

○ WRESTLING WITH *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

AT THE MOVIES WITH ROLAND BARTHES AND MEL GIBSON

Richard Walsh, Professor of Religion, Methodist College

Richard Walsh is the author of Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film (Trinity Press International, Pennsylvania, 2003).

Correspondence to Richard Walsh: rwalsh@methodist.edu

Gibson offers his spectacle of Christ suffering as a reel sacrament. To do so, he writes the Hollywood passion hero and the legalistic Western Christian myth over Jesus, or lifts the sign of Jesus' suffering into those mythic orders. In the West, as Gibson's success shows, this myth often masquerades as the nature of things. This myth transforms us into bastards who consume the suffering of others at a safe distance. We can confess this myth, as if it were a hierophany, or we can wrestle with it, exposing it as an interpretation.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking'. But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me'. So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob'. Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed'. Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name'. But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved' (Gen 32:24-30 NRSV).

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah'. And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down'. Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' (Mark 15:33-39 NRSV).

Jacob's wrestling match and Mark's passion have striking similarities. Both stories focus on a figure in self-imposed isolation, struggling in the dark with mysterious forces. Both protagonists assume these forces are their gods. Confessions, by Jacob and the centurion, enforce these assumptions and render the stories hierophanies; nonetheless, dark shadows remain. In addition to the questionable character of both gods, these gods fail to respond directly to the protagonist's pleas. These silences make these hierophanies dark revelations. For readers who notice these shadows, the wrestling in the text may become wrestling with the text.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* hardly ends this wrestling. Suburban audiences gather in darkened cinemas for the blinding light of a new biblical spectacle. Instead of wrestling, they see a suffering Christ. This hero is not as loquacious as Jacob. Like Mark's Jesus, he is silent after his passion. As the houselights rise, however, not everyone is left dumb. One lady in the audience with me, for example, confessed tremulously, 'How could anyone not believe?' Like Jacob and the centurion, she wrote a confession over her experience and created a hierophany. Without such a neat confession, I was left wrestling, quite non-heroically, in the dark.¹

I can confess that I never really wanted to see the movie. I had heard troubling rumours about its gratuitous, macabre violence and anti-Semitism. The carefully managed pre-release debate on the film did nothing to peak my interest. It all seemed too nakedly capitalistic. Worst of all, I feared that the movie would bring back troubling memories from the old, old story I had heard too many times in my youth.

Relentless students, in religion and film and Gospel classes, insisted, however, that I see the movie and make some confession to them. So, I sat and wrestled with the movie. I confess also that I wanted to be fair to Gibson and to grant him the right to interpret the Jesus story. After all, I had already written disdainfully of critics who had failed to appreciate earlier Jesus films as cultural interpretations of Jesus. Nonetheless, I must confess that I do not appreciate his film. Partly, it is because I see it as a cultural interpretation only with some difficulty. Even though the movie is obviously Catholic, it recalls for me the evangelical Baptist religion of my youth. It comes too close, that is, to what was once for me numinous truth, not mere interpretation.

Fortuitously, when I saw *The Passion of the Christ*, I happened to be re-reading Barthes's *Mythologies* whose English translation coincidentally opens with an intriguing essay on wrestling. For Barthes (1972), wrestling is itself a hierophany or an intelligible spectacle, 'a light without shadow [that] generates an emotion without reserve' (p. 15). His book, however, investigates the shadowy forces that work, quite publicly, to make such a blinding light possible. For Barthes, the clarity comes from the work of myth, which writes a second level of meaning over some primary signification and, thereby, proffers history as nature, value as fact, and a perspective as universal gaze (pp. 121–31). Myth speaks so excessively that it becomes the spectacles that blind us so that we may see. Criticism, like that of Barthes's *Mythologies*, seeks to expose myth as a particular, ideological perspective. With Barthes as my tag-team partner, then, I will wrestle with *The Passion of the Christ* in order to see what myth(s) Gibson writes over the Jesus story as revealed, hierophanic truth.²

SPECTACLE: BLOODY SUFFERING

The virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess... Even hidden in the most squalid Parisian halls, wrestling partakes of the nature of the great solar spectacles, Greek drama and bullfights: in both, a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve.

There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle... performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema... what matters is not what it [the public] thinks but what it sees (Barthes 1972, p. 15).

The spectacle is the film genre of excess and conspicuous waste (see Wood 1989, pp. 165–188). Grotesquely expensive, the biblical spectacle lifts the Jesus story into a new level of signification. Or, this film genre writes spectacle over Jesus. By so doing, it turns the Jesus story into a priced, consumed commodity. It merges Christianity and capitalist consumerism, writing a comfortable myth for modern audiences (Babbington et al. 1993). Gibson's huge economic success has revitalised this moribund genre. His film sells the spectacular Jesus to willing audiences as one choice among others in the entertainment market. That cultural context was brought home to me quite forcefully when, while working on this essay, I hurriedly entered 'The Passion' as a search item at imdb.com. While I eventually arrived at *The Passion of the Christ*, I also, to my amusement, found an advertisement for Caviezel's performance of the 'passion' of Bobby Jones. Theatre marquees offering *The Passion of the Christ* as one choice among many (for example, alongside *Fifty First Dates*, *Barbershop 2*, *Mooseport*, and *Miracle* [the story of the surprising triumph of the 1980 United States Olympic Hockey Team]) bespeak the same context of capitalist consumerism. Perhaps, then, to be properly devout, we should ask 'How can anyone not buy?' rather than 'How can anyone not believe?'

