed to the cross Gibson follows Emmerich closely, but again allows the Passion and the Eucharist to interpenetrate:

The executioners did not allow him to rest long, but bade him rise and place himself on the cross that they might nail him to it. Then seizing his right arm they dragged it to the hole prepared for the nail ... The nails were very large, the heads about the size of a crown piece, and the thickness that of a man's thumb, while the points came through at the back of the cross ... When the executioners had nailed the right hand of our Lord, they perceived that his left hand did not reach the hole they had bored to receive the nail, therefore they tied ropes to his left arm, and having steadied their feet against the cross, pulled the left hand violently until it reached the place prepared for it. This dreadful process caused our Lord indescribable agony, his breast heaved, and his legs were quite contracted. They again knelt upon him, tied down his arms, and drove the second nail into his left hand; his blood flowed afresh, and his feeble groans were once more heard between the blows of the hammer, but nothing could move the hard-hearted executioners to the slightest pity (Emmerich 1862: 253).

Similarly in the film Jesus' arm is stretched to fit the pre-drilled hole in the cross with an audible snap of dislocation. At this point he cries prematurely:

Father forgive them ...

In this tortuous breaking and stretching of the body to fit the cross, the redemptive sacrifice is effectively complete. Jesus has embraced the cross; cross and Christ have become one, 'a perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world' (Article XXXI, *Book of Common Prayer* 1662). The attitudes and expressions of both Marys change during this sequence, from bitter despair to an awed reverence, as mere human suffering gives way to divine transcendence, and the sign of the cross rises against the sky. The offering of bread at the Last Supper, which follows,

commemorated in the Mass by the elevation of the Host, is simply another way of putting the same thing, in however many languages.

QABILU LEH AKULU. DNA HU GISHMI (Duncan and Antonello 2004: 113).

Take this and eat. This is my body (Matthew 26: 26)

Hoc est enim corpus meum (Daily Missal 1956: 564).

We see the cross raised with the Christ on it: the body of the crucified has become the Crucifix. The Last Supper defines this offering of blood, again repeated in the Mass as the elevation of the chalice:

QABILU SHTEYU. DNA D'MI (Duncan and Antonello 2004: 115).

Take and drink. This is my blood (Matthew 26: 27-8).

Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei (Daily Missal 1956: 565)

The primary objective of the film's narrative and dramatic structure is then to confirm the indissoluble identity between the sacrifice of the Passion, and the sacrifice of the Mass. This is a wholly orthodox Tridentine approach, as set out in the pre-Vatican II Missal:

The supreme act of Divine Worship in the Church is the holy sacrifice of the Mass. This sacrifice is identical with that offered by Christ on the Cross ... The sacrifice of the Mass is the memorial, the renewal and the application of the sacrifice of Calvary (*Daily Missal 1956: 3*).

The text cited here also quotes from the Council of Trent:

In the sacrifice of the Mass, the same Christ is contained and offered in an unbloody manner, who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the Cross (*Daily Missal* 1956: 3).

This juxtaposition is established equally clearly in the book of still images from the film (Duncan and Antonello 2004) where we find on facing pages the Passover meal and the nail placed in the palm (105-6); the Crucifixion, and the blessing of the bread (112-13); the pierced feet, and the offering of the chalice (114-15).

Critics obviously noted that the unrelenting agony of the Crucifixion is punctuated with brief flashback scenes to the Last Supper. But generally they supposed this to be some kind of light relief, to take our minds off the pain by recalling scenes of companionship and love (see Kermode 2004). Christologically the Last Supper is there because it is the first prospective re-enactment of the Crucifixion. It is the same self-offering, the same pouring out of the soul to death, in the breaking of the bread, and the nailing on the cross; in the sharing of the cup, and the shedding of the blood. This is my body, which is given up for you; this is my blood of the new covenant. Bread, wine, body, blood; the death on the cross, the nails and the piercing. As Vittorio Messori puts it in one of the best commentaries on the film, ‘the blood of the Passion is continuously intermingled with the wine of the Mass, the tortured flesh of the ‘Corpus Christi’ [body of Christ] with the consecrated bread’:

Gibson produced the movie to be ‘a Mass’, because he believes that the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass are one and the same, as taught by the Council of Trent (Messori 2004).