While the Gospels are hierophanies for some, they are not very spectacular.³ Accordingly, Gibson's spectacle borrows little from the Gospel narratives. With the exception of a few flashbacks, Gibson takes material only from the Gospel passion narratives. In fact, while the Gospels' passion narratives begin either with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (the Synoptic Gospels) or with Jesus' retreat to an upper room with his disciples (John), Gibson begins with Gethsemane. In dark Gethsemane, Gibson's Christ wrestles with an androgynous Satan and heroically stomps a hissing snake (see Gen 3:15). Thereafter, the action is over and Gibson's Christ suffers betrayal, arrest, beatings, scourging, and crucifixion. In essence, the movie moves from Gethsemane to the cross and, thereby, focuses relentlessly on Christ's suffering.

Additions to this lean narrative emphasise Catholic devotions and traditions or the visual reality of Christ's suffering. Specifically, Gibson portrays the passion through the Stations of the Cross and the mystic visions of two nuns (Mary of Agreda and Anne Catherine Emmerich). The Stations of the Cross is an excellent choice for his focus as they became popular in the era that saw Christian mysticism move from a neo-Platonic spirituality eschewing the body to a concentration on the physical sufferings of Jesus, typified, for example, by the stigmata of St Francis. Gibson's film, however, is a far more brutal depiction of Christ's physical suffering than any previous depiction or enactment of the Stations of the Cross that I can find.⁴ Where the Stations of the Cross begins with Christ's condemnation by Pilate, Gibson starts with the sweated blood in Gethsemane, dramatises the beatings of the police and the Jewish trial, and adds a striking visual of Jesus hung, like a side of beef (or lamb), from a bridge. The scourging is the most vicious and emotional moment in the movie. That Jesus, already flayed beyond belief, stands again, after catching Mary's eye, to bear yet more suffering should sate even the bloodiest lust. Thereafter, the crucifixion is somewhat anticlimactic. Flashbacks to the ministry and a minimal, stigmatic resurrection appearance do not alter this cinematic focus. Everything is sweat and blood, flayed body, and grim anguish. In fact, Roger Ebert (2004) estimates that one hundred of the film's one hundred twenty-six minutes depict Christ's suffering. In short, Gibson writes his story with Christ/Caviezel's body. The 'passion' in Gibson's title, then, clearly means physical suffering.

Advertisers for Jesus movies once heralded the piety with which H. B. Warner (*The King of Kings*) or Jeffrey Hunter (*King of Kings*) approached their roles. By contrast, pre-release press advertisements for *The Passion of the Christ* underlined its actor's (Jim Caviezel) suffering. Caviezel, it seems, required several stitches because of an injury sustained during the filming of the horrific scourging scene; nevertheless, he soldiered on. Perhaps, I should say suffered on, for, as Peter Travers notes, Caviezel 'doesn't so much give a performance as offer himself up as raw meat' (Travers 2004).

While this unrelenting focus on suffering conjures images and charges of sadism, perhaps we should not rush to this charge. After all, when critics make the same complaint about wrestling, Barthes opines, 'It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle: it is only an intelligible spectacle' (Barthes 1972, p. 20). Everything is broken body and blood, then, in order to be instantly clear. For Gibson, suffering is a hierophany, the excess of blood an intelligible spectacle. No wonder, then, that Gibson contemplated offering the movie without subtitles. His spectacle of suffering needs no words.⁵

The result is so violent that various critics cautioned parents not to take their children to the movie. Averring that the movie is the most violent movie he has ever seen, Ebert wonders how its excesses avoided an NC-17 rating. He concludes that the subject matter intimidated the raters: 'If it had been anyone other than Jesus up on that cross, I have a feeling that NC-17 would have been automatic' (Ebert 2004). More dramatically, David Edelstein calls the movie 'The Jesus Chain Saw Massacre' (in Hornblow 2004). In short, Gibson's concentration on Christ's suffering turns the Gospel into a horror movie. Of course, when it comes to religious topics, horror is a safe, successful genre for film, and Gibson clearly intends to succeed. Incidentally, it took another horror movie, *Dawn of the Dead*, to displace Gibson's spectacle as the weekly top box-office draw.⁶

The suffering is so intense that the spectacle failed to work for a friend of mine. Having worked as an EMT and having taught and written in the field of medical ethics, he complained that the suffering was unrealistic. No one could lose that much blood (in the scourging alone) and continue. As he told me, 'No one could live through that'. Not coincidentally, his words echo Satan's temptation in the Garden, 'No one can bear such suffering'. While my friend is a quite conservative Anglo-Catholic, something has disrupted the smooth machine of Gibson's spectacle for my friend. My friend has confused spectacle, or simulacrum, with the desire for verisimilitude. By contrast, spectacle aims at intelligibility. Excess is its *métier*. My friend is like those who mistake wrestling for a sport. Gibson needs and uses inhuman, unreal fountains of blood – flowing deep and wide – to write intelligibly over reality and bodies. What this produces is not reality or realism, but the unmistakable signs of an intelligible, that is, ideologically coated, spectacle.

THE PASSION HERO

... in America wrestling represents a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil (of a quasi-political nature, the 'bad' wrestler always being supposed to be a Red) (Barthes 1972, p. 23).

In Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Jesus carries his cross, but most of the grotesque faces of the bystanders look away.⁷ Perhaps, they stand outside of (or before) Christian mythology and do not see the Christian significance of Jesus' suffering. Perhaps, they are humane and cannot bear to look. Perhaps, they are callous and have seen too many insignificants suffer. For whatever reason, they do not look. In *The Passion of the Christ*, we never look at Jesus either. Through his relentless focus on Christ's intelligible – and thus unreal – suffering, Gibson obscures the human Jesus. Perhaps, Jesus' body lies somewhere beneath all those rivers of blood, but we see only Gibson's suffering Christ. Gibson tells and shows his story, then, after and over any human (body), historical fact.

In particular, Gibson writes his own version of the Hollywood action hero, the passion hero, over Jesus.⁸ Gibson made his acting career by writing suffering on the screen from the hero of (*The Road Warrior* and) *Lethal Weapon* to that of *Braveheart*. As a reviewer for the *New York Times* wittily remarks, Gibson prepared for the role of Christ his entire career. Unfortunately, the opportunity came too late and he was too old. As a result, we are left with Jim Caviezel standing in for – or is it, writing over – Mel Gibson, whose passion-hero Christ stands in for an unmentioned Jesus.

Fred Burnett has written persuasively of Martin Riggs, the Mel Gibson hero of *Lethal Weapon*, as a secular American Christ:

The profound appeal of Riggs in LW1 is his personal quest to find meaning for his existence in the face of overwhelming evil and death. His death wish is really his struggle to decide to stay alive one more day; his daily question, much like Hamlet's, is 'to be or not to be'...

Riggs's view of God, and by implication of religion, plays a central yet underlying role in his heroic quest for meaning; Riggs is a hero on a quest in a world in which God is dead, or at least practically and theoretically irrelevant. In a traditional theistic sense Riggs is a religionless hero who lives out his quest in the post-Nietzschean world of God's demise, and in the world of Albert Camus' absurd hero, Sisyphus, with all of the variations that those worlds require (Burnett 2002, p. 252).

This secular Christ accepts the reality of his death. Thus, Riggs flirts with suicide throughout the movie and overcomes suicide daily simply by doing his job. Like Camus' Sisyphus, he surmounts his fate with scorn (Burnett 2002, pp. 266–274).

By contrast, the William Wallace hero of *Braveheart* dies. Battling the forces of empire, he ultimately becomes a martyr for his cause. Despite a romance angle and dramatic battle sequences, the movie climaxes with the torture and death of Wallace. There, ever true to the cause despite horrible suffering, Wallace screams 'Freedom' as he dies. Reportedly, Gibson is now considering filming the story of the Maccabees, another story, as he puts it, of those 'who stuck by their guns and... came out winning', even if they died (Hornblow 2004). Clearly, what is absolutely essential in the passion hero is not life or death, but heroic, courageous, unmitigated suffering for 'the cause'.

Gibson's Christ is cut from the same Hollywood cloth as Wallace is. In fact, in many ways, the visual portrayal of Wallace's torture is a precursor of Gibson's portrayal of Christ's sufferings:

for example, the soulful, meaningful looks toward the followers; the close-ups of the anguish of heroes and disciples; and the slow-motion torture. In *The Passion of the Christ*, the two most (passionate) heroic scenes are the squashing of the snake in the garden and the hero's slow rise from the ground midway through the scourging. This scene, like Rocky rising from the mat, is the real crux of the movie. In fact, the scourging is the movie's most definitive resurrection scene. At least, that rise from the bloody ground is the scene that writes the model of the Hollywood passion-hero upon Jesus and, thereby, also writes triumph over suffering.

This is the triumphant, heroic Christ of Hollywood, particularly the Western, and of the Gospel of John (see Staley 1995; Walsh 2003, pp. 147–171). John's passion 'lifts' its hero 'up', exalts him, and glorifies him. Suffering becomes an action, not a passion, and a means to an end, the hero's triumph. The contrast with the apocalyptic formula, 'suffer, then triumph' is striking. Gibson's cross has nothing about it of Mark's God-forsakenness (Mark 15:34) or of Paul's weakness and folly (1 Cor 1:18–2:5). As the suffering of Gibson's hero is already triumph, Gibson's movie reduces the passion to a sign that Christ is 'a tough dude who can take a licking and keep on ticking' (Petrakis 2004). Unfortunately, for Gibson's ideological designs, this signification may suggest the Energizer Bunny or Wylie E. Coyote as easily as it does the passion hero. Of course, Gibson is hardly alone here. As Miles (2001, p. 241) notes, the Christ signification of the New Testament requires the proper background music: 'Catch it at a slightly crooked angle, with the sound system off, and you will laugh out loud'. In short, Gibson's spectacle of the passion hero, and the Gospel passion narratives by association, easily becomes cartoon-like in the ever-shifting play of signs of consumer capitalism.⁹

Like John's passion and Barthes's wrestling, Gibson's passion is no contest. It is scripted in advance. The outcome is never in doubt. The whole story stands under the opening title from Isaiah 53 and Gethsemane's stomped snake. No one stands in the way of this triumphal passion-action. As a result, while we see Christ suffer interminably, it is never clear with what he struggles. Gibson does not explore evil. A wraith-like, androgynous Satan haunts the margins, but never proves a real foe. With Judas and the Jews, Gibson dwells only with consequences, with psychotic derangement and fallen temple. Pilate is a mere politician (and the only interesting character in the movie). The scourging soldiers are villainous and bestial enough, but they are only mechanisms. There is no 'Red' or 'bastard', Barthes's term for wrestling's blatantly obvious 'bad guy', at whose defeat we can exult (Barthes 1972, pp. 21–24). After the squashed snake, Gibson's morally sparse spectacle provides only a bare-bones framework of good versus evil. Consequently, Gibson also fails to explore goodness. This Christ is a hero only because he endures suffering. He incarnates suffering. He is merely raw meat. Hung meat.¹⁰ Broken body and gushing fountains of spilt blood.