The use of unfamiliar ancient languages also parallels the Tridentine Latin Mass:

This film, for its author, is a Mass: let it be then, in an obscure language, as it was for so many centuries. If the mind does not understand, so much the better. What

matters is that the heart understands that all that happens redeems us from sin and opens to us the doors of salvation (Messori 2004).

The film is ritualistic in its enactment of the Eucharist, as past history and present sacrament: love and death united in one awful moment, but a moment repeated daily in real and eternal time at the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

VIII

The Passion of the Christ is something more than, or at least other than, a film. It is also a votive offering, a memorial of the Christian Redemption, a celebration of the Eucharist. The audience is not invited passively to ‘gaze’, nor even actively to ‘watch’; but rather voluntarily to participate in a ritual of shared suffering.

It is not at all surprising then that reluctance and resistance should be natural reactions from many viewers invited into such unfamiliar, even unwelcome territory. Normally Christ-films address mass audiences by offering a much wider repertoire of interests and ways of engaging: giving to the non-Christian or agnostic ‘Jesus the admirable moral teacher’, or ‘Jesus the compelling example of human self-sacrifice’; offering to the atheist a radical or revolutionary, wholly or partially secularised or humanised Christ. Gibson’s film by contrast is unrelenting in its insistence on the divinity of Christ, and on the sacramental participation of the audience. These factors explain both the film’s power and difficulty.

For example the film’s notorious violence and cruelty have been linked, not with comparable Christ-films, or with traditional representations of the Passion in the visual arts, but with the violence of other films in which Mel Gibson has participated, and with Hollywood screen violence in general. So the film has been compared, not with *King of Kings*; *The Greatest Story Ever Told*; *The Gospel According to St Matthew*; *Jesus of Nazareth*; *The Last Temptation of Christ* - but to *The Exorcist* or *Saving Private Ryan*. Mel Gibson as director has been compared not with Nicholas Ray, George Stevens,

Pasolini, Zeffirelli, Scorsese; but to the characters he himself played in *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon*.

In fact *The Passion of the Christ* challenges rather than reflects conventional screen violence. People are routinely treated in Hollywood films to similar ordeals, but always as a preparation for fighting back. Viewers noted that with a closed, swollen eye acquired early on in the film, Gibson's Jesus resembles Sylvester Stallone as Rocky. He does: but unlike Rocky, Jesus does not retaliate. Rocky always wins⁸. Jesus is not taking a vicious beating that will later justify even more vicious retribution and revenge; He is bearing the chastisement of our peace.

Violence works in this film to subvert Hollywood conventions. The ordeal of the Passion, Latin *passus* or suffering, is an ordeal of subjection, of helplessness, as well as one of violence. Witnessing such voluntary subjection, such willed helplessness, the audience has no choice but to feel com-passion, suffering with the subjected victim. By focalising spectator perceptions through the viewpoints of John, the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene, Gibson's camera guides the audience into a sympathy that is racked with the guilt of enforced helplessness. Audiences are accustomed to suffering with the subjected hero, but accustomed also to facilitating his earned manumission from the servitude of pain. In this case the audience is obliged to contemplate the agony of suffering, but is denied the pleasures of resistance and retribution.

This is a painful position for a voyeur to occupy, and explains both the rapture of audiences and the resentment of critics. To witness such agony and to be unable vicariously to help reduces spectators to tears, and critics to uncomfortable silence. 'What you've heard about how audiences reacted is true' said broadcaster John Dean. 'There was no sound after the film's conclusion. No noise at all. No one got up. No one moved. The only sound one could hear was sobbing' (quoted in Kjos 2004: 2-3). When I saw it the entire audience, mainly of young people, cried throughout the performance. At many

⁸ *Rocky* is in any case a Christian allegory, minus the bit about the other cheek (Martin and Ostwalt 1995: 1).

points some literally could not look, could not see. Neither gazing nor watching, but averting their eyes from the screen. They hid as it were their faces from Him.