We can see what Gibson does not assay here by comparing his movie to a 'boiler-plate' effort like the *End of Days*. That movie's hero, Jericho Cane (Arnold Schwarzenegger), struggles far more convincingly with himself and a scarier, more seductive Satan. To reach that level of character exploration, Gibson would need to extend the struggle in Gethsemane throughout his movie. Instead, Gibson's hero simply endures suffering. Gibson, that is, simply writes the sign of the passion hero as excessively as he can. He makes no attempt, not even the limited attempt of boiler-plate films like *End of Days*, to explore heroism and evil (Walsh 2002). For his intelligible

spectacle, Gibson reduces everything to the visual surface of suffering. Ethics (character) is of little concern. Neither is struggle nor conflict.

Finally, Gibson studiously avoids the humiliation of his passion hero. Historians unanimously agree that part of crucifixion, the slave's death, was the public exhibition of the victim's nudity. Thereby, victims were stripped of the last shreds of honour. Despite Gibson's unblinking presentation of Christ's physical suffering, he refuses to expose his Christ. Here, of course, Gibson is faithful to the ascetic Christian imagination. Generally, Christian art, and the movies, present strategically clothed crucifixions.¹¹ Even Scorsese, who portrays a nude, and sexual, Christ on the cross, turns the camera away as the loin cloth is stripped away and twists his Christ on the cross so that Christ's genitals remain safely out of view. Even so, Scorsese's sexually tempted Christ departs too far from both the Christian imagination and the model of the passion hero to succeed. A sexually active Christ does not sell. One who suffers in a sado-masochistic way does. No wonder, then, that Gibson clothes his successful Christ in the myth of the Hollywood passion hero.

SPECTACLES: A REEL SACRAMENT

In wrestling, unlike judo, Defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood, it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration, a display; it takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and the pillory. It is as if the wrestler is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all. I have heard it said of a wrestler stretched on the ground: 'He is dead, little Jesus, there on the cross', and these ironic words revealed the hidden roots of a spectacle which enacts the exact gestures of the most ancient purifications.

But what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice. The idea of 'paying' is essential to wrestling, and the crowd's 'Give it to him' means above all else 'Make him pay' (Barthes 1972, p. 21).

No characterisation detracts from the spectacle of passionate suffering in Gibson's movie. Other than Pilate, the most intriguing character in the movie, as befits a Roman Catholic sensibility, is Mary. She is the primary character-lens through which we see Christ's suffering. As our intermediary, she leads us through the Stations of the Cross. That she is his mother, the point of one of the homely flashbacks, only magnifies the suffering. In the end, of course, she holds the suffering body for us.

Mary as receptacle for suffering raises horrifying consequences for feminist and abuse issues, but Mary is crucial to the film's intelligibility. If *The Passion of the Christ* rises above a gratuitous, sadistic display of a passion hero's suffering, it is because of the perspective that Mary, and lesser characters like Veronica, provide. The constant references to the Stations of the Cross and the title, Isaiah 53, which stands over the entire movie are similar captions for the action. All these interpretative devices render this suffering 'for the forgiveness of our sins' (see Matt 1:21; 26:28).¹²

The Passion of the Christ is not a documentary providing a simulacrum of a real crucifixion. It matters little, then, that the historical Jesus would have been nailed through his wrists. The

cruciform Western imagination fixes the wounds firmly in Christ's palms,¹³ and Gibson's movie is faithful to that imagination. The movie offers, then, the cinematic equivalent of the crucifix adorning Roman Catholic worship sites. It does not so much imagine the religion's founding hierophany as it does that hierophany's revitalising ritual replay, the Eucharist. Thus, the most important flashback in the movie is that of the institution of the Eucharist. Flashing back from the crucifixion itself, the movie merges the crucifixion and the Eucharist into one ritual moment (compare John 6).¹⁴ This ritual merger makes any time the ritual is enacted the founding time, the eternal time of the myth. The ritual/movie does not take the worshipper to some past historical moment. It makes that (eternal) time available now (Eliade 1959, pp. 68–113). This is no mere remembrance of the crucifixion. No wonder, then, that Pilate washes his hands, as Christ does in flashback before the supper. Pilate is nothing less than the Eucharist's first priest.

Gibson's spectacle, then, is a reel sacrament. We see the body broken and the blood shed ubiquitously for us. Blood drips constantly off of every conceivable surface because it must be universally available. If only the bell would tinkle... for the movie aspires to transubstantiate the crucifixion. Of course, here again, Gibson's Christ loses all connection to humanity and becomes the religious objects of the sacrament. He is the body eaten and the blood drunk (John 6:53-58).

Barthes claims that wrestling is about purifications and justice. The guilty, particularly 'the bastard', pays for his arrogance and evil. Justice is triumphant. By contrast, the Eucharist is a sacrament, a dispensation of grace. Nonetheless, justice is not far from the sacrament's grace, for one takes the Eucharist rightly only after confession, after purification. Further, the imagination of Western Christianity is as legal as it is cruciform. At the cross, played out in penitential ritual, purifying justice takes place. Here, Christ, not wrestling's 'bastard', pays.