One imagines this is exactly how Mel Gibson wanted it. He elected to constitute his audience not as detached spectators observing a historical fiction, but as embedded participants sharing in a sacramental mystery. This has nothing to do with sadism, or voyeurism, or attachment to historical realism. Gibson wants his viewer up close to the ordeal of the Passion, not in order to check out the authenticity, or to endure an exploitative shudder, but to appreciate that the occasion of Christ's suffering is the sinfulness of humanity. We are not even permitted the luxury of loathing the Roman torturers, though loathsome they certainly are, since Jesus so graciously forgives them. We, as audience, cannot facilitate the cessation of this pain, because we are the cause of it, and because only God has the power to begin and end it (during the scourging the Blessed Virgin mentally asks her son: 'When, where, how will you choose to be delivered of this?'). Again this is an obstinately Christian view that is surely virtually impossible for unbelievers to share. It is strongly present in Gibson's source, where Sr. Emmerich sees the procession of her own sins included in the universal guilt that tortures Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane ('the sins we so frequently commit, and which are, in fact, a species of consent which we give to, and a participation in, the tortures which were inflicted on Jesus by his cruel enemies' [Emmerich 1862: 165-6]). And it is also present in the film, where it is Mel Gibson's own hand that we see piercing with a nail the palm of the Saviour.

IX

Gibson spoke of *The Passion of the Christ* in terms of the Greek word '*aletheia*', 'truth' (literally what is not forgotten in the oblivion of Lethe):

The film is not meant as a historical documentary, nor does it claim to have assembled all the facts. But it does enumerate those described in Holy Scripture. It is not merely representative or merely expressive. I think of it as contemplative in the

sense that one is compelled to remember (unforget) in a spiritual way which cannot be articulated, only experienced (Gibson, 'Foreword' in Duncan and Antonello 2004).

A parallel Greek word '*anamnesis*' (ἀνάμνησις), used by Plato to denote the soul-memory that survives immersion in Lethe, became in Christian terminology a technical term associated with the Eucharist. Like '*aletheia*', it means more than its usual translation 'remembrance', and suggests a proactive dispelling of oblivion, an insistence on preserving or reinstating the past as a present reality. '*Aletheia*' and '*anamnesis*' are more than just 'remembrance of things past': they are actions of restoration and revivification, 're-collection' and 're-membering'. They are acts of faith.

Gibson also however speaks here of 'compulsion', which may be a spiritual obligation to him, but becomes an onus on his viewer. The compulsion of *aletheia* leaves the disinterested open-minded liberal spectator with precious little room for manoeuvre. In addition this compelled unforgetting is to take place in a 'spiritual way' that 'cannot be articulated, only experienced'. This is entirely in line with the 'contemplative' tradition on which Gibson has drawn through *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*: a tradition characterised by 'vision' and 'showing', the apprehension of images rather than words, things rather than ideas. It also connects the film with the vivid sensuous pictorialism of counter-Reformation visual art, to which Gibson also alludes: 'I began to look at the work of some of the great artists who had drawn inspiration from the same story: Caravaggio ... Mantegna' (Gibson, 'Foreword' in Duncan and Antonello 2004); and to the active devotional contemplation recommended by St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. These are all examples of visualized mysteries that defy rational comprehension. As Messori puts it, 'If the mind does not understand, so much the better. What matters is that the heart understands' (Messori 2004).

Such contemplation is then essentially visual and deeply filmic. It privileges the image over the word; experience over articulation; immediacy over exposition; repetition over continuity; and where we would expect to find narrative, we encounter instead a timeless domain of inward contemplation. Viewers caught up in this medium, their attention

‘imprisoned’ (Mast 1983: 113) or ‘compelled’ (Gibson, ‘Foreword’ in Duncan and Antonello 2004), could find their experience so unlike normal cinematic pleasure as to constitute something other than film:

This is not a movie that anyone will ‘like’ ... There isn’t even the sense that one has just watched a movie. What it is ... is an *experience* on a level of primary emotion that is scarcely comprehensible (John Dean, quoted in Kjos 2004: 2).

The film’s ‘compulsion’ is also admittedly and unashamedly proselytising, doctrinaire, evangelical, as Gibson made clear:

I wanted the effort to be a testament to the infinite love of Jesus the Christ, which has saved, and continues to save, many the world over.

My hope is that *The Passion of the Christ* will help many more people recognize the power of His love and let him help them to save their own lives (Gibson, ‘Foreword’ in Duncan and Antonello 2004).

But this Catholic evangelism is quite unlike the more familiar Protestant evangelicalism that dominates modern Christianity, especially in North America. The savagery and splendour of counter-Reformation iconography can only appear as idolatrous to protestant Christians brought up in Reformation iconoclasm:

Passion Plays and icons were designed, like most visual imagery, to play upon the emotions and stimulate a response; but the ability to evoke an emotional response via imagery or drama is not the same as successfully transmitting the gospel (Andrew J. Webb, quoted in Kjos 2004: 3).

When people are *caught up in the emotional plot of The Passion*, all the extra-biblical additions – including each step along the Catholic ‘Stations of the Cross’ – become as real to the viewer’s virtual experience as the factual (but less dramatic) framework from the four gospels (Kjos, 2004: 3)

Is this how God really wants us to evangelise the unsaved TODAY ... by overwhelming their SENSES in an EXPERIENTIAL display of realistic torture and sadism ... Experientialism trumping the preaching of the Word? (Kurt Feich, quoted in Kjos 2004: 3).

The logical conclusion of this is to blind oneself to idolatry, as iconoclasts have always done; to repudiate the image and to seek enlightenment in darkness and the light of the word. The cinema becomes what the icon was to Byzantine iconoclasts in the 8th and 9th centuries, or the decorated mediaeval cathedral (described by Melvin Bragg as ‘the cinema of the pre-celluloid era’ [Bragg 1993: 10-11]) was to 15th century Reformers. In a self-explanatory article entitled ‘Why I will not see *The Passion of the Christ*’, John Legare defines the film as ‘idolatrous’ in the same way as the Roman Catholic Mass is idolatrous, since it ‘misrepresents and denies the complete sacrifice of Christ on the cross by claiming that the sacrifice of Jesus is continued in the Mass’. Legare quotes Calvin on ‘the true image of God’:

A true image of God is not to be found in all the world; and hence ... His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form. Therefore, To devise any image of God is itself impious because by this corruption His Majesty is adulterated, and He is figured to be other than he is.

In *The Passion of the Christ* Catholic evangelism has created a new cinematic medium and a new mode of audience participation. Wherever the film seems to harmonise with Hollywood ‘normality’ it proves instead to be radically divergent. Take as a benchmark Bordwell’s checklist of the characteristics of classical film narrative.

- The film has a happy or at least satisfying ending;
- uncertainties or gaps are temporary;
- the source of causality lies in the main characters;

- chronological order is used where possible;
- the viewer sees and hears only what is necessary;
- it is clear whether a scene is objective or subjective;
- the medium does not draw attention to itself as artefact;
- genre defines its presence by adherence to conventions (Bordwell 1985).

The Passion seems systematically to dissent from every precept listed here. Its ending is ambivalent; uncertainties are legion; chronological order is defied; the viewer sees and hears more than is necessary; objectivity and subjectivity break down (some shots represent God's point of view); the medium is full of still tableaux like the '*Ecce Homo!*', and has been described as a succession of Renaissance paintings; and the film invokes and denies every genre convention it touches. What appeared to be normal orchestrated pre-release publicity, with Mel Gibson speaking to church groups, and exploiting or responding to public debates, operated instead, like the Mass of the Catachumens, as a doctrinal preparation for the liturgical event of the film itself:

The release of the film has engendered a spectrum of fervent responses, becoming in itself a theological event shaped by merchandising, media and audience reception (Flannery-Dailey 2004)⁹.