While the apostle Paul tortuously struggles to make himself and his readers believe this theodicy (see, particularly, Rom 3:21-26), Gibson never doubts it. He has fewer qualms than Paul on this point because he is the heir of long-standing, legalistic Western reflection from Tertullian through the development of medieval penance and Anselm's feudalistic reflections on the atonement. This Western Christianity is relentlessly about the forgiveness of sins, a religious matter whose 'justice' has come in the West to rely upon some macabre transaction taking place at the cross or in its ritual reenactment.

This sinful fascination is written so deeply into the Western imagination that evangelical Protestants and Catholics gleefully lined up together to watch Gibson's revelation of justice. Protestants simply ignore, or tolerate, the Catholic 'vener' of the movie because they fixate on the substitution taking place for their bastard selves. They are so bad that they deserve this. They are so important that someone else paid on their behalf. They are the very centre of the universe, the centre of an eternal struggle between good and evil. In this passionate triumph, they are victorious too. They know this, of course, not in the ritual of confession and Eucharist but in the ritual of evangelical revival and mystical fervour. No wonder, then, that Gibson's exorbitant spectacle is such a financial success. We doubted him because we thought the era of the biblical spectacle was over. We should not have. He has tapped into the very heart of things in the West. For a price, he has given us our myth – both Hollywood and Christian – written as large as only myth can write.

THE NATURE OF THINGS REVEALED

Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction (Barthes 1972, p. 25).

Gibson's spectacle wraps Christ's suffering in the myths of the Hollywood passion hero and legalistic Western Christianity. These myths transubstantiate ambiguous suffering into revelatory light. The Eucharist and the evangelical revival become the 'really real' (Geertz 1973, p. 112). Peniel and Golgotha become places to meet God. Gibson's Christ becomes 'the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible' (Barthes 1972, p. 25). As a further result, Western Christianity and Western Christians, as well as Christ, are placed at the very heart of things.

Thus, Gibson's spectacle does the work of myth. According to Barthes, myth takes a 'sign', the full meaning of a signifier and signified, and renders it a mere signifier, an empty form, in a second-order of signification (Barthes 1972, pp. 113–117). Barthes's most famous example of this writing over, or theft of meaning, is a picture on the cover of *Paris-Match* in which 'a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour' (p. 116).¹⁵ Myth puts one meaning, 'the biography of the Negro in parentheses' in order to arrive at a second-level of signification, a new concept, that of French empire/colonialism itself (p. 118). This myth deprives the young man of his history and transforms him into a gesture. It does this so completely that the second-level of signification takes on a 'natural', indisputable, or common sense quality. The picture naturally suggests empire to members of the empire. Myth, then, presents history as nature, value as fact, and perspective as universal gaze:

... in it [myth], things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature; it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.

... In the case of the soldier-Negro, for instance, what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: *fabricated*, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a

natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.... [I]t [myth] organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 1972, pp. 142-43).

Myth, then, writes upon the body, the historical, or the material in order to create a spiritual, mythical, or ideological ‘reality’.¹⁶ It writes confessions over and, thereby, makes intelligible spectacles out of the ambiguities of Peniel and Golgotha.

Like myth, Gibson’s spectacle hides nothing. It imperially, publicly writes the Hollywood passion hero and legalistic Western Christianity over Christ (Jesus is nowhere to be found) as if it were the universal essence of Christianity. It offers its ideology as if it were the very revelation of the nature of things. It seeks to shut down the wild connotations of signs to arrive at a clear, natural moment of mythic lucidity, a hierophany. No wonder, then, that evangelicals left the moving sobbing, ‘How can anyone not believe?’ By contrast, Barthes allows us to visualise this hierophany as a dark revelation, a covering over of history, perspective, and the body. Myth writes confessions too glibly over ambiguity, over other possible readings. From this perspective, Gibson’s ubiquitous blood is itself revelatory. Like myth, blood cleanses, saves, and purifies by ‘covering’ (Lev 16). It covers so excessively that finally all we can see is the blood or the endlessly repeated myth. Jesus and colonials vanish from view.

In fact, Gibson’s spectacle reveals human nature to be incredibly bloody. Unlike Barthes’s wrestlers who merely act the part of a ‘bastard’, all Gibson’s people are bastards. Wonderfully true to his own anthropology, then, Gibson himself held the nails that crucified his cinematic Christ. In this sense, the leering, sadistic, Bosch-like Roman soldiers rightly dominate the film. They are we:

Anyone viewing the film from a non-Christian perspective will discover much to appreciate, and one overriding theme comes across with crystal clarity: the inhumanity of human beings to others of their kind. There is such naked, unfettered cruelty in the way Jesus is treated that it makes one ponder the nature of man. And the dark reality is that worse torments have been visited upon others throughout history. Over the centuries, our civilizations and technology have evolved, but that aspect of our essential nature has not changed. Given the chance, we easily revert to the bestial barbarians who derived sadistic enjoyment from the torture of Jesus. It’s a sickness that cannot be expunged (Beardardinelli 2004).

Since the release of Gibson’s film, revelations of the torture of Iraqi prisoners by leering American soldiers have underlined this point.¹⁷ In Gibson’s spectacular world, we are all those leering, sadistic soldiers. The notion that such abuse ‘saves us’ requires the dark, bloody coverings of imperial myths.

Gibson’s spectacle creates a horrific or perverse, unreal Bosch-like ‘world’, a world in which hell triumphs over earthly reality.¹⁸ Everything – save for the rather empty cipher that is the passion hero – is twisted and macabre. Not just humans, but the very nature of things is bloody

and vile. The world of *The Passion of the Christ* is unforgiving and vengeful. Thus, it is not just the Christ who pays. Those who reject and oppose him do too.

Accordingly, Gibson does not trifle with any psychological motivation for Judas' betrayal. He simply highlights, in slow motion, the greedy thirty pieces. What intrigues Gibson are the consequences of the betrayal for Judas, a matter that he does explore psychologically. Thus, furies in the form of demonic children beset his Judas, who falls suggestively alongside a rotting animal, before hanging himself after failing to find priestly absolution.

The fate of the bad thief reveals an even more macabre, vindictive nature of things. Immediately after his mockery, a bird descends (from heaven?) to snatch out his eye. While historians often remark upon scavenging birds and dogs at the cross (Crossan 1994, pp. 123–158), Gibson's lone bird is rather providentially focused. Leaving Christ and the good thief untouched, it visits a natural – in Barthes's terms – vengeance upon this one thief.

Finally, at the cross, Gibson leaves the earthly plane altogether in order to provide us with a camera shot from heaven itself. The camera, then, traces a single falling raindrop (or teardrop?) on its course from heaven. When it falls, Matthew's supernatural events begin (Matt 27:51-54). In fact, in Gibson's hands, Matthew's split temple veil becomes a temple destroyed by an earthquake. In short, Nature does not like it when 'you mess with' the passion hero. He may be born to suffer, but if you are complicit, then you will pay as well. Certainly, despite Gibson's defenders, all this is anti-Semitic. Of course, it is also so completely misanthropic that perhaps one should not bother to split hairs.

In Gibson's spectacle, of course, Nature is God. While Gibson's God never speaks, we know he enjoys wrestling. In fact, to this divine eye, the world is a melodramatic, wrestling match in which only the passionate hero is triumphant. The bastards – and we are all bastards – pay. In the last analysis, then, what Gibson's spectacle truly reveals is the vicious God of legalistic, imperial Western Christianity, a God complicit in the suffering of innocents, like the God of Genesis 22, Exodus, and Job. Gibson's God is a sadistic executioner, like the black-hooded fellow in *Braveheart*. He makes no cameo appearance in *The Passion of the Christ* unless he is those leering, sadistic soldiers. Certainly, however, he is part of the mythic overlay, the scripture title, Gethsemane's set piece, and the vengeful providence.

Here, Gibson's spectacle is an epiphany for me. He is a better reader of the Western Gospel than I. I had never seen so clearly before that the God of the Gospels was as horrible and reprehensible as the God that, for no human reason, brings Isaac, Egyptian children, and Job to the point of death. This God is about nothing but power (see Moore 1996). I will never read the Gospels in the same complacent way again. Monstrous spectacle. Monstrous God. Here is a divine enemy with whom to wrestle (Barthes 1994, p. 259), not one to gloss over with a confession.

BLIND, VOYEURISTIC GODS

What the public wants is the image of passion, not the passion itself (Barthes 1972, p. 18).

In remarks about the Chaplin hero of *Modern Times*, Barthes observes, 'To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see...' (Barthes 1972, p. 40). Barthes has in mind the situation of the poor that Chaplin's character never himself sees in

any revolutionary way, but which the audience sees because of the Little Tramp's blindness. Barthes could have been describing the rhetoric of the Gospel of Mark or of John as well. There, too, the blind see and the sighted do not. In a sense, Gibson's concentration on Christ's suffering is a similar tactic. As Gibson's audience, we are to see the Christ that those who rejected him did not.¹⁹ Barthes himself is, of course, employing the same tactic throughout his *Mythologies*. He explores item after item of bourgeois life to illustrate the bourgeois perspective (myth) that masquerades as a universal gaze, which we do not see (pp. 137–142). While Barthes labours to expose this process, Gibson's myth revels in transforming his perspective into universal gaze.

Gibson writes Christ's suffering as the passion hero and Eucharistic bread larger than life. We can hardly miss it. But what is it that we are blind to when we see this way? Certainly, the movie sacrifices Jesus and the Jews as real people, transforming them into cardboard cut-outs for a cinematic mystery play. It also rejects any humane conception of God or of humans. In short, when we become blind voyeurs with Gibson, we lose sight of any human passion/suffering. We are left only with images. Further, if we watch with Gibson, we also lose sight of the sadistic spectacle that legalistic, imperial Western Christianity presents to the rest of the world.

Ultimately, the character of some hypothetical God is not in question here. What is in question is our character. If we follow the rituals of Western Christianity, we become purified innocents, bastards freed from sin, and immortals alongside God. Perhaps, what seems such a strange break in perspective, when Gibson suddenly transports us to the divine-eye view above the cross, is not so strange after all. The movie, like Western Christianity itself, leaves us divine voyeurs untroubled by human passion. The differences in various views of the atonement become inconsequential here. We, like gods, consume the images of broken body and flowing blood.