Making an important distinction between literature and film, word and image, Boris Eikhenbaum said that the cinema audience is

placed in completely new conditions of perception, which are to an extent opposite to those of the reading process. Whereas the reader moves from the printed word to visualization of the subject, the viewer goes in the opposite direction: he moves from the subject, from comparison of the moving frames to their comprehension, to

⁹ The use of merchandising, silver nails and thorny crowns, which again seems violently inappropriate to Protestants, was nothing less than the recuperation of the mediaeval trade in images, a market the church exploited for centuries before Hollywood caught on to its potential value.

naming them; in short, to the construction of internal speech (Eikhenbaum 1973: 122).

There is no doubt that language is an essential part of *The Passion of the Christ*. The film begins with the prophetic words of Isaiah, and the dialogue, though embodied in ancient tongues, is also subtitled in a script adapted from the limpid transparency of the New Living Translation of the Bible. In both cases written English lies outside the viewer's auditory and visual perceptions of the film image itself.

Clearly this film has an unusual relationship with language. In its Incarnational Christology *The Passion of the Christ* uses the filmed image to represent the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word to which these densely saturated signs point is the ultimate language of the Logos, the Word of God. But in an Incarnational and Eucharistic theology there is no divergence between signifier and signified. Just as in traditional Catholic theology the bread and wine of the Eucharist become at the consecration the body and blood of Christ, so in cinematic Christology word and image are indissoluble. The unfamiliar ancient languages are there to impede any easy commerce between film dialogue and contemporary colloquial speech, so that words never flutter too far away from the images that enfold them. Even the post-structuralist truism that signs point only to the absence of the thing they signify is accounted for in 'negative theology' by the fact that God is both absent and present in the world.

If *The Passion of the Christ* has anything at all to tell us about cinema then it will be in terms of the way the film problematises narrative and time. As I have shown by demonstrating the interdependence of the film and the liturgy of the traditional Catholic Mass, conventional assumptions about narrative are contextualised by a timescale of eternity, and normal narrative flow compressed and broken by devices of simultaneity, montage and repetition. Using a medium that is generally held to emulate by kinetic duration the very movement of history, *The Passion of the Christ* redefines history as 'a pattern/Of timeless moments' (Eliot 1944: 48).

In addition the film calls into question conventional distinctions between the still and the moving image. Whatever technological changes alter the ways in which film captures, records and displays its object, the medium remains of course a sequence of still images that practices on a weakness of the eye, on the ‘persistence of vision’. ‘When we look at the screen, what we see is not really a “moving” picture at all but a series of frozen ones, *still* pictures’ (Beja 1979: 21). Usually the film medium does everything possible to maximise the ‘phi’ phenomenon and its own pretended mobility. But *The Passion of the Christ* by contrast resolves readily into the traditional still images that underlie and inform its construction, such as the devotional paintings with which Gibson began (Gibson, ‘Foreword’ in Duncan and Antonello, 2004). This challenges for example the distinction Seymour Chatman makes between still and moving image in terms of relative duration. ‘Non-narrative communicative objects’, he says, do not

regulate the temporal flow or spatial direction of the audience’s perception ...

Temporality is immanent to ... narrative texts (Chatman 1990: 7).

This confuses the imagined time of the fiction in which the image is located, with the real time of the spectator. There duration applies equally to both still and moving images.

Film does indeed, then, consist, as Rowan Williams defined it, of ‘animated icons’. For centuries the icon was the primary visual resource for Christian worship and belief. St John Chrysostom said that the correct way to view an icon was to stand before it with eyes closed, so that the imagination could perceive the immanent and eternal meanings signified by the two-dimensional image. It is of course impossible to make windows into the souls of all those who saw *The Passion of the Christ*, whether with eyes open or closed; but we can at least speculate that in many cases the film opened up to vision that ‘split second of darkness between each image’ that normally ‘we do not “see”’ (Beja 1979: 22). It is perhaps no coincidence that the film was made by Mel Gibson’s own production company: Icon.

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