I do not know that cinematic images of violence engender 'real' violence nor do I wish to participate in movie censorship. It does give me pause, however, that Ebert opines that this was the most violent film that he has ever seen and that any victim other than Christ would have earned the film an NC-17 rating for violence alone. It is even more troubling that Western monotheism has such a troubling history of complicity with violence (Schwartz 1998). If the hero of the faith suffers as Western Christianity's does and if this suffering founds the divine status of the faithful, what will the faithful not do? My problem is not that Gibson's film may inspire violence. It is, rather, that Gibson 'gets' Western Christianity – with its crucifixes, stigmata, bleeding hearts, Stations of the Cross, Eucharist – so correctly. With such at its imaginative centre, it is no wonder that Western Christianity also sponsors Crusades, Inquisitions, Colonizing Missions, Empires, and Hell. Perhaps, the crucified imagination, so vividly captured by Gibson, makes us insensitive to suffering. Perhaps, the crucified imagination makes bastards of us all.²⁰

Gibson's movie leaves critical liberals and Jews strewn in its wake. The populace loves it. Critics have begun to say that he has single-handedly resurrected the moribund biblical spectacle. That is worth considering for a moment. The heyday of the biblical spectacle was the Cold War (see Babbington et al. 1993). Despite the apparent victory of capitalism, if not Western democracy, events in the third millennium suggest that the West (at least, the United States) is quickly creating a new Cold War in conflicts with various Islamic groups and nations.²¹ Perhaps, the success of Gibson's film as biblical spectacle has something alarming to do with this new, anxious day. Perhaps, it helps deaden our sensitivity to new rounds of violence.

As a film of conspicuous excess or waste (Wood 1989, pp. 165–188), the spectacle places us so far above the fray that suffering becomes mere image. Spectacle makes us divine. We are the god-like people who can engage in such frivolous, wasteful consumption (entertainment). But, what ‘gets’ wasted is ultimately human expendables, not merely abstract capital. The real spectacular excess of the first century was Roman imperial might and the masses of expendables upon which it perched. Jesus was one of those wasted expendables. Gibson’s movie sacrifices those expendables, including Jesus, for his intelligible spectacle of Christ’s suffering. Nicholas Ray and the Monty Python troupe did a far better job of situating Jesus among the expendable masses of the Roman Empire (as does, incidentally, the admittedly unhistorical finale of *Spartacus* and, for that matter, *Barabbas*).

Instead of the human expendables, we see a passion hero adopt our suffering and insure our triumph. As the primary audience of Hollywood film is a rather Eurocentric us, triumph at the price of others is rather troubling. Eurocentric Christians have not suffered all that much recently. In fact, in the last few centuries, if anything, they have exported suffering in the name of Western Christianity. Given recent events, the image of Roman soldiers scourging Christ and American soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners will likely remain forever fixed together in my mind. We can only hope that this is not a true image of some god.

All of this, of course, is simply to raise a question mark beside the Western Christianity that Gibson so faithfully visualises in cinematic mythmaking. Is its focus on the (repeated, ritual) death of Jesus as the means of salvation, grace, and forgiveness of sins not itself fundamentally sadistic? If not, how does it avoid presenting this face to the world?

One step would be to reject, once and for all, the idea that humans deserve to die. In this regard, Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* is far more helpful than Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. While Gibson’s movie simply offers yet another passion hero, Eastwood demythologises the use of violence in the service of (passionate) heroism, justice, and vengeance. He does so by following the fortunes of Will Munny (Eastwood), known thief and murderer. Although Munny has given up his outlaw ways for his wife, she has died and he is an ineffectual farmer. For purely mercenary reasons, then, he returns to an outlaw life to collect a bounty put up by wronged whores. In the process, he runs afoul of and kills a sadistic sheriff (Gene Hackman). As the sheriff dies, he claims that he does not deserve to die this way. Munny’s response, which became the movie’s most famous line, is ‘Deserve’s got nothing to do with it [death]’. That tagline and Eastwood’s non-hero stand as appropriate question marks alongside Gibson’s movie and the entire legalistic Western Christian tradition.

This legal, sinful myth is written so deeply into the Western imagination that it is difficult to see it as a mere interpretation. It seems rather the revelation of the nature of things. As an antidote to Gibson’s mythic spectacle, we should remember, then, that the crucifixion is a ‘just transaction’ only in the ‘legal’ form that Western imperial Christianity took. Even the New Testament documents do not speak uniformly on this point. Paul, for example, uses several metaphors for the cross, but he never uses the notion of ‘forgiveness’ in connection with it. Instead, Paul’s cross stands somewhere between apocalyptic visions and mystery cults. Mark’s cross marks the onset of apocalypse. Luke’s cross is the Jewish murder of the innocent one. Matthew’s cross has to do most directly with sin, obedience, and law (read ‘Torah’), and, accordingly, Gibson turns to Matthew at important moments. As we have seen already, however, Gibson is most indebted to John’s cross as the passion hero’s triumph. This model, whether consciously or unconsciously,

leads Gibson to eschew other interpretative possibilities, even those within the New Testament itself, for his intelligible spectacle of suffering.

A FINAL CONFESSION?

I am through wrestling with Gibson's film. It is time for a final confession, but I do not want to render this wrestling or Gibson's movie a hierophany, revealing the nature of things. I am aghast at Gibson's movie. I will not, however, censor it although I agree with the critics who suggest that only adults should see it. Gibson has a right to interpret the Jesus story. Criticism should insist, however, that Gibson's film is *only an interpretation*. Criticism should also offer reasons for or against any such interpretation. On Gibson's behalf, I would like to say that he has faithfully, masterfully, brutally visualised the horrific, crucified imagination at the heart of Western Christianity. He has, of course, left liberals and Jews aside as he has done so. Further, Gibson has helped me to remember why I have left the religion of my youth. In sum, however, what troubles me about his interpretation is the resulting bestialising of humans – we all become Barthes's bastard and Gibson's Roman soldiers – and the sadistic, monstrous God implicit in this spectacle. In the face of this divine, triumphant hero/empire, there are too many expendables. We can no longer afford this price. We do not deserve such deaths.²²

ENDNOTES

- 1 Because of the delay in the release of the movie and because of pre-release publicity, people began wrestling with this movie before it appeared. *The Journal of Religion and Film*, e.g., devoted an entire issue (Blizek 2004) to the film *before it was released*. Among other items, the issue deals with precursors to the film, questions of historical accuracy, sectarian Catholicism, and the problem of anti-Semitism.
- 2 Reading Barthes's essay led me back to his essay on Jacob's wrestling and suggested the first epigraph for this essay. Barthes's salutary insight is that various readings of the passage are possible (Barthes 1994, pp. 252–54, 257).
- 3 Barthes's intelligible spectacle is a hierophany. I use spectacle to refer to both a film genre, primarily in this section, and to a hierophany throughout the essay.
- 4 It is far more brutal, e.g., than the collection of paintings in Geiss (2004).
- 5 Words dominate early Jesus movies, like *From the Manger to the Cross* and DeMille's *The King of Kings*. Visuals are as important to Pasolini as to Gibson, but Pasolini uses his visuals in the service of a dramatically different ideology. He offers class oppression, not physical suffering, as spectacle. See: Walsh, Richard. 'Three versions of Jesus'. In: Aichele, George; and Walsh, Richard, editors. *Those Outside: Noncanonical Readings of Canonical Gospels*. Harrisburg: T & T Clark; forthcoming.
- 6 According to movieweb.com [(cited 28 June 2004); available at http://movieweb.com/movies/box_office/yearly/], *The Passion of the Christ* was the top box-office for three weeks. *Dawn of the Dead*, *Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*, and *Hellboy* were the top draws for the next three weeks respectively. *The Passion of the Christ* returned to the top of the box-office for another week, only to be displaced the following week by *Kill Bill Vol. 2*. Clearly, violence and horror sell.
- 7 Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, may be viewed at <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch/carrying/> (cited 18 May 2004).
- 8 Gibson is, of course, Australian and produced his movie, with his own money, in Italy. Further, the language of the film is Aramaic and Latin. Nevertheless, the film does not 'seem' independent or

foreign. Perhaps, it is because of Jesus' iconic significance in the United States and in Hollywood. Perhaps, it is because Gibson himself has been so successful in Hollywood. Perhaps, it is because Hollywood has so successfully exported its style internationally.

9 Those interested in cartoon or, more accurately, comic book gospels should see Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*. It renders the making of messiahs questionable in a fashion quite different from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* or *Being There*.

10 Moore (1996) illustrates the passion narratives and Revelation with a discussion of butchery, torture, dissection, and body-building.

11 The crucifixion on the passion façade of Gaudi's *La Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona is a notable exception. There is already some discussion about what the Roman Catholic Church will do with this nude Christ when the completed church becomes its property. For photos, see <http://www.photoguide.to/barcelona/sagradafamilia.html> (cited 20 May 2004).

12 That Christ's death has to do with the forgiveness of sins is clearest in Matthew. Compare for example the different statements about Christ's blood in the Synoptic accounts of the institution of the supper (Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-19a). John, Gibson's Gospel of choice most often, does have the Baptist describe Jesus as the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), but the references to the salvific character of Jesus blood are less obvious in John (though see 6:53-58).

13 When the female stigmatic in *Stigmata* wonders why Christian art is 'wrong' on this point, her mentor priest informs her that Christian imagination is more important than history.

14 We might compare the scene in *The Godfather*, where Coppola cuts back and forth between Michael Corleone's renunciation of evil at his son's baptism and the assassination of his enemies.

15 The picture from the cover of *Paris-Match* to which Barthes refers is [cited 28 June 2004] available at <http://www.classics.upenn.edu/myth/mythperl/myth/remyth/soldier.php>.

16 Christian discourse (myth), of course, writes upon the blank it calls 'Jesus' (or, sometimes less evasively, 'Christ'). See Walsh (forthcoming).

17 For the *Sixty Minutes II* report, photos, and links to other photos, see <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/main614063.shtml> and http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/?040510onco_covers_gallery (both cited 21 May 2004).

18 The extras in Gibson's movie have rather Bosch-like faces, but I refer specifically to Bosch's triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. While traditional triptychs confined hell to one panel, Bosch's Eden and the carnival of delight on earth lead inexorably to hell and its macabre, unreal denizens. Further, those denizens spill into the entire painting, just as suffering consumes Gibson's movie. This painting may be viewed at <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch/delight/> (cited 18 May 2004).

19 Once again, Gibson's film, like the Gospel of John upon which he depends, is open to the charge of anti-Semitism. Of course, according to Maccoby (1992, pp. 160-168), the entire crucified Western Christian imagination is as well. He argues that one would have to give up the salvific death of Jesus in order to avoid the inherent anti-Semitism in Western Christianity. Surely, however, the misanthropy in Gibson's successful spectacle deserves some special mention even in the bloody annals of Western Christianity.

20 Despite the pre-eminent place of the discussion of sin in Romans (1:19-3:20), Paul 'knows' that humans are sinful only because of his prior, apocalyptic vision of the crucified Christ and his call to a mission to the Gentiles. Paul can 'explain' the cross and the inclusion of the Gentiles as a 'divine' act only by assuming human sinfulness. Romans 11:32 may be the heart of Paul's theodicy at this point.

21 See Runions' analysis of *Three Kings* (Runions 2003, pp. 65-91).

22 I would like to thank George Aichele for his assistance with this article.

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Cite this article as: Walsh, Richard. 'Wrestling with *The Passion of the Christ*'. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2005. DOI: 10.2104/bc050